

sensitive approach to literary parallels; Arthur Darby Nock's *Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933), for its perceptive handling of Greco-Roman modes of religious experience; and Ramsay MacMullen's *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966), for its pioneering insights into the discourse of alienation in the empire.

*From: Hearing the
New Testament (Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).*

7. Textual Criticism of the New Testament

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Unlike other methods discussed in this book, textual criticism is not an "option" for interpreters of the NT. Whereas other approaches presuppose the wording of the text under consideration, textual criticism determines that wording. To put the matter somewhat differently, we cannot begin to explore what a text means until we know what it says. Rather than interpreting the text, textual criticism decides which words belong in the text. For this reason, textual criticism is a foundational discipline — indeed, *the* foundational discipline — for NT studies.

1. Why Textual Criticism Is Needed

We need the discipline of textual criticism because we do not have the original manuscripts of any of the books of the NT. What we have are copies that were made much later than the originals, in most instances many centuries later. These later copies were not themselves made from the autographs;¹ they were instead made from copies of copies of copies of the autographs. The problem with these later copies, the ones that have survived to our day, is that they all differ from one another to a greater or lesser

1. The term "autograph" comes from the Greek *auto-graphos*, meaning literally, "written with one's own hand." It is used to refer to the original manuscript produced by an author.

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extent. Textual criticism examines these surviving manuscripts² — and there are thousands of them — and tries to decide on the basis of established critical principles what the originals themselves must have said.

Only with the invention of moveable type four hundred years ago was it possible to mass-produce literature with absolute accuracy, one copy appearing exactly like another. In antiquity, exact replications of texts were virtually impossible. When an author produced a book, he or she had to have it copied by hand; anyone else wanting a copy needed to produce it for himself or herself or hire a professional scribe to do so. Thus, to use an illustration from the NT, whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew no doubt produced his text for his own community. If other members of the community wanted a copy for themselves, they would have to go through the laborious and painstaking process of copying it, one word at a time. Or if a Christian from a neighboring community wanted a copy, he or she would have to go through the same process. We can assume that Christians from different locations did in fact want to have copies of such valuable works. This led to a proliferation of copies, made by different Christians from different places, most of them private individuals rather than professional scribes, with differing aptitudes for the task.

The difficulty with making handwritten copies of such a long text as Matthew, or even shorter ones, is that it is nearly impossible to do so without making mistakes. (Anyone who doubts this should try to copy the Gospel of Matthew by hand, a text of about thirty-four pages in my NRSV Bible.) Moreover, anyone who makes a copy not of the original text, but of a copy of the original, will not only make new mistakes, but will also reproduce the mistakes created by the person who made the copy being used. In this way, mistakes multiply from copy to copy. Sometimes, of course, a copyist may detect a mistake in the manuscript he or she is using (for example, when the previous scribe has accidentally left out a word or an entire verse — a fairly common occurrence in our manuscripts). When this happens, the scribe producing the new copy may try to correct the error. Unfortunately, if the original is not available for checking, the “correction” may not restore the reading of the original, but introduce a new error, which will then be copied by the next copyist. And so it goes. Copies of copies of copies, each with its own errors and the errors of the copy from which it was produced.

2. The term “manuscript” is Latin, meaning “hand-written” (*manus* = hand; *scriptum* = something written). It typically refers to any handwritten text.

Moreover, we know from a study of ancient manuscripts that errors were not always accidental. Sometimes scribes felt inclined to change the text that they read. For example, copyists who came to a verse like Matt 24:36 — which indicates that no one, not even the Son of God himself, knows when the end will come — could well take offense at the idea that Christ did not know the time of his own return (this was especially a problem for scribes who were convinced that Christ was none other than God). This might lead a scribe to modify the text. Indeed, in this case it often *did* lead to a modification: A number of our manuscripts omit the words “not even the Son” from Matt 24:36. Scribes who made this change no doubt saw it as a “correction” or an “improvement,” but textual critics, concerned to know what Matthew himself wrote, would label it a “corruption.”³

To this point we have been speaking chiefly in the abstract about scribes inadvertently and intentionally modifying the texts of the NT that they copied. What, though, are the concrete realities? Were there in fact a large number of such errors? For us to realize the extent of the problem, some basic data may prove useful. At present, we have over 5360 manuscripts of all or part of the NT in Greek (the language in which all its books were originally written).⁴ These manuscripts range in size from tiny fragments the size of a credit card to hefty volumes that include all twenty-seven books of the NT. They range in date from the early second century⁵ to the sixteenth century (some copies were made by hand even after the invention of moveable-type printing). What is striking is that among these thousands of manuscripts, with the exception of the smallest fragments, no two are exactly alike in all of their particulars.

