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CHALLENGES IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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I. PREFACE

Thirty years ago, NT textual criticism on this side of the Atlantic seemed to be on its last legs—so much so that Eldon Epp could write with a straight face an essay entitled "New Testament Textual Criticism in America: Requiem for a Discipline"—an article published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.[1] Five years earlier, he lamented the fact that there were probably more textual critics working at the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster than there were in all of North America.[2] (The INTF is responsible for producing the Nestle-Aland Greek text; there are about half a dozen full-time textual critics working there.) What Epp described was a sad state of affairs, but the *postmortem* reports were nonetheless a bit premature.

In the last decade and a half, the cadaver has come back to life[3] and is stronger than ever. Who could have predicted that a book on textual criticism would ever make the New York Times Bestseller list? Yet Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, published four years ago, did just that. A large part of the reason it did so was because its thesis was that the proto-orthodox radically changed the text to conform to their views. *Misquoting Jesus* gave the impression that everything was in doubt and nothing was certain. The book was a sensation, creating a Chicken Little effect; countless people abandoned the faith because of it.

When *Misquoting Jesus* hit the stores, questions were raised that many biblical scholars were not prepared to discuss. That is because most scholars have only gotten a taste of textual criticism, often on the assumption that all the work has already been done. All they needed was their Nestle-Aland text and they have got the original.

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[1] *JBL* 98 (1979) 94–98.

[2] Eldon J. Epp, "The Twentieth-Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism," *JBL* 93 (1974) 386–414; the article was republished in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee; Studies and Documents 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 83–108. The statement appears on p. 108.

[3] What is arguably the watershed in both the new life and changing character of NT textual criticism is Bart D. Ehrman's masterful tome *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Much of what Ehrman said was a simplifying of his *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, a first-rate academic piece published in 1993. But he had also gone through a theological shift in the last decade and a half, and *Misquoting Jesus* began to reflect that shift. He was more provocative and less cautious than he had been previously. Most importantly, he took his argument to the public square rather than to peers. This was not an oversight; it was part of his strategy. In one of his interviews, Ehrman spoke about a new breed of biblical scholar, stating with approbation that they are bypassing peer review and going straight to the public arena to market their ideas.

Along with two other well-known textual critics, Eldon Epp and David Parker, Bart Ehrman is leading the way toward a new skepticism about recovering the wording of the autographa.

As I said, this discipline has been given new life in recent years, but there are some doubts that what was resurrected is the same thing as that which was buried. To put it bluntly, NT textual criticism has changed in some dramatic and even drastic ways. This article offers an analysis of two aspects of that change, proposes *desiderata* for the discipline, and concludes with why evangelicals should contribute to the field.

II. POSTMODERN INTRUSIONS INTO NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The first aspect to investigate is a hybrid of cultural and philosophical shifts, or what may more specifically be labeled as postmodern intrusions into the discipline.

There are three specific ways in which postmodern thought and its cultural milieu have affected NT textual criticism: defining the goal of the discipline; assessing the role of certainty; and promoting the need for collaboration.

1. *The goal of NT textual criticism.* Until the 1990s, there was little question that the primary objective of NT textual criticism was to examine the copies of the NT for the purpose of determining the exact wording of the original. In 1993, Bart Ehrman's provocative book *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* appeared. He opens the discussion by offering his thesis: "scribes occasionally altered the words of their sacred texts to make them more patently orthodox and to prevent their misuse by Christians who espoused aberrant views." This is followed by a statement of his method:

> I am less concerned with interpreting the words of the New Testament as they came from the pens of its authors than with seeing how these words came to be altered in the course of their transmission. Moreover, my understanding of this process of transmission, that is, the way I conceptualize scribal alterations of a text, derives less from traditional categories of philology than from recent developments in the field of literary theory.[4]

Ehrman here shifts the goal of textual criticism slightly: no longer is his concern for the original words of the text as much it is with seeing the cor-

[4] Ibid., xi.

ruptions of the text in the early transmissional history. Although this is not a denial of the prime objective, it is giving it considerably less weight than other textual critics[5] had previously done.[6]

Four years later, Ehrman was the president of the Southeastern regional Society of Biblical Literature. His presidential address was entitled "The Neglect of the First Born in New Testament Studies"—by which he meant the neglect of textual criticism. He spoke of the "modernist obsessions with origins" as that which has contributed to this neglect, and argued that the only way to bring the discipline back into a prominent role was to put the quest for the original text on the shelf and instead "pursue new lines of inquiry." To Ehrman, the primary goal of textual criticism was now "to see how the transmission of this text came to be so thoroughly enmeshed in the concerns and conflicts of the emerging Christian church."

Flash forward nine years, to 2006. In an online interview, Ehrman said: "For me, the most exciting thing about being a textual critic over the past 15–20 years has been seeing how textual criticism has moved beyond its *myopic* concern of . . . trying to determine some kind of 'original' text to situating itself in the broader fields of discourse that concern an enormous range of scholars of Christian antiquity."[7] In other words, trying to get back to the original was irrelevant, uninteresting, narrow-minded, and part and parcel of a *modernist* ideology.

In the same year that Ehrman gave his presidential address, David Parker, professor of theology at the University of Birmingham, published a small

[5] Ehrman's indebtedness to "developments in the field of literary theory" may mean nothing more than what he stated earlier, viz., that scribal activity on the text of scripture needs to be accounted for in ways that go beyond philological explanations. But that is a truism that has been understood since the days of Lachmann. It would seem rather that Ehrman is moving toward the next logical step in what E. D. Hirsch called "The Banishment of the Author"—that is, not only is the critic no longer concerned about what the author *meant*; now, he is also unconcerned about what the author *wrote*. This is perhaps saying more than Ehrman intended. After all, in order to establish that scribes corrupted the text, *some* original text almost surely has to be presupposed. But Ehrman's study seemed to open the door for the next step.

[6] In Ehrman's 1997 presidential address to the Southeastern Region of the Society of Biblical Literature, he moves farther away from the traditional goal of textual criticism. In his concluding remarks, he summarizes his argument:

> Thus the modernist obsession with origins, historically so characteristic of biblical studies, can give way even in the study of the text, a study invested not simply in a hypothetically primal fixed entity ("the autograph") but in texts that have been construed over time, reread by readers in real contexts, and occasionally rewritten by some of these readers in the process of transmission.

It only needs be noted here that Ehrman eschews the traditional objective as belonging to a bygone era, calling it "the *modernist* obsession with origins" (italics added). He speaks of NT textual criticism as "the firstborn of New Testament studies" (*passim*), and he hints at replacing an outdated modernist approach with a postmodern one when he declares, "With the passing of time, and the emergence of new questions and interests, every critical approach to the New Testament becomes antiquated." In his final sentence, he hopes that we will "train a new generation of scholars in the field to pursue new lines of inquiry and so bring this neglected child to an age of maturity." (The title of this address is "The Neglect of the Firstborn in New Testament Studies," delivered on March 14, 1997 in Macon, GA. It is accessible online at http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/extras/ehrman-pres.html.)

