

An Introduction to Textual Criticism

Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, ThD
Assistant Professor of New Testament
Palm Beach Atlantic University

Textual criticism is the term used to describe the science that seeks to determine the original text of a biblical passage. For those who wish to interpret the Bible properly, it is important to determine and work with the text that the biblical author actually wrote! Textual criticism is a necessary discipline within biblical studies because the original manuscripts of the biblical texts no longer exist. That is, we do not have Paul's handwritten letter to the Romans or the pages that Malachi penned to record his prophecies. Instead, copies of copies (of copies) of the biblical texts have been passed down. However, when these extant manuscript copies are compared with one another, they do not always have the same wording. Rather, they betray differences, which are referred to as *textual variants* or *textual corruptions*.

Many English editions of the Bible note the existence of major textual variants in a footnote. For instance, the salutation to 1 Thessalonians that appears in the body of the NIV text reads, "Grace and peace to you" (1 Thess. 1:1b). However, the associated footnote indicates that some of the manuscripts of 1 Thessalonians have a longer greeting: "Grace and peace to you *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*."

Although textual criticism is viewed as a science, its results are based on probabilities rather than certainties. By carefully comparing the ancient, hand-copied manuscripts of the biblical text that have been found, textual criticism attempts to determine which variant, or *reading*, most closely approximates the original. The actual step-by-step process of doing textual criticism differs for the Old Testament and the New Testament, warranting separate discussions below.

Textual Criticism in the Old Testament

Those who engage in textual criticism factor two kinds of evidence into their decisions: *external* evidence and *internal* evidence. External evidence relates to manuscript evidence itself and addresses which particular manuscripts support any given variant. Old Testament textual

critics begin their work by comparing the extant manuscripts for a given passage and noting any differences between them. In the Old Testament this involves consulting and ranking the relative reliability of the various Old Testament manuscripts. The textual witnesses they consult can include the following:

1. Masoretic Text (MT) – The Masoretes were a highly esteemed scribal community from the third through eighth centuries AD. Their work was instrumental in preserving the tradition and pronunciation of the Old Testament material. The Leningrad Codex, a very carefully copied manuscript, is recognized as the best manuscript from this tradition.
2. Dead Sea Scrolls – The precise origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls is unknown, but it is generally agreed that they reflect the work of a Jewish sect from the second and first centuries BC. The documents found in this Dead Sea region include biblical material (from all of the Old Testament documents except Esther) as well as texts unique to this community. A given biblical verse, however, may in fact not be preserved in the scrolls.
3. Septuagint (LXX) – The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed during the third and second centuries BC. Because of the early date of this translation, it may closely reflect the original Hebrew of the text. But because the original text of the LXX no longer exists, its manuscripts, too, must be critically assessed.
4. Talmud – Jewish tradition produced both a Palestinian (circa AD 450) and a Babylonian Talmud (circa AD 500). Each includes a collection of the Jewish oral, rabbinic tradition (Mishnah) and commentary. As such, the Talmuds provide translations of Old Testament texts along with interpretation.
5. Quotations by rabbinic schools and early church fathers – Commentary on the Old Testament texts from these sources dates to the first three centuries AD.

The most prominent resources on this list are the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint. On the whole, these tend to be more reliable than the others, which tend to include considerable interpretation interspersed with the text. As a result, the MT, DSS and LXX generally are given more weight as external evidence for a particular variant.

Internal evidence, on the other hand, analyzes the intrinsic likelihood of a particular variant. In this step, text critics ask questions like:

- Which variant best fits with the literary context of the entire writing in which it is found? The variant that is the best fit is **more likely** to be original.
- Does a given variant better fit the style and characteristics of the biblical author? The variant that reflects known authorial characteristics is **more likely** to be original.

- Which variant can best explain how the other readings came into existence? The variant that can best account for alternative readings is **more likely** to be original.
- Is one reading significantly shorter than another? It is presumed that scribes are more likely to add explanation and elaborate than they are to remove something from the text. Therefore the shorter reading is **more likely** to be original.
- Does one option solve a particular theological, grammatical, or contextual problem that another version presents? The variant that is the easiest to understand is **less likely** to be original. It is assumed that copyists were more likely to make things more clear than to make things more difficult.

Consider an example from 1 Samuel 8:16, a verse which raises a text critical question.¹ Does this text say, “He will take your finest young men and your donkeys? (MT)” OR “He will take the best of your cattle and donkeys? (LXX)” Evaluating the external evidence requires a recognition that the two best available witnesses to the original text differ. Both variants are supported by strong external evidence.

