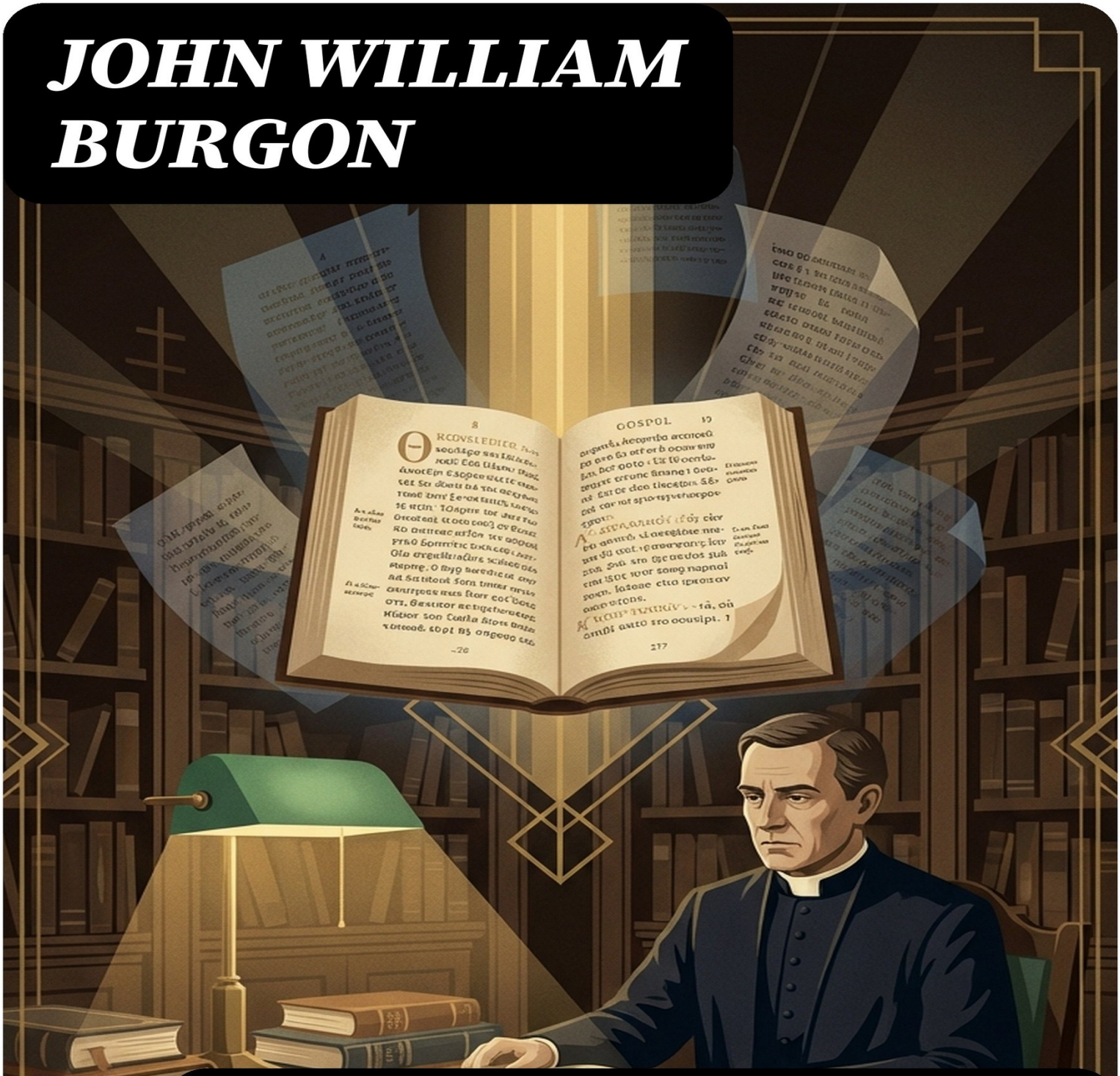
JOHN WILLIAM BURGON



THE CAUSES OF THE CORRUPTION OF THE TRADITIONAL TEXT OF THE HOLY GOSPELS

John William Burgon

The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels

Enriched edition. Being the Sequel to The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Oliver Hilton

