

A Very Brief Introduction to the Critical Apparatus of the Nestle-Aland

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There's a saying about reading the New Testament in Greek: You need to learn two languages to be able to do it—you have to learn Greek and you have to learn the cryptic language of the Nestle-Aland apparatus. This short introduction will acquaint you with the history of the apparatus and how to use it. At the end, there are two appendices—one on “text types” and one on the differences between the Nestle-Aland and the *Greek New Testament* (the one with the burgundy cover).

The 27th edition of the “Nestle-Aland” is the standard Greek text used by most scholars today. It is an eclectic text, which is to say it is composed of bits and pieces of lots of manuscripts, although it reproduces no actual single manuscript from the ancient world. In fact, most editions of ancient Greek and Latin texts work this way when multiple copies of the ancient manuscripts survive (when I say “manuscripts,” I refer to handwritten copies made before the introduction of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century). What makes the New Testament different is that we have many, many more manuscripts than we have for any other document from antiquity. There are over 5,400 known Greek fragments or complete manuscripts of the books of the New Testament, not to mention translations into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and several other languages (compare that to less than 700 manuscripts or fragments of the *Iliad*). These surviving copies of the books of the New Testament also have many, many variations. As the textual critic Bart Ehrman puts it, “there are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”¹

How did this situation come about? It seems that early followers of Jesus circulated copies of their literature (as indicated by the instructions in Colossians 4:16: “When this letter has been read among you all, see to it that it is read among the Laodiceans and that you all also read the letter from the Laodiceans”), and they felt quite free to alter the material as they passed it on. At some point, individuals or groups began making collections of these documents (Paul’s letters or the four gospels, for example).² The result was a multiplicity of readings at a very early date. Ancient authors who wrote commentaries on the books of the New Testament often describe the conflicting manuscripts that they have seen.

At some point in Late Antiquity (the fourth century?), there seems to have been a large-scale revision of the New Testament that produced a new text (variously called “the Byzantine Text,” “the Majority Text,” or “the Koine Text”). This text of the New Testament became extremely popular, and most of our Greek manuscripts of the New Testament from antiquity have this type of text (thus the name, “the Majority Text”).

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3rd ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 481.

² Also see the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians (which likely dates to some time in the first half of the second century) “Just as you requested, we are sending to you the letters of Ignatius (which were sent to us by him) as well as other letters of his that we possess. These are attached to this letter...” (13:2).

The earliest printed editions of the Greek New Testament relied on the Majority Text, which came to be called “the Textus Receptus”—the received, or accepted, text. Early translations into the European vernaculars used these printed editions (the King James Version is based on the Textus Receptus). As time wore on, some editors who produced Greek New Testaments cited variants in footnotes, which could be quite extensive, as in J.J. Wettstein’s 1751-2 edition. As Europe’s colonial exploits in the Middle East increased, so did the number of ancient manuscripts that became available to European scholars. Large uncial codices (such as Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century C.E.) came to light. These manuscripts were much older than most of the manuscripts of the Majority Text, and they showed a number of striking variations from the Textus Receptus.

As this variance became clearer, scholars producing new editions of the Greek New Testament began to adapt some of the older readings into their texts and remove the Textus Receptus readings down to the footnotes. The two key editions in this respect were that of Constantin von Tischendorf in 1869-72 and that of B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort (usually just called “Westcott/Hort,” published in 1881-2). Westcott/Hort relied heavily on Vaticanus, while Tischendorf gave preference to Sinaiticus.

In 1898, Eberhard Nestle published a hybrid text by combining the edition of Westcott/Hort with that of Tischendorf. Nestle thus created a text based on all the agreements between the two editions. Where Westcott/Hort differed from Tischendorf, Nestle used a third edition to decide the dispute. The early editions of Nestle’s Greek text had a small apparatus listing the alternative readings of Tischendorf, Westcott/Hort, and others. Nestle’s edition was inexpensive and popular, and it slowly came to dominate the market for Greek editions of the New Testament.

