

The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis at Age Forty-Four In Commemoration of Eldon Epp's Eightieth Birthday

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Not many years after Eldon Epp composed a “Requiem for the Discipline” of New Testament textual criticism in America, the field experienced a birth to new life. Ironically, in many ways Epp himself was the progenitor. His best-known publication *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* had earlier raised issues now central to the discussions: textual variants as historically significant data rather than mere chaff to be discarded; the importance of “scribal tendencies”; and the fraught question of an “original” text. This essay looks back on Epp’s early achievement and its long-term effect on what is now a vibrant and thriving discipline.

In writing this paper I have had the very pleasant experience of rereading the publication of a revised edition of Eldon Epp’s Harvard dissertation. The book, of course, was called *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*, and it appeared forty-four years ago, in 1966.¹ At the time I did not think much of it, since I was only eleven years old. But since then I have come to appreciate it deeply. It was a ground-breaking work that set the stage for much of what was to happen and what continues to happen in the field of textual criticism, especially in North America. I intend this review of Eldon’s study not only to be a summary and celebration, but also to be an opportunity to engage substantively with one or two of the most significant issues that the book raises.

As Eldon notes in the book, codex Bezae had been an object of scholarly inquiry for just about as long as it had been available to scholars, since Theodore Beza presented the manuscript to Cambridge University in 1581.² Most investigations, of course, have been concerned with questions of the original text and the relation of codex Bezae to it: did the distinctive readings of this manuscript derive from the autograph, or were they later corruptions of the text? The corruptions themselves were by and large seen as having little broad significance. James Hardy Rope’s opinion was typical: “Of any special point of view, theological or other, on the part of the ‘Western’ reviser it is difficult to find any trace.”³

Eldon’s project was designed to show that, on the contrary, there was a dominant theological perspective represented in the Western textual tradition as embodied in its earliest surviving, full Greek iteration, codex Bezae. This manuscript’s textual variants were dominated by an anti-Judaic bias.

Eldon never claimed to be the *first* to express a judgment contrary to the dominant position taken by Ropes. A number of short and incomplete analyses of the problem had appeared:

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

² Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 12–13.

³ J. H. Ropes, *The Text of Acts* (London: MacMillan, 1926), cxxxiii. Cited and discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 4.

J. Rendel Harris suspected the manuscript of harboring Marcionite sympathies, F. Blass saw in its text of Luke a polemic against Jews, and P. Corssen added some comments on the anti-Jewish tendencies in the Western tradition of Acts.⁴ Other authors had touched upon the problem, in particular C. S. C. Williams in his well-known study, *Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts*, E. Fascher's *Text History as Hermeneutical Problem*, and especially P. H. Menoud's "The Western Text and the Theology of Acts," a work that is probably the closest in genealogical relation to Eldon's study.⁵

Still, some of these investigations were less than rigorous in their study of the problem, and none of them resembled the hard-hitting and thorough examination that Eldon provided. To some degree that was because textual scholars continued to be less interested in how a manuscript or a manuscript tradition may have altered the text it inherited than in using these manuscripts and traditions to get *behind* the alterations to reconstruct the autographs. What mattered were the originals. The changes to the originals mattered only in so far as they represented the chaff that could be discarded to reveal the pure kernel of the authorial text. The widespread opinion had long been that if the originals were discovered or reconstructed beyond reasonable doubt, there would be no reason to consider later imperfect reproductions of the original, or in the words of Souter, "there would be no textual criticism of the New Testament."⁶

Dissenting voices on this particular consensus were also heard on occasion, of course, for example from A. F. J. Klijn, Donald Riddle, Merrill Parvis, Kenneth Clark, and Erich Fascher.⁷ But these were *isolated* voices crying out in the wilderness.

Eldon's study served as an intervention in this state of affairs. It was to be a full-length study of a solitary manuscript in a single book of the New Testament: just codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis and just in the book of Acts. Moreover, it had a single objective—to show the anti-Judaic biases advanced in this manuscript. But the overarching goals, in fact, were much bigger than this. The single manuscript was chosen as a key representative of one of the major textual traditions of the New Testament; the single book was chosen because there the tradition's *Tendenzen* could be more easily seen, apart from the problems afforded, say, by the complex textual traditions of the gospels, where certain kinds of well-known errors, such as harmonization among the accounts, so easily muddy the water. What was needed was clarity of vision and the rigorous application of criticism. These were provided by Eldon in spades.