Regarding internal evidence, the context surrounding the verse discusses sons and daughters (1 Sam. 8:11–13) before transitioning to a discussion of possessions (8:14–17). Verse 16 appears in the section where possessions, and specifically animals such as donkeys and flocks, are listed. As such the context favors “your cattle” as the original reading. Whichever reading is original, the corruption has resulted most likely from an error in penmanship and copying. This becomes clear when one recognizes that the difference between the word for “your young men” (*bhrykm*) and the word for “your cattle” (*bqrykm*) in Hebrew is just one letter, and they are Hebrew letters that could have been mistaken for one another. [Think how easily an English U can look like a V when written sloppily.] If “your cattle” is original, the LXX translated it properly, and the copying mistake occurred in the Hebrew text at some point after the second century BC. In this scenario, a later copyist mistakenly read the *kop* (ק/ק) as a *het* (ה/ה), and the MT preserves this textual corruption. The textual variant was a result of human error – bad eyesight or poor penmanship – and can be solved fairly easily and with a high degree of certainty. But even if it were impossible to determine the original reading with certainty, or even if the wrong variant were chosen, does it have significant theological ramifications? No. This is the case with the

¹See the further discussion in Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 37.

great majority of textual variants. One's choice can have major exegetical implications, but rarely will it have a major theological impact.

Textual Criticism in the New Testament

The *concept* of textual criticism in the New Testament does not change, although the *process* differs slightly. New Testament textual criticism examines both external and internal evidence. Remember that external evidence concerns the manuscript evidence itself, so New Testament text critics are also interested in comparing the various known manuscripts and assessing which ones are most reliable. Whereas the number of significant Old Testament manuscripts is small, New Testament manuscripts number more than five thousand and range from as early as the second century AD to as late as the sixteenth century, and they stem from various locations including Egypt, Syria, Byzantium, and Rome. Of these manuscripts, no more than two thousand are for any one book contained within the New Testament, and no two are exactly alike. The vast majority date from 800 AD on and are very similar.

The New Testament textual witnesses can be grouped into the following general categories:

1. Papyri (125–700 AD) – Some manuscripts of the New Testament consist of texts written in all capital letters on papyrus material. In order to save space and ensure uniformity, many papyri lack spaces between words and contain no punctuation. Some important papyri include the Chester Beatty papyri and the Bodmer papyri.
2. Uncials (300–1000 AD) – Also capital-letter manuscripts of the New Testament, uncials differ from papyri in that they are written on leather or vellum and are compiled in codex (book) form. They may also lack spaces between words. Among the top codices are Codex Sinaiticus (a) and Codex Vaticanus (B).²
3. Minuscules (900–1500 AD) – Over time scribes developed a flowing lower case script that enabled them to copy manuscripts more quickly. These lower case New Testament manuscripts, written on vellum, are called minuscules.
4. Lectionaries (after 800 AD) – The early Christians wrote materials for use in worship which were known as lectionaries. In places these lectionaries quote from the New Testament and thus serve as textual witnesses.

²For the fascinating account of the discovery of these and other New Testament manuscripts, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. Versions – During the early centuries of Christianity the New Testament was translated into several languages, including Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. These translations may at times help the textual critic reconstruct the original Greek from which the version was translated.
6. Church fathers – Early Christian theologians known as the church fathers (the study of whom is called “patristics”) wrote much that interacted with the New Testament text. Similar to lectionaries, these materials often contain New Testament quotations.



Figure 1: An ancient minuscule manuscript of the New Testament.³

In weighing a textual variant with regard to external evidence, New Testament critics are interested in three things: 1) the manuscript’s *age*; 2) the manuscript’s *family*; and 3) the manuscript’s geographical *distribution*.

1. Age – All other things being equal, New Testament textual critics assume that older manuscripts are more reliable than recent ones. In general the passage of time brings with it greater opportunity for textual corruption, that is, mistakes in the copying process. Therefore, as a whole, papyri tend to have greater reliability than minuscules and lectionaries.
2. Family – Each manuscript belongs to a textual tradition, also called a *family*. Texts in a given family are thought to arise from a common textual ancestor, and they have certain characteristics in common with one another. Most New Testament scholars identify at least three textual families. The Alexandrian family is generally considered to be the most reliable. Texts in the Byzantine family tend to be later and give longer, smoother readings. For this reason they are generally viewed as less reliable. All uncials and other manuscripts after the fifth century belong in the Byzantine family. The third family is the

³The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts has several photographs of New Testament manuscripts posted on the web. See www.csntm.org.

Western family, which includes early and widely distributed manuscripts. Western manuscripts reflect a reliability that lies somewhere between manuscripts in the Alexandrian and the Byzantine families. An early witness from a good family is especially significant, but later witnesses from a good family can also be important.

