CHAPTER 1

The theory

To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune, but to write and read comes by nature.

William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Textual criticism is in essence the act of understanding what another person means by the words that are laid before me. When I sit at the meal table with my family I can observe, throughout the talk, that what is said contains broken sentences, one word spoken where another is intended, gaps and false starts. Occasionally a little enquiry is needed to sort out a particular statement, and sometimes confusion will provoke hilarity or fierce argument. But generally we meet what is intended in what is said and are unaware of the process by which we receive the words. Whether the words are spoken or written is of secondary importance. But we speak of the process as textual criticism when the words are laid before us in written form.

Everybody who reads the newspaper is expert in textual criticism, in coping with those distctive errors of omssion and displaced lines, and jumbling of letrset. This sophisticated process of recognizing nonsense and picking up the sense is so natural to us the classical scholars of ancient Alexandria or the Benedictines of that we perform it without thinking, unaware of our kinship with St Maur. Textual criticism is not an arcane science. It belongs to all human communication.

The matter will become a little more complicated when we apply our critical faculties to another language than our own, in a form spoken two millennia since.

The undertaking changes again when – the nub of the matter – the text concerned is preserved in a number of handwritten copies which differ from one another. Instead of our single printed newspaper with its distinctive types of error, we are now reading half a dozen handwritten copies of the sports page, each with its own variations on events. We will decide which we believe by looking for more information in the context, by asking ourselves which of the papers is more likely to have jumbled the figures, and by speculating on the probability: what we know of the teams, who was playing for them, and so on. The process is the same as the one I described in the first paragraph, except that it is made more complicated by the language, by the distance in time, and by the number of differing copies.

These are the processes which are at work as we compare the five and a half thousand catalogued manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. There is plenty of accidental error to be found among so many. And there is a large additional factor, which will occupy most of our time: the incidence of conscious alteration to the text, whose causes have to be understood.

Textual criticism of the New Testament has been damaged by the notion that it is best left in the hands of experts. This view is no doubt a part of a general division of knowledge into compartments. Certainly, this particular branch of knowledge is frequently treated as so recherché as to be beyond the comprehension of all but a very few people, devotees who bring rare gifts to a secret god. It is clear that there is a certain amount of knowledge necessary to practise this discipline. But harm has been done by the assumption that the discipline itself is off limits for anyone who has not devoted their life to it. That it has been unfortunate for the discipline is not my concern here. The greater harm lies in the attitude to the text which it has engendered. This attitude manifests itself in two beliefs. The first is that the text chosen by the editors of the main current Greek New Testament is virtually certain, and that all variations from it, even those which the edition places at the foot of the page as significant variants, may be ignored. We shall shortly find that such optimism is not shared by the editors of that edition, who are best placed to know the doubts and uncertainties which attended their decisions. There are certainly other reasons for this assumption that the text is reliable and that no more needs to be said.

One reason is the success, or perhaps one should say the confidence, of textual critics themselves. The edition of the Greek New Testament published in 1881 by Westcott and Hort is titled *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. Nobody does believe or has believed that this is literally true, except in that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. But such a phrase will make its mark. The discovery since 1881 of copies much older than those available to Westcott and Hort may have led to the belief that scholarship has subsequently approached even closer to the original text. Other writers will emphasise the degree of reliability of the text in all but a few places.

We have, however, to distinguish at any rate between the desirable and the attainable. Caution rightly prevails in the Introduction to the most commonly used edition of the Greek New Testament, the small blue volume known as Nestle–Aland:

> *Novum Testamentum Graece* seeks to provide the reader with a critical appreciation of the whole textual tradition . . . It should naturally be understood that this text is a working text (in the sense of the century-long Nestle tradition); it is not to be considered as definitive, but as a stimulus to further efforts towards redefining and verifying the text of the New Testament.[1]

This text was agreed by a committee. When they disagreed on the best reading to print, they voted. Evidently, they agreed either by a majority or unanimously that their text was the best available. But it does not follow that they believed their text to be 'original'. On the whole, textual critics have always been reluctant to claim so much. Other users of the Greek New Testament accord them too much honour in treating the text as definitive.