The manuscripts themselves thus leave no question that scribes made changes in their texts, and many such changes. How many differences are

3. The term “corruption” is used by textual critics to refer to any modification of the original text, whether intentional or accidental.

4. Newly discovered manuscripts are numbered at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster, Germany, which was founded by Kurt Aland and is now directed by Barbara Aland. For the numbers of the surviving manuscripts and brief descriptions of many of them, see the Alands’ book *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leiden: Brill, 1987).

5. The oldest surviving fragment is the tiny p⁵², which contains several verses from John 18. It is usually dated to the first half of the second century, i.e., some 30-50 years after the Gospel itself was written.

there among our surviving manuscripts? While estimates typically put them in the hundreds of thousands, no one knows the real number for certain because no one has yet been able to count them all. What we can say with confidence is that there are more differences among the manuscripts than there are words in the NT.

This is not to say that we are totally at a loss when trying to decide what the *original* text of the NT was. In fact, the vast majority of the differences in our manuscripts are insignificant, irrelevant, and easy to explain. Far and away the most common mistakes involve differences in spelling; many others involve accidental omissions of words and phrases by careless scribes.

There are, however, a large number of cases where the wording of a passage differs significantly among our manuscripts in ways that are critical for exegesis. In these instances, textual critics have to balance the arguments for one form of the text over those for another and then render a judgment as to which appears to be the original text and which a corruption of it by a later scribe.

To illustrate the potential significance of such differences, we might consider some of the more famous and striking examples. Did the author of the Gospel of Mark end his narrative at 16:8 with the women fleeing Jesus' empty tomb in fear, telling no one what they had seen? Or did the author write the final twelve verses found in some of our manuscripts but not in others, verses in which the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and tells them that those who believe in him will be able to handle deadly snakes and drink poison without suffering harm? Did the author of the Fourth Gospel write the famous story of the woman taken in adultery, or was this a later addition to the Gospel by a well-meaning scribe? The story is found in many of our later manuscripts between chapters 7 and 8, but in none of the early manuscripts. Did the voice at Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Luke originally declare "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (exactly the words found in Mark's account), or did it proclaim "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (as the text is worded in some of our earliest witnesses)? The latter version, a quotation of Psalm 2, proved acceptable to second-century Christians who denied that Jesus was God by insisting that he came to be "adopted" as God's Son at his baptism. As a final example, did the author of 1 John include the famous "Johannine comma" (5:7-8), the only passage in the entire Bible that explicitly affirms the trinitarian views of later Christians — that the Godhead consists of three persons and that "these three are one"? Even though the

passage is part of the Latin Bible and found its way into the King James Version, it does not occur in any Greek manuscript of the NT earlier than the fourteenth century.

2. The Theory and Practice of Textual Criticism

Since all of our surviving manuscripts have mistakes, scholars must decide the original wording of the text on a case-by-case basis. The process of making this decision in view of the whole range of evidence is sometimes called the "eclectic" method.⁶ In rough terms, the textual evidence is classified either as "external" — that is, based on the kinds of manuscripts that support one reading or the other — or "internal" — that is, based on the likelihood of a reading going back to the original author or to an error introduced by a scribe.

2.1 External Evidence

Since our only access to the words of the NT authors comes through the flawed manuscripts of their writings, it is important to understand how critics use these witnesses when trying to reconstruct the original text. First it is necessary to know about the kinds of manuscript evidence that are available.

a. *Greek Manuscripts.* The more than 5360 Greek manuscripts of all or part of the NT range in date, as we have seen, from the early second century through the sixteenth. Very few, however, are from the earlier period, down to about the year 400.

Greek manuscripts are normally divided into three main categories.⁷ The papyri, that is, those written on papyrus,⁸ are the earliest available witnesses, most of them dating from the second to the fifth centuries; the majuscules were written on parchment or vellum in uncial letters — com-

6. From the Greek word ἐκλέγω (*eklegō*), "choose."

7. For more detailed information see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (3d ed., New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1993) ch. 1.