By this point, we have reached the turn of the twentieth century, which was the golden age of the discovery of papyri in Egypt. The influx of papyrus fragments of the New Testament made the text critical picture more complex, since these papyri seem to be as old as the oldest uncials, if not slightly older. Eberhard Nestle’s son, Erwin continued to produce editions of the “Nestle” text, slowly taking into account new discoveries.

In 1963, Erwin Nestle, with the help of Kurt Aland, revised the method of citing ancient manuscripts in the 25th edition of Nestle’s Greek text. This more extensive notation of manuscripts and set of critical signs closely resembles that of our familiar 27th edition of Nestle-Aland. The reasoning behind this particular page formatting is illuminating. Erwin Nestle wrote in the introduction to that 25th edition that the eclectic text with sigla and an apparatus is ideal for “those who want to concentrate only on the text itself, without noticing the variations, [because they] will easily get used to overlooking these signs” (64*). The signs (and the apparatus) are thus *intended* to be easily ignored. *The idea is to project a veneer of uniformity when what in fact exists is plurality.* It is important to remember that there are other ways of presenting “the” New Testament that have the opposite intent—to emphasize diversity and draw the eye to the differences in the manuscripts. Consider the image below, an excerpt from a page of Reuben Swanson’s edition of Galatians:³

³ Reuben J. Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus: Galatians* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999), 59.

ΠΡΟΣ ΓΑΛΑΤΑΣ

4.24-25

γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δὲ	Ἀγάρ	Σεινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	B-D
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δὲ	Σεινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	ᾤ ⁴⁶	
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δὲ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	A 69 88 330 1175 u[w]
γεννώσα, <u>εἴτις</u>	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δὲ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1319
<u>γενώσα</u> , ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δε	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	2464
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ δὲ	Ἀγάρ	ὅρος Σινᾶ	ἐστὶν	2400
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν	25					999
		25				ὅρος ἐστὶν	1573
<u>γενώσα</u> , ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25			Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1352*
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25			Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1243 1352 ^c 1874*
..... Ἀγάρ	25				Σινᾶ	2344
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν ὃν	κ	
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	C	
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος	1739	
<u>γενόσα</u> , <u>ἥτις</u>	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	F*	
<u>γενώσα</u> , <u>ἥτις</u>	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	F ^c G	
<u>γενώσα</u> , ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1241 ^s	
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	ἄρα	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1874 ^c
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ἐστὶν ὅρος	Ψ 1505 1611 2495
<u>γενώσα</u> , ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	618 1245* 1646
γεννώσα, <u>εἴτις</u>	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	L
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος	1827 [↓614 796 910 927 945]
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	P [↓226 323 440 460 489 517 547]
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	K 056 075 1 6 33 104 131 205 209
γεννώσα, ἥτις	ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ.	25	τὸ γάρ	Ἀγάρ	Σινᾶ	ὅρος ἐστὶν	1242 1245 ^c 1270 1315 1424 1448 1734 1735 1738 1836 1837 1854 1891 1982 2125 2147 2412 2815 [w]τ Er ¹
ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ	συνστοιχεῖ	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	Ἱερουσαλὴμ,	δουλεύει	B ᾤ ⁴⁶ D ^c 33 w
ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ	ἢ <u>συνστοιχοῦσα</u>	τῇ	νῦν	Ἱερουσαλὴμ,	δουλεύει		F G
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συστοιχεῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	ἰλημ,	δουλεύει	6 205 209 1505 1827 2495
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συστοιχεῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	Ἱερουσαλὴμ,	δουλεύει	1611
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συστοιχεῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	Ἱερουσαλὴμ,	δουλεύει	1175
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συστοιχεῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	ἰλημ,	δουλεύει	A
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συστοιχῇ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	ἰλημ,	δουλεύει	2464
ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ	<u>συστοιχοῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	ἰλημ,	δουλεύει	1243
ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ	<u>συστοιχοῖ</u>	δὲ	τῇ	νῦν	ἰλημ,	δουλεύει	1245
ἐν τῇ <u>Ἀραβίᾳ</u>	<u>συνστοιχοῦσα</u>	τῇ	νῦν	Ἱερουσαλὴμ,	δουλεύει		D* [↓927 1424 2125]

The layout of Swanson's text is disconcerting (but in a productive way—the variety of the texts is manifest). The drawback of such a presentation is the amount of space it takes up, and this is the chief benefit of Nestle-Aland—its handbook format. It packs an astounding amount of information into an incredibly small space.⁴ To access that information, however, one must understand and be able to use the critical apparatus.

