A HANDBOOK *of* NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS

Craig L. Blomberg
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Introduction

"This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Those who do not do what is right are not God's children; nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:10). This sounds pretty cut and dried, but don't most people fall somewhere in between doing what is right and not doing so? "Son though he [Jesus] was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8–9). Christ had to learn to obey God? He was *made* perfect? Wasn't he God from all eternity past and therefore always perfect? And doesn't this passage, like the last one, clearly teach salvation through obedience to God's commandments? Isn't salvation entirely by grace through faith? "But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (1 Tim. 2:15). Good grief! Now half the human race is saved not only by good works but by one particular deed—having kids? What about all those women who can't or don't have children? "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Here it sounds like all people, including women and men alike, must be baptized to be saved. At least that's easier than having children. Moreover, then we'll receive a gift from the Spirit. Hmm, I wonder which gift it is. The Scriptures certainly seem confusing.

The Protestant Reformers, on the one hand, regularly stressed what they called the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture. What they meant was that anyone who was reasonably literate and had a well-translated copy of the Bible in their native language could discover in its pages everything they needed to be right with God and live a life pleasing to him. Anyone who read from Genesis to Revelation, or even just the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation, would capture the main contours of the story of God, his creation, their fall

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into sin, and his plan of redemption for them. They would see Jesus as the heaven-sent deliverer, recognize their need to trust in him and follow him in discipleship, and claim the promises of eternal life—a new quality of human existence in this world and unending happiness with God and all the company of the redeemed for an eternity.

On the other hand, the Reformers never claimed that all passages in the Bible were equally clear. They never claimed that readers would not run across texts that appeared to conflict with the overall gist of the Bible's story line and theology. They never claimed that we could cite individual verses, out of context and apart from a knowledge of the entire revelatory word we call Scripture, and not risk grave misinterpretation. Indeed, beginning in the sixteenth century it was the Protestant Reformation that emphasized—against the previous millennium of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition and to an extent not seen since the first five centuries of Christianity—the discipline of biblical exegesis.[1]

Exegesis comes from two Greek words, ἐξ ("from, of, out of") and ἄγω ("to lead"), referring to the process of leading out from a text its original meaning. Exegesis is closely related to the art and science of hermeneutics (from Gk. ἑρμενεύω, "interpret, translate"). As it turns out, perusing the tables of contents of recent works on these two topics often discloses considerable overlap. Traditionally, hermeneutics developed more as a subset of philosophy, dealing with larger, theoretical questions about whether one can determine the meaning of someone else's utterances or communicative acts and, if so, to what extent and how, whereas exegesis is the actual practice of doing the interpretation.[2] In some contexts, "exegesis" is the term reserved for working with the biblical texts in their original language as one seeks to grasp their intent.[3] But we want our textbook to be widely useful to specialists and nonspecialists alike, so we have written it for New Testament readers who have studied Greek as well as for those who haven't.

The etymology of "handbook" suggests a small volume, though not all that goes by that label today is necessarily short or succinct. This little book was inspired by Gordon Fee's highly successful and useful introductory textbook, *New Testament Exegesis*, which has gone through three editions and helped

1. See further esp. James P. Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture: History, Theology and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001). Cf. also Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

2. Cf., e.g., the issues treated in Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

3. Over thirty years ago the Denver Seminary Biblical Studies faculty decided to label all Bible book electives based on the English text of Scripture "Analysis of . . ." but all classes requiring the translation and interpretation of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text "Exegesis of . . ." The nomenclature remains unchanged to this day.

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a generation or more of theological students and practitioners.[4] Fee wrote what in many ways can be thought of as a "how-to manual," with numerous short, prescriptive instructions in each chapter but without an abundance of illustrations from Scripture elaborated in detail. In our experience, exegesis is caught as much as it is taught, or, better put, it is learned inductively at least as much as deductively. In other words, there are really only a fairly small number of unvarying rules or principles with which one needs to acquaint oneself; the rest of the skill comes from repeated practice and from the evaluation of the work of other practitioners. So we have written a work of more expansive prose than Fee's, emphasizing examples of the various exegetical tasks from significant New Testament passages, with motivational comments en route. We did so because we recognize the barriers, logistically and emotionally, that Bible students face in faithfully elaborating a full-orbed exegesis of a given passage of Scripture.

There are plenty of other books related to the New Testament with "exegesis" or one of its cognates in their titles, but some focus on the whole range of biblical criticisms rather than function as an exegetical textbook per se.[5] Many produce excellent, detailed explorations of a select number of the key tasks involved in exegesis but don't work the student step by step through the full exegetical process.[6] Occasionally, a work excels in presenting extended examples from New Testament texts, but doesn't treat methodology in much detail.[7] In several instances among these various volumes, genre criticism (highlighting the distinctive interpretive principles for different literary forms), more appropriately dealt with in introductory hermeneutics texts, occupies a large percentage of the work.

We have tried to avoid each of these potential pitfalls and to create a ten-chapter work, not too long overall, that proceeds in a sequential fashion according to the logic of the exegetical task itself and devotes approximately the same amount of attention to each step. We have discussed methodology to what extent is necessary to get the introductory theological student under way in the process. But we have used abundant illustrations from the New Testa-

4. Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

5. E.g., Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002).

6. As with Richard Erickson, *A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis: Taking the Fear out of Critical Method* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005); George H. Guthrie and J. Scott Duvall, *Biblical Greek Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); and John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay Jr., *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

7. E.g., Werner Stenger, *Introduction to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

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ment itself, focusing on those where getting exegesis right makes a significant difference because of what is at stake in the text. Of course, many students will recognize that we have not shied away from at times using biblical illustrations that themselves have been interpreted in competing ways. Interpreters who wish to disagree with the conclusions in our specific illustrations are obviously free to do so, but hopefully they will recognize the kinds of principles and methods they will need to employ in defending alternative interpretations. They will also learn why one pair of writers has chosen the particular interpretations they have, and they will understand the kinds of arguments they would have to counter in order to argue for alternative approaches.

Overview

First, the foundation for the exegesis of any ancient document is *textual criticism*. Rarely do the "autographs," or original manuscripts, still exist. Unless we have reason to believe we have a largely accurate reconstruction of what those originals contained (and a reasonably accurate identification of those places where we do not have this confidence), there is little point in continuing with the remaining nine steps. Second, once we have such a reconstruction, we must then create a reliable *translation* in the modern language or languages in which we wish it to be read. Different translations have different objectives in view, objectives that we need to understand and evaluate so that we can choose the right kind of translation for each different modern context in which the Bible is used. Third, still before turning to an explanation of the meaning of the text, we must investigate its *historical-cultural background*. This includes whatever information can be known about the circumstances of the composition of the book overall—such as author, audience, date, provenance, purposes, and setting—as well as specific historical and cultural information pertinent to the most important topics or details of the passage. With the burgeoning of social-scientific analysis of texts, sociology and cultural anthropology must not be neglected in our acquisition of relevant historical and cultural information.

The fourth step is to analyze the *literary context* of the passage at hand. This includes its most immediate contexts within the document itself, as well as more remote ones within the same book or, as with an anthology like the Bible, the most relevant surrounding literature. Identification of any figures of speech, distinctive literary forms or genres, or overall species of rhetoric is also important, lest we miss or misinterpret important nuances of the text that are less straightforward and clear than others. Fifth, we must determine those words in the passage for which the translations are disputed, for which the theology proves crucial, or for which the contexts suggest an unusual meaning. *Word studies* of such terms, which examine their meaning over time in the Greek language leading up to the period of the biblical writer and their

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function in the literary context in which they appear, can shed important light on how the terms are to be rendered and understood. Sixth, constructions with ambiguous *grammar* (or crucial theological implications that depend on the correct identification of the grammatical form employed) must be investigated in a manner akin to word studies.

The final four steps are more synthetic in nature. The analysis of *interpretive problems* addresses the exegetical questions often asked of a text that cannot be simply answered by one of the previous methods but may require a combination of several of them. The ways the historical and literary contexts interact with each other and with the meanings of words and important grammatical constructions often make these problems more complex. Discerning an *outline* of the individual passage being studied, preferably according to the structure of the original Greek, can afford an opportunity to synthesize the results of preceding sections. Discussing a passage's *theology* requires at least an introductory awareness of the major topics of systematic theology, and an assessment of how any given biblical text can be viewed legitimately as contributing to the sum total of the Bible's teaching. Finally, no exegesis is complete without reflection on contemporary *application* of the text at hand. To what specific issues or situations in the twenty-first century is a given passage relevant and in what ways? The more specific the answers to those questions can be, the more likely the exegesis will be not just accurate but also useful and pertinent.

Students in theological colleges and seminaries will typically write one or more in-depth exegetical papers, and this book can serve as a handbook for a step-by-step process for them. As noted earlier, it is particularly useful for those who have had some Greek, but it can pay rich dividends even in English Bible courses. The authors are schooled particularly in the methods that Denver Seminary has promoted for at least the last thirty years. Throughout that time exegetical papers have been assigned in second-year, second-semester Greek exegesis courses, in which students have employed all ten of these processes to a selected passage from the letters of James or Romans and written up the results of their research in a prescribed format, with material on each of the various procedures. English Bible students have for at least as long undertaken and written up the results of "inductive Bible studies," with the same steps, minus textual criticism and translation. Some exegetical manuals give in-depth instruction for how such papers can be composed.[8] Individual professors, however, inevitably want to put their own unique stamps on their assignments, so we are not sure this is one of the more helpful parts of exegetical handbooks. Invariably, different passages from different sections and genres of the New Testament literature will require more stress on certain steps in the exegetical process and less on others.

