The ultimate goal of most textual critics, since the inception of the discipline, has been to reconstruct the “original” text of the New Testament—however the term “original” has been conceptualized and defined. The logic of this goal is clear and, for many scholars still today, compelling: we do not have the autographs of any of the books of the New Testament or perfectly accurate reproductions of them. All surviving manuscripts are filled with intentional and accidental alterations of the text. If one wants to know what an author wrote—which is, after all, the sine qua non of all historical exegesis—then we have to move beyond the alterations that riddle our manuscripts to reconstruct the text as it was first written. This conception of the discipline is exemplified in the work of Fenton John Anthony Hort, one of the greatest minds to approach the task, who focused his labors on a solitary objective: “to present exactly the original words of the New Testament, so far as they can now be determined from surviving documents.” Hort construed this task in entirely negative terms: “nothing more than the detection and rejection of error.”

Arguably the most significant conceptual development in the field of NT textual studies of the past fifty years, and especially in the past twenty (at least in the English-speaking world), has been the widespread realization that an exclusive concentration on the autographs is myopic, as it overlooks the value of variant forms of the text for historians interested in matters other than exegesis. The history of a text’s transmission can contribute

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1. On problems with imagining and defining the original text, see the essay by Michael Holmes in this volume.
3. As David Parker has argued in his popular account, The Living Text of the Gospels, there is no reason to think that the “purpose of textual criticism” should be to “recover
to the history of its interpretation: early Christian exegetes occasionally disagreed on the interpretation of a passage because they knew the text in different forms. Of yet greater interest to the present essay, variants in the textual tradition provide data for the social history of early Christianity, especially during the first three Christian centuries, when the majority of all textual corruptions were generated. Changes that scribes made in their texts frequently reflect their own sociohistorical contexts. By examining these changes, one can, theoretically, reconstruct the contexts within which they were created, contexts that are otherwise sparsely attested in our surviving sources. When viewed in this way, variant readings are not merely chaff to be discarded en route to the original text, as they were for Hort and others of his ilk; they are instead valuable evidence for the history of the early Christian movement. The New Testament manuscripts can thus serve as a window into the social world of early Christianity. Peering through this window has become one of the major tasks of the text-critical enterprise.

I. TEXTUAL VARIANTS AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Recent study of textual variation has contributed to our understanding of a wide range of significant issues, including the theological conflicts of early Christianity (i.e., struggles between “heresy” and “orthodoxy”), Jewish-Christian relations and the rise of anti-Judaism, the apologetic impulses of the pre-Constantinian church in the face of pagan opposition, the role of women in the early church, and the social worlds of Christian scribes. Other peculiarities of our surviving manuscripts—for instance, their provenance, dates, and formal features—have deepened our knowledge of such diverse topics as the use of magic and fortune telling among early Christians, the character and extent of the Christian mission in the empire, the extent and