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Jonathan Edwards' *A History of the Work of Redemption*

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As a historian of religion, I appreciate the opportunity to present this discussion of a very particular editing assignment I have lived with for some years. Needless to say, this experience has increased my respect for those whose primary profession is close editorial work on texts. As a consequence, I offer these brief comments with a vivid sense of being essentially a layman in the field of editing who has tried to come to terms with its demands. Let me summarize the very special issues present in this project, and then turn to indicate the elements of the solution that have emerged.

Jonathan Edwards' *A History of the Work of Redemption* was issued as a treatise in 1774, sixteen years after Edwards' death. A Scottish admirer, John Erskine, edited it for publication. In this version it had enormous, indeed incalculable, influence especially within and upon American culture as it was forming in the new nation and then developing throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time we have Jonathan Edwards' own manuscript booklets for thirty sermons he preached under this title to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the spring and summer months of 1739. This preaching series preceded, of course, the turbulence of the Great Awakening, the controversy surrounding Edwards' dismissal from the Northampton parish, and it was well before the productive exile at the Stockbridge Indian Mission where he composed his mature works such as *Freedom of the Will* and the *Two Dissertations.*

It may help if I lay out the chief elements of this picture in a logical order.

1. *A History of the Work of Redemption* was initially brought before the public, published if you will, and preached for the only time, and published the only time by Jonathan Edwards himself, as a sermon-lecture series over a six-month period from March through August 1739.

2. Implicitly it is the case, and it may be directly inferred from references in roughly contemporary writings as well, that Edwards thought of this project even at the time of its composition as the draft of a treatise. He referred to it as his "Redemption Discourse" (in the singular). So we must see it as in his mind already a proto-treatise, if you will. Jonathan Edwards perfected the device of extending and developing the sermon form, even stretching it to the breaking point so that it would become a treatise, in the course of the

next decade, specifically in working through his powerful analysis of the Great Awakening in the *Treatise on Religious Affections.* But in some respects the logical transformation of the form into a treatise was achieved in the earlier Redemption sermons.

3. We do have three notebooks, the most important of which dates from the closing years of the Stockbridge period (probably 1755–57), that indicate Edwards was turning to think about reworking the "Redemption Discourse" into a treatise as he relocated at the College of New Jersey in 1758 and died in a matter of weeks. He made notes on the most fitting organization and structure of the book as well as jottings on points of substance that he wished to include.

4. *A History of the Work of Redemption* was edited by John Erskine in Scotland and first issued in Edinburgh as a treatise from a transcription of the original sermon-manuscript booklets made by Jonathan Edwards, Jr. in New Haven in the early 1770's. John Erskine removed the specific features of the sermon so as to make it more like the treatise he thought Edwards had intended it to be.

5. This large tract circulated widely in numerous editions throughout the English-speaking world as well as in Dutch, Welsh, French and Arabic translations, all deriving from Erskine's edition. *A History of the Work of Redemption* had enormous significance for the development of evangelical consciousness in the nineteenth century and exercised a vast influence within the new American nation. Arguably it was one of the most influential books in American culture, understood to include popular culture. Figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe and George Bancroft can be called upon for testimony to this point.

How should such a work be presented in a critical edition? This is not a literary text perfected by its author and handed over to a printer. Nor is it a summary theological treatise completed posthumously by the protégés. It may have strongest resemblance to a political tract that has its influence as much through secondary re-presentations as through conventional published formats.

One conclusion seems firm to me: the copy text must be Edwards' original sermon-manuscript booklets that he took into the Northampton pulpit—however much the influence and effect actually derived from the subsequently edited and published version we owe to Edwards Jr. and Erskine. But

to settle this issue simply introduces us to another range of problems that arise from these sermon booklets and their characteristics that relate to their oral delivery.

Jonathan Edwards developed and cultivated the practice of writing out his sermons in small booklets that he could hold in his hand when in the pulpit. The booklets that contain the Redemption Discourse are a part of this genre that Wilson Kimnach has discussed in the February 1983 *Newsletter*. Let me briefly summarize the relevant points as far as my project is concerned.

First, Edwards used the plain-style sermon form as developed among the Puritans in old England and brought to the new world in the seventeenth century. The "text" has condensed into "doctrine" and its ramifications explored before being "applied" in various conventional uses. This form gives a logical structure to the whole "discourse" (of thirty sermons delivered over six months) as well as determining discrete elements within it.

Second, since this was a rather full text for an oral delivery, Edwards regularly used private symbols—although not to the point of writing in shorthand (as he did in yet more private materials).

Third, contractions and abbreviations are commonly used throughout the manuscript. The latter, especially, vary widely so that the same letter or combination of them can sustain different readings.

Fourth, Edwards did not use punctuation in his sermon booklets (as he did in his correspondence or in the fair copies of works that he sent to a printer). There are block divisions of the materials, as well as keying lines between and within the blocks. Apparently these latter lines permit him to look up from his text from time to time and to return to it with confidence. But these are not equivalent to paragraphs or punctuation marks in any simple sense.

Fifth, he relentlessly ordered his discourse under heads duly subordinating points. But his "levels" of ordering are unclear and potentially confusing to the uninitated reader.

It is clear we must be committed to the booklets as the copy text. Another kind of question then comes into focus: how should *they* be edited? A simple transcription of the booklets (including symbols, abbreviations, contractions, etc.) would leave us with an edition that bore little relationship to the enormously influential and widely distributed version that was eventually a document of consequence to American culture and beyond. It would also be an edition largely unintelligible, even to the theologically literate, without sustained effort.