8. Papyrus was a reed that grew in Egypt from which was manufactured the principal writing material of antiquity, analogous in texture to a very rough grade of paper. For a more precise description, including a brief discussion of the manufacturing process itself, see Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 3-4.

parable to our English “capitals” — from roughly the fourth to the ninth centuries; the minuscules were written on parchment or vellum, but in minuscule (= small) letters — comparable to our English “cursive” — after the ninth century.

b. Early Versions. In addition to the Greek witnesses, we have a large number of NT manuscripts produced in other languages. Christians from the second century on recognized the need for translations of the Scriptures into other languages for those who did not read or speak Greek. The earliest translations were probably into Syriac and Latin, perhaps as early as the late second or early third centuries; sometime thereafter the NT was translated into Coptic, and eventually into Armenian, Ethiopic, Georgian, Gothic, and other languages. Like the Greek NT, each of these versions survives in a number of manuscripts, all of which, again, appear to contain mistakes.⁹

It is possible to compare the various manuscripts of any of the versions to decide what the earliest form of the translation was, to take that form and translate it back into Greek, and on that basis to decide what form of the Greek text was available to the original translator. Needless to say, this is an arduous and technical process, but it does produce useful results for scholars concerned to learn what Greek manuscripts were available in the early period when the versions were made — the period from which, unfortunately, very few actual Greek manuscripts survive.

c. Patristic quotations. Finally, we have numerous Christian writings from the second century on; the authors of these works frequently quote the NT, making it theoretically possible to reconstruct the wording of the manuscripts that they themselves were using. This particular kind of external evidence is especially fraught with uncertainty, as it is not always easy to decide whether an author is quoting exactly or simply paraphrasing; moreover, these early writings have also been handed down to us only in manuscripts produced by scribes who sometimes changed quotations found in their texts in conformity with the wording of the Scriptures as they themselves knew them. Nonetheless, when this kind of evidence is studied carefully, it can prove quite valuable; unlike the scribes of our surviving Greek manuscripts and the early versions, the patristic writers can be fixed in time and space. We know exactly when and where most of

9. Since Latin became the official language of Western Christendom, there are a particularly large number of Latin manuscripts, nearly twice the number of Greek manuscripts.

them lived; their quotations can therefore indicate with relative certainty how the text of the NT had been changed in different times and places.

How can these thousands of bits of data be used to determine the original text wherever there are differences among our witnesses? Over the years, scholars have devised a number of principles of criticism, some of which, as we will see, are of greater use than others. These principles can be expressed in terms of questions that a critic will bring to a passage that is attested in a variety of ways among different witnesses.

a. How many witnesses support each reading? For some critics, this is the all-important question; others, however, discount it entirely. Those who support this principle argue that if a passage is worded in one way in three hundred manuscripts but differently in only three, it is more likely that the majority text is original and that the three aberrant witnesses have simply incorporated a mistake.

The problem with this logic is that it overlooks an important feature of our manuscript evidence. All of our witnesses were copied from one another. Suppose that at some time during the second century there were two manuscripts with a different reading for a particular verse. One was in a remote area, and came to be copied three times before being destroyed in a fire. The other was in a major metropolitan area with a large Christian population; it was copied thirty times, and each of the copies made from it was copied ten times. At the end of this process, there would be three hundred and one manuscripts with one reading and three with the other. Does that mean that the three hundred and one are correct and the three are in error? Not necessarily! In fact, the numerical difference in the manuscript support for the two readings is not three hundred and one to three, but one to one. Each reading goes back to a solitary manuscript of the same time period. For this reason, simply counting the number of manuscripts supporting a reading is not the best way to decide the original text.

b. Which reading is supported by the most ancient manuscripts? The same illustration shows the importance of knowing the *date* of the witnesses supporting each variant reading. If there are two hundred manuscripts from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries with a particular form of the text, but two from the third century with a different form, then the form supported by the two may well be superior to that found in the two hundred. The logic here is that since manuscripts become *increasingly* corrupt with the passage of time (since copyists reproduce the mistakes of their predecessors as well as create some of their own), the earlier manuscripts as a rule will be better than the later ones.

