

# In Honor of Eldon Jay Epp: Nonagenarian and Doyen of New Testament Textual Criticism

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The editors Knust and Wasserman introduce five articles in the current volume written in honor of Eldon J. App, now a nonagenarian, and at the same time express their own appreciation and personal gratitude for Epp's tremendous contribution to the field.

The systematic destruction of books, libraries, pamphlets, documents, archives, records and the buildings that house them has been an effective strategy for those seeking to erase the memories, lives, and loves of others. From the burning of the Library of Alexandria to the organized ruination of libraries in Dubrovnik and Sarajevo, armies, rulers, and opportunists have made a business of this form of murder by proxy, well aware that a people will not be erased so long as their records remain.<sup>1</sup> Never doubt, then, the importance of a scholar like Eldon Jay Epp. Throughout his long career, Epp has tirelessly devoted himself to the careful reconstruction of ancient texts and their histories as well as to the transmission of knowledge about how to undertake this crucial task.<sup>2</sup> With the right incendiary device, a library can be burned down in a day. The production of even one book, let alone several, takes years of painstaking work. The writing of books and dozens of articles designed for a highly technical field like New Testament textual criticism—while simultaneously addressing the most important ethical, political, and theological challenges of one's current age—that takes a once-in-a-generation intellect with a character of gold and a kind-heartedness that changes the world, one sentence and one student at a time.

From *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis in Acts* (1966) to *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (2005) and, most recently, "Text-Critical Witnesses and Methodology for Isolating a Distinctive D-Text in Acts" (2017), Epp has employed textual criticism not only to assist in the reconstruction of the best text of the New Testament, and he is an undeniable expert at this, but also to challenge anti-Judaism, antifeminism, structural racism, and nar-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Roger Bagnall, "Alexandria: 'Library of Dreams,'" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146.4 (2002): 348–62; Dirk Rohmann, *Christianity, Book-Burning and Censorship in Late Antiquity: Studies in Text Transmission* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016); Mark Glickman, *The Nazi Plunder of Jewish Books* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016); András J. Riedlmayer, "Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace: Destruction of Libraries during and after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s," *Library Trends* 56.1 (2007): 107–32; Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, *The Missing Pages: The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript from Genocide to Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> We are delighted that most of the articles by our honoree are now collected in Eldon J. Epp, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism*, vol. 1, *Collected Essays, 1962–2000*, NovTSup 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2005); and Epp, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism*, vol. 2, *Collected Essays, 2006–2017*, NovTSup 181 (Leiden: Brill, 2020). An additional bibliography of text-critical books authored or edited by Epp and his articles that are *not* reprinted in these two volumes are included in *Perspectives*, 2:787–89.

row-mindedness, albeit implicitly.<sup>3</sup> As his historical work has shown, and his studies of the *Oxyrhynchus papyri* are front and center here, what may seem to be the mere detritus of a forgotten past is, in fact, both an astonishing record of what once was and an invitation to imagine a wider, more welcoming world. Epp's steadfast dedication to precision has never been in doubt. It is his compassion, however, that makes his work not only unassailable but also groundbreaking. We should trust him with our books, our memories, and our lives, and we do.

Epp has opened up cathedrals of knowledge, libraries of possibility, and hallways of opportunity for so many, including the two of us. Jennifer first met Epp in 2006 when she was an assistant professor at Boston University. New to the field of textual criticism if not to manuscript studies *per se*, she decided that it might be a good idea to learn how a "real textual critic" goes about his work. She boldly contacted him and asked if she could attend the New Testament textual criticism course he taught for decades at the Harvard Divinity School. He generously agreed, sharing not only his wisdom and experience but also his numerous publications and copious unpublished notes, distributed liberally throughout the semester to the students in the room. Once a week she would run out of her own classroom and swiftly ride her bicycle along the Charles River, eager not to miss a single moment of the discussion.<sup>4</sup> Studying in Sweden rather than the United States, Tommy first met Epp in person at the Annual Meeting of the Society of New Testament Studies (SNTS) in Lund 2008. Tommy was then a steward and guest at the meeting, scheduled to present a paper in the New Testament text-critical seminar, of which Epp was an avid participant. He actually first bumped into Epp at the book exhibition, however; his published dissertation on the text of Jude was on display, and, when Epp noticed that he was standing next to the author, he explained that he acquired virtually every publication he could find in New Testament textual criticism. Tommy was therefore honored to dedicate a copy to him right there in Lund, at the university where he had only just recently defended his thesis. In 2010, when J. Keith Elliott proposed Tommy for membership in the SNTS, Epp seconded the application.

