

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts Textual Criticism: External Evidence

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1. Review of textual criticism

Since the original writings of the New Testament have not survived the two thousand year span of time, the task of determining their text becomes necessary. This process of evaluating the variant readings of existing New Testament manuscripts and coming to a decision about the original text is known as textual criticism.

While these differences in the 5,800+ existing handwritten texts are many, they do not affect any specific doctrine of the New Testament. They have occurred through accidental mistakes, omitting or adding letters, words or even phrases and at times they have occurred through attempts by scribes to improve the text. It was not uncommon for a scribe to seek to help the reading of the copy he was creating by spelling, grammar, or style changes. Changes were also made to make the text fit with other parts of the Bible better. Less than one percent of all the discrepancies that exist are meaningful and viable and worthy of study.

The work of textual criticism surrounds the study of which manuscripts support which variant reading, known as the “external evidence.” The counterpart to this study is to consider which variant reading would have been more likely to give rise to the other reading(s), known as the “internal evidence.” This class will cover external evidence and our next class will examine internal evidence.

It is important to remember that the attempt to discover the reading of the original text has very little to do with a person’s theological persuasion but rather it is a scientific methodology that guides this work. The process is not exclusive to the biblical text; all ancient texts require this study of the extant writings to arrive at the wording of the original autograph.

2. Review of text-types

The multitude of New Testament manuscripts shows a degree of relationship between them. This is described as “text-types” which are generally centered geographically in origin in either North Africa (the Alexandrian text-type), area of Greece and Turkey (the Byzantine text-type) or Italy (the Western text-type).

These text-types become fundamental in the study of the manuscript evidence since they point us to the development of the textual variants over time. The dates of the appearance of these text-types are also important since the Byzantine text-type manuscripts do not appear before the fifth century (in the Gospels) or the eighth century (in Paul’s writings). The Alexandrian text-type is found in the older manuscripts, including in almost all the significant New Testament papyri and the clear majority of the earliest uncial manuscripts. The Western text-type is found in a few early manuscripts but tends to have the highest amount of confections of the text.

As Latin took over in the Western church, and after the Muslim invasion of North Africa and the Middle East, the only people producing Greek copies of the New Testament in volume after the seventh century lived in the Byzantine Empire. This accounts for the Byzantine text-type being found in overwhelming majority of texts produced in this region and has been left for us in over two thousand minuscule manuscripts.

3. Approaches to textual criticism

As we begin the practice of examining these meaningful and viable variants, we must first consider the philosophy behind how we approach this work. There are two defective ways to look at the practice of textual criticism.

The first defective way is to completely dismiss textual criticism and choose to believe that the King James Version is the only inspired English Bible and the Greek text underlying its translation (the Textus Receptus) is the exact original text.

The second defective way is to count the manuscript evidence and choose to believe that the reading that occurs the most must be the original text. Both of these ways of looking at textual criticism were examined in our last class and found wanting.

Nearly every New Testament scholar support the premise that manuscripts should be weighted, not just counted. Yet there remains some diversity among scholars regarding what approach to take in evaluating the manuscript evidence and considering how the readings may have come about.

A. Byzantine Priority

A small number of scholars advance the theory that the Byzantine text-type represents the original text but they do not completely dismiss the need to weigh the manuscripts and they give some value to the age of the manuscripts. While this approach acknowledges the lateness of the Byzantine text-type, it argues that the reason for this lateness was because the uncial manuscripts that were used to make the copies were discarded in favor of the minuscules, in an attempt to explain why we find no older Byzantine texts. It is difficult to embrace the idea that Christians would intentionally discard any older New Testament copy that was of some usefulness, even if it were in the older uncial form.

B. Alexandrian Priority

The original text based upon textual criticism, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, published in 1881 by Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort, was based upon the view that the Alexandrian text-type had priority over the other text-types. Because they did not have the availability of yet-to-be discovered New Testament papyri, they ended up depending upon Codex Vaticanus with help from Codex Sinaiticus as the representatives of the Alexandrian text-type.

As manuscripts have been found and the study of them has progressed, the view that the Alexandrian text-type should be followed exclusively has been largely discarded. We have found readings that are either Western, Byzantine or a blend in the papyri and this awareness has increased the value of the other text-types to some degree.

C. Equal External Priority

This approach views the three major text-types evenly without much regard to internal evidence. Harry Sturz of Biola University advocated this approach by showing that many variants common to the Byzantine text-type are found in the New Testament papyri. Therefore, all three text-types are represented in the earliest manuscripts.

This approach works well for the readings that are found in earlier manuscripts but it does not follow that if some readings are found in an early text then the entire Byzantine text-type is early. We can only conclude that the Byzantine text-type has absorbed some readings that occur early and as such are important.

