
Reviewed by
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Since Eldon Jay Epp offered his “requiem” for the discipline of New Testament Textual Criticism (at least in America) at the San Francisco Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in 1977, this field of study has experienced something of a resurrection. New manuscript discoveries have combined with fresh approaches such as Bart Ehrman’s study of “Orthodox Corruption” to make the discipline both exciting and inviting. Advances in computer-assisted research have aided in developing new methods in studying the relationships of different manuscripts and reassessing text-types. Chief among these fruits in manuscript study has been the development of the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) developed by Gerd Mink of the Institut fur Neutstamentliche Textforschung at Münster University. The essays in this volume represent the papers delivered at a conference in Münster in August of 2008 to assess the state of the discipline today, with special attention to the CBGM. The longest essay in the book by Gerd Mink is entitled “Contamination, Coherence and Coincidence in Textual Transmission: The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) as a Complement and Corrective to Existing Approaches” (pp. 141-216).

The essays in this volume engage some of the major issues in contemporary New Testament textual research. The first two contributors treat the questions surrounding the earliest attainable text of the New Testament. D.C. Parker’s essay asserts the impossibility of the attempt to recover a single original text, and hence the editor or critic must be content with “the text from which the readings in the extant manuscripts are genealogically descended” (p. 21). This is Parker’s definition of the “initial text,” and it is the text which the editors of the *Editio Critica Maior* (ECM) seek to establish as the base text. On the other hand, writes Holger Strutwolf, “The quest for the original text does not as such involve contradictions and logical impossibilities” (p. 41). Nevertheless, he recognizes that this goal is much more problematic due to what Epp dubs the “multivalence of the term ‘original text.’”

The shorter essays in this volume address a number of issues that have a direct bearing on the text-critical task. David Trobisch writes of “The Need to Discern Distinctive Editions of the New Testament in the Manuscript Tradition.” Ulrich Schmid raises issues of “scribal performance,” and sharpens the distinction between scribal and non-scribal activities. Michael W. Holmes explores the problems of working with an “open” tradition: one in which the scribes have not simply copied from one exemplar, but are subject to influence from other manuscripts. J.K. Elliott refers to text-critics as “greedy people” (p. 129) and to himself as “greedy scholar” (p. 139), and calls for the presentation of the evidence in an *apparatus criticus* to be as exhaustive as possible. This goal is now in sight with the development of electronic editions. One example may suffice to show how important is Elliott’s plea. In 1 Peter 2:11 a few manuscripts read ὑμᾶς after ἀπέχεσθαι rather than after παρακαλῶ. At least one modern editor (Kilpatrick/Diglot) believes that the former is the “original” reading. ECM 1 Peter (p. 134) does not list this
alternative, though the range of options is found in Tischendorf’s eighth edition. A truly comprehensive edition would have included this variant.

The second longest essay by Eldon Jay Epp is entitled “Traditional ‘Canons’ of New Testament Textual Criticism: Their Value, Validity and Viability—or Lack Thereof.” Epp’s thorough review warrants the use of the term History in the tide of the book. Most of the “canons” come under Epp’s scrutiny, but some are simply listed, or even lumped together. Hence numbers 13, 14 and 15, dealing with parallel passages in the New Testament, Old Testament, and liturgical forms, merit no more than a mention. At least with regard to the variations involving quotations, allusions or echoes of the Old Testament in the New Testament more thorough discussion is called for, as I illustrate below.

Gerd Mink’s long essay represents the substance of the second day of the August 2008 conference in Münster. Mink asserts, “Genealogical research should be based on full collation of all extant manuscripts” (p. 147). In practice, however, the ECM was edited in the Catholic Epistles with a selection of manuscript. Although the ECM does not use witnesses beyond the 9th century, the selection of earliest manuscripts actually reflects what may be seen in the manuscripts they do use, i.e. readings in the Byzantine text-type (not that they now use such language) that are known in pre-10th century manuscripts. The CBGM proceeds by establishing the relationship between manuscripts, focusing on one variant unit at a time. The cumulative results are then compared against those manuscripts generally assumed to be the most reliable. Thus, it is hoped, a pattern of coherence will emerge, and the problems of contamination and coincidence addressed, in the quest for the initial text (Ausgangstext).

In illustrating the CBGM Mink presents the variant at James 2:23, φίλος/δοῦλος. Mink asserts that 1) Scribes aim to copy a Vorlage with fidelity. 2) If a scribe introduces divergent variants, they come from another source and are not “invented.” 3) The scribe uses few rather than many sources. 4) The sources feature closely related texts rather than less related ones (pp. 151-155). These basic assumptions have been validated by the CBGM, other things being equal. But at James 2:23, as in many other instances in the New Testament, there is an added factor that can contribute to “contamination.” Here we have a quotation from the Old Testament (Gen 15:6) followed by a “scriptural” allusion of uncertain origin (2 Chron 20:7, Isa 41:8 and Sap 7:2 are suggested by NA27). Nowhere in the LXX is Abraham called the friend (φίλος) of God. However in Psalm 105:42 (LXX 104:42) Abraham is referred to as God’s δοῦλος, his “servant.” The Vulgate Iuxta Heb. reads Abraham servo suo. Iuxta LXX “Abraham puercum suum.” We may assume that the copyist was likely also to be a singer of the psalms, and the combination of a regular recitation of Ps 104, and the absence of the term φίλος for Abraham in the LXX would have contributed to the “contamination.” The Old Testament textual tradition, especially the LXX, must be seriously considered in assessing variations within quotations, allusions and echoes.

Further exploration along these lines is beyond the scope of a book review. But these and other considerations illustrate that this volume is both essential and thought-provoking reading for anyone interested in contemporary research on the text of the New Testament.