

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts Textual Criticism: Internal 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 5,800+ New Testament manuscripts and coming to a decision about the original text is known as textual criticism.

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.” In our last class we covered external evidence and in this class we will examine internal evidence.

2. Review of approaches to textual criticism

We have looked at the different methodology employed in the field of textual criticism, looking at those that emphasize external evidence and those that emphasize internal evidence. The approach that considers the totality of the evidence and is the main way textual criticism is done by New Testament scholars of a wide variety of theological persuasions is known as “reasoned eclecticism.”

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.

3. The basis for internal evidence

Internal evidence is the part of textual criticism that studies what possibilities might explain the occurrence of the variants that we find. A few textual scholars dismiss the value of internal evidence and a few others depend highly upon it. The most well accepted practice considers the question why a variant reading may exist as a very important step once the external evidence is collected and evaluated.

There are two basic areas of consideration when evaluating the internal evidence:

- A. What the author is most likely to have written, known as “intrinsic probability.”
- B. What the scribe is most likely to have written, known as “transcriptional probability.”

The most significant challenge with internal evidence is the nature of its subjectivity. How do we know what the author or the scribe would be likely to have written? This subjectivity is real and this is why the study of the internal evidence occurs after the examination of the external evidence.

While we don't know perfectly what would have happened, we can evaluate tendencies. Also, we should recognize that not all these tendencies lead to the same degree of confidence in our conclusions. However, the recognition that some possible explanations for the occurrence of a variant are questionable does not preclude this type of evaluation and it does not necessarily undermine all possible explanations.

Some of what we see with the examination of internal evidence are such logical deductions that it becomes hard to ignore what appears to be the obvious explanation for what occurred. Since we know the scribes made errors in their copying process, both accidental and intentional, we must consider how the errors may have come about if we are going to do the examination of these texts justice.

4. Principles of evaluating internal evidence

A. The shorter reading is the best reading.

The presumption here is that scribes would be not likely to want to subtract words from the text. This is particularly true with phrases or more important words.

We have seen that words and phrases could have been omitted by looking at the text and after copying looking back at a word later in the manuscript and thus leaving out the intervening words. But this error of sight is accidental and not interjecting a scribe's belief, and thus it will occur more randomly and the correct reading will be found in other copies.

The general rule is that accidental changes tend to omit words while intentional changes tend to add words. Since the accidental changes are typically easier to observe, the rule regarding the shorter reading is commonly applied since most of the difficult variants have some degree of intent on the part of the scribes.

B. The harder reading is the best reading.

The desire for scribes to make the text simpler and more understandable was a factor in the transmission process. Scribes had an awareness of the reader and did not spend countless hours producing a copy so that the reader of their work would be confused, or worse, that the reader's faith might be shaken.

For example, most manuscripts omit the phrase "nor the son" in Matthew 24:36. But external evidence shows that older manuscripts include the phrase and internal evidence leads to the including "nor the son" in light of the desire of the scribes to remove what would make Christ appear not omniscient.

However, this principle is a generalization since many accidental mistakes make can a variant very hard to read. Harder readings are only preferred when there is adequate external manuscript evidence supporting them.

C. The reading that is less ecclesiastical is the best reading.

Scribes were churchmen who at times used phrasing that reflected them. A frequent example is the addition by copyists of the word “amen” after New Testament books. Another example is the doxology at the end of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:13, “for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” This phrasing was used in the liturgy in Eastern church (but not in the Western church) and is not found in earliest manuscripts or translations.

D. The reading that is less like a parallel text in another passage is the best reading.

The tendency toward smoothing out the differences between parallel passages in the New Testament is fairly strong. The Gospels in particular are affected by this scribal practice. The Gospel of Matthew tends to have a little stronger influence, with its readings getting assimilated into other Gospels.

Also, words from the immediate context frequently were assimilated into other verses. Another way of considering this principle is “that which is less familiar is the best reading.” Scribes would insert what was well known.

E. The reading that best reflects *koine* Greek is the best reading.

In the centuries after the New Testament was written, the form of Greek changed from *Koine* Greek to *Attic* Greek. Some of the grammar changes reflect the change in the language that affected their copy (e.g. Mark 1:37).

G. The reading that fits what the scribe is less likely to write is the best reading.

This is what is known as “transcriptional probability” and means that which is most likely what the scribe might have changed. We find this commonly in the harmonization that occurred with the scribes who made copies the blended of parallel Gospel passages together. It is more likely the scribe would write what was familiar.

H. The reading that best fits with the style of the author is the best reading.

Just like any person, there are unique ways the biblical authors write. When we observe an author’s style and vocabulary it may help in evaluating the variants.

One example is John 4:1, which we looked at when we looked at variants occurring due to substituting one word for another. John 4:1, has the text evidence divided between “Jesus Knew” (ESV, NIV, CEV) vs. “The Lord Knew” (NASB, KJV, RSV). Which word is original, Jesus or Lord? When we look at John’s writings, we find him using the title “Lord” for Jesus in his narrative beginning after the resurrection. Thus internal evidence points to the name “Jesus” being more likely.

I. The reading that best explains the rise of the other readings is the best reading.

This principle is the most important thing to evaluate in the practice of analyzing internal evidence. Variant readings do not occur by themselves but for reasons. The more you can see how one reading could lead to another reading, the more confident we can be about excluding a reading from being possibly original.

One example is Luke 24:53, where most early texts note that the disciples were “blessing God,” while early Latin translations and Codex Bezae read “praising God.” The Byzantine text-type reads “blessing and praising God” which is obviously a conflation of the two various readings and can be eliminated as a likely original reading. The best explanation of the variant is the Latin translation influenced the Western text-type, which got assimilated into the Byzantine text-type. Thus “blessing God” is the most likely reading.