The second belief is one that is more deeply held. To challenge it is to offer a vital theological question. This belief is that the purpose of textual criticism is to recover the original text. That this was for long their goal was also expressed by textual critics themselves. It is

[1] *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. K. Aland and B. Aland, 27th edn (Stuttgart, 1993), p. 45*.

expressed in the very beginning of one classic manual of the discipline:

> The object of all textual criticism is to recover so far as possible the actual words written by the author.[2]

But, precisely because it has been taken as axiomatic, the idea that there is an original text to be recovered is one that we must examine with the utmost care. The issue is not one which concerns only the New Testament, so we shall approach it more broadly.

We are used to the idea that to read a book is to read the text as the author wrote it. The reality is more complicated. Of course, there are occasions when there may have been more than one edition. But – and this is to be stressed – there are also texts which *cannot* exist in an 'original' form. Two examples will help.

Many of Shakespeare's plays exist in several early printings; a Quarto (in which they are printed separately) and the First Folio, the first collected works. A few of them survive in two quarto printings. The often significant differences between these used to be measured for purposes of recovering the original definitive text of the play, and generally the older printing was called 'bad' or 'corrupt' and the later one 'good'. But recently a quite different way of interpreting the evidence has been proposed, that the two printings represent stages in the growth of the play. Shakespeare produces the first draft of a play, a written text. This is later printed. He then takes his play down to the Globe, and it goes into rehearsal. Some things don't work, and he cuts them; suggestions are made by the cast, and he develops them. The form of the play that is finally put on may be markedly different from the original draft. This later comes out as another printing. What is the original text? The question obscures the truth, and we need instead to find a new way of thinking about the different printed texts and the process which they represent. There is no *original* text. There are just different texts from different stages of production. One modern editor has solved the particularly acute problems of the text of *King Lear* by printing it twice as two separate plays, *The Tragedy of King*

[2] Kirsopp Lake, *The Text of the New Testament* (London, 1913), p. 1.

Lear and *The History of King Lear*.[3] The character of the materials justifies the editor's procedure:

> The hypothesis that we possess, in Q[uarto] and F[olio], Shakespeare's original version and Shakespeare's revision of *King Lear* necessitates a radical departure from traditional editorial practice; but traditional editorial practice itself represents a radical departure from the early texts.[4]

The second example is drawn from a very different kind of text, produced two centuries later. As Susanna and the Countess, Figaro and the Count sing their way through their day of madness to their final reconciliation, textual criticism is – or should be – far from our minds. But somebody has had to provide a text from which they could learn their parts, and recent research has revealed interesting information about the relationship between what Mozart wrote and what we hear. Manuscript sources include the autograph score, sketches, and what was probably the official copy of the court theatre in Vienna. The kind of traditional textual criticism that is applied also to the New Testament will seek to discover which manuscript is a copy of which. The expected conclusion will be that the autograph is the source of the others, and is to be followed unless there is good reason to mistrust it. Not so, for revisions made *in rehearsal* will have been written in the performance copies and the theatre's official copy, but not in the autograph. In rehearsal, Mozart had in some places to exchange the vocal lines of Susanna and the Countess, in order to accommodate the singers' voices. We might reverse this change in favour of the autograph in order to realise Mozart's original intentions. But there are also many smaller changes to the two soprano parts, also probably made by Mozart in rehearsal because he felt that they

[3] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, general editors Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986). For the editors' approach to the textual criticism, see especially pp. xxxiii–xxxv. 'It is not simply that the 1608 quarto lacks over 100 lines that are in the Folio, or that the Folio lacks close on 100 lines that are in the Quarto, or . . . It is rather that the sum total of these differences amounts, in this play, to a substantial shift in the presentation and interpretation of the underlying action . . . We believe, in short, that there are two distinct plays of *King Lear*, not merely two different texts of the same play.' It is significant that although the theory adopted by Wells was first broached in 1931, it has gained currency only in the last twenty years.

