

Going for the Bigger Picture Eldon Epp as Textual Critic¹

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Abstract

Eldon Jay Epp, who turned 80 in 2010, has made numerous contributions to NT textual criticism. In this essay, the focus is on his repeated efforts to promote greater efforts toward framing a fully-informed theory and history of the early textual transmission of NT writings. At various points over the last several decades, he has drawn upon his appreciable knowledge of the history of the discipline to criticize the slow pace in these matters. He has also promoted and demonstrated study of the earliest NT papyri as key evidence for any such theory and history of the NT texts. Moreover, he has urged that study of NT papyri be done with attention to the larger Roman-era environment of textual transmission.

It is a bit daunting to attempt a characterization of the contributions of one's teacher and thesis supervisor, and it is unrealistic here to attempt a comprehensive survey of Eldon Epp's body of publications and the spectrum of issues that he has addressed in them.² Instead, in observance of his 80th birthday in 2010 I attempt a more modest aim of identifying what seem to me some main and recurring emphases and objectives evident in his text-critical work. As my title indicates, I propose that these particular emphases and objectives represent a clear disposition, or better stated, a commitment toward what I call "the bigger picture" in NT textual criticism. That is, I think that we can see a persistent concern in his work to address particular larger questions in the discipline with the aim of helping to shape its future. He is no stranger to manuscript-collation and the nitty-gritty particularities of variant readings, to be sure; but I think that we see in his body of publications efforts to develop wider perspectives and focus attention on certain major issues. The emphases that I highlight here are these: The history of the discipline as the necessary context in which to view particular developments, and a persistent concern for progress in the history and theory of the NT text. In defence of my focus, I cite Epp's own words: In the opening sentence of an essay originally published in 1989, he stated, "I have two major interests in New Testament textual criticism: history and method."³

¹ Originally presented as part of a special session of the New Testament Textual Criticism programme unit in honor of Professor Epp at 80 years of age, part of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 2010 (Atlanta). Professor Epp was my PhD supervisor and has remained a friend and mentor over the decades since my PhD studies.

² For example, I omit here discussion of Epp's several contributions to the clarification of key terms and concepts. E.g., Eldon Jay Epp, "Toward the Clarification of the Term 'Textual Variant,'" in *Studies in the New Testament Language and Text*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 153-73, republished in E. J. Epp, G. D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 47-61; and *idem*, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *HTR* 92 (1999): 245-81.

³ E. J. Epp, "The New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective," in *To Touch the Text: Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, eds. M. P. Horgan, P. J. Kobelski (New York: Crossroad,

I

From my student days in his doctoral course on NT textual criticism, it was clear to me that Professor Epp had a strong interest in the history of the discipline, and in a number of publications over the years he has demonstrated his impressive acquaintance with the material involved. He has also insisted, however, that knowledge of the history of the discipline is not an optional pastime or hobby, but is instead a vital context in which to engage and assess current activity.

He does not use his considerable knowledge of the history of the discipline simply to give impressive museum tours or to guide readers through old academic battlefields, providing witty commentary like the hosts of TV documentaries. Instead, repeatedly, Epp has drawn upon his knowledge of the history of NT textual criticism to offer trenchant observations and timely exhortations about the current state of the discipline. The classic demonstration is his 1973 Hatch Memorial Lecture, “The Twentieth Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism.”⁴ In this essay, Epp submitted the judgment that (to that point) the twentieth century activities in NT textual criticism, though a time of undoubtedly important activity in the field, had not measured up to the great methodological breakthroughs of the preceding century. Nineteenth-century scholars, he emphasized, had developed foundational principles for using textual evidence, had de-throned the *textus receptus* (at least in scholarly opinion) and won overwhelming scholarly assent to the need for a critical approach to establishing the NT text, and (especially in the work of Westcott and Hort) had laid out a cogent and influential history and theory of NT textual transmission in the early centuries. By comparison, he judged, twentieth-century NT textual criticism had not made equivalent progress. Instead, Epp contended, the twentieth century had been essentially a time of engaging the massive increase in manuscript evidence (including majuscules such as the Freer Gospels codex, and also the Chester Beatty and then the Bodmer papyri), the preparation of a number of critical editions of the NT, some noteworthy developments in the analysis of the relationships of manuscripts (especially deriving from the adaptation and application Colwell’s pioneering proposals), and, of course, the massive amount of activity and the projects undertaken in the Münster Institute for Text-Critical Research. But, though all of this was commendable and worth celebrating, he complained that scholars were either still tacitly working within the basic (and dated) historical/theoretical framework laid down by Westcott and Hort, or else had come to practice various degrees of an eclectic approach at a variation-unit level, having given up on (or eschewed) the task of making a significant advance in the larger history and theory of NT textual transmission. I cite Epp’s own words from his Hatch Lecture:

