

BOOK REVIEW

Porter, Stanley E., and Andrew W. Pitts, *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). xvi + 202 pp. Pbk. \$22.00.

For new and intermediate students of the Greek New Testament who have some familiarity with text-critical issues, this work is a decent summary of the major topics that can be found in the lengthier foundational books on New Testament textual criticism. Since this book has received many reviews already, a justification seems necessary for one more. First, while some of the reviews are too simplistic and not critical enough, others are justifiably critical—although at times their criticism is unjustified and more a matter of personal taste. The reality is that some of the criticisms are colored by presuppositions that relate to areas of disagreement across the entire discipline. Secondly, I take some personal responsibility as one of the initial readers of this book and so offer my more seasoned reflections. Having said that, the aim of this review will be to provide a fair assessment in light of the shifting sands and entrenched viewpoints that can be confusing to new students and vexing to more seasoned critics.

Porter and Pitts build on the classic works by Kurt and Barbara Aland and Bruce Metzger, but they also venture into areas that cover recent advances in modern linguistics that are not found in more recent text critical books like David Parker's valuable *Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For intermediate and advanced students of the Greek New Testament, or the experienced critic looking for an erudite synthesis of the principles of traditional textual criticism, this short volume provides a handy pocket guide for teaching and research.

True to their aim, they produce a 'mid-level' textbook that is neither 'too detailed or too abbreviated' (p. xiii). This book is born out of a desire to bridge the gap between students with at least one year of studies in New Testament or Classical/Hellenistic Greek and the basics

of textual criticism. It has been designed as a companion volume to Stanley E. Porter, Jeffrey Reed and Matthew Brook O'Donnell's *Fundamentals of the New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) and the forthcoming intermediate grammar by Porter and Pitts. Although it does not provide a detailed analysis of the multiple issues and trends facing textual criticism (i.e. the fall of text-types, original vs. initial text) nor does it cover in great detail the changing views in methodology (i.e. CBGM, Coherence Based Genealogical Method), the topics are addressed fairly with sufficient reference to the broader debates.

One advantage of this book is the simple layout and helpful provision of vocabulary and chapter summaries for both students and for teachers who want some assistance in formulating tests and quizzes. Where more advanced works can leave the reader with information overload and confusion regarding the major principles in each chapter, Porter and Pitts have written this from the perspective of expert pedagogy. Meanwhile, their select bibliography allows the reader to do further reading and research.

Their first chapter explores the question, 'What Is Textual Criticism?' while explaining in simple terms the two major competing views on the discipline's definitions and aims. While there are only six pages dedicated to a subject that could easily fill an entire book, for budding text critics the differences between the 'traditional' and 'sociohistorical' aims are well summarized here. Although the quest for an 'original' text of the New Testament is seen by a growing number of scholars (i.e. Epp, Elliott, Ehrman, Parker etc.) as an impossible goal, there remains a core group of scholars (to which Pitts and Porter belong) that continues to seek the 'original form of the text' (p. 1)—along with classic scholars (Tischendorf, Griesbach, Hort etc.) and more recent ones (Aland, Metzger, Fee, Comfort etc.). While the 'sociohistorical' goal of understanding the transmission history of the variants is growing in popularity for what it can teach us about early Christianity, for Porter and Pitts the traditional goal remains a 'must' (p. 6). They believe that 'the textual critic must ascertain the text itself before the exegete can begin to interpret the meaning of the text' (p. 6). Hence, the 'text' or even the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus is not only 'logically prior to critical interpretation but must precede sociohistorical text-critical analysis itself' (p. 6). It is doubtful if any 'sociohistorical' critics would agree to this supposition.

Furthermore, it would have been beneficial to include discussions of the various meanings of the term ‘original’ as well as the issue of the *Initial* or *Ausgangstext* that is seen by many critics as the best that we can hope for given the state of our manuscripts to date (Parker, Erhman, Elliott and especially E.J. Epp’s essay, ‘The Multivalence of the Term “Original Text” in New Testament Textual Criticism’, *HTR* 92 [1999], pp. 245-81). The reader will need to explore this subject further as there is anything but consensus on this issue (see the edited volume by Klaus Wachtel and Michael Holmes, *The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research* [Leiden: Brill, 2012] and also from the same year David Parker’s informative book, *Textual Scholarship and the Making of the New Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]). However, common ground can be found between the two seemingly divergent goals in the manuscripts themselves, because they are the foundation for making any judgements about an Original (or *Initial*) text and its transmission history.

