

Eldon Jay Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Tradition,” in William L. Petersen, ed., *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), pp. 71-103.

Idem, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 92.3 (1999), pp. 245-281.

Over the course of his distinguished career, Eldon Jay Epp has made numerous invaluable and highly influential contributions to the evolution of New Testament textual criticism. Among his most significant recent offerings are two articles: “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Tradition,” which was first published in 1989, and “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” which appeared a decade later. In the former, Epp embarks upon “an exercise in historical-critical imagination” (p. 71) in order to posit tenable hypotheses concerning the state of the New Testament text in the second century—a period from which only one extremely fragmentary manuscript has survived. He begins with the assertion that the primordial history of the New Testament, like that of the movement which produced it, must be conceived in “dynamic” rather than “static” terms. Although generations of critics have assumed that distinct early recensions of the text (often described as “text-forms” or “text-types”) were essentially the products of particular geographic locales and did not interact with or impact upon one another, the true picture appears much more complex. Christianity’s astonishingly rapid diffusion from Palestine throughout the remainder of the Roman Empire strongly suggests that the contemporary historical and cultural climate was conducive to the easy transmission of both individuals and ideas. This argument is bolstered by the corpus of non-Christian papyri unearthed throughout Egypt, which provide evidence of cultural, commercial, and other contact not only with adjacent areas but also with cities as far away as Ravenna, Ostia, and Rome. Thus the fact that the forty-five earliest New Testament manuscripts are all papyri of Egyptian provenance does not preclude the possibility of their witness to the complete early textual tapestry, and not simply a localized portion.

With this more fluid understanding of New Testament textual transmission and circulation in hand, Epp turns to the question of the relationships between the earliest manuscripts. In order to avoid anachronism, he temporarily abandons the traditional terms of “text-form” and “text-type” in favor of the less rigid “text group” and “text cluster.” He briefly outlines four such groups: Group A, which includes the later manuscripts usually classified as “Byzantine” or the “Majority Text” and therefore is largely inconsequential in a discussion of the papyri; Group B, which includes the notable early manuscripts **Π**75 (3rd c.), Codex Vaticanus (B 03; 4th c.), and, to a lesser extent, **Π**66 (c. 200); Group D, which includes **Π**29 (3rd c.), **Π**48 (3rd c.), **Π**38 (c. 300), and Codex Bezae (D 05; 5th c.); and Group C, which in the text of the Gospel of Mark includes **Π**45 (3rd c.) and Codex Washingtonianus (also known as the “Freer Gospels”; W 032; 4th-5th c.) and which forms a kind of textual and chronological bridge between Groups B and D. These designations benefit from their concurrent continuity and discontinuity with the traditional text-critical sigla, employing some standard symbols in a familiar way (e.g., B and D are the symbols of the most widely known members of their respective groups) while also adopting new designations in an attempt to eliminate

previous inadequacies, particularly the stringency of the separation of closely related manuscripts from their more distant cousins. Ultimately, Epp is able to tentatively divide all of the earliest papyri into these four categories (p. 100).

The introduction and characterization of the text groups or clusters is followed by a more detailed discussion of the interplay between the key members of each group—with the natural exception of Group A, whose form is unattested until the fourth century and is thus too late to play any significant role in a discussion of the early text of the New Testament. Epp begins with two of the most significant manuscripts of his newly designated B group: **ⲡ75** and Codex Vaticanus, whose texts are nearly identical despite the extensive chronological gap between them. Indeed, “there is virtually a straight line from the text of a papyrus dated around 200 to that of a major, elegant manuscript of 150 years later” (p. 92). When this observation is joined with Gordon Fee’s intriguing hypothesis that Codex Vaticanus, **ⲡ75** and **ⲡ66** shared a common ancestor, and also with the possibility that widespread use of uniform *nomina sacra* in early manuscripts represents standardization of transmission, one may conclude with some degree of certainty “that a distinctive kind of text, *with both antecedents and descendants*, existed in the very early period of New Testament textual transmission” (p. 94; italics original), that is, in the second century. The vital role of the maverick **ⲡ66** in this discussion, despite its clear failure to meet Ernest Colwell’s old standard of seventy percent agreement with the other members of its “text-type,” demonstrates the fact that “[a] text-type is not a closely concentrated entity with rigid boundaries, but is more like a galaxy—with a compact nucleus and additional but less closely related members which range out from the nucleus toward the perimeter” (p. 95). Within the C group, another trajectory is charted from **ⲡ45** to Codex Washingtonianus (but only in Mark 5:31-16:20, as this manuscript exhibits a number of different kinds of text) to the minuscules of *f*13. As for the D group, several papyri containing portions of Luke-Acts are clearly connected with the unique text of these books most prominently displayed in Codex Bezae.