... every textual critic knows ... that we have made little progress in textual *theory* since Westcott-Hort; that we simply do not know how to make a definitive determination as to what the best text is; that we do not have a clear picture of the transmission and alteration of the text in the first few centuries ...⁵

This characterization proved controversial in some quarters, however, and drew a characteristically vigorous (and patently defensive) response from the late Kurt Aland.⁶ The basic drift of

1989), 261-88 (citing 261). The essay appears also in *idem, Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962–2004* (NovTSup 116; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 309-43 (citing 309). Hereafter, I cite this volume as *Perspectives*.

⁴ Eldon Jay Epp, “The Twentieth Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 386-414 [= *Perspectives*, 59-100].

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65 [= 390-91 of *JBL* version].

⁶ Kurt Aland, “The Twentieth-Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Text and*

(or at least the reason for) Aland's critique seemed that Epp had failed to appreciate adequately the importance of certain developments in the field (including particularly the many projects and developments based in the Münster Institute). In his rejoinder to Aland, after granting again (as he had in the Hatch lecture) that there had indeed been noteworthy progress and attainments in the discipline, an "unrepentant" Epp nevertheless reiterated his judgment that,

... all of these exemplary advances in our accumulated materials, in the tools of research, and in our control of the data have not yet resulted, it seems to me, in decisive progress in certain critical areas of New Testament textual criticism, namely in the textual character of the critical editions of the twentieth century; in the theory and history of the earliest New Testament text; or in the evaluation of readings.⁷

Repeatedly in his publications, Epp has expressed his disappointment and frustration at the lack of progress equivalent to nineteenth-century developments, specifically in these larger matters to do with the theory and history of the NT texts. For example, in a substantial essay published in 2002, he urged NT textual critics to "stick to major issues," thereby preventing "the light they cast on the New Testament text from being obliterated by the sunshine of the great textual critics that have gone before."⁸ Taking stock of the quarter-century since his Hatch Lecture, however, in this essay Epp acknowledged "the prodigious labors expended" in the twentieth century in analysis of the many manuscripts that became available, and in "the development of theories, tools, and methods for studying the transmission, history and nature of the New Testament text—including some radical new approaches and attitudes." Consequently, he indicated that he had come to share "the more optimistic outlook" expressed in one of my essays that had appeared a few years earlier.⁹ Nevertheless, he still complained,

After all, Westcott and Hort had written, to their satisfaction, a rather clear history of the text ... why couldn't we do much better since they had virtually no early papyri to aid them. ... Should we not be able to write the very early history of our text—something that the vast majority of textual critics are convinced would improve our external arguments?¹⁰

In short, Epp's deep acquaintance with, and appreciation of, the monumental steps taken in nineteenth-century text-critical scholarship led him to hold twentieth-century scholars to an exacting standard. In particular, his historical perspective gave him a keen appreciation and

Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black, eds. Ernest Best, R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-14. Aland's article appeared also as "Die Rolle des 20. Jahrhunderts in der Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Textkritik," in *Bericht der Hermann Kunst-Stiftung zur Förderung der neutestamentlichen Textforschung für die Jahre 1977 bis 1979* (Münster: Herman Kunst-Stiftung, 1979), 28-42, but the first two paragraphs and final few lines of the original article were omitted in this version.

