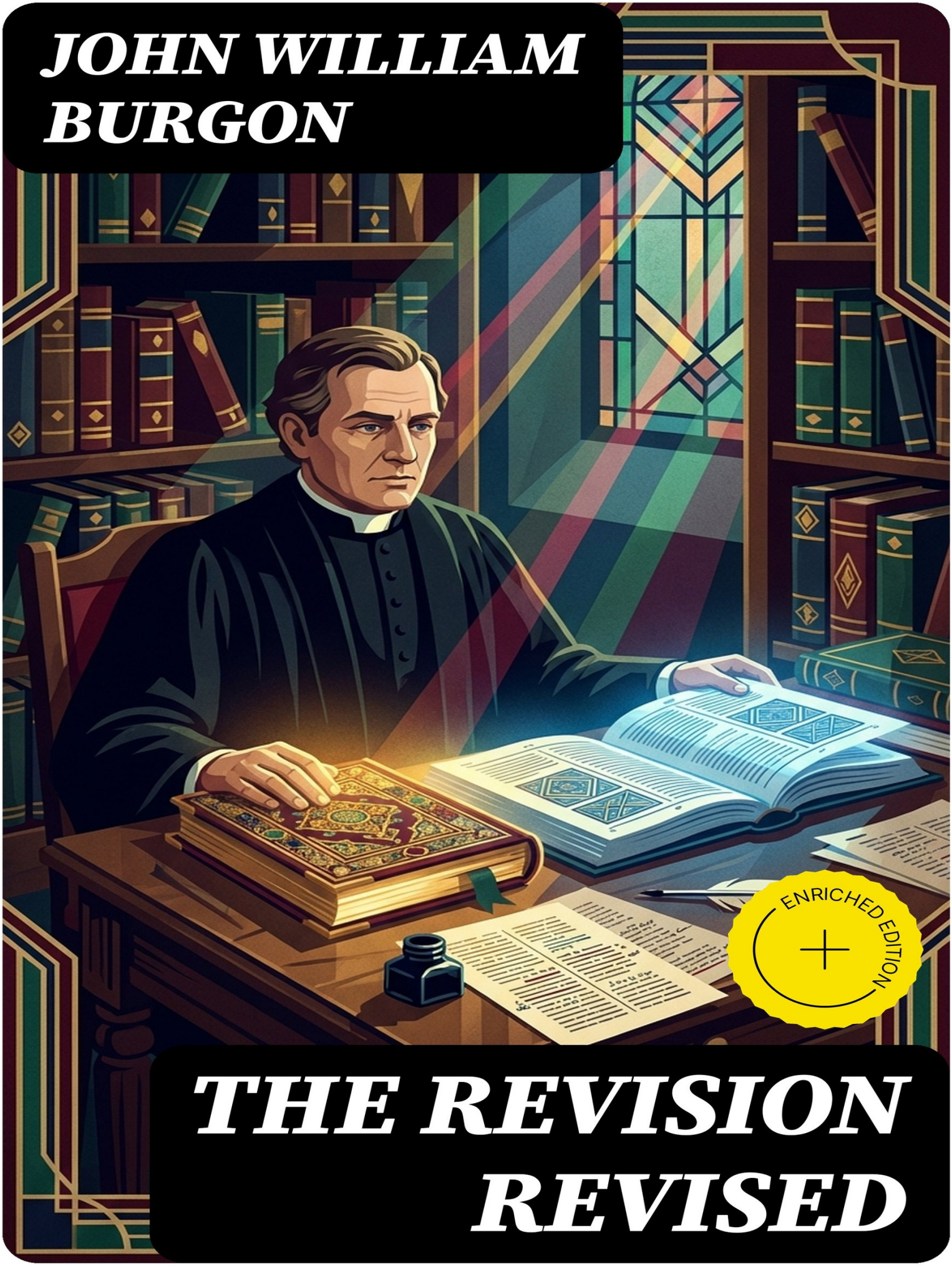
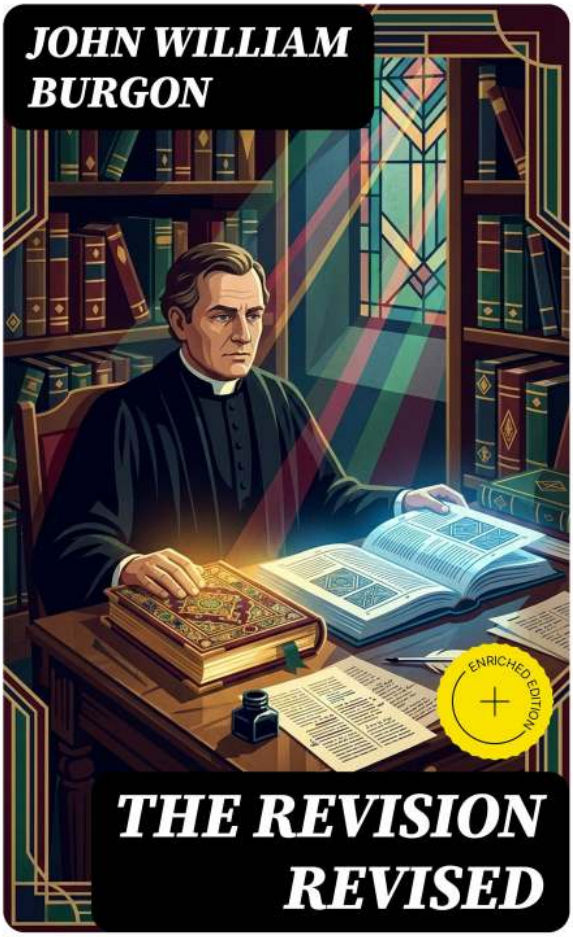
# JOHN WILLIAM BURGON