8. E.g., Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 5–38.

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We would prefer, therefore, to think of this slim volume not so much as a precise how-to manual, in which strict, unvarying conformity to a long set of rules and policies will produce award-winning exegetical papers and Bible studies, but rather as a tool box. Just as the construction worker or repairperson selects a hammer and nails for some jobs, screws and screwdrivers for others, and nuts, bolts, and a monkey wrench for still others, so Bible students, teachers, and pastors will seldom need to apply all ten steps (or apply them to the same degree) to all New Testament passages. Lack of time and inadequate access to the best reference works are the most common hindrances to a thorough process, but the fact that so many other people have repeatedly gone through similar processes for all major parts of the Bible means that many issues have been reasonably settled. When time or interest does not justify utilizing all ten "tools," choose those that are the most necessary for a given passage, based on what is least agreed on about that passage by scholars and commentators in the recent past. Here is where one will need to expend the most energy, in forming convictions on the most controversial and debated issues. Interpreters who have familiarity and practice with *all* of the tools, however, will not have to shy away from trying to answer important questions about a given passage just because they are less skilled in using the tools most needed to answer those questions.

Preliminary Applications of the Method

We return to the four questions, then, with which we began this introduction. There are a number of proposed solutions to the problem of the apparent claims of sinlessness in 1 John 3; one of the most common involves understanding the *grammar* of the Greek present tense, especially with nonindicative mood verbs, as implying ongoing, characteristic behavior. True believers do not continue constantly in a state of sin (cf. [T]NIV).[9] For Hebrews 5:8 an understanding of the overall *theology* of the New Testament doctrine of the incarnation is important. Jesus did not retain the independent exercise of his divine attributes apart from those occasional circumstances when it was his father's will that he do so.[10] So there were many things he had to learn as a human being, without being able to draw on divine omniscience. For 1 Timothy, a *word study* of "saved," especially in the Pastoral Epistles, shows that this verb is by no means limited to spiritual redemption. Paul may be referring in 1 Timothy 2:15 to the restoration of the female gender to its divinely appointed role, overall, after the fall. When we recognize from the

9. Marianne Meye Thompson, *1–3 John* (Leicester and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 95.

10. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 284–86.

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historical context that false teachers in Ephesus were promoting celibacy as a Christian ideal (1 Tim. 4:3), this explanation makes good sense of 1 Timothy 2:15, without us having to take the first part of the verse as a mandate to every woman or as the means of salvation from sin.[11] The *literary context* of Acts 2 discloses that Peter's next evangelistic sermon climaxes in the call to repentance without a word about baptism, suggesting that baptism itself is neither salvific nor normative, though it appears to have been normal, following belief, throughout the New Testament.[12]

Much more could be said about each of these four texts, which would bring additional elements of the exegetical process into play, but these brief hors d'oeuvres should at least whet readers' appetites for the main course to come. Some of these issues will be explored in more detail in the course of our handbook. So let us proceed to the entrées. Each chapter is largely a self-contained unit for those who wish to dip into the book at different places or read chapters selectively or out of order. But, as sketched above, there is a logic to the sequence of topics. Readers not yet familiar with the entire exegetical process should benefit most by perusing the topics in the order we have presented them. Enjoy the feast!

11. Somewhat similarly, cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 107–44.

12. Cf. also Luther McIntyre, "Baptism and Forgiveness in Acts 2:38," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 53–62.

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1

Textual Criticism

The term "textual criticism" may sound more like students complaining about their reading assignments than a shorthand reference to the artful science of establishing a probable original text. The practice of textual criticism often takes a back seat to some of the more "glamorous," or at least better known, exegetical endeavors. It is certainly not a discernible element in most sermons. Relatively few laypeople are aware of how the manuscripts of the Bible have been copied and passed down to us throughout the generations. However, because we do not possess Scripture as it was originally written, the exegete who is interested in handling the Bible with as much accuracy as possible needs to know that the ancient copies of the New Testament sometimes disagree with one another as to the precise wording of a given text. After acknowledging this, he or she needs to assess the various options and determine which of the different readings is most likely the original one.[1]

It is not our intention to give a comprehensive explanation of the entire field of textual criticism; many other works treat such issues with the detail

1. Not all New Testament textual criticism experts agree that the primary goal of textual criticism should be to determine the original as the author of each New Testament book first wrote it, but this is certainly the dominant perspective. For a discussion of the opinions of various contemporary scholars on the topic, see Eldon Jay Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text,'" in *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962–2004* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 551–93. For a definition of the term "original text" as we will use it throughout our discussion, see below, pp. 5–6.

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that this brief chapter will not permit.[2] Instead we aim to introduce the topic in a way that will allow students and pastors to engage in the practice, thereby improving their understanding and exposition of Scripture. We will therefore define textual criticism and the relevant terms used in its practice, look at the history of how the various texts available for study have been transmitted, and then examine a few pertinent characteristics of these texts. With these items in place, we can move to a discussion of how one practices textual criticism as part of the exegetical process.

What Is Textual Criticism?

Our contemporary ease of communication makes it difficult to appreciate the painstaking process of textual transmission in antiquity. In a world of photocopiers, e-mail, and word processing that offers automatic correction of misspelled words and cut-and-paste options, it is easy to overlook the mistakes that come with copying documents by hand. Since the autographs (the original documents) of each of the writings in the Bible were lost or discarded long ago, we must rely on manuscripts that represent the originals copied many times over. If these copies agreed at all points, our discussion could end here. The exact text would be established for us. However, the copies do not agree, hence the need for textual criticism.

Simply defined, textual criticism is the practice of comparing the various copies of a work in order to determine, as best as possible, the exact wording of an original text that is either undiscovered or no longer exists. Textual criticism is both a science and an art. It is a scientific practice because it requires the critic to collect data and compare the various options and then to apply certain rules for determining the original reading. However, not all the rules apply equally to each instance of textual variation, so the critic must artfully balance the evidence and incorporate common sense in order to assimilate the relevant information and arrive at sound conclusions.

The ancient documents that are used to reconstruct the New Testament text as we have it today have been grouped into three main headings for ease of reference: *Greek manuscripts*, *ancient translations*, and *patristic citations*.[3]

2. Particularly useful, in ascending order of detail, are David A. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. Other, less central resources include ancient Greek lectionaries, of which there are over 2,400 (books with Scripture readings for each Sunday in church) and the Diatessaron (a late

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The Greek manuscripts are further subdivided into *papyri* (about 120), *majuscules* (about 320), and *minuscules* (nearly 2,900). Papyri (papyrus is an ancient form of paperlike material) comprise some of the oldest manuscripts available for scrutiny. A papyrus is usually designated in the scholarly literature by a Gothic *p* (𝔭), followed by a numerical superscript (𝔭^{45}, for example). Greek manuscripts written on material besides papyrus (usually parchment and, much later, paper) were subdivided by writing style into majuscules (also called *uncials*) and minuscules. Uncials are the earliest codices (pages bound into books) and were written in capital letters, for the most part without spacing, word division, or punctuation. The most famous, oldest, and/or most reliable are represented by capital letters from the Hebrew, Latin, and Greek alphabets as well as by numbers with a "0" prefix, while the others are designated solely by numbers with a "0" prefix. Of the approximately 310 uncials, the most important are codices Sinaiticus (א/01), Alexandrinus (A/02), Vaticanus (B/03), Ephraemi Rescriptus (C/04), Bezae (D/05), and Washingtonianus (W/032), all dating to the fourth or fifth century, and Koridthi (Θ/038), dating to the ninth century.[4] Minuscules are manuscripts written in the later lowercase, cursive style that was developed in the eighth or ninth century to speed the copying process. Minuscules begin to introduce some occasional spacing between sections of text and a little punctuation. They are labeled with simple Arabic numerals with groups of extremely similar manuscripts collected together in families. Families 1 and 13 (designated f^1 and f^{13}, respectively) are often viewed as the most reliable or important for the text-critical process.[5]

Sidebar 1.1

Types of Ancient Documents

Greek manuscripts
- papyri
- majuscules (or uncials)
- minuscules

Ancient translations
- Latin (esp. the Vulgate)
- Syriac
- Coptic
- Armenian
- others

Patristic citations
- Irenaeus
- Clement of Alexandria
- Origen
- Athanasius
- others

A second category of source material for textual criticism involves translations of parts or all of the Greek New Testament into other ancient languages in the early centuries of church history. These include Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Slavonic. Because the Latin "Vulgate" (meaning "common" [language]), produced by Jerome in the fourth and fifth

second-century harmonization of all four Gospels). For a complete overview of the documents cited in the United Bible Societies or Nestle-Aland Greek New Testaments and their age and place of origin, see the introductions to each of those works.

4. Cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 48; Michael W. Holmes, "Textual Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 48–49, who omit C.

5. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 106–7.

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centuries, became the standard Roman Catholic Bible worldwide for over a millennium, its readings have been very influential. More significant for textual criticism, however, are the "old italic" or "old Latin" translations that predate the Vulgate. Syriac readings are significant for the Gospels because at times Syriac vocabulary and syntax closely resemble Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken before his words were translated into Greek by the Gospel writers. Occasionally, a divergent Syriac rendering may therefore enable us to pick up on a nuance of Jesus's words that is not as clear from the Greek.[6] The other translations are less significant, except that some of the earliest ones do come from the third through fifth centuries so that, to the extent they were translated very literally, they represent testimony to the state of the Greek manuscripts in the period for which we have noticeably fewer Greek texts themselves than in the centuries that followed.