[7] Interview with P. J. Williams at www.evangelicaltextualcriticism.com (emphasis added).

book called *The Living Text of the Gospels*.[8] Parker sees his work as nothing less than revolutionary for Gospel studies: "The book has been written with the growing conviction that, once the present approach has been adopted, much else in our understanding of the Gospels requires revision."[9]

He tips his hand about where the book is heading in his definition of the discipline: "Textual criticism is *in essence* the act of *understanding* what another person means by the words that are laid before me."[10] That definition is hardly the traditional one for this field. In fact, it is a definition more related to *exegesis* than to textual criticism, for it embraces as of highest importance "understanding." Textual criticism has historically focused its energies more on establishing the *wording* of a document, but Parker does not see it that way.[11] If he were some pseudo-scholar putting this idea out on the internet, no one would take him seriously. But David Parker is probably Great Britain's best NT textual critic today. What he says helps to define the discipline.

Note also the second part of this definition: "understanding what another person means by *the words that are laid before me*."[12] By this Parker does *not* mean that the original text has been established. No, he means that *each* MS of the NT tells a story, and it is the task of the textual critic to find out what that story is. It does not matter that the MSS differ from each other, because the objective is no longer to get back to the original text. The objective is to learn what we can about the social milieu and theological tensions that early Christians faced. In other words, Parker is assuming that the quest for the autographic text is virtually irrelevant and that the goal of textual criticism should be to focus on the rich heritage of textual variants that the scribes have bequeathed to us.

Why this preoccupation with secondary variants, with words that only tell us about various Christian groups in various times and places, but tell us nothing about what Paul or Mark or James wrote? Parker argues that we have made a false distinction between Scripture and tradition, and that the lines need to be erased. "For the heart of the matter," he says, "is that the definitive text is not essential to Christianity, because the presence of the Spirit is not limited to the inspiration of the written word."[13] Thus, for Parker, the Spirit of God works in the community of believers to such an extent that deviations from the autographic text are simply evidence that the Spirit is still at work

[8] David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[9] Ibid. xi.

[10] Ibid. 1. Emphasis added.

[11] Ibid. 3.

[12] By "stability of the text" we do not mean that Parker thinks that the original NT text in every instance is known. Rather, his objective is to interpret the text as it appears in the MSS, and to wrestle with the variants as indicating the social milieu of various Christian groups. In other words, he is assuming that the quest for the autographic text must be abandoned and that the goal of textual criticism should be to focus on the rich heritage of textual variants that the MSS have bequeathed us.

[13] David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 211.

and that the Bible is a living, changing document. He concludes *The Living Text of the Gospels* with these words:

> Rather than looking for right and wrong readings, and with them for right or wrong beliefs and practices, the way is [now] open for the possibility that the church is the community of the Spirit even in its multiplicities of texts.[14]

Parker illustrates how the goal of recovering the wording of the original has to be jettisoned by finding an analogy in Shakespeare's plays. Since Shakespeare both wrote his plays and tweaked them as they were in living production, it is impossible to speak of a single *original* text: "There are just different texts from different stages of production."[15] Parker concludes from this illustration that "the quest for an original text need not be the only option available to the modern textual critic."[16] He then asks, "[A]re the Gospels the kinds of texts that have originals?"[17] The rest of his book essentially attempts to disabuse the reader of that notion.[18]

What are we to make of Parker's argument? First, his analogy breaks down at the very point he is trying to argue for. In Shakespeare's case, the author continued to have control over the document after it was written. He tweaked it, added words and notes, altered stanzas, rewrote sections. As long as he was in control, there was always the possibility that multiple "originals" could arise. That is not the case with NT books. Every book of the NT was something that was dispatched to a locale other than where the author was. Once the courier took the letter or Gospel to its destination, the author lost

[14] Ibid. 212.

[15] Ibid. 4.

[16] Ibid. 7.

[17] Ibid.

[18] For example, he boldly states that "[t]he concept of a Gospel that is fixed in shape, authoritative, and final as a piece of literature has to be abandoned" (ibid. 93). To be sure, Parker does seem to affirm that the quest for the original wording of the text has its place, but he also seems to quickly dismiss this with a theological agenda (p. 211):

> It may seem that the argument is moving towards the conclusion that the quest for the earliest forms of the text is worthless. But it is not, because the attempt to recover early text forms is a necessary part of that reconstruction of the history of the text without which, as this book has been at some pains to demonstrate, nothing can be understood. But, even if very ancient, even the original texts, could be recovered or reconstructed, the ambiguity of the definitive text would not be at an end. Even though many historical questions would be answered, our interest in the history of the text would not cease. Theologically, there would be no resolution of the central problem. For the heart of the matter is that the definitive text is not essential to Christianity, because the presence of the Spirit is not limited to the inspiration of the written word. We have already approached this from the point of view of a false distinction between Scripture and tradition. Examining it in the present context, one is struck by the fact that a belief in single authoritative texts accords to the Spirit a large role in the formation of Scripture, and almost none at all in the growth of the tradition. Once the distinction has been abolished in the way that we have attempted above, it is possible fully to acknowledge that the very life and whole life of the church is in the Spirit.

There is much to critique in what Parker is saying here, but we will leave it at this: whether the original text carries a different weight of theological authority than the copies that differ from it, to argue that "the whole of the church is in the Spirit" in the way Parker does is to deny the historical foundations of the gospel any significant role.

control of the document. This act of distancing the document from the author means that the original text was that form of the text that the author dispatched—the form of the text when he handed the document to the courier to take it to its destination.

