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THE TEXT OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Some Current Questions

by J. NEVILLE BIRDSALL

THIS paper was read at Tyndale House, Cambridge, in July, 1956, to a New Testament Study Group convened by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, which was considering various aspects of the study of St. John's Gospel. Mr. Birdsall, who is on the staff of the Department of Theology at Leeds University, has for a number of years devoted special attention to the textual criticism of the New Testament. One product of his studies is the article on "The Text of the Gospels in Photius" which appeared in the *JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* for 1956 (pp. 42 ff., 190 ff.). Since the present paper was written, a fresh piece of valuable evidence for the text of the Fourth Gospel has become available in Papyrus Bodmer II (P 66), recently edited by Professor Victor Martin and published by the Swiss Bibliotheca Bodmeriana. The papyrus, which is dated c. A.D. 200, has preserved most of John 1-14 in an Alexandrian text-type.

I

IN C. H. Dodd's inaugural lecture as Norris-Hulse Professor, entitled *The Present Task in New Testament Studies* (1936), it is suggested that in each generation a different topic within the sphere of New Testament attracts the attention and demands the research of scholars: each generation finds a fresh task lying to its hand, and for our generation, Dodd makes plain, the task is that of elucidating and formulating the theology of the New Testament. The day of the "text-critical" generation is already fifty years away; and that task is done, as nearly as matters for the other investigations indicated by Dodd. To the task of New Testament theology, which the studies of Dodd have so greatly illuminated, the attention and research of this generation have indeed been directed; and with the assumption that textual criticism has done its work, that task is now left—like other duties within the Kingdom of God—for those "to whom it is given to bear it".

It does not need to be emphasized that Dodd is free from the more facile understanding of the completion of the text-critics' task. He writes: "It may be that textual criticism will prove to

have entered upon another great age when the remarkable discoveries of the last two or three decades have been fully assimilated. But for the present", New Testament study "is still based on the text of Westcott and Hort". It is to be feared that the latter sentence, without the proviso of the former, represents the attitude of too many exponents of Biblical theology. Yet the task of textual criticism is far from done. The work of the great pioneers, Westcott and Hort, while it is justly to be admired, and by its greatness overshadows us still, is not the last word; and it seems nowadays the wildest *petitio principii* to call their text *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. Enough has been done since their day to discredit Codex Vaticanus and to move it (in the opinion of some, only slightly) from the high eminence which they accorded it; and to enhance in some respects the reputation of Codex Bezae. These are but the *ὠδίνες* of greater things which do not yet appear; for at present we seem to be in an impasse, not knowing how to go beyond these fourth-century texts, how to assess the earlier evidence which now lies at our disposal, or how to penetrate to earlier strata. I hope in this summary of recent textual work (limited though it is to the Fourth Gospel by reason of our theme) to indicate the new materials and to glimpse some possible ways out of this impasse into a more hopeful scheme of investigation.

The text-critical comments in the recent works of Dodd, Bultmann and Barrett illustrate the present unwillingness to abide by the Hortian or Sodenian texts, and the tendency to fall back upon an eclectic text in which readings from the major textual families will find a place, having been isolated as probably original on *a priori* grounds. Dodd's work¹ is not a commentary, and his discussion of variants is limited by the object of his investigations. He makes some ten references to textual matters, and some of his notes are very illuminating in this field; the note on John 5: 39 (p. 329, n. 1) is especially valuable. It is interesting to note that in several cases he approves on exegetical grounds such "non-Alexandrian" readings as 3: 13, add. ὁ ὢν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ; 8: 34, om. ἀμαρτίας; 14: 7, εἰ ἐγνώκατέ με καὶ τὸν πατέρα μου γνώσεσθε. However, textual judgment on grounds of exegesis is not always a safe guide; and it is surprising to read Dodd's judgment on the crux at 10: 29 where the banal reading of the majority of manuscripts, ὁ πατήρ ὃς δέδωκέν μοι πάντων μίσθων ἐστίν, is adopted, in the face of the well-established text-critical adage *lectio difficilior*

¹ *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953).

potior, on the grounds that it is "like 6: 37-40 in sense though not in form" and is "more widely if less weightily approved".