Although this argument is generally valid, it, too, is not entirely fool-proof. Suppose there are two manuscripts with different forms of the text, one from the third century and the other from the fifth. A critic might naturally think that the third-century witness is superior since it is older. But we cannot always be certain about the age of each manuscript's *exemplar*, that is, the copy that the scribe used to produce the manuscript. It is entirely possible, for example, that the third-century manuscript had as its exemplar a manuscript made ten years earlier, still in the third century, whereas the copyist of the fifth-century manuscript had access to a very old copy preserved in his church library, say, from the second century. In this case, ironically enough, the fifth-century manuscript would reproduce an older form of the text than the third-century manuscript! For this reason, even though the age of a manuscript can be important in determining the quality of its text, it is by no means a failsafe guide.

c. *How geographically diverse is the attestation for each reading?* Less problematic is the matter of the geographic distribution of a reading. Here again the principle can be stated simply. If manuscripts support two different forms of a passage, with one of the forms restricted to witnesses produced in only one geographical area (Italy, for instance), whereas the other is found in witnesses spread throughout the Mediterranean (e.g., Northern Africa, Alexandria, Syria, Asia Minor, Gaul, and Spain), then the former is more likely a local variation reproduced by scribes in the region, and the other is more likely older since it was more widely known. If witnesses supporting a reading are *both* early and widespread, a strong case can be made that this reading is original.

d. *What is the "quality" of the supporting witnesses?* As in a court of law, there are some textual witnesses that are more reliable than others. The general principle of external evidence is that witnesses that are *known* to produce an inferior text — when the case can be decided with a high degree of certainty (on the "internal" grounds discussed below) — are also likely to produce an inferior text where the internal evidence is more ambiguous. Witnesses, like people, can be trusted or suspected, and through years of careful study scholars have decided that certain manuscripts (for example, some of the papyri, like p^{75} , and some of the majuscules, like Codex B) can be trusted more than others.

e. *Which "groups" of witnesses support the variant readings?* Scholars have long recognized that some manuscripts are closely related to one another in the sense that they typically support the same wording of the text in a large number of passages. Witnesses can thus be grouped together

in light of their resemblances. Today three major groups are widely recognized: The "Alexandrian" witnesses, which include most of the earliest and "best" manuscripts as judged by their overall quality, may ultimately go back to the form of text preserved among scholars in Alexandria, Egypt; the "Western" witnesses, which are misnamed since some of them derive from the East, are manuscripts associated with codex D in the Gospels and Acts and appear to preserve an early but generally unreliable form of the text;¹⁰ the "Byzantine" witnesses, which include the vast majority of later manuscripts, are almost universally judged by scholars to preserve an inferior form of the text.¹¹ The general rule of thumb for most critics is that readings attested only in Byzantine or only in Western witnesses are highly suspect; readings found among the Alexandrian witnesses are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, especially when they are also attested by witnesses of the other two groups.

In summary, it usually does not matter how many manuscripts support one or another reading (unless there is literally only one supporting witness, in which case we can almost always suspect that an individual scribe made a mistake). It is much more important to know the *age* of the supporting witnesses: the more ancient the better. But what matters even more is the geographical diversity, general quality, and textual grouping of the witnesses that support a reading. Readings found in the oldest, most widespread, and best manuscripts are more likely to be original than their variants.

2.2 Internal Evidence

With "internal" evidence we turn from considering the strength of the manuscript support for a reading to evaluating the competing merits of the variant readings in and of themselves. If a verse is found in two or more different forms in the manuscript tradition, which can be judged to be corruptions? And which is the original? Since these are two different questions — even though they eventually lead to the same result — scholars have identified two basic kinds of internal evidence. The first considers

10. One of the major debates among textual critics over the past century has been the overall quality of the "Western" witnesses. Some specialists continue to argue that the Western text is generally superior to the Alexandrian text. This continues, though, to be the opinion of only a small minority.

11. Some advocates of the King James Version continue to contend that the Byzantine witnesses more reliably represent the original text. None of the leading textual scholars in North America or Europe, however, takes this stance.

“transcriptional probabilities,” by asking which readings were more likely to appeal to the interests and concerns of scribes (and thus to have been created by them when they “transcribed,” and sometimes changed, the text); the other considers “intrinsic probabilities” by asking which readings appear to conform more closely with the language, style, and theology of the NT author and are thus intrinsically more likely to be original.