Second, in the case of Shakespeare, aesthetics were at stake, not authority. That is not the case with the NT. It is not an "unhelpful" objective to recover the original wording, in spite of Parker's protests to the contrary.[19] If the alteration of the original text takes the form of changing the meaning, then to that degree it also dilutes the authority of the original author's message. And precisely because of this it is imperative that textual critics attend to the primary task of recovering the wording of the original documents.[20]

Besides Ehrman and Parker, Eldon Epp has also moved in this direction. In a multi-author book entitled *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, he praises Parker's *Living Text of the Gospels*, arguing that community and the role of the Spirit are more important than an authoritative text or even a historically reliable text.[21] In the same multi-author volume, Moisés Silva implicitly takes Epp to task, and explicitly takes Parker to task:

> I would like to affirm—not only with Hort, but with practically all students of ancient documents—that the recovery of the original text (i.e., the text in its original form, prior to the alterations produced in the copying process) remains the primary task of textual criticism. Of course, it is not the only task. The study of early textual variation for its own sake is both a fascinating and a most profitable exercise. And it is also true that we have sometimes been sloppy in our use of the term *original text*. But neither of these truths nor the admittedly great difficulties involved in recovering the autographic words can be allowed to dissolve the concept of an original text. Nor do I find it helpful when David Parker, for example, sanctifies his proposals by a theological appeal to a divinely inspired textual diversity—indeed, textual confusion and contradiction—that is supposed to be of greater spiritual value than apostolic authority.
>
> But even apart from that, for us to retreat from the traditional task of textual criticism is equivalent to shooting ourselves in the foot. And my exhibit A is Bart Ehrman's brilliant monograph *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. . . . Although this book is appealed to in support of blurring the notion of an original text, there is hardly a page in that book that does not in fact mention such a text or assume its accessibility. . . . Indeed, Ehrman's book is unimaginable unless he can identify an initial form of the text that can be differentiated from a later alteration.[22]

[19] Parker, *Living Text* 6.

[20] Parker uses as primary biblical illustrations difficult textual problems in the Gospels. These cannot be dismissed, of course, but neither does it logically follow to say that because a problem may not at the present time present a clear solution, the original text therefore is a myth. Should we give up on the main objective of recovering the text because our knowledge of the data is imperfect? In what other academic discipline does one completely redefine his mission because there are bumps in the road?

[21] See his discussion of Ehrman and Parker in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. David Alan Black; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 55–61 (in Epp's chapter, "Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism: Moving from the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century").

[22] Moisés Silva, "Response," in *Rethinking* 149.

When all is said and done, we still must affirm the following as the *primary* goal of NT textual criticism: the study of the copies of the NT for the primary purpose of determining the exact wording of the autographs.

Further, this is not just a *modernist* goal, as Ehrman claims; it reaches back to Origen, Ireneaus, Tertullian, Eusebius, Jerome, and a host of others. All of them spoke about textual variants and they all commented on the priority of the original text as that which had authority. That the fathers may not have always executed their approach to the text well does not mean that recovery of the original wording was irrelevant to them. Indeed, it is *only* in recent times that a new model has been proposed. To speak of the modernist preoccupation with origins is only half true: this was also a concern to *pre*-modern Christians. *Every* generation of the church, in fact, has been concerned with determining the wording of the originals—until now.

The worst aspects of postmodern textual criticism thus are that it is anchorless, detached from history; it is isolationist, because it divorces itself from the concerns of the *community* of Christians—a community that has been around for two millennia; and it is self-defeating because it has to presuppose an original text in order to blur the distinctions between it and any secondary text. In short, the quest for the wording of the autographa is still worth fighting for.

But I agree that the secondary objective of tracing out how Christians have changed the text is important, and I am grateful for the work of Ehrman, Epp, and Parker in this direction. (At the same time, looking at the social milieu of early Christians as seen through the window of textual variants cannot be accomplished without knowledge of the original text.) But by no stretch of the imagination can it be said that this secondary goal is just as important or even just as "exciting" as the primary one.

Ironically, what Bart Ehrman—just two years ago—called the "most exciting thing about [textual criticism]" has apparently lost its luster. When the INTF in Münster had a colloquium on textual criticism this past summer at which all NT textual critics were invited, Bart Ehrman did not show up. I inquired about this and learned that he was not invited. Why not? Because he had declared that he is no longer working in the discipline.[23] This new goal of seeing textual variants as equal in importance to the wording of the original apparently has not captured his interest with any kind of staying power.

Now, to be sure, Ehrman, Parker, and Epp are but three voices. But they are three extremely influential voices. And those who get involved in textual criticism need to be wary of the pitfalls of their agenda.

2. *Epistemological skepticism.* Concomitant with the new definition of textual criticism is a frontal attack on any kind of certainty. This is in keeping with postmodernism's focus on relativism and of seeing all views as equally possible with none more probable than the others.

[23] He also confirmed this to me in an email prior to our Greer-Heard Forum dialogue.

The epistemological skepticism of generations X and Y is cultivated in the soil of cultural pessimism.[24] Broken homes and lives racked with sin are not the ingredients for hope or certainty. And just as ancient textual variants are often a window on the soul of the Christian community back then, so also the methods and assumptions of textual criticism today are becoming a window on the soul of our own culture and our own lives.

The only certainty, in this approach, is uncertainty itself. It is the one absolute that denies all the others. Going hand in glove with this is an intellectual pride—pride that one "knows" enough to be skeptical about all positions. What gets blurred in such wholesale skepticism is any distinction between types of certainty.

Can we know with absolute certainty that what we have in our hands today exactly replicates the original text? Of course not. We can never have absolute certainty about any historical documents whose originals have vanished. And postmodernism is a corrective to the naïve epistemological triumphalism of the modernism that has infected so much of the evangelical community.

So, if we do not have absolute certainty about the wording of the original, what do we have? We have overwhelming probability that the wording in our printed Bibles is pretty close. The new skeptics, however, argue that because something is not absolutely certain it's entirely up for grabs. I will offer two illustrations.

First is an article by Brent Nongbri that appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 2005, entitled, "The Use and Abuse of $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel."[25] $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ is widely considered to be the oldest known fragment of the NT. Most scholars date it between AD 100 and 150 and have so ever since its discovery in 1934. Nongbri finds a few parallels to the script of this papyrus in other papyri dating from the late second or early third century. And even though the best and most abundant parallels come from 100 to 150,[26] Nongbri declares:

> What emerges from this survey is nothing surprising to papyrologists: paleography is not the most effective method for dating texts, particularly those written in a literary hand. Roberts himself noted this point in his edition of $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$. The real problem is the way scholars of the New Testament have used and

[24] David Dockery, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (ed. David Dockery; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 15:

> This new generation can be characterized by chaos. They are children of divorce, with 50 percent coming from broken homes. According to the most recent statistics, every day 13 youth commit suicide, 16 are murdered, 1,000 become mothers, 100,000 bring guns to school, 2,200 drop out of school, 500 begin using drugs, 1,000 begin drinking alcohol, and hundreds are assaulted, robbed, or raped.

These sobering realities have produced a generation pessimistic about its own chances for survival.

[25] Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *HTR* 98 (2005) 23–52.

[26] Cf. C. H. Roberts's note in *Greek Literary Hands* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) 11, that P. Fayyum 110, a dated manuscript from AD 94, may resemble $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ more closely than any other dated manuscript. Further, of the new evidence that Nongbri marshals, P Michigan 5336, dated AD 152, is his closest parallel.