# THE REVISION REVISED


JOHN WILLIAM BURGON
ENRICHED EDITION
THE REVISION REVISED

**John William Burgon**

# The Revision Revised

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Oliver Hilton*

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# Introduction

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The Revision Revised confronts the uneasy boundary between reverent fidelity to the church’s received Scriptures and the bold confidence of nineteenth-century critics who proposed to reconfigure the New Testament’s text, insisting that what many had long trusted in worship and devotion should yield to a new constellation of manuscripts and rules, and in doing so it stages a dramatic dispute over who holds the authority—tradition’s wide, time-tested consensus or scholarship’s narrowly curated evidence—to determine which words English-speaking Christians read, hear, and memorize as Holy Writ, and how far the methods of science may reach into matters of faith and practice.

John William Burgon’s The Revision Revised is a polemical work of biblical textual criticism shaped in Victorian England’s ecclesiastical milieu and published in the late nineteenth century, in 1881, just as the English Revised Version of the New Testament appeared. Burgon, then Dean of Chichester, gathers and expands material he had written for The Quarterly Review to challenge the principles guiding the new revision and the Greek text preferred by contemporary editors, especially the approach associated with Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort. The book thus stands at the crossroads of scholarship, church life, and national Bible-reading culture.

As a reading experience, the volume is at once scholarly and combative, presenting extended arguments, copious

references to manuscripts, versions, and Fathers, and an insistent plea for methodological rigor. Structured around substantial essays reprinted and revised from periodical criticism, its voice blends courtroom-like cross-examination with pastoral anxiety over the effect of textual novelties on public worship. The tone is formal, emphatic, and occasionally severe, yet attentive to detail. Without rehearsing every dispute, the book challenges readers to weigh evidence, consider the burden of proof for change, and attend to how translation choices rest on prior textual decisions.

Central to Burgon’s case is the claim that wide, historically diffused testimony deserves greater weight than a small cluster of early but isolated witnesses, and that canons of internal probability should not displace the larger documentary record. He surveys readings across centuries, appeals to patristic citations and church lectionaries, and criticizes what he regards as undue reliance on a handful of celebrated codices. He insists that stability in the public Bible depends on transparent, comprehensive evaluation of evidence rather than novelty. The book therefore defends continuity in transmission while demanding that proposed alterations demonstrate overwhelming and broadly attested support.

Although written for a particular Victorian debate, the book remains pertinent wherever communities weigh revision against continuity in authoritative texts. Contemporary textual criticism employs new tools and broader datasets, yet the questions Burgon presses—how to calibrate manuscript quality and number, how to disclose

assumptions, how to explain revisions to the public—persist beyond his moment. For pastors, translators, and lay readers, the work illuminates how editorial decisions shape preaching and devotion. For scholars, it models a fierce insistence that method be explicit and replicable, even when one contests its conclusions. As a historical document, it clarifies the genealogy of later discussions.