Finally, patristic citations of the New Testament are found in the writings of the earliest post–New Testament Christian leaders (often called church fathers), such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria. Because these writers were so dependent on what would later become the New Testament canon, if the New Testament as we have it today were somehow lost or destroyed it could be reconstructed virtually in its entirety from its quotation by the church fathers.[7] These citations, however, are somewhat limited in their usefulness for reconstructing the exact autographs of Scripture because we do not always know how literally they were "quoting" the Bible, and they were not always based on what we would consider the most reliable manuscripts of their day. Before we can determine the helpfulness of patristic citations, they too must undergo the process of textual criticism. Their greatest contribution to the field is that textual critics can approximate how the text appeared at different times and places by seeing how it was used in the writings of these church fathers.[8] Because patristic writings begin emerging as early as the second century, their information proves invaluable in assessing the history of the text in the earliest days of its transmission.[9]

Three other basic terms related to textual criticism remain to be defined before we can proceed in our discussion. First, as different copies of New

6. The scholar best known for proposing a large number of such insights is George M. Lamsa. See esp. his *Gospel Light*, rev. ed. (Covington, GA: Aramaic Bible Society, 2002). Many of his proposals go beyond what can be demonstrated with any confidence, but he often captures a key component of the original meaning; e.g., "baptism of fire" probably does not mean "free from sin" in its New Testament contexts (as p. 1 argues), but "pure in heart" does mean "pure in mind" (p. 4).

7. Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods and Results* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 236.

8. For detailed criteria of how to use and assess these materials, see esp. Carroll D. Osburn, "Methodology in Identifying Patristic Citations in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Novum Testamentum* 47 (2005): 313–43.

9. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 176–78.

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Testament manuscripts generate different readings of the same passages, these differences are labeled *textual variants* or *variant readings*. Variant readings may involve changes in a letter, a word, a phrase, or even additions and omissions of whole sentences or paragraphs, although changes of this magnitude are extremely rare. Indeed, there are only two places in the New Testament where textual variants affect whole paragraphs or chapter portions: the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:9–20) and the account of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11).[10] Among the textual variants that affect an entire verse or two, only a handful have been moved to the footnotes of modern editions of the Greek New Testament so that we should probably doubt their authenticity.[11] Second, after weighing the options, the textual critic will establish which of the variant readings is the *preferred reading*. Finally, certain distinguishing characteristics occur in the copies of the New Testament, allowing experts to group the numerous copies into a particular *text type*. Copies within a text type are probably based on a parent copy that originated in a particular geographical area. The major text types and their representative characteristics will be discussed below.

One final definition is required. What exactly is the original text? While the chief goal of textual criticism is to determine the text as the author originally wrote it, the spurious readings that are ruled out by careful criticism are not useless and in fact can represent a different sort of "original." Scholars recognize various levels of "originals" or, better stated, different "dimensions of originality."[12] First, there is the *precanonical original* of certain New Testament texts, which represents the earliest stages in the composition of what later would become the canonical text. For example, the Gospel of John may well contain not only material by John himself but possibly some by a community that added

10. Both are unlikely to have been in the autographs. Mark either intended to end at verse 8 or his original ending has been lost. For state-of-the-art discussion of all major options here, see David A. Black, ed., *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: 4 Views* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008). Most Christians will be relieved to discover that vv. 9–20 need not be treated as part of the inspired, authoritative originals, since they promise snake handlers and venom drinkers no harm. Snake handling cults throughout church history have regularly appealed to this passage and have always had fatalities. Modern translations like the NRSV and TNIV helpfully relegate these passages to footnotes or smaller print, and almost all modern translations insert comments alerting the reader to their absence from older and more reliable manuscripts. The account of the woman caught in adultery may well represent an authentic incident from the life of Jesus; it is just highly unlikely that it forms part of what John originally wrote, not least because it seems to be an episode in search of a home, appearing in some ancient manuscripts after John 7:36 or 21:25, or even after Luke 21:38 or 24:53. For an excellent overview of the issue, see Chris Keith, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53–8.11)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2008): 373–404.

11. See Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 298–305. The examples they discuss are Matt. 17:21; 18:11; 23:14; Mark 7:16; 9:44, 46; 11:26; 15:28; Luke 17:36; 23:17; John 5:3b–4; Acts 8:37; 15:34; 24:6b–8a; 28:29; and Rom. 16:24.

12. Epp, "Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text,'" 567.

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to and/or edited his work, probably after his death.[13] The precanonical original would be the words of John and the separate words of the community before they were joined and subsequently circulated for the purpose of instruction. Second, there is the *author's original*, that is, the text as it was when it left the hand of, say, Paul or Luke and was delivered to the recipients. Third, there is the *canonical original*, or the text when a given writing was recognized as authoritative or its canonicity was established, such as the time when the letters of Paul or the four Gospels were gathered together into larger collections. Finally, there exist *interpretive originals* or Scripture as it came to be known and used in the life, instruction, and worship of the church throughout its history. Each of these categories really qualifies as original.[14] It is the second one, the author's original, that we are most interested to find,[15] but it is sometimes admittedly difficult to extract this original from the others. Likewise, it is unfair to act as if the other originals are not useful in our study of Scripture, especially as these four levels of originals closely overlap the majority of the time.

From now on, when we mention originals it will be helpful to remember that the authorial original is in primary view, but that we encounter and interact with the others in every variant of the New Testament. To fail to recognize this is to discount the rich history and the journey of the text from its initial writing to today. By involving oneself in the practice of textual criticism, the interpreter becomes a historian, interested not only in the author's original but also in the traditions leading up to the penning of a particular writing and its history within the life of the church. Analyzing why textual variants may have appeared in individual texts can serve as a way to further engage the historical-cultural situation of the church as it passed on its sacred writing from generation to generation. What was happening in the church at various stages of manuscript production that would cause intentional changes—changes deemed important enough by scribes that they would introduce them into the text and by doing so elevate those alterations to the status of Scripture? Answering this question when encountering text-critical problems has the potential to enrich our understanding of church history throughout the ages and alerts us not only to how the text was written but also to how it was read at various points throughout its history.[16]

13. See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H; Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 200.

14. Eldon J. Epp, "Textual Criticism in the Exegesis of the New Testament, with an Excursus on Canon," in *A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002), 87–89. In "Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text,'" 586–88, Epp gives new labels to these various dimensions of reality, which are more technical and "careful," but his former titles for each category still communicate their essence.

15. For a good defense of why this should remain so, see Paul Ellingworth, "Text, Translation, and Theology: The New Testament in the Original Greek?" *Filología Neotestamentaria* 13 (2000): 61–73.

16. Bart D. Ehrman, "The Text as Window: New Testament Manuscripts and the Social History of the Early Christianity," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research:*

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The Bible is not the only ancient literature that requires the work of textual criticism in order to establish the wording of the text, but biblical text criticism is distinguished from other textual criticism for at least three reasons. First, the wealth of copies available for scrutiny is far greater for biblical writings than for any other ancient document. This is especially true for the New Testament writings, whose existing hand-copied Greek manuscripts alone number over 5,700.[17] In the interest of preserving what they considered sacred writing, scribes across many geographical areas and throughout many centuries committed themselves to copying New Testament texts. Such abundant resources are not available for most other literature of antiquity. Many critics of ancient documents would consider even a dozen different manuscripts for any one work thrilling.[18] While the vast New Testament manuscript resources are undoubtedly a blessing and a testimony to the early church's belief in the truth and relevance of Scripture, they also create a web of complexity that requires the devoted attention of many text-critical specialists.[19]

Second, New Testament textual criticism in particular is distinct because even when there are multiple manuscripts of other ancient documents, there is often a considerable time gap between the initial composition of the text and the earliest manuscript available. For example, there are only nine or ten good manuscripts from Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and the most ancient of these derives from about nine hundred years after Caesar's day.[20] The New Testament, on the other hand, enjoys the existence of multiple early papyri. One papyrus fragment ($\mathfrak{P}^{52}$), which contains a portion of a few verses of John 18, has been dated to the first third of the second century, making it likely no more than forty years later than the original Gospel of John, which probably dates to the 90s. More than thirty other papyri are dated to the late second through early third centuries, and some of these contain the Gospels and Acts (esp. $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$) or

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Essays on the Status Quaestionis, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 361.

17. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 52.

18. Compare the 5,700 New Testament manuscripts with the quantity of extant manuscripts of other ancient Greek and Roman writers and their ages: 27 surviving manuscripts for Livy, the oldest from the fourth century (400 years after he wrote); 3 from Tacitus, the oldest from the ninth century (700 years after he wrote); just over 200 for Suetonius, beginning in the ninth century (600 years after he wrote); 20 for Thucydides, starting in the first century (400 years after he wrote); and 75 for Herodotus, starting in the first century (again 400 years after he wrote). See J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the* Da Vinci Code *and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 71.

19. The fullest text-critical data has been assembled and continues to be analyzed in detailed, technical volumes produced by the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster, Westfalia, Germany, known as Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior. Four volumes have appeared to date covering James–Jude and are published in the United States by Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997–2006.

20. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 11. See also the data in n. 18 above.

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the Pauline Epistles (esp. $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$) in almost their entirety. Reliable copies of most or all of the entire New Testament date from the fourth (א and B) and fifth centuries (esp. A and C).[21]

Third, textual criticism within the field of biblical studies stands apart because of the conviction of Christians throughout the centuries that the Bible is the uniquely inspired word of God. If we are dealing with the very words of God, we had better do our best to determine what those words are! At the same time, such convictions also led to a care in the preservation of the text usually not found to the same degree elsewhere in antiquity.[22]

Perhaps all this talk about text-critical specialization and the abundance of manuscripts seems a bit overwhelming. There is no need for the pastor or student to worry or be intimidated. Don't shut the doors of your church or neglect the people in your life and ministry in order to collect and compare manuscript data! It has been the calling of the experts to do the work of manuscript collection and comparison so that you don't have to. Their findings are easily accessible to the student of Greek who will spend some time learning to use the basic text-critical tools, of which the text-critical apparatuses of the United Bible Society's *Greek New Testament*, 4th revised edition (hereafter UBS^4 or simply UBS) and Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edition (hereafter NA^{27} or simply NA) are the most important. Also eminently helpful for explaining why the UBS translation committee chose the preferred readings that occur in the text and thus for guiding one's own approach to text-critical decisions is Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*.[23] We will give a brief introduction to these tools below.