> abused papyrological evidence. I have not radically revised Roberts's work. I have not provided any third-century documentary papyri that are absolute "dead ringers" for the handwriting of $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$, and even had I done so, that would not force us to date $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ at some exact point in the third century. Paleographic evidence does not work that way. What I have done is to show that any serious consideration of the window of possible dates for $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ must include dates in the later second and early third centuries. Thus, $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ *cannot be used as evidence to silence other debates about the existence (or non-existence) of the Gospel of John in the first half of the second century.* Only a papyrus containing an explicit date or one found in a clear archaeological stratigraphic context could do the work scholars want $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ to do. As it stands now, the papyrological evidence should take a second place to other forms of evidence in addressing debates about the dating of the Fourth Gospel.[27]

Nongbri's point is that because an early third century date is *possible*, $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ is worthless in defense of a first-century date of John. In other words, because we do not have absolute certainty that $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ was written between 100 and 150, we have no certainty at all. However, as several scholars have noted in critiques of Nongbri's article, the evidence for $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ is overwhelmingly in favor of a date in the first half of the second century. Although we lack certainty in this instance, we do not lack probability. The epistemological skepticism of postmodern culture tends to ignore probabilities and simply notes that if a view is not watertight, then it is just as leaky as any other. And since interpretations of historical data are almost always less than watertight, no view is privileged.

As a second illustration, consider again the writings of Bart Ehrman. In print and in internet discussions with other textual critics, he has argued that we have absolutely no idea what the original form of the text looked like, since our earliest copies come from a few generations removed. Consider for example the following:

> we don't know how much the texts got changed in all those decades/[and] *centuries before* our *earliest* manuscripts, and we have no way of knowing.[28]

One might think that speaking so casually of the *centuries* before our earliest NT MSS was a misprint. But Ehrman has said this very thing in interviews and even at the Greer-Heard Forum last April in which he and I debated the general reliability of the early MSS. But the facts are otherwise. We have as many as a dozen manuscripts from the second century alone, and more MSS from the third century than from the fourth, so it is not at all accurate to speak of "*centuries* before our earliest manuscripts." Although the second-century MSS are all fragmentary, they attest to most of the NT books and over 40% of the verses of the NT.

When asked whether he entertained a degree of certainty concerning other ancient Greek writers, Ehrman said: "[W]e have no way of knowing how close we are to the actual wordings of these authors. . . . No reason to gang

[27] Ibid. 46.

[28] Posted on the "tc-list," an international Internet discussion group of biblical textual critics (November 1, 2008). Italics to "centuries" and "earliest" are added; italics to "before" are original.

up on me on this issue," he added. "Ask the two leading textual critics in America and the U.K. respectively—Eldon Epp and David Parker—what *they* think about it!"[29]

But this is disingenuous. Ehrman does not practice this with virtually any other ancient sources, for he frequently cites extrabiblical literature as though the extant MSS go right back to the author without any change. To take but one example, in *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, Ehrman quotes from Euripides,[30] Galen,[31] Josephus,[32] Lucian the satirist,[33] Marcus Aurelius,[34] Philostratus,[35] Plato,[36] Plautus,[37] Pliny the Younger,[38] Plutarch,[39] Suetonius,[40] and Tacitus[41]—to name a few. Yet all such sources have to be reconstructed from the surviving manuscripts—almost all of which were copied several hundred years later than the originals. But Ehrman quotes them without any caveat such as "the earliest MSS of Suetonius say," or "our best sources for Plutarch read this." No, he simply enlists these authors and their writings as though the extant documents are *identical* at those points with what the author wrote.

I do not think that this is naïve of Ehrman to do so. It is a necessity. Virtually all of ancient history is reconstructed from surviving MSS. In many cases, we have only one or two copies of a particular writer, and those copies come from hundreds of years later! The problem comes when the NT is not treated with the same respect. *We have more than 1,000 times as many copies of the NT as we do of almost any Greco-Roman author.*[42] And the earliest of those copies come from within *decades* of the completion of the NT, while the average Greco-Roman author's surviving MSS do not show up for half a millennium.

If we were as skeptical about Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, and Livy, the way this new breed of textual critics claims to be about the NT, then we would have to relegate all the surviving copies of Greco-Roman literature to the flames and attempt to reconstruct history only on the basis of coins, inscriptions, and potsherds. Ninety-five percent of what we *think* we know about the past would have to be forgotten. Although it is true that we cannot be

[29] Ibid., November 2, 2008.

[30] Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 281.

[31] Ibid. 373.

[32] Ibid. 242.

[33] Ibid. 430.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid. 19–20.

[36] Ibid. 414.

[37] Ibid. 202.

[38] Ibid. 212.

[39] Ibid. 63.

[40] Ibid. 212.

[41] Ibid. 213, 430.

[42] This number is based on both the Greek witnesses and the versional witnesses, all of which total at least 20,000 copies. It does not take into account, however, the over one-million quotations of the NT in the patristic writers, a factor that would substantially increase the disparity.

certain that we have recovered the exact wording in these authors, virtually all historians work from the presumption of replication unless there is good reason to doubt it.

To suggest that the form of the original text could be radically different from what we have in the early MSS—and that this hypothesis is every bit as valid as the belief that the earliest MSS fairly represent the autographa—strikes me as incredibly illogical on a massive scale. One of the first principles that students of exegesis learn is that virtually all heterodox views are *possible*, but they are not probable. A good exegete dwells in the land of the probable.

When virtually all the evidence we have is on the side of a relatively stable text, to jettison all this evidence with the line that we really cannot know is to commit epistemological suicide. And yet, it is not applied across the board. Almost every copy of ancient literature is looked at with trusting eyes, while the NT MSS alone are treated like they were the CEO of Enron trying to sell you a used car!

At bottom, postmodern textual critics have confused absolute certainty—which we cannot have—with reasonable certainty—which we can.[43] And they are even calling this reasonable certainty a "blind leap of faith" without recognizing that their own skepticism requires much more faith. As Carl Henry said in his critique of postmodernism, "Our lack of exhaustive knowledge does not condemn us to intellectual futility."[44]

3. *Focus on community/collaboration.* The third influence that postmodern thought is having on textual criticism is its focus on community. Frankly, I see this as a very positive trend.

A key feature, if not *the* key feature, of modernism was its focus on reason, on the autonomous scholar who thinks, postulates, theorizes, argues, and debates. And what he debates is the truth of this or that proposition. Postmodernism, however, places a premium on collaborative efforts—even when those involved see the objectives as different, even disparate.[45]

If this emphasis on community is a *sine qua non* of postmodernism, then it could be argued that NT textual criticism became postmodern as early as 1948. Up until that time, the great achievements in the discipline were done almost entirely by individuals or at most very small groups: Mill, Wettstein, Lachmann, Tregelles, Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, Scrivener, Nestle, von Soden, Hoskier, Kenyon, Lake, and many others.

