CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE MAJORITY TEXT THEORY:
HISTORY, METHODS, AND CRITIQUE

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For the first two thirds of the twentieth century, NT textual critics could speak with one accord: the TR had finally been laid to rest.\(^1\) In 1899 Marvin Vincent referred to it as a “historical monument” that “has been summarily rejected as a basis for a correct text.”\(^2\) In the 1960s, in his Text of the New Testament, Professor Metzger could justifiably dismiss the then-contemporary defense of the Byzantine text in a mere footnote.\(^3\)

The situation today is significantly different. A small but growing number of students of the New Testament in North America and, to a lesser degree, in Europe (in particular the Netherlands and Great Britain) are embracing a view that was left for dead more than a century ago, namely, that the original text is to be found in a majority of MSS.\(^4\) The MT theory is also

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\(^1\) In this essay, “Majority Text” (or MT) refers to the text found in the majority of extant Greek witnesses; Majority Text refers to the published text compiled and arranged by Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform, 2d ed. (Southborough: Chilton, 2005 [the cover and title page include “2005” in the title, but it is absent on the copyright page]); when Majority Text refers to the volume produced by Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad (The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text, 2d ed. [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985]), “Hodges-Farstad” is always used with the title; textus receptus or TR, a name originating in an advertising blurb in the second edition (1633) of the Elzevirs’ Greek New Testament, refers to any edition of the Greek New Testament that is based primarily on Erasmus’ text; “traditional text,” an intentionally ambiguous term, refers to that form of text that is found in either the TR or the Majority Text or a proximity of either of these—in other words, some form of the Byzantine text. Advocates of the traditional text, then, would include strict TR proponents as well as MT proponents.


\(^4\) The Majority Text Society (MTS) was established 1988 in Dallas; after two years in
making inroads into third world missionary and translation endeavors.\textsuperscript{5} As in the parallel case of Marcan priority, proponents of a minority view are reopening an issue once thought to be settled. Significantly, in the fourth edition of his Text, it was now necessary for Metzger and coauthor Bart Ehrman to devote nearly five pages to a discussion of the resuscitation of Dean Burgon’s views.\textsuperscript{6}

This resuscitation is far more multifaceted than what might register with the casual observer. In particular, the distinction between the TR and the MT theories needs to be carefully noted. Consequently, this chapter, which necessarily casts a broad net, will attempt three general objectives: (1) to survey the history of the resuscitation, (2) to examine briefly the various methods within the traditional text camp (with an emphasis on the MT), and (3) to offer an evaluation of the various strands, as well as of the unifying presuppositions, of the MT theory.

existence, it could boast a membership of 160 in seventeen countries (Wilbur N. Pickering, “State of the Union—Year Two” [unpublished paper circulated from the president to members of the MTS, January 1991]). In 1989 a preliminary membership list of 121 included eight from Great Britain, three from the Netherlands, two from elsewhere in Europe (though none in Germany), and ten from third world countries (principally Brazil). Membership required the signing of the following credo: “I believe that the best approach to the original wording of the New Testament is through the Majority Text, or I wish to cooperate in testing that hypothesis.” Consequently, not all the members embraced the MT theory. As of 2008, when Zane Hodges died, the MTS no longer existed.

Besides the MTS, two other societies support the traditional text. The Trinitarian Bible Society (Great Britain), in existence since 1831, has since 1958 vigorously supported the TR under Terence H. Brown’s leadership; the Dean Burgon Society (USA), founded in Philadelphia, November 3–4 1978, by D.A. Waite, D.O. Fuller, and E.L. Bynum, also staunchly defends the TR (David D. Shields, “Recent Attempts to Defend the Byzantine Text of the Greek New Testament” [Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1985], 100–120, 42–66). The name is a curiosity, since Dean Burgon’s views would disqualify him from membership in the society named after him (see below).
