Variants and Variance

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You who copy this book, I adjure you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his coming in glory, when he will judge the quick and the dead, that you collate what you copy, and correct it against this copy from which you transcribed it; and likewise that you transcribe this adjuration and set it in the copy.

This solemn command, appended by Irenaeus of Lyons to his lost *Ogdoad* and preserved by Eusebius (who described it as “most elegant”), is a reminder that textual accuracy mattered as much to some people in antiquity as it matters to some people today. But one interesting thing about commands not to do something is that they are proof this is precisely what people were indeed doing. The same is true of the awful warning at the end of the Apocalypse (Rev 22:18–19). Every textual critic who has spoken about the discipline to a general audience will have had these words quoted at them by an angry listener who is convinced that the truth of the Bible has been called into question. It is not that textual critics should expect anything very terrible to happen to them if they make poor decisions in constructing their critical texts of the New Testament, or that dreadful consequences await those who practice thorough-going eclecticism. Rather, the significance of both these dire warnings is that they provide evidence for textual variation having been a matter of concern to ancient authors, and therefore demonstrate how important textual criticism has always been.

When we look at them more carefully, one may surmise that the two passages may illustrate two different reasons for anxiety on the part of ancient authors. There is no evidence from the first quotation that Irenaeus was expecting anyone to meddle intentionally with his text. But it is reasonable to assume that he was well aware that scribes made mistakes, and that conscientious scribes were expected to check their copy against their exemplar. The seer of Revelation, on the other hand, seems to be pre-empting something much more serious which he was afraid might happen to his book, namely that a person or persons unknown would make significant additions or deletions to it. What he

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1 This token of my gratitude to Professor Keith Elliott for his contribution to our discipline is based upon a plenary paper presented to the British New Testament Conference, Aberdeen, September 2009.

2 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.2 (ed. F. Winkelmann; 2nd ed., GCS NF 6.1; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 482.
would make of the variants in his text of which we know is an interesting ques-
tion. If he could read the Nestle-Aland apparatus, or even better the exhaustive
list of readings compiled by Hoskier, would he be appalled or indifferent? We
can imagine what he would say of the manuscript in which the entire sentence
cursing meddlers is missing.3 Would it matter to him whether the number of
the beast was 616 or 666? Would he be more pleased that his text had survived
at all than worried about the detail? Likewise, what would Irenaeus have to say
about the half-dozen variants recorded in the apparatus of the GCS edition of
Eusebius?4 Would he have regarded the manuscripts available to us as accurate
copies or not?

These observations bring me to the title of the paper. What do the vari-
ants we have in our extant manuscripts amount to? Traditionally they have
been regarded as mostly accidental error arising out of frequent copying. In
recent years, the issue of intentional alteration to the text has, almost for the
first time in five centuries, been treated seriously. This approach is particularly
associated with the names of Bart Ehrman and myself, who have explored the
issues in very different ways.5 To Ehrman, scribes made theologically motivated
changes to the texts they were copying. Crucially, he showed how early Chris-
tian Christological debates often discussed the interpretation of the texts where
the variation may be seen. In a nutshell, he argued that scribes changed the
text to make the wording conform to its evident meaning. By contrast, I con-
centrated on the Gospels and took the variation we see in the manuscripts as
evidence for a particular attitude to written texts within early Christianity, in
which the focus was on the transmission of the spirit rather than the letter of
the texts.

Both these approaches align textual variation with the variation in thought
and practice of early Christians at different times and places. It turns textual
variants from the material rejected by editors reconstructing what some have
supposed to be the authorial text, into the raw material for histories of Christian
thought and exegesis. Other research deals with different classes of variants,
such as stylistic traits and developments. The work of Elliott in demonstrating
how various trends such as Atticisation led to textual variation stands out.6

3 Gregory-Aland 181.
4 Of course these are technically variants to Eusebius and not to Irenaeus.
5 See particularly B.D. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christo-
logical Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993);
6 See for example J.K. Elliott, Essays and Studies in New Testament Textual Criticism (Estudios de
Filología 3; Cordova: Ediciones El Almendro, n.d. [1990]); The Language and Style of the Gospel