

Eldon Jay Epp's Exegesis A Paper Honoring the Exegetical Work of Eldon Jay Epp*

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Since the 1960s I have been reading with interest all that Eldon Epp has been publishing on New Testament Textual Criticism. He is clearly the doyen of the trade and his many papers (now carefully gathered together into two separate volumes) have been expertly and professionally reprinted and updated. Those articles, together with his two main books, have provided us with a splendid summary of his work. In this article I offer a brief review of his most important contributions including appreciative comments on what he has done more generally for our discipline.

When I was starting my studies on textual criticism in Oxford under George Kilpatrick in the mid-1960s (a time then closer to the very composition of the New Testament itself, of course), it was decided that I would benefit from a period spent in Beuron at the Vetus Latina Institute and in Münster at the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung. Those of you who have visited Münster will know that there is a large lake in the center of the town, the Aasee. When I arrived there for the first time I was asked if I had come to see the Aasee. No, I replied, I have come to see A-land. I was duly granted an audience of Professor Kurt Aland in his cigar-smoke-filled study, and he, seeking some common ground in English-speaking scholarship, asked me what I thought of Eldon Epp's *Theological Tendency*, then recently published. This was the first I had heard of Epp. Soon afterwards I became aware that Gordon Fee was another rising new star in the current generation of New Testament textual critics. It became obvious that Epp and Fee would be among the biggest names. Well, actually the shortest names. I wondered what chance I, with a three-syllable surname, would have in the realms of academe.

Since those early days I have met Epp on numerous occasions over many a decade. And we have shared platforms in various countries. My wife and I have been privileged to entertain the Epps in the United Kingdom, where El-don, El-doris and the El-liotts have been clubbing in London (by which I hasten to mean the Oxford and Cambridge Club in Pall Mall and the Army and Navy Club); in turn Carolyn and I have enjoyed visits to Lexington and Concord and have seen with the Epps battlefields where it was pointed out how the British Redcoats dealt with a little local difficulty. In this short presentation I hope that he and you will not object if I refer to our honoree not familiarly as Eldon nor as formally correct as Professor or Dr Epp, but normally as "Epp," following publishing convention.

Throughout the years since the mid-1960s I have always learned much from Epp's constant stream of sophisticated, nuanced, and always meticulously researched and beautifully presented articles and monographs.

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Inevitably it is his Harvard thesis which was re-presented as an early SNTS monograph that is still most commonly associated with Epp's output.¹ It is regularly cited in works on textual criticism and in studies and commentaries on Acts. Based as it was on the solid foundations of J. Rendel Harris, A. C. Clark, P.-H. Menoud, Erich Fascher, and J. H. Ropes, Epp set out to demonstrate that the so-called Western text and Bezae in particular displayed a radically different text of Acts that reflected distinctive dogmatic purposes, when compared with other witnesses.² This monograph was widely and extensively reviewed by many famous scholars, among them Reginald Fuller, A. R. C. Leaney, Bruce Metzger, Joost Smit Sibinga, and Ian Moir.³ C. K. Barrett's own review in the *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* was later expanded into an article for the *Matthew Black Festschrift*: "Is There a Theological Tendency in Codex Bezae?" in which Barrett argued that one should not speak of a deliberately imposed tendency but rather an exaggeration of existing elements in the basic story line.⁴ Epp had certainly started a vigorous debate. He had been accused by several reviewers of having over-pressed the evidence or having over-egged the pudding. That is a charge Epp seems to have accepted when he revisited the monograph forty years later in a volume on Acts edited by Tobias Nicklas and Michael Tilly.⁵ But he writes, "That the work has been and continues to be part of a lively conversation about the D-text of Acts suggests that it was either sufficiently convincing or sufficiently provocative—or both—to engage the interest and at times to evoke the consternation of scholars in the field, and that is perhaps legacy enough." Yes, indeed! It is.

A former student of mine, Jenny Read Heimerdinger, took up Epp's challenge but argued in various articles and in a monograph (*The Bezan Text of Acts*) that the Western text was the prior text of Acts.⁶ Now she and Josep Rius Camps (whose work has not to my knowledge been referred to by Epp) have produced a four-volume textual commentary on Acts (*The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae*) to try to prove their case that this text is not anti-Jewish but rather represents a Jewish insider's view that belongs to the second century.⁷

In his article of 2003, revisiting his thesis, Epp answers some of his early critics, pointing out that he had had no intention of pronouncing on the primacy or secondariness of the Western or Alexandrian traditions but merely wanted to demonstrate the existence of two story

¹ Eldon J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*, SNTSMS 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

² J. Rendel Harris, "New Points of View in Textual Criticism," *Expositor* 8 (1914): 316–34; A. C. Clark, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes on Selected Passages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933); P.-H. Menoud, "The Western Text and the Theology of Acts," *SNTS Bulletin* 2 (1951): 19–32; Erich Fascher, *Textgeschichte als hermeneutisches Problem* (Halle: Niemeyer), 1953; J. H. Ropes, *The Text of Acts*, *Beginnings of Christianity* 3 (London: Macmillan, 1926).