Chapter 2 ventures into a summary discussion of the canon as the ‘Domain’ of New Testament textual criticism. They propose that the ‘domain of NT textual criticism must be established before we can undertake the task of NT textual criticism’ (p. 9). Here they provide a decent summary discussion of the evidence for an early canon while introducing the reader to some of the main issues and debates. They define the New Testament canon as the ‘body of writings that came to be recognized by the early church as authoritative in matters of doctrine and practice’ (p. 9, later reinforced and defended on pp. 28-29). They offer a traditional examination of the issues surrounding the ancient and later canonical lists including a note on the *Muratorian* fragment and the writings of the fourth-century church historian Eusebius of Caesarea. While their conclusions have been argued well, some critical discussion seems absent, such as the late acceptance of Revelation (or lack thereof, see p. 29). In addition, one wonders how defensible it is to suggest that the canon closed ‘as soon as the apostles died’ (p. 30). Further discussion on the relationship between canon and textual issues seems wanting especially given the inclusion of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* in Sinaiticus. This is further complicated by the differences between manuscripts among the early collections.

Chapter 3 examines the ‘Materials and Methods of Classification’ and offers a general introduction to the first-century book trade, the writing materials (papyrus/parchment) and the scroll and codices. The authors describe the writing styles and other important topics such as the *nomina sacra* which, in fairness to the authors, remains a contested subject. The reader should also take special notice that some of the ‘errors’ pointed out in previous reviews (such as the list of manuscripts on p. 50) were in fact corrected by the authors. The publisher (Eerdmans) issued an errata sheet with the corrected list of manuscripts (the Kindle edition also reflects these corrections). At any rate, the reader should refer to the INTF website (cf. n. 22) for an update because this number will continue to change as new manuscripts are discovered. Further, the reference to Bruce’s 1988 list of classical manuscripts (on p. 50) is outdated thereby skewing the comparative data (for an update cf. <http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/>).

Subsequently, Chapter 4 gives a broad survey of the important New Testament witnesses beginning with a brief note on the Gregory-Aland numbering system while including a discussion of the papyri, majuscules, minuscules, lectionaries, the early versions of the New Testament and the patristic quotations. Although their list of papyri is anything but exhaustive, it seems to be missing a few important witnesses. For example, there are no early Acts manuscripts such as P²⁹, P³⁸ and P⁴⁸ which are known for their ‘Western’ tendencies. Additionally, P⁴⁵, P⁷² and P⁷⁵ should also be added to this list, but again, text critics emphasize their own favorite manuscripts for various reasons. Their selection of listed papyri rests primarily on the ‘Alexandrian’ (or proto) variety that has ‘affinities’ of various strengths in relation to \aleph (01) and B (03) Vaticanus. As well, some of the textual character descriptions require qualification such as W (32) being the ‘earliest representation of Byzantine text-type’ (p. 60). In actuality, A (02) is arguably the earliest example, and surely it is an understatement to describe the text as ‘mixed’ (p. 60) where others consider it to exemplify extreme variation (so Comfort). It should also be noted that \aleph (01) is not purely Alexandrian as Fee has demonstrated that Jn 1.1–8.38 is clearly Western.

Chapter 5 addresses the highly contested issue of text-types. On the one hand, Porter and Pitts provide a great defense of traditional text-types: ‘As copies of the NT moved farther and farther from their origin, this process of circulation eventually resulted in a number of

geographically based textual families or text-types' (p. 73). The use of text-types in textual criticism is not without a measure of justification as Porter and Pitts build their case on the backs of Griesbach, Tischendorf and Westcott. On the other hand, the perceived fall of text-types (so Parker and others)—or their reclassification into families or clusters (most notably Epp and Elliott)—is an important trend in the discipline that is not adequately explored in this chapter. Secondly, there is also a distinct bias towards and prioritization of the Alexandrian text as compared to other forms (Byzantine, Western or the much contested Caesarean text). Some justification and indication as to what characterizes each type or family and their corresponding age and development would have been beneficial here. Otherwise, the reader may be left with the impression that a handful of Alexandrian witness are the prize artefacts for study, while the broadly defined yet early Western witnesses and the Byzantine text (with the highest percentage of manuscripts spanning over a thousand years) are of minimal importance.