With exegetical precision and text-critical acumen, Eldon parsed the variants of codex Bezae in Acts and uncovered three main areas of anti-Judaic bias: first, passages and textual variants involving the Jews' reaction to Jesus, especially in relation to his death; second, Jews and Jewish institutions such as the synagogue in relation to Christianity, and as a corollary, the gentile reception of Christianity; and third, Jews and their relationship with and treatment of the apostles. In all three areas Eldon found significant anti-Judaic tendencies: the textu-

⁴ J. Rendel Harris, *Codex Bezae. A Study of the So-Called Western Text of the New Testament*, TS 2.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 228–34; discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 3; F. Blass, *Evangelium secundum Lucam sive Lucae ad Theophilum liber prior secundum formam quae videtur Romanam* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1897), xlii, xlix, discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 2; P. Corssen, "Acta Apostolorum ed. F. Blass," *GGA* 158 (1896): 444, discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 3.

⁵ C. S. C. Williams, *Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951); Erich Fascher, *Textgeschichte als hermeneutisches Problem* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1953); P. H. Menoud, "The Western Text and the Theology of Acts," *SNTS Bulletin* 2 (1951): 19–32; discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 21.

⁶ Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, Studies in Theology (New York: Scribner, 1913), 3; quoted and discussed by Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 13.

⁷ See Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 13–21.

al tradition embodied in codex Bezae heightened the Jewish role in Jesus's death and in the persecution of his apostles, and so on. What struck many readers of the study was not just its impressive depth and breadth but the significant number of passages involved. If one were to consider all the textual variants highlighted in A.C. Clark's edition of Acts, fully 4 percent of them were found to be implicated in anti-Judaic bias.⁸ This was far beyond what anyone had expected. And, as a result, and as you can well imagine even without knowing the history of the discipline, it engendered several negative reactions by scholars who were not only entrenched in their traditional ways of doing textual criticism—which involved discovering their beloved but lost autographs—but who also very much *enjoyed* being entrenched.

I will discuss a couple of objections in a moment, but first let me give you my own evaluative comment on the work, a comment that perhaps should not be taken all too seriously in that it is, after all, coming forty-four years after the fact and is based on all that we have learned in the intervening period, largely because of the shift in our thinking that was inaugurated by Eldon's study in the first place.

If Eldon were to revise the book today, which he is not going to do, and if he were to ask my advice about it, which he would not, I would tell him that to be even *more* persuasive in arguing for a deep anti-Judaic bias in codex Bezae, or at least in the textual tradition that it represented, he would need to provide a cogent and coherent theological or historical context within which to situate that bias. The Western text emerged and developed probably in the early second to third centuries. This was a time in which Christians were involved with numerous debates and controversies, as apologists were providing intellectual defenses of the faith against the charges of its cultured despisers, as heresiologists on all sides were attacking Christians of alternative persuasions for representing falsehood and error rather than truth, and as Christians of many persuasions were doing their utmost to separate themselves from Jews and from the Jewish matrix out of which the Christian movement originally emerged.

Christians had numerous reasons to want to attack Jews and the Jewish religion. That is a long story that has been told many times and that continues to be retold in various versions among scholars today, Jewish, Christian, and nonaligned. For one thing, Christians were being attacked by Jews in some parts of the empire for their aberrant claims about Jesus, and they had to defend themselves from assault and to justify their views and even their existence. Moreover, Christians had to explain to the gentile world how it was they were claiming the Jewish tradition without insisting that their converts become Jews. Christians were more or less compelled by the ideologies of antiquity to claim to be heirs of the Jewish tradition, in no small part because they lived in a time and place that valued antiquity in matters philosophical and religious and that questioned novelty. To stand a fighting chance before pagans Christians had to assert an ancestral tradition. Not having one themselves, they had to usurp the traditions of the Jews and claim that it was they, not the Jews, who were the rightful heirs of that tradition.