Readers should expect nineteenth-century prose marked by periodic sentences, a lawyerly accumulation of data, and a readiness to challenge eminent names in print. The book’s energy springs from a pastoral desire to protect congregational Scripture-reading, yet it remains a work of scholarship, inviting verification and argument rather than deference. Burgon’s critiques are rigorous and sometimes sharp, but they are framed by appeals to publicly accessible evidence. Taken slowly, with attention to the structure of claims and the kinds of proofs offered, the text rewards patient study and enables newcomers to observe how a major ecclesiastical controversy was argued.

Ultimately, The Revision Revised endures because it crystallizes a question that confronts every age: by what criteria ought treasured texts be corrected, and who is entrusted to decide. Burgon answers from within his ecclesial and scholarly vocation, and whether or not one shares his judgments, his demand for clarity, evidence, and candor retains force. Approached as history, it maps the pressures that accompany revision; approached as method, it tests the coherence of critical canons; approached as public theology, it probes trust between experts and

worshipers. In all modes, it still invites careful readers to examine the grounds of change.

# Synopsis

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John William Burgon’s The Revision Revised (1883) is a sustained critique of the 1881 English Revised Version of the New Testament and of the Greek text underlying it, chiefly associated with B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort. Writing as Dean of Chichester and a seasoned textual commentator, Burgon addresses both translation and textual foundations. He argues that the new revision rests on uncertain principles and a narrow set of witnesses, and he aims to show how methodological choices shape English renderings. The book unfolds as a closely argued rejoinder, seeking to reassert continuity with the church’s long-standing text and to question the premises guiding recent editorial decisions.

The first major section examines the proposed Greek text used by revisers. Burgon challenges the primacy accorded to a small number of early manuscripts, contending that age alone does not guarantee fidelity. He catalogs divergences among favored codices and stresses the weight of the broad manuscript tradition, patristic citations, and ancient versions. For Burgon, a reading widely attested across time, geography, and ecclesiastical usage deserves presumption of authenticity. He maintains that editorial confidence in a select group of witnesses leads to instability, and he calls for evidence that is both varied and abundant before displacing readings long received in public and private devotion.

Turning to English translation, Burgon argues that the revisers exceeded their mandate to make limited, necessary changes to the Authorized Version. He objects to widespread alterations in diction, word order, and punctuation that, in his view, introduce novelty without commensurate gain in precision. He also criticizes the expanding use of marginal alternatives and notes, which he believes unsettle readers and compromise the clarity prized in public worship and catechesis. While allowing that some corrections may be warranted, Burgon contends that the overall strategy disrupts the familiar cadence and doctrinally safe boundaries associated with the traditional English Bible.

Burgon’s third line of argument targets Westcott and Hort’s textual theory. He disputes their genealogical classification of text-types and the notion of a distinct “neutral” form underlying preferred readings. Questioning reconstructions that depend on hypothetical ancestors, he argues that the cumulative testimony of the broad tradition outweighs localized or isolated ancient witnesses. He rejects the idea that later copies necessarily reflect systematic corruption, proposing instead that transmission often conserved authentic readings. By pressing for demonstrable ancestry and comprehensive corroboration, Burgon seeks to undercut the theoretical scaffolding that, in his view, enabled sweeping editorial departures.

Throughout, Burgon defends several familiar readings that the new text relegates to margins or brackets. He assembles a case from lectionaries, early commentators, and early versions, emphasizing usage across centuries as evidence of authenticity. The removal or demotion of such

passages, he warns, risks diminishing confidence in Scripture among clergy and laity alike. Without adjudicating every disputed line, he insists that changes should rest on overwhelming proof, not on preferences for a limited manuscript subset. His standard is conservative: preserve what is widely attested and ecclesiastically embedded unless a stronger, multifaceted case compels alteration.

Methodologically, the book blends polemic with painstaking citation. Burgon tallies manuscript support, sifts internal probabilities with caution, and repeatedly urges exhaustive collation before emending text or translation. He distances himself from uncritical adherence to any printed edition, yet resists conjectural or sparsely attested innovations. As a program, he advocates modest, clearly justified English revisions and a Greek text grounded in comprehensive, cross-checked evidence. His rhetoric is vigorous, but his stated aim is pastoral as much as scholarly: to safeguard intelligibility, stability, and trust in the Scriptures read in church and home.