[43] This is especially remarkable since elsewhere Ehrman displays a good historian's sense when he writes: "the historian can do no more than establish probabilities. In no case can we reconstruct the past with absolute certitude. All that we can do is take the evidence that happens to survive and determine to the best of our abilities what probably happened."

[44] Carl F. H. Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in *Challenge of Postmodernism* 46.

[45] See, e.g., Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), and the dialogue among evangelical scholars about the pros and cons in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (ed. David S. Dockery; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

In 1935, S. C. E. Legg produced a single-volume book on the Gospel of Mark; it was the Westcott-Hort text with an extensive critical apparatus that listed far more witnesses than any critical text previously had done. Five years later, his Gospel of Matthew appeared. Eight years after that, he completed his Gospel of Luke. But it was never published. Legg's first two volumes had, by this time, "evoked severe and widespread criticism"[46] over the accuracy of his citation of witnesses, and the publisher decided against issuing the fascicle on Luke. That was in 1948. "It had become clear that the task was beyond the powers of any one man."[47]

A committee of British and American scholars was formed to take over the assignment; collectively this new project was known as the International Greek New Testament Project or the IGNTP. The list of volunteers working on the project grew as news of it was announced annually at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings. After nearly forty years, with 300 individuals involved, the two-volume Luke fascicle was published. In 1984 and 1987, the first community-produced textual apparatus of any NT book was born.

Meanwhile, the INTF in Münster was working on its projects: continual updating of the UBS and Nestle-Aland Greek texts, specialized studies on the text of the NT, and the *Editio Critica Maior* or "major critical edition" of the Catholic Epistles.

Up until this century, however, work in NTTC was largely divided along linguistic lines: there was German textual criticism and there was English-speaking textual criticism. Each utilized its own methods and theories, and each gave different priorities to different kinds of witnesses, and even had different theories on what to publish when the work was done. The IGNTP preferred to publish the *Textus Receptus* and allow the reader to make informed decisions about what the original wording was, based on the *apparatus criticus*; the INTF preferred to publish a critically-reconstructed text, even though all that was apparently used to make such decisions was the external evidence alone. The distance between the two schools of thought seemed to be growing greater, hitting full stride in the 1970s and 80s.[48] Eldon Epp and Kurt Aland duked it out with dueling articles that addressed the current state of text-critical studies.[49]

But early in the twenty-first century, tensions began to relax significantly and a growing rapprochement was taking their place. INTF and David

[46] *The New Testament in Greek: The Gospel according to St. Luke: Part One, Chapters 1–12* (ed. American and British Committees of the International Greek New Testament Project; Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) v.

[47] Ibid.

[48] At the same time, it should be noted that there was collaboration on the production of a critical edition of the Greek NT in the 1970s until the present day. The Nestle-Aland 26th edition (1979) was produced by K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, A. Wikgren (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft). And it was followed by the third edition of the UBS text. To be sure, there was collaboration, but it was largely a Protestant work. The 4th edition of the UBS text and the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland text (both published in the 1990s) involved Protestants, a Roman Catholic, and an Orthodox scholar—all three branches of Christendom.

Parker's institute at Birmingham joined hands in getting the high-resolution images of Codex Sinaiticus on-line. This also required collaboration with the four institutes that own portions of the famous codex: the British Library, Leipzig University, the National Library of St. Petersburg, and St. Catherine's Monastery at Mt. Sinai. *That*, in itself, is a grade B miracle!

The IGNTP and INTF have also begun to coordinate efforts in producing a comprehensive apparatus for John's Gospel.[50] Not only this, but changes were occurring within the INTF, too. Historically, the Institut in Münster has operated under the auspices of the Protestant faculty at the University of Münster. When Barbara Aland retired a few years ago, the search was on for a new director. In 2004, Holger Strutwolf was found. What is remarkable about this appointment is that Strutwolf is a Roman Catholic. To understand how radical this shift is, just imagine the Evangelical Theological Society having a Roman Catholic as its president!

This last August witnessed a high watermark in text-critical collaboration. The INTF hosted, for the first time ever, a three-day colloquium in which all NT textual critics were invited. This historic colloquium marked the beginning of a new era in which textual criticism was truly viewed as a community task. There was a sense that we all need each other to do this noble work.[51]

After the colloquium, representatives of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (or CSNTM) met with the leaders of INTF. CSNTM's initial objective is to take high-resolution digital photographs of all extant Greek NT MSS and post the images on the Internet. Already tens of thousands of images are on our site. We are working out an arrangement in which INTF will open doors for us in Europe and CSNTM will scan the MSS. This win-win situation is good for everyone, because it will ultimately make available the images of all MSS to anyone in the world who has internet access.[52]

[49] Eldon Epp's "The Twentieth-Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism" (1974) was answered by Kurt Aland, "The twentieth-century interlude in New Testament textual criticism," in *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black* (ed. E. Best and R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 1–14, which in turn was responded to by Eldon Epp, "A Continuing Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism?" *HTR* 73 (1980) 131–51.

[50] *The New Testament in Greek IV: The Gospel according to St. John*, Vol. 2: *The Majuscules* (ed. U. B. Schmid, with W. J. Elliott and D. C. Parker; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007) 2: "At an early stage in the project, it was decided that a formal agreement between the IGNTP and INTF would be of benefit, and a document was drawn up."

[51] Still, there are lone wolves who do some decent work, but increasingly their efforts will be viewed as subpar precisely because the demand for accuracy can be made when only one scholar is involved in the minutiae. The works of von Soden, Legg, Swanson, and others have all been criticized for a high number of inaccuracies. An exception to this criticism is the two-volume work on the Apocalypse by Herman C. Hoskier (*Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse* [2 vols.; London: Bernard Quaritch, 1939]), a man who has been called an almost supernatural collator.

[52] Movement toward this kind of collaborative effort can already be seen in *The New English Translation/Novum Testamentum Graece* (ed. Michael H. Burer, W. Hall Harris, and Daniel B. Wallace; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/Dallas: NET Bible Press, 2004).

III. THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Sixteen years ago I wrote an article entitled “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism.”[53] In it I declared, “A theological *a priori* has no place in textual criticism.”[54] At that time, evangelical doctoral students could, generally speaking, earn their degrees in the field of textual criticism without feeling as though they had to sell their souls to do so. Theological agendas were not very prominent with their mentors.

The lone exception was with some majority text advocates: they held a curious view of preservation which declared both that God *had* to preserve the original text and that he had to do so in a way that made it accessible to all of God’s people in every generation. I found this view to be contrary to the evidence, unsupportable by exegesis, and bibliologically Marcionite in its implicit elevation of the NT text above the OT text.[55]

Things have changed in the last sixteen years. Rightly or wrongly, theological presuppositions have taken on a *more* prominent role in text-critical studies—on *both* sides of the theological aisle.[56] Consider the following points.