5. Limitations of internal evidence

Not only does the use of internal evidence vary, but the aggressiveness of using types of internal evidence that we can be less confident with varies also. Not all internal evidence is of equal validity.

Determinations according to the perspective of the author’s theology are particularly subjective. This puts the textual critic in an authority position over the text and moves the text to conform to what he believes the author should have written from a *theological* perspective.

The same holds true to some degree with observations of an author’s style. Authors do have their style but we cannot know if they may have actually diverted from their style. Basically, when assumptions are made about what the author would have included there will be great uncertainty about the confidence of these conclusions.

The internal evidence that relates to the author is more subjective than the internal evidence that relates to the scribes because the author only gives us one data point whereas there are many scribes with each variant.

6. Comparing external and internal evidence

A great example of the role that internal evidence can play in the reading of the text is found in Matthew 27:16-17. This passage is translated either with the name of the prisoner being “Jesus Barabbas” or “Barabbas.”

The NIV (also the CEV and NET) translates Matthew 27:16-17:

*At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was **Jesus Barabbas**. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” (NIV, also CEV, NET).*

The ESV (also the NASB and NKJV) translates Matthew 27:16-17:

*And they had then a notorious prisoner called **Barabbas**. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”*

If you examine the external evidence, very few Greek manuscripts support adding the name “Jesus” to Barabbas. One later uncial (Codex Koridethi, c. ninth century) adds it along with a very small number of minuscules. The vast majority of manuscripts of all text-types in all locations and in all the earliest text omit the name “Jesus” from the prisoner’s name.

The only reason to consider the name Jesus as authentic is based solely upon internal evidence. It is highly unlikely that a scribe accidentally added the name Jesus when it wasn't there and there is no reason for a Christian scribe to put the Savior's name in front of Barabbas. On the contrary, there is every reason why a scribe would want to disassociate the name of Jesus with this notorious prisoner.

In addition, Matthew 27:17 notes that Pilate included a special identifier for the Lord, specifically "the one called Christ." The most compelling reason to specify Jesus in this way would be to distinguish him from the other Jesus. Therefore, the internal evidence explains why the NIV and a few other translations opt to include Jesus in the name of Barabbas.

This is a case not just where the internal evidence moves us to strongly consider a minority reading, but where the existence of certain translations are also helpful. The earliest New Testament translation into Syrian (fourth century), plus Armenian and Georgian (both traced from the fifth century) show a greater degree of support for the name "Jesus Barabbas."

7. Arriving at a decision when encountering textual variants

This class is not designed to enable you to become a textual scholar. Nor will you quickly be able to assess the manuscript evidence and identify all the issues and factors surround each textual variant. The only goal is to increase your awareness and understanding of the practice of textual criticism, which will serve to help you each time you encounter variants readings. At best, you may be able to understand the reasoning behind textual decisions that underlie our English translations.

These decisions of what to do when encountering a variant were something that has occurred when variants began to appear and be recognized. For example, find Irenaeus dismissing the variant number 616 in Revelation 13:18 as a copyist error in his *Against Heresies* in around 180 A.D. When scribes made copies, they made have had more than one text that they were working from, thus making textual choices when encountering variants. When Greek texts are printed, frequent decisions must be made regarding what Greek text to print. Ultimately, each English translation has made these same choices regarding the best Greek text to translate from.

In the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies, there is an apparatus that we have looked at that provides the manuscript evidence supporting the reading they chose. In addition, they also assigned a letter grade, noted in brackets, to each of the roughly 1,600 variants that they address to inform the reader as to the degree of confidence they have in each of the variants that they address. Their description of their letter grade system is as follows:

- [A] Signifies that the textual choice is certain.
- [B] Signifies that the textual choice is almost certain.
- [C] Signifies that the committee had difficulty in deciding the variant to choose.
- [D] Signifies that the committee had great difficulty in arriving at its decision.

Of the variants that we have addressed in today's class, here is what the United Bible Societies editorial committee gave as the confidence level and the reasons for their textual decisions (their reasons are found in their separately published textual commentary):

Matthew 6:13: The doxology is omitted with a confidence level of A due to its absence in early manuscripts, the nature of the liturgical phrasing and the variety of different forms of the ascription in different manuscripts.

Matthew 24:36: “nor the son” is considered to be original with a level of confidence of B. The external evidence sides with including it as the Alexandrian and Western text-types do. The internal evidence is described as supporting the inclusion also since a scribe would want to soften the doctrinal difficulty by omitting what was there.

Luke 24:53: “blessing God” was chosen over “praising God” the basis of the external evidence, with a confidence level of B.

John 4:1: “Jesus knew” was chosen over “the Lord knew” with a confidence level of C entirely on the weight of the internal evidence, noting that the church used the term “Lord” to refer to Jesus through the years.

Matthew 27:16-17: “Jesus Barabbas” was chosen over the singular “Barabbas” with a confidence level of C, but “in view of the relatively slender external support for [“Jesus”}], however, it was deemed fitting to enclose the word within square brackets. They note that a tenth century uncial (S) has a marginal comment stating, “In many ancient copies which I have met with I found Barabbas himself likewise called “Jesus.” Also noted is that fact that Codex Vaticanus (along with minuscule 1010) includes the Greek word “*τον*” that appears to presuppose that an earlier copy must have had the name Jesus before Barabbas.

8. Application

“Access insights in the text.”