The Revision Revised endures as a landmark in the nineteenth-century debate over New Testament textual criticism and English Bible revision. While later scholarship continued to refine methods and evidence, Burgon’s work remains a reference point for arguments favoring the traditional text’s broad attestation and for caution in translation policy. Its significance lies less in closing the question than in framing enduring issues: how to weigh age against consensus, how to balance accuracy with readability, and how ecclesial reception should inform editorial judgment. The book’s resonance persists wherever

communities negotiate continuity and change in their scriptural texts.

# Historical Context

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John William Burgon’s The Revision Revised (1883) arose in late Victorian England, when the Church of England, its universities, and learned societies were reexamining the text and translation of Scripture. The Authorized Version of 1611 had long dominated English-speaking churches, but nineteenth-century advances in philology and access to earlier Greek manuscripts prompted calls for an official update. In 1870 the Convocation of Canterbury commissioned revision companies to undertake this task, drawing heavily on scholars from Oxford and Cambridge and later inviting American cooperation. A high-church Anglican and later Dean of Chichester (1813–1888), Burgon entered this debate as a forceful defender of received tradition.

The century’s most striking catalyst was the discovery and collation of ancient witnesses. Constantin von Tischendorf recovered major portions of Codex Sinaiticus at St Catherine’s Monastery in 1844 and 1859, while renewed study of Codex Vaticanus deepened confidence in very early Alexandrian readings. Earlier, Karl Lachmann’s 1831 edition deliberately broke with the Textus Receptus; Samuel Prideaux Tregelles and Tischendorf advanced eclectic methods across mid-century. Culminating this trend, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort published The New Testament in the Original Greek (1881), proposing a genealogical theory that treated the Byzantine, or “Syrian,”

text as a later recension. Burgon vigorously disputed these premises.

Formal revision began after the 1870 vote of the Convocation of Canterbury, which established two British companies, one for the Old Testament and one for the New. The New Testament Company was chaired by Bishop C. J. Ellicott, and in 1871–1872 American scholars were invited to cooperate, forming an American Committee under Philip Schaff. The rules required that the Authorized Version be altered only where necessary and that changes gain a two-thirds majority. The revisers employed current textual criticism, weighed ancient versions and fathers, and supplied marginal alternatives, while attempting to preserve familiar English idiom. Their transatlantic correspondence continued throughout the project.

The Revised Version New Testament appeared in May 1881 from the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses amid enormous public attention. Reviewers praised its closer adherence to the Greek, yet many readers found the diction less graceful than the Authorized Version. The revisers omitted the Comma Johanneum from the text and signaled the disputed status of Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11 with notes or brackets, reflecting the weight they assigned to Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. The Old Testament volume followed in 1885. Burgon’s The Revision Revised answered these developments directly, contesting both the Greek text underlying the revision and the English changes derived from it.

Burgon was an Oxford-trained Anglican cleric who became Dean of Chichester in 1876. A staunch defender of

Scripture’s inspiration and of traditional ecclesiastical authority, he had already intervened in textual issues, most notably with The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel according to S. Mark (1871), which marshaled patristic and liturgical evidence for Mark 16:9–20. He had also opposed liberalizing currents associated with Essays and Reviews (1860) and with Bishop J. W. Colenso’s critical writings on the Pentateuch. These controversies shaped his conviction that the church’s long, public use of Scripture carried evidential weight that recent critical reconstructions could not easily displace.

In The Revision Revised, Burgon attacked what he called the “Westcott-Hort” theory, arguing that excessive reliance on two fourth-century codices had produced a defective Greek text. He advocated a “Traditional Text” approach that prioritized the consensus of the vast majority of later Greek manuscripts, corroborated by ancient versions and extensive patristic citation. He appealed to lectionaries and the continuous usage of the Christian East and West as historical witnesses. Burgon also criticized the revisers’ English style and their departure, in his view, from the stated rules of conservative alteration. His polemic combined textual arguments with appeals to ecclesiastical continuity.

The broader Victorian backdrop included intensifying debates over biblical authority and interpretation. German critical scholarship, associated with figures such as F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school, exerted wide influence. In Britain, Essays and Reviews (1860) and the trials that followed, together with the controversies surrounding

Bishop Colenso (1860s), unsettled many churchmen. Court decisions, including the 1864 Privy Council judgments, signaled official toleration of some critical views. While the Revision Companies were not organs of doctrinal liberalism, their embrace of contemporary textual methods appeared, to conservatives like Burgon, contiguous with a trend that elevated academic reconstruction over received ecclesial testimony.

