



**Greenlee, J. Harold**

***The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition***

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The wide dissemination of Bart Ehrman's 1993 book *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* and the publicity surrounding his populist *Misquoting Jesus* of 2005 (blandly retitled *Whose Word Is It?* for the British edition) introduced many readers to the discipline of textual criticism. Some nonacademic readers were alarmed by the results of Ehrman's exposé of text-critical variation. As a consequence, several attempted rebuttals of his conclusions have been produced, generally by conservative American scholars and evangelical clergy. The latest comes from the respected veteran text-critic Harold Greenlee, who is known in academic circles for writings on New Testament Greek grammar and on patristic citations and for his pioneering collations of manuscripts; he is more generally known for his 1964 *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (revised 1995).

In this latest short monograph, *The Text of the New Testament* (itself an expanded and revised version of his 1985 *Scribes, Scrolls and Scripture*), Greenlee seems to have in his sights an audience of newcomers to the discipline who are introduced here to the ways in which ancient texts were produced and then copied, but which is also an audience that is disturbed by suggestions from Ehrman and the like that the original authors' words in the New Testament writings have been tampered with.

One of his ways to answer readers' concerns is to offer palliative platitudes. Among such pacifying remarks are "The great majority of textual variants involve little or no difference in meaning" (83), and "The vast majority of the most theologically significant passages of the New Testament have no significant textual variations" (117), a blatantly unsustainable assertion that tests the gullibility of the readership. Also to be endured are his quoting Bengel's pabulum that "the variations between the manuscripts did not shake any article of evangelical doctrine" (76) and his repeating Sir Frederic Kenyon's words "we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God" (120), despite his not drawing attention to the unsettling get-out phrase "in substantial [i.e., not complete] integrity." The fact that the majority of the text is secure may well be true, but what disturbs conservative readers is not the total percentage of variants that are insignificant as regards matters theological but that minority of readings that are indeed theologically important. More on these below.

Another means used to placate the fundamentalists is to appeal to divine protection of the text. Surprisingly, in a book by a respected academic, is his appeal on more than one occasion to the Holy Spirit (although why the index has a reference to the Holy Spirit on 46–47 eludes this reviewer). On page 37 we do find: "we believe that the Holy Spirit guided the authors of the New Testament books so that their message would be protected from error" and "We likewise believe that the Holy Spirit operated providentially in the copying and preservation of the MSS through the centuries." Oh! That is not the sort of presupposition one would find in works of textual criticism of the Greek or Latin classics or of other ancient literature. Nor is it warranted here. In any case, such a view is a hostage to fortune—the vast quantity of textual variants is hardly suggestive of providential preservation. It were better had Greenlee avoided such peculiar *obiter dicta*. Even Greenlee himself tells us in a prelude to a description of scribal habits that "we should not think that it was only by supernatural preservation that the New Testament was kept from being lost or hopelessly confused during those centuries" (37) Perversely, Greenlee allows (103) that Mark's original ending has been lost. Mainly, though, Greenlee is concerned to show how the frail human agency of scribal copying resulted in accidental and deliberate change (and even he points to places such as 1 Thess 2:7 and 1 Cor 13:3 [!] where he is not certain which reading came from the "inspired" biblical author).

But a more effective way to educate tyros in the discipline is to give examples of text-critical variation in the biblical manuscripts and to discuss how an editor can resolve differences in the ancient sources. That Greenlee does. There is a commendably lengthy list of passages briefly discussed (particularly in ch. 8) such as Matt 1:25; 8:25; 12:15; 22:30; Luke 4:17; 1 Cor 11:29; 1 Thess 2:3; Col 1:14; Eph 1:1; Rev 21:18. Generally his comments on each variant are unexceptional, but at Mark 6:22 Greenlee accepts (82–83) the reading "his daughter—that is Herodias'"; why not the easier "her daughter, that is,

Herodias’,” which fits Markan style and usage? Many of his examples of word-order or minor changes do not substantially affect meaning, interpretation, or translation, much less theology. One set of variants Greenlee makes much of is the conclusion to the Paternoster in Matthew, where he concludes that the doxology was added only after the text was used liturgically. (The index refers to only one discussion [98] and oddly avoids directing us to eight other references on 107–14!). Chapter 10 has a further list of bland and unexceptional variants to demonstrate that most *variae lectiones* are “insignificant” and of no theological significance. If Greenlee wants to promote that message, then he must expect the response: Why bother with text-critical study? Why trouble oneself with the complicated analyses of manuscript allegiances, with text-types, with matters of authors’ styles and the other minutiae of the discipline?” Greenlee’s high-handed declamations about the relative security of the textual tradition do him no credit, underestimate the significance of the exceptional cases, and denigrate an audience’s interest in the very subject to which the author devoted his scholarly life.

