New Testament textual criticism, like every other area of academic inquiry, is always in process. Its history is a record of various discoveries, insights, methods, and distinctive achievements that provide the basis for further investigation, but with fewer definitive conclusions or final resolutions than might be expected. A periodic assessment of the “state of the discipline,” or of one segment in its long history, can be enlightening both with respect to understanding those accomplishments of the past and in facing the tasks of the future. Though history is eminently instructive, obviously it is more urgent for us to understand the unfinished tasks and to seek ways to accomplish them. Any assessment of such decision points in current New Testament textual criticism, however, almost of necessity requires at least a brief review of decision points in past New Testament textual criticism. If the “past is prologue,” such a review will provide, at the very least, the necessary perspective for understanding the current and future issues, and at best will contain the basis for their resolution. This chapter, therefore, includes those two aspects—past turning points in New Testament text-critical study and decision points in the current discipline of New Testament textual criticism—with an intervening section on specific developments since World War II that assists us in grasping those current issues that require our attention.

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I. PAST DECISION POINTS IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

It is a curious but intriguing fact that if the past is divided roughly into fifty-year periods, starting in 1980 and moving backward through time, many of the major landmarks or turning points in New Testament textual criticism appear or find their impetus at such fifty-year intervals—give or take a few years—and most of them are landmarks in text-critical methodology. This will provide a convenient framework for our quick review of the major factors in the development of the discipline as we know it today.

One should begin at the beginning—some 1750 years ago—with Origen of Caesarea, who undoubtedly was the first to apply critical canons to the New Testament text. His Commentary on John was written in the few years before and after 230 CE, followed by commentaries on Matthew and Romans, and these works contain most of his references to variant readings in the New Testament that have the support of “few,” “many,” or “most” manuscripts accessible to him, as well as applications of such canons as suitability to context and harmony with parallel passages. Origen’s lack of sophistication and consistency in applying such “rules” hardly qualifies him as a model of text-critical method, but his use of these embryonic guidelines does suggest that he was the discipline’s founder. One hundred and fifty years later, beginning with his Commentary on Galatians in the late 380s, Jerome noted variant readings and was employing canons such as an older manuscript carries more weight than a recent one and a reading is preferable that fits the grammar or context of its passage.

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