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THE WESTCOTT-HORT CRITICAL THEORY

Although Brooke Foss Westcott identified himself fully with the project and the results, it is generally understood that it was mainly Fenton John Anthony Hort¹ who developed the theory and composed the Introduction in their two-volume work.² In the following discussion I consider the W-H theory to be Hort's creation.

At the age of 23, in late 1851, Hort wrote to a friend: "I had no idea till the last few weeks of the importance of texts, having read so little Greek Testament, and dragged on with the villainous *Textus Receptus*. . . . Think of that vile *Textus Receptus* leaning entirely on late MSS.; it is a blessing there are such early ones."³

Scarcely more than a year later, "the plan of a joint [with B.F. Westcott] revision of the text of the Greek Testament was first definitely agreed upon".⁴ And within that year (1853) Hort wrote to a friend that he hoped to have the new text out "in little more than a year".⁵ That it actually took twenty-eight years does not obscure the circumstance that though uninformed, by his own admission, Hort conceived a personal animosity for the *Textus Receptus*,⁶ and only because it was based entirely, so he thought, on late manuscripts. It appears that Hort did not arrive at his theory through unprejudiced intercourse with the facts. Rather, he deliberately set out to construct a theory that would vindicate his preconceived animosity for the Received Text.

Colwell has made the same observation: "Hort organized his entire argument to depose the *Textus Receptus*".⁷ And again, "Westcott and Hort wrote with two things constantly in mind; the *Textus Receptus* and the *Codex Vaticanus*. But they did not hold them in mind with that passive objectivity which romanticists ascribe to the scientific mind."⁸

As the years went by, Hort must have seen that to achieve his end he had to have a convincing history of the text—he had to be able to explain why essentially only one type of text was to be found in the mass of later manuscripts and show how this explanation justified the rejection of this type of text.

The Basic Approach

Hort started by taking the position that the New Testament is to be treated like any other book.⁹ "The principles of criticism explained in the foregoing section hold good for all ancient texts preserved in a plurality of documents. In dealing with the text of the New Testament no new principle whatever is needed or legitimate."¹⁰

This stance required the declared presupposition that no malice touched the text. "It will not be out of place to add here a distinct expression of our belief that even among the numerous unquestionably

¹ F.J.A. Hort and B.F. Westcott were highly respected and influential Anglican churchmen of the 19th century—especially during the 70s and 80s. Westcott was Bishop of Durham and Hort a Professor at Cambridge. The Greek text of the N.T. prepared by them was adopted (essentially) by the committee that produced the English Revised Version of 1881. Westcott wrote a number of commentaries on N.T. books which are still considered to be standard works. His prestige and influence were important to the success of their (W-H) undertaking.

² B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (2 Vols.; London: Macmillan and Co., 1881).

³ A.F. Hort, *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort* (2 Vols.; London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1896), I, 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁶ The expression '*Textus Receptus*' properly refers to some one of the printed editions of the Greek text of the N.T. related in character to the text prepared by Erasmus in the sixteenth century. (Of over thirty such editions, few are identical.) It is not identical to the text reflected in the AV (though it is quite close) nor yet to the so-called "Syrian" or "Byzantine" text (these terms will be introduced presently). The critical edition of the "Byzantine" text prepared by Zane C. Hodges, former Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at the Dallas Theological Seminary, Arthur L. Farstad, and others, and published by Thomas Nelson in 1982, differs from the *Textus Receptus* in over 1,500 places.

⁷ Colwell, "Hort Redivivus", p. 158.

⁸ Colwell, "Genealogical Method: Its Achievements and its Limitations", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXVI (1947), 111.

⁹ In fact, Hort did not hold to a high view of inspiration. Cf. A.F. Hort, I, 419-21 and Westcott and Hort, II, "Introduction", 280-81.