The Nestle-Aland apparatus contains basically two kinds of symbols—abbreviations of names of manuscripts and the “critical sigla”—symbols indicating common types of differences among manuscripts. There is a key to the critical sigla in the Introduction to your Nestle-Aland (pp. 49*-83*, or if you read Latin, a condensed key is on pp. 807-10) and a more thorough description of the manuscripts in the appendices (pp. 684-718). These are good for reference, but I provide a short introduction to the most important symbols here. You should work to memorize these symbols (for instance, when you see “κ” in the apparatus, you should know that this sign refers to Codex Sinaiticus and that this codex comes from the fourth century and is thus an important witness).

⁴ It is important to note, though, that the Nestle-Aland is not a critical edition; it does not report the readings of all the extant manuscripts. A project that more nearly approaches that kind of thoroughness is now underway in Germany, and a few of the early volumes have been published.

SOME IMPORTANT ABBREVIATIONS IN THE APPARATUS

MANUSCRIPTS

Uncial manuscripts (those written on parchment in upright block letters) are abbreviated in the apparatus using a number in the form 0XXX. An older system of letters (mostly English, but occasionally Greek or Hebrew) is used for the most well-known codices.

	Name	Date	Contents
Ⲛ	01 Sinaiticus	4 th cent. C.E.	Almost complete NT; also has Ep. of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas
A	02 Alexandrinus	5 th cent. C.E.	Almost complete NT; also has 1 and 2 Clement
B	03 Vaticanus	4 th cent. C.E.	Almost complete NT
C	04 Ephraemi Syri Rescriptus	5 th cent. C.E.	Almost complete NT
D ^{ea}	05 Bezae Cantabrigiensis	5 th cent. C.E.	Gospels, Acts Greek-Latin diglot
D ^p	06 Claromontanus	6 th cent. C.E.	Pauline letters Greek-Latin diglot
G	012 Boernerianus	9 th cent. C.E.	Pauline letters Greek-Latin diglot
Θ	038 Koridethianus	9 th cent. C.E.	Gospels Scribe may not have known Greek

Ⲙ This symbol is used to indicate the reading of “the Majority Text”

*You’ll note that there are two “D” abbreviations. These are two different codices; so when you see D in the apparatus of the gospels and Acts, it refers to Codex Bezae, but when you see D in the Pauline letters, it refers to Codex Claromontanus. This phenomenon occurs with several of the “letter” abbreviations.

Minuscule manuscripts (those written on parchment in cursive letters) are abbreviated in the apparatus with a number in the form XXX (in contrast to the uncials, there is no initial zero). The most important minuscule manuscripts are usually referenced by a group name that designates a “family” of manuscripts with similar texts, abbreviated *f*^{xx} in the apparatus. The two most important are:

family 1 (*f*¹) consists of 1, 118, 131, 209, 1582; headed by Minuscule 1 (12th cent.); contains the gospels, Acts, and the Pauline letters; its text resembles Θ

family 13 (*f*¹³) consists of 12 mss. headed by Minuscule 13 (13th cent.); contains the gospels; its text resembles Θ

Papyrus fragments appear in the apparatus with the symbol ⲡ followed by a numeral. The most important are:

ⲡ ⁴⁵	Chester Beatty Biblical Papyrus I	3 rd cent. C.E.; gospels and Acts
ⲡ ⁴⁶	Chester Beatty Biblical Papyrus II	3 rd cent. C.E.; Pauline letters (did not contain pastorals)
ⲡ ⁶⁶	Bodmer Papyrus II (plus other frags.)	3 rd cent. C.E.; John
ⲡ ⁷²	Bodmer Papyrus VII-VIII	4 th cent. C.E.; earliest copy of Jude, 1 and 2 Peter
ⲡ ⁷⁵	Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV	3 rd cent. C.E.; Luke and John; text is very close to B

The apparatus also cites lectionaries (abbreviates these with the symbol *l* followed by a series of numerals) and church fathers as witnesses. The church fathers are especially useful because, unlike most early manuscripts, they allow us to pinpoint precisely where and when a certain reading was in circulation. They are problematic because their texts, just like those of the New Testament, have been altered in the course of transmission.

You may sometimes see an asterisk (*) or a superscript number after one of the manuscript abbreviations. These signs distinguish the work of the original scribe from that of correctors. Thus B* would be the original scribe of Vaticanus, while B¹ would indicate the first corrector of that passage in Vaticanus.

CRITICAL SIGLA

The critical sigla (the small signs interspersed throughout the text) are explained in the Introduction to the Nestle-Aland on pages 44*-83*. Here are some of the most important:

- The word following this sign is omitted in some manuscripts.
- ⱱ The word following this sign is different in some manuscripts.
- Ⱳ At this point, some manuscripts contain an additional word or words.
- ⱳ \ The words enclosed between these two signs are absent in some manuscripts.
- ⱴ \ The words enclosed between these two signs are different in some manuscripts.
- Ⱶ The word or verse following this sign is transposed as indicated in the apparatus (e.g. Luke 6:5)
- ⱶ ⱷ The words enclosed between these two signs occur in a different order in some manuscripts; the apparatus indicates the order by the use of numerals in italics: *1 3 4 2*.

If the same critical sign is repeated within a single verse, a dot is added to the second occurrence (ⱱ̇ or Ⱳ̇).

There are also a few English and Latin abbreviations that occur frequently in the apparatus and are worth learning:

txt = "text" The manuscripts listed after this have the text of the variant printed in Nestle-Aland

pc = pauci = "a few"

pm = permulti = "a great many"

al = alii = "others"

rell = reliqui = "the rest"

cet = ceteri = "some others"

Finally, the translations of the New Testament into other languages are also abbreviated:

it = Itala = "Old Latin"

vg = Vulgate

latt = all Latin witnesses

sy = Syriac

Abbreviations for Coptic manuscripts include ac, bo, mae, mf, pbo, and sa.

The Rest of the Typical Nestle-Aland Page

Arabic numerals in *italics* on the inner margins are "Kephalaia," or "chapter numbers" present in some manuscripts.

Arabic numerals on top of Roman numerals on the inner margins occur in the gospels and refer to Eusebius' system of organizing a kind of parallel gospel.

Text on the outer margins are simply topical cross references to other scriptures (exact quotations in *italics*).

If you master this information, you are in good shape. Anything foreign that you encounter in the apparatus can be looked up in the Introduction and appendices of Nestle-Aland. Learning these symbols will allow you to extract information from the apparatus. Putting that information to use in making text critical decisions about what might be the "original" text of a passage requires a bit more information. A nod in that direction is given in Appendix 1 below.

Appendix 1: What Makes a Manuscript “Important”?

A Brief Introduction to Textual Types

When classical scholars produce a Greek text (of, say, Plato), they arrange the surviving ancient manuscripts into families, creating a stemma that traces the manuscripts back to a small number of archetypes. Carrying out such a procedure on the New Testament is nearly impossible due to the large number of surviving manuscripts and the great variety of readings in these manuscripts. Text critics of the New Testament will, however, often talk about “text-types,” groups of manuscripts linked by the similarity of their contents. The “types” sometimes have geographical names but do not really have geographical significance. The types are:

Byzantine (also called the Majority Text, the Koine, the Syrian, etc.): This type, so it is argued, reflects a revision made in Late Antiquity. It is the most polished and found in the majority of ancient manuscripts. When its text conflicts with other types, particularly the Alexandrian, textual critics usually think the Byzantine text is secondary.