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At the heart of this treatise lies a gripping tension between the reverent desire to safeguard a received sacred text and the unsettling recognition that centuries of human copying, correcting, and theorizing can unsettle what communities have long trusted, a tension that John William Burgon confronts by arguing that the traditional form of the Gospels, distilled through the broad stream of ecclesial usage, better preserves the Evangelists’ wording than the selectively reconstructed texts favored by modern critics, and that the many small ways a text can be altered—innocently or intentionally—must be understood before one can responsibly judge which readings deserve to stand.

This work belongs to the field of biblical textual criticism and emerges from the late nineteenth-century English ecclesiastical milieu, where questions about the Greek text of the New Testament were vigorously contested. Authored by John William Burgon and published posthumously, it was prepared for the press by his collaborator and literary executor, Edward Miller. Its appearance followed the release of the Revised Version of the English Bible and new critical editions of the Greek text, developments that reshaped scholarly and churchly discussion. Burgon writes into this atmosphere with a clear sense of pastoral responsibility and scholarly dissent, seeking to weigh methods as well as conclusions.

The book’s premise is at once simple and exacting: before preferring one reading over another, the reader must grasp

the recurring causes by which the text of the Gospels can be altered. Burgon catalogs such causes as scribal habits, harmonization between parallel passages, marginal glosses migrating into the text, liturgical influences, and slips of hearing or sight, among others. He argues that these forces, compounded over time, explain why some early witnesses display appealing but secondary forms. The reading experience is analytical and cumulative: examples pile up, categories are clarified, and the argument advances by patient exposition rather than by rhetorical flourish.

Although the prose bears the cadence of Victorian scholarship, the voice is unmistakably personal and insistent, confident that a wide, ancient consensus is a safer guide than narrow preference. Burgon fills his pages with references to manuscript families, early versions, and citations from Christian antiquity, drawing attention to the breadth and continuity of the textual tradition. He is polemical when critiquing fashions he regards as precarious, yet he remains methodical in presenting evidence. The tone combines pastoral concern for the integrity of Scripture with a craftsman’s attention to minute details, inviting readers to see how small variations can produce sweeping interpretive effects.

Among the book’s key themes are the authority of long-tested tradition, the fallibility of purely internal criteria, and the need to consider the whole textual inheritance rather than a select circle of prized witnesses. Burgon insists that transmission is a communal, historical process, and that judgments about authenticity should be bounded by the widest attainable evidence. He underscores how accidental and intentional alterations can echo doctrinal debates or liturgical convenience, reminding readers that piety alone does not purify a copyist’s pen. The result is a sustained call for methodological sobriety, urging critics and pastors alike

to prefer balance, breadth, and patient comparison over novelty.

Contemporary readers will find the book relevant not only to biblical studies but to broader questions about how communities preserve and evaluate texts. In an age of rapid reproduction and revision, Burgon’s emphasis on corroboration, transparency of method, and respect for the widest witness map onto habits of critical reading that remain indispensable. His arguments model how to interrogate assumptions, expose hidden preferences, and distinguish persuasive patterns from isolated curiosities. Even those who reach different conclusions can profit from his insistence that evidence be weighed in public and in full, and that editorial decisions be accountable to history, usage, and reasoned scrutiny.

Approached as a guide to recurring mechanisms of change rather than as a catalogue of winners and losers, this volume offers a disciplined education in reading the Gospels with historical alertness. Expect careful definitions, copious examples, and a firm, argumentative through-line that returns repeatedly to first principles. The pace is measured, the learning substantial, and the aim unmistakable: to show why the enduring, traditional form of the text deserves serious presumption. Read slowly, compare notes, and let the categories sharpen your own discernment; the reward is not merely a position taken, but an enlarged capacity to see how texts live and endure.