¹⁰ Westcott and Hort, p. 73.

spurious readings of the New Testament there are no signs of deliberate falsification of the text for dogmatic purposes.”¹

Such a position allowed him to bring over into the textual criticism of the New Testament the family-tree method, or genealogy, as developed by students of the classics.

Genealogy

Here is Hort's classic definition of genealogical method:

The proper method of Genealogy consists . . . in the more or less complete recovery of the texts of successive ancestors by analysis and comparison of the varying texts of their respective descendants, each ancestral text so recovered being in its turn used, in conjunction with other similar texts, for the recovery of the text of a yet earlier common ancestor.²

Colwell says of Hort's use of this method:

As the justification of their rejection of the majority, Westcott and Hort found the possibilities of genealogical method invaluable. Suppose that there are only ten copies of a document and that nine are all copied from one; then the majority can be safely rejected. Or suppose that the nine are copied from a lost manuscript and that this lost manuscript and the other one were both copied from the original; then the vote of the majority would not outweigh that of the minority. These are the arguments with which W. and H. opened their discussion of genealogical method. . . . They show clearly that a majority of manuscripts is not **necessarily** to be preferred as correct. It is this *a priori* possibility which Westcott and Hort used to demolish the argument based on the numerical superiority of the adherents of the Textus Receptus.³

It is clear that the notion of genealogy is crucial to Hort's theory and purpose. He felt that the genealogical method enabled him to reduce the mass of manuscript testimony to four voices—“Neutral”, “Alexandrian”, “Western” and “Syrian”.

Text-types and Recensions

To sum up what has been said on the results of genealogical evidence proper, as affecting the text of the New Testament, we regard the following propositions as absolutely certain. (I) The great ancient texts did actually exist as we have described them in Sections II and III. . . . (III) The extant documents contain no readings (unless the peculiar Western non-interpolations noticed above are counted as exceptions), which suggest the existence of important textual events unknown to us, a knowledge of which could materially alter the interpretation of evidence as determined by the above history.⁴

The “great ancient texts” are the four named above. Although Hort's “Neutral” and “Alexandrian” are now generally lumped together and called “Alexandrian”, and Hort's “Syrian” is now usually named “Byzantine”, and the literature refers to an added text-type, “Caesarean”, the notion of at least three major text-types or recensions dominates the field to this day. Here is another basic tenet of Hort's theory.

Having, ostensibly, justified the handling of the mass of later manuscripts as one witness or text, Hort now moved to demonstrate that this supposed text was an inferior, even inconsequential, witness. The first proof put forward was “conflation”.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282. In this chapter I am merely presenting Hort's theory in his own words. The next chapter gives my detailed evaluation of each aspect of his theory.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³ Colwell, “Genealogical Method”, p. 111.

⁴ Westcott and Hort, pp. 178-9. Note that Hort made use of only a small fraction of the manuscripts extant in his day. Cf. K. Aland, “The Significance of the Papyri”, pp. 327-28. A check of W-H's “Notes on Select Readings” in volume 2 of their *The New Testament in the Original Greek* suggests that Aland is probably generous.

Conflation

Once manuscripts are assigned to different text-types on the basis of characteristic variants shared in common, almost any early manuscript that one chances to pick up is observed to exhibit variants thought to be diagnostic or characteristic of alien text-types. Such a situation has been called 'mixture'. 'Conflation' is a special kind of mixture. In Hort's words,

The clearest evidence for tracing the antecedent factors of mixture in texts is afforded by readings which are themselves mixed or, as they are sometimes called, 'conflate,' that is, not simple substitutions of the reading of one document for that of another, but combinations of the readings of both documents into a composite whole, sometimes by mere addition with or without a conjunction, sometimes with more or less of fusion.¹

Hort urged the conclusion that a text containing conflate readings must be posterior in date to the texts containing the various components from which the conflations were constructed.² Then he produced eight examples³ where, by his interpretation, the "Syrian" (Byzantine) text had combined "Neutral" and "Western" elements. He went on to say:

To the best of our belief the relations thus provisionally traced are never inverted. We do not know of any places where the α group of documents supports readings apparently conflate from the readings of the β and δ groups respectively, or where the β group of documents supports readings apparently conflate from the readings of the α and δ groups respectively.⁴

It was essential to Hort's purpose of demonstrating the "Syrian" text to be posterior that he not find any inversion of the relationships between the three "texts". (An "inversion" would be either the "Neutral" or the "Western" text containing a conflation from the other plus the "Syrian".) So he claimed that inversions do not exist.⁵

Hort's statement and interpretation have been generally accepted.⁶ Vincent Taylor calls the argument "very cogent indeed".⁷ Kirsopp Lake calls it "the keystone of their theory".⁸ Here is another tenet crucial to Hort's theory and purpose. For a second and independent proof of the posteriority of the "Syrian" text he turned to the ante-Nicene Fathers.

"Syrian" Readings Before Chrysostom

After a lengthy discussion, Hort concluded:

Before the middle of the third century, at the very earliest, we have no historical signs of the existence of readings, conflate or other, that are marked as distinctively Syrian by the want of attestation from groups of documents which have preserved the other ancient forms of text. This is a fact of great significance, ascertained as it is exclusively by external evidence, and therefore supplying an absolutely independent verification and extension of the result already obtained by comparison of the internal character of readings as classified by conflation.⁹

¹ Westcott and Hort, p. 49.

² *Ibid.*, p. 106. This seems obvious enough, since the materials used to manufacture something must of necessity exist before the resulting product. A clear putative example occurs in Luke 24:53. The "Western" text has "praising God", the "Neutral" text has "blessing God" and the "Syrian" text has "praising and blessing God". According to Hort's hypothesis the longest reading was constructed out of the two shorter ones. Note that the use of the word 'conflation' embodies the rejection of the possibility that the longer reading is original and that the shorter ones are independent simplifications of that original longer reading.

³ Mark 6:33; 8:26; 9:38; 9:49; Luke 9:10; 11:54; 12:18; 24:53.

⁴ Westcott and Hort, p. 106. By " α group" Hort means his "Neutral" text, by " β group" he means his "Western" text, and by " δ group" he means his "Syrian" text.

⁵ In Appendix D the reader will find a refutation of this claim. (Hort himself knew that they do exist.)

⁶ Cf. Kenyon, p. 302; E.F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 73; and Metzger, *The Text*, pp. 135-36.

⁷ Taylor, p. 53.

⁸ Lake, p. 68.

⁹ Westcott and Hort, p. 115.

Elsewhere he considered that Chrysostom (who died in 407) was the first Father to characteristically use the "Syrian" text.¹

The importance of this argument to Hort's theory has been recognized by Kenyon.

Hort's contention, which was the corner-stone of his theory, was that readings characteristic of the Received Text are never found in the quotations of Christian writers prior to about A.D. 350. Before that date we find characteristically "Neutral" and "Western" readings, but never "Syrian". This argument is in fact decisive; . . .²

Lake, also, considered it to be decisive.³ (But to have any chance of being 'decisive' it would have to be true.)

Hort's purpose would appear to have been achieved, but for good measure he advanced a third argument against the "Syrian" text, one based on internal evidence.

Internal Evidence of Readings

Such 'evidence' is based on two kinds of probability, intrinsic and transcriptional. Intrinsic probability is author oriented—what reading makes the best sense, best fits the context, and conforms to the author's style and purpose? Transcriptional probability is scribe or copyist oriented—what reading can be attributed to carelessness or officiousness on the part of the copyist? Aside from inadvertent mistakes, presumed deliberate changes have given rise to two important canons of criticism—*brevior lectio potior*, the shorter reading is to be preferred (on the assumed propensity of scribes to add material to the text), and *proclivi lectioni praestat ardua*, the harder reading is to be preferred (on the assumed propensity of scribes to attempt to simplify the text when confronted with a supposed difficulty).