Textual criticism, then, is not just for experts but also for interpreters of Scripture who have a basic knowledge of Greek and want to deal with the text as it was written by the original, inspired authors. Making the task of textual criticism even less daunting is the fact that in the instances where texts present variant readings, very few of these (probably less than 1 percent) require the exegete's attention.[24] Textual variants can be divided into three categories. First, there are variants that do little to change the meaning of the text. These often include unintentional scribal errors such as the omission or addition of letters or other misspellings. The most common of all involve the "movable nu"—the

21. Cf. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 67–71.

22. See, e.g., Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 43–52. Parker (*New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 158) observes that five changes per one thousand words are typical for early New Testament scribal activity.

23. Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994). See also Roger L. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 2006). Omanson's work has a similar format but is designed to be somewhat more user-friendly for Bible translators.

24. Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 58.

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Greek letter "n" that may or may not occur on the end of certain noun and verb forms.[25] Second are variants that affect the meaning of the text yet are unattested or very poorly attested by the most reliable text types or in the older manuscripts. This kind of variant occurs especially in contexts in which the scribes felt more liberty to "correct" by adding or omitting words or phrases to make the texts harmonize more easily with one another, particularly among Gospel parallels.[26] Third are variants that significantly affect the meaning of the text and are well attested by the most reliable text types. Of the three kinds of variants, this last is the one with which exegetes should concern themselves. Modern-language translations of the Bible typically present only a small selection of this third category of variants in their footnotes or marginal references. The Greek New Testaments present a fuller selection, including some from the second category, with which teachers should familiarize themselves. Neither the UBS nor the Nestle-Aland committee, however, claims to represent the original text with absolute certainty, and often their decisions reflect split votes, leaving room for exegetes to make their own decisions about which reading is most probably original.[27]

Sidebar 1.2

Types of Textual Variants

1. Insignificant variants that do little to change the meaning of the text (e.g., scribal errors of omission or addition of letters, misspellings, "movable nu")
2. Variants that affect the meaning of the text but are unattested or poorly attested in the best manuscripts (e.g., scribal decisions to add or omit words in order to make certain texts harmonize more easily, especially among Gospel parallels)
3. Variants that significantly affect the meaning of the text and are well attested

Text Types

When it comes to reliability and closest approximation to the original text, not all text types are created equal. Three major text types emerged in the early centuries of the church: (1) the Western, (2) the Alexandrian, and (3) the

25. Ibid., 55. In this category, too, are the mere substitutions of synonyms for each other.

26. Or take as an example James 2:20, in which some manuscripts change the otherwise unparalleled ἀργή (useless) to the common νεκρά (dead). In other words, instead of reading "faith without works is useless," involving a clever pun that might better be captured in English as "faith without works doesn't work," the scribes wanted to harmonize James's texts with his other declarations that "faith without works is dead" (see vv. 17 and 26).

27. Expressing concern that modern editions of the Greek New Testament not become a new *Textus Receptus* (see below, p. 13) is Rodney R. Reeves, "What Do We Do Now? Approaching the Crossroads of New Testament Textual Criticism," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23 (1996): 61–73.

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Byzantine (see table 1.1).[28] Before we examine these text types in detail, a brief history of textual transmission from its earliest days may prove helpful for understanding how variants were introduced into the New Testament text.

Table 1.1 Major Text Types, Characteristic Features, and Examples

Text Type	Characteristic Features	Examples
Alexandrian	• Copied with meticulous care and accuracy • Earliest exemplars are dated to the second century • Generally preferred over Western and Byzantine text types, due to characteristic accuracy	• $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ and $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ • Codex Vaticanus (B) • Codex Sinaiticus (א) • Various Coptic translations
Western	• Early dating (some as early as the second century) • Use of loose paraphrase, harmonization with other New Testament texts • Enrichment of narrative through inclusion of extra and/or explanatory material	• Codex Bezae (D) • Old Latin or italic manuscripts • $\mathfrak{P}^{48}$ and $\mathfrak{P}^{38}$
Byzantine	• Continual development from third century through early Middle Ages • Clarity and completeness • Conflated preexistent divergent readings by expanding the text and smoothing out word difficulties • Became the dominant Greek text type from seventh century onward • Represents 80 percent of existing manuscripts today	• Majority Text • *Textus Receptus*

Imagine the excitement of any one of the fledgling Christian communities upon receiving a letter from Paul, the missionary who had first preached the gospel to them. In an act to preserve the writing, a literate, but not necessarily professional, copyist was put to the task of copying the entire document so that the church might have additional records of this letter.[29] As news trickled out

28. It should be noted that some scholars recognize a Caesarean text type as a fourth textual family. It is a mixture of the Alexandrian text and the Western text. The compiler of the Caesarean text followed the Alexandrian text and incorporated the Western text where it did not seem too improbable. Its editor was interested in harmonization and flow of thought, as was the Western text, but was also committed to modified reproduction of the Alexandrian text. Larry W. Hurtado (*Text-Critical Methodology and the Pre-Caesarean Text: Codex W in the Gospel of Mark* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 88) argues that this text type is "a form of Western text as it was shaped in the East." We will limit our discussion to the three major types listed above for two reasons: (1) compared to the other textual families, relatively few traces remain of this original text type; and (2) the Caesarean type can be understood after a thorough discussion of the Alexandrian and Western families.

29. The fullest study of copying texts during the first few Christian centuries is now James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

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across Asia Minor of the church's apostolic document, other communities who recognized Paul's authority and perhaps even inspiration also wished to obtain these truths in written form for themselves. So the copying tradition continued, and it proceeded all the more fervently after the death of Paul. The same principle of rapid copying and dispersal throughout the far reaches of the Roman empire would be true for the writings of the other New Testament authors as well.[30]

Interestingly, the variant readings in the earliest manuscripts are somewhat greater in number than those in the later copies. This indicates that at some point the process of copying was professionalized and subjected to standards by which the earliest copyists did not abide.[31] Yet even the greater number of variants at this earlier period seldom discloses a reading not known from the later period, reassuring us that important readings have not been lost. Regarding the progress modern textual critics have made in evaluating the variants to determine the best form of the text, Bart Ehrman summarizes:

> Textual scholars have enjoyed reasonable success at establishing, to the best of their abilities, the original text of the NT. Indeed, barring extraordinary new discoveries (e.g., the autographs!) or phenomenal alteration of method, it is virtually inconceivable that the physiognomy of our printed Greek New Testaments is ever going to change significantly.[32]

The writings of the early church fathers are helpful for determining that, from as early as the second century, different major text types emerged and were being used in different locales of the empire. For example, the Western text-type is represented in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian; the Alexandrian text can be found in the writings of Origen and Athanasius; and a nascent form of the Byzantine text appears in the writing of Basil the Great and Chrysostom.[33] While at some point the text types began to interact with one another as copies were compared and used to correct one another, most manuscripts retained a number of the characteristics of the textual parent(s) from which they originated.

The Alexandrian Text Type

Alexandria, Egypt, was known as one of the major centers for learning and classical scholarship. Not surprisingly, the copying tradition of the

30. For details, see Michael B. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 49–70; and Loveday Alexander, "Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels," in ibid., 71–111.

31. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 275–76.

32. Ehrman, "Text as Window," 375.

33. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 277–79.

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manuscripts originating in this region shows meticulous care and accuracy.[34] Evidence for this text type's high quality of transmission is best demonstrated by comparing $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ and Codex Vaticanus (B). $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ is dated to around AD 200 while the more elegant codex is dated to around AD 350. That $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ and B are nearly identical shows a straight line of transmission across generations from the papyrus to the codex. While the $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$–B line demonstrates remarkable excellence of transmission, changes in the text are evident in other copies within the Alexandrian family. Despite these changes, the manuscripts in the Alexandrian family reveal a commitment to preserving the accurate form of the text in ways that the other two major families do not. Other important manuscripts in this tradition include $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$, Codex Sinaiticus (א), and various Coptic translations. This text type thus has the advantages of both the early dating of its oldest exemplars (second century) and the demonstrated care of transmission.[35]

The Western Text Type

The Western text type shares the advantage of early dating with the Alexandrian text tradition, with citations of its text appearing in the writings of the church fathers as early as the second century. But fondness for loose paraphrase, harmonization with other New Testament texts, and enrichment of narrative through the inclusion of extra and/or explanatory information are also distinctive characteristics of this text type. Western scribes felt free to smooth out the rough edges and add further clarification to the text, especially in the book of Acts, in ways that the Alexandrian tradition did not.[36] In general, therefore, the Alexandrian text type is to be preferred to the Western text type, though there are occasional key exceptions. Important early manuscripts from the Western textual family include Codex Bezae (D), the Old Latin or italic manuscripts, and $\mathfrak{P}^{48}$ and $\mathfrak{P}^{38}$, all of which demonstrate the Western tendency to add, omit, or change words, phrases, or whole accounts as the scribes saw fit.[37]

The Byzantine Text Type

The Byzantine text type, hardest to date because of its continual development through the early Middle Ages, is characterized by clarity and completeness. There is no clear evidence of the existence of this family before the fourth

34. Gordon D. Fee, "Textual Criticism of the New Testament," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 7.

35. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 278.

36. See Eldon J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); and David C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

37. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 279–80.