Synopsis

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The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels by John William Burgon is a posthumous treatise, edited from his papers by Edward Miller, that addresses why the Gospel text shows divergent readings. Writing amid vigorous nineteenth-century debates over New Testament text, Burgon sets out to explain how variations arose and to defend what he calls the Traditional Text against recent critical editions. He frames the book not as a catalogue of preferred readings but as an inquiry into mechanisms of change, contending that understanding the agents and habits that altered copies is prerequisite to judging which readings most closely reflect the evangelists' words.

Burgon's approach combines external testimony and internal probability, yet privileges breadth of attestation. He weighs the cumulative force of many manuscripts, ancient versions, and citations in early Christian writers, arguing that wide, consistent, and independent witness offers the safest guide. He challenges the elevation of a few early codices as decisive, cautioning that age alone does not ensure purity. Throughout, he illustrates how patristic evidence can anchor readings before surviving manuscripts, and how numerical preponderance across regions may indicate a stable tradition. This methodological preface sets the stage for a tour through concrete causes that, he contends, systematically eroded the text.

The first cluster of causes is accidental. Burgon surveys routine scribal slips that any extended copying enterprise invites: omissions caused by similar line endings or beginnings, repeated words or lines, transpositions of letters and clauses, and confusions of similar-sounding vowels and diphthongs. He notes how such lapses can shorten, rearrange, or slightly rephrase clauses without any doctrinal intent, yet cumulatively produce families of readings. He argues that even careful scribes were vulnerable to momentary distraction or to ambiguous exemplars, and that mechanical errors must be recognized and sifted before attributing changes to deliberate editorial hands.

Beyond inadvertence, he catalogs intentional tendencies that, in his view, shaped numerous readings. Scribes sometimes harmonized parallel passages, aligning wording among the Gospels to ease comparison or liturgical reading. Others smoothed grammar, clarified pronouns, or replaced rare words with familiar expressions. Doctrinal preferences could prompt softening of difficult phrases, though Burgon maintains that such alterations are often transparent upon comparison. He also traces the influence of ecclesiastical usage, where lectionary practices and liturgical headings encouraged predictable insertions or omissions at section boundaries. These patterns, he argues, create recognizable signatures that help distinguish secondary adjustments from ancestral text.

A further source of corruption arises, in his analysis, from the page itself. Marginal glosses, alternative renderings, and cross-references could drift into the main line of text, especially when cramped layouts obscured their status. Paratextual apparatus, section markers, or liturgical cues sometimes displaced words or elicited expansions. Burgon also notes the bidirectional pressures of translation: versional renderings can preserve ancient readings, yet

retroversion from Latin or Syriac into Greek may import foreign idiom. Across these channels, he urges discrimination between annotation and composition, warning that the growth of explanatory matter often masquerades as authorial content in later copies.

Setting his survey of causes against contemporary theory, Burgon challenges reconstructions that privilege a narrow set of early manuscripts and posit a late, manufactured Syrian text. He disputes claims that the Traditional Text is chiefly a conflation of earlier forms, countering with appeals to breadth of witness and to patristic citations he deems prior to the alleged recension. The book advances case studies to argue that distinctive readings of favored codices often reflect the very corruptive forces he catalogues. Rather than a single editorial overhaul, he envisions long, dispersed processes of alteration, to be corrected by comprehensive, historical comparison.

The volume concludes by returning to its central question: how to weigh evidence responsibly when the record is both abundant and uneven. Without announcing novelty for its own sake, it aims to model a mode of criticism that is wary of isolated authorities and attentive to ordinary channels of textual change. Its enduring resonance lies in the way it crystallizes a majority-text rationale and presses for fuller use of versions and patristic testimony. Regardless of one's verdict on its specific judgments, the book remains a touchstone for debates about method, reminding readers that causes must be mastered before conclusions can be trusted.