1. *www.evangelicaltextualcriticism.com.* First, a group of British evangelical scholars, mostly at Tyndale House, Cambridge, started an internet site in 2005[57] called www.evangelicaltextualcriticism.com. It was established specifically as “a forum for people with knowledge of the Bible in its original languages to discuss its manuscripts from the perspective of historic evangelical theology.” Such a website would have been laughable a decade ago. But the need for such a discussion group has been felt more acutely of late, in light of the postmodern agendas of certain high-visibility textual critics.

2. *The orthodoxy of the variants.* Second, in the eighteenth century, Swabian pietist Johann Albrecht Bengel articulated what we might call “the orthodoxy of the variants.” After examining 30,000 textual variants that John Mill had culled from over 100 MSS, Bengel declared that no evangelic doctrine rests on textually dubious passages. Since Bengel’s day, this has been the view of many liberal Protestants and by far the majority of conservative Protestants such as A. T. Robertson, B. B. Warfield, Leon Vaganay, F. C. Grant, and John Knox.[58] More recently, D. A. Carson remarked,

[53] *Grace Theological Journal* 12 (1992) 21–51, a reprint of a chapter in *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr.* (ed. Gary T. Meadors; Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991) 69–102. Quotations are from the journal article.

[54] Ibid. 51.

[55] I also noted that the doctrine of preservation was not well founded biblically and of recent vintage as far as creedal formulation was concerned.

[56] Of course, what I believe I could still write is: “A theological *a priori should have* no place in textual criticism.”

[57] The earliest archives at the site are from October 2005.

[58] Kenneth W. Clark, “Textual Criticism and Doctrine,” in *Studia Paulina: in Honorem Johannis De Zwaan Septuagenarii* (Haarlem: DeErven F. Bohn N. V., 1953) 52–53.

> [The] purity of text [is] of such a substantial nature that nothing we believe to be doctrinally true, and nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants. This is true of *any* textual tradition. The interpretation of individual passages may well be called in question; but never is a doctrine affected.[59]

One notable exception to this assessment has been those of the *Textus Receptus* and Majority Text persuasion. Often the notion that inerrancy must dictate which text is authentic is found in this camp. George Salmond and Herman Hoskier used it a century ago.[60] More recently, James Borland argued in his *JETS* article "Re-examining New Testament Textual-Critical Principles and Practices Used to Negate Inerrancy"[61] that the Alexandrian text in Matt 1:7 and Luke 23:45 are errors and must, *for this reason*, be rejected; to retain them in the text would be to falsify inerrancy.

I would question whether it is an epistemologically sound principle to allow one's presuppositions to dictate his text-critical methodology. This is neither honest to a historical investigation nor helpful to our evangelical heritage. If our faith cannot stand up to the scrutiny of rigorous investigation, then our beliefs need to be adjusted. But if we always jerk back the fideistic reins when the empirical horse goes too fast for us, then the charges of obscurantism, scholasticism, even pietistic dribble are well deserved.

Borland believes that "unhappily our widely accepted textual-critical principles and practices may help to accommodate [non-Christians] in their jesting against the inerrancy of Scripture."[62] But surely the jesting will be louder and stronger if we change the rules of the game because the other side seems to be winning!

Most members of this society have not been persuaded by the logic that makes inerrancy the divining rod for which variants are authentic. But in recent years, the idea has even infected those who are not majority text proponents. Exhibit A is Gordon Fee. In his otherwise excellent commentary on

[59] D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 56. My own view is stated less absolutely: No viable variant affects any cardinal doctrine. The key terms are "viable" and "cardinal." That the doctrinal content of the Bible is not affected by the variants is an *a posteriori* demonstration that stops short of dogma. Thus if a viable variant were to turn up that affected a cardinal doctrine, my view of God's providential care would not be in jeopardy, though it would be reworded. Similarly, my view of God's providential care of the text does not depend on the nonexistence of viable variants that teach heresy precisely because I am not affirming such on a doctrinal level. (I argue explicitly against a *doctrine* of preservation in "Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism.") The above statement is made solely on the basis of the evidence.

[60] G. Salmon, *Some Thoughts on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1897) 26; H. C. Hoskier, "Codex Vaticanus and Its Allies," in *Which Bible?* (5th ed.; ed. David Otis Fuller; Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975) 143. Although Hoskier was not strictly a TR or MT advocate (cf. Daniel B. Wallace, "Historical Revisionism and the Majority Text: The Cases of F. H. A. Scrivener and Herman C. Hoskier," *NTS* 41 [1995] 280–85).

[61] James A. Borland, "Re-examining New Testament Textual-Critical Principles and Practices Used to Negate Inerrancy," *JETS* 25 (1982) 499–506.

[62] Ibid. 506.

1 Corinthians, Fee argues that 1 Cor 14:34–35, which speaks about the silencing of women, should be removed from the text. He admits that no MSS omit these verses, so he must base his view almost entirely on internal evidence. One of the key arguments he uses is that if these verses are retained, they "stand in obvious *contradiction* to [chapter] 11: [verses] 2–16."[63]

There is no fudge room in this statement; they do not stand in "obvious *tension*" or in "*apparent* contradiction." No, 1 Cor 14:34–35 stands in "obvious contradiction" to what Paul said about women praying in chapter 11. I cannot help but feel that whipping out the inerrancy card was a last resort for Fee, whose scholarship is usually of the highest order. But since *all* the witnesses to this passage have the verses, he had to resort to drastic measures to deny these verses a place in the text.

But in so doing he has crossed a line—a line that reaches back to Bengel; a line that evangelical scholar after evangelical scholar has not crossed, from Bengel to Warfield to Carson; a line that, once crossed, puts Fee in league with the one group of evangelicals whom Fee has never otherwise had any affinity with—majority text advocates.[64] And like majority text advocates who use inerrancy as a text-critical method, Fee's agenda, rather than the evidence, seems to be driving his conclusions.

I maintain, with most evangelical scholars, that inerrancy is not jeopardized by viable textual variants. To make inerrancy a theological *a priori* in *any* given text is to bring an end to honest historical inquiry.

3. *The logical fallacy of denying the inerrancy of the autographs.* Third, inerrancy is also a factor in how non-conservative textual critics go about their work. They ask, "How can anyone believe that the Scriptures are inerrant in the original when we do not even possess the original documents?" This question is raised so often from non-inerrantists that it has become almost rhetorical. The answer seems obvious: No thinking individual can hold to this doctrine because the originals are lost and therefore the doctrine cannot be verified.

