

3.9

Text Criticism: Determining the Original Reading of the Text

External Evidence

Text critics try to determine which manuscripts are likely to be the most reliable. Manuscripts must be “weighed and not counted.”

Antiquity

More ancient manuscripts are generally preferred to less ancient ones; the following broad categories may be considered in order of decreasing significance.

1. Papyri: oldest and best (usually before the fourth century); usually fragmentary or incomplete manuscripts. Papyri manuscripts are written on sheets of papyrus.
2. Uncials: next best (usually from fourth century to ninth century); most of our oldest complete manuscripts. Uncial manuscripts are written in all capital letters.
3. Minuscules: least ancient (usually later than the ninth century). Minuscule manuscripts are written with both capital and lowercase letters. The majority of our manuscripts are minuscules, but these are not valued as highly as uncials or papyri.

Text Type

Certain families of manuscripts (produced in particular geographical areas and, perhaps, under more controlled conditions) generally prove more reliable than other families.

- Alexandrian: usually regarded as most reliable; resists grammatical or stylistic polishing or theologically motivated corrections; includes Sinaiticus [A] and Vaticanus [B], two fourth-century uncial manuscripts
- Western: displays certain oddities (harmonizes one book to agree with another; adds explanatory notes, especially in Acts; paraphrases or omits passages) but otherwise seems reliable; includes Bezae [D] and Washingtonianus [W], two fifth-century uncial manuscripts
- Byzantine: contains many more errors than the other text types and generally is regarded as the least reliable; often tries to resolve problematic readings (e.g., by harmonizing disparate accounts); includes most minuscules (and therefore the majority of manuscripts); specifically, the handful of minuscule manuscripts used for translation of the KJV were Byzantine type

Internal Evidence

Text critics try to consider variant readings logically to determine if there are intrinsic reasons to suggest that the reading found in one

manuscript is more likely to be original than the reading found in another manuscript.

What Would the Author Be More Likely to Have Written?

- Is one reading more consistent with the style and vocabulary of the author?
- Is one reading more consistent with the theology of the author?
- Does one reading cohere better with the immediate context in which the passage is found?

What Would a Scribe Be More Likely to Have Altered?

Confronted with two different readings, text critics examine each reading in turn and ask, “If this reading was the original, what would have motivated or caused the other reading to come into existence?” Sometimes, it seems more logical for the alteration to have been made in one direction than the other. Two general principles are often cited (though there are certainly exceptions to both):

The Shorter Reading Is to Be Preferred

Scribes did not want to leave anything out. When they were uncertain whether or not something belonged in the text, they were encouraged to err on the side of inclusion, so that nothing that might possibly belong in Scripture would be lost. A scribe might read an explanatory note written in the margin of a manuscript and copy it into the text of the manuscript that he was producing. A scribe confronted with two different possible readings of a verse might

include both rather than choose between them. Thus, except in obvious cases where someone accidentally skipped a line or section, the more reliable reading is often the shorter reading; the longer variant is regarded as having added something to the text rather than the shorter variant being regarded as having omitted something.

The More Difficult Reading Is to Be Preferred

Scribes had no motivation to create readings that would cause problems for the church, but they sometimes were motivated (consciously or subconsciously) to create readings that would resolve problems. They tended to correct what appeared to be grammatical errors or to substitute more common vocabulary words for obscure ones. They tended to harmonize accounts that appeared to be contradictory—for example, making Jesus say the same thing in one Gospel as he does in another Gospel. They sometimes tended to reword a text that was phrased in a way that had become theologically objectionable. Thus the more reliable reading is often the more difficult one; the easier variant is regarded as an alteration of a potentially problematic text rather than the difficult variant being regarded as an alteration of a nonproblematic one.