Historical Context

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John William Burgon (1813–1888) was an English Anglican divine, educated at Oxford and appointed Dean of Chichester in 1876. His scholarship unfolded in Victorian Britain, when universities, learned societies, and church synods vigorously debated the text of the New Testament. Burgon labored in libraries across Oxford and London, collating manuscripts, patristic quotations, and lectionaries. The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels, issued after his death, distills that work. It addresses how errors entered Gospel manuscripts, and why Burgon believed the church's received text deserved priority against newer critical reconstructions emerging from continental and Cambridge scholarship.

In the centuries before Burgon, the printed Greek New Testament had stabilized in forms collectively labeled the Textus Receptus. Originating with Erasmus's editions beginning in 1516, and refined by Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs, that text underlay the 1611 Authorized Version and shaped Protestant devotion, preaching, and doctrine. Its long ecclesiastical use, including in Anglican liturgy and catechesis, made it a benchmark for English-speaking Christians. Scholars also mined patristic citations and ancient versions, but parish life and public worship generally echoed the received wording. Burgon's frame of reference was this entrenched textual tradition, often called the Traditional or Byzantine text.

During the 19th century, textual criticism shifted toward privileging the earliest attainable witnesses. Karl Lachmann proposed breaking with the Textus Receptus, S. P. Tregelles advanced rigorous collation, and Constantin von Tischendorf published successive critical editions culminating in his eighth edition. Tischendorf’s discovery and publication of Codex Sinaiticus, together with renewed access to Codex Vaticanus, supplied very early, divergent readings. Paleographical dating and a genealogical approach led many scholars to prefer these Alexandrian witnesses. This movement, drawing on German philology and classical stemmatics, challenged the long-standing dominance of later majority manuscripts, proposing that antiquity and quality should trump mere numerical majority.

In Britain, these trends converged in two events in 1881. B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort issued The New Testament in the Original Greek, articulating a theory that the Byzantine text was secondary. The same year, the Church of England’s Revised Version New Testament appeared, produced by committees meeting in London and collaborating with an American Company. The RV often followed the Westcott-Hort text against the Textus Receptus, altering familiar verses and marginal notes. The changes stirred controversy among clergy and laity, with newspapers, reviews, and sermons debating whether scholars had improved or unsettled the Bible used in worship.

Burgon had already entered the lists. In The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel according to S. Mark (1871) he defended Mark 16:9–20, and in The Revision Revised (1883) he sharply criticized the Revised Version and the Westcott-Hort Greek text. He contended that the Traditional Text embodies a continuous ecclesiastical transmission corroborated by lectionaries, ancient versions, and extensive patristic citation. He challenged the theory that

Byzantine readings were late conflations, and argued that two fourth-century codices could not outweigh the consensus of later witnesses. He cataloged common scribal causes of error, such as homoeoteleuton, itacism, assimilation, and marginal glosses entering the text.

The Causes of the Corruption was published posthumously in 1896 by Edward Miller, Burgon’s literary executor, who arranged and edited his papers. Miller, also known for editing F. H. A. Scrivener’s Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament, presented this volume as a companion to The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels. The book arose before the great influx of New Testament papyri, so its evidential base centered on uncials, minuscules, early versions, lectionaries, and Fathers. Its discussions reflect careful work in British collections and the scholarly conventions of the day, challenging the prevailing confidence in a narrow set of early codices.

The broader Victorian backdrop included clashes over biblical authority and historical criticism. German scholarship had pressed questions about sources and authenticity, while in Britain the Oxford Movement revived interest in patristic continuity and liturgical tradition. Cambridge figures such as Westcott, Hort, and J. B. Lightfoot shaped ecclesiastical and academic opinion, and the Education Act of 1870 widened the literate public engaging these debates. Periodicals, church congresses, and university presses became arenas for contest. Burgon’s ecclesial commitments and pastoral concerns led him to emphasize consensus across centuries, seeing in public reading, catechesis, and ancient citation a safeguard against theoretical reconstructions of the Gospels.

