

# Textual Criticism

## Brief History of Textual Criticism

The method of textual criticism which has been generally practised by editors of classical Greek and Latin texts involves two main processes, recension and emendation. Recension is the selection, after examination of all available material, of the most trustworthy evidence on which to base a text. Emendation is the attempt to eliminate the errors which are found even in the best manuscripts.

The application of critical methods in the editing of classical texts was developed principally by three German scholars, Friedrich Wolf (1759-1824), one of the founders of classical philology, Immanuel Bekker (1785-1871), and Karl Lachmann (1793-1851). Bekker devoted his long life to the preparation of critical editions of Greek texts. Bekker collated some 400 manuscripts, grouped existing manuscripts of an author into families where one was derived from another, and published sixty volumes of improved editions of Greek authors. Lachmann went further than Bekker, showing how, by comparison of manuscripts, it is possible to draw inferences as to their lost ancestors or archetypes, their condition, and even their pagination.

The basic principle which underlies the process of constructing a stemma, or family tree, of manuscripts is that, *apart from accident, identity of reading implies identity of origin*. Often, however, difficulties hinder the construction of a stemma of manuscripts. A disturbing element enters when mixture has occurred, that is, when a copyist has had two or more manuscripts before him and has followed sometimes one, sometimes the other; or, as sometimes happened, when a scribe copied a manuscript from one exemplar and corrected it against another. To the extent that manuscripts have a "mixed" ancestry, the genealogical relations among them become progressively more complex and obscure to the investigator.

Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 156-159.

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## Principles of Textual Criticism

### *Canons of Tischendorf*

Lobegott Friedrich Constantin von Tischendorf (1815-1874)

The text is to be sought from the most ancient evidence, meaning especially the oldest Greek manuscripts; (2) a reading peculiar to a single document is to be considered suspect; (3) an obvious scribal error is to be rejected even though well supported in the manuscripts; (4) in parallel passages the tendency of copyists would be to make the readings agree, and therefore, in such passages, testimonies are to be preferred which are not in precise accordance; (5) that reading is to be preferred which could have given occasion to the others, or which appears to comprise the elements of the others; and (6) that reading is to be preferred which accords with NT Greek or with the style of the individual writer.

(Summarized by Finegan, *Encountering NT Manuscripts*, p. 63)

## **Metzger Criteria**

- I. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE, involving considerations bearing upon:
  1. The date of the witness or, rather, of the type of text.
  2. The geographical distribution of the witnesses that agree in supporting a variant.
  3. The genealogical relationship of texts and families of witnesses: Witnesses are weighed rather than counted.
- II. INTERNAL EVIDENCE, involving two kinds of probabilities:
  - i. Transcriptional Probabilities depend upon considerations of palaeographical details and the habits of scribes. Thus:
    1. In general the more difficult reading is to be preferred.
    2. In general the shorter reading is to be preferred.
    3. That reading is to be preferred which stands in verbal dissidence with the other.
  - ii. Intrinsic Probabilities depend upon considerations of what the author was more likely to have written, taking into account:
    1. the style and vocabulary of the author throughout the book,
    2. the immediate context,
    3. harmony with the usage of the author elsewhere, and, in the Gospels,
    4. the Aramaic background of the teaching of Jesus,
    5. the priority of the Gospel according to Mark, and
    6. the influence of the Christian community upon the formulation and transmission of the passage in question.

Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 209-210.

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## **Twelve Basic Rules of Aland/Aland**

1. Only one reading can be original, however many variant readings there may be.
2. Only the readings which best satisfies the requirements of both external and internal criteria can be original.
3. Criticism of the text must always begin from the evidence of the manuscript tradition and only afterward turn to a consideration of internal criteria.
4. Internal criteria (the context of the passage, its style and vocabulary, the theological environment of the author, etc.) can never be the sole basis for a critical decision, especially when they stand in opposition to the external evidence.
5. The primary authority for a critical textual decision lies with the Greek manuscript tradition, with the version and Fathers serving no more than a supplementary and corroborative function, particularly in passages where their underlying Greek text cannot be reconstructed with absolute certainty.
6. Furthermore, manuscripts should be weighed, not counted, and the peculiar traits of each manuscript should be duly considered. However important the early papyri, or a particular uncial, or a minuscule may be, there is no single manuscript or group or manuscripts that can be followed mechanically, even though certain combinations of witnesses may deserve a greater degree of confidence than others. Rather, decisions in textual criticism must be worked out afresh, passage by passage (the local principle).
7. The principle that the original reading may be found in any single manuscript or version when it stands alone or nearly alone is only a theoretical possibility. Any form of eclecticism which accepts this principle will hardly succeed in establishing the original text of the New Testament; it will only confirm the view of the text which it presupposes.
8. The reconstruction of a stemma of readings for each variant (the genealogical principle) is an

extremely important device, because the reading which can most easily explain the derivation of the other forms is itself most likely the original.