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century.[38] Its popularity as the most favored text among copyists in the early Middle Ages was due to the fact that the Byzantine textual tradition had worked to conflate preexisting divergent readings by expanding the text and smoothing out difficulties. This approach is even less tempered in its discipline than the Western type and noticeably less literal in manuscript reproduction than the Alexandrian type.[39] Because the Byzantine textual family was received in Byzantium (which became Constantinople and eventually Istanbul), the capital and heart of the Eastern Orthodox world, it was copied and distributed throughout the Byzantine empire. The result was that the Byzantine text type came to be the dominant Greek text type from the seventh century onward, so that the majority of the manuscripts surviving today (some 80 percent of existing manuscripts) were generated from this textual tradition. From this tradition came the Majority Text (so named for the vast number of manuscripts in the tradition) and the so-called *Textus Receptus* (i.e., "received text"), a collection of very similar Byzantine manuscripts on which Reformation-era translations—such as the King James Version in English, the *Reina Valera* in Spanish, or the *Lutherbibel* in German—were largely based. Although this tradition is well attested by its large number of existing manuscripts, quantity does not equal quality with regard to the best material for establishing the original reading.[40]

How Does One Practice Textual Criticism?

Getting to Know the Relevant Tools

Familiarity with the available tools will arm the willing exegete with the information he or she needs to make informed judgments about the original text. The text-critical apparatus of the UBS[4] *Greek New Testament* is a good place to start.[41]

The United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition

The UBS[4] critical apparatus is structured to be friendly for the pastor or student who is familiar with Greek. It is the presupposition of the editorial

38. D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 44.

39. Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 244.

40. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 280.

41. The editors of the UBS[4] explain the changes from the third edition in their preface. The text remains unchanged not because the committee is certain they have recovered the original wording, but because at the time of publication the committee found no evidence indicating that the previously established preferred readings should be altered. The major shift between the editions occurred in the textual apparatus. Besides eliminating less helpful and including more helpful text-critical problems, as discussed above (pp. 5–6), the fourth edition has drastically reduced the number of "D" ratings given to a text-critical problem by solidifying their decisions somewhat on difficult texts.

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committee that the interpreter should be able to be involved in the process of text criticism without that process becoming such an overwhelming task that there remains no time for the exegete to engage in translation and interpretation. Therefore, the committee has selected 1,438 passages that they consider most important for showing textual variants and manuscript support for those variants. The variants represent only about 1 percent of the New Testament text, and of these only about four hundred have a significant bearing on the meaning of the text.[42] These are the text-critical issues that most interest the exegete.

Perhaps the best way to become acquainted with the UBS[4] critical apparatus is to look at each of its components. Here is an example of the text along with the apparatus taken from Romans 5:2, which contains a small set of minor textual variants (compared with the many that the UBS includes):

> δι᾽ οὗ καὶ τὴν προσαγωγὴν ἐσχήκαμεν [τῇ πίστει][2] εἰς τὴν χάριν ταύτην ἐν ᾗ ἑστήκαμεν καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐπ᾽ ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ.
>
> through whom also we have had access [by faith][2] into this grace in which we have stood and boast in the hope of the glory of God.
>
> [2] **2** {C} τῇ πίστει ℵ*,2 C Ψ 6 33 81 104 256 263 365 424 436 459 1175 1241 1319 1506 1573 1739 1852 1881 1912 2127 2200 2464 *Byz* [K L P] *Lect* it$^{ar, b, d^2, mon, o}$ vg syr$^{p, h, pal}$ cop^{bo} arm eth geo slav Origen$^{lat2/5}$ Chrysostom$^{1/2}$ Cyril // ἐν τῇ πίστει ℵ[1] A 1962 *l* 597 vg^{mss} Chrysostom$^{1/2}$ Hesychius // *omit* B D F G 0220 it$^{d*, f, g}$ cop^{sa} Origen$^{lat3/5}$ Basil; Ambrosiaster Julian-Eclanum Augustine

The superscripted number that appears in the Greek text points the reader to the same number in the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page. In the apparatus, the bold number occurring after the superscript reference indicates the verse of the text under consideration. The bracketed letter that follows is the UBS committee's degree of certainty about the reading they have chosen as most likely original, on a scale of A through D. An "A" indicates a high degree of certainty that the reading chosen is superior to the variants, while a "D" indicates the least amount of certainty. Therefore, a "C" or "D" rating invites the interpreter to engage in his or her own evaluation to a greater degree than an "A" or a "B."[43] However, because the UBS has included the text-critical evidence even for the variants in which the degree of certainty about the solution is relatively high, the interpreter may evaluate the committee's choices for all readings.[44] The UBS

42. UBS[4], v.

43. Elizabeth G. Edwards, "On Using the Textual Apparatus of the UBS Greek New Testament," *Bible Translator* 28.1 (1977): 122–23. Although this article was based on the third edition of the UBS, it is still an excellent introduction to using the textual apparatus overall.

44. Indeed, some textual critics think the current UBS committee has been too confident of their decisions too often. See esp. Kent D. Clarke, *Textual Optimism: A Critique of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

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system of rating variants thus forms a handy reference tool for interpreters to know which of the text-critical problems most merit their sustained attention.

Following the letter indicating the degree of certainty for the preferred reading, the apparatus offers the variant readings along with the most important manuscripts that support each reading. The preferred reading (in this case, τῇ πίστει) with its supporting manuscripts is always listed first in the apparatus. Parallel slanted lines (//) divide the variants from each other. The introduction to the UBS *Greek New Testament* gives lists of abbreviations enabling the student to decode the symbols for the various manuscripts, including superscripts that differentiate the original form of a manuscript (indicated with an asterisk) from later corrections to it, or that distinguish between different manuscripts from a given church father or different editions or dialects of a version from another language (along with virtually everything else one might want to know about the apparatuses of this edition).[45]

Using this information, we may look at our example from Romans 5:2 and see that there are three possible readings for this text-critical problem. Option one is what the text reads (τῇ πίστει, "by faith"); option two has the addition of the preposition ἐν (ἐν τῇ πίστει, making the "by" explicit rather than just indicated by the case ending of "faith"); and option three omits the phrase altogether. Each of the variants is attested by several important manuscripts. Later, in our final section on evaluating external evidence, we will consider the manuscript weight for each option. For now, it will suffice to note that there are three possibilities, and the preferred reading is granted only a "C" for the committee's degree of confidence or consensus, which leaves plenty of room for the textual critic to evaluate the various options. In fact, in this rare case the committee was tentative enough regarding this conclusion that they chose to bracket the phrase in question in the text in order to represent the balance of the evidence.[46] Interpreting the text-critical apparatus has given us the necessary external evidence to begin making a decision on this variant reading.

A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, 2nd Edition

The United Bible Societies was not content to leave the exegete with only external evidence to make a text-critical decision. Therefore they have published a companion volume to the *Greek New Testament* that gives a brief description of why the committee of the UBS[4] chose the preferred reading in each of the 1,428 texts treated in the apparatus. The *Textual Commentary* explains

45. UBS, 1*–52*.

46. Bracketing the phrase denotes that the committee had difficulty reaching the decision (as indicated by the "C" rating) and that the words in the brackets "may be regarded as part of the text, but that in the present state of New Testament textual scholarship this cannot be taken as completely certain" (UBS, 2*).

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the significance of the external evidence and evaluates manuscript attestation. It also discusses internal evidence, showing what rules of interpretation are most relevant for the passage at hand. This is an especially useful resource for the exegete in situations where the committee decided against the witness of the most reliable early manuscripts, for in these cases the grounds for choosing a contrary reading is almost always based on internal evidence. The logic employed in these instances is not always as obvious to the beginning student. Thus, the *Textual Commentary* is an invaluable tool to help the amateur interpreter begin to think like a textual critic and is handy for helping the more seasoned student formulate arguments either for or against the decisions of the UBS[4] committee. These discussions are listed in the order in which the affected texts occur in the New Testament canon and can be accessed by looking up the New Testament book, chapter, and verse(s) involved. For Romans 5:2, the *Textual Commentary* explains the balanced external evidence for both τῇ πίστει and its omission, alerts the reader that the committee decided to keep the phrase because it was most likely dropped by a copyist who thought it was superfluous after ἐκ πίστεως (from faith) in 5:1, and mentions that ἐν τῇ πίστει was a scribal error caused by dittography—recopying the last two letters (ἐν) of the previous word (ἐσχήκαμεν).[47]

The Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th Edition

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of critical editions began to emerge as scholars gathered and compared manuscript evidence.[48] Eberhard Nestle's version was outstanding among these texts because of its careful work with the various text types and its critical apparatus, which mentioned far more variant readings among manuscripts than had previous editions of the Greek New Testament. Such a thorough apparatus allowed the user to form independent opinions about the text, no longer having to rely

47. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 452–53.

48. Critical Greek New Testament texts such as those compiled by late nineteenth-century scholars Constantin von Tischendorf, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, and, consummately, Cambridge professors Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, evaluated various early manuscripts in order to achieve a text that most likely represented the original. They laid the groundwork for Nestle's meticulous work, which did little more than compare the Westcott-Hort edition with the Tischendorf edition. Where the readings differed, Nestle consulted a third edition (either Richard Frances Weymouth's or Bernhard Weiss's), and in doing so was able to establish the text by majority. Because the editions Nestle consulted were based for the most part on early reliable manuscripts, Nestle's edition was outstandingly accurate. The work of these critics triggered the downfall of reliance on the so-called *Textus Receptus*, which, although the dominant text from the 400s to the 1800s, was based on much later, more-corrupt manuscripts. Scholars could now begin to explain how and why variations had crept in and offer conjectures about which reading could best account for all of the textual variants. For a succinct history of the various editions of the Greek New Testament, see Parker, *New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 191–223.