There were many other factors involved in ancient Jewish-Christian polemics, as you all know. I think it is a shade unfortunate that Eldon's study does not set them forth; my hunch is that he assumed that his readers would know what the issues were. Still, in my view, one cannot assume too much about one's readers. Any claim to have discovered an ideological *Tendenz* in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament needs to be historically grounded; otherwise it will appear to be text-critically Marcionite (a kind of historical docetism) or Melchizedekian, having no mother or father. My hunch is that now, over four decades later, Eldon would probably agree on this point, so there is no reason to press it much harder.

My second concern is related. I wonder very much if it is appropriate to call the anti-Judaic bias of the Western tradition "theological." In his study Eldon emphasizes that this is how he

⁸ Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 167 n. 7.

sees it: it is an anti-Judaic bias—against Judaism—not an anti-Jewish bias—against Jews. But I wonder if that is true. In point of fact, many of the variants that Eldon uncovers are directed against the Jewish people and/or their leaders, not against something that we might imagine, or construct, as the religion of Judaism floating in a sociohistorical vacuum. The reason for this text-variational polemic is not simply that Christians had a different theology from their neighbors. It is because they were in actual conflict with their neighbors, real flesh and blood Jews, some of whom hated the Christians and who were hated by the Christians in return. In some parts of the empire—not all of them—Christians and Jews were at each other's throats. These occasional battles were not simply conducted in the rarified atmosphere of theological discourse; they happened on the ground, in the synagogues, and in the churches, well before the appearance of codex Bezae or the Western textual tradition, before even the Johannine Christians became "aposynagaged," and before Paul received his forty lashes minus one.

On one level, of course, the textual variants Eldon uncovered do involve theological discourse, but there is much more to it than that. The milieu, if nothing else, entailed an enormous set of social, cultural, and historical conflicts. If a complete study of anti-Jewish corruptions of Scripture were to be written today, I think it would have to begin with a reconstruction of those conflicts and situate the textual tendencies of the tradition within that milieu. That by the way is a study that is just begging to be done and to be done well: a *full* investigation of the effect of Jewish-Christian controversies on the textual tradition of the New Testament.

In any event these are two evaluative comments that might come from forty-four years of hindsight and again are meant in no way to diminish the significance of Eldon's enormous accomplishment. At the time there were other reactions to Eldon's project; here I will mention just two, one which can be easily shunted aside and the other that deserves some sustained attention.

On the one hand, there were some critics who proposed that Eldon's findings were not significant because the *Tendenz* that he uncovered in codex Bezae was already found in the book of Acts in the first place.⁹ That is, Acts itself condemns Jews, for example, for the role they played in Jesus's death and in the persecution of the apostles—so why would it be significant that the same condemnation can be found in the textual *tradition* of Acts?

There was a powerful rhetorical effect of such a claim: it comforted many critics, making them think that Eldon's findings must not have been that significant after all. But, in fact, there is not much force behind the rhetoric. Of course it is significant when a textual tradition heightens tendencies of the tradition it inherits and makes them more palpable and even more heinous. It is quite easy to expose the vapidness of the objection simply by taking it to its logical conclusion. Would anyone say that it was not significant that Jews in the Middle Ages were persecuted, hunted down, tortured, and murdered because this is just a heightening of tensions that are already found in the New Testament, where Matthew makes the Jewish crowd cry out "His blood be upon us and our children"? The severe heightening of a *Tendenz* is just as important as the proposal of a counter-*Tendenz*. Eldon's findings are highly significant, even if they simply further, to a considerable degree, the tendencies of the Lukan tradition in its older form.

The other objection is one that is commonly raised against studies that try to isolate the *Tendenzen* of textual traditions, namely, that the variants cited as evidence for one *Tendenz* or an-

⁹ See Eldon Jay Epp, "Anti-Judaic Tendencies in the D-Text of Acts: Forty Years of Conversation," in *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962–2004*, NovTSup 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 722–25. For examples of this argument, see C. K. 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), 25–26; and D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 190–91.

other could in fact be explained on other grounds. Possibly a scribe was harmonizing one text to another, or was making a quotation line up better with a passage in the Septuagint, or was manifesting a simple scribal proclivity unrelated to socio-historical or theological conflicts. The goal of this kind of objection is to undercut the critic's claim to understand the intention of the scribe.¹⁰

I want to spend the rest of my time talking about this matter of scribal intention, as it relates closely to Eldon's work and to so much that has been going on in the field over the past few decades, as it has stood in the Eppian tradition.