9. Variants must never be treated in isolation, but always considered in the context of the tradition. Otherwise there is too great a danger of reconstructing a "test tube text" which never existed at any time or place.
10. There is truth in the maxim: *lectio difficilior lectio potior* ("the more difficult reading is the more probable reading"). But this principle must not be taken too mechanically, with the most difficult reading (*lectio difficilima*) adopted as original simply because of its degree of difficulty.
11. The venerable maxim *lectio brevior lectio potior* ("the shorter reading is the more probable reading") is certainly right in many instances. But here again the principle cannot be applied mechanically.
12. A constantly maintained familiarity with New Testament manuscripts themselves is the best training for textual criticism. In textual criticism the pure theoretician has often done more harm than good.

Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 275-276.

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## ***Hypothetical Text Types***

### *Introduction*

New Testament manuscripts can be classified according to certain major types or families. A family is the name given to a group of texts with a common ancestor. These texts are discovered through the deviations common to a group of manuscripts. For example, the errors made in copying the text in Alexandria were perpetuated in later reproductions. Classification according to families is the basic point of departure in the actual work of textual reconstruction. One reading of a text that represents a good family may provide more support for the original text than a dozen readings from a poor family. Caution is required at this point lest a generalization become misleading. Families are not represented by entire manuscripts but often only segments of them. The modern practice of copying an entire manuscript of the New Testament at once was seldom followed in antiquity. Thus, several families of texts may be represented in a single manuscript. Four types of families of texts have been sufficiently defined to merit discussion.

### *The Alexandrian Text*

This text arose in Egypt and is generally conceded to be the most important one. Westcott and Hort, who named this the Neutral Text, thought that Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus had preserved a pure form of the Alexandrian type of text. It is now evident that these manuscripts had been corrected by later scribes, but they are the most ancient uncials and preserve the Alexandrian text at an early stage. Some of the important papyrus manuscripts also represent this family.

### *The Byzantine Text*

This family has been designated by many names. It is called Byzantine because it was adopted in Constantinople and used as the common text in the Byzantine world. It was produced in Antioch, Syria, under the direction of Lucian near the beginning of the fourth century and has been called the Syrian or Antiochene text. It was used almost universally after the eighth century. Both Erasmus, who created the first printed Greek text, and the translators of the King James Version of the Bible used this type of text. It was produced by combining earlier texts and has less value than the Alexandrian text. A (Codex

Alexandrinus, fifth century) and C (Codex Ephraemi, fifth century) are the oldest representatives of the Byzantine family. A great majority of late uncials and minuscules belong to this group.

### *The Western Text*

This family of texts was closely related to the church in the west, particularly in North Africa. Although it can probably be traced to the second century, its value has been disputed. It was used by the early church fathers. Its age would seem to suggest great importance, but there are clear indications that it was not carefully preserved. It is best represented by the Old Latin translations, by the Syriac versions, and the church fathers. Its most famous representative is manuscript D (Codex Bezae) for the book of Acts.

### *The Caesarean Text*

This family of texts was widely used in Caesarea from which it derived its name. It seems to have arisen out of the Alexandrian text but was also mixed with the Western text. Consequently, its value is limited. Metzger suggests that it is necessary to distinguish between two stages in its development, the pre-Caesarean and the Caesarean (Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 215). Some of its more prominent representatives are W (Washington Codex, fifth century), P45, and two groups of minuscules and lectionaries.

This material is based on R. C. Briggs, *Interpreting the New Testament Today: An Introduction to Methods and Issues in the Study of the New Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 45-47).

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## **Example of Textual Criticism - John 1:3**

The following example analyzes one textual problem that involves a single word. J. Finegan explores this in detail in his book *Encountering NT Manuscripts*. In addition to the individual graphics which illuminate the textual problem, there are also thirteen images of the manuscripts in question. For those who have difficulty deciphering the Greek, look at the page containing a table of the [Greek alphabet](#).

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