Within this milieu, The Causes of the Corruption functions as a critique of late 19th-century critical methods and a

defense of inherited usage. It seeks to explain variant readings historically, to vindicate the Traditional Text’s resilience, and to caution against privileging a handful of early manuscripts without comprehensive external and internal evidence. The book remembers the parish and the pulpit as much as the seminar room, urging deference to the church’s broad witness. After its appearance, it became a touchstone for later Majority Text and Byzantine-priority advocates, preserving a conservative, historically anchored response to the era’s transformative editorial projects.

The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels

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PREFACE

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The reception given by the learned world to the First Volume of this work, as expressed hitherto in smaller reviews and notices, has on the whole been decidedly far from discouraging. All have had some word of encomium on our efforts. Many have accorded praise and signified their agreement, sometimes with unquestionable ability. Some have pronounced adverse opinions with considerable candour and courtesy. Others in opposing have employed arguments so weak and even irrelevant to the real question at issue, as to suggest that there is not after all so much as I anticipated to advance against our case. Longer examinations of this important matter are doubtless impending, with all the interest attaching to them and the judgements involved: but I beg now to offer my acknowledgements for all the words of encouragement that have been uttered.

Something however must be said in reply to an attack made in the *Guardian* newspaper on May 20, because it represents in the main the position occupied by some members of an existing School. I do not linger over an offhand stricture upon my 'adhesion to the extravagant claim of a second-century origin for the Peshitto[1],' because I am content with the companionship of some of the very first Syriac scholars, and with the teaching given in an unanswered article in the *Church Quarterly Review* for April, 1895. Nor except in passing do I remark upon a fanciful censure of my account of the use of papyrus in MSS. before the tenth century—as to which the reviewer is evidently not versed in information recently collected, and described for example in Sir E. Maunde Thompson[3]'s

Greek and Latin Palaeography, or in Mr. F. G. Kenyon[4]'s Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts, and in an article in the just mentioned Review which appeared in October, 1894. These observations and a large number of inaccuracies shew that he was at the least not posted up to date. But what will be thought, when attention is drawn to the fact that in a question whether a singular set of quotations from the early Fathers refer to a passage in St. Matthew or the parallel one in St. Luke, the peculiar characteristic of St. Matthew—'them that persecute you'—is put out of sight, and both passages (taking the lengthened reading of St. Matthew) are represented as having equally only four clauses? And again, when quotations going on to the succeeding verse in St. Matthew (v. 45) are stated dogmatically to have been wrongly referred by me to that Evangelist? But as to the details of this point in dispute, I beg to refer our readers to pp. 144–153 of the present volume. The reviewer appears also to be entirely unacquainted with the history of the phrase μονογενησ Θεοσ[2] in St. John i. 18, which, as may be read on pp. 215–218, was introduced by heretics and harmonized with Arian tenets, and was rejected on the other side. That some orthodox churchmen fell into the trap, and like those who in these days are not aware of the pedigree and use of the phrase, employed it even for good purposes, is only an instance of a strange phenomenon. We must not be led only by first impressions as to what is to be taken for the genuine words of the Gospels. Even if phrases or passages make for orthodoxy, to accept them if condemned by evidence and history is to alight upon the quicksands of conjecture.

A curious instance of a fate like this has been supplied by a critic in the *Athenaeum*, who, when contrasting Dean Burgon's style of writing with mine to my discredit, quotes a passage of some length as the Dean's which was really written by me. Surely the principle upheld by our

opponents, that much more importance than we allow should be attributed to the 'Internal evidence of Readings and Documents,' might have saved him from error upon a piece of composition which characteristically proclaimed its own origin. At all events, after this undesigned support, I am the less inclined to retire from our vantage ground.

