

BOOK REVIEW

Porter, Stanley E., *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013). xviii + 222 pp. Pbk. \$21.99 USD.

The search for answers to the inquiry ‘How did we get our New Testament?’ will always be a fascinating enterprise for the serious New Testament scholar. After all, the New Testament scholar exists only because of this set of writings. This book originates from a series of lectures delivered at Acadia Divinity College in 2008, and arises from the author’s keen interest in the origins of the New Testament. Here Porter presents manuscript evidence, surveys histories and proffers new proposals regarding the text, transmission and translation of the New Testament. Porter states that he wrote *How We Got the New Testament* for the ‘inquisitive and generally well-educated and thinking Christian audience, ideally though not necessarily with some formal theological education, that wishes to learn more about the New Testament and where it came from’ (p. 8). In addition, he expects that the book will challenge his fellow scholars to rethink the issues he raises and to ruminate upon his suggested propositions, notably, ‘the use of a single-manuscript text of the New Testament, the early formation of the bulk of the New Testament, and how the constraints of translation theory can be broadened’ (p. 8). Porter’s ideas with reference to previous discussions of this topic are clearly novel (cf. J.K. Elliott, ‘Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon’, *JSNT* 63 (1996), pp. 105-23). Yet it remains to be seen how both current and future New Testament scholars will respond to these ideas, especially because the majority of textual critics remain entrenched in their use of various eclectic approaches to textual criticism.

The three main chapters of the book—Text, Transmission and Translation of the New Testament—are prefaced by an introduction and followed by a concluding section. The book also has appendices of ancient and modern authors.

Chapter 1 deals with the text of the New Testament. Porter says, 'The traditional task and goal of textual criticism of the Greek New Testament, within the confines of the recognition that we no longer have the autograph manuscripts, is to devise a method by which the original text, or the text that is as close as possible to the original, can be ascertained' (p. 17). While this traditional task and goal was common ground for nineteenth- and twentieth-century text-critical scholarship, and has been from Erasmus to the present, Porter notes that in recent times there have been scholars who have expressed their discontent with the traditional notion of an original text, the result of which are two major developments worth noting: an appreciation of the theological and other contexts of variation of the New Testament texts (so Harris, Ehrman and Epp) and the questioning of whether there is even a possibility of finding the original text itself (so Petersen, Trobisch, Holmes, Parker, Mink and Epp). Porter rejoins that 'discussion of context must be put in its own proper context' (p. 23) and that 'the original text is the published text that goes forth as the author's, is circulated in the Christian community, and is found in the Greek New Testament' (pp. 35-36).

The next section traces the history of the printed editions of the Greek New Testament, from Erasmus (1515) and the Complutensian Polyglot (1522) to Michael Holmes's SBLGNT (2010), from which Porter subsequently raises two important issues. The first issue concerns which edition should be used in studying the Greek New Testament. Porter argues that the arguments used to support various forms of the 'traditional text', which are mainly based on the Textus Receptus and the Majority and Byzantine texts, have remained unconvincing. The second issue concerns the manuscript basis of the Greek New Testament, in which Porter, following his discussion of the various text-types (Byzantine, Caesarean, Alexandrian and Western), notes, 'It is the Alexandrian text that has been the basis of virtually all major critical texts of the New Testament from Westcott and Hort to the present' (p. 64). In the remainder of the chapter, Porter critiques Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, pointing out that such sensationalistic statements as 'we have more variants than words in the New Testament' (p. 65) are not only unfounded but are also misleading, especially given the fact that 'on a conservative estimate, 80 percent of the text is established (some say 90 percent or more)' (p. 66). The chapter concludes with Porter's recommendation of the use of indivi-

dual codices for the study of the Greek New Testament, as they ‘represent the Bible of a given Christian community, and while they may not represent the text as it came penned from the author, this is probably as early as we can get while still preserving the integrity of the New Testament’ (p. 74).

The use of a single-manuscript text of the New Testament is undoubtedly a persuasive and logical proposal. With the plethora of eclectic Greek texts that are available to the New Testament scholar, however, the practical question becomes whether it would make any difference to use this single-manuscript text approach to the study of the New Testament when it is now recognized that more than 90 per cent of the Greek New Testament text is well established. Porter may also want to provide a list of advantages of the use of a single-manuscript text over the eclectic Greek texts to convince readers why his proposal deserves attention. Additionally, readers might want to see a concrete illustration or a more elaborate explanation as to how the use of a single-manuscript approach could be implemented in actual practice. This might be something that Porter may want to address in the future.

