CHAPTER FOUR

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY INTERLUDE IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM


I. INTRODUCTION

At the time of his death, William Henry Paine Hatch (2 August 1875–11 November 1972) had been a member of the Society of Biblical Literature for sixty-seven years—longer than any other living person—and doubtless was the oldest current member of the Society. When he served as president of SBL in 1938, he already had been on the membership rolls for thirty-three years. Our purpose here, however, is not to recount or to assess the life and work of this distinguished American textual critic, instructive as that approach might be, but Professor Hatch’s long life coincides almost exactly with the period of New Testament textual criticism that I wish to examine, for he was born within a year of Tischendorf’s death (which occurred 7 December 1874); in the same year as the death of S. P. Tregelles (1875); and at the time when Westcott and Hort were in the late stages of their nearly thirty-year project to produce the text of the New Testament “in the original Greek,” which finally was published in 1881—when Hatch was just six years

1 Nearly all of Hatch’s published volumes dealt with manuscripts of the Greek New Testament or with Syriac manuscript studies, as did many of his articles. A bibliography of his writings appeared in the *Festschrift* for his 70th birthday, *Munera studiosa* (eds. M. H. Shepherd, Jr. and S. E. Johnson; Cambridge, MA: Episcopal Theological School, 1946) 179–82. Something of the significance of Hatch’s work for New Testament textual criticism may be indicated by the index to B. M. Metzger’s *The Text of the New Testament* (2d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), for here Hatch is referred to 15 times [13 times, though it should be 14, in the 3d ed., 1992], while no other scholar, including the great figures of the field, is referred to more than 11 times.
old. As all will recognize, Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Westcott-Hort were among the foremost figures in the final overthrow of the tyrannical *textus receptus* in favor of older and better New Testament manuscripts (though, as a matter of fact, Karl Lachmann some fifty years earlier—in 1831—had effected the first clean break with the *textus receptus*). Simply stated, an old era had come to its end, the era of the *textus receptus*, and a whole new era of New Testament textual criticism had been fully established in the last decades of the nineteenth century, culminating in the work of Westcott-Hort; and the lifetime of our distinguished—and lamented—contemporary, W. H. P. Hatch, bridges that period between the self-confident, optimistic, and resolute textual criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the diffuse, indeterminate, and eclectic New Testament textual criticism of our own present and recent past. Indeed, I have ventured to call this latter period the twentieth century interlude in New Testament textual criticism, and I use the term “interlude,” not in its everyday sense as a period of waiting between two events, often with the implication of merely marking time or of inactivity, but in its classical meaning in theater and music as a performance between the acts of a play or the parts of a composition.

To characterize twentieth century textual criticism as an interlude is, on the one hand, to suggest something negative: it affirms that the critical work of the period is not a main feature, but a subsidiary or a secondary and minor performance following a portion of the main event. On the other hand, there is a positive aspect, for interlude implies—if not demands—that another major act is to follow, and it is this to which the interlude leads and for which it prepares. It does not mean inactivity, but if it is a pause or an interval, it is a meaningful and preparatory pause.

Certainly for New Testament textual criticism the twentieth century has been anything but a period of inactivity. To attempt here a survey of this period in terms either of its rich yield of new manuscripts or manuscript studies or its extensive bibliographical contributions not only would be inappropriate but would be too easy a way out and would fail to strike at the central issues. Yet the productivity of the period is obvious from mere mention, e.g., of the Oxyrhynchus papyri (1896 ff.), the Chester Beatty papyri (1930–31), and the Bodmer papyri (1956 ff.), which together represent a 600% increase over the number of New Testament papyri known at the turn of the century. This productivity is evident also in the isolation