Though widely discussed, the Revised Version never displaced the Authorized Version in popular use, and Burgon’s critique resonated with readers who prized traditional readings and idiom. Critical scholarship nonetheless moved toward eclectic editions like Eberhard Nestle’s 1898 text and, later, the Nestle-Aland and United Bible Societies editions that underlie many twentieth-century translations. Elements of Burgon’s defense informed later Byzantine-priority work, such as the Majority Text of Zane C. Hodges and Arthur Farstad (1982) and the editions of Maurice Robinson and William Pierpont. The Revision Revised thus crystallizes a Victorian contest between modern textual theory and claims of historical, ecclesial continuity.

# The Revision Revised

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The following is PREBENDARY SCRIVENER'S[1] recently published estimate of the System on which DRS. WESTCOTT AND HORT[2] have constructed their "*Revised Greek Text of the New Testament*" (1881).—That System, the Chairman of the Revising Body (BISHOP ELLICOTT) has entirely adopted (see below, pp. 391 to 397), and made the basis of his Defence of THE REVISERS and their "*New Greek Text.*"

> (1.) "There is little hope for the stability of their imposing structure, if *its foundations have been laid on the sandy ground of ingenious conjecture*. And, since barely the smallest vestige of historical evidence has ever been alleged in support of the views of these accomplished Editors, their teaching must either be received as intuitively true, or *dismissed from our consideration as precarious and even visionary*."
>
> (2.) "DR. HORT'S System *is entirely destitute of historical foundation*[1q]."

(3.) “We are compelled to repeat as emphatically as ever our strong conviction that the Hypothesis to whose proof he has devoted so many laborious years, *is destitute not only of historical foundation, but of all probability, resulting from the internal goodness of the Text which its adoption would force upon us*.”

(4.) “‘We cannot doubt’ (says Dr. Hort) ‘that S. Luke xxiii. 34 comes from an extraneous source.’ [*Notes*, p. 68.]—*Nor can we, on our part, doubt*,” (rejoins Dr. Scrivener,) “*that the System which entails such consequences is hopelessly self-condemned*.”

Scrivener's “Plain Introduction,” &c. [ed. 1883]: pp. 531, 537, 542, 604.

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# Dedication.

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To The
Right Hon. Viscount Cranbrook, G.C.S.I.,
&c., &c., &c.

My dear Lord Cranbrook,

*Allow me the gratification of dedicating the present Volume to yourself; but for whom—(I reserve the explanation for another day)—it would never have been written.*

*This is not, (as you will perceive at a glance,) the Treatise which a few years ago I told you I had in hand; and which, but for the present hindrance, might by this time have been completed. It has however* grown out *of that other work in the manner explained at the beginning of my Preface. Moreover it contains not a few specimens of the argumentation of which the work in question, when at last it sees the light, will be discovered to be full.*

*My one object has been to defeat the mischievous attempt which was made in 1881 to thrust upon this Church and Realm a Revision of the Sacred Text, which—recommended though it be by eminent names—I am thoroughly convinced, and am able to prove, is untrustworthy from beginning to end.*

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*The reason is plain. It has been constructed throughout on an utterly erroneous hypothesis. And I inscribe this Volume to you, my friend, as a conspicuous member of that*

*body of faithful and learned Laity by whose deliberate verdict, when the whole of the evidence has been produced and the case has been fully argued out, I shall be quite willing that my contention may stand or fall.*

*The* English *(as well as the Greek) of the newly "Revised Version**[3]**" is hopelessly at fault. It is to me simply unintelligible how a company of Scholars can have spent ten years in elaborating such a very unsatisfactory production. Their uncouth phraseology and their jerky sentences, their pedantic obscurity and their unidiomatic English, contrast painfully with "the happy turns of expression, the music of the cadences, the felicities of the rhythm" of our Authorized Version. The transition from one to the other, as the Bishop of Lincoln remarks, is like exchanging a well-built carriage for a vehicle without springs, in which you get jolted to death on a newly-mended and rarely-traversed road. But the "Revised Version" is inaccurate as well; exhibits defective scholarship, I mean, in countless places.*