First we consider a range of issues relating to *transcriptional probabilities*. As already indicated, the majority of changes in our manuscripts can be ascribed not to the intentional manipulations of the copyists but simply to scribal accidents occasioned, for instance, by fatigue or carelessness. Transcriptional probabilities can come into play in determining where these kinds of changes have occurred. Apart from mistakes in spelling, one of the most common kinds of transcriptional error involves the accidental omission of words, phrases, or even lines. This kind of mistake is quite understandable: Not only was transcribing a Greek text slow and arduous work, but it also had to be done from exemplars that were often difficult to read. The oldest Greek manuscripts do not include punctuation or paragraph divisions; indeed, there are not even spaces left between words. As a result, when a scribe copied a word or a phrase, his eye would sometimes return to the page at the wrong place — alighting, for example, on the same word repeated later in the sentence. By resuming his copying at that point, then, the scribe would accidentally leave out the entire text between the two occurrences of the word. We have instances of scribes omitting not only phrases and lines in this way, but also entire pages!

Conversely, if the scribe’s eye returned to the page at an *earlier* occurrence of a word, he could inadvertently repeat everything he had already copied. While these kinds of accidental errors are intriguing because they show how difficult it must have been to transcribe texts, they are for the most part unimportant for knowing what the originals were. They can be easily detected and disposed of as corruptions.

Far more interesting are changes that scribes appear to have made intentionally. Based on both common sense and hard data, scholars have been able to show that scribes were more likely to create certain kinds of readings than others. That is to say, when scribes changed their texts, they appear to have done so in detectable ways. The basic principle at work under transcriptional probability is the famous dictum, which may initially appear somewhat backward, that “the more difficult reading is to be preferred as original.” The logic behind this principle is that Christian scribes, who had a vested interest in the texts they were copying, were more likely

to make a passage easier to understand than more difficult. That is, if and when scribes were actually thinking about what they were doing, they were more likely, on average, to produce a text that made better sense rather than worse sense.

A careful study of the manuscripts of the NT reveals that scribes characteristically made several kinds of changes to “improve” the sense of the text. As is the case for many modern Christians, scribes were often puzzled or disturbed by the presence of parallel passages in the NT, especially in the Gospels, in which the same story is worded in different (sometimes contradictory) ways. When scribes were more conversant with one of the Gospel accounts, they would sometimes modify the text of the others, making them agree word for word. In Luke 3:16, for example, John the Baptist declares “I baptize you in water.” Several scribes appear to have been familiar with the longer statement that John makes in Matt 3:11 and have added the appropriate final phrase to their copies of Luke so that the Baptist is more explicit, saying: “I baptize you in water *unto repentance*.” Three verses later we learn of John’s reproach of Herod “for Herodias, his brother’s wife.” Some manuscripts have conformed this text to the parallel passage found in both Mark 6:17 and Matt 14:3 by adding the brother’s name. The harmonized text now has John reproach Herod “for Herodias, his brother *Philip’s* wife.”

Sometimes scribes changed a verse by making it conform with a phrase that was *not* found in a parallel passage but was nonetheless familiar in popular Christian usage. This happens, for example, in Luke 3:10, where the crowds ask John “What then shall we do?” Several scribes, perhaps instinctively reflecting their knowledge of the famous scene of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:30, added a clause that probably struck them as natural, so that now John is asked “What then shall we do, *that we might be saved?*”

Scribes sometimes added a graphic detail or a rhetorical flourish to a text they copied. An example occurs in one manuscript, the famous codex D, in Luke 3:16. Here, rather than stating that “John answered, saying to all of them,” the text makes the more striking statement that “John, knowing what they were thinking, said. . . .” Yet more frequently, scribes sometimes “improved” a passage by changing its grammar. This is especially common in passages that preserve unusual or incorrect Greek syntax; but it also occurs in places where the change simply appears to help the sense. In his quotation of Isaiah 40 in Luke 3:5, John states that “the crooked ways shall be made into a straight (path).” The word “path” is not actually found in the Greek text, but, as with other occurrences of the adjective “straight,” has to be supplied in our English translations from the context. The difficulty is that while the adjective

("straight") is singular, the noun that precedes it is plural ("crooked ways"). The grammar is not incorrect, but nonetheless appears to have puzzled some scribes, who changed the text simply by making the adjective plural as well, so that the (numerous) crooked ways are not transformed into a solitary straight path, but into "straight paths."