³ R. H. Fuller in *CBQ* 30 (1968): 447–48; A. R. C. Leaney in *Theol* 70 (1967): 461–63; Bruce M. Metzger in *Gnomon* 40 (1968): 831–33; J. Smit Sibinga in *VigChr* 24 (1970): 76–77; Ian Moir in *JTS* n.s. 19 (1968): 277–81.

⁴ C. K. Barrett in *LQHR* 192 (1967): 345–46; Barrett, "Is There a Theological Tendency in Codex Bezae?" in *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black*, ed. Ernest Best and R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 15–27.

⁵ Eldon J. Epp, "Anti-Judaic Tendencies in the D-Text of Acts: Forty Years of Conversation," in *The Book of Acts as Church History: Text, Textual Traditions and Ancient Interpretations / Apostelgeschichte als Kirchengeschichte: Text, Texttraditionen und antike Auslegungen*, ed. Tobias Nicklas and Michael Tilly, *BZNW* 120 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 111–46.

⁶ Jenny Read Heimerdinger, *The Bezan Text of Acts: A Contribution of Discourse Analysis to Textual Criticism*, JSNTSup 236 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002).

⁷ Josep Rius-Camps and Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae: A Comparison with the Alexandrian Tradition*, 4 vols. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004–2009).

lines in the textual tradition of Acts. (The term *narrative textual criticism*, meaning that all variants have a story to tell, is now used to describe such an approach and is a term Epp encourages.)⁸ Epp now admits that the title of the monograph could perhaps have been more accurate had it read *A* not *The Theological Tendency* and had it referred to the D-type text, rather than emphasize apparently exclusively the text in Codex Bezae. But the real importance of that monograph is that in the 1960s he was encouraging and promoting a sympathetic reading of *all* textual variants and an awareness that certain manuscripts or at least some of the readings in them may sometimes reflect a particular motive. In this case that motive may indeed have been theological; at other times changes may be due to Atticizing tendencies, grammatical improvement, or liturgical influence. Textual critics, even—or especially—those of us dubbed “thoroughgoing” critics, should always look for the reasons for change in manuscripts. Gone are the days when only one text was deemed original and all alternatives jettisoned as secondary, spurious, and untrustworthy. Epp’s teaching along those lines was in the vanguard of the sorts of studies carried through more recently by Bart Ehrman and David Parker with their emphases on the vibrancy and volatility of a *living* text.⁹ Epp regularly praises their approach. I note he quotes with approval this return to an appreciation of the validity of all manuscripts whose texts would not have been accepted as containing the canonical version of the scriptures, however maverick modern scholars and text-critics may brand certain readings. Epp approves of Merrill Parvis’s comment in 1952 that the invention of printing diminished the nature of scripture as a living body of writing.¹⁰ Our electronic age may reverse that?

I leave it to Ehrman to elaborate on an evaluation of *Theological Tendency*.¹¹

Coupled with the argument initiated in his first book, Epp has done all exegetes a service by attempting to define what he calls the multivalence of the words *original text*.¹² A much-quoted article, arguably his most influential, of 1999 encourages commentators and exegetes to place all meaningful variants in their social, historical, and theological contexts. It is an important message that seems to have been heard where it matters. This highly significant overview is already influencing the way responsible text-critics and exegetes do their work.

Although most recent readers associate Epp with his sterling work on papyri, especially the significance of the Oxyrhynchus materials, it would be wrong to deduce that the detailed exegesis of the New Testament is not in his sights.¹³ That would be far from true. The first chapter

⁸ The term *narrative textual criticism* was first coined by David C. Parker, in a review of Bart D. Ehrman’s 1993-monograph, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* in *JTS* 45 (1994): 704–8, referred to by Epp, “Anti-Judaic Tendencies,” 144–45.

⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Merrill Parvis states that prior to the invention of printing “the Scripture was a living body of literature, which was constantly being enriched as it was interpreted and reinterpreted by each succeeding generation.” See Merrill Parvis, “The Nature and Tasks of New Testament Textual Criticism,” *JR* 32 (1952): 172, cited by Eldon J. Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 273.

¹¹ See now, Bart D. Ehrman, “*The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*, At Age Forty-Four, in Commemoration of Eldon Epp’s Eightieth Birthday,” in this current volume of *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*.

¹² Epp, “Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text,’” 245–81.