⁷ Eldon Jay Epp, "A Continuing Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism?," *HTR* 73 (1980): 131-51 [= Epp, *Perspectives*, 185-209, citing here from p. 189]. "... I remain unrepentant in the face of Professor Aland's stinging and at times sarcastic criticism" (Ibid. 187).

⁸ E. J. Epp, "Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism: Moving From the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century," in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, eds. D. A. Black (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 17-76 [= *Perspectives*, 641-97, citing 642].

⁹ Ibid., 642-43 (and n. 2). He refers here to L. W. Hurtado, "Beyond the Interlude? Developments and Directions in New Testament Textual Criticism," in *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts*, ed. D. G. K. Taylor (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 26-48.

¹⁰ Epp, *Perspectives*, 656.

desire specifically for further developments in scholarly understanding of the early history of the transmission of the NT writings, the forces that drove and shaped this process, and why and how the early manuscripts came to exhibit their specific textual complexions.

II

As well as modelling and using with effect a commendable grasp of the wider history of the discipline to exhort progress in mapping the early history of the transmission of NT writings and a theory of the forces that shaped it, Epp has also offered his own contributions toward this goal. In a number of essays, he has focused on the earliest NT papyri in particular as the most important direct evidence for these questions.

Of course, he has certainly not been alone in emphasizing the special historical significance of the NT papyri. One can immediately think of a similar emphasis repeatedly made by Kurt Aland in particular, although their specific approaches (and perhaps their objectives) differ noticeably.¹¹ One could also point to other scholars as well from decades ago who urged that attention be focused on the NT papyri, e.g., J. N. Birdsall, K. W. Clark and E. C. Colwell.¹² In the 1989 essay mentioned earlier in this discussion, Epp acknowledged that scholars had not left the NT papyri unattended by any means.¹³ For example, these important witnesses certainly have been incorporated into the apparatus of several successive editions of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament. Moreover, in the volumes of *Das neue Testament auf Papyrus*, the readings of the NT papyri are the centre of attention.¹⁴

But Epp complained that the papyri seem to have had little particular effect on the text of modern critical editions, and he asked, "... should not the current critical text be more *directly* based on principles and theories that issue more *immediately* from an assessment of the textual character of the earliest papyri?" He then posed this challenge: "Can we find a way, methodologically, to use these papyri to break through in a new fashion to an earlier state of the New Testament text?" This, Epp urged, would require establishing "a history and theory of the New Testament text ... by beginning with the early papyri and then basing the critical text on the resultant theory."¹⁵ He urged that the papyri be studied "to isolate the earliest discernible text-

¹¹ E.g., Kurt Aland, "The Significance of the Papyri for Progress in New Testament Research," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. James Philip Hyatt (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 325-46, and Aland's numerous works in which early papyri are the focus: e.g., *Repertorium der griechischen christlichen Papyri*, I, *biblische Papyri, Altes Testament, Neues Testament, varia, Apokryphen*, Patristische Texte und Studien, 18 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976).

¹² J. N. Birdsall, *The Bodmer Papyrus of the Gospel of John* (Tyndale New Testament Lecture, 1958; London: Tyndale Press, 1960), 7; K. W. Clark, "The Manuscripts of the Greek New Testament," in *New Testament Manuscript Studies: The Materials and the Making of a Critical Apparatus*, eds. M. M. Parvis, A. P. Wikgren (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 20-21; these cited by Epp, "The New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective," 282-83 [= *Perspectives*, 335]. See also E. C. Colwell, "Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 370-89; republished in Colwell, *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 106-24.

¹³ Epp, "New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective," 274-86 [= *Perspectives*, 324-40].

¹⁴ *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus: I. Die katholischen Briefe*, ed. W. Grunewald (ANTF 6; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986); *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus II. Die paulinischen Briefe, Teil 1*, ed. K. Junack et al. (ANTF 12; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989); *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus II. Die paulinischen Briefe, Teil 2*, ed. K. Wachtel et al. (ANTF 22; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994).