Epp concludes the essay with a helpful five-point recapitulation of the “reasonable grounds for concluding that three identifiable text-types were in existence around 200 CE or shortly thereafter” (p. 101): 1) the “dynamism” of nascent Christianity encouraged widespread dissemination of its writings; 2) the dynamism of the Greco-Roman world, particularly in Egypt, can support the assumption that the various Egyptian papyri account for all the types of New Testament texts read, copied, and transmitted by early Christians; 3) the standard use of the codex and the *nomina sacra* in the earliest extant witnesses suggests the existence of earlier ancestors which have since been lost; 4) the connection of the papyri to later descendants, as well as conjectural predecessors, forms textual trajectories within a broader, interrelated spectrum; 5) clusters of early manuscripts containing members relatively similar to one another and relatively dissimilar to others indicate that the B, C, and D groups can confidently be posited to exist in the second century. Like many excellent articles, its deficiencies are primarily those of exposition and detail. When discussing **ⲡ52** (c. 100-125) and Papyrus Edgerton 2, Epp states that while their exact provenance is unknown, “doubtless they are from the Fayyum or Oxyrhynchus” (p. 78), without stating why this must be the case. Furthermore, additional discussion of the export and use of papyrus throughout the Roman Empire could shed additional light on the possibility of foreign origins for some or all of the Egyptian papyri. And while the claim that dynamism allowed for *all* of the types of early New Testament text to reach Egypt is certainly an attractive and

hopeful one, there is no firm evidence to confirm this, nor is any likely to be forthcoming. A few methodological questions could also be raised, beginning with the viability and clarity of Epp's "text groups" over the more traditional "text-types." Aside from a new set of appellations, a subtle preference for blurred boundaries rather than firm ones, and a reluctance to place many manuscripts within the C group—all of which could be viewed as relatively minor alterations—it is difficult to see how these new categories represent a significant departure from the old standard. Epp's initial abandonment of the term "text-type," followed by his sudden reintroduction of the term at the conclusion of the essay, is also somewhat confusing, although he does state his reasons for these decisions. Finally, Epp adopts as axiomatic a dictum from the noted text-critical team of Kurt and Barbara Aland: "[i]f a fragment preserves a passage where there is any variation in the tradition, *it is quite sufficient to signal the textual character of the whole manuscript*" (p. 89; italics added). But as he himself later admits, a number of manuscripts (e.g., Codex Washingtonianus) display "block mixture"—a number of different kinds of texts in a single volume—and others (e.g., P66) possess affinities with various groups as various points. It seems more reasonable to state that the fragment signals the textual character of the manuscript *at that particular point*, rather than in total, particularly if a significant portion of the fragment is no longer extant and is thus utterly unavailable for evaluation. All of these, however, are minor criticisms which should in no way detract from the import of one of the most significant recent examinations of papyrology and New Testament textual criticism.

It is appropriate that the article discussed above be read in tandem with Epp's later article on the extremely problematic term "original text of the New Testament," as his interest in this subject was particularly kindled by a paper given by Helmut Koester during the conference at which the former article was first presented. For Epp, the words "original text," whether they are bracketed with qualifying quotation marks (as in some more cautious modern handbooks) or otherwise, are imbued with not one but many cogent and viable meanings, and the recognition and exploration of this fact will greatly expand the horizons and possibilities of the discipline: "recognizing the multivalence of 'original text' ensures that New Testament textual criticism will certainly relinquish its myopic concentration on an elusive and often illusive target of a single original text" (p. 270). He begins by charting the tempestuous history of the usage of the term, noting that as early as 1808 Johann Hug readily conceded the possibility of multiple "originals" of the New Testament writings due to scribal copying and dissemination, and that Samuel P. Tregelles adopted a rather cautious definition of textual criticism which stated that its goal was to reconstruct a given text "as far as possible" and "as nearly as can be done on existing evidence" (p. 252). But for many others, the "original text" was simply equated with the autographic text, and identified as the principal—if not the singular—disciplinary goal. Adherents of this theory in the nineteenth century included Frederick Nolan, Thomas R. Birks, and, to a lesser extent, F. J. A. Hort; Alexander Souter famously proclaimed in 1913 that "[i]f we possessed the twenty-seven document now comprising the New Testament exactly in the form in which they were dictated or written by their original authors, there would be no textual criticism of the New Testament" (p. 249); and even J. H. Greenlee, writing in 1964, explicitly identified the recovery of the original (i.e., autographic) text as the purpose of text-critical work. Nevertheless, some of the most notable manuals of the contemporary era, particularly those of Bruce Metzger and Kurt Aland, are much more reticent to approach the question of original text, and do so only in a rather ambiguous manner after extended presentations of the development and proper utilization of text-critical tools.