Probably the most interesting kinds of changes that scribes made in their texts are theological in nature. On occasion scribes modified their texts either to eliminate a doctrinally troublesome reference (as in Matt 24:36, mentioned above) or to insert a notion that was theologically significant.¹² This kind of motivation may lie behind the change made by several scribes of the Syriac text of Luke 3:4. In these manuscripts, rather than saying "prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths," John is said to have proclaimed "prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God." This modified reading is interesting because it conforms John's proclamation more closely to the passage in Isaiah 40 that he quotes. What is yet more significant, however, is how the modified text functions within the context of Luke's Gospel. In the original text, John is said to announce the coming of Jesus, the Lord. For the scribes of these Syriac manuscripts, however, Jesus is more than the Lord; he is now said to be "our God."¹³

In view of the kinds of changes scribes appear likely to have made (judging not only from common sense, but also from the evidence that we have available to us), transcriptional probabilities can be set forth as guidelines for deciding which variant readings represent corruptions and which the original text. Scribes were more likely to harmonize two passages than to make them differ; they were more likely to make a passage more graphic than less; they were more likely to improve the grammar of a passage than to make it worse; they were more likely to bring a passage into conformity with their own theological views than to contradict them. As a result, the critic can employ a general rule of thumb when considering transcriptional probabilities: The more difficult reading — that is, the less harmonized, graphic, grammatical, and theologically "correct" reading — is to be preferred as original.

12. I have produced an exhaustive study of this kind of variant by looking at instances in which scribes in the second and third centuries changed their texts for christological reasons, making them conform more closely with the orthodox belief that Jesus was fully God and fully human, yet one being instead of two. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993).

13. See below for a fuller discussion of this variant and the problems it raises.

Whereas in dealing with transcriptional probabilities we ask which readings were most likely to have been created by scribes in the process of transcription, in dealing with *intrinsic probabilities* we ask which reading is most likely to have been created by the author of the NT book, that is, which reading coincides with the author's language, style, and theology.

The questions raised by such considerations are more closely aligned with traditional issues of exegesis. The first question is that of language. One of the ways that the authorship of ancient texts is established is on the basis of vocabulary preferences of a writer, when these can be known. Thus, for instance, the Pastoral Epistles are commonly judged not to be Pauline, in no small measure because of the inordinately large number of words that occur in them but nowhere in the undisputed Paulines (over one-third of the entire vocabulary of the Pastorals). Similar arguments can be applied to text-critical problems. If there are two variant readings of a passage, with one of them containing words characteristic of an author and the other containing words found nowhere else in that author's writings, the latter is less likely to be original.

Similarly with arguments from style. Every author has a characteristic way of phrasing things. Moreover, most of the time, stylistic conventions are somewhat unconscious. Rarely, for example, do authors give a good deal of thought to the kinds of subordinate clauses or coordinating conjunctions that they use or to the typical length of their sentences. Once a person has developed a literary competence, these stylistic forms come more or less naturally. Since everyone has a slightly different style, though, it is sometimes possible to detect the hand of an editor when the work of an author has been modified by someone else. This basic principle has a text-critical payoff. It sometimes happens that when a passage occurs in two different forms in our manuscript tradition, one of them conforms to the style attested elsewhere for an author, whereas the other does not. In such instances, intrinsic probabilities favor the former reading.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, each author of a NT book has a distinct theological perspective that can, theoretically, be uncovered by a careful exegesis of that author's writings. There are instances, particularly in some of the most exegetically significant variants preserved for us in the manuscript tradition, in which different readings support different theological perspectives. Intrinsic probabilities demand that the theological perspective that coincides most closely with that which can otherwise be established for an author is more likely to be original.

In summary, textual critics are concerned not only to determine which

readings are more likely to have appealed to (and therefore, to have been created by) scribes, but also to establish which readings are more likely to have been created by the authors of the NT books themselves. Intrinsic probabilities involve establishing the original text on the basis of the language, style, and theology of a given author.

