

The “New” Textual Criticism: Challenges and Promise

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In contrast to an overly optimistic view of the state of the NT text, scholars have raised new challenges and begun to explore new horizons in textual criticism. These emphases call into question common assumptions about the goals of textual criticism. This article examines six areas of emphasis, noting where they are problematic as well as where they show promise for understanding not only the discipline but also the nature and function of the NT.

A sea change in textual criticism¹ took place during the last half century that has altered the focus of the discipline and the questions scholars are asking of the manuscripts (MSS) themselves. Several recent observations by text critics have far-reaching implications for our understanding of the ancient texts and their treatment by early Christian communities. Moreover, they raise serious questions about the goals and methods of NT textual criticism.

In the latter half of the last century, many scholars believed that the primary task of NT textual criticism—simply stated, reconstructing the original NT documents as best we can²—was finished.³ Already in the 1940s an overly optimistic view of the state of the NT text was abroad. This quote illustrates: “The interval . . . between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the

¹ Richard Goode, “Kings or God? Towards an Anthropology of Text,” in *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies? Papers from the Fifth Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (eds. Hugh A.G. Houghton and David C. Parker; TS 3/5; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008) 25-33.

² See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) xv.

³ Kurt Aland, “Das neue ‘Standardtext’ in seinem Verhältnis zu den frühen Papyri und Majuskeln,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis: Essays in Honour of Bruce M. Metzger* (ed. E.J. Epp and G. Fee; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 274, states: “A hundred years after Westcott and Hort it appears that we have reached the goal of an edition of the New Testament ‘in the original Greek’” (translation mine); see E.J. Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *HTR* 92 (1999) 245-281.

Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed.”⁴

By contrast, in 1953 Erich Fascher wrote of the earliest NT MSS, “These manuscripts come from people who did not merely copy out an exemplar mechanically, but on the basis of their own reflection they improved, clarified, or made them more understandable, according to their own thinking.”⁵ Such “improvements” started not in the fourth or fifth century, he said, but took place from the very beginning. There were changes by scribes, the *de facto* first expositors of Scripture, as well as editorial changes during the process as the documents were brought together into sub-collections (Paul’s letters, the Gospels, and Acts and the Catholic Epistles). Fascher concludes: “We must give up the hope of finding *the* original of a [NT] text.”⁶ While one may take issue with different aspects of Fascher’s position, most scholars concede the basic point.

In the mid-1970s, text critic Eldon Epp lamented the “interlude” in NT textual criticism.⁷ He observed that, while Westcott and Hort’s 1881 edition of the Greek New Testament marked the end of “the tyranny of the *textus receptus*,” the twentieth century had seen no such progress.⁸ In fact, in terms of methods and procedures, most textual work subsequent to Westcott and Hort merely confirmed their readings. Given the perceived lack of progress in the standard critical editions and the lack of progress toward a theory and history of the earliest NT text, Epp concluded: “The 20th century [to 1974] has been an *interlude* between the grand achievement of Westcott and Hort and whatever significant second act is to follow.”⁹

According to some critics, twentieth-century textual criticism has ensured that newly catalogued and published papyrus finds have contributed little to the state of the NT text, for the papyri are compared negatively against the uncials on which the text is based. Only when they confirm the existing readings of the critical editions are they cited favorably. While the papyri are our oldest witnesses to the NT text, the pragmatic reality is different.¹⁰ Scholars have similarly complained that

⁴Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (London: George G. Harrap, 1940) 288-289; see F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (6th ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1943, 1981) 15.

⁵Erich Fascher, *Textgeschichte als hermeneutisches Problem* (Halle/Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1953) 12; translations of Fascher are mine.

⁶Ibid., 13.

⁷Eldon J. Epp, “The Twentieth Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *JBL* 93 (1974) 386-414.

⁸Ibid., 386.

⁹Ibid., 387-390.

¹⁰Bart D. Ehrman, “The Use and Significance of Patristic Evidence for New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis and Church History* (eds. B. Aland and J. Delobel; CBET 7; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994) 118.

patristic citations are not regularly used except to confirm existing readings. Thus, Epp concludes, we are not appreciably closer to the original text of the NT than were Westcott and Hort.¹¹

Epp’s critique underscores a conundrum in NT textual criticism: what should be the goals of the discipline, and what methods should be employed to reach those goals?¹² How do we move beyond Epp’s “interlude”? Epp’s own answer is a new-found optimism over progress in analyzing numerous early manuscripts which have recently come to light and “in the development of theories, tools, and methods for studying the transmission, history, and nature of the NT text—including some radical new approaches and attitudes.”¹³ But it is these “radical approaches and attitudes” that are giving traditionalists pause.

CHALLENGES OF THE “NEW” TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Much has changed in scholarly opinion since Kenyon.¹⁴ Specifically, what is being called the “new” textual criticism” has raised again issues of the reliability of the NT text, as well as questions about the feasibility or even the desirability of reconstructing the “original autographs.”¹⁵ In what follows a few of these challenges will be sketched.