Through the years, Professor Epp has kindly sent many off-prints of his articles to both Tommy and Jennifer. Tommy and Jennifer have also occasionally sent offprints to Epp, who has responded with many kind words. Tommy remembers in particular a comment on the final sentence of "The Implications of Textual Criticism for Understanding the 'Original Text.'"<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to volume 2 of *Perspectives*, Epp eloquently formulates "the unitary goal" of the discipline: "New Testament textual criticism, employing aspects of both science and art, studies the transmission of the New Testament text and the manuscripts that facilitate its transmission, with the unitary goal (1) of establishing the earliest attainable text (which serves as a baseline), and at the same time (2) of assessing the textual variants that emerge from the baseline text so as to hear the narratives of early Christian thought and life that inhere in the array of meaningful variants" (*Perspectives*, 2:xxiv).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer is only one among the countless students fortunate enough to have benefitted both from this justly famous seminar, which has left a mark on so many. At least two of the students from the course Jennifer attended are also now accomplished professors in their own right—David W. Jorgensen, Assistant Research Professor at Boston College, and Geoffrey Smith, Assistant Professor of Biblical Greek and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin. A few years later, Jennifer's student David Young also enrolled in Epp's seminar. After defending a dissertation that employed text critical as well as historical methods, Young joined the faculty of Eastern Nazarene College, where he is now Dean of the Chapel and College Chaplain.

<sup>5</sup> Tommy Wasserman, "The Implications of Textual Criticism for Understanding the 'Original Text,'" in *Mark and Matthew I: Comparative Readings; Understanding the Earliest Gospels in Their First-Century Settings*, ed. E.-M. Becker and A. Runesson, WUNT 1/271 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 77–96.

Tommy stated, “The reconstruction of the original text [of the New Testament] remains an ‘impossible possibility;’ whereupon Epp remarked that, while he agreed on many points, he was perhaps a bit less optimistic and would rather say that the reconstruction of the New Testament text remains “a possible impossibility.”

The essays published in this volume of *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* acknowledge and celebrate these as well as other stunning contributions. The first three articles are based on presentations given in 2010 at a special session of the New Testament Textual Criticism Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, “Honoring the Work of Eldon Jay Epp, Octogenarian,” two of which are published here for the first time. The first, Bart Ehrman’s assessment of the lasting impact of *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*, notes Epp’s “clarity of vision” and “rigorous application of criticism”; though he had predecessors, Ehrman concludes, it was “his major study that made all the difference.” J. K. Elliott’s second essay concurs: the lively debate generated by what began as Epp’s Harvard dissertation set the stage for numerous studies and commentaries, and to the credit of the field. Elliott reviews Epp’s numerous other contributions as well; while engaged in “sterling” work on the Oxyrhynchus papyri, Elliott points out, Epp has been at the center of what is now known (thanks to David Parker) as “narrative textual criticism.” Larry Hurtado’s reflections round out this section of the collection by reflecting on Epp’s contributions to papyrology. Epp became Hurtado’s Doktorvater at Harvard and Epp remained a significant mentor throughout Larry’s own estimable career. The loss of Hurtado in 2019—also a friend, mentor, and inspiration to so many—is keenly felt by the editors of *TC*, the discipline as a whole, as well as by Epp, his academic father.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, Hurtado published his essay in *TC* in 2010; we include a link to the original article here.

Remarkably, another decade has elapsed since the celebration of Epp’s eightieth birthday. Epp has contributed even more to the field and his earlier work continues to reverberate. The next two articles explore questions Epp introduced, perhaps in ways he did not fully anticipate. Yii-Jan Lin’s close study of Acts 8:37 illustrates the importance of Epp’s wide vision: textual variants are not blemishes that require swift obliteration but invitations to historical investigation, theological reflection, and cultural criticism. She asks: What have been the costs of the elimination of the Ethiopian’s christological confession from the original text of Acts? What can be gained by a restoration of his words as evidence of a church tradition—and a contemporary world—that has wanted them? Borrowing Epp’s language, she argues that this variant “should not be discarded but rather become part of the main event.” In their essay, An-Ting Yi, Jan Krans, and Bart Jan Lietaert Peerbolte take the lead from Epp’s fascination with the contributions of Richard Bentley and take the crucial first step in fulfilling a dream he mentioned in passing in 2014. Thanks to their efforts, Wren Library of Trinity College’s archive of Bentley’s notes and collations has been significantly updated and more precisely described. As they show, and as Epp has also insisted, the labors of the past are not antiquated curiosities but rich sources with relevance for anyone interested in textual scholarship. The contemporaneity of Bentley’s—and Epp’s—necessary contributions to our shared work could not be more evident.

We, the editors and authors, thank Epp, now a nonagenarian, for his splendid contributions to our disciplines. It is a privilege to publish these essays in his honor and to express our sincere gratitude, publicly and in print, for the many ways he has challenged us to do better, think more clearly, and conduct our scholarship with greater accuracy and care. May his example continue to inspire ever more careful and compassionate engagements with the possible im-

<sup>6</sup> In a guest post on the ETC blog, Epp assesses Hurtado’s excellent scholarship in textual criticism and laments the loss of his “academic son.” <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2019/12/larry-w-hurtado-29-december-1943-25.html>.

possibility of establishing the earliest attainable text while listening attentively not only to our early Christian predecessors but also to one another.