CHAPTER TWENTY

THE MULTIVALENCE OF THE TERM “ORIGINAL TEXT” IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

I. Introduction

One hundred and ninety-one years ago, in 1808, Johann Leonhard Hug’s *Introduction to the New Testament* carried statements that, in part, may strike textual critics as being far ahead of their time. Hug laments the loss of all the original manuscripts of the New Testament writings “so important to the church” and wonders “How shall we explain this singular fact?” Next, he observes that Paul and others employed secretaries, but Hug views the closing salutation, written in the author’s own hand, as “sufficient to give them the value of originals.” Then, referring to the further role that scribes and correctors must have played after such a Christian writing had been dictated by its author, he says:

Let us now suppose, as it is very natural to do, that the same *librarius* [copyist] who was employed to make this copy, made copies likewise for opulent individuals and other churches—and there was no original at all, or there were perhaps ten or more [originals] of which none could claim superiority.²

A writing with no original? Or with ten originals? And proposed by a scholar at the outset of the nineteenth century? Later Hug asserts that “the New Testament has had the peculiar fate of suffering more

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² Johann Leonhard Hug, *Hug’s Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. from the German 3d ed. by David Fosdick Jr. with notes by Moses Stuart; Andover, MA: Gould & Newman, 1836) 70–71. [German original, 1808; 3d ed., 1826.] I have not found the 1808 ed., but I have checked the 2d (1821) and 4th (1847) German eds., where the language is identical to that translated in the English ed.
by intentional alterations than the works of profane literature . . . and the heretics, to whom it would perhaps be attributed, had no share in it.”\(^3\) What he is saying by both assertions is that, because “strange things had happened in individual mss, even at this early period”\(^4\) (that is, before the mid-third century), the originals of the New Testament writings, through such alterations, have been obscured and the very notion of an “original” has been confounded.

This illustration from an early generation of modern criticism is hardly necessary to remind current textual critics that the question of “original text” in the New Testament is not only complex and tangled, but is also an issue that confronts one with increased intensity and urgency in this generation when, quite understandably, ambiguity is pervasive and multiple meanings are endemic to this multicultural world. The issue of “original text” is, for example, more complex than the issue of canon, because the former includes questions of both canon and authority. It is more complex than possessing Greek gospels when Jesus spoke primarily Aramaic, because the transmission of traditions in different languages and their translation from one to another are relevant factors in what is “original.” It is more complex than matters of oral tradition and form criticism, because “original text” encompasses aspects of the formation and transmission of pre-literary New Testament tradition. It is more complex than the Synoptic problem and other questions of compositional stages within and behind our New Testament, because such matters affect definitions of authorship, and of the origin and unity of writings. More directly, it is more complex than making a textual decision in a variation unit containing multiple readings when no “original” is readily discernible, because the issue is broader and richer than merely choosing a single “original” and even allows making no choice at all. Finally, what “original text” signifies is more complex than Hermann von Soden’s, or Westcott-Hort’s, or any other systems of text-types, or B. H. Streeter’s theory of local texts, or various current text-critical methodologies, including the criteria for originality of readings, or “rigorous” versus “reasoned” eclecticisms, or claims of theological tendencies or ideological alterations of readings and manuscripts, because the question of “original text” encompasses all of these and much more.

\(^3\) Ibid., 85.
\(^4\) Ibid., 86.