The Paucity of Early Manuscripts

Perhaps the biggest challenge to textual criticism today is the paucity of MSS dating earlier than the fourth century. The traditional explanation is that prior to

¹¹Epp, “Interlude,” 398-399.

¹²Because of space this article omits a detailed discussion of methods; see Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (SD 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); compare David Alan Black, ed., *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

¹³Eldon J. Epp, “Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism: Moving from the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century,” in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. David Alan Black; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 17-76, in which Epp softened his earlier pessimism over the situation. See 19 n. 2: “I now find myself in agreement . . . with the more optimistic outlook in Larry W. Hurtado, ‘Beyond the Interlude? Developments and Directions in New Testament Textual Criticism,’” in David G.K. Taylor, *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts: The Papers of the First Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (TS 3/1; Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1999) 26-49.

¹⁴Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible* (3rd ed.; London: Duckworth, 1936, 1975) 248-249, 256, made the more balanced claim that (then) recent discoveries justified an attitude of “hopefulness” regarding the authenticity and integrity of our texts.

¹⁵Several recent emphases in textual criticism are not new—hence the word *new* in quotes. What is new is the way in which the concerns have been raised and the attention they have attracted among non-specialists.

Constantine's protection of the church, many manuscripts were destroyed as Christians were persecuted. In addition, presumably countless MSS perished from exposure to the elements, which reminds us that the finds we do have are largely attributable to coincidence. Moreover, William Walker hypothesized a great "recension" at the end of the second century which removed variants and standardized the text, thus creating the current situation in which "we have no MSS dating earlier than the third century," and all the extant MSS are remarkably similar, such that our manuscript evidence tells us nothing about the state of the NT prior to the third century.¹⁶ There are serious objections to this "recension" hypothesis, however, namely the absence of any authoritative, organized force within the churches which could have eliminated competing traditions and the fact that the allegedly suppressed readings continue to be found long after the supposed recension.¹⁷

Frederik Wisse argues against the assumption that by the early third century emerging orthodoxy brought about an end to the period of redactional freedom by deciding on a standard text and suppressing "deviant" readings.¹⁸ Similar to Hengel's objection to the thesis of David Trobisch,¹⁹ Wisse notes that even long after the third century, the church was in no position to establish control over the text, let alone eliminate rival forms.²⁰

If manuscript evidence from the third century is rare, from the second century it is almost nonexistent. Judging \mathfrak{P}^{52} too small to be of any help in this discussion,²¹ Helmut Koester simply stated that there is no second-century manuscript evidence.²² Larry Hurtado has noted cautiously that there is some "good news" along with the bad.²³ First, the small fund of second- and early third-century MSS

¹⁶William O. Walker, Jr., "The Burden of Proof in Identifying Interpolations in the Pauline Letters," *NTS* 33 (1987) 610-618.

¹⁷See Hurtado, "Beyond the Interlude?" 40-43.

¹⁸Frederik Wisse, "The Nature and Purpose of Redactional Changes in Early Christian Texts: The Canonical Gospels," in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission* (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989) 45, n. 26.

¹⁹Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 242-243; David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Trobisch argued for a "first edition" of the NT by an entrepreneurial editor which allegedly had a normalizing effect on the text of the NT.

²⁰Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 242-243; Wisse, "Redactional Changes," 45.

²¹ \mathfrak{P}^{52} is a fragment of the Gospel of John widely regarded as the oldest known NT papyrus.

²²Helmut Koester, "The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century," in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission* (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989) 19. Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 23, 65, questions the early dating of several NT MSS, suggesting there are no second-century manuscripts.

²³Larry W. Hurtado, "The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon," in

has been enriched with the recent publication of certain Oxyrhynchus papyri.²⁴ Second, although comprising a small amount of the *text* of the NT, these fragments are rich in other data (see below).²⁵ Third, though the fragments are small, in general these fragments “confirm the text of the great uncials which form the basis of the modern critical editions.”²⁶ In cases where the variants were previously attested only in the versions, Hurtado suggests there may be other cases supported only in the versions that reflect very early readings. And fourth, these fragments tend to confirm that the substantial later witnesses are probably not the results of some supposed major recension of the NT initiated toward the end of the second century. “Rather, Oxyrhynchus fragments justify the view that the more substantial early third-century papyri are reliable witnesses of the text of the writings they contain, as these writings had been transmitted across the second century.”²⁷

There is more good news: Epp argues for the existence of early textual “clusters” (primitive text-types). He believes we can be confident from our finds in Egypt that there was sufficient interaction between Christian communities outside Egypt that we have a good representation of all available text-types; thus, many of the MSS found in Egypt may be assumed to have originated elsewhere.²⁸ For example, both the Oxyrhynchus papyri and the Bodmer codex’s preservation of Greek MSS in a Coptic environment with hints of Syriac background to some of the MSS reveal an international orientation connecting to the Christian centers in Antioch and Rome.²⁹ While the good news is limited, we can be optimistic that, even in small steps, there is progress towards a better understanding of the development of the NT text before the fourth century.