*It is, however, the* systematic depravation of the underlying Greek *which does so grievously offend me: for this is nothing else but a poisoning of the River of Life at its sacred source. Our Revisers, (with the best and purest intentions, no doubt,) stand convicted of having deliberately rejected the words of* [pg vii] *Inspiration in every page, and of having substituted for them fabricated Readings which the Church has long since refused to acknowledge, or else has rejected with abhorrence; and which only survive at this time in a little handful of documents of the most depraved type.*

*As Critics they have had abundant warning. Twelve years ago (1871) a volume appeared on* the "last Twelve Verses of the Gospel according to S. Mark,"—*of which the declared object was to vindicate those Verses against certain critical objectors, and to establish them by an exhaustive argumentative process. Up to this hour, for a very obvious reason, no answer to that volume has been attempted. And yet, at the end of ten years (1881),—not only in the Revised English but also in the volume which professes to exhibit the underlying Greek, (which at least is indefensible,)—the Revisers are observed to separate off those Twelve precious Verses from their context, in token that they are no part of the genuine Gospel. Such a deliberate preference of* "mumpsimus" *to* "sumpsimus" *is by no means calculated to conciliate favour, or even to win respect. The Revisers have in fact been the dupes of an ingenious Theorist, concerning whose extraordinary views you are invited to read what Dr. Scrivener has recently put forth. The words of the last-named writer (who is* facile princeps *in Textual Criticism) will be found facing the beginning of the present Dedication.*

*If, therefore, any do complain that I have sometimes hit my opponents rather hard, I take leave to point out that "to everything* [pg viii] *there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the sun": "a time to embrace, and a time to be far from embracing": a time for speaking smoothly, and a time for speaking sharply. And that when the words of Inspiration are seriously imperilled, as now they are, it is scarcely possible for one who is determined effectually to preserve the Deposit in its integrity, to hit either too straight or too hard. In handling certain recent utterances of Bishop*

*Ellicott, I considered throughout that it was the* “Textual Critic”*—not the Successor of the Apostles,—with whom I had to do.*

*And thus I commend my Volume, the fruit of many years of incessant anxious toil, to your indulgence: requesting that you will receive it as a token of my sincere respect and admiration; and desiring to be remembered, my dear Lord Cranbrook, as*

*Your grateful and affectionate*
*Friend and Servant,*
*John W. Burgon.*

Deanery, Chichester,
All Saints' Day., 1883.

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# Preface.

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The ensuing three Articles from the “Quarterly Review,”—(wrung out of me by the publication [May 17th, 1881] of the “Revision” of our “Authorized Version of the New Testament,”)—appear in their present form in compliance with an amount of continuous solicitation that they should be separately published, which it would have been alike unreasonable and ungracious to disregard. I was not prepared for it. It has caused me—as letter after letter has reached my hands—mixed feelings; has revived all my original disinclination and regret. For, gratified as I cannot but feel by the reception my labours have met with,—(and only the Author of my being knows what an amount of antecedent toil is represented by the ensuing pages,)—I yet deplore more heartily than I am able to express, the injustice done to the cause of Truth by handling the subject in this fragmentary way, and by exhibiting the evidence for what is most certainly true, in such a very incomplete form. A systematic Treatise is the indispensable condition for securing cordial assent to the view for which I mainly contend. The cogency of the argument lies entirely in the cumulative character of the proof. It requires to be demonstrated by induction from a large collection of particular instances, as well as by the complex exhibition of many converging lines of evidence, that the testimony of one small group of documents, or rather, of one particular manuscript,—(namely [pg x] the Vatican Codex B, which, for some unexplained reason, it is just now the fashion to regard with superstitious deference,)—is the reverse of trustworthy. Nothing in fact but a considerable Treatise will

**73** A Latin phrase meaning “from silence,” used to denote an argument that infers a fact from an author's failure to mention it; in historical and textual studies such “argument(s) e silentio” are generally treated as weak or precarious evidence.

**74** Macedonius II. was Patriarch of Constantinople (the text gives his tenure as a.d. 496–511); later Latin writers accused him of tampering with certain New Testament readings, an allegation attested in some medieval sources but disputed by modern scholars.

**75** Liberatus of Carthage was a sixth-century (VIth century) Latin churchman and archdeacon who recorded the story that Macedonius altered a New Testament reading; his account is an important medieval source for the allegation but has been judged unreliable or exaggerated by many later commentators.

**76** John of Damascus (called John Damascene; c.675–c.749) was an eighth-century Byzantine monk, priest, and theologian noted for defending the veneration of icons and for influential hymns and theological writings.

