CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AN ECLECTIC TEXTUAL STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

The distinctive characteristics of the transmission of the text of Acts are well-known, especially the longer ‘Western’ text and the alleged tendencies of its main representative, Codex Bezae, when compared with the shorter text in the so-called Alexandrian uncial (normally followed in modern editions and translations). The issues raised by these features, their resolution in terms of establishing a presumed ‘original’ text and the explanations proffered for the subsequent history of that text are usually readily available in introductions to the New Testament, in commentaries on the text of Acts (recently that by Barrett in his ICC commentary¹ is most helpful in this regard), and, conveniently and succinctly, in Metzger’s Textual Commentary.²

There is thus no need in the present article to rehearse all the differing views that have been expressed regarding the alleged superiority of one line of transmission to represent Luke’s original text, the motives for adapting that text in later mutations of it, the possibility that Luke himself was responsible for both main textual forms, or that both main text types represent editions of a now lost original.

In this context ‘original’ means a form of the text as close as possible to that issued, ‘published’, by the author.³

Ropes set out two forms of the text as represented by B and D in Beginnings of Christianity III.⁴ Boismard and Lamouille printed their

reconstructed *Texte Alexandrin and Texte Occidental* in parallel columns in *Le texte occidental des Actes des Apôtres*.5

[10] The great diversity in the transmitted form of this Biblical book, when compared with that of the Gospels and Epistles may be due to the fact that Acts as a narrative and with comparatively less teaching lends itself to later editorial revision, expansion or contraction. In this respect the textual history of Acts invites comparison to the way in which the apocryphal Acts were treated.

But most commentators, certainly all translators and editors of a printed Greek testament, need to work on only one form, the presumed original from which all subsequent changes are based. They do not have the luxury of using two forms such as displayed by Ropes or by Boismard and Lamouille, however much they choose to use their footnotes to tell us what ‘other ancient manuscripts’ add or subtract or change from the text they print above.

In choosing to print one and only one form of the text of Acts the editor, translator or commentator must make decisions at each point of textual variation in the manuscript tradition unless he is (rarely) deciding to work from the text of one manuscript only throughout. Ropes argued for the relative superiority of the Egyptian ‘Old Uncial’ text of Acts. Few now would agree with his view that the Western text is merely a later editor’s logical expansion of the original text. Nor would many agree with A.C. Clark6 who maintained the superiority of the Western text-type. In practice we may see that Ropes was often prepared to desert B in favour of Western readings and Clark asterisked readings which he accepted from outside the Western tradition.

Even the United Bible Societies’ edition which may be seen as a clone of Westcott and Hort’s edition and thus heavily dependent on the readings of B adopts a less doctrinaire approach to textual variants when it discusses Acts. This change in policy is expressed by the spokesman for the UBS committee, B.M. Metzger, where he writes in the *Textual Commentary*2, p. 235:

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