But it is gratifying on all accounts to say now, that such interpolations as in the companion volume I was obliged frequently to supply in order to fill up gaps in the several MSS. and in integral portions of the treatise, which through their very frequency would have there made square brackets unpleasant to our readers, are not required so often in this part of the work. Accordingly, except in instances of pure editing or in simple bringing up to date, my own additions or insertions have been so marked off. It will doubtless afford great satisfaction to others as well as the admirers of the Dean to know what was really his own writing: and though some of the MSS., especially towards the end of the volume, were not left as he would have prepared them for the press if his life had been prolonged, yet much of the book will afford, on what he regarded as the chief study of his life, excellent examples of his style, so vigorously fresh and so happy in idiomatic and lucid expression.

But the Introduction, and Appendix II on 'Conflation' and the 'Neutral Text,' have been necessarily contributed by me. I am anxious to invite attention particularly to the latter essay, because it has been composed upon request, and also because—unless it contains some extraordinary mistake—it exhibits to a degree which has amazed me the baselessness of Dr. Hort's theory.

The manner in which the Dean prepared piecemeal for his book, and the large number of fragments in which he left his materials, as has been detailed in the Preface to the former

volume, have necessarily produced an amount of repetition which I deplore. To have avoided it entirely, some of the MSS. must have been rewritten. But in one instance I discovered when it was too late that after searching for, and finding with difficulty and treating, an example which had not been supplied, I had forestalled a subsequent examination of the same passage from his abler hand. However I hope that in nearly all, if not all cases, each treatment involves some new contribution to the question discussed; and that our readers will kindly make allowance for the perplexity which such an assemblage of separate papers could not but entail.

My thanks are again due to the Rev. G. H. Gwilliam, B.D., Fellow of Hertford College, for much advice and suggestion, which he is so capable of giving, and for his valuable care in looking through all the first proofs of this volume; to 'M. W.,' Dean Burgon's indefatigable secretary, who in a pure labour of love copied out the text of the MSS. before and after his death; also to the zealous printers at the Clarendon Press, for help in unravelling intricacies still remaining in them.

This treatise is now commended to the fair and candid consideration of readers and reviewers. The latter body of men should remember that there was perhaps never a time when reviewers were themselves reviewed by many intelligent readers more than they are at present. I cannot hope that all that we have advanced will be finally adopted, though my opinion is unfaltering as resting in my belief upon the Rock; still less do I imagine that errors may not be discovered in our work. But I trust that under Divine Blessing some not unimportant contribution has been made towards the establishment upon sound principles of the reverent criticism of the Text of the New Testament. And I am sure that, as to the Dean's part in it, this trust will be ultimately justified.

EDWARD MILLER.

9 BRADMORE ROAD, OXFORD:

Sept. 2, 1896.

THE CAUSES OF THE CORRUPTION OF THE TRADITIONAL TEXT OF THE HOLY GOSPELS.

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an accompanying Introduction that shaped modern textual-critical practice.

33 Ephraem (Ephraem the Syrian, often spelled Ephraem Syrus) was a 4th-century Syriac Christian theologian and hymnographer (c. 306–373), noted for extensive biblical commentary and devotional writings in the Syriac tradition.

34 Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536) was a Dutch humanist scholar who produced the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516; his edition heavily influenced the so-called Received Text (Textus Receptus) used in later vernacular translations.

35 Gnosticism refers to a diverse set of early religious movements (principally in the 2nd–3rd centuries) that emphasized secret knowledge ('gnosis') and often held dualistic beliefs about spirit and matter; some Gnostic groups produced alternative gospel texts and interpretative traditions.

36 Marcion of Sinope was a prominent 2nd-century Christian teacher (active c. mid-2nd century) who produced a distinctive canon and an edited Gospel (based on Luke) and whose teachings prompted extensive contemporary rebuttals and commentary.

37 The Ebionites were an early Jewish-Christian group (active in the first few centuries CE) that retained Jewish practices and are described in patristic sources as holding adoptionist Christology and a preference for a modified form of Matthew's Gospel.