But the argument is not really valid. Indeed, whether one believes in inerrancy or not, this argument is illogical and out of sync with the empirical data. The argument depends for its force on an unstated supposition, viz., that the original cannot be recovered from the existing MSS. But that supposition is, in the opinion of most scholars, hardly the case. We may not know whether variant A or variant B is original, but we can be confident that there is no need to appeal to conjectural emendation in our reconstruction of

[63] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 702 (italics added).

[64] In Fee's defense, it could be said that he was really trying to argue that retaining these verses would not fit into Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians because their retention is difficult to harmonize with 1 Cor 11:2–16. Thus, it was not so much inerrancy that Fee was using as a method as internal consistency within Paul. But that he did not state it this way suggests that Fee sees the issues involved in a more dogmatic light. Further, he really does not allow any wiggle room for those with other views: the adoption of 1 Cor 14:34–35 results in "obvious contradiction."

the text. In other words, what we have in our hands today is the original NT; we just do not know in all cases if it is in the text or in the apparatus.[65]

Now if the original text is to be found among the MSS, then what we need to examine are those MSS. And, on this score, I return to Bengel's point about the orthodoxy of the variants: no doctrine is jeopardized by any of these variants, not even inerrancy. So just because I do not know exactly what the original text said in every place does not mean that I cannot affirm a belief in the inerrancy of the autographs since the original is to be found among the MSS—and those MSS do not yield variants that jeopardize inerrancy.

This is all too brief a treatment, but I have written more extensively about this point on the internet, in an essay called, "Inerrancy and the Text of the New Testament: Assessing the Logic of the Agnostic View."[66] The argument against the inerrancy of non-existent originals should be retired to the round file since it is logically and empirically fallacious.

4. *The incarnation as a methodological model for historical investigation.* Finally, there is one theological *a priori* that I think evangelicals must have as we do the work of textual criticism—indeed, as we do the work of theology, exegesis, archeology, etc. It is belief in the incarnation of the theanthropic person. God invaded time-space history in the person of Jesus Christ. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures are the only Scriptures of any major religion in the world that subject themselves to historical inquiry. The Bible puts itself at risk in a world of science and history while the sacred Scriptures of all other religions (including the Gnostic gospels) are untouched and non-falsifiable, because they do not intersect with the real world.

The incarnation is both a redemptive event and a methodological model. The incarnation is God's "yes" to the question, "Can I investigate Christianity with historical rigor?" The incarnation serves notice that we dare not treat the Bible with kid gloves. The incarnation not only invites us to examine the evidence; it requires us to do so.

Too often evangelicals take a hands-off attitude toward the Bible because of a prior commitment to inerrancy. But it is precisely because the incarnation of Christ is more important than the inerrancy of the Bible that we must not do that. I believe it is disrespectful to our Lord not to ask the Bible the tough questions that every thinking non-Christian is already asking it. The result of this incarnational approach is that we will no longer be afraid to wrestle hard with the text, and we will no longer be afraid to go where the evidence leads. It may lead us to conclusions that we did not want to arrive

[65] To be sure, some conjectural emendations may well have recovered the wording of the autographs in spite of the fact that no MSS attest to such a reading. But even if so, I am not aware of any conjectural emendations that create contradictions in the text (indeed, most conjectures try to solve difficulties in the text, difficulties that nevertheless fall short of being genuine problems for inerrancy). Consequently, even if new discoveries were to prove some of these conjectures correct, they would not add problems for inerrancy by so doing.

[66] See Daniel B. Wallace, "Inerrancy and the Text of the New Testament: Assessing the Logic of the Agnostic View," posted at www.4truth.net for a detailed discussion of this point.

at, but at least we will arrive at those conclusions with full integrity. And we will arrive at them with a Christological center that is fully intact.

IV. *DESIDERATA*: THE TASK THAT REMAINS

In this final section, I would like to group my thoughts around two themes: knowledge of documents and closing the gap.

1. *Knowledge of documents*. In the late nineteenth century, Hort observed: "knowledge of documents must precede final judgement upon readings."[67] Sager advice has never been uttered in this discipline. But if this is true, then in the past one hundred and twenty-five years we still have not completed the first step in doing textual criticism. This "knowledge of documents" has four component parts: discovery, accessibility, collation, and analysis.

a. *Discovery.* When it comes to discovery, most students of the NT assume that all the work has been done already. To be sure, two or three more MSS are added to the catalog each year, but this is only a trickle of what it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The official number of known Greek NT MSS stands now at 5,760.

However, what is often not known is that important discoveries continue to be made. Just a few years ago, the curators of the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford University discovered seventeen NT papyri, some of which are very early and important. These papyri had been excavated decades previously. But there were simply not enough scholars to sift through the data, so they sat there, waiting to be identified.

Less than seven years ago, I founded a non-profit institution, the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts. Our first task is to digitally photograph all surviving Greek NT MSS. We have so far taken more than 100,000 digital photographs and have posted tens of thousands of images online. In the process, we have also discovered somewhere between 40 and 50 NT MSS. This is more than the rest of the world combined has discovered in the same period of time—by a factor of four. Most of these MSS, to be sure, are not especially important. But some are. We have located, for example, missing members of family 13 and have discovered the only biblical majuscule in Constantinople, a fragment of Mark that may be as old as the third century.

CSNTM also has leads on hundreds of uncatalogued MSS. Without going into the details, there is good evidence that there may be as many as 1,000 NT MSS yet to be discovered. Even this initial stage of discovery is far from over.

b. *Accessibility.* Up until recently, if a scholar wanted to see what a manuscript looked like, he had one of two choices: visit the library that owned the

[67] B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1881) 31.

MS, or visit the INTF which has microfilms of 90% of the MSS. These options are not great. In the first place, the NT MSS are spread out among 253 different sites[68] worldwide. Second, the microfilms in Münster are, to put it charitably, of very poor quality, at times even illegible. The INTF has done the world of NT scholarship a great service by collecting all these microfilms; I do not in any way wish to understate the incredible work of this fine institute. What they have done on a shoestring budget is breathtaking.

But now is the time for collaboration with other institutes. That is why INTF and CSNTM are partnering to get the MSS digitally photographed and put on the internet, to make superb images accessible to scholars worldwide at the click of a mouse.

c. *Collation*. "Collation" is the comparison of a MS to a base text. All the differences, down to the individual letters, are noted. Collation is thus an exact transcription of the MS but done with less effort and less paper. To date, all the MSS of only one book of the NT have been completely collated. Herman Hoskier took thirty years to collate all the MSS for Revelation—a book that has by far fewer MSS than any other NT book.[69]

Complete collations of all NT books are desperately needed. Furthermore, only about 20% of all NT MSS have published collations or transcriptions. How can we honestly speak about "knowledge of documents" without doing complete collations on them? At present, the work to collate all Greek NT MSS would take about 400 man-years. In short, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few!

d. *Analysis*. After collation comes analysis. What is particularly needed is an analysis of the scribal habits of our more important MSS. Only a few have been so analyzed. If we could know the predilections and habits of every scribe, we would have a good sense of their contribution to any given textual problem. Until we have an analysis of individual scribal habits, we do not have a comprehensive "knowledge of documents."