The Fluidity of Pre-Fourth-Century Texts

Another major challenge is the fluidity of the texts during the second and third centuries. According to the prevailing view, NT texts in this precanonical period were

Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies (ed. J.W. Childers and D.C. Parker; TS 3/4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006) 6; see Hurtado, “Beyond the Interlude?” 34-47.

²⁴Hurtado refers to vols. 64–66. Other texts have appeared since those volumes; see J. Chapa, “4934. First Letter of Peter I 23–II 5, 7–12,” *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 73 (ed. D. Obbink and N. Gonis; Oxford: The Egypt Exploration Society, 2009) 17–22, and Plates II and III.

²⁵Hurtado, “Second Century,” 7. See Peter Head, “Some Recently Published New Testament Papyri from Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment” *TynBul* 51 (2000) 1–16; see John K. Elliott, “Five New Papyri of the New Testament,” *NovT* 41 (1999) 209–213.

²⁶Head, “Recently Published,” 16.

²⁷Hurtado, “Second Century,” 7; see Hurtado, “Beyond the Interlude?” 37–43.

²⁸Eldon J. Epp, “The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: ‘Not without Honor Except in Their Hometown?’” *JBL* 123 (2004) 5–55.

²⁹Thomas Scott Caulley, “A Fragment of an Early Christian Hymn (PBodm. 12): Some Observations,” *ZAC* 13 (2009) 403–414, on the possible Syriac background for the Bodmer hymn fragment.

treated differently than they were later—that is, not as sacred Scripture—while at the same time constantly being used in liturgy. This view suggests that though important for worship, these texts were otherwise treated casually and suffered many changes.³⁰ Not only so, but constant liturgical use made necessary frequent copying which, by its very nature, contributed greatly to the introduction of variants.³¹ This problem was compounded by the fact that, judging by the state of the MSS themselves, early scribes were often less well-trained than the professional scribes used later.³²

One source of the alleged casual attitude toward texts in the second century was the oft-cited preference for the old oral traditions over written texts.³³ But this loose “orality” model does not fit well with the evidence. According to Hurtado, scholars have perhaps read too much into Papias’s oft-quoted preference for “living and surviving” voices over against books. Papias’s profession simply echoes the sort of claims to eyewitness accounts that ancient historians regularly made for their works. That is, Papias’s words do not really represent a preference for oral tradition but instead reflect a literary convention of his time, seeking authority for one’s written reports. Hurtado notes that Papias, who supposedly disdained books, is himself reported to have written a five-volume exposition of the sayings of Jesus.³⁴

In addition, the move to lectionaries was another step away from the written text of the Gospels. Epp thinks this may be why the Christians in Oxyrhynchus seemed more interested in noncanonical texts than in the (precanonical) NT documents.³⁵ But Hurtado reminds us that all the interest in (liturgical) public reading suggests that, from the earliest observable years, Christianity was a profoundly *textual* movement.³⁶

³⁰ Koester, “Text of the Synoptic Gospels,” 19–20, 37.

³¹ See David C. Parker, “Scribal Tendencies and the Mechanics of Book Production,” in *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies? Papers from the Fifth Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (ed. Hugh A.G. Houghton and David C. Parker; TS 3/6; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008) 173–184.

³² See Peter Head, “Scribal Behavior and Theological Tendencies in Singular Readings in P. Bodmer II (P⁶⁶),” in *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies? Papers from the Fifth Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (eds. Hugh A.G. Houghton and David C. Parker; TS 3/6; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008) 55–74; Dirk Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (TS 3/5; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007); E.A. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community,” in *The First Christians in the Roman Empire: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (WUNT 229; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008) 526–552.

³³ See Eusebius’s quotation of Papias in *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.4, or Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4 (Lake, LCL).

³⁴ Hurtado, “Second Century,” 26. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 21–30.

³⁵ Epp, “The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri,” 5–55.

³⁶ Hurtado, “Second Century,” 25–26; see Barbara Aland, “Welche Rolle spielen Textkritik und Textgeschichte für das Verständnis des Neuen Testaments? Frühe Leserperspektiven,” *NTS* 52 (2006) 303–318.

The fluidity described above has contributed to the discussion of “living texts”—that is, the phenomenon of texts that evolved through adaptations by the Christian communities who used them.³⁷ According to David Parker and others, the NT texts—in this case, the Gospels—were adapted for the life of the congregation in preaching and teaching, and these adaptations found their way into the texts. Famous examples include the various extant versions of the divorce texts, the Lord’s Prayer, the various endings of Mark,³⁸ and Jesus’ “Eucharistic Words.”³⁹ Each of these sections has long been thought to show signs of reworking and adaptation or interpolation by early Christian communities in the context of their practical applications of Jesus’ teaching.