Chapter 2 addresses the transmission of the New Testament. Porter first discusses the four general types of manuscripts—papyri, majuscules or uncials (written on parchment), minuscules and lectionaries—in which the New Testament was copied and transmitted. From here, he provides a historical reconstruction (in reverse chronology) of the transmission of the Greek New Testament before the major codices. He begins with the Gospels–Acts corpus, arguing and providing manuscript evidence that this corpus was already fixed and firmly established sometime during the second century. Porter next presents the bodies of manuscript evidence for the Pauline corpus. He observes that these collections of manuscript evidence seem ‘to point toward complete consistency in the entire compositional ordering of the entire Pauline corpus...[which] follows the principle of decreasing size from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, what might be called the “church letters”, and...from 1 Timothy to Philemon, what might be called the “personal letters”’ (p. 118). Finally, with reference to the rest of the New Testament corpus, Porter acknowledges that retracing its transmissional history is more difficult, and its reconstruction is thus ‘highly speculative’ (p. 121). Nevertheless, he argues, ‘By the time of the fourth century, the existence of the Catholic Epistles as a group—with James

at the head, followed by 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude (in that order, though separated by the Johannine Epistles)—is well established’ (p. 124).

The subsequent sections discuss the major codices (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus), the liturgical use of manuscripts, and the use of minuscules and lectionaries. From these discussions, Porter proposes that these manuscripts should be classified into two major categories. The first category should include ‘continuous text’ manuscripts, and the second category should consist of ‘non-continuous text’ manuscripts, which can further be subcategorized under the following heads: lectionary and liturgical texts, miniature codices and magical papyri and amulets, commentaries, especially Johannine manuscripts with *hermēneia*, apocryphal texts, excerpts and occasional texts and other unknown works. The objective of this categorization is to account for ‘the fullest range of manuscripts [that] should be included in the discussion, not to necessarily use category-two (non-continuous text manuscripts) documents to establish the Greek New Testament, but to provide possible insight into its development and transmission’ (p. 146). Porter concludes that, even though the second century appears to be a tunnel period of limited manuscript evidence, once we emerge from it, we immediately encounter the deluxe major codices and other types of manuscripts in the subsequent centuries—a clear and fine line of transmission of the Greek New Testament textual traditions.

Chapter 3 tackles the translation of the New Testament. After tracing the history of translation of the Bible starting with the Septuagint and three other ancient versions (Syriac, Latin and Coptic), and moving to some of the most recent translations (e.g. NET, ESV and CEB), Porter makes several comments on the nature of translation: that translation is an old phenomenon; that there is always tension between literalism and freedom of expression, as well as between focus on the source text and the target audience; that there is the difficulty of rendering accurately one language to another; that such elements as audience and original author must not be ignored; and that there are all kinds of constraints imposed on translation by the source texts and target language and audience. Consequently, one needs to be familiar with the major approaches to translation theory, moving beyond ‘the simple opposition between literal and dynamic equivalence’ (p. 177). Porter discusses seven translation theories—literal/formal equivalence theory, dynamic

equivalence theory, functionalist translation, discourse analysis-based translation, relevance theory, descriptivist translation and cultural/postcolonial theory—and assesses their relations in terms of the rank scale or textual level upon which each translation model focuses in the textual analysis. Porter concludes with a renewed call for translators of the New Testament to consider new approaches to translational theory and practice. He believes that the next stage, albeit ‘a difficult stage to move to because it requires that we move outside of our long-standing translational comfort zones—is to explore levels of language use that move beyond the clause all the way to the discourse level, to see how these various levels open up and yet constrain translational possibilities’ (p. 208).

This book is a handy introduction to the subject of how we got the New Testament that every New Testament scholar and student will find useful. Porter not only presents the three major sections of his book in a clear and orderly way, he also carefully selects the important topics to give a full account of the subject matter at hand, encompassing textual critical matters, manuscript and papyri evidence, and modern translation theories. Despite this positive evaluation, readers may raise an eyebrow upon encountering Porter’s proposal for the use of a single-manuscript text as an alternative to the eclectic Greek texts that are believed by most scholars to be how the original Greek actually might have appeared. In many respects, because these eclectic texts are a product of years of cumulative scholarly research, with the noble goal of trying to ascertain and arrive at the original text as closely as possible, any objection to Porter’s proposal must be considered. Moreover, the internal and external criteria utilized by textual critics seem logical, sophisticated and appropriate for the job. Nevertheless, Porter’s proposal, despite sounding simple, also merits careful attention, if scholars are truly serious in their quest for the original text. The fourth-century codices provide a strong body of evidence that scholars need to think about critically to decide whether their own modern text-critical work or the actual texts used by the fourth-century Christians come closer to the original text.

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