Bultmann's work² is very different from Dodd's in approach and in the conclusions reached; but on the textual points to which Dodd refers we often find Bultmann in his commentary reaching a similar decision. Of the four readings indicated above he adopts three (including the Byzantine variant at 10: 29), and though he will not accept the addition at 3: 13 he concedes that it is in harmony with the thought of the source. He refers at length to other variants to which Dodd is obliged to give but cursory reference, e.g. the singular $\delta\varsigma \dots \epsilon\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\theta\eta$ at 1: 13, which he discusses fully, and rejects—Dodd simply notes that it is "poorly attested" (later we shall examine articles which challenge this assertion) and that its "insertion (!) is all too easily understood". Since Bultmann's work is a commentary, he examines in full all important variants which bear on exegesis, and his work, like Dodd's, emphasizes both the value of exegesis as one criterion of judgment upon readings, and the limitations which arise where this discipline is the sole criterion, and where exegetical clarity and the dominant thought of the Evangelist, as elsewhere elucidated, are the keynotes of discussion. There is always then the danger that the real problems of text will be obscured, and the hard but necessary decisions of textual criticism evaded (as at 10: 29).

Barrett³ does not seem to be motivated so much by exegetical considerations: he seeks perhaps rather to write with a pedagogic aim, and to teach, among many other valuable things, text-critical method. At least, his work is valuable in this respect: he explicitly notes that he has so far as possible confirmed every reading from facsimile or standard edition. It is, however, to be regretted that he does not, in his introductory chapter on "The Text", provide any discussion of the textual problems of the Gospel as a whole; and his method, no less than that of the two great exegetes above noted, is eclectic. He takes more factors into account, but otherwise approaches each variant separately by the self-same route of judgment on the basis of other aspects of the Evangelist's language, thought and style.

Thus we observe that these three noteworthy recent students of the Fourth Gospel have in common a characteristic indicative of

² *Das Evangelium des Johannes erklärt* (Meyer-Kommentar, Göttingen, 1950).

³ *The Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1955).

the present dilemma in textual studies to which we have already made reference. Whatever text is adopted as a basis of comment, no wholehearted confidence is reposed in it. The lines of Westcott and Hort, or of Von Soden, are allowed to stand in a general sense, but in any particular case the critic is free to judge on grounds of intrinsic probability. We can infer from this situation that, for the time being, the analysis of the manuscript evidence into families and clans, and the determination of the locality and age of these by comparison with patristic citation, appear to be unable to take us to the very original, but only part of the way. Only the third criterion of Hort is any longer available for our judgment, and any text approaching the original will be a text determined on eclectic principles by choice based on other factors. This approach is advocated at present by notable exponents of the art and science of textual criticism: a noteworthy article by G. D. Kilpatrick on "Western Text and Original Text in the Gospels and Acts"⁴ sets out in typical clarity and thoroughness a number of criteria whereby the original may be elucidated. These include judgments based on the author's habitual style or linguistic usage, on parallel passages (when dealing with synoptic variants), on liturgical usage of Gospels, on Aramaic sources, on palaeography, on theological motivation discernible behind variants, and others. An attempt at the application of such methods is to be found in the 1946 Schweich Lectures of Dr. Gunther Zuntz entitled *The Text of the Epistles* (London, 1953). Apparently, we are counselled to assume that right early the original text was rent piecemeal and carried as it were to the ends of the earth, whither the textual critic, like lamenting Isis, must seek it by his skill—a piece preserved in this text and a piece in that, and perhaps one or two parts to be refurnished by the neglected art of conjectural emendation.

If we concede this point, and seek the original text by this method, there are notable books available among recently published works to provide us with help. The commentaries and studies are already referred to can guide us by precept and example; and time fails us to review at length other works which we name briefly. Matthew Black's justly praised *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, now in its second edition (Oxford, 1954), provides help from that linguistic angle, and contains a valuable chapter on "Aramaic as a Source of Variant Readings".

⁴ *J.T.S.* 44 (1943), pp. 24-36; cf. "Western Text and Original Text in the Epistles", *J.T.S.* 45 (1944), pp. 60-65.

Erich Fascher's *Textgeschichte als hermeneutische Problem* (Halle, 1953), amasses a large number of instances throughout the Greek New Testament where theological causes can be discerned behind variants; he devotes twelve pages to the Fourth Gospel, including a summary of Bultmann's textual notes. Heinrich Joseph Vogels, the veteran student of the Latin and Syriac textual traditions, provides in the second edition of his *Handbuch der Textkritik des Neuen Testaments* (Bonn, 1955), one of the most valuable introductions to the subject, especially noteworthy for its concrete examples of all types of variants and of induction from textual evidence, given in great profusion. C. S. C. Williams, the Oxford scholar, in the various books⁵ and new editions⁶ appearing over his name provides much useful material on many of these topics and aspects of textual study

II

Yet, important though the work of Kilpatrick and the rest is, and although for the present we must utilize these diverse criteria and establish a text by an eclectic method, it is impossible to stifle the hope that, at some future time, we shall find our methods and our resultant text justified by manuscript discoveries and by the classical methods of induction from conflation and patristic evidence which Hort exemplified so brilliantly in his work. Such a hope is vigorously expressed by K. W. Clark in his contribution to the *Festschrift* presented to C. H. Dodd.⁷ I intend to glance now at some methods by which other textual scholars are attempting to get behind the conflicting evidence to an earlier stratum than we at present possess.