[4] S. Wells and G. Taylor, with J. Jowett and W. Montgomery, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), p. 509.

improved the music. We would therefore end up with a hybrid text, one that existed neither in Mozart's intentions nor in the manuscript authorities. The quest for an original text is, again, unhelpful.[5]

In both these examples, the task of textual criticism and the role of the textual critic have changed. Instead of eliminating material in order to recover a single original text, the editor analyses all the developments of the material in order to demonstrate the processes to which they owe their origin. The textual critic's task has not become less important because there is no definitive text to be recovered. There is a sense in which an editor's continuing importance has increased. For when it is assumed that there *is* an original text, the textual critic's task is very simple: to recover the original text. The user then offers grateful thanks for the definitive product, and gets on with the interpretation, while the editor goes in search of another text to polish off. But if the task does not consist in the recovery of an original text, then the study of the entire range of materials available will not cease with the publication of an edition. That is, the reader of Shakespeare can now, and indeed should, read *both* forms of *King Lear*, rather than a single hybrid version.

Both these examples are, while not simple problems to resolve, based on comparatively limited materials. They consist essentially of the comparison of two forms of the text. Greater complexity arises where an author's process of revision lasted over many years, or resulted in a complicated process of development. Such is the case with Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. The problem here is to distinguish between the various stages of the text. And, frequently, we may prefer a line or a sentence which the author came to reject. *The Prelude* was first published in 1850 in its latest form. The earliest version of 1805 may be read with a different pleasure.[6]

Such quite different textual traditions and problems, and those contemporary interpretations of Shakespeare and Mozart, encour-

[5] For this example, see Alan Tyson, *Mozart: Studies of the Autograph Score* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1987).

[6] See also S. Gill, 'Wordsworth's Poems: The Question of the Text', *Review of English Studies* N.S. 34 (1983), 172–90.

age us to see that the quest for an original text need not be the only option available to the modern textual critic, or the only expectation of the modern reader. Returning to the Gospels armed with these possibilities, we ask this question: are the Gospels the kinds of texts that have originals? This book will attempt to provide ways of answering. For the moment we shall content ourselves with a more general point. Almost all writers on theological, ethical and historical issues have taken it for granted that the New Testament evidence on which they are drawing for support is the original text of the writers. The importance of scrutinising this assumption cannot be stressed too highly. It is a principal theme of this book. The discovery that the assumption is mistaken will have profound consequences for contemporary understandings of Scripture. We shall find that textual criticism of the Gospels not only is a preliminary to their study, but also provides a new way of interpreting them. It does not simply provide the service of recovering the text; it also provides ways of describing the text.

The need for that security which is provided by authority is an aspect of human life which we have to recognise if we are to understand the nature of the enquiry before us. I do not claim immunity from that need. But I hope to demonstrate that there are sound historical reasons why the original text of the Gospels does not satisfy it.

One final word to this chapter. The task of textual criticism consists of collecting evidence and evaluating it. Its contribution in gathering information about early Christian documents is beyond question. It is evidently important then to discern the appropriate question and to ask it of the data. But an answer can certainly not always be provided, nor where it can is it always of as much significance as the question. In the following pages, the fact that such questions arise will frequently prove as fruitful for reflection as whatever answers may be attempted.

But enough of theory. It must follow, not precede, the practice.

CHAPTER 2

The materials

Nothing beside remains. P. B. Shelley

The description of the materials in the handbooks of textual criticism follows a well-established pattern.[1] I shall first follow that, as concisely as possible in order to provide information that will be relevant to this book, and then attempt a different approach. Individual manuscripts will not be described here. They will be introduced as they appear in subsequent chapters.

I

The materials are generally divided into three categories: Greek manuscripts, translations into other tongues, and quotations by early Christian writers. And each may be further divided.

Greek manuscripts

All known manuscripts are itemised in a list that is accepted as standard by everyone. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster, Westphalia, assumed reponsibility for the List, and for forty years has earned our gratitude by improving and updating it. A revised edition was published in 1994.[2] It provides for each manuscript a number, its contents, date, the material on

[1] Besides the handbooks of Metzger and the Alands, attention should be drawn to the recent Festschrift honouring Professor Bruce Metzger: *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the* Status Quaestionis. *A Volume in Honor of Bruce M. Metzger*, ed. B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes, SD 46 (Grand Rapids, 1995). In addition to a section written by a specialist in the field on each of the areas outlined below, there are chapters on other important aspects of the discipline.