3. Applying the Principles

At this point of our discussion, an astute reader may be wondering what happens when the various kinds of evidence we have discussed conflict with one another, or in the worst of cases, appear to cancel one another out. What can the critic do, for example, when the reading that conforms most closely with the language and style of an author (and is therefore more likely original, based on intrinsic probabilities) is also the one more closely harmonized to a parallel passage (and is therefore less likely original on the basis of transcriptional probabilities)? Or, expanding the question yet further, how do critics resolve a problem when the external evidence clearly goes one way, and the internal evidence the other?

We are fortunate not to have thousands upon thousands of such cases thrust upon us. Indeed, as nearly everyone at work in this field will concede, the vast majority of all textual problems are easily resolved, so that there is a consensus on most of the variant readings preserved in our manuscripts. This is not at all to say, however, that no significant problems remain. On the contrary, many of the remaining problems *are* significant; in most instances they continue to be problems precisely because scholars disagree on how to evaluate the competing kinds of evidence. To my knowledge, all textual scholars today acknowledge that the trinitarian statement found in the "Johannine comma" (1 John 5:7-8) is not original to the Epistle. Moreover, the vast majority agree that the final twelve verses in many manuscripts (and English translations) of Mark represent a later addition to the text, as does the story of the woman taken in adultery in the later manuscripts of John. There are far fewer critics, however, willing to concede that the voice at Jesus' baptism in Luke said "Today I have begotten you."¹⁴

14. I am a member of the vocal minority who think that this *was* the original text, even though it is not found in many of our manuscripts. For a full discussion, which attempts to balance the various arguments pro and con, see Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 62-67.

In this instance, the evidence is not as clear-cut, and scholars weigh the various kinds of arguments differently.

What this means is that textual criticism is not some kind of objective science (as if any historical discipline ever could be!), but a matter of evaluating historical evidence as conscientiously and cogently as possible. Arguments have to be made for the original text on a case-by-case basis, as scholars choose to prefer the reading found in some manuscripts over that found in others.¹⁵ Ideally, the decisions will be based on a cumulative argument that appeals to the most weighty issues of a case. We can illustrate the process by evaluating more fully two of the textual problems found in Luke 3:1-20.

We have seen that a theological issue was at stake when Luke 3:4 was changed from "Make straight his paths," to "Make straight the paths of our God." The latter text emphasizes the deity of Christ in a way that would be particularly amenable to early Christian scribes. But that is not the entire story, and there may be some countervailing evidence since the shorter text ("his paths"), which I have argued is original, happens also to be found in the parallel passages in Mark 1:3 and Matt 3:3. Moreover, the longer text, which I have judged to be theologically attractive to scribes, happens also to be more closely aligned with Isa 40:3, the verse that is quoted here. Since it is more faithful to the OT text and is less harmonized with the other Synoptics, is not the longer text more likely to be original?

These in fact would be good internal arguments for the reading that I have rejected as a corruption. But as it turns out, there is little debate among scholars in this instance as to the original text. Luke, of course, received this story from Mark (who reads "his paths" rather than "the paths of our God"). We know that there may have been a reason for *scribes* to have changed the text (to promote their beliefs in Jesus' divinity), but is there a reason for *Luke* to have done so? What is striking in this connection is that throughout his entire narrative, Luke nowhere else gives any firm indication that he understands Jesus to be "God." To be sure, Jesus is God's Son; but never, for Luke, is he simply God. Thus the longer reading both conforms to the views of early Christian scribes (Jesus' divinity: a transcriptional argument) and fails to conform to the perspective of Luke (an intrinsic argument). Since Luke would have had to go out of his way to incorporate such a view into his text (that is, he would not have been simply reproducing

15. This element of informed decision and choice, as I have previously indicated, is why the method is called "eclectic."

Mark here, but would have had to change the text before him to incorporate the new theological perspective), it appears unlikely that the change to "the paths of our God" was made by Luke.

This judgment is rendered altogether certain when one considers the external evidence for both readings. It is to be recalled that good external support requires that a reading be attested in the earliest, most geographically diverse, and best witnesses. In this instance, the variant reading that is at odds with Luke's own theology ("the paths of our God") is found in only one Latin and three Syriac manuscripts. All of our most valuable sources — that is, the entire Greek manuscript tradition — attest the other reading; thus it is found in the earliest (as well as nearly all of the latest!) and the best witnesses, and it is attested throughout the entire Mediterranean, wherever manuscripts were produced. This kind of overwhelming external attestation is almost impossible to explain if the reading is not original. Here we can see, then, how a confluence of arguments, internal and external, can work together to establish with relative certainty the original text of Luke.