Firstly, the search for the *Diatessaron* of Tatian still goes on. It is a search which has led its pursuers through fields ranging from Old High German to Persian and Middle Sogdian. Since Ciasca's edition of an Arabic version of the Gospel Harmony in 1888, the work has progressed steadily and with ever increasing accuracy; and it would appear that great steps forward have been

⁵ *Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Oxford, 1951).

⁶ A. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, second edition, revised by C. S. C. Williams (London, 1954); A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*, second edition revised by C. S. C. Williams (Oxford, 1953); see especially pp. 373-453.

⁷ W. D. Davies and D. Daube (ed.), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (Cambridge, 1956); see pp. 27-51, "The effect of recent textual criticism upon New Testament studies", by K. W. Clark.

made, especially since the work of Daniel Plooij on the Dutch Gospel Harmonies. It is to be regretted that the average English reader hears little or nothing of these studies (the work of C. S. C. Williams constitutes an exception in this), and that here as at so many points the standard summary is in German—Curt Peters, *Das Diatessaron Tatians* (Rome, 1939); for there can be little doubt that, if we can attain to the text of Tatian's work, we shall possess a valuable tool. There is room for legitimate doubt how far the Gospel text was influenced by a dominant harmonistic text—though a leading *Diatessaronforscher* such as Vogels suggests that for a reading to be Tatian's is enough to demand that we avoid it!—but there can be no doubt that Tatian's text is a second-century text, and if his harmony be recovered, we shall possess a cross-check upon the evidence of second-century papyri and patristic citations, which at present defeat elucidation.

In the second place, the analyses of the Gospel text of the Chester Beatty papyri and other witnesses by Teófilo Ayuso Marazuela⁸ (and more recently by H. W. Huston⁹) cast new light on the situation. Ayuso examines the so-called Caesarean text, and demonstrates that many of the weaker witnesses to that text are in fact distinct in text from it. He therefore postulates a "pre-Caesarean" text—found in fam. 1, fam. 13, and the Chester Beatty papyrus among others, and also in the versions in certain Coptic dialects, notably Fayyumic and Subakhmimic—which was the "raw material" out of which the recensional Caesarean text (i.e. that of Origen, Eusebius and the Koridethi codex) was created. Whereas Huston demurs to the word "pre-Caesarean", his statistical analyses of readings in the Chester Beatty codex emphasize the implications of Ayuso's conclusions, namely, that our present categories do not correspond to the textual pattern of third-century witnesses, but derive from a later time when learned recension had played its part. Such studies enable us, in John as elsewhere, to look at our earliest evidence and to assess it without unconscious prejudice.

A third approach to a more primitive text has been suggested by the Dominican scholar M. E. Boismard, who takes very seriously the evidence provided in patristic citations even where there is little manuscript support. In five notable articles in the *Revue Biblique*, Professor Boismard indicates how often the Fathers ap-

⁸ "¿ Testo cesariense o precesariense?" *Biblica* 16 (1935), pp. 369-415.

⁹ *J.B.L.* 74 (1955), pp. 262-271.

pear to conserve a text of which few traces are left in the Greek sources at our disposal. This text—studied in the Fourth Gospel by Boismard—is shorter, more concise and succinct in style and many ways preferable to the Neutral text which, as he puts it, is canonized in our critical editions. He demonstrates this thesis in a variety of ways. In 1948, in the article “A propos de Jean 5: 39—Essai de critique textuelle”, he dealt at great length and in profound detail with a triple textual tradition, practically unnoticed by the editors in this verse. The indications in this article of the importance of patristic citation were made explicit by the article “Critique textuelle et citations patristiques” (1950), which outlines the thesis that “there exists a textual tradition in the Fathers different from the tradition in the manuscripts and almost completely unknown in the latter”, and illustrates this by variants at John 14: 2; 12: 32; 14: 23; 17: 5; 17: 21; 1: 13. A third article, “Lectio Brevior, Potior” (1951), presents the observations that the manuscript tradition bears traces of a concise recension, which has been largely replaced by one expanded in the interests of exegesis, Codex Sinaiticus being a valuable witness for this concise text; and that John Chrysostom among Greek Fathers, the Syriac Fathers, the versions in Syriac, Ethiopic and Old Latin, and the *Diatessaron* in its various forms, are particularly helpful for its demonstration. The article “Dans le sein du Père” (1952) deals with a little known variant of John 1: 18, where Boismard proposes to read as the original text: θεόν οὐδεις ἑώρακεν πρόποτε εἰ μή ὁ μονογενῆς. εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.¹⁰ This requires the translation of ἐξηγοῦμαι as “lead, induct, introduce”, for which Boismard adduces a considerable amount of lexicographical evidence. Lastly, he sums up his theses and gives further examples in the article “Problèmes de critique textuelle concernant le quatrième Évangile” (1953). In addition to the positions already indicated, he re-emphasizes that frequently one currently accepted critical reading is in fact a conflation of two earlier readings; and that this earlier tradition can be discovered only by an ample and careful use of the patristic and versional evidence. He deals with variants at John 19: 34; 11: 48-50; 13: 10; 13: 24; and (at great length) 6: 22-24, with a glance at 6: 1.