While building on Colwell and Tune's important studies, the authors in Chapter 6 explore the essential question, 'What is a textual variant?' They move from a note on the 'traditional tendencies' that are arguably too 'simplistic' to consider (so Epp) to the 'larger units in which they occur' (p. 80). Subsequently, they describe (again with reliance on Colwell and Tune) the types of textual variation and make the important distinction between significant and insignificant variants (especially nonsense readings, scribal errors and singular readings). For new students, a fuller discussion of singular readings may be unwarranted here, but Parker (*Textual Scholarship*, p. 94) considers the elimination of singular readings as cheating. The implication is that if singular readings are included in a comparison between Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, the distance between them becomes vastly greater, thus potentially undermining some of this book's principles.

The third section explores the problem of defining the beginning and end of a variant-unit. Porter and Pitts discuss the limitations of Colwell and Tune's solution to notice 'those elements of expression in the Greek text which regularly exist together' (p. 83). They expand upon Epp and Fee's later grammatical observations, but present a 'more promising ... way forward' (p. 83) that looks at the structure of the Greek text from the smallest to the largest unit via principles of modern linguistics. A clausal and word-group analysis offers the necessary

structure and a creative, workable solution to a well-recognized problem. This valuable contribution to the discipline deserves a future, expanded treatment. For the time being, it would be helpful to have a list of linguistic resources in the bibliography for students to draw from.

Chapter 7 is the first of their valuable methodology chapters that describe the four broad approaches to New Testament textual criticism: (1) stemmatic approach, (2) majority text approach, (3) various eclectic methods and the (4) single text model. This chapter is especially valuable because few books survey and synthesize the various methods in such an accessible way. The authors note that the stemmatic approach is making a comeback with the CBGM developed by the Münster Institute for New Testament Textual Research. With the aid of computers, this method is able to test ‘various agreements and disagreements among the variants and possible genealogical relationships and how they might fit together to form connected variant chains, [and] is able to reconstruct a stemmatic flow of the variants to what is called the *initial text*’ (pp. 89-90). Although they identify many limitations of CBGM (despite its use by the *Editio Critica Maior* since 1999), a further weakness is that it fails to accommodate non-Greek witnesses (Epp), and there is also an overbalance in prioritizing texts and internal criteria without adequate consideration of text-types (or their reclassification). At the same time, and in fairness to CBGM, the authors should have discussed in greater detail many of its advantages such as its contribution to dealing with the problem of contamination (cf. the essays in Wachtel and Holmes, *The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research* [Leiden: Brill, 2012] and esp. Gerd Mink’s essay, ‘Contamination, Coherence, and Coincidence in Textual Transmission: The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method [CBGM] as a Compliment and Corrective to Existing Approaches’, pp. 141-216).

The remaining sections focus on the Byzantine/Majority text approach, eclectic methods and the single text model. Although the introductory summaries of these positions are useful, they will assuredly vary considerably from the perspective of its defenders. Robinson, and others who value the Byzantine/majority text approach, would no doubt challenge some of the assumptions the authors have about the low value of the Byzantine text and the way the method is presented (cf. pp. 90-91 and also pp. 77-78). The section on eclecticism

provides a tidy synthesis of each of the two competing branches—*thoroughgoing eclecticism* on the one hand and *reasoned eclecticism* on the other. Although Elliott endorses this book, new students need to go beyond the authors' one page introduction to thoroughgoing principles (p. 99)—given the size and scope of J.K. Elliott's *New Testament Textual Criticism: The Application of Thoroughgoing Principles: Essays on Manuscripts and Textual Variation* (NovTSup, 137; Leiden: Brill, 2010). At any rate, the authors acknowledge the delicate balance involved in weighing external and internal criteria and the problem of 'how one decides, on the basis of the manuscript evidence alone, which manuscript to favour over another' (p. 95).