38 An early second-century teacher (active around A.D. 120) associated with Gnostic or quasi-Gnostic views; here he is noted for teaching that marriage was a product of Satan, a claim recorded in patristic sources.

39 A major early Christian theologian and biblical scholar (c. 185–c. 253) known for extensive scriptural commentaries and textual work, whose writings are frequently cited in discussions of variants and early readings.

40 Epiphanius of Salamis (c. early 4th century–403), a bishop and author of the Panarion (a treatise against heresies), who is quoted here for reporting on contested readings and ‘corrected’ copies.

41 A reference to adherents of Docetism, an early Christian position (from the 1st–3rd centuries in various forms) that claimed Jesus’ physical body or sufferings were merely apparent rather than real.

42 A phrasing that uses textual-criticism sigla to refer to major ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts—typically B (Codex Vaticanus), [Symbol: Aleph] (א, Codex Sinaiticus) and D (Codex Bezae)—which are usually dated to the 4th–5th centuries and often cited as key witnesses in variant readings.

43 Apolinarius (more commonly Apollinaris of Laodicea) was a 4th-century Christian bishop and theologian (c. 310–390) whose Christological view—asserting a divine rather than a full human rational soul in Christ—was later judged heretical by mainstream churches.

44 The hypostatical union is a technical theological phrase in classical Christology referring to the personal (hypostatic) union of divine and human natures in the single person of Jesus Christ; it is used in patristic and later doctrinal discussions.

45 Lectionaries are liturgical books that arrange Scripture readings for use in church services according to the calendar; their selection and omission practices historically

influenced which passages were copied or circulated in manuscript traditions.

46 A term for the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in early medieval England (roughly 5th–9th centuries), often used in later English historical and legal analogies.

47 The standard Latin translation of the Bible largely produced by Jerome in the late 4th century, which became the authoritative Scripture text in the Western Church for many centuries.

48 A Coptic (Egyptian) translation of the New Testament in the Bohairic (Memphitic) dialect, attested from late antiquity and preserved in a number of medieval Egyptian manuscripts.

49 Also called Sukkot in Hebrew, a week-long Jewish pilgrimage festival in autumn commemorating the Israelites' wilderness dwellings; it provided set scriptural readings in ancient synagogue and later Christian lectionary practice.

50 A liturgical book or system that arranges Scripture readings (lections) to be read on particular days or feasts in public worship; many ancient lectionaries shaped which Gospel passages were read publicly.

51 The chief Jewish council or court in Jerusalem during the late Second Temple period, composed of leading priests, elders and scribes, which appears in New Testament accounts as a religious and legal authority.

52 Refers to the historic body of Eastern Christian churches (broadly the churches of the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East, often grouped under the later term Eastern Orthodox and related eastern rites) whose liturgical and

patristic practices date back to the early centuries of Christianity.

53 An older English name for the feast of Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after Easter to commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit; historically important in British and other Western liturgical calendars.

54 Manuscripts written in uncial script (large, rounded majuscule letters) on materials like vellum or papyrus, typically dating from roughly the 4th–9th centuries; in New Testament studies ‘old uncials’ denotes some of the earliest codex witnesses to the text.

55 Plural of codex, the ancient book form (stacked, bound leaves) that replaced the scroll; in New Testament scholarship individual codices (often designated by letters such as A, B, C) are cited as manuscript witnesses to the text.

56 This refers to Codex Vaticanus (siglum B), a 4th-century Greek uncial manuscript kept in the Vatican Library and regarded as a principal early witness to the New Testament text, often associated with the Alexandrian text-type.

57 Codex Bezae (siglum D) is a 5th-century bilingual (Greek–Latin) uncial manuscript noted for its distinctive ‘Western’ readings and many unique variant readings in the Gospels and Acts.

58 The Peshitta (here spelled Peshitto) is the standard Syriac translation of the Bible used in Syriac churches; it was established by the early centuries of the Christian era (roughly 2nd–5th century) and is an important witness in textual criticism.