¹⁵ Quotations all from Epp, "New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective," 287-88 [= *Perspectives*, 341-42].

types,” this in turn helping us “to trace out the very early history of the New Testament text,” and also aiding in “refining the canons of criticism,” the papyri providing us early “instances of how scribes worked in copying their manuscripts.”¹⁶

In several essays, Epp has made his own forays into this evidence. Among them, perhaps his 1989 essay from the Notre Dame conference is the most serviceable for capturing the directions of his work in this area.¹⁷ The essay illustrates a distinguishing feature of Epp’s approach, which is to set early Christian transmission of texts in its larger historical context. In this essay Epp focuses particularly on the early Christian circulation of texts around the Roman world, but he also takes note of evidence from the copying and circulation of non-Christian texts as well. This results in his contention that the NT papyri from Egypt may well be sufficiently representative of the copying and circulation of texts in Christian circles more widely.¹⁸

Then, turning directly to the NT papyri, Epp attempts to characterize their textual complexions and alignments. Agreeing that the familiar names of the text-types are not helpful, and that we should avoid simply slotting the papyri uncritically into these text-types (which are based primarily on later manuscripts), Epp proposes “textual group” or “textual cluster” as more appropriate terms. He finds that among the pre-300 CE papyri a few can be classified as members of a “B” group (particularly represented by \mathfrak{P}^{75} , and as a weaker witness \mathfrak{P}^{66}), exhibiting a textual complexion familiar to us later in Codex Vaticanus.¹⁹ He also proposes a “C” cluster (at least in Mark), \mathfrak{P}^{45} its principal witness among the papyri and reflected later in Codex W (exhibiting a kind of text that seems equidistant from all known text-types), and a “D” group comprising \mathfrak{P}^{48} , \mathfrak{P}^{69} , \mathfrak{P}^{38} , 0171, and perhaps \mathfrak{P}^{29} , these latter having “an affinity with Codex Bezae.”²⁰

Epp’s conclusion is that “three identifiable text-types were in existence around 200 C.E. or shortly thereafter,” corresponding to these three textual clusters, although he judges that it is really only the “B” and “D” types that have a strong subsequent heritage in later manuscripts. He also contends that we have interesting evidences of “standardization procedures” in second-century Christian circles (pointing particularly to the preference for the codex, especially for scriptural texts, the *nomina sacra*, and programmatic corrections in some manuscripts such as \mathfrak{P}^{66} , suggesting “the possible presence of scriptoria”). He proposes that these phenomena permit the view that “our very earliest New Testament papyri in turn had antecedents or ancestors as much as a century earlier than their own time.”²¹

In sum, the broad historical conclusion which Epp offers is that we see in the earliest papyri “a range of differing textual complexions.” Moreover, the diachronic relationships of NT papyri to later witnesses (e.g., the \mathfrak{P}^{75} -B relationship) suggest the image of textual “trajectories” extending both centuries later than the earliest papyri and also some time prior to them, taking us back earlier than any of our extant manuscripts and into the crucial second century. Epp’s study reinforces the view (which had already been expressed for a few decades) that

¹⁶ Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective,” 288 [= *Perspectives*, 342].

¹⁷ Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 71-103 [= *Perspectives*, 345-81]. In a subsequent essay, Epp took his discussion a bit farther: “The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus: Their Significance for Understanding the Transmission of the Early New Testament Text,” in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts*, ed. A. K. Bowman et al. (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007), 315-31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-90 [= *Perspectives*, 364-65].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-97 [= *Perspectives*, 368-73].

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97-99 [= *Perspectives*, 373-75].

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101-2 [= *Perspectives*, 377-78].