[2] Aland, *Liste*. The first edition had appeared in 1963.

which it is written, the number of leaves that survive, the number of columns on a page and the number of lines in a column, the dimensions, and the library where it is held with its classmark. The List separates manuscripts into four groups: papyri, majuscules, minuscules and lectionaries. Each manuscript's number tells us to which group it belongs. This system was formulated at the end of the last century by C. R. Gregory, and replaced a more cumbersome system which had separate lists for manuscripts according to contents. According to the older system, one might have one number given to four different manuscripts severally containing the Gospels, Pauline Epistles, Acts and the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation.

There are 2,388 listed manuscripts which include the Gospels.[3]

Papyri are indicated by a P, in either roman (P) or black-letter (𝔓) font, followed by a number written either normally or superscript. These are all manuscripts written on papyrus, a kind of reed. This, a common writing material of the ancient world, was manufactured by pressing cut strips of the papyrus plant into two layers at right angles to each other. There are ninety-five papyri in the List, forty-five of them containing Gospel material.[4] The latest are of the seventh century, the earliest of the second. Until their discovery in the course of excavations (mostly in Egypt) in the past century, no manuscript older than the second quarter of the fourth century was known. Now with the most extensive of the papyri we have large portions of copies of the Gospels dating from the late second century and the first part of the third. These are P^{45} (which contains parts of all the Gospels), P^{66} (most of John) and P^{75} (large parts of Luke and John). Their study has led to some extensive reconsideration of the ways in which the text was copied in the first four centuries.

Majuscules (more often called uncials[5]) take their name from the style of writing in which they are produced, a form that is the

[3] The figure of 2,361 is given in Alands, *Text*, p. 83 as correct in May 1988. I have revised it by adding manuscripts added to the List since then: one papyrus, six majuscules and twenty minuscules.

[4] There are in fact ninety-nine items listed, but two manuscripts are divided between two numbers, and one between three.

[5] The word 'uncial', which is of uncertain origin, is more properly applied to various Latin scripts in use at the same period.

source of modern Greek capital letters. Most of the papyri are also written in majuscule hands, but the manuscripts classed as majuscules are all written on parchment (animal skin). Their numbers are prefixed with a zero; thus 01, 02, 0234. The oldest of them are also denominated in two other ways. Before many were known, it was possible to assign to each an upper-case letter of the alphabet. When the total reached thirty-five (J is not present in the Latin alphabet, but some letters were used twice, such as E which is used for one manuscript of the Gospels and one of Acts), the upper-case letters unique to the Greek alphabet were used – Γ Δ Θ Λ Ξ Π Σ Φ Ψ Ω. When these had been exhausted, Tischendorf (the first western scholar to find and to study many of these manuscripts) began to use Hebrew letters. The system was becoming unworkable, and in the generation after Tischendorf, C. R. Gregory introduced the numbering system. But traces of the alphabetical system remain. All the first forty-five majuscules in the List are also known by a letter. The first has the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so it is given as א 01. The next thirty-four all have Latin letters, and the remainder have Greek.

The other convention is of naming important manuscripts. Most of those forty-five which have letters are also named, either from their provenance (such as Codex Sinaiticus or Codex Zacynthius), or by their present location (such as Codex Vaticanus or Codex Mosquensis), or by some other distinguishing epithet. A manuscript that has been reused (a palimpsest) is often called after the author of the text for whose writing it was reused (such as Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, or Codex Climaci Rescriptus, severally named after the Syrian writers Ephraem and John Climacus).

Turning the pages of the List one soon notes that while the first fifty or so majuscules are either complete or very extensive, the remainder down to the last entry, 0306, rarely consist of a dozen leaves and generally only of one or two. A few have, like the papyri, been found in excavation. More are the results of thorough searches through libraries. Others, the chance debris of ancient collections, have been recovered from bindings of later books or were used as palimpsests. The best of them provide us with valuable materials. A few of them are older than any of the extensive majuscules. There are 196 majuscule manuscripts con-