

John 20:30-31 and the Text-Critical Problem

Dear ...

Your question with regard to Jn 20:30-31 relates to two matters which in themselves are independent of one another. The one is the grammatical form as such of each of the two readings and the other the relevance of each of the two readings on the question of why the Gospel of John was written. However, because of the occurrence of both readings in the manuscript tradition, the two ‘problems’ in the text under discussion become interrelated.

A. The Grammatical Issue. As you quite correctly expressed it yourself, the form πιστεύσητε is Aor Subj and has aoristic, indefinite, often punctiliar significance. The implication of this in a sentence such as the present one is that the recipients of the Gospel or its readers, or intended readers, if you like, are not yet believers, but that it is hoped that by reading the account presented so far, faith will be awakened in them and that they will come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, i.e. as God’s Son. If we, on the other hand, follow the Pres Subj πιστεύητε, then the implication is that the recipients or intended readers of the Gospel are already believers and that by reading his account (sc. the Gospel) they will be confirmed in their faith and will continue (to grow) in it (the aspect of continuity). These are the facts, stated briefly, of the grammatical aspect of the problem.

B. The Text-Critical Issue. Now, whether these two verses can throw any light on the question of the purpose of the Gospel is dependent on which of the two readings is the reading that the Author wrote down when he authored the Gospel.

This problem, which is a text-critical problem, is totally separate from the grammatical problem. Here it is a question of which MSS have preserved the correct reading.

a. πιστεύσητε \aleph^2 A C D L N W Δ Ψ f^{1, 13} 33 \mathfrak{M} Byz lectionaries

Cyril

b. πιστεύητε \mathfrak{P}^{66} vid \aleph^* B Θ 0250 157 892^{supp}

Metzger (*Text-Critical Commentary*, p. 219) states that “Both [readings] have notable early support”. Then, he correctly spells out the implications of each reading, and finally, he and his friends, unable to make up their mind, incorporate the letter “σ”, placing it within square brackets, thus keeping both alternatives—which in itself is quite dubious—and letting the reader choose whichever he likes—which is, of course, a non-scientific procedure, since the Author wrote down only one of the two readings.

Which of the two readings has stronger MSS support is, of course, dependent upon how one evaluates the various MSS. In traditional text-critical evaluations—which recently have been called into question (cf. e.g. the references to recent discussions in my *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, etc., pp. 475-93)—it has been almost axiomatic that a combination of **Ⲙ** and B (especially if it is supported by some early Papyrus) is decisive or almost decisive. But as I have shown in the 8th chapter of my book (“The Impact of the Historical Greek Pronunciation on the Transmission of the NT Text, pp. 475-564”), above, many of these early MSS are full of orthographical mistakes, having being written by scribes who were *anorthographoi* (grammatical ignoramuses). Thus **ⲡ**⁶⁶ contains 492 orthographical mistakes in only 783 of John’s 867 verses. And though Sinaiticus’ (**Ⲙ**) mistakes are somewhat fewer, this scribe, too, cannot escape the charge of *anorthography* (Cf. *The Development of Greek*, p. 496-502). As a matter of fact, the very word that causes the problem here, that is, **πιστεύητε**, occurs in **ⲡ**⁶⁶ not in the grammatically correct form **πιστεύητε** (i.e. second person plural) but **πιστεύηται** (third person singular mid-pass) (see Comfort-Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest NT MSS*, 2001, p. 467). This, of course, was on account of the *Historical Greek Pronunciation*, where **αι** and **ε** were pronounced identically and thus were confused, but this is another problem. However, the fact of his mistake here, raises the question whether we can trust his reading!

If then, these “early MSS”, which were so highly thought of by Metzger and company, are shown to be products of careless copying (some of them, no doubt, were made under difficult circumstances, though hardly **Ⲙ**), the question

that arises is: Can we really continue to attribute to their readings the weight that older Text- Critics have attributed?

When we put questions such as this to these “early MSS”, the strength of their support weakens considerably, and the alternative reading appears, if anything, stronger. But though, the majority of MSS and their geographical spread is a significant factor, one can never be certain that the original reading could not have been, in spite of everything and speaking hypothetically, πιστεύητε. With the same breath I would say that the alternative reading, πιστεύσητε, is at least as probable.

It is at this point that one has to turn to the contents of the Gospel in order to see whether its contents are addressed to believers or to non-believers. When we remember that the Early Church was a missionary Church, reaching out to make new disciples of Jesus, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Gospels were written to present the Christian faith outwardly, that is, to outsiders, whereas the epistles were written to Churches, i.e to such as had already accepted the claims of Jesus and needed to get certain things straightened out. This does not mean that Christians would not have profited from reading the Gospel of John or of Matthew; of course they would, but the main target was the unbeliever. Perhaps then, such considerations as these—and here we must not overlook the many relevancies to the life of the believer in the Gospel, such as “abide in Me”—would tend to suggest that the intended audience was in the first place unbelievers. The parts relating to the life of the believer do not contradict this, since the Early Church, unlike some modern evangelism, proclaimed a rich Gospel, where the intended addressee was allowed to see something of the inner life in the Spirit and of the fellowship to which he or she was being called.