“text-types” are expressive of various transmission/copying tendencies or proclivities, not (as curiously still seems to be assumed in some quarters) “local-texts” produced as recensions. He also notes that the early NT papyri exhibit a spectrum of textual hues, often even among those that seem to belong to the same textual cluster.²²

In other essays subsequently, Epp pursues further his approach of setting NT papyri in a larger historical context, widening the circumference of evidence still further. His essay, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times” is an excellent example of this. Complaining that scholars have tended to study the NT papyri in isolation from their “bedfellows’ in the rubbish heaps,” Epp then lays out abundantly evidence from Egyptian documentary and literary papyri that texts circulated and letters were delivered widely and with impressive rapidity around the Roman world. On the basis of this “brisk ‘intellectual commerce,’” he then again contends that the various “textual complexions” reflected in NT papyri from Egypt may have originated there or elsewhere, and “could easily, in a matter of a few weeks, have moved anywhere in the Mediterranean area.” Still more boldly, he proposes,

that the present array of text-types represented in the Egyptian New Testament papyri do, in fact, represent text-types from the *entire* Mediterranean region, and, furthermore that they could very likely represent *all* of the existent text-types in that large region in the early period of New Testament textual transmission.²³

As noted already, Epp’s approach of taking account of the wider historical context of the NT papyri sets it apart. But, as his body of work shows, his approach requires a lot of investigation and assimilation of information, and the results for the development of a theory and history of the earliest transmission of the NT writings are not as immediate as one could wish. Yet I think that Epp’s emphasis is right and that others should join him in this more contextual approach to these earliest NT manuscripts. Toward that end, I offer now a few modest suggestions of my own.

The first is that we should consider the textual transmission of the NT in the first three centuries in the light of studies of the textual transmission of literary works in that period more generally. I can pretend no great competence myself, but I point to the sort of discussion by Eric Turner in his *Greek Papyri: An Introduction*. I find it intriguing that Turner identifies two broad tendencies in ancient papyri of classical literary texts, one exhibiting greater freedom in adding lines or leaving out lines and with “substantial variant phrases or formulas” (which Turner associates with a Platonic attitude toward books), and the other reflecting a greater respect for the wording of the text and exhibiting a lower “coefficient of error” (which Turner links with Aristotle).²⁴ So, is it not plausible to suspect that the early NT papyri, which suggest both a more strict transmission process in some cases and in other cases a more flexible handling of the text, reflect the broader textual transmission attitudes or tendencies of their time?²⁵ Granted, there certainly seem to be particularities in the transmission of early Christian texts (e.g., the preference for the codex, *nomina sacra*, and a constellation of “readers’ aids”).²⁶ But it

²² Ibid., 102-3 [= *Perspectives*, 378-80].

²³ Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. B. A. Pearson, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 35-56 (citing 55-56) [= *Perspectives*, 383-408, citing 408].

²⁴ Eric G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 1980), 106-9.

²⁵ Among importance resources, see L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Egert Pöhlmann, *Einführung in die Überlieferungsgeschichte und in die Textkritik der antiken Literatur. Band 1: Altertum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

²⁶ I have discussed how earliest Christian biblical manuscripts are typically “kitted out” with various devices that seem intended to facilitate reading them, in distinction from the much more demand-

is also worth exploring further how the textual features and complexions of earliest Christian papyri may reflect wider copying attitudes and practices of the Roman era, including particularly Jewish copying practices.²⁷

Second, I point also to an essay by Michael Holmes in which he queries the term “recension” (observing that this and related terms are used “in a multivalent and undefined manner”), and he probes how variation and revision of texts actually went on in Roman antiquity.²⁸ He finds that ancient scholars “apparently had almost *no effect* upon the texts they studied, commented upon, and transmitted,” acting “more as *transmitters* of the various textual traditions than as creators of them.”²⁹ Instead, he posits that the major role in the preservation of and/or variation in ancient texts was exercised by their readers/users:

Whether or not we have a careful or a sloppy text, an interpolated version or an accurate representation of the author’s original work, depends entirely on the individuals whose copies have been preserved.³⁰

So, he contends,

... we need to re-think how we visualize the transmission of the NT text in terms of Greco-Roman literary culture, in terms of ancient practice, rather than modern paradigms or analogies.³¹