The phenomenon of “living texts” also includes the Pauline letters, some of which were sent out more than once in different forms to different addressees (Romans and Ephesians), and which were edited into yet other new forms when collected together. Now Paul’s letters exist only in the edited forms extant in such collections.⁴⁰ Another example of a “living text” may be the earlier version of Mark supposedly discernible in Luke and Matthew’s use of Mark, but which differs from our extant Gospel.⁴¹

One of the most celebrated interpolations in the NT is the so-called *pericope adulterae*, the story of the woman caught in adultery. Scholars have long known that this pericope, found in modern Bibles at John 7:53–8:11, is not original to that location, and probably not original to the four Gospels at all. But the story is very old—possibly attested as early as the second century—and is found in various MSS in one of several different locations in John and a couple in the Gospel of Luke; several MSS omit it altogether.⁴²

Though its authenticity is disputed, most translation committees have decided to leave the *pericope adulterae* at its current location, usually with a disclaimer in the

³⁷ David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); see Tobias Nicklas, “Der ‘lebendige Text’ des Neuen Testaments: Der *Judasbrief* in P72 (P. Bodmer VII),” *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi*, 22 (2005) 203–222; Richard Goode, “Looking for the Living among the Dead (Letters): Textual Transmission within First and Second Century Christianity” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2006).

³⁸ Parker, “Living Text,” 49–102.

³⁹ See Eldon J. Epp, “The Disputed Words of the Eucharistic Institution (Luke 22:19b–20): The Long and Short of the Matter,” *Bib* 90 (2009) 407–416, a review of Bradley S. Billings, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Disputed Words in the Lukan Institution (Luke 22:19b–20). An Historico-Exegetical, Theological and Sociological Analysis* (Library of New Testament Studies 314; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009).

⁴⁰ See Fascher, *Textgeschichte*, 13; David Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 9–10.

⁴¹ Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels,” 21, 37.

⁴² Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (NTTS 38; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 208–209; cf. 120–121; see Parker, *Living Text*, 96.

footnotes.⁴³ Others have concluded that it does not belong in the Bible.⁴⁴ Conservative text critic Daniel Wallace argues that the disclaimer approach used by editorial committees is merely a concession to a “tradition of timidity.” Both the *pericope adulterae* and the “long ending of Mark” should be dropped, he suggests, since they were doubtless not original.⁴⁵ A call to remove these sections—which in my estimation should be treated separately—raises larger issues of the nature of scriptural tradition, canon, and authority, to which I will return all too briefly below.

The Nature of Patristic Citations

Patristic citations of the NT are the oldest evidence we have for those texts.⁴⁶ The fluidity of the NT text is also supposedly evidenced by the casual way in which early church fathers cited their texts—citations which show a good deal of adaptation, conflation, omissions, interpolations, and paraphrasing.⁴⁷ Not only so, but patristic texts have also suffered redaction and corruption.⁴⁸ While pointing out the inherent unreliability of patristic citations for the reconstruction of the NT text, some text critics have at the same time complained that those citations are not taken seriously in reconstructing the Greek text unless they support a fourth-century or later uncial reading.⁴⁹ Gordon Fee maintains that the groundwork has at last been laid for scholars to make great strides in this area.⁵⁰ Given the problems, however, it is no surprise that patristic citations have been treated with caution in reconstructing the ancient texts.

The problem is not only the manner of patristic citation of their source materials, but modern expectations. First, according to some scholars, patristic authors

⁴³ So, for example, the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (RSV and NRSV versions), states that although not original to John 8, the story “appears to be an authentic incident in Jesus’ ministry.”

⁴⁴ See Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 65.

⁴⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, “Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-first Century,” *JETS* 52 (2009) 79–100.

⁴⁶ Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels,” 19, states, “Since there is no second-century manuscript evidence, the quest for the text of the Synoptic Gospels in the second century is identical with the question of the earliest usage of their text in other writings.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

⁴⁸ William L. Petersen, “What Text Can New Testament Textual Criticism Ultimately Reach?” in *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis, and Early Church History* (eds. Barbara Aland and Joël Delobel; CBET 7; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994) 136–152. Moreover, many patristic MSS are later than the oldest witnesses to the texts which the Fathers cite.

⁴⁹ See Ehrman, “The Use and Significance of Patristic Evidence,” 118.

⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee, “The Use of Greek Patristic Citations in New Testament Textual Criticism” (ANRW II.26.1; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992); repr. in Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 192.

were likely not citing a biblical text at all but adapting excerpts of catechetical sayings-collections.⁵¹ Second, it is pointed out that patristic citations are similar to the way Paul cites his OT.⁵² Informative for this observation, Emanuel Tov has argued that both Paul and Matthew appear occasionally to cite differing versions of their OT—sometimes preferring a Greek edition that was closer to the proto-Masoretic text.⁵³ This approach, it appears, is at least sometimes a matter of pragmatism—whichever wording works best for the argument in question. Paul’s adaptations of his OT texts, taken together, reflect methods also found in the early church fathers. Third, we should remember that citations are not texts. Citations are often paraphrases or conflation; they *may* give evidence of a specific textual reading.⁵⁴ Fourth, it has been observed that the church fathers often cited texts differently from work to work. That is, they may have adapted their texts in letters and sermons but stayed closer to the source texts when writing commentaries and polemical treatises.⁵⁵

The Problem of Early Christian Heterodoxy

Contributing to the notion of fluidity of the earliest NT MSS is the phenomenon of early Christian heterodoxy. Much second- and third-century Christianity was heterodox by later standards, especially in comparison to Nicene Christology.⁵⁶ This point is consistent with the view dominant since Walter Bauer⁵⁷ that early Christianity was made up of a number of competing theologies, all of which were relatively equal in influence and legitimacy.⁵⁸ A hard-line version of this view suggests that post-fourth-century Nicene orthodoxy was merely the winner in this

⁵¹ See William L. Petersen, “Textual Traditions Examined: What the Text of the Apostolic Fathers Tells Us about the Text of the New Testament in the Second Century,” in *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (eds. Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher M. Tuckett; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 29-46. See Hurtado “Second Century,” 15-18.

