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THE STUDY OF THE TEXT OF ACTS

Introduction

Since the beginning of systematic study of the New Testament text, the textual peculiarities of Acts have been the subject of controversy. In the book of Acts, to a greater extent than anywhere else in the New Testament, the so-called Western text gives a large number of variant readings, which amount to virtually an alternative version of the book. The text-critical problem is thus forced upon the reader of Acts so that, to a degree unique in the New Testament, decisions about the text affect conclusions about the work in all its aspects. It is a matter of some consequence for the study of Luke's work to decide whether Acts acquired its textual peculiarities at its origin, or in the course of its transmission. It is also of consequence for the study of Christian literature in an obscure period, the early second century, to discover in what circumstances the book of Acts was transmitted, and how it happened that, as Patristic evidence suggests, Acts already existed in two forms by the last quarter of the second century.

The course of controversy over the text of Acts may be divided into three periods. The first was that before 1939. In this period the nature and scope of the problem became clear, and the main hypotheses were formulated which attempted to give comprehensive explanations of the textual peculiarities of Acts as a whole. None of these theories, however, succeeded in establishing an undisputed consensus, and from the time of the Second World War there may be detected a turning away from such comprehensive hypotheses, a movement occasioned by dissatisfaction with these hypotheses' results. This change of emphasis marks the second period in the study of the text of Acts, the three decades 1945–75, which may be described as the period of eclecticism, although it is to be noted that this eclecticism was often rather half-hearted. In

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this period, text-critical work on Acts appeared to be moving towards consensus after the radical disagreements of the pre-war period. The foundation of this consensus was a tacit acceptance that the Western text was the result of the activity of second-century 'improvement' of the text, and could therefore in practice be disregarded when Luke's own work was being considered. But this tacit and widespread assumption of the post-war decades lacked a coherent justification: it arose out of a decision to set aside the questions which had been debated before the war, rather than from a genuine resolution of these problems. Since the mid 1970s, text-critical study of Acts has entered its third period. In this period the unresolved problems of the text of Acts have been examined afresh. There has been a renaissance in the text-critical study of Acts, and as a result of much recent work, the possibility has re-emerged that substantial Lucan material may exist in the Western readings of Acts. If this should prove to be so, then eclecticism cannot be enough, because it fails to deal with the central problem: what sort of work can Acts be, to exist in two versions, both of which bear some relationship to the author? It is a question which has never received a satisfactory answer.

The purpose of this chapter will be to trace the characteristic features of the three periods in the study of the text of Acts, and to analyse the reasons for the transitions between them. This review will enable the current issues in the textual criticism of Acts to be seen in perspective. It will then be possible to see what problems need to be addressed today in the attempt to resolve the enigma of the text of Acts.

The period before 1939: the classic theories

Early criticism

The existence of the two great bilingual manuscripts Codex Bezae (D) and Codex Laudianus (E) drew scholars' attention from the sixteenth century onwards to the problem of what was later to be called the Western text, in the New Testament generally, and in Acts specifically. The readings of D first entered a printed text in Stephanus' third edition of his New Testament (1550), in which D is designated β^r in the Preface, and cited as β in the text.¹ Laudianus, taken from Würzburg to Oxford in 1636, became widely known through its citation in Fell's edition of the New Testament (1675).

The problem of the text of Acts was therefore first posed when textual criticism of the New Testament was in its infancy. J. Leclerc suggested in 1686 that the textual peculiarities of Codex Bezae in Acts might indicate that Luke issued two editions of the work, one of which has given rise to the text of Bezae, and one to the usually accepted text. But having examined some Bezan variants, and noting that such readings occur elsewhere in Codex Bezae, Leclerc concluded that the Bezan text is more likely to be due to paraphrasing interpolations.² Leclerc's opinion was shared by his opponent, the astute critic Richard Simon.³ In what was probably the first monograph to give extensive attention to Codex D, A. Arnaud argued that the peculiarities of D were due to the activities of a sixth-century falsifier.⁴

The seventeenth-century critics had seen the problems of Bezae and Laudianus as little more than the peculiarities of particular manuscripts. The organisation of witnesses into groups, which was the work of Bengel, Wettstein, and Semler in the eighteenth century, made it clear that there was a recognisable 'Western' group of witnesses, and that the textual problem of Acts was more than merely the idiosyncrasy of two manuscripts. Eighteenth-century criticism, valuable though it was in laying the foundations of ordering of witnesses, left critics with the unhappy choice of 'Western' as an adjective to describe the group of witnesses of which Codex D is the principal. This text is scarcely 'Western' in a geographical sense, as has been widely recognised for some time. The term 'Western text' will be used here though, because it is a familiar legacy from the eighteenth century, even if it is inaccurate.