Alexandrian: This is the textual type in Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Textual critics seem to think this textual type is a fairly reliable witness to the “original” text of the documents of the New Testament.

Western: This is the textual type represented in Codex Bezae (for the gospels and Acts) and Codices Claromontanus, Augiensis, and Boernerianus (for Paul’s letters). This text is also represented by the “Old Latin” translation. The Western text is usually longer than the Alexandrian (a full 10% longer in the case of Acts); so some text critics (like Westcott/Hort) proposed that when a Western reading is shorter than an Alexandrian, the Western is likely more “original.”

Caesarean: Many scholars argue that this classification should not exist. The text is generally speaking longer than the Alexandrian and shorter than the Western. The main representatives of this type of text are the minuscules in family 1 and family 13 as well as Codex Koridethianus (for the gospel of Mark; otherwise the text of Koridethianus is Byzantine).

Textual critics decide on the most “original” reading by using “external” and “internal” criteria. The internal criteria deal with things like the immediate context of the passage and the author’s writing style; the external criteria concern the manuscripts. It is the latter that concerns us here. Textual critics “weigh” the manuscript evidence; that is, they don’t simply count up the manuscripts supporting one reading versus the manuscripts containing another reading and select the winner; doing so would always result in selecting the Majority Text reading. Rather, they consider factors like the antiquity of the manuscript evidence for a given reading and the “geographical” spread of the manuscript support for a reading.

List of Important Manuscripts Arranged by “Textual Type”

Byzantine: \mathfrak{M} (most of our ancient manuscripts)

Alexandrian: \aleph B \mathfrak{P}^{66} \mathfrak{P}^{72} \mathfrak{P}^{75}

Western: D^{ea} D^p G Old Latin

Caesarean: \mathfrak{P}^{45} Θ (Mark) f^1 f^{13}

Many of our earlier manuscripts (like A, C, and \mathfrak{P}^{46}) vary in “textual type” from book to book, which likely indicates a multiplicity of readings even before the documents were assembled into collections.

Appendix 2: What's the Difference between the Nestle-Aland and the UBS *Greek New Testament* (with the burgundy cover)?

The United Bible Societies produces both editions, and both editions print the same Greek text. The *Greek New Testament* (GNT), however, provides far fewer variant readings than does the Nestle-Aland, but for the variants that it does show, the GNT often gives fuller attestation (that is, it lists more manuscripts supporting each reading). Thus, if one wants to get a feel for the extent of the variation within the manuscript tradition, the NA is a better choice than the GNT, but if you want a fuller list of manuscripts for a given variant, you should check the GNT. The reasoning behind this difference is a bit odd: The editors say that the GNT is mainly for those who wish to translate the NT into modern languages, while the Nestle-Aland is intended more for scholars. Why these two groups would need or want texts with differing apparatuses is a mystery to me.

The other feature that distinguishes the GNT is its letter rating system of variants. For example, if the editors feel very certain that the variant printed in the text is original, it will be assigned the letter "A." If, however, there is a lot of doubt about whether the variant printed in the text is original, then they would give the variant a rating of "C." These ratings, however, have changed from edition to edition with no discernable reasoning, a phenomenon discussed in a brilliant little book by Kent D. Clarke, *Textual Optimism: A Critique of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). Consider this book required reading if you ever want to make use of the GNT's "letter" rating system.

A Few Tools of Interest

Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (2nd ed, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). This book is full of useful information, but that information is buried in (largely unjustified) polemics against other scholars. If you want a good list of manuscripts and their contents, just xerox the pages containing the lists of manuscripts and their descriptions (it is the easiest to find and most complete list of manuscripts known up to 1987).

Bruce Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). An old-fashioned (but very good) guide to the practice of textual criticism of the New Testament.

D.C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). A superb introduction to the practice of textual criticism that emphasizes the "living" character of each individual manuscript.

Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Reprint ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). An excellent discussion of how and why scribes creatively changed the manuscripts of the New Testament.