Five verses later another interesting textual problem occurs, one that is somewhat harder to resolve. Luke 3:9 appears in several different forms in our manuscripts; here we will restrict ourselves to only one of the textual problems. Does John the Baptist indicate that "every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire," or did the original text leave out the adjective, so that the Baptist spoke of "every tree that does not bear fruit"? In this instance, the general consensus among textual critics is that the longer reading ("good fruit") is original. But a strong case can be made that this consensus is wrong. Exploring some of the points in favor of the shorter reading will help us see again how various text-critical arguments can work together.

The external evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the longer reading. This is probably the main reason that scholars have generally preferred it: It is attested in almost all of our witnesses. But it is striking that the earliest Greek witness to preserve the passage, ρ^4 , from the third century, appears to attest the shorter reading.¹⁶ Moreover, it is found in quotations of the passage in writings of the third-century Alexandrian theologian Origen,

16. When critics say that a manuscript "appears" to attest a reading, it usually means that there is a hole in the manuscript at the relevant point, but that by counting the number of letters that would have taken up the space created by the hole, they are reasonably certain what the manuscript must have read before it was damaged.

who is one of our best witnesses to the text of the NT during the earliest period of transmission. It is also found somewhat earlier in the writings of Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul (near the end of the second century). Finally, it is attested in several Latin manuscripts. Thus, while the longer reading has *more* documents in its favor, the shorter reading has the earliest and some of the best; and these are not at all localized, but are scattered around the Mediterranean.

It is difficult to apply intrinsic probabilities to these readings, as both appear to make good sense in a Lukan context. The transcriptional probabilities, on the other hand, are intriguing. First, the longer reading is clearly the one that scribes would know from parallel passages; not only the preaching of John in Matt 3:10, but also the even more familiar account of Jesus' own words in Matt 7:19, speak of believers bearing "good fruit." If the less harmonized reading is more likely original, then the adjective should probably be considered a scribal addition. Second, the longer reading is less susceptible of misunderstanding, which also argues against its being original. And third, as I have already intimated, one can readily imagine another reason for scribes choosing to modify the passage, if the shorter text were original: According to the short form of the text, John states that barren trees alone — those that do not bear any fruit — will be destroyed in the day of apocalyptic wrath. What, though, about trees that bear "bad" or "rotten" fruit? Will they not be judged as well?

The point is that one can readily imagine scribes adding the adjective "good" to the text if it were not originally there. But what could be the motivation for deleting it if it *were* there? It should be pointed out, in this connection, that the word is *not* omitted by scribes in the parallel passages in Matthew, which shows that scribes did not find it at all puzzling. Given the circumstance that the shorter text is attested in the earliest witnesses, which also happen to be among the best witnesses, we may be inclined to consider it original.¹⁷

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As should be obvious, textual criticism is on one level a complex and demanding discipline. Only someone with a good knowledge of the Greek

17. Those who would argue that the external evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the longer text would probably have to explain that the adjective was omitted accidentally by several scribes.

language in which the NT was written can be expected to delve deeply into the problems raised by the NT manuscripts and the variant forms of the text that they preserve. On the other hand, the methods that scholars use to adjudicate among the competing virtues of these textual variants are not in themselves particularly difficult and should become familiar working principles for anyone who is serious about NT interpretation. These principles are used in the better critical commentaries, and the student with only a brief introduction such as I have provided here should be able to evaluate their use for himself or herself. To restate those principles briefly: Readings that are preserved in our earliest, most widely distributed, and best witnesses are more likely to be original; so, too, are those that are judged, on a variety of grounds, to be the "more difficult" readings; and so, too, finally, are readings that conform to the language, style, and theological perspective of their author.

4. Suggestions for Further Reading

A useful college-level introduction to textual criticism is J. Harold Greenlee, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (rev. ed., Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995). A more substantial treatment, rightly hailed as the authoritative and classic introduction, is Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (3d ed., New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1993). Also valuable, particularly for the student interested in learning to use the