On the basis of such considerations, Hort declared the "Syrian" text to be characterized by "lucidity and completeness", "apparent simplicity", "harmonistic assimilation", and as being "conspicuously a full text".⁴ He said further:

In themselves Syrian readings hardly ever offend at first. With rare exceptions they run smoothly and easily in form, and yield at once to even a careless reader a passable sense, free from surprises and seemingly transparent. But when distinctively Syrian readings are minutely compared one after the other with the rival variants, their claim to be regarded as the original readings is found gradually to diminish, and at last to disappear.⁵

Hort's characterization of the "Syrian" text has been generally accepted by subsequent scholars.⁶

Even after demonstrating, so he thought, the "Syrian" text to be eclectic and late, Hort had a major obstacle to hurdle. He had to explain how this "text" came into being, and above all how it came to dominate the field from the fifth century on. An organized revision of the text, executed and imposed upon the churches by ecclesiastical authority, was his solution to the problem.

The "Lucianic Recension" and the Peshitta

"The Syrian text", Hort said, "must in fact be the result of a 'recension' in the proper sense of the word, a work of attempted criticism, performed deliberately by editors and not merely by scribes."⁷

An authoritative Revision at Antioch . . . was itself subjected to a second authoritative Revision carrying out more completely the purposes of the first. At what date between A.D.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

² F.G. Kenyon, *Recent Developments in the Textual Criticism of the Greek Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 7-8.

³ Lake, p. 72.

⁴ Westcott and Hort, pp. 134-35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

⁶ See, for example, Kenyon, *Recent Developments*, p. 66, Metzger, *The Text*, p. 131, and Greenlee, p. 91.

⁷ Westcott and Hort, p. 133.

250 and 350 the first process took place, it is impossible to say with confidence. The final process was apparently completed by A.D. 350 or thereabouts.¹

Hort tentatively suggested Lucian (who died in 311) as perhaps the leader in the movement and some scholars subsequently became dogmatic on the subject.

The matter of the Syriac Peshitta version is often treated in connection with the "Lucianic recension" of the Greek because of a supposed connection between them. Because the Peshitta does witness to the "Byzantine" text Hort had to get it out of the second and third centuries. Accordingly, he posited a late recension to account for it. F.C. Burkitt went further than Hort and specified Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa from A.D. 411-435, as the author of the revision.²

Both ideas have had a wide acceptance. H.C. Thiessen's statement is typical, both in content and dogmatism.

This [Peshitta] was formerly regarded as the oldest of the Syrian versions; but Burkitt has shown that it is in reality a revision of the Old Syriac made by Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa, about the year 425. This view is now held by nearly all Syriac scholars. . . . The text of the Peshitta is now identified as the Byzantine text, which almost certainly goes back to the revision made by Lucian of Antioch about A.D. 300.³

Summary and Consequences

And there you have the essence of the W-H critical theory. I have read every word of Hort's "Introduction", all 324 difficult pages of it [I had to read some pages two or three times to be more or less sure that I had understood it], and I believe the description offered above is a reasonable one. Suffice it to say that Hort achieved his purpose, even if it took him twenty-eight years. Although such men as Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Alford had done much to undermine the position of the TR (*Textus Receptus*), Westcott and Hort are generally credited with having furnished the death blow, beginning a new era. Many scholars have written to this effect,⁴ but Colwell expresses it as well as anyone.

The dead hand of Fenton John Anthony Hort lies heavy upon us. In the early years of this century Kirsopp Lake described Hort's work as a failure, though a glorious one. But Hort did **not** fail to reach his major goal. He dethroned the *Textus Receptus*. After Hort, the late medieval Greek Vulgate was not used by serious students, and the text supported by earlier witnesses became the standard text. This was a sensational achievement, an impressive success. Hort's success in this task and the cogency of his tightly reasoned theory shaped—and still shapes—the thinking of those who approach the textual criticism of the NT through the English language.⁵

And that explains the nature and extent of the common divergence of the modern versions from the AV (King James Version)—they are all based essentially on the W-H theory and text whereas the AV is essentially based on the *Textus Receptus*.