The single text model (pp. 95-96), with its focus on the largest and earliest collections of New Testament writings (i.e. Vaticanus/Sinaiticus), seems appropriate for the study of an early (though original?) text along with its inherent historical worth and place in the NT's transmission history. For Porter and Pitts, this is better than a 'scholarly construct of the twentieth century' (p. 96). However, this model requires further research to develop a methodology and corresponding criteria that would navigate a 'single text' in view of the full manuscript record and in due consideration of the manuscript additions and deficiencies. Finally, this chapter boasts a sizable collection of resources for further study (as compared to the deficit in Chapter 6).

The next few chapters (8–10), offer a tidy summary of how critics go about weighing external and internal evidence (or criteria). Metzger's third edition is perhaps the only previous work that comes close in clarity. Chapter 8 first narrates the important external evidence by looking at the date and text-type, the geographical distribution and genealogical relationships between 'two or more documents that share a common origin' (p. 106). Here they explain the evolution of the traditional approaches into Colwell's important quantitative method and then the Claremont Profile Method developed by his students at Claremont (Frederick Wisse and Paul McReynolds). Without discounting the need to value external evidence first, this chapter requires further explanation because their understanding of external evidence is anchored in a traditional theory of text-types and geographical distribution. (As mentioned above, text-types are thrown out altogether by some critics, and reorganized by others.) Furthermore, since text-types have 'gone hand in hand with linking

these text-types to geographical regions of origin' (p. 105) since Griesbach, the geographical criteria also becomes problematic in light of the recent attitudes towards text-types and difficulties in linking them to certain regions.

Chapter 9 focuses on the first major aspect of internal evidence: *transcriptional probabilities* (scribal errors), while Chapter 10 discusses *intrinsic probabilities*—both of which are governed by one chief rule known as the *genetic principle*. For new and advanced students, these two chapters blend recognizable criteria from previous works (such as Metzger or Vaganj/Amphoux) in a concise way that is not available in any recent volume. The section on doctrinal alterations is worth serious attention as the authors maintain that doctrinal agendas impacting scribes are 'the exception rather than the rule' (p. 119, contra Ehrman).

The goal of assessing intrinsic probabilities 'is to discover which variant the author is most likely to have written based upon what we know about his style' (p. 129). The authors, in Chapter 10, reason succinctly that the text critic should be familiar with the following variables: (1) stylistic continuity, (2) cohesion, (3) theological and literary coherence, (4) linguistic conformity and (5) source consistency. This chapter tidies up (and sometimes) corrects the variously labelled criteria found in other works, synthesizes them and adds some new and creative linguistic solutions that will no doubt make a contribution to the discipline (i.e. cohesion on pp. 130-32).

The authors (in Chapter 11) are familiar with the history of the critical editions from Ximenes to Nestle, and from Nestle to NA^{27/28} (and UBSGNT^{4/5}). However, a few paragraphs on the ECM would have been appropriate given its progress and popularity (references are only given in passing, pp. 90, 113, 146). Chapter 12 should be required reading for new students as it provides a succinct description with explanatory notes and symbols relating to the inner and outer margins of the critical apparatus. There is also a helpful section on the distinctive features of the UBSGNT^{4/5} and a comparison of features between them both (pp. 162-75). Finally, Chapter 13 offers a history of the English Bible and modern translations, with an updated summary of research on translation theory.

In conclusion, despite some of the areas that could have received a fuller discussion, this volume offers a learned synthesis and summary of traditional textual criticism with some creative advice, advances and

solutions. With due consideration of the competing methodologies and trends, and with some further supplementation, this book provides new and intermediate students a valuable guide for understanding the various methodologies and the application of criteria, especially when it is compared to the more detailed volumes such as Vagany/Amphoux, Parker, or Metzger and Ehrman's. For these reasons, and with due attention to the issues outlined above, this book will be a useful and welcome addition to one's library.

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