⁵² Hurtado, “Second Century,” 15.

⁵³ Emanuel Tov, “The Septuagint between Judaism and Christianity,” in *The Septuagint and Christian Origins/Die Septuaginta und das frühe Christentum*. Papers from the Tübingen Symposium on the Septuagint and Christian Origins, 1-3 April, 2009 (WUNT; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck), forthcoming; see also Moises Silva, “Old Testament in Paul,” in *DPL*, 630-642, esp. 631. Tov attributes certain Pauline quotes to a Greek version close to the proto-Masoretic text, while Silva equates them with the MT.

⁵⁴ Hurtado “Second Century,” 15.

⁵⁵ Fee, “The Use of Greek Patristic Citations,” 193.

⁵⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 11-15.

⁵⁷ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

⁵⁸ But see Wisse, “Redactional Changes,” 53: “The pre-canonical period was not characterized by rival ‘orthodoxies’ . . . but by an inevitable heterodoxy.”

competition and the perpetrator of an orthodox conspiracy against “heretics.” The winners simply rewrote history in their favor, so to speak,⁵⁹ thus accounting for the period of “wild” textual variation ending in the alleged massive textual recension.⁶⁰ But most scholars believe there was no conspiracy nor was there a great recension which eliminated the competition—and most have moved away from a doctrinaire application of Bauer’s thesis. The case for the preeminence of first- and second-century apostolic “proto-orthodoxy” remains strong.⁶¹

Consistent with apostolic “proto-orthodoxy,” Epp argues for a kind of grass-roots sorting out of the texts. He says that the very early near-universal use of *nomina sacra* in NT texts and the (also very early) widespread Christian preference for the codex constitute evidence of early “standardization.”⁶² According to this view, early standardization came from the Jerusalem congregation or from Antioch.⁶³ Such standard practices could also explain the very early formation of the Pauline corpus, with its use of standard Hellenistic forms, as well as the early uniformity in the admittedly unusual configuration of the Gospel titles.⁶⁴

While it may be true that the use of the codex encouraged the comparison of the Synoptic Gospels and the subsequent rewriting of Mark by Luke and Matthew,⁶⁵ Wisse reminds us that in this instance a great deal of respect for the source document was demonstrated. Neither Matthew’s nor Luke’s use of Mark could be considered a “hostile takeover,” aimed at eliminating the source.⁶⁶ Indeed, Mark took its place alongside the liturgically preferred Matthew and the others in the fourfold Gospel collection.

⁵⁹For example, Bart D. Ehrman, “The Text as Window: New Testament Manuscripts and the Social History of Early Christianity,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (SD 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 101-119; see Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 20, 23-25.

⁶⁰See Wisse, “Redactional Changes,” 39-42.

⁶¹See Lee M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007) 410-412.

⁶²Eldon J. Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3)*; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 71-103.

⁶³Antioch is also a likely location of early Christian contact with that Roman innovation, the codex. Bagnall, *Books*, 88-90, suggests Rome as the location for these developments but argues for a later time frame.

⁶⁴See Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, 48-49.

⁶⁵Parker, *Living Text*, 186-187.

⁶⁶Wisse, “Redactional Changes,” 42.

The Phenomenon of Scribal Corruptions

In addition to the omnipresent copying errors in MSS, there are some well-known instances of scribes or their communities effecting changes in the text that “corrected” or “clarified” the exemplar to say what they already knew it meant.⁶⁷ Such examples are ideological—especially christological—where a text was changed to reflect a “high” christology.

Parker asserts that in the very early period (pre-third century), written texts had a different role in the Christian community than they did later, and consequently there were “many striking changes to the text” early on.⁶⁸ On scribal corruption, Bart Ehrman parallels the conclusion of Fascher (above), noting several instances of “orthodox” corruptions related to various christological controversies.⁶⁹

But other scholars urge caution against overstating the problem. Barbara Aland notes that while clearly there are instances of intentional scribal corruption, for the most part the scribes were faithful to their source texts.⁷⁰ To refer, therefore, to scribes as the “first interpreters” or “expositors” of the text, while technically correct, tends to exaggerate the problem. In another example, Peter Head analyzed several singular readings of \mathfrak{P}^{66} and concluded that the scribe was careless and would appear to have been a likely candidate for the kinds of theological adaptation and improvement (or corruption) which supposedly were characteristic of early Christian scribal behavior. However, this study of the singular readings shows a notable lack of clear theological tendency in scribal behavior.⁷¹ Similarly, commenting on the theological variants of \mathfrak{P}^{72} , James Royse notes that though such changes do occur, they are rare.⁷²

Parker concludes that there is no evidence for mass scribal changes due to dictation and, for later MSS, suggests an evolutionary model of scribal changes, that is, of tiny alterations over time.⁷³ Regarding the theory of “orthodox corruption,” Parker suggests that the situation in the early church was more complex than Ehrman allows:

⁶⁷ Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 276.