The result of this approach tends to be a Byzantine text because it does not consider why the variants could have occurred and what reading logically would have been produced later than the others in question. By completely ignoring the issue of internal evidence and by offsetting the significance of the earliest text-type by equating them with the Byzantine text, this approach ends up to be another way of thinking that only arrives at the same place as the Majority Text.

D. Rigorous Eclecticism

Rigorous eclecticism uses the manuscript data primarily to identify where there are textual discrepancies and relies almost entirely upon internal evidence to resolve the textual issue. This is also known as “radical” or “thoroughgoing” eclecticism.

The first weakness of this school of thought is that it assumes that because no perfect manuscript copy exists, therefore all of these texts are equally corrupt. This is completely untrue as we have seen some manuscripts make different types of errors. Many scribes sought to simply faithfully copy their text as best they could, just making natural omissions and additions due to errors of sight, etc. Those errors that came unintentionally are more easily evaluated and the age and reliability of the manuscript becomes very important in our recognition of the value of a particular reading.

Secondly, with such a great priority placed upon internal evidence, we find that certain readings can be promoted with extremely weak manuscript evidence. This appears to elevate the opinion of the textual critic to a role of deciding what he thinks the text ought to say, which is very similar to how we have ended up with so many intentional variants in the manuscripts in the first place.

E. The Historical-Documentary Method

This historical-documentary approach is so heavily based upon external evidence that it is the opposite of the rigorous eclecticism method. It looks at the existing manuscripts as attempts to construct the lines of transmission between the older texts and their descendants. In theory, this will allow us to reconstruct the original text as we trace back when the errant readings appeared.

This method depends upon the text-types, and looking at the families of manuscripts within each text-type in an attempt to find clusters of manuscripts that are closely related. Ideally, the lone cluster that represents the earliest group can be identified.

The problem with trying to reconstruct the development of the text by looking at it logically as a tree with limbs and branches and twigs all descending from the same trunk is that we simply have far from enough evidence to reconstruct these textual relationships between manuscripts that closely. There is simply too much textual mixture beyond the broadest text-types to reconstruct the array of manuscript evidence.

The historical-documentary approach makes sense in theory but in practice it is impossible without a lot more documentary evidence than what we are left with. This is why this overemphasis on looking at the external evidence has fallen out of favor as it has proven inadequate, practically speaking.

F. Reasoned Eclecticism

Reasoned eclecticism is the approach used by the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament, the Nestle/Aland Greek New Testament and the majority of textual scholars, conservative and otherwise. As the field of textual criticism has developed this approach to textual criticism has become dominant.

Reasoned eclecticism treats internal and external evidence as equally valuable, although most advocate looking at the external evidence first before considering the internal evidence. As such, it lies between the rigorous eclecticism and historical-documentary perspectives on textual criticism.

With reasoned eclecticism each textual variant is evaluated independently and no one text-type is inherently assigned priority. However, in practice, weight is given to the date of the variants and therefore the result is a text that is reflective of the Alexandrian text-type. Nevertheless, it is the approach that considers the totality of the evidence.

4. Summary of the most significant manuscripts for external evidence

The following texts are the most significant in terms of age and manuscript content. They will be the most noteworthy when they appear in the apparatus.

A. Significant manuscripts from the Alexandrian text-type

- P46 (200 A.D.; contains most of the Pauline epistles)
- P66 (150-200 A.D.; most of John's Gospel)
- P72 (300 A.D.; contains 1 & 2 Peter and Jude)
- P75 (200 A.D.; contains most of Luke's Gospel and most of John's Gospel)
- Codex Sinaiticus (330-360 A.D.; **Σ**, contains the New Testament)
- Codex Vaticanus (300-325 A.D.; B; NT except for pastoral epistles and Revelation)
- Codex Alexandrinus (400 A.D.; A; NT) – Alexandrian except for Gospels
- Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (450 A.D.; C; NT) – primarily Alexandrian text-type

B. Significant manuscripts from the Western text-type

- Codex Bezae (400 A.D.; D; contains the Gospels and Acts)
- Codex Claromontanus (550 A.D.; D^P; contains the Pauline epistles)

C. Significant manuscripts an eclectic text-type

- P45 (200-250 A.D.; contains much of the Gospels and most of Acts)
- Codex Washingtonianus (400 A.D.; W; contains the Gospels)

5. Principles of evaluating external evidence

A. The reading that is the original text is the reading that is supported by the best manuscripts.

This consideration of the best manuscripts is the fundamental principle that governs textual criticism. However, it completely begs the question of what determines which manuscripts are considered best. Also, it presumes that those best manuscripts all agree with each other, which at times is not the case. However, it is certainly critical to distinguish what manuscripts should carry more weight when looking at the external evidence since we cannot simply count the manuscripts to decided the original reading.