In his brief discussions Greenlee usually tells us where the original reading lies. Variants are thus jettisoned as aberrations. A more positive assessment of textual variation, however, should be concerned to explain the possible motives for deliberate changes. In some cases we could be presented with the reasons for variations from a text that was changing, precisely because it was used—a living text indeed. (And here an author such as Greenlee might wish to credit the Holy Spirit with such developments.) A false enemy, the Heretic, is constantly put up as an Aunt Sally. Greenlee tells us on several occasions that such and such a reading is not heretical. That is a red herring. Even Ehrman tells us that many a variant is due to a dominant but *orthodox* party’s deliberate change (i.e., corruption)—that is not a heretical rewriting of scripture. What Greenlee should be telling us is that variants reveal how changes to the reading, understanding, and *use* of the biblical words reflect developments in Christian doctrine and church history. Another Aunt Sally erected to be easily knocked down is that there is no evidence that there was a wholesale rewriting of scripture (Marcion excepted). Again, Ehrman and others have never claimed that there was a consistent rewriting. Our extant manuscripts preserve only inconsistent and haphazard examples of theologically motivated changes.

His assessment of many variants visible in the *apparatus criticus* to a critical edition where harmonizing to parallels or the improving of the Greek or the accidental omission of words when palaeographical reasons can be demonstrated to have caused an optical error or misreading are succinct. Obviously, the strategy of highlighting such variants is intended to be a comfort to his worried readership, but declamations such as “Very few variants involve readings that are doctrinally erroneous except for occasional scribal blunders that can easily be recognised” (71) and “most variants entail only small differences or no differences in meaning” (71) are unhelpful. Little is made of the

disturbing qualifiers “very few” and “most” here, and his selected variants hardly address those major variants that are typically exposed in the marginal notes of a modern English version. There statements about what “some ancient authorities” (normally meaning manuscripts) add, change, or omit more often do concern theologically or exegetically significant changes. Greenlee does indeed discuss the longer ending of Mark, the *pericope de adultera*, and the *comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7b–8) at some length (although he avoids the equally significant nest of complex *variae lectiones* at 1 John 5:6!). However, he ignores Heb 2:9 (made much of by Ehrman in several places).

Are Greenlee’s readers not supposed to be interested in what Hebrews says about the condition of Jesus at the point of death? Or why is there no help on the variants at Mark 1:1 or 6:3? Help on Acts 20:28 is sought in vain in this book. In these feminist days much ink has been spilled on Paul’s teaching on women’s silence, but not one word is said in this book about the position or even the originality of 1 Cor 14:34–35. Can Greenlee offer no comforting words to those who seek certainty of text and belief at those verses? Similarly, those who observe in the marginalia of English versions the many variants in Acts are offered nothing but the generalization “in Acts the Western reading is often a rewording of alternative readings” (72), which is not only insipid but untrue! Greenlee provides no help to readers disturbed by the uncertain textual status of the doxology in Romans or its position. If readers note that Jesus’ words about divorce are disputed in the manuscripts (at Matt 19:3–9 especially in vv. 7 and 9, Matt 5:27–32 especially at v. 32, or Mark 10:2–21 especially at v. 7), they get no help whatsoever in trying to understand what Jesus’ teachings on such a relevant issue may have been!

This revised monograph ought to have tackled head on variants that Ehrman in particular promotes as significant, such as Mark 1:41, Luke 22:43–44 (surely important theologically and exegetically as well as of relevance in any discussion of the Lukan passion story), and others. By ignoring discussion of *variae lectiones* such as these, Greenlee denies his readers the antidotes to Ehrman they may be seeking. By contrast, the evangelical pastor Timothy Paul Jones writing to a similar audience courteously tries in his *Misquoting Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2007) to confront Ehrman directly by reexamining many of his examples and reaching different conclusions.

As it is, by sweeping inconveniently troublesome variants under the carpet and by giving the impression that no significant variants effect creedal statements or Christian fundamentals, Greenlee has short-changed his audience. Those alerted to the marginalia of English versions will readily observe that many significant words are not textually secure. The eucharistic words may be reported in different places (in differing wording) in the New Testament, but the textual insecurity of the words of institution in Luke 22:17–20 surely affects one’s assessment of *Luke’s* message. The same applies to the

absence of the ascension from some manuscripts at Luke 24:51—again, whether the words are in or not must affect one’s assessment of the theology of this Gospel. If one wishes to learn about Paul’s teaching on resurrection, it may be helpful to know what is to happen at the end time. Are we all to be changed or not? The theologically significant variants at 1 Cor 15:51 have been airbrushed from Greenlee’s lists of relevant examples.

One addition to this revision is chapter 9 on English versions, which, according to the publisher’s blurb, is intended to show how contemporary translations fit in with our understanding of the New Testament text. This is wise. Ian Moir and I in our little primer *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament* (1995; 2nd ed., 2003) also had in mind readers made conscious that the New Testament text was not uniformly copied from the footnotes in their English Bibles. Greenlee gives a very brief overview of seven versions (NIV, NRSV, NLT, NET, ESV, REB, NKJV), but he is uncritical. For instance, he fails to warn us about the erroneous statement in the marginalia of the RED that “some witnesses” place the *pericope de adultera* after John 21:24!