To start with, I should note that, as you all know, most textual critics have unproblematically talked about scribal changes being either accidental or intentional, with accidental changes being slips of the pen of one kind or another and intentional changes being those that a scribe made with deliberation and forethought. There are enormous problems with this taxonomy. For one thing, in most instances it is impossible, at the end of the day, to differentiate between the two. To take just the simplest example: when a scribe spells a word in an unusual way, who is to say this is an accident? Possibly he simply copied his exemplar and so did not make a mistake at all. Possibly he thought his exemplar had misspelled the word and so spelled it the way he thought it should be spelled, even though he was wrong. Possibly he liked altering the spellings of words the way most of us like to alter the grammar of our sentences. When trying to distinguish between accidental and intentional changes, we have the problem that at times it is difficult, or even impossible, to know which is which.

A second problem is more subtle but also more significant and may require us to redirect how we think about so-called intentional changes, anti-Judaic or otherwise. The problem is that there are passages where we can conjecture that a change was made intentionally, but we cannot know for certain what the intention was.

I should stress that despite the difficulties I am about to mention, I have no *intention* of eliminating the category of *intention*. Quite the contrary, I am certain scribes did have intentions and that in some instances these intentions affected the text. Whoever added the final twelve verses of Mark did not do so by a mere slip of the pen. They were added deliberately. But it is difficult to reconstruct, ultimately and completely, his intentions. Whoever added the story of the woman taken in adultery also must have done so deliberately. But scholars continue to debate why. I should point out that even in these two cases, one *could* argue that the changes were accidents, for example, if scribes thought that marginal notes in their exemplars were to be included in the text. If we assume, however, that the changes were made consciously with forethought, we are still left to ponder what they were meant to accomplish.

In this connection we may be helped by considering a categorical distinction made by philosophers of intention. A classic work in the field is G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*. At the outset of her study, Anscombe indicates that "we may be inclined to say that 'intention' has a different sense when we speak of a [person's] intentions *simpliciter*—i.e., what he intends to do and of his intention *in* doing or proposing something — what he aims at in it."¹¹ That is to say, there is a key difference between what one intends to do and what one intends to achieve. If I say, "I'm planning to go into town today," it is clear what I am intending to do, but it is not clear what my intention is in doing it, that is, what I am going into town *for*.

If this problem with understanding what someone intends to do in an intentional act applies to all of us in our daily lives, it certainly applies to contemporary authors who write the texts

¹⁰ Epp, "Anti-Judaic Tendencies," 725. Also see Bart D. Ehrman, "The Text of the Gospels at the End of the Second Century," in *Codex Bezae: Studies from the Lunel Colloquium June 1994*, NTTTS 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 109–14. For an example of this sort of dismissal, see Ian Moir's review of *Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae*, *JTS* n.s. 19 (1968): 278.

¹¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 1.

we read. How can we really know what they intend to achieve? Even if we ask a contemporary author about why she wrote what she did, we can never be certain that she will remember, or remember completely or correctly, or that she will tell the truth, or that she will not be self-deceived. Her intentions may be obscure even to herself, or mixed, or too complex to convey in words. And if that applies to modern-day authors—living breathing human beings who are, in theory at least, available for us to contact to discuss their intentions—how much more does it apply to ancient authors, who are no longer here to interrogate? And if it applies to ancient authors, it applies even more to ancient scribes, nameless, faceless individuals who copied our texts and occasionally changed them in sensible ways and sometimes in nonsensible ways and then left us no other records. It may be possible to assume that these scribes intended to change the text (their intention *simpliciter*), but that does not tell us what they were intending to achieve by doing so.