⁶⁸ Parker, “Scribal Tendencies,” 183-184.

⁶⁹ Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 47-273.

⁷⁰ Barbara Aland, “Sind Schreiber Früher Neutestamentlicher Handschriften Interpreten des Textes?” in *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies* (TS 3/4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006) 114-122; see Hurtado, “Beyond the Interlude?” 38-39.

⁷¹ Head, “Scribal Behavior,” 74.

⁷² James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (NTTS 36; Leiden: Brill, 2008) 738; see Scott D. Charlesworth, “Public and Private—Second- and Third-Century Gospel Manuscripts,” in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias; Library of Second Temple Studies 70; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009) 148-175.

⁷³ Parker, “Scribal Tendencies,” 183.

The theories of *Orthodox Corruption* are binary, presenting one form of the text as original and the second as an orthodox corruption. [My arguments] require that *both* forms of text (or the three or more that may exist) are available to us because they were preserved in the textual life of a community, which both accepted them and had them recopied because they expressed what they believed.⁷⁴

This statement reminds us that different scholars may interpret the data differently. As Parker notes, absence of evidence requires caution.

Implications for the Search for the “Original Autographs”

Parker’s evaluation of Ehrman’s binary theory of orthodox corruptions returns us to the discussion of the NT documents as “living texts.” To illustrate what happened with certain texts that were adapted by later Christian communities, Parker uses the analogy of a Shakespeare play which the bard wrote in its original draft, but which he then changed numerous times during rehearsals, such that by the time of the first performance, the “original” performance text was considerably different from the “original” prerehearsal draft.⁷⁵

Parker cites the *pericope adulterae* as evidence for the “living” nature of the text. According to his view, oral tradition continued into the third or even fourth centuries, and in the early days was preferred over the written text; authority had to do not with a passage’s place in a canonical (or precanonical) text but with its utility (the fact it was used),⁷⁶ a fact which allowed for the inclusion of the *pericope adulterae*.

Wallace pans the concept of living text as a “post-modern intrusion” into textual criticism.⁷⁷ He rejects Parker’s analogy of the Shakespeare play, pointing out that though there were changes in the text, the author maintained control throughout the process. While Wallace has a point, perhaps Parker’s purpose would have been better served by the illustration of Modest Musorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” Musorgsky’s original piano version was first edited and published five years after his death. The piece appeared in several adaptations before Maurice Ravel published his famous orchestration. Various conductors further modified Ravel’s version, so that our familiar recordings are several steps removed from Musorgsky’s original piano version. It is the same piece in several different “originals.”⁷⁸ The NT texts have undergone a development considerably more complicated than that in this illustration, the implications of which we may not ignore.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 184.

⁷⁵ Parker, *Living Text*, 4–6.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 183.

⁷⁷ Wallace, “Challenges,” 80–91.

⁷⁸ See Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, Maurice,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 20:868.

Regarding the multivalence of the term "original autograph," Epp discusses the task of textual criticism in light of the problem "living texts."⁷⁹ He says we must consider four "text-forms" (a designation he prefers over the term "original"). These are (1) a predecessor text-form discoverable behind a NT writing that played a role in the composition of that writing; (2) an autographic text-form as it left the desk of the Bible writer or a secretary. Whole books in this dimension of originality would normally be close in form to the NT writings as we possess them—except in two important cases, when they have been subject to reformulation by forces operative in one or both of the following dimensions: (3) a canonical text-form, that is, the textual form of a book (or collection of books) at the time it acquired consensual authority; and/or (4) an interpretive text form, representing each iteration or reformulation of a writing—as it was used in the life, worship, and teaching of the church.⁸⁰

In response we may say that the phenomenon of the "living text" (a) is real and must be taken seriously, and (b) is limited and does not change the goals of textual criticism, realistically understood. Two observations illustrate the point: (1) The *pericope adulterae*, for all its celebrity, is a unique case.⁸¹ If such "free-floating" stories were really a major source of inauthentic interpolations, then we would not be talking about one pericope, but many. The problem of this pericope is intriguing, perhaps even intractable, but it is not ultimately serious. (2) The likely differences between multiple "originals" of Romans or Ephesians are not so great as to nullify our study of those documents⁸²—unless one has an inappropriate view of Scripture and of the tasks of textual criticism. We may also say that the problem of "scribal corruptions" is not insurmountable, since we can usually identify such texts. At the same time, the "new original" texts are valuable, as Parker suggests, in helping us understand the faith of our early Christian forebears for whom these altered texts constituted Scripture.

The ambiguity we are forced to live with, given the likelihood we will never completely reconstruct the original texts (when there actually was *one* original), is only an insurmountable problem to those who labor under an inappropriate concept of Scripture. Most text critics are convinced of the value of reconstructing the

⁷⁹Epp, "Multivalence," 245-281.

