In the Beginning was the New Testament Text, but Which Text?  

* A Consideration of ‘Ausgangstext’ and ‘Initial Text’  

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Recently an advanced student from Eastern Europe enrolled in my graduate seminar at Harvard University, and he was still in the process of mastering English. In one of his papers he referred to my article on “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text,’” but it came out as “the malevolence of the original text.” In that essay of a decade ago I offered a detailed critique of the term, “original text,” and responses, to be sure, extended from acceptance to charges of postmodernism. Never before, however, had “original text” been characterized as evil! At the end of the article I suggested that more suitable terminology to describe an important aspect of the goal of New Testament textual criticism would be that we seek the “earliest attainable text.” That phraseology leads directly to the topic of the present essay, which highlights terminology used from the early sixteenth century to the present by editors in describing their critical editions and the texts they contain, followed by an assessment of what might be understood from the terms employed by the newest critical edition for its primary text-line. The very terms editors employ in the titles of their volumes and in descriptions of the texts they publish tell us much about the broader conceptions of their printed New Testament texts.

I    Past and Current Terminology for Critical Editions and Their Resultant Texts

Our discussion opens, not with the first critical text, but with a major figure whose proposed edition came to naught. Yet, much can be learned from his carefully-planned, long-pursued, and highly ambitious, but aborted project.

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In 1720 Richard Bentley of Cambridge University formulated a sophisticated plan for a freshly-minted critical text of the Greek and Latin New Testament, based on the earliest manuscripts, versions, and patristic citations then available. He publicized this in a six-page pamphlet entitled Proposals for Printing, though it was headed by what appears to be his proposed title page for the edition. Eight paragraphs of description open by noting that “now by God’s providence there are MSS. in Europe ... above a thousand years old,” followed by his proposal for “a new edition of the Greek and Latin, not according to the recent and interpolated copies, but as represented in the most ancient and venerable MSS. in Greek and Roman capital letters.”

A few years earlier, in 1716, Bentley had written to the Archbishop of Canterbury asserting his ability “to give an edition of the Greek Testament exactly as it was in the best exemplars at the time of the Council of Nice [323 C.E.]; so that there shall not be twenty words, nor even particles, difference.” While Master of Trinity College for forty-two years (1700 until his death in 1742) Bentley labored on his proposed edition from about 1716 to 1729. Unfortunately—as is well known—he never finished

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2 Bentley’s presumed title page read as follows: Η ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ Graece. Novum testamentum versionis vulgatae, per ssum Hieronymum ad vetusta exemplaria graeca castigatae et exactae. Utrumque ex antiquissimis codd. mss., cum graecis tum latinis, edidit Richardus Bentleius. Proposals for printing. The key phrases here are “... corrected and completed according to ancient Greek copies; both from the oldest manuscript codices, not only Greek but also Latin.” The Proposal is printed in A.A. Ellis, Bentleii critica sacra: Notes on the Greek and Latin Text of the New Testament, Extracted from the Bentley MSS. in Trinity College Library (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1862) xvii–xix; citation from xvii; and in C. Tischendorf, Novum Testamentum Graece, ad antiquissimos testes denuo recensuit, apparatum criticum apposuit; Volume III: Prolegomena by C.R. Gregory (8th major critical edition; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1884–1894) 231–240; see 234–240 for Bentley’s Greek/Latin specimen of Apocalypse of John 22 (not provided in Ellis).

3 Ellis, Bentleii critica sacra, xii; see xvii–xviii. In contrast to John Mill’s 1707 edition, with its 30,000 variants to the printed textus receptus, Bentley asserted that in his text, based on the specified early witnesses, “there will scarce be two hundred ... that can deserve the least consideration” (xvii). But Bentley, the author of highly respected editions of classical writings, went on to offer a highly questionable affirmation, that his edition “shall have a testimony of certainty above all other books whatever, and an end be put at once to all Various Lections [readings] now or hereafter” (xii). Currently, however, nearly all will agree that all meaningful variants are valuable even if rejected from a critical text: see E.J. Epp, “It’s All about Variants: A Variant-Conscious Approach to New Testament Textual Criticism,” HTR 100 (2007): 275–308, esp. 287–293; 298–301.