2. *Closing the gap*. Besides knowledge of documents, what we need to do in this discipline is close the gap. Of the several gaps that exist, I will briefly address just three.

a. *The gap between liberals and evangelicals*. Evangelicals are making a decent contribution in textual criticism. In our own society we have William

[68] By "site" I mean city or island. If one were to break this down to specific libraries, the number would be significantly higher.

[69] Hoskier, *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse*. Tommy Wasserman has also collated all the non-lectionary MSS of Jude (*The Epistle of Jude: Its Text and Transmission* [ConBNT 43; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2006]), and Maurice Robinson has collated most of the continuous text MSS of the *pericope adulterae*, though his work is handwritten and not accessible (only the results are published), and there are problems with doing just a pericope ("Preliminary Observations Regarding the Pericope Adulterae based upon Fresh Collations of nearly all Continuous-Text Manuscripts and all Lectionary Manuscripts containing the Passage," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 13 [2000] 35–59).

Warren at New Orleans Baptist Seminary and Maurice Robinson at Southeastern Baptist Seminary, both excellent textual critics. But we need more evangelicals dedicated to this field. And what we especially lack are those who are working in the secondary ancient languages. The NT was translated early on into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. These three languages are exceedingly important for NTTC. Where are the evangelical scholars who are doing text-critical work in them? I know of only one who has made a serious contribution to the field: P. J. Williams, the warden of Tyndale House, whose work in the Syriac NT is outstanding. But where are the others? We need a fresh crop of evangelical scholars who will dedicate themselves to working in these languages—both in relation to textual criticism and in relation to patristic and early heterodox literature.

Further, if liberal scholarship follows the lead of Ehrman, Parker, and Epp, evangelicals will need to be the voice of reason in this discipline. But we have to earn the right to be heard. Ironically, working in several *dead* languages may be one thing that can give us a *living* voice in the guild!

b. *The gap between scholars and apologists*. For whatever reason, there seems to be a huge disconnect between scholars and apologists. Whenever our *primary* purpose in biblical studies is to vindicate the evangelical faith, we open ourselves up to serious distortion.

For the sake of time, I will mention but one example: In 1963, a popular book on bibliology was published. In it, the author, Neil Lightfoot, declared that what constituted a textual variant was a single MS disagreeing with other MSS. True enough. But he went on to suggest that if 1,000 MSS said "Jesus Christ" in one place and another 1,000 had "the Lord Jesus" there, then that would constitute 1,000 textual variants. By this thinking, he was able to soften considerably the statement that there are hundreds of thousands of variants among the NT MSS.[70]

This notion of what constitutes a textual variant has made its way into numerous apologetic books, including works by Lee Strobel,[71] Norm Geisler,[72] and many others.

But it is entirely false. If that is how we are to count textual variants, then there would be *tens of millions* of variants among the NT MSS. A variant is any place where there is deviation among the MSS. Each *deviation* counts as *one* variant, regardless of how many MSS attest to it.

That this simple fact has not been known by apologists for the past four decades suggests that they are only reading themselves rather than inter-

[70] Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963) 53–54.

[71] Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 64–65.

[72] Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 468: "If one single word is misspelled in 3,000 different manuscripts, it is counted as 3,000 variants or readings. Once this counting procedure is understood, and the mechanical (orthographic) variants have been eliminated, the remaining significant variants are surprisingly few in number." This statement duplicates verbatim the wording found on p. 361 in the first edition of this book, published in 1968. See also Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 532.

acting with the best scholarly literature out there. To our shame, *Muslim* apologists are doing a far better job of interacting with the primary sources in textual criticism. Evangelicals have a lot of catching up to do.

c. *The gap between church and academe*. A glance at virtually any English Bible today reveals that the longer ending of Mark and the *pericope adulterae* are to be found in their usual places. Thus, not only do the KJV and NKJV have these passages (as would be expected), but so do the ASV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, TNIV, NASB, ESV, TEV, NAB, NJB, and NET. Yet the scholars who produced these translations, by and large, do not subscribe to the authenticity of such texts. The reasons are simple enough: they do not show up in the oldest and best manuscripts and their internal evidence is decidedly against authenticity. Why then are they still in these Bibles?

To a large extent, they seem to be in the Bibles because of a tradition of timidity. The editors of the NET Bible toyed with dropping these verses down to the footnotes for the first edition, but in the end we kept them in the text but printed the passages in smaller font with brackets around them. Smaller type, of course, makes it harder to read from the pulpit. The NET also adds a lengthy discussion about the inauthenticity of the verses. But they are still in the text. We are, however, seriously considering dropping these passages into the footnotes for the next edition.

Most translations mention that these pericopae are not found in the oldest manuscripts, but such a comment is rarely noticed by readers today. How do we know this? From the shock waves produced by Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*. In radio, TV, and newspaper interviews with Ehrman, the story of the woman caught in adultery is almost always the first text brought up as inauthentic, and the mention is calculated to alarm the audience.

In retrospect, treating these two pericopae differently than we do virtually any other doubtful passage seems to have been a bomb just waiting to explode. All Ehrman did was to light the fuse. One lesson we must learn from *Misquoting Jesus* is that those in ministry *must* close the gap between the church and the academe. We *have* to educate believers. It is far, far better that they hear the facts from us than from someone who is hostile to the faith. Instead of trying to isolate laypeople from critical scholarship, we need to insulate them. They need to be ready for the barrage, because it is coming. We are reaping what we have sown, and what we have sown is a divorce between the church and the seminaries. Ehrman is to be thanked for giving us a wake-up call.

V. CONCLUSION: WHY EVANGELICALS NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

In conclusion, evangelicals need to get involved in textual criticism because we, of all people, have a high view of the text. If the autographs are inspired, we should not rest until we have done all we can to determine the wording of the original.

Evangelicals need to get involved in textual criticism because we have a concern for history. And history is taking a beating lately in the hands of pluralistic historical revisionists and by epistemological skeptics. We need to be a voice of reason in a sea of doubt.

Finally, evangelicals need to get involved in textual criticism because the incarnation demands of us that we take history seriously. We should have a no-holds barred approach to the problems of the text. And we must pursue truth at all costs, rather than protect our presuppositions. At bottom, is it for the sake of Jesus Christ that we need to get involved in this discipline.