⁸⁰Ibid., 276-277; Epp notes that there is "a real sense in which every intentional, meaningful scribal alteration to a text creates a new text-form, a new 'original,' though we may not wish to carry the matter to this extreme (if only out of practical considerations)," 277.

⁸¹Keith, *Pericope Adulterae*, 258: "It is surprising that no scholar . . . has recognized the implications of the (pericope's) unique status as an independent Jesus tradition that a written (fourfold) gospel then absorbed."

⁸²But see Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection*, 50-54; esp. 46-47, where he portrays Paul's letters not as private but as "literature" edited for publication as a "compatible collection."

original as best we can. But that task must be carried out in light of the traditional nature of Scripture, its historical developments, and the understanding of scriptural authority by the church throughout its history.⁸³

Some scholars claim that essentially we already have the original autographs in our reconstructed texts. While we may have a text close to the “originals,”⁸⁴ the point raises fundamental questions about the nature of Scripture. Evangelicals who (rightly) reject the preservationist arguments for priority of the Majority Text are themselves vulnerable to the same objections, at least in the case of an extreme form of “inerrancy of the original autographs.” Specifically, preservationism is not a viable historical position, for it is not legitimate to “tell” God what he must have done (or what he must do); it is dogma rewriting history. More to the point, elevating the hypothetical original autographs to such a level of importance misunderstands the nature of scriptural authority.⁸⁵ Since the first Christians did not invest the original autographs with such artificial value, why should we?⁸⁶

THE PROMISE OF THE “NEW” TEXTUAL CRITICISM

What positive contributions have been made by the “new” textual criticism? A sign of the vitality of textual criticism is the current debate. The “new” textual criticism’s emphasis on the history of the transmission of the text and on the sociological investigation of the early Christians for whom these texts were Scripture is a positive development. Singular readings such as christological scribal corruptions, once simply discarded in favor of determining the original text, are now used to portray scribal characteristics and to better understand the Christians who produced those MSS.⁸⁷ A better understanding of early Christian history and a stronger sense of solidarity with those believers is an important benefit of the “new” textual criticism.

⁸³ Parker, *Living Text*, 189–190, contends that the advent of printing introduced a new understanding of the text as authoritative. Scripture acquired a status that conferred upon the document a power that was really “that of the press.”

⁸⁴ Moises Silva, “Response,” in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. David Alan Black; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 141–150. See Moises Silva’s response to the problem that our reconstructed texts do not correspond to any known MSS.

⁸⁵ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 428, states: “The final authority of the church is not its Bible, but its Lord”; see Lee M. McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority? A Discussion of Books, Texts, and Translations,” in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (ed. Craig Evans and Emanuel Tov; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 203–239.

⁸⁶ See R. Timothy McLay, “Excursus: The Use of the Septuagint in the New Testament,” in Lee M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 224–240.

⁸⁷ For example, Ernest C. Colwell, “Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits: A Study in \mathfrak{P}^{45} , \mathfrak{P}^{66} , and \mathfrak{P}^{75} ,” in *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 106–124; Roysse, *Scribal Habits*, 39–63.

The recent debate has also yielded fruit in the area of the methodology for construction of a NT critical apparatus. Two different approaches are at work in parallel projects to construct a thorough apparatus. These are the University of Münster Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung's *Editio Critica Maior* and the British-American "International Greek New Testament Project."

The *ECM* has appeared to date as fascicles covering the General Epistles.⁸⁸ However, dissatisfaction with the methodological assumptions behind the hypothetical text reconstruction has led the IGNTF group to work on their own textual apparatus, using the *textus receptus* as a collation base and encouraging scholars and students to move out from there.⁸⁹ After a long history of delays and controversy over method,⁹⁰ so far this project has yielded volumes on the Gospels of Luke and John.⁹¹

Another promising emphasis of the "new" textual criticism is the stress on the NT manuscripts themselves as artifacts of early Christianity. Hurtado calls attention to the rich data the MSS provide in addition to the text itself.⁹² He asks about the overwhelming Christian preference for the codex form and about the origins and significance of the near-ubiquitous *nomina sacra*, as well as the use of the staurogram.⁹³ In addition, much may be learned about early Christian attitudes towards

⁸⁸ Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, ed. Barbara Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior*, 4:1 of Catholic Letters/James (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).

⁸⁹ Eldon J. Epp, "The International Greek New Testament Project: Motivation and History," *NovT* 39 (1997) 1-20; repr. in *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays 1962-2004* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Epp notes the controversial nature of the decision to use the *textus receptus* as a base but defends the need for a "full text" as text-base. The issue has become moot, since digital resources now make possible comparison with any manuscript—that is, at that time in John only (Epp, "IGNTF," 14).

⁹⁰ Kurt Aland (Muenster) considered the IGNTF use of the *textus receptus* unacceptably "anachronistic," even though the purpose of the project is to produce a critical apparatus for which the *textus receptus* functions only as a starting point; see Epp, "Interlude," 402-403.