¹³ Many of his articles on textual criticism are collected in Eldon J. Epp, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism*, vol. 1, *Collected Essays, 1962–2000*, NovTSup 116 (Leiden: Brill 2005); and idem, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism*, vol. 2, *Collected Essays, 2006–2017*, NovTSup 181 (Leiden: Brill 2020).

in Epp's monograph on Junia, to which we turn in a moment, discusses textual criticism and exegesis.¹⁴ And one chapter (ch. 17) in his collected essays entitled "Textual Criticism in the Exegesis of the New Testament" reprints a 1997 article in which he discusses major text-critical cruxes at 1 Cor 14:34–35; Luke 10:41–42 (the words to Martha); and Mark 1:1, all of course highly relevant to exegesis.¹⁵ Also we recall his first published article of 1962 where he deals with the longer ending including *πονηρόν* in Codex Bezae (D 05) in Acts 3:17 and Luke 23:41; the shorter reading by Bezae at Luke 23:34 as well as distinctive readings at Acts 13:27 and 17:30 all of which were to resurface in his thesis.

Epp also wrote a significant piece on the Ascension for the first Metzger *Festschrift* (in 1981); this is obviously a major issue in our evaluation of Lukan theology and one that has enormous importance for Christianity. His arguments there, as always beautifully crafted, with copious footnotes and unerring logic, make him conclude that the so-called Western manuscripts reduced (without totally eliminating) the detail that Jesus was *seen* to have been elevated. Here comes that "tendency" again. Does the New Testament describe an observable event of Jesus's going up to an exalted position or not? The description of ascension (rather than acceptance that Jesus was in a place of exaltation) occurs only in Luke-Acts, and the answer needs to take into account Luke 24:51 *v.l.*; Acts 1:2 *v.l.*; 1:9–11 *v.l.* and 1:22. And this is clearly exegesis and textual criticism in practice.

Now to another targeted piece of Epp's exegesis—his analysis of Rom 16:7. In 1967 Kurt Aland published an influential article on the problem of interpreting John 1:3–4. This concerned how or where one punctuates the verses. His article was entitled, "Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes" ("Concerning the Importance of a Full Stop").¹⁶ Such a title confirmed many misguided readers' suspicion about textual criticism's apparent obsession with minutiae! Epp has gone one better. He has published a whole monograph on a textual issue concerning a Greek accent. But what a Greek accent! This was his book *Junia: The First Woman Apostle*, trailed originally as an article in the *Festschrift* for Joël Delobel.¹⁷ And it was significant and appropriate for a volume honoring Delobel, whose teaching that exegesis and textual criticism are twins is well-known.¹⁸ Epp echoes that teaching in the introduction to his collected essays, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism*, stating that there is a "complementarity of textual criticism and exegesis"—that "higher" and "lower" criticism belong together.¹⁹

In his monograph on Junia, Epp is concerned with the accenting of the accusative Ἰουνίαν. With an acute on the second *iota*, Ἰουνίαν, we have the feminine noun Junia; with a circumflex on the *alpha*, Ἰουνιάων, we have a masculine Junias, supposedly an abbreviated form of Junianus. The UBS *Greek New Testament* up to its third revised edition and NA²⁷ up to the fifth printing had the masculine. Thereafter these editions print the feminine. That issue has huge exegetical implications. Was Junia an apostle, like the later Thecla of the apocrypha? Epp says, "Yes," and his meticulous survey leaving no palaeographical, historical, or textual stone

¹⁴ Eldon J. Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

¹⁵ Epp, "Perspectives," 461–96.

¹⁶ Kurt Aland, "Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes. Eine Untersuchung zu Joh 1,3,4," in *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe*, Theologische Bücherei 63 (Munich: Kaiser, 1979), 351–91.

¹⁷ Eldon J. Epp, "Text-Critical, Exegetical, and Socio-cultural Factors Affecting the Junia/Junias Variation in Romans 16,7," in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. Adelbert Denaux, BETL 161 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 227–92; *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

¹⁸ Joël Delobel, "Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Siamese Twins?," in *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis, and Early Church History: A Discussion of Methods*, ed. Barbara Aland and Joël Delobel, CBET 7 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994): 98–117.

¹⁹ Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxix.

untuned is convincing. Junia was indeed an apostle recognized as “prominent among other apostles” (Rom 16:7). Quite whether we need follow Epp whose preface states that the masculine was inevitably promoted by white, male scholars is debatable, especially when we recall that Barbara Aland was involved in the earlier NA and UBS texts.²⁰

At the end of his first chapter in the book on Junia, Epp writes: “I for one, . . . project a bright and exciting (if perhaps somewhat tumultuous) future for the text-critical enterprise, and, as an accompaniment, an enriching influence on exegesis.”²¹ I am confident that Eldon will continue to be part of that exciting future in our discipline. In fact we *demand* that he is.

²⁰ Epp, *Junia*, xvii.

²¹ Epp, *Junia*, 13.