While understandings of “original text” prior to the last decades of the twentieth century display a great deal of variety, Epp states that they all “appear to have in view a single, original text of the New Testament writings, with the assumption, I presume, that this original is to be identified with the autograph (at least ideally) and apparently with little though given to questioning this assumption” (p. 254). At this point, he turns to the work of six recent scholars who have challenged this traditional understanding of originality: Helmut Koester, Bart Ehrman, William Petersen, David Parker, and himself (together with Nils Dahl). The impetus for the challenge is credited to Koester, who delivered a provocative paper in 1988 which noted that the second-century manuscript evidence of the New Testament is virtually nil and that the most serious textual corruptions usually occur within the first century of transmission, meaning that many deviations from the autographic text may be completely undetectable to modern readers. He also argued, utilizing the writings of Justin Martyr and the controversial *Secret Gospel of Mark*, that the canonical Gospel of Mark represents a later revision of the autograph. Five years later, Ehrman published an extensive monograph which outlined a number of readings possibly implemented by “proto-orthodox” scribes in an attempt to render scripture less accessible to the attacks and appropriations of the heterodox, and noted that some critics were beginning to appreciate the importance of “what a reader read” in addition to “what an author wrote.” Petersen returned to the Gospel of Mark, asking a number of probing and perplexing questions concerning the relationship of originality to the conclusion of the gospel (as a number of endings are preserved in the manuscript tradition) as well as to the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. He advocated for a greater appreciation and application of patristic quotations of the New Testament text, as they often represent a layer of tradition decades if not centuries older than that of the earliest and best manuscripts (e.g., Matt. 19:17). Epp himself employed an example from the earlier work of Nils Dahl, which suggested that the omission of an addressee in some extant manuscripts of Ephesians and Romans represents a universalist tendency on the part of some early Christian scribes. Finally, Parker, in his appropriately titled *The Living Text of the Gospels*, directly challenged the notion that textual criticism can or should uncover the autographic text, and concluded that “the concept of a gospel that is fixed in shape, authoritative, and final as a piece of literature has to be abandoned.” Rather, variant readings should be examined together in order to provide the modern reader with a richer, more complete understanding of the history and development of the (continually evolving) text; the six surviving versions of the Lord’s Prayer are a pertinent example.

The results of the efforts of these and other scholars have been profound and irreversible. Because of the increasing confusion surrounding the term “original,” Epp suggests the adoption of a more neutral term such as “text-form,” and then modifies it in a number of ways to demonstrate its multivalence. Within New Testament textual criticism alone, the predecessor text-form (the vestigial text or oral tradition which lies beneath the extant canonical), the autographic text-form (the text as completed by its original author), the canonical text-form (the text as it was authoritatively accepted by the church), and the interpretative text-form (the text as reimagined, reevaluated, or rewritten by its recipients) may be individually or collectively pursued; often they will impinge upon one another. In sum, the early modern hope for the recovery of a single original text of the New Testament must be abandoned in the wake of flagging evidence and increasing discord and disagreement over the meaning and usage of the term “original.” Instead the discipline must expand far beyond its conventional, pseudo-scientific boundaries to dialogue with other cognate fields. Moreover, the arguments that textual criticism is theologically “safe”—that it

can be practiced without any undue threat to one's faith commitments—must also be discarded, if they have not already fallen by the wayside. The beginning of the twenty-first century truly represents the dawning of a new age in this subset of New Testament studies.

As this article is relatively recent in origin, only time will tell if Epp's predictions represent an authentic oracle of impending progress, or a false one doomed to be abandoned or ignored. It seems likely, however, that the lingering influence of postmodernism has permanently crippled the recovery or identification of any single "original" text by all but the most traditional scholars. Although hindsight is certainly the clearest perspective of all, it is difficult, based upon this article alone, to understand how the textual critics and the form critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries failed to fully perceive or comprehend the implications of the others' work for their own. What were Bultmann, Jeremias, and their comrades doing, after all, if not attempting to identify the "authentic" or "original" sayings of Jesus which lay buried within the extant text? And if these "originals" were different than those sought by text critics, why was this fact not recognized? Perhaps this issue was too complex to be treated in an article of this size and scope; perhaps the two groups truly operated in essential ignorance of one another. Also, while a number of modern challenges to traditional originality are discussed in penetrating detail, there is at least one conspicuous absence: the sayings source commonly known as "Q." This text has been hypothesized for at least a century; did no one consider it as an alternative "original" gospel to those found in the New Testament? And similarly, how have long-standing theories of oral transmission and composition affected the understanding of the New Testament, and particularly the gospel narratives, as "original"? In any case, such questions arise in response to Epp's work rather than in opposition to it; they are a testament to a fine article which has stimulated a great deal of fruitful discussion, and will likely continue to do so for some time to come.