⁹¹ *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (The New Testament in Greek 3,1 and 3,2; Oxford: Clarendon, 1984; 1987). See W.J. Elliott and D.C. Parker, eds., *The Gospel according to St. John: The Papyri* (The New Testament in Greek IV,1; NTTs 20; Leiden: Brill, 1995). See U.B. Schmid, with W.J. Elliott and David C. Parker, eds. *The Gospel according to St. John: The Majuscules* (The New Testament in Greek IV,2; NTTs 37; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁹² Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); see Larry W. Hurtado, "The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the *Nomina Sacra* and the Staurogram," in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson* (eds. Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2000) 271-288.

⁹³ The Tau-Rho staurogram is an actual depiction of a figure upon a cross, with the loop of the Rho representing the head of the crucified figure.

their texts and understanding of the content through an examination of the use of *titloi* and *kephalaioi* (titles and headings).⁹⁴ Not only do these markers show early Christian ideas about where the text divides, but they constitute a simple commentary indicating early understanding of the content. Scribal marginal notes may also be informative.⁹⁵

Along similar lines is the evidence provided by manuscript reading aids—breathing marks, use of dieresis, and occasional spacing. These aids are unusual for literary texts of the period, and Hurtado suggests that the Christian MSS with these scribal devices were prepared for groups, for ease of public reading, and probably constitute artifact confirmation of second-century reports (Justin Martyr) of the liturgical practice of reading these NT writings.⁹⁶

Yet another positive area of research was pursued by the late Tübingen NT scholar Martin Hengel. His work on the titles of the Gospels,⁹⁷ the four-Gospel collection, and early church “book cupboards” has drawn attention to early liturgical use of the Gospels.⁹⁸ Hengel argued that as book titles met the needs of the libraries, scriptoria, and bookshops of Hellenism, the titles of the Gospels were functional necessities in the church from early on. He disputes the old assumption that the Gospels were circulated as anonymous documents, maintaining that the titles were necessarily present once the Gospels began circulating. There was no such thing as a public (liturgical) reading from an anonymous text. “Every written gospel needs the proof of the authority that stands behind it.”⁹⁹

The discipline of textual criticism lends itself to the use of computers in research. Great strides have been made in computer-assisted research techniques, databases, digital imaging of MSS, and other online resources. Adequate discussion of this topic would require a separate article, so I list only a few representative resources.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Metzger and Ehrman, *Text*, 34–36.

⁹⁵ Note the content-oriented section markers as marginal notes in \mathfrak{P}^{72} .

⁹⁶ Hurtado, “Second Century,” 1, notes that such evidence is found in previously available MSS (Gospel of John \mathfrak{P}^{52} [P.Ryl.] 457). See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995) 205–208, 211–231.

⁹⁷ Martin Hengel, “The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark,” in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985) 68–84.

⁹⁸ See Martin Hengel, *Die vier Evangelien und das eine Evangelium von Jesus Christus* (WUNT 224; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87, n. 258 (my translation).

¹⁰⁰ See Hurtado, “Beyond the Interlude?” 46–48; “Codex Sinaiticus” site, <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>; “POxy: Oxyrhynchus Online,” <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/>; see also links at such sites as TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism, <http://purl.org/TC>; “Evangelical Textual Criticism” site, <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/>.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS FURTHER DISCUSSION

The challenges posed by the “new” textual criticism are several, and they are significant. At core, these issues touch us deeply in areas of life and faith. What are the implications for our notions of canon, of apostolicity, inspiration, and scriptural authority? These questions need to be explored further.

We need not conclude that traditional text critical endeavors are futile, but neither may we sweep the issues under the rug. To assume that the NT documents as we have them are virtually identical with the originals merely stifles discussion and hinders progress. Finally, we must explore the ramifications of a reconstructed NT text for our understanding of early Christianity. For not only must we face the implications of using a hypothetical text that never was, but we must also avoid imposing upon early Christianity a later canon-consciousness. First-century Christians knew the *Septuagint* as their Bible, while, strictly speaking, the first “New Testament Christians” lived in the fourth century!¹⁰¹ Nor may we ignore the fact that—except for heretics—Christians have always revered the OT. The whole Bible, not just the NT, is Christian Scripture. These observations have implications for biblical theology and hermeneutics, indeed for the theological self-understanding of the Stone-Campbell movement.

What should we do from here? The problems presented by the “new” textual criticism are real, but with appropriate caveats we may proceed with exegesis, theology, and preaching, confident in the knowledge that we have the best Bible of any Christians since the fixing of the NT canon. Let us celebrate the centuries of invaluable work on the NT text as we debate the methods and goals of textual criticism, at the same time humbly recognizing that ours will never be a perfect Bible. The realities warn against allowing the current NT text to become the new *Textus Receptus*, and call for ongoing discussions about the NT text in relation to the hermeneutical traditions impacting its study. But the news for Christians has never been better: ours is an excellent text—a text that is at the heart of our theology, our praxis, and of the future of the Stone-Campbell movement itself.^{ScJ}

¹⁰¹ That is, the 27-book NT as we know it was first delineated in the fourth century.