The solution, I believe, is to issue several correlated versions so as to make possible use and study of this important text in at least several modes. Let me suggest a range of different *kinds* of text that might be issued, ordered in terms of increasing editorial intervention.

1. Photo-facsimile. This would retain all of the uniqueness of the original, sacrificing only access to such technical matters as the texture of the paper or the quality and the color of the ink.

2. A type-face transcription. Though symbols and contractions might be retained in such a version, the regularization of spacing and of the formation of characters would represent a fundamental editorial transformation of a manuscript as unique as a sermon booklet.

3. An "extended" or full transcription. In such a version symbols would be translated and contractions completed. This would represent a further stage of editorial transformation of the text.

4. A "reading version." Here the basic criterion would be, insofar as possible, what Jonathan Edwards would have given voice to (and his audience heard) in the initial "publication" of the sermon series from the pulpit. So beyond the completion of contractions and symbols, punctuation would be introduced (the beginnings and ends of sentences, commas to separate clauses, paragraph divisions, etc.) as well as words necessary to complete a phrase or connect several clauses. Parenthetically this was the "operative text" as transcribed by Jonathan Edwards, Jr., thirty years later and edited by Erskine. It would also be close, conceptually speaking, to the "literary text" Wilson Kimnach has described as latent in the booklets.

5. A further degree of editorial intervention is represented in the attempt already made by John Erskine to "perfect" the text in such a way as to fulfill at least in part the apparent intention Edwards had to transform the series of sermons into a treatise.

My judgement is to think that any one of these versions of the text would be inadequate; at least two are required. In my view, one of these should be a microfilm-facsimile and the other a reading version. The latter (the reading version) would permit access to the intelligible content of the these powerful lecture-sermons that had such cultural significance in the yet more developed printed version, but if judiciously edited it would also enable a scholar to work with the facsimile or original for which there can be no substitute.

In view of the significance I attach to the "reading version" I should comment that it is in some respects equivocal as a concept or model because there are at least three different references made by it. The first reference, as already suggested, is that it would approximate to what Jonathan Edwards intended to deliver or publish orally from the Northampton pulpit in 1739 insofar as that can be recovered from the text he prepared and actually used. Ideally it would represent what Jonathan Edwards read out; in fact we can only recover what he *intended* to read out before doing so. I see no way that a reading version can come any closer to the original delivery than that in the absence, for example, of extensive notes taken by one or more members of the congregation, or comments by a preacher himself about how his oral delivery departed from his intended delivery. So

one of the references, and the basic one, is to the text that Edwards read from.

A second reference I intend is that such a reading version should make it possible for others to read and make use of Jonathan Edwards' sermon booklets for the Redemption Discourse, decoding for their own scholarly purposes the manifestly difficult text made readily accessible in microform. Among the purposes I can imagine would be systematic analysis of his use of symbols, of his practices of spelling and contraction, of his stylistic development across his career, etc. This means, incidentally, that provision ought to be made to facilitate reference between the reading version and the original at particular points. So some scheme of crossnotation is in order.

A third reference I intend by calling it a reading version is that it ought to be readily intelligible, it ought to read well for the student or general reader—not to say scholar—genuinely interested in the intellectual substance of this culturally significant work. So in these terms a "reading version" carries a heavy burden if it is to fulfill this complex ideal. In light of this expanded discussion of the "reading version," let me indicate briefly the kind of editorial treatment contemplated for it as "operative text."

1. Unnoted editorial intervention. All symbols should be translated, for instance the dotted circle standing for world. Contractions should be completed unless they serve as the basis for pronunciation; "can't" would be left (a term with which we are familiar) as well as "ben't" (a familiar term in Edwards' own era). On the other hand, "r.," "red.," "redemp.," etc. would all be rendered as "redemption." Finally, paragraphs and punctuation should be inserted sensitive to the rhetorical basis of the sermon genre and the content of the sermon-lecture.

2. Editorial notation should be given with respect to the following kinds of editorial intervention, signalled by brackets where actual words are introduced: uncertain or possible readings wherever such occur (the number is very few), scripture verses left unquoted or incompletely written out, verbs or connectives necessary to render the text intelligible.

In addition to these two classes of change, the reading version should include marginal notes facilitating reference to either the microfilm-facsimile or the original manuscript. Where Jonathan Edwards edited his own text, his instructions to himself should be noted as well as followed. Where deletions suggest the probable saving of material (and thus its possible use elsewhere), these passages should be transcribed and made available in footnotes.

Let me stress the twofold objective that would guide presentation of a "reading version" of this sort:

1. To make Jonathan Edwards' Redemption Discourse available for scholarly and general use in a form that takes account of its original "oral publication," recognizing that the historical influence of the work was through a version later edited from the original and representing development of it to yet another stage. (Thanks to the Evans microtext series there is widespread access to early American printed editions of A History of the Work of Redemption, indeed originals remain in many collections.)

2. To make possible scholarly access to and use of the microfilm-facsimile (or the original manuscript booklets) for specialized and technical scholarly use.

No one version would achieve both of these objectives and no additional versions beyond these two would accomplish substantially more than they do taken together.

In conclusion let me offer the following comment. Of course all editing problems are unique, but to paraphrase George Orwell some are "uniquer than others." I am not convinced that this particular solution would be advisable for all or even many essentially oral documents. I do think, however, that this solution addresses the special characteristics of A History of the Work of Redemption, and the practice of issuing correlated versions of texts may be underutilized in current editing practice. The morale, I suppose, is that different solutions, or different combinations of solutions, are necessary to address some of the more difficult issues we confront in editing oral documents, and determination of the appropriate one or ones is a burden that scholars must take up forthrightly.