MAKING EDITIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TODAY

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A recent press release seemed to mirror all the worst fears of the contemporary philologist:

After seven months of writing day and night, a robot in Germany clutching a fountain pen has completed a “manuscript” Bible in cursive handwriting ... The machine, dubbed “Bios (Bible),” began copying the Bible in June onto a 900-metre-long roll of paper, with its arm forming each letter with the pen after all 66 books of scripture had been loaded into its memory. “It’s just a working machine, yet it’s a participant in society,” said Gommel. The robot was thus a “mediator” in the process of social communication. Asked why they chose the bible, Zappe said, “Because it is one of the most significant books of the age and contains a huge amount of data.” The group did not explain how the robot misspelled two of the 800,000 words.1

Generally speaking, the computer appears to ring the knell of traditional philology, by replacing the decision-making of the scholar, based on a natural bent, a thorough training and extensive knowledge, with an automated process in which all editorial acts are based on predetermined criteria. Since it is one of the axioms of textual criticism that every variant reading may represent a unique situation, the blind decisions of a computer are the worst possible way of making a critical text. Indeed, the critical text by its very nature represents everything that a computer can never achieve.

And yet, the story of the robot as scribe is not all bad news for the scholar. Apparently, although the entire text and every action was pre-ordained by the programme, even this production process offers the opportunity for inexplicable scribal activity. And it is refreshing that the report offers the opportunity to exercise one’s power’s of conjectural emendation (“Bios,” leg. “Biblos”).

Is the computer a machine that is replacing the traditional artefact (the critical text) produced by the individual skills of the craftsman

(the critical editor) with a mass-produced item? Can we envisage a situation in which the world will be filled with more critical editions than there have ever been, but critical editions lacking that insight and distinctive understanding which is the hallmark of an individual scholar’s lifetime dedicated to the text of a single author? Does the rise of the computer require the decline of the philologist? One does not have to be so pessimistic. Indeed, one should not regard the machine as an enemy, nor even as a neutral which will leave philologists alone so long as they leave it alone. Rather, the computer, not the least wonderful product of the human brain, offers its services as a loyal ally to the philologist who has the ability and skill to understand it and bend it towards philological goals.

This is as true in the field of New Testament studies as anywhere else in textual scholarship. Indeed, there is good reason to argue that the text of the New Testament particularly demands such research. It is striking that the team who produced the Bible robotically chose it “Because it is one of the most significant books of the age and contains a huge amount of data.” The same two grounds apply to the use of computers in philological research. The continuing cultural importance of the texts enhances the likelihood of funding and of visibility for electronic projects, whose advances may then be applied elsewhere. And it is certainly true that with regard to the amount of data, the New Testament poses some formidable challenges. There are other much longer texts, but the number of variety of witnesses is distinctive. One should not claim that the New Testament contains the hardest set of texts to edit. Nevertheless, it has to be edited from up to two thousand manuscripts, along with versions and patristic citations. This means that there is a huge amount of material to be collected, analysed and presented, an amount which individuals can no longer handle.

The role of the computer in making it possible for the editor to study and to edit this information in a coherent fashion is essential. It would certainly be an error to assume that this means that it is more convenient. At the present juncture, scholars who use computers to make editions are having to deal with a variety of technical problems and challenges which often means that the editorial task itself has to be suspended until the difficulty is resolved. It is certainly not the case at present that the computer necessarily makes the task easier or quicker. Nor can it ever be said that an edition made with computer