

Comfort, Philip Wesley. *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992. 200 pp. \$11.95.

*The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament* follows up on Comfort's earlier book concerning the impact of the earliest manuscripts on recent translations of the New Testament, a spin-off of his doctoral dissertation. The present book is a logical sequel examining the impact of the early manuscripts on the critical text of the New Testament.

Comfort's basic assertion is that modern textual criticism has moved too far in the direction of subjectivism and internal evidence in the making of text-critical decisions. He argues for a return to the principles of Westcott and Hort, giving priority to the external evidence of the best available manuscripts: the early papyri and uncial fragments where available, and B and Aleph for the rest of the NT.

Underlying Comfort's position are certain assumptions about the history of the text. He argues, first of all, that Christian scribes inherited the first-century Jewish concern for textual fidelity. The authoritative nature of NT writings would have earned them the same kind of respect accorded the LXX in Christian circles. Second, the universal presence of *nomina sacra* and the codex style indicates to him that strong controls were placed on textual transmission from the very beginning. Third, Comfort argues that the Alexandrian scriptorial heritage would have made it the prime city in all of Christendom to preserve and transmit the original text. Fourth, it is likely that the manuscripts of Egypt were typical of the text found throughout the entire Church over the first two centuries. Commerce and communication flourished in the world of the second century. The fact that second- and third-century fathers and manuscripts generally follow the "Alexandrian" form of the text is taken to support the assertion.

The pivotal event, according to Comfort, was the great persecution under Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. This was the first Roman persecution designed not only to destroy Christians but to eradicate their sacred text. Comfort suggests that Alexandria was hit first and hardest by the persecution. It is reasonable to assume, in that case, that faithful Christians of Alexandria fled from the persecution with copies of the sacred texts in their possession. They sought refuge in rural Egypt, in places like Oxyrhynchus, Panopolis, and the Fayum. Though the persecution followed them and many manuscripts were destroyed, some were preserved in the dry climate.

After the persecution, these manuscripts would have been used by the Alexandrians to create archetypes for fresh copies of the text. Among these fresh copies, no doubt, are the great uncials B and Aleph. The close affinity between the two great uncials and the most rigorously copied of the papyri

suggests the essential faithfulness of these early manuscripts to the original text.

Comfort further points out that, for most of the books of the NT, genuine manuscript trajectories are possible only for the Alexandrian text. The "D text" and the "western text" survive in only a few early examples and only for parts of the NT such as Luke-Acts. The Byzantine text exists not at all in the earliest period. Thus the Alexandrian text of the earliest manuscripts provides the best window onto the original text.

This unabashed call for a revival of Westcott and Hort is stimulating reading whether or not one buys into Comfort's thesis. Obviously, the ongoing debate is somewhat reminiscent of the chicken and egg controversy. Internal and external evidence for textual readings both support and challenge each other. Any solution to the problems of text criticism, therefore, inevitably comes up against the obstacle of contradictory evidence. Certitude in the face of contradictory evidence can only come by overplaying some evidence and ignoring some, a reality which Comfort cannot entirely escape.

The book is as readable as Metzger and quite up-to-date: it therefore offers an excellent overview of the text-critical field for beginning students as long as it is balanced with other sources like the Alands' book or Epp's chapter in the MacRae volume. In addition to the above discussions, Comfort offers a survey of the major papyri finds over the last hundred years, suggests manuscript "trajectories" for each book or group of books in the NT, offers specific suggestions for further amending the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland in light of the early papyri, and argues that two early papyri contain a 20-chapter first edition of the Fourth Gospel.

On the negative side, Comfort tends to make assertions, often without footnotes or evidence. He offers surprisingly early dates for a number of papyri without a great deal of supporting evidence. He is honest about certain evangelical assumptions that many readers will not hold. Nevertheless, the book is readable enough and stimulating enough to recommend it to anyone who is interested in the latest developments in the text-criticism of the New Testament.

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Dothan, Trude and Moshe Dothan. *People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992. 276 pp. Cloth, \$25.00.

*People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* by Trude and Moshe Dothan is a popular account of the pursuit to identify the Philistines and their material culture. Beyond this, it is the personal account of two Israeli