The history of NT textual criticism is a road littered with abandoned theories about major textual recensions supposedly sponsored by local ecclesiastical authorities in the earliest centuries. For example, as Gordon Fee persuasively noted over thirty years ago, the NT papyri (especially P⁷⁵ and P⁶⁶) discredited the notion that the “Alexandrian” text was the product of a fourth or even third-century recension.³² So, more recent advocates of such a recension have been compelled to push it back into the late second century.³³ In my view, however, prospects

ing and severe layout characteristic of high-quality manuscripts of classical texts: L. W. Hurtado, “Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading,” in *The Early Text of the New Testament*, eds. C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2011).

²⁷ For treatment of early Jewish evidence, see now Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (STDJ 54; Leiden: Brill, 2004).

²⁸ Michael W. Holmes, “Codex Bezae as a Recension of the Gospels,” in *Codex Bezae: Studies From the Lunel Colloquium, June 1994*, ed. D. C. Parker and C.-B. Amphoux (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 123-60 (citing 143).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³² Gordon D. Fee, “P⁷⁵, P⁶⁶, and Origen: The Myth of Early Textual Recension in Alexandria,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 19-45. The essay was republished in Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 247-73. Fee drew upon his own research and that of other scholars, especially Calvin L. Porter, “An Analysis of the Textual Variation Between Pap 75 and Codex Vaticanus in the Text of John,” in *Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament in Honor of Kenneth Willis Clark Ph.D.*, ed. Boyd L. Daniels and Jack Suggs (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1967), 71-83; and Carlo M. Martini, *Il problema della recensionalità del codice B alla luce del papiro Bodmer XIV* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1966).

³³ E.g., Helmut Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 19-37; W. L. Petersen, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis*, ed. A. Denaux (BETL 161; Leuven:

for this redated recension-theory are no more promising than the fates of its predecessors. It seems more likely that the textual complexion we refer to as “the Alexandrian text” is the product of a line of readers and copyists with a comparatively strong concern for accurate transmission of the wording of texts, just as there were others who exercised greater freedom in handling the wording of texts toward clear, idiomatic, edifying readings, sometimes also removing ambiguities, harmonizing (to immediate context and to parallel passages), and including edifying expansions. These varying concerns and attitudes toward textual transmission across time produced the artefactual results found in our earliest extant manuscripts, not some organized recension.

Thirdly, I am also not confident that we have analyzed fully the data provided by the early NT papyri themselves. In considering the strictly textual data, the sort of detailed study provided now by Royse points the way, but we need to proceed farther on the basis of the findings that he puts before us.³⁴ In the readings of these papyri, and also crucially in their corrections, we have our most direct evidence of the process by which NT writings were transmitted, perhaps even allowing us to peer farther back into the second century. Moreover, as well as giving us our earliest copies of NT texts, the papyri can be approached as important artifacts, their physical and visual features providing additional data about the purposes for which, and circumstances in which these manuscripts were copied.³⁵

III

As Epp himself has acknowledged readily, there is much more to do toward developing a theory and a history of the earliest transmission of the NT writings, and to date his own contributions have been exploratory and provisional. It would be premature of me to estimate what more he will offer. But whatever subsequent advances there may be, from him and/or others, Epp’s exhortations and pioneering probes will deserve credit as both stimulating and modelling the sort of careful and wide-ranging work that I hope will be done in coming years.

Peeters/University of Leuven Press, 2002), 33-65. Cf. L. W. Hurtado, “Beyond the Interlude? Developments and Directions in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts*, ed. D. G. K. Taylor (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999), 26-48; Barbara Aland, “Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes in den ersten Jahrhunderten,” in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 1-38.

³⁴ James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (NTTS, 36; Leiden: Brill, 2007). For some basic observations by Epp see “Are Early New Testament Manuscripts Truly Abundant?” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. David B. Capes et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 77-117, esp. 103-7.

³⁵ L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).