**77** The Second Council of Nicaea (convened in 787 AD) was an ecumenical council of the Christian Church that restored and regulated the veneration of icons after the period of Byzantine iconoclasm.

**78** “Cod. Angelicus” is the conventional name for a Greek uncial manuscript (often abbreviated l) of parts of the New Testament, dated by scholars to about the 9th century and cited in textual-critical apparatuses for the Pauline epistles.

**79** Scholarly sigla for two major Greek New Testament manuscripts: 'b' (often rendered B) refers to Codex

Vaticanus and 'א' (Hebrew letter aleph) to Codex Sinaiticus; both codices are usually dated to the 4th century, though precise datings are contested among experts.

**80** An Italian abbé and Vatican official who, as Prefect or a senior librarian at the Vatican in the late 19th century, arranged access to Roman manuscript collections and assisted Burgon's researches; he was active chiefly in the 1870s–1880s.

**81** Abbreviation of Menologium, a liturgical book or calendar in the Eastern Christian tradition listing saints' commemorations and readings for fixed feast days; such menologies often accompany manuscript collections and can be fragmentary or vary by local usage.

**82** Refers to the fragmentary Old Syriac Gospel manuscripts edited and published in the mid-19th century by William Cureton (often called the Curetonian Syriac), which are an important witness in New Testament textual criticism and distinct from the later Peshitta.

**83** A historical term (used from at least the 16th century) meaning a mistaken phrase or reading that someone stubbornly persists in using despite being corrected, often invoked in debates about textual error and conservative adherence to tradition.

**84** A nineteenth-century clergyman and scholar cited here as a correspondent and author of works on textual revision; he is known for publishing studies and translations of early versions of the New Testament (active roughly mid–late 1800s).

**85** An editorial siglum (single-letter designation) used in New Testament textual criticism to identify a particular

ancient manuscript or family of readings; such sigla (e.g. b, א) are conventional labels used by editors and do not, by themselves, specify date or origin without the scholar's apparatus.

**86** Latin title meaning 'Councils,' used for printed collections of church council canons and acts; in 19th-century scholarship it refers to editions compiling conciliar documents (dates and editors vary by edition).

**87** Abbreviation for the Vulgate, the Latin Bible translation largely produced by Jerome in the late 4th century and long the standard Latin text in the Western Church.

**88** Short for Codex Sinaiticus, a 4th-century Greek manuscript of the Bible discovered at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai in the 19th century and important for modern New Testament textual criticism.

**89** Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, two 19th-century English biblical scholars who produced an influential critical edition of the Greek New Testament (published 1881) that shaped the Revised Version.

**90** A 19th-century British lawyer and author (Sir Edmund Beckett, later Baron Grimthorpe) noted here for a short book criticizing the Revised New Testament; he wrote on legal, architectural and ecclesiastical topics.

**91** A textual-critical term for a reading that appears to combine (or 'conflate') elements from two or more different manuscript traditions into a single text, often discussed when assessing how variant readings arose.

**92** Photius was a 9th-century Patriarch of Constantinople (c. 820–893) who compiled the Bibliotheca (or Myriobiblion),

a catalogue and summary of many works; the bracketed "cod. 48" refers to an item or codex number in his listing.

**93** "Clemens Al." abbreviates Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian active roughly in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries (commonly dated c. 150–215), known for works such as the Stromata and Paedagogus.

**94** This refers to the work of Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, 19th-century scholars who published a highly influential critical edition of the Greek New Testament (and an accompanying Introduction) in 1881, shaping modern textual-critical discussion.

**95** "Codex A" is the conventional scholarly siglum for Codex Alexandrinus, a major Greek uncial manuscript of the Bible usually dated to the 5th century and long held in the British Library collection.

**96** Abbé Martin refers to a 19th-century French churchman and textual critic (an abbé) who inspected Paris manuscripts and published work on New Testament textual criticism, notably his Introduction à la Critique Textuelle du N. T. (c. 1883).

**97** Euthalius is the name given to an early Greek churchman traditionally credited (by later scholars) with editorial aids such as chapter divisions, headings, and marginalia in New Testament manuscripts; he is commonly dated by scholars to roughly the 4th–6th centuries (dates vary by authority).

**98** The Harkleian (often spelled Harklean) refers to the Harklean Syriac version or recension of the New Testament prepared by Thomas of Harqel, usually dated to the early