B. The best reading is the reading that has the most geographically diverse support.

Since ancient church was dispersed around the Mediterranean, copies from different local areas would be more likely to have similarities to texts that were from the same area. Therefore, seeing the same reading in different regions adds confidence to that reading. However, it is an assumption to think that the text was always where it was originally discovered. Many of the minuscules moved to the west with the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Nevertheless, readings that are supported across text-types carry more weight than readings found in only one text-type.

Observing a diversity of readings will provide much greater confidence than one localized text or even one scribe is not unduly influencing the text.

C. The older the manuscript the more important the reading of the manuscript is.

This stands to reason since there are theoretically fewer generations of copies between an earlier text and the original text that would be the case with later texts. The discovery of the New Testament papyri over the past 150 years has increased the value of older manuscripts because they have validated the reading of the earlier uncial manuscripts.

However, we cannot only look at the older reading exclusively since that may have been a corruption of the text. Indeed, the age of the text is not fixed since we learn more about manuscript dating and we even discover older manuscripts at times. Also, manuscripts of different text types increase the weight of their reading.

The most notable exception to this principle is minuscule 1739, which was copied by a monk named Ephraim, the most active scribe of the tenth century. His copy contains a large number of notes alongside the text, with the latest being from Basil (d. 379 A.D.). These notes make it quite apparent that the exemplar, that is text that Ephraim used to make his copy, was from the fourth century and was therefore a contemporary with the earliest uncials. This minuscule follows the Alexandrian text-type, though it was found in 1879 in Greece. It contains the book of Acts, Paul's epistles and the general epistles.

D. The more manuscripts support a reading, the more weight we should give to that reading.

No single manuscript should be relied upon exclusively. For example, Codex Alexandrinus contains the books of 1 and 2 Clement. Codex Sinaiticus contains the Epistle of Barnabas and portions of the Shepherd of Hermes. Codex Vaticanus, like the original King James Version, contains books of the Apocrypha. Each of these includes books that have been consistently rejected as Scripture by the majority of the Bible-believing church for the entire church age.

This principle also should seem intuitive; more manuscript support cannot be a bad thing when considering a certain reading as viable. There is one major caveat to this principle—it holds far less significance in the Byzantine text-type. The Byzantine text-type is so much more homogeneous that the Alexandrian or Western text-types that additional manuscript support does little to help a Byzantine reading.

For the older manuscripts, additional support even within one text-type is very helpful to having confidence in a variant reading. While theoretically possible, realistically speaking no reading of the original text can exist in only one manuscript since we just have far too many very diverse copies.

E. The Greek texts have priority over the versions, which have priority over the fathers.

The early church fathers rarely quote a text word for word. So they are of limited use when addressing variants that are a matter of letters or a word. The versions, meaning the early translations, are not always able to effectively translate all aspects of the text, so they have limitations as well. Finally, we do not have the original copies of either the fathers or the versions,, so textual criticism is necessary even with their use.

F. The character of the manuscript affects the significance of its readings.

Certainly the date and the text-type of a manuscript impacts the value that we give to a manuscript. But there are manuscripts that are more eclectic and do not fit into a text-type. An example is Codex Washingtonianus (c. 400 A.D.) which is an almost complete uncial of the four Gospels with an eclectic text-type and thus somewhat independent. Another example is P66 (c. 200 A.D.) which is the Gospel of John copied by a scribe that gave more attention to the stylish forming of the letters, sometimes at the expense of accuracy.

If the manuscript is a diglot, the influence of the translation on the text is noteworthy. For example, in comparing two codices of the Western text-type, there is apparent harmonization between the Latin and Greek text of Codex Bezae (c. 400 A.D.) but much less so with Codex Claromontanus (c. 550 A.D.).

The types of observable errors that a manuscript contains determine its character and value. Manuscripts that contain errors that are letter-for-letter type errors, indicates a more careful copy. Minor changes are better than major changes. Codex Bazaе (c. 400 A.D.) is less useful than the papyri for this reason. Even P66 is far more helpful since though some of the changes made by the scribe were made for style, and he made corrections (evidently from a second exemplar) that show the types of issues that concerned him. Each manuscript has its own character and the observations regarding its uniqueness guide us in evaluating its contribution toward determining the original text.

G. The reading that goes against the tendencies of a particular manuscript has added value.

Just as manuscript text-types have certain characteristics, so do some of the individual manuscripts. This of course assumes that we can accurately identify what the characteristics are but when we see them, we can recognize when the manuscript diverges from its habits.

For example, P75 (of the Alexandrian text-type) tends to leave out words so if it confirms a longer reading we should consider this significant. Similarly, Codex Bezae (of the Western text-type) has a great many fuller readings so if a shorter reading is found in this manuscript we can have more confidence in that variant.

We can expect the study of these manuscript tendencies and their affect upon the analysis of the text to develop further into the future as more eyes spend more time analyzing each text.

6. Application

“Analyze Bible translations better.”