Apart from his acknowledged forerunner Friedrich Blass,¹¹

¹⁰ “No one hath seen God at any time save the Only-begotten: He has led us into the Father’s bosom.”

¹¹ *Evangelium secundum Iohannem cum variae lectionis delectu* (Leipzig, 1902).

Boismard is apparently pioneering in the elucidation of patristic citations: hitherto, while such citations have been considered valuable for the dating and placing of text-types, no one has dared to take their differences from the manuscript tradition with equal seriousness to that with which manuscript variants are considered. These differences are usually attributed to the memory-citation common to the Fathers; but Boismard rightly draws our attention to many instances in which Fathers widely separated in time and place, and versions equally diverse, concur in disagreement with the majority voice of the manuscripts. He rightly poses to us the question how this can be, if it does not derive from a manuscript tradition now lost. We may counter this by the question: How did this tradition disappear in manuscript so utterly? When we find that even Photius, a ninth-century patriarch, agrees with Boismard's readings in several instances, we are robbed of the Diocletianic persecution and its fires of Bibles as the explanation of this disappearance! My present opinion is that here we have a genuine problem, the answer to which may well take us some distance in our search for the earliest attainable text. But until others follow Boismard in his investigations, too little benefit will derive from his revolutionary proposals. It may be that we shall find the answer in an early method of exegesis or in some hitherto unsuspected influence of liturgy: until we know, Boismard's hypothesis would appear extremely attractive.

III

Textual criticism is not, however, a matter of theory-spinning but of induction from hard facts. In drawing to a close, I wish to give by way of interest and example some account of two recent studies of the reading in John 1: 13, ὃς . . . ἐγεννήθη.¹² It has been considered by F. M. Braun in the *Festschrift* for M. Goguel (*Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne*) under its Latin form as title, "Qui Ex Deo Natus Est"; and, in connection with adjacent variants, by M. E. Boismard in the article above referred to (*Revue Biblique*, 1950).

Braun gives an outline of the evidence, in which he seeks to establish that the singular reading, though lacking support from any Greek manuscript source, is strongly supported elsewhere and is of a respectable antiquity. Among Latin manuscripts it is read

¹² "Who was begotten" (referring to Christ) in place of the common reading "who were begotten" (referring to believers in Christ).

by Codex Veronensis and by the Toledo lectionary known as the Liber Comicus; and in the Curetonian Syriac a possible attestation is to be found in that, whereas the antecedent of the relative clause is in the plural ('ylyn), the verb is in the singular ('tyld). This was explained by Burkitt as a case of simple haplography, the letter *w* having been omitted from the end of the verb or from the beginning of verse 14. But the reading might be intentional and point to an earlier stage in Syriac Gospel tradition. (It is perhaps noteworthy, however, that Dr. A. Vööbus, in his *History of the Gospel Text in Syriac*,¹³ has no reference to this verse.) Braun considers it feasible to accept the second possibility because of the definite knowledge of the singular reading evinced in the *Epistle of the Eleven Apostles*, a work now extant in Coptic and Ethiopic only, but whose origin was probably Syriac. A second-century date is probable for this work. However, no other Syriac sources are quoted for the reading; and it appears to me the weakest point in Braun's arguments. The Latin Fathers, Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine and Sulpicius Severus, can be cited for the reading, and among the Greeks Hippolytus, Methodius, and Apollinaris of Laodicea. The Latin version of Irenaeus, too, attests the singular, and is supported in the Armenian where that is extant. Braun would add Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch, though these seem very dubious cases.