Greenlee promotes in a simplified way the reasoned eclecticism of Metzger and the principles behind the Nestle text and the Bible Societies’ edition of the New Testament. He is no Majority Text adherent nor KJV advocate. In fact, his decisions that Mark’s original is now lost, that the story of the adulteress was never part of the New Testament text, and that the *comma Johanneum* was not part of 1 John are likely to alienate him from some potential readers. He accepts the absence of Acts 8:37; he describes the longer text at 1 Cor 6:20 as a pious expansion; he accepts the shorter reading at John 5:3–4; and he rejects the originality of the longer reading at Col 1:14.

This book may be a revision, but it is hardly updated. Greenlee is out of date on several fronts. First he is still concerned to show that text critics are trying to expose the original text. Eldon Epp has already shown the problem of defining what “original” may mean in his “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism” (first in *HTR* 1999). More recently, the Münster Institut behind the major critical editions is prepared to seek and print only an *Ausgangstext* (‘initial text’) from which scribal variants may be traced; the *Ausgangstext* is unlikely to be the authorial text. Second, he is out of date in promoting text-types and especially for using these in determining the supposed originals. (He is wrong to state that the Western text-type is so named because of its association with Rome; in fact, it is more likely to have developed in the Levant. Most critics now place single quotes around Western or preface it with “so-called”). He is also out of date in giving a manuscript location:  $\Xi$  (erroneously given as eighth century) is said to be in London (27), but for many years the British and Foreign Bible Society’s manuscripts have been deposited at Cambridge University Library.

Greenlee's textual principles (59ff.) need to be treated with caution. On page 63 he seems to promote the shorter reading as being preferable: most examples seem to prove the opposite. On page 60 he gives examples where harmonization to Mark and Luke is argued for, but most harmonizing variants actually seem to be toward Matthew, the most quoted of the Synoptics in antiquity and the one typically placed first in a fourfold Gospel canon. His principles applying palaeographical considerations to the shortening of a text are inconsistently applied. For instance on page 97 he accepts the shorter reading at Mark 9:29 omitting "and fasting" with aleph\* B 1274 2427 and fails to alert us to a possibility that the original may have included those words and that their removal may have been due to hom(oiarkton): ...KA ...KA, a phenomenon he describes elsewhere as a cause for accidental shortening. He is wrong to compare that reading to 1 Cor 7:5, since the word "fasting" there comes *before* "prayer," but, again, hom(oioteuleton) may have caused an accidental shortening: ...TH ...TH. Likewise, we are told categorically on page 64 that there was "no reason to omit" the disputed words in Luke 15:21, although the word preceding the longer reading and the last word of that longer text is the same (σου)! Then there is the principle about privileged manuscripts. What is the rule here? What are his beginners to make of his refusal to accept the logion about the man working on the Sabbath (found in MS D after Luke 6:4) as an original part of Luke's Gospel because it is only in one manuscript, whereas he expects them to accept a version of Mark ending at 16:8 found in only two Greek manuscripts? I am also unhappy with his telling his readers that such and such a reading is to be preferred because it is read by "good manuscripts." How is the quality of such manuscripts determined? What are readers to make of such a judgment, and may they not ask why manuscripts that are not good came to exist (the Holy Spirit notwithstanding)?

I regret to have to draw attention to the following errors and confusing statements. Some foreign (Latin) words have caused problems. The polyglot of 1522 is from Complutum (and not as stated on 44 ); on page 10 read Pergamum (*not* Pergamus). In his discussing Codex Sinaiticus (26) it is strange that the Russian emperor is called by the non-Slavonic form "czar" rather than the usual "tsar." On page 19 it is confusing in a book of this level to try to differentiate minuscule from cursive handwriting. On the same page readers are left wondering whether majuscule script continued into the tenth century or the eleventh. On page 65 it is an exaggeration to claim that *scriptio continua* was difficult for readers to cope with; very few variants derive from misdivided words. Codex Ephraemi is misspelled on page 126, and Ephaem is mistyped on page 53 (*bis*). The index of biblical references needs tidying: for instance, the false reference to page 87 for Luke 6:4, and the absence of references to the discussions of John 7:53–8:11 and the endings to Mark in chapter 8.

So, good though Greenlee's basic intentions be and commendable as his pedagogical skills are, too much has been left unsaid and many examples of text-critical variation

uncongenial to his basic thesis are unexposed. Thanks to Greenlee's attempts to placate and oversimplify, readers are unhelped. Although one is sorry to have to make such a judgment, especially given Greenlee's previous reputation in the field, we must say that this monograph fails to answer the very cases where audiences may be seeking guidance, and, as such, the book provides a disservice to them.