But the question remains: Has the apparent potential for improving the text (arising from increased materials and 'wisdom') been realized? Did the translators of the RSV, for instance, make better use of the manuscripts and employ superior principles of textual criticism than did the translators of the AV? Well, the principles they used led them to adopt the W-H text with very little variation, and that text is based essentially on just two manuscripts, Codices B and Aleph.⁶

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

² F.C. Burkitt, *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), II, 161.

³ H.C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), pp. 54-55.

⁴ Cf. Clark, "Today's Problems", pp. 158-60, M.M. Parvis, "Text, NT.", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 Vols.; New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), IV, 602, and D.W. Riddle, "Fifty Years of New Testament Scholarship", *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, X (1942), 139.

⁵ Colwell, "Scribal Habits", p. 370.

⁶ Cf. Colwell, "External Evidence and New Testament Criticism", *Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament*, eds. B.L. Daniels and M.J. Suggs (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1967), p. 3; Colwell, "Hort Redivivus", p. 162; Clark, "Today's Problems", pp. 159-60; Epp, p. 390.

Hort declared: "It is our belief (1) that the readings of ⋈ B should be accepted as the true readings until strong internal evidence is found to the contrary, and (2) that no readings of ⋈ B can safely be rejected absolutely. . . ."1

Again, Hort said of B and Aleph, "The fullest comparison does but increase the conviction that their preeminent relative purity is likewise approximately absolute, a true approximate reproduction of the text of the autographs."² One wonders whether the W-H theory and text would ever have seen the light of day had Codex B not been extant. Hort gave himself away while discussing genealogy.

In the Apocalypse the difficulty of recognizing the ancient texts is still greater, owing to the great relative paucity of documents, and especially the absence or loss of this book from the Vatican MS (B) which is available for nearly all the rest of the New Testament; and thus the power of using a directly genealogical method is much limited.³

The practical effect of the W-H theory was a complete rejection of the "Syrian" text and an almost exclusive preference for the "Neutral" text (equals B and Aleph). Subsequent scholarship has generally rejected the notion of a "Neutral" text but sustained the rejection of the "Syrian" text.

Curiously, there seems to be a determination not to reconsider the status of the "Syrian" text even though each of the arguments Hort used in relegating it to oblivion has been challenged. Thus J.N. Birdsall, after referring to the work of Lake, Lagrange, Colwell and Streeter, as well as his own, declared: "It is evident that all presuppositions concerning the Byzantine text—or texts—except its inferiority to other types, must be doubted and investigated *de novo*".⁴ (But doesn't the supposed inferiority depend on those presuppositions?)

Recalling what has already been said above in the discussion of eclecticism, it seems evident that Clark was quite right when he said that "textual theory appears to have reached an impasse in our time".⁵

Since Hort's purpose was to get rid of the "Syrian" text and that is the one point of his theory that subsequent scholars have generally not questioned, perhaps it is time to ask whether that circumstance may not have something to do with the present confusion and impasse, and to wonder whether Hort was really right. I proceed to work through Hort's theory again, point by point, to inquire to what extent it corresponds to the evidence.

¹ Westcott and Hort, p. 225. Cf. pp. 212-13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 276. And, "B very far exceeds all other documents in neutrality of text", p. 171.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10.

⁴ J.N. Birdsall, "The Text of the Gospels in Photius", *Journal of Theological Studies*, VII (1956), p. 43. Some scholars seem even to reflect the emotion of the twenty-three-year-old Hort—not long ago Epp spoke of "the tyrannical *textus receptus*" (p. 386).

⁵ Clark, "The Effect of Recent Textual Criticism", p. 50.