He then turns to assess the two readings on internal grounds, considering that the concurrence of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Codex Veronensis renders the singular worthy of serious consideration. The authority of manuscript tradition over against patristic citation can, in his submission, be greatly exaggerated in view of the two factors of error and recension (these are, however, surely at work in both). He considers that the originality of the reading ἐγενήθη is supported by the strophic arrangement of the prologue, the necessity of a logical connection between verse 14 and the preceding verse, the difficulty of finding an adequate explanation of the aorist tense if the plural be correct, the pointlessly polemical tone of the plural reading, and the overshadowing of the Incarnation of the Word by the spiritual regeneration of the children of God if the plural be original. He agrees that the plural reading agrees with the thought of the Gospel as expressed in Ch. 3, for example; but argues that in the prologue this would yield an "evident accord" with the preceding words, and thus is a case of

¹³ C.S.C.O. Subsidia, tome 3 (Louvain, 1951).

lectio facilior, whereas the singular ἐγεννήθη leaves the analogy of rebirth and the Incarnation to be inferred from the harmonic overtones of the verse (so to speak), and is thus a case of "hidden accord". He is prepared, then, to accept the reading ἐγεννήθη as original, and considers this conclusion to be corroborated by the Ephesian connections of the primitive authors and the "Western" text-type which attest the tradition. He indicates also that there are other cases (e.g. the punctuation of John 7: 37 f.) where the correct text has been preserved by Latin manuscripts and the Greek Fathers, where the Greek manuscript tradition has gone clean contrary.

Boismard in his study deals most cursorily with this variant, and attends more thoroughly to other variants in verses 12 and 13. He finds in the patristic evidence (to some extent corroborated in sporadic variants of the manuscripts) traces of a primordial two-fold tradition which is now conflated into one current text. He notes in verse 12 the omission of τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ in the Fathers Pamphilus, Origen, Athanasius, Epiphanius, Didymus of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Nonnus of Pannopolis, Chrysostom, Procopius of Gaza, Andreas of Crete; Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine, Rufinus; Babaï the Great, Philoxenus of Mabbug; and in the Venetian *Diatessaron*. He finds further variations pointing to this omission in Ethiopic manuscripts, and in Tertullian and other Latin authors. He claims on the basis of patristic citation to isolate three forms of verse 12:

(1) ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι.

(2) ὅσοι ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῆναι.

(3) Text of critical editions.

In verse 13, he emphasizes some uncertainties which surround the phrases οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων κτλ. B and 17, supported by many Fathers, omit οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρός, E and five minuscules, again supported by Fathers, omit οὐκ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκός. Here again, on the basis of evidence which he adduces in minutest detail, he isolates a number of shorter texts which he claims to have been conflated in the text which our critical editions attest as the earliest which we can attain to. He suggests that this variety arose when the Hebraistic "not from flesh and blood" was paraphrased as "not by the will of man".

He accepts ἐγεννήθη, as I have indicated, without much ado, as he finds it attested by the earliest patristic evidence, common to

both his postulated shorter texts ; and thus from verses 12 and 13 he claims to isolate two textual forms, the first presumably Hebraistic in language, the second periphrastic or interpretative in terms more congenial to Greek thought forms and idiom:

(1) ὅσοι ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῆναι ὃς οὐκ ἐξ αἱματος οὐδὲ ἐκ σαρκὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθη.

(2) ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι ὃς οὐκ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθη.

Our current text then is a conflation of the two.

I find Braun's simpler thesis more plausible: it seems to me that Boismard, especially in his treatment of verse 13, is not so well supported by his evidence, and is more in danger of concocting his own text. But at least the approach of these two scholars is instructive, and represents a serious attempt to strike behind the manuscript evidence into the traditions preceding the recensional activities which almost certainly crystallized the text-forms known to us in fourth-century uncials. It is interesting to note that Boismard's procedure in particular can be described in terms germane to Hort's: he eschews the conflate reading ; he uses without demur the evidence provided in the Fathers ; and when these means have taken him (and Braun) as far as possible, he utilizes every scholarly tool to determine intrinsic probability. On one point alone would there appear to be a difference: is Boismard's judgment of readings always preceded by knowledge of documents?—for instance, can we utilize the readings of random Ethiopic manuscripts, or the Venetian *Diatessaron*, with such confidence as he appears to do, until we know with more certainty the history of those particular witnesses ? Nevertheless, here is a third way in which scholars are attempting to break the impasse and to establish with greater certainty the original text of Scripture.

While it is far from my intention to decry any discipline of the investigation of Scripture, I would fain see more scholars leaving realms more evident in grandeur and more alluring in fame to seek definable accuracy concerning that Word which we all exist to receive, expound and glorify ; and entering into the many investigations and debates which await us as we seek to clarify the earthly appearance of the *Verbum Domini quod manet in aeternum*.