3. Distribution – The external evidence in support of a particular textual variant must also be evaluated according to its limited or widespread geographical distribution. If a particular reading is found only within a limited geographical range, typically it is viewed to be less reliable. On the other hand, variants that have textual support in multiple geographical regions often are held in higher esteem. In other words, the widespread attestation of one variant, all other things being equal, is more significant than the testimony of witnesses limited to one region.

These three criteria related to external evidence do not allow for an exact science in the evaluation of textual readings. There are times when a variant represented in a later manuscript from a good family and with wide geographic distribution may be more reliable than a reading found in only one early manuscript from a poor family. Or a variant found in one early manuscript with limited distribution may be considered more trustworthy than another reading that is widespread.

In making text-critical decisions, it is important not to be swayed by numbers. Text critics cannot automatically conclude that a reading supported by fifty extant manuscripts is more likely to reflect the wording of the original than a variant supported by three manuscripts. After all, it is possible that all fifty are copies of the same faulty ancestor. When a given variant of a biblical passage is supported by one witness from a good family while fifteen witnesses from a lesser textual family favor another variant, the former is to be preferred. Text critics must ask about the quality of the manuscripts – their age, family, and distribution. Textual criticism values quality over quantity.

In addition to external evidence, text critics consider internal evidence before making their decisions regarding New Testament variants. As with the Old Testament, internal evidence can sometimes help explain how a particular reading might have arisen. Textual corruptions may reflect *unintentional* scribal errors which arose when scribes misread or misheard a verse. Other accidental errors include spelling mistakes or a subconscious assimilation with another verse. Variants may also reveal *intentional* modifications, where scribes thought they were correcting the text by spelling out its meaning, attempting to clear up historical or geographical difficulties, harmonizing Old Testament quotations or gospel parallels, or clarifying specific doctrines.

This can be illustrated by an examination of the conclusion to the Gospel of Mark. Following Mark 16:8, the majority of English bibles include a footnote, which indicates the presence of a textual variant. Although Mark only wrote one ending to his gospel, the manuscripts of the New Testament that have been passed down reflect several possible endings. Most conclude the gospel with Mark 16:8, while others contain additional information in Mark 16:9–20. Textual critics working with the Gospel of Mark must determine which ending most likely reflects the one composed by Mark. They will evaluate the readings in order to decide which is most likely the original.

The external evidence in favor of the shorter ending includes α and B, both very early manuscripts from a strong textual family. The external evidence in favor of the longer ending includes A and C (two other uncials) from the fifth century. While these are good sources, they are not as strong as α and B. Regarding internal evidence, it is easy to see, in light of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, why a scribe might have intentionally added resurrection appearances to the end of Mark's gospel. On the other hand, if the long ending is original, accidental loss of the end of the scroll is not unlikely. When we consider the larger context of Mark's gospel, themes of fear in the midst of persecution surface, making 16:8 a good ending. For these reasons and others the majority of New Testament scholars today do not accept Mark 16:9–20 as original to Mark.

This example from Mark 16 is one of only a handful of lengthy textual variants spread throughout the entire New Testament. In fact, a word of reassurance regarding New Testament textual criticism is in order. F. F. Bruce, one of the leading scholars in this field, assures those who might be concerned to learn about textual variants that “the variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.”⁴

Conclusion

The process of textual criticism is highly technical. Beginning students do not have the necessary skills to engage in textual criticism on their own. Why then should they care? Three reasons can be suggested.

⁴F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 14–15.

First, anyone who wishes to use scholarly commentaries will encounter text-critical discussions. Engagement with these resources requires enough general knowledge so that the basics of the text-critical interaction will be clear. Lay readers need not be experts in all the manuscripts that derive from a particular region, nor are they required to be conversant in all known details about the origin of any particular manuscript, but familiarity with the *concepts* of external and internal evidence and the *terms* likely to arise in such presentations is invaluable.

Second, the issue of textual criticism is gaining popular attention. Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* is the first full length work on textual criticism to capture widespread attention among those who are not specialists in biblical studies.⁵ Many times Ehrman's information in this book is selectively presented in order to challenge a belief in biblical inerrancy and to claim that existing textual variants substantially alter core Christian beliefs. Christians who have been educated about the basics of textual criticism are equipped to respond to Ehrman's presentation and to counter the doubts that his work has prompted.

Third, textual variants are present in English Bibles. Those who serve as Bible study leaders or Sunday school teachers at local churches may be faced with questions about footnotes that say "Other ancient manuscripts read. . ." Again, for those who lack adequate information such notes may raise fears that Scripture contains errors and uncertainties. The reassuring word from a leader who can explain why textual variants exist is of tremendous value.

⁵ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). For a critical review of Ehrman's work, see Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel according to Bart: A Review Article of *Misquoting Jesus*" *JETS* 49 (June 2006): 327–49. The same article is posted on www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4000, while a shorter critique by Wallace is posted on www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=3452.

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