In view of these problems I would propose a conceptual reorganization of our category of intentional changes, or re-propose it, since I have proposed it before to no avail. I do not suggest that we do away with the category of intentional changes, since I think that it can be a useful heuristic device for us, its problems notwithstanding. But I do think we can make a further taxonomic distinction in the category of intention by positing two additional sub-categories. The first is the largely speculative matter of what an individual scribe may have had in mind when he deliberately changed a text and the second is the more demonstrable matter of what effect the change has on the text and its meaning for readers. This second category takes seriously the claims of literary critics since W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley that we have no real means, or possibly any reason, to know what an author (in this case a scribe functioning as author) intended by making a change.¹² But we do have the resultant text, and we can evaluate how the text reads to see how it differs now that the change has been made.

This second category is a functional understanding of intentional changes. Some changes in the text function to harmonize one passage with another (whether or not that is what the scribe wanted to achieve); others function to eliminate grammatical problems, historical errors, or geographical mistakes; others function to make the text more theologically acceptable to orthodox thinkers; others function to make the text more suitable for apologetic purposes; others function to diminish the role of women; others function to heighten the animosity of the text towards Jews and/or Judaism. There are, of course, many other options.

If we restrict ourselves to the function of intentional changes, we keep ourselves from getting bogged down in the quagmire of personal scribal motivations, which we can never really establish. We instead can focus on the text in its multiple forms as it has come down to us. As an additional advantage, this strategic move can help circumvent the rather pointless wranglings that we sometimes have over *why* a text was changed. We may never know why a text was changed. But we can know what the result of the change was for the way the text could be read. This is not to say that we cannot argue over the more speculative, first subcategory of intentional changes: one can always make more or less plausible arguments about what was driving a scribe to make a change, and Eldon does indeed make such arguments in his book. But arguments over what motivated scribes are irrelevant when dealing with the second subcategory, of the function of the changes, which can be assessed independently of the whims motivating any particular scribe.

Part of the intrigue of the text-critical enterprise involves seeing how scholars argue their case for what a scribe had in mind when he decided to change the text (my first subcategory of

¹² See W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1954): 468–88.

intention). This would include an attempt to change the text to incorporate an anti-Jewish bias. At the end of the day, this scholarly back and forth is a rhetorical exercise intended to convince an audience to a particular perspective on an entirely speculative issue. If intentional changes are seen from a functional perspective, however (my second subcategory), much of that argument is circumvented. Functional descriptions of the alteration of the text can be argued out on textual bases. They too cannot be absolutely proven, of course, but they do not depend on hypotheses concerning the psychological motivations of unknown scribes in unknown places at unknown times.

At the end of the day, this functional reading of intentional changes provides us with common grounds of discourse. It has the advantage of appealing to evidence that is available rather than knowledge that is not. And it is based on the empirical states of the text that we have access to, rather than inner states of the scribes that can never be recovered. The text of Bezae can be seen as embodying a functional intentionality of anti-Judaic bias, whatever was motivating the scribes who produced it.

Let me conclude by emphasizing what I have only hinted at in the course of my paper. Much of what we are doing in textual criticism today, especially in the English-speaking world, relates closely to the intervention that Eldon successfully made by the publication of his revised dissertation forty-four years ago. We wrangle over issues concerning the original text—not just how to find one, but over whether such a thing is attainable and even what it might *mean* to call a text original. Eldon, of course, is front and center in these debates. Much of our work today involves the ideological investments of scribes, such as, but not limited to, their anti-Judaic bias: one thinks of the significant work of David Parker, Juan Hernandez, and Wayne Kannaday.¹³ We explore the broader matter of scribal tendencies, none of us more comprehensively than James Royse. We explore the social world of the scribes, with significant and compelling contributions to the question by Harry Gamble, Kim Haines-Eitzen, Larry Hurtado, our chair AnneMarie Luijendijk, among others.¹⁴ All of these advances have a historical lineage. Although Eldon had predecessors, one could easily argue that it was his major study that made all the difference and that none of what we see happening today would be happening, or at least happening in the same way, apart from the publication of the *Theological Tendency of Codex Cantabrigiensis in Acts*.

¹³ D. C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Juan Hernández Jr., *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi*, WUNT 2.218 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Wayne C. Kannaday, *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition: Evidence of the Influence of Apologetic Interests on the Text of the Canonical Gospels*, SBLTCS 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

¹⁴ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, HTS 60 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).