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on the Majority Text or even on scholarly consensus. It was the production of such a work that slowly began to replace previous editions that were often overly dependent on the abundant but later Byzantine manuscripts. Now in its 27th edition and supplemented by the contributions of Kurt Aland, the Nestle-Aland text remains the foundation for other critical editions, especially the UBS text. Today the UBS[4] and NA[27] have identical texts but different apparatuses. The NA includes considerably more instances of textual variants than the UBS does but then gives much briefer representative manuscript attestation, lest the apparatus grow so large as to overwhelm the text itself.[49] Additionally, the NA does not include a "grading" system like the UBS does, and it lacks the companion volume that explains committee decisions. The extra information in the NA proves handy for the interpreter who typically works with the UBS text and finds no variant readings for a given passage (James 3:13–18, for example) and yet is still interested in seeing if and how manuscript traditions diverge from one another in that particular text, even if in more minor ways. The reverse is also true: the information in the UBS is helpful for the textual critic who most often works with the NA but desires a fuller listing of evidence for the variants or would like to see which of the variants listed in the NA apparatus the UBS committee considered the most significant (Rom. 5:1–11, for example, has eleven variants listed in the NA apparatus but only three in the UBS).

As we did with the text-critical apparatus of the UBS[4], we will do here with the NA[27]. The sample passage and explanation of its apparatus will again come from Romans 5:2.

> δι' οὗ καὶ τὴν προσαγωγὴν ἐσχήκαμεν ⌜[τῇ πίστει]⌝ εἰς τὴν χάριν ταύτην ἐν ᾗ ἑστήκαμεν καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐπ' ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης ⊤ τοῦ θεοῦ.
>
> through whom also we have had access ⌜[by faith]⌝ into this grace in which we have stood and boast in the hope of the glory ⊤ of God.
>
> 2 ⌜– B D F G 0220 sa; Ambst ¦ εν τη π. ℵ[1] A *pc* vg[mss] ¦ *txt* ℵ[*,2] C Ψ 33. 1739. 1881 𝔐 lat | ⊤ filiorum lat

49. Note that although the wording in the text is the same in the UBS and NA, the punctuation differs at points, since punctuation and word division do not appear in ancient manuscripts. The UBS also divides the text into smaller passages and provides English titles that capture the main idea of each passage. It is particularly important that the exegete realize that the punctuation and the passage division and titles are not inspired. Therefore, when the interpreter practices literary context analysis, he or she may decide against the division of the passage as it is represented in the UBS text. Likewise, punctuation can change the meaning of the text and may indeed constitute an interpretive problem that must be considered by the student or pastor. Again, in this case the interpreter is not constrained to the punctuation as listed in either the UBS or the NA.

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The number listed directs the reader to the verse in which the variant reading appears. Next, different symbols point the reader to the place in the verse where this variant occurs. These symbols represent the four dominant types of variants in the New Testament, namely additions, omission, substitutions, and transpositions.[50] Many verses have multiple variants, but the symbols allow the reader to match the variant reading in the text with its apparatus information.[51] Additionally, multiple variant readings within a single verse are divided from each other by a single vertical line. Any textual variant (as opposed to the preferred reading that occurs in the text) is offered first in the NA, followed by a very short list of manuscript support. Alternative textual variants for one specific part of a verse are divided from each other by a broken vertical line. The reading chosen for the text is preceded by the designation *txt* in the apparatus and is then followed by a list of manuscript support, but only when there is any reasonable uncertainty. Where passages would have merited a high level of confidence in the UBS apparatus, the NA lists only the variants and leaves the reader to infer that all other significant texts follow the reading chosen for inclusion in the text itself. One can see that although the NA offers considerably less manuscript attestation for the variants in Romans 5:2, it does include one more textual variant (in Latin) for this verse than the UBS[4].

Weighing Evidence and Making Decisions

With all our discussion about gathering witnesses, weighing evidence, determining whose testimony is most reliable, and making final judgments about which variants most likely represent the original text, perhaps we should invoke a courtroom analogy to help us better understand the practice of textual criticism. Just as a careful judge and jury listen to different witnesses and make decisions on who is telling the most accurate version of the truth, so textual critics adjudicate among existing textual variants. As in the justice system, verdicts can never be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt, that is, with 100 percent certainty. The jury will convict where there is proof of guilt beyond a *reasonable* doubt. The text critic deals with less than 100 percent certainty simply because the original autographs of Scripture are not available to be consulted. Nonetheless, great degrees of accuracy are achievable in the careful practice of textual criticism. Even if the text established by the preferred readings of the critical editions of the Greek New Testament or chosen by the translator or exegete does not always perfectly represent the originals, the odds are exceedingly high that the original reading is represented *among* the textual variants. The person trained in textual criticism is therefore at least aware

50. See the introduction in NA, 45*–47*, for a legend of which symbols represent the changes mentioned here.

51. Consult the introduction in NA, 49*–69*, for a key to understanding the remaining symbols used in the text and apparatus.

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Sidebar 1.3

Guidelines for Weighing the Evidence

Evaluating External Evidence

- Prefer the reading attested by the earliest reliable manuscripts.
- Prefer the reading that occurs across a wide geographical spread in a number of different text types or kinds of sources.
- Prefer the reading that originates from the more accurately preserved textual traditions.

Evaluating Internal Evidence: Transcriptional Principles

- Prefer the more difficult reading (the *lectio difficilior*) as original.
- Prefer the shorter reading.

Evaluating Internal Evidence: Intrinsic Principles

- Prefer the reading that most easily fits with the author's style and vocabulary.
- Prefer the reading that best fits in the context and in the author's overall theological and narrative framework.
- Where parallel passages with variants exist (such as in the Gospels), prefer the less-harmonious reading.

of the original reading, even if he or she is not certain which one of several options it is. Textual criticism puts the original text more within the reach of the interpreter, even if absolute certainty remains elusive. The textual critic must balance external and internal evidence in the process and avoid giving too much weight to any single argument among a larger number.

Evaluating External Evidence

By examining the various witnesses, textual critics have come up with principles, also called "canons," for evaluating external evidence. These may sound familiar because we have implicitly alluded to them throughout our discussion. Here we state them explicitly:[52]

1. *Prefer the reading attested by the earliest reliable manuscripts.* The rationale in general is that the earlier the text, the closer it will be to the original since there has been less opportunity for corruption. However, this should be applied with discernment, since there are some early manuscripts with significantly corrupted texts and some later manuscripts that reflect reliable early readings. For example, manuscript 1739 from the tenth century preserves a text very similar to $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ (second century).[53] Even more important than

52. Cf. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 32–35.
53. Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 241.

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the date of the manuscript itself is the date and quality of the text type it represents. An early manuscript based on an early or more accurate text type should be given priority over others.[54] Still, blind preference for one manuscript when there is a wealth of reliable manuscripts is irresponsible, because no one manuscript can be followed mechanically in all places in establishing the original text. The most dramatic example of this first principle appears in the words added to 1 John 5:7–8 about the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit being three witnesses in heaven who agree, words which appear in no known Greek manuscript before the fourteenth century.[55] In extreme cases like this, it scarcely matters what the internal evidence might demonstrate; with no external evidence that the reading was known in earlier centuries, the reading cannot be considered original.

2. *Prefer the reading that occurs across a wide geographical spread in a number of different text types or kinds of sources.* A reading that is attested by papyri, uncials, and patristic citations from a broad cross section of the ancient world is more likely to be original than a reading found in only one area. So if a reading can be found in manuscripts from North Africa, Rome, and Asia Minor, it is more likely to be original than that which appears in only one of those regions. This is especially true if the readings from these different locations are from different text types.[56] These factors would indicate that the reading occurs in a manuscript that predates widespread geographical distribution. Thus, for example, some Western manuscripts omit Luke 22:19b–20, but others contain it, as do almost all Byzantine and Alexandrian manuscripts, so these additional statements about the Lord's Supper (from the so-called Words of Institution) should be accepted.[57]

3. *Prefer the reading that originates from the more accurately preserved textual traditions.* Text-critical scholars have identified which of the traditions are more prone to copying mistakes, harmonizations, and secondary additions. The textual traditions that avoid these errors in any given passage should be preferred; however, it is vital to remember that original readings can be found in all text types, which is why the critic should always make comparisons. Far more often than not, readings on which Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus agree will be preferred, though occasionally, they may be rejected if little or no other external evidence supports their readings. Romans 4:19 offers the textual critic two options, which also affect how the verse should be understood: "[Abraham's] faith did not weaken when he considered . . ."

54. See, e.g., Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 305–6.

55. Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 293.

56. Cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 302.

57. For a fuller discussion of this variant, see Bradly S. Billings, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Disputed Words in the Lukan Institution Narrative (Luke 22.19b–20): An Historico-Exegetical, Theological, and Sociological Analysis* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

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and "[Abraham] was so strong in faith that he did *not* consider. . . ." Here the external evidence for the former rendering includes not only ℵ and B, but also A and C, while the latter is supported primarily by the Western and Byzantine traditions. The former reading is therefore preferred.[58] But only a few verses later in 5:1, despite very strong external evidence for the subjunctive ἔχωμεν ("let us have") over against the indicative ἔχομεν ("we have"), only the latter fits the context, which is talking about the results of justification, which believers "have." The reading "let us have" is explicable as an accidental substitution of one kind of Greek "o" for another. In this case, strong external evidence for one reading cannot by itself justify choosing that reading.[59]

In other words, these canons for employing external evidence must be used together, and never in isolation from one another. And even when taken together, these principles *by themselves* will usually not be sufficient to point the textual critic to the most likely original reading. After analyzing the external evidence, the critic will need to evaluate the internal evidence as well in order to reach a sound judgment on the text in question.[60]

Evaluating Internal Evidence

Internal evidence must be evaluated on two levels, in terms of both *transcriptional* and *intrinsic* probabilities. Transcriptional probabilities have to do with the process of copying and transmission. They deal with scribal tendencies toward mistakes or accuracy. A good example of this is the accidental omission or addition of a letter. Intrinsic probabilities have to do with the author's style of writing and typical vocabulary. For example, if a single reading emerged using atypical Pauline vocabulary in one of Paul's epistles, even if that reading was from an early, generally reliable manuscript, the reading would be suspect because of the unlikelihood of Paul suddenly or dramatically changing his style.[61] However, this alone would not render the reading inauthentic; it would merely raise questions in the reader's mind about what other options might be available that would fit Paul's typical patterns. Internal evidence can be best evaluated by applying the transcriptional and intrinsic principles listed below.[62]

Transcriptional Principles

1. *Prefer the more difficult reading (the* lectio difficilior*) as original*. The principle of determining the reading that best explains the existence of the others comes into play here. Because scribes were interested in smoothing out

58. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 451.

59. Ibid., 452.

60. A table of witnesses dividing the more important manuscripts into their respective textual families appears in Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 63–65.

61. Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 241; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 302.

62. Cf. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 52–55.

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the text and having it be as clear as possible, the textual critic should generally prefer the more difficult reading as the original text.[63] The most puzzling reading for us was likely the most puzzling reading for the scribe and hence prompted the scribe to change the wording (for example, Matt. 5:22, in which some variants seek to soften Jesus's difficult words by inserting "without cause" after "whoever hates his brother"). However, there are points at which a reading is too difficult (such as when one variant ending to the parable of the two sons in Matt. 21:29–31 identifies the son who promised to work in the vineyard but then didn't as the one who did his father's will). Then the exegete should reject the hardest reading.

2. *Prefer the shorter reading.* Scribes tended to add to the text, in order to clarify, rather than to delete material, especially when they believed they were dealing with God's Word. While a transcriptional error may have led to the omission of a phrase because of mistakes such as *homoeoteleuton* (Greek for "similar ending," meaning that a scribe accidentally skipped from a letter or word to the same letter or word farther down the page, leaving out material in between), the addition of explanatory material by the scribe occurs more frequently.[64] By far the most common examples are references to Jesus that attract one or more titles to themselves, such as "the Lord Jesus," "Jesus Christ," and "the Lord Jesus Christ."[65] Preference for the shorter reading should be disregarded, however, where the context and other variants indicate that a shorter reading has occurred because a textual difficulty has been smoothed over by a scribe who decided to omit rather than include or change the difficult phrase (see John 3:13 for a good example). Additionally, certain early papyri tend to abbreviate rather than expand.[66] Above all things, remember that we are seeking the reading that best explains the presence of the other variants.

Intrinsic Principles

1. *Prefer the reading that most easily fits with the author's style and vocabulary.* As mentioned earlier, a reading reflecting an abrupt change in style from

63. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 302–3; Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 247.

64. Other frequent mistakes that will aid the textual critic in assessing transcriptional probabilities are (1) faulty word division, since there were no breaks in the early texts; (2) haplography—writing a letter or word once where it appeared twice in the text being copied; (3) dittography—writing a letter or word twice where it appeared only once in the previous copy; (4) metathesis—changing the order of words or letters; and (5) itacism—writing the wrong vowel letter that sounds like another, such as replacing an omicron with an omega. For examples of places where such errors occur in the New Testament text, see Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 59–60.

65. See esp. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

66. See the thorough demonstration of this tendency for six early papyri in Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*.

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the author's typical form of expression should generally be rejected if other, good readings exist.[67] The longer ending of Mark is an excellent example of longer, more awkward sentences that do not much resemble the simple, straightforward Greek of the rest of the Gospel.

2. *Prefer the reading that best fits in the context and in the author's overall theological and narrative framework*. If the theology appears different from what is encountered in the rest of the book, it may be the handiwork of a scribe who was interested in promoting certain theological convictions.[68] The rest of the exegetical process must be considered here too. For example, literary analysis would be supremely important in a decision of this sort, in order to determine the author's flow of thought (see chap. 4). Not only does textual criticism inform exegesis, but also proper exegesis will help determine difficult text-critical decisions, so that no one part of the interpretive process can become the exegete's sole focus.

A highly controversial example involves 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. Because in a handful of manuscripts these verses on women being silent in the churches appear at the end of the chapter (after vv. 39–40), some scholars have argued that they may not have been written by Paul at all. After all, Paul clearly envisions women praying and prophesying in church in 11:5, even while insisting that they respect their husbands with culturally appropriate head coverings. However, the seemingly disruptive location of these verses, in the middle of Paul's discourse on tongues and prophecy, more than adequately explains why some scribes would move them to just after Paul had finished that discussion, and there are no known manuscripts in which the verses are actually absent. As for the apparent disruption of the narrative, that may in fact be the exegetical key to their interpretation—that a much more circumscribed form of speaking is in view.[69]

3. *Where parallel passages with variants exist (such as in the Gospels), prefer the less-harmonious reading*. The scribes were more likely to harmonize seemingly discrepant parallels than to introduce new problems into their texts.[70] The various authors of Scripture, however, should be granted the right to express themselves in their own characteristic fashion. In the later exegetical step of biblical theology (see chap. 9), the interpreter can determine how seemingly discordant passages can be reconciled, but that is not the task of a scribe or copyist. So when a large number of manuscripts add to the shorter, Lukan version of the Lord's prayer in Luke 11:2 "your will be done, on earth as it is

67. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 313–14.

68. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 36.

69. The two most likely options are the evaluation of prophecy (a complementarian argument) or interruptions by uneducated women (an egalitarian argument). See further Craig L. Blomberg, "Neither Hierarchicalist nor Egalitarian: Gender Roles in Paul," in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 304–5.

70. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 314.

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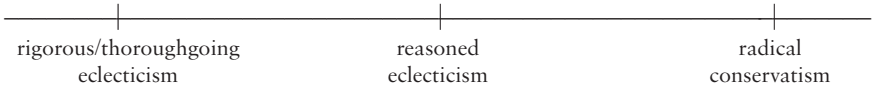
in heaven," it is clearly to bring the prayer in line with the Matthean or more common liturgical form (Matt. 6:10).

The Relationship between Internal and External Evidence

There is no complete scholarly consensus on the way in which external and internal evidence should be used together to determine the original reading. The method we are following throughout this chapter is called *reasoned eclecticism*.[71] It gives equal consideration to both external and internal evidence and seeks to establish whether external, internal, or some combination of both types of evidence answers the question of which reading accounts for the rise of the others. This is by far the most common approach. Some, however, favor the internal evidence of a text as more important than the external evidence. *Rigorous* or *thoroughgoing eclecticism* prefers to determine the probable original by giving almost exclusive consideration to the contextual demands and the style of the author. Finally, a few scholars passionately promote *radical conservatism* or the *Majority Text/Byzantine Priority approach*. They consider only external evidence and give priority to the Byzantine text type, arguing that the text should be established according to the support of the majority of manuscripts.[72] Charted on a continuum, the various major approaches would look like this:



The methods on the ends of the continuum do not incorporate the text's history of transmission into the text-critical decision.[73] Yet these two methods are prevalent enough in New Testament scholarship that we must briefly explain why we have not chosen them and then turn to the rationale for the mediating view that we prefer.

Weaknesses of the Byzantine Priority / Majority Text Approach

While it is true that about 80 percent of extant manuscripts are Byzantine in character, the proliferation of manuscripts of this sort is explained by the text type's adoption by the religious leaders of the Byzantine empire that flourished

71. See esp. Michael W. Holmes, "Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism," in Ehrman and Holmes, *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 336–60.

72. For a volume that includes articles by defenders of each of these different approaches, see David A. Black, ed., *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

73. Holmes, "Textual Criticism," 56.

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from the fifth to the twelfth centuries.[74] As long as this geographical region proved central to the developing Christian faith, we would expect it to produce and preserve the greatest number of Greek New Testament manuscripts.

In fact, most in the Majority Text movement, which so heartily decries the "subjectivity" of internal evidence, base their arguments on a theological presupposition that the inspiration of Scripture demands not only inerrant originals but also providentially preserved, inerrant copies. Though Scripture itself makes no such claims for the providence of God functioning in this way, Majority Text proponents typically think God simply must have acted like this.[75] Ironically, there is no comparable tradition of "preservation by majority rule" for Old Testament manuscripts, so this approach is demonstrably unworkable for that larger portion of Scripture.[76] As with every other area of exegesis, the interpreter must do his or her best to arrive at conclusions that are not already predetermined by presuppositions.[77]

Weaknesses of Rigorous Eclecticism

A text-critical method that relies solely on internal evidence errs in the opposite direction. The biggest difficulty with a rigorous eclectic approach is that individual scholars' preference for various readings based on internal criteria can be highly subjective where it remains unbalanced by a good measure of external evidence. Further, in this practice the author's style is usually preferred irrespective of transcriptional probabilities. In effect, this robs the original author of his voice, since he very well may have used something contrary to his usual diction or style to emphasize a point.[78] A later scribe who then found difficulty with the break in authorial style could have made a change in order to smooth out the text and harmonize the concept with the rest of the author's work. Rigorous eclecticism would then wind up choosing the corrupted reading.

A Rationale for Reasoned Eclecticism

Reasoned eclecticism, however, gives consideration to both external and internal evidence. How widely and early the external evidence supports a

74. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 220.

