

Hugh Houghton: Institute of Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing

Hugh talks about the research being conducted at ITSEE.

Duration: 3:28

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My name's Hugh Houghton, I'm a Research Fellow here at the Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing, or ITSEE for short. We have a number of projects running at ITSEE which focus on the text of the New Testament. The goal of ITSEE is to bring together textual scholars who are using electronic tools to gather materials, to make editions of texts that are preserved in manuscript form, or texts that are preserved in printed form but different editions. So in addition to working on a variety of sources – so people who've worked at ITSEE have worked on Darwin and the Canterbury Tales. We have a Doctoral student working on different manuscripts of the Koran, but the two principle projects based at ITSEE at the moment are both looking at the New Testament.

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We have a long history of research at Birmingham, looking at the text of the Greek New Testament, and over the last 8 or 9 years we've had a team working on an edition of the earliest version of the Latin New Testament, which is how I started at Birmingham. The Latin New Testament is particularly interesting because there are many different early versions, and what seems to have happened is that at the very beginning the texts were obviously written in Greek, but there were Christian communities where Greek was not the first language, so they needed translation from Greek into Latin, and different versions it seems are those in different places. But around the end of the fourth century, the scholar Jerome made a revision of the Gospels which became the standard text for the whole of later Christianity. So to get back to those earliest versions, before Jerome's vulgate, before that standard text, we need to piece together evidence from manuscripts which are only partially preserved or have partially a vulgate text and partially the older text, and also go back to Christian authors when they cite words from the gospel or when they're quoting bits of Paul's epistles, they use the earlier versions which were known to them. So, by this process of piecing together all the evidence, we can get some idea of what the earlier versions which are no longer preserved might have looked like.

That's why the use of electronic equipment is very important because we're creating these huge databases of texts, which for our purposes are important because we can gather the material we need so we can produce editions of the New Testament to be used by scholars, to be used by translators, to be used by pastors and students looking at the whole history of the biblical text. But also the data gathered on the manuscript – the way it's laid out, the scribal spellings and so on, presents all sorts of information which other people might be interested to look at in terms of seeing how books were put together, or how particular items of vocabulary are used by an individual Christian author – how one commentary might be used by a series of later commentators in putting together a commentary on the biblical text.

So it's that critical moment if you like, after centuries of relying on printed books and printed culture, we're now moving into electronic culture and creating resources which can be used in many many different ways, but will hopefully stand the test of time and be a focus for future scholarship.