Eighteenth-century criticism also led to a dismissal of the Western tradition from consideration. It was generally regarded as a late and degenerate form. So, although the text of D was published for the first time by Kipling in 1793, and the peculiarities of the Harclean Syriac became evident through White's edition of 1799, critics of the early nineteenth century took on the whole little notice either of D in particular, or of the Western text in general. A notable exception was F. A. Bornemann, who in 1848 proposed the theses that either the text of Acts had been interpolated from a travel narrative kept by Luke and preserved separately from the book of Acts, or the Western text was original, and the non-Western a later abbreviation. Both theses were to reappear in later work on the text of Acts.⁵ But the emerging German criticism showed little interest at this stage in the problems of the Western text.⁶

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The classic theories

The refinement of textual criticism in the mid to late nineteenth century brought a renewed interest in the particular problems of the text of Acts, and the half-century before 1939 was the most fertile period in the study of Acts' text. Scrivener's edition of Codex Bezae (1864) had given critics a new tool for the study of D, more accessible, more accurate, and more critical than Kipling's edition.⁷ At the same time, new studies of versional evidence were beginning to reveal the true extent of the Western textual tradition.

Interest in the text of Acts stemmed from two sources. On the one hand, it was widely recognised that the text itself required examination and explanation. From this perception of the problem, as one relating specifically to the book of Acts (and perhaps also to the Gospel of Luke), arose the work of Blass and A. C. Clark. For them, the problem was a Lucan one. On the other hand there were those critics who approached the text of Acts as a part of the more general problem of the Western text in the New Testament as a whole. For these critics, the text of Acts was one battlefield in the more general war provoked by the work of Westcott and Hort. Among those whose interest in Acts was of this sort, as well as Westcott and Hort themselves, were Rendel Harris and J. H. Ropes.

Westcott and Hort

Westcott and Hort ascribed the Western text of the New Testament as a whole to the free handling of the text by scribes in the process of copying.⁸ They saw no reason to distinguish between the Western text in Acts and that elsewhere in the New Testament. In Acts, as elsewhere, the desire to smooth, to clarify, and to embellish the work has led scribes to alter passages, and even to insert new material. The differences between the Western text in Acts and that in other New Testament books could be accounted for, they suggested, by the continued circulation of stories about the apostolic era until well into the second century. From such sources as these, material was added to the text of Acts.⁹ There was thus no unity in the Western text of Acts, since it was made up of a collection of readings which had accumulated over time, and as the result of the activity of various hands.

Blass

Blass approached the text of Acts as essentially a Lucan problem. Blass's thesis was first expressed in a study published in 1894¹⁰ and was further developed in the following year by the publication of an edition of Acts according to the principles of his thesis.¹¹ Blass took issue with Westcott and Hort at two points: the 'Lucanism' of the Western variants, and the relative order in which the two texts were written. Blass proposed that such additional material as that found in 1.5, 14.2, or 21.16, could only have been added by someone with an intimate knowledge of the events themselves.¹² When it is also noted that the vocabulary of the Western variants remains faithful to that of Luke, then it is to be concluded, Blass maintained, that the material peculiar to the Western text was written by the author of Acts.¹³

Westcott and Hort had regarded the Western text as paraphrase and expansion. Blass, on the other hand, argued that the non-Western text was in fact secondary to the Western, since no one in possession of the polished and concise non-Western text would wish to rewrite it as the rough and verbose Western text.¹⁴ Blass proposed that the two text-forms be regarded as a polished and an unpolished form of the work, both of which may be attributed to the author. His explanation for this phenomenon was that the Western text represents the author's first draft, and the non-Western the finished state of the work.¹⁵ Blass cited the example of Catullus, who mentions the custom of writing first drafts on a palimpsest, and a fair copy on better materials.¹⁶

Blass's hypothesis remained a serious point of contention for some years. His case convinced a number of New Testament scholars, most notably T. Zahn and E. Nestle.¹⁷ Blass's critics, however, were numerous. They questioned his assumptions about the relative priority of the texts. They argued that he had over-valued the literary tastes of second-century copyists, and that their reasons for producing the paraphrases of the Western text were quite clear. Critics also drew attention to passages in which there appeared to be a distance in point of view between the Western and non-Western texts: the Apostolic Decree (15.20,29,21.25) was a notable instance. They maintained that it was hard to see how the same author could be responsible for these alternative accounts. Several studies of the text of Acts appeared in the decade after the

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publication of Blass's edition which criticised his work in this manner.¹⁸

Ropes

The most effective answer to Blass, however, was the publication in 1926 of Ropes's study of the text of Acts.¹⁹ Ropes's work was conceived as part of a thorough investigation of the book of Acts in all its aspects. It was so solidly done, that it has provided the basis for most subsequent work in the field.

Ropes reached two conclusions about the Western text of Acts: in the first place, it was the result of a specific revision, and not merely of accumulated additions, as Westcott and Hort had thought; and in the second, this revision was the work of a later reviser than the author of Acts. Ropes's first conclusion rested on two observations:

In the first place it [the Western text] has an unmistakably homogeneous internal character. Secondly, its hundreds or thousands of variants are now known to have arisen in a brief period, scarcely, if at all, longer than the fifty years after the book first passed into circulation. In that period a pedigree of successive copies was short and to produce so many variants the mere natural licence of copyists would be insufficient. And since one rewriting would suffice, any theory that more than one took place in those years would seem to fall under the condemnation of Occam's razor.²⁰

That the Western text of Acts was not written by the author of Acts himself is apparent, Ropes argued, from the nature of the Western readings themselves:

The 'Western' fulness of words, the elaboration of religious expressions, such as the names for Christ and the *plus* of conventional religious phrases, the fact that the difference in language and mode of narration can often be explained as due to superficial difficulties in the other text, occasional misunderstanding, as would appear, or at least neglect, of the meaning of the other text (for instance Acts xx. 3–5), the relative colourlessness and a certain empty naiveté of the 'Western', all contrast unfavourably with the greater conciseness, sententiousness, and vigour, and occa-

sionally the obscurity, of the Old Uncial text. And even more decisive is the fact that in all the excess of matter which the 'Western' text shows, virtually nothing is to be found beyond what could be inferred from the Old Uncial text.²¹

The Western reviser had, according to Ropes, a few recognisable interests, for example, a concern with Gentiles, but taken as a whole, his was no tendentious revision.²² What is more, in spite of the fact that the Western text is essentially a revised text, there are places at which the Western witnesses have preserved readings drawn from the ancient textual base on which they rest, and which have perished from the alternative text, the Old Uncial, as Ropes named it. Ropes notes three readings in this category: καὶ μείναντες ἐν Τρωγυλία (20.15), καὶ Μύρα (21.1), and δι' ἡμερῶν δεκάπεντε (27.5). He noted that 'there may be others', and in fact there are several places at which his textual notes indicate a preference for the Western readings.²³ The omissions of the Western text are of particular importance, he argued, because of the reviser's tendency to expand. When there are Western 'omissions' in Acts, these deserve careful scrutiny, because they may well prove to be 'Western non-interpolations', and therefore genuine readings.²⁴ After examining other aspects of the text, Ropes drew his conclusion as to its origin:

Our conclusion, then, is that the 'Western' text was made before, and perhaps long before, the year 150, by a Greek-speaking Christian who knew something of Hebrew, in the East, perhaps in Syria or Palestine. The introduction of 'we' in the 'Western' text of xi.27 possibly gives some colour to the guess that the place was Antioch.²⁵

Ropes's work was taken further by G. Zuntz, in a study written in 1939 but published only in 1972, which for this reason did not attract the attention it deserved.²⁶ Zuntz accepted Ropes's case in all essentials, but added more precision in two respects. He took up the distinction within the Western text to which Ropes had alluded, between 'an ancient base, which would be of the greatest possible value if it could be recovered, and the paraphrastic rewriting of a second-century Christian'.²⁷ Zuntz detected two groups of Western readings, of quite contrary character: readings marked by 'brevity,

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harshness, omissions' on the one hand, and those marked by 'laxity, alleviations, additions' on the other.²⁸ These two tendencies point to the conclusion that two elements have given the Western text its present character, its sporadic faithfulness to the original text (shorter readings), and its habitual paraphrasing (longer readings). Both p⁴⁵ and Clement of Alexandria, Zuntz argued, are witnesses to the ancient, and shorter Western text.²⁹

Zuntz was also more specific than Ropes had been about the place of origin of the Western text in its revised form. Ropes tentatively suggested Antioch (see n. 25 above). Zuntz believed that Edessa was more likely, because some Western readings showed evidence of adaptation for lectionary reading, according to the lections identified by Burkitt as in use at Edessa,³⁰ and because (reviving a thesis of F. H. Chase) some Western readings appear to have been translated into Greek from Syriac.³¹

Ropes was perhaps wise not to have been drawn to quite such precise conclusions as Zuntz. Zuntz, though, added some important observations to Ropes's thesis. One was to underline the distinction between the Western text's base and its later developments. This distinction was to play a major part, in a different form, in the work of Boismard and Lamouille (see pp. 30–2 below).

Another important observation was to supplement Ropes's denial of tendentious purpose behind the Western text by noting that while not reflecting the theological controversies of the second century,³² the Western text manifests a concern to make the book of Acts relevant to its readers. Zuntz called one of the Western text's major techniques 'paradigmatic expansions' – that is, the transforming of narrative from historical scenes into models of church life at a particular point. The inclusion of a catechetical formula in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of this.³³ In this, Zuntz was anticipating the much later comments of C. K. Barrett (see p. 26 below).

Lake and Cadbury

The fourth volume of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, of which Ropes's *Text of Acts* was the third, was the *Commentary* by Kirsopp Lake and H. J. Cadbury.³⁴ Lake combined two sources of interest in the Western text of Acts: a concern with the text of the New Testament generally, and an interest in the book of Acts itself. In consequence, we are probably justified in regarding the bulk of the

textual discussions in the book as being the work of Lake.³⁵ Lake's comments on the text are often an instructive supplement to the work of Ropes. Lake agreed with Ropes about the history of the text in general terms, but was in practice more willing to allow that the Western text has preserved readings from its ancient textual base, when the non-Western text may be corrupt.³⁶ This meant that in many instances Lake was willing to allow that the Western reading was original,³⁷ although he also thought that certainty was often unattainable.³⁸ Lake's discussions of variants therefore owed little to his professed convictions about the origin of the Western text as a whole, and proceeded instead in an eclectic manner, on the basis of the internal characteristics of the readings.

Clark

A more fundamental reappraisal of Ropes's conclusions was attempted seven years after the appearance of Ropes's study by A. C. Clark's *The Acts of the Apostles*.³⁹ In this book Clark extended observations which he had already made about the abbreviating habits of ancient copyists, and which had arisen from study of the manuscript tradition of classical authors as well as of biblical texts.⁴⁰ In his earlier work, Clark had argued that the Gospels were transmitted in manuscripts having very short lines, of only ten to twelve characters each, and that virtually all of our existing manuscripts have suffered from omission of single lines or numbers of lines.⁴¹ In the case of Acts, though, the work had been written in sense-lines, much as Codex Bezae now is, and the shorter text, although it was produced by the accidental omission of lines, was more coherent than the shorter text of the Gospels because the omission of a line which was a self-contained unit did not leave such an evident gap as the omission of a line whose content was wholly arbitrary.⁴²

Ropes noted this early work of Clark, and argued that it did not account for 'the facts . . . which show a rational, not merely an accidental difference between the two types of text'.⁴³ In his major work on Acts, Clark was able to take account of Ropes's criticisms. In consequence he modified his thesis, and argued that in Acts the omissions in the non-Western text were deliberate. They represent the work of an Alexandrian abbreviator, who eliminated short passages throughout the work, inspired by various motives.⁴⁴ Clark's argument thus led to the conclusion that the Western text

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(which he designated Z) is original, while the non-Western (which he designated Γ = Graeci) is not, because it was the result of a deliberate process of abbreviation, for which there are parallels in other manuscript traditions.

The decline of the 'Western Problem'

In the years before the Second World War, Clark's view won some sympathisers, notable among them B. H. Streeter.⁴⁵ However, Ropes's analysis of the textual history of Acts prevailed, not only over Clark, but also over Blass, and to a certain extent, over that of Westcott and Hort also. Two reasons may be seen for this dominance of Ropes's thesis.

Those whose interest in the text of Acts arose from concern with the book of Acts itself could conclude that the monumental *Beginnings of Christianity* had in effect disposed of the textual problem, and that Acts-research could now proceed on a more secure base to more fruitful areas of enquiry. So, when Acts became in the post-war years 'one of the great storm-centres of New Testament scholarship',⁴⁶ the textual problem came to be regarded as a peripheral issue, in a way in which it had not been regarded by scholars of a previous generation.

The other reason for the dominance of Ropes's thesis was that interest in the Western text generally was waning in the inter-war years. During the 1920s and 1930s there existed, indeed, an international fraternity of scholars, the 'Bezan Club', concerned with the problems of the Western text, and publishing material in the form of an occasional *Bulletin*.⁴⁷ It was significant, though, that the driving force behind the group was the ageing Rendel Harris, one of the scholars who had kept open the issue of the Western text's value in the years after the publication of Westcott and Hort's edition.⁴⁸ The series of the *Bulletin of the Bezan Club* came to an end in 1937. From its pages, and from the editorial comments in particular, one may gather that its collapse was due chiefly to a lack of interest in the issues which it set itself to address. By the 1930s it was generally judged that textual criticism had established a secure working basis for New Testament scholarship. Minor difficulties might remain in places, but the majority of scholars were content to believe that in the fifty years since the appearance of Westcott and Hort's edition, the work of textual criticism had in large part been done. The Western text of Acts, like the Western text elsewhere in