75. The promise in 2 Tim. 3:16, which Majority Text proponents like to cite in support of their view, would apply to Old Testament Scripture rather than the entire Bible as we have it today. This historical-cultural fact makes the use of this verse by Majority Text proponents an unwarranted proof text. Even then, it says nothing about the inerrant preservation of the text.

76. Daniel B. Wallace, "The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994): 203.

77. For an outstanding history and critique of the resurgent Majority Text argument, more generally, see Wallace's entire article (ibid., 185–215).

78. Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Textual Criticism: Recent Developments," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 71.

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reading determines how seriously to take it. Internal evidence is then used to adjudicate among variants that all have reasonably strong external support. Nuancing our earlier criterion, we may now affirm that reasoned eclecticism thus always asks, "Which reading best explains, *in terms of both external and internal evidence*, the origins of the other readings?"[79] Of course there is some measure of subjectivity even here, but there are far more checks and balances than in the other two approaches. Moreover, reasoned eclecticism is willing to grapple with historical evidence, rather than dismissing it in favor of a purely internal analysis of the text (as in rigorous eclecticism) or in favor of a reading in which the external evidence has been merely counted instead of weighed (as in the Majority Text approach).

Implications for Pastoral Ministry

Where does this discussion of textual criticism leave the believer who has a high view of Scripture? It seems that so many existing versions of the text and the lack of the originals, not to mention all of our language about "probabilities," "approximations," and "most likely readings," undercut the notion that the New Testament as we have it is God's very word to his church. In fact, the circumstances are not nearly as dire as we might first imagine. More than 99 percent of the original Greek New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt. As noted above, only about four hundred variants (less than one per page in an average English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage at hand, and the committees that produced modern-language translations usually note the most theologically significant of these variants in footnotes, so that even those who do not read Greek know the major options. Furthermore, no mainstream Christian doctrine is founded solely, or even primarily, on any textually disputed passage.[80] The average reader of Scripture is not at any great peril if he or she does not understand the text-critical process; however, the pastor or teacher who wants to instruct with the greatest amount of accuracy and precision but who bypasses this step in exegesis risks relying on an inferior text at some point without even knowing it. Ignorance of textual criticism will become a more serious obstacle for pastors or teachers when they are unable to answer parishioners' questions about how the text has come to us in the forms in which we have it, or about why different modern-language translations opt for different textual variants. They will be unable to respond to the charges of the "far right" that contemporary translations have corrupted the supposedly pure, inerrant King James Version, and of the "far left" that careless copying or theologically motivated distor-

79. Holmes, "Textual Criticism," 56, italics ours.

80. Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 281.

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tions prove so pervasive that we cannot be confident that anything remaining resembles the original documents.[81]

As useful as textual criticism can be in ministry, a word of caution is in order. Often, many people in a congregation have never learned much about it. Some may have no idea that anything exists other than a single Greek text from which their English translation derives. Some may even act as if they think the Bible was originally written in English, or whatever modern language they speak. A few words regarding the use of textual criticism in teaching and preaching are thus in order. If in the course of exegesis a text-critical issue presents itself as important enough to include in a message, devote some serious time to introducing the issue to your audience so that it is not confusing. Otherwise, most text-critical work should be done behind the scenes, rather than discussing the practice at length in your preaching and teaching. As a given audience becomes familiar with the discipline, it will become easier simply to say, "The oldest and most reliable texts here read . . ." or "Probably a scribe understood x as follows and therefore changed it to y." But even with a seasoned congregation, be alert to newcomers, visitors, young Christians, or others who are unfamiliar with the concept of textual variants, and make adjustments accordingly.[82]

Taking Our Text-Critical Skills for a Test Drive

There is no better way to test the understanding and potential fruitfulness of practicing textual criticism than to dive right in. We have found that a helpful way to assess the evidence is to create a chart that puts the most important witnesses of each of the different text types in parallel columns. Brief sentences in three boxes at the bottom of the sheet can then be created to summarize the external evidence, along with the internal evidence under both intrinsic and transcriptional headings. A final decision as to the preferred reading may then be made. One possible template for compiling text-critical observations and a chart categorizing many of the most important witnesses to each text-type are provided at the end of the chapter.[83]

81. Contra the former, see esp. James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2009). Contra the latter, see esp. Timothy P. Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's* Misquoting Jesus (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).

82. Walter L. Liefeld (*New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 143–44), e.g., suggests limiting the topic to small groups, where there is plenty of time for discussion once these principles are introduced. We are indebted to Liefeld for several of his astute pastoral observations on how to use this tool to benefit maximally the spiritual lives of churchgoers.

83. Note that some manuscripts vary text type from one part of the New Testament to another.

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The following example from 1 Thessalonians 2:7 provides the kind of information that could be recorded in a text-critical chart.[84]

δυνάμενοι ἐν βάρει εἶναι ὡς Χριστοῦ ἀπόστολοι. ἀλλὰ ἐγενήθημεν νήπιοι[1] ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν, ὡς ἐὰν τροφὸς θάλπῃ τὰ ἑαυτῆς τέκνα,

. . . being able to be weighty as apostles of Christ, but we became babes[1] in your midst, as whenever a nursing mother takes care of her own children.

[1] 7 {B} νήπιοι $\mathfrak{P}^{65}$ ℵ* B C* D* F G I Ψ* 0150 104* 263 459 1962 *l* 147 *l* 592 *l* 593 *l* 603^{c} it$^{ar, b, d, f, g, mon, o}$ vg$^{cl, ww}$ cop$^{sa^{ms}, bo}$ eth Origen$^{(gr1/3), lat}$; Ambrosiaster Jerome Pelagius Augustine // ἤπιοι ℵ^{c} A C^{2} D^{2} Ψ^{c} 075 6 33 81 104^{c} 256 365 424 436 1241 1319 1573 1739 1852 1881 1912 2127 2200 2464 *Byz* [K L P] *Lect* vgst (syr$^{p, h}$) cop$^{sa^{mss}, fay}$ arm (geo) slav Clement Origen$^{2/3}$ Basil Chrysostom Theodore^{lat}

The two options for the original text are νήπιοι ("babes") and ἤπιοι ("gentle"). The external evidence is relatively evenly divided. Although "gentle" has the Byzantine tradition (*Byz*) and hence the Majority Text in support of it, the earliest manuscripts line up more with "babes"—a third-century papyrus ($\mathfrak{P}^{65}$), the two key fourth-century Alexandrian witnesses, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (ℵ* B), and several other important early uncials. One sees also a large number of old italic manuscripts, which with Codex Bezae (D) give the Western text type good representation as well. Complicating matters, however, are the number of early witnesses that were later altered from "babes" to "gentle." On the one hand, the fact that "babes" was written by the initial copyist in so many texts (asterisked in the apparatus) that were later changed to "gentle" suggests "babes" as the original reading. On the other hand, so many potentially independent correctors could indicate knowledge of one or more earlier manuscripts that did in fact read "gentle." The varied weights of the minuscules, translations, and church fathers add few further insights.

When one turns to the internal evidence, it appears that "babes" is the harder reading that would more likely have generated "gentle" than vice versa. Intrinsically, it is more likely that scribes would find Paul's mixed metaphor very jarring, as he likens himself to young children in one clause and nursing mothers caring for those children in the next, and would try to alter it. But is "babes" too hard a reading to be the original? Probably not, given Paul's ability to switch metaphors abruptly elsewhere (e.g., in the middle of 1 Cor. 3:9, in which believers shift from being a field to a building, without even a

84. On this verse, cf. esp. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "'But We Became Infants among You,'" *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 547–61; Timothy B. Sailors, "Wedding Textual and Rhetorical Criticism to Understand the Text of 1 Thessalonians 2.7," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000): 81–98; and Stefano Cotrozzi, "1 Thessalonians 2:7—A Review," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 12 (1999): 155–60.

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conjunction separating the two predicates). Transcriptionally, the evidence is almost equal for each option. A scribe could easily have missed the nu (ν) at the beginning of νήπιοι when the words ἐγενήθημεν νήπιοι were originally run together without spacing, because ἐγενήθημεν ends with the same letter. But dittography—writing a letter (or sometimes even a word) twice by accident—was also common, so the transcriptional evidence proves indecisive.

With the external evidence and the intrinsic part of the internal evidence both largely favoring "babes," though not overwhelmingly so, the UBS committee opted for νήπιοι but only with a B level of confidence.[85] Had one of these two lines of reasoning been more indecisive, they probably would have opted for a C; had all the arguments been finely balanced, a D. What is intriguing for readers of the NIV, however, is that this English translation reads "gentle." The translators were probably thinking the mixed metaphor was too blatantly contradictory for Paul to have written, but, against its usual practice with a reading this uncertain, there is no footnote to tell the reader of the other option. The TNIV has now chosen to follow the UBS, doubtless an improvement, but equally surprisingly gives no footnote supplying the option that the NIV had adopted. There could scarcely be stronger justification for learning the basics of textual criticism—enough to make sense of these changes in English translations—than an example like this one.

Conclusion

Although textual criticism is a complex and sometimes arduous task, it is not impossible to understand. Even the committed beginner can employ the field of study in order to understand the choices made by the different editions of the Greek New Testament and different modern-language translations. Through knowledge of the terminology, theory, and tools of textual criticism, students can become reasonably assured that they are dealing with the text as it was originally written by the author. While we should not assume that this degree of accuracy is guaranteed, we should never give up the quest to find the words of God as they were written to communities by the original, inspired authors of Scripture.

85. Indeed, Metzger (*Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 562) notes that he and Allen Wikgren argued for the reading "gentle," finding "babes" too harsh a juxtaposition of metaphors in the context. The rest of the committee outvoted them, however, pointing out Gal. 4:19 as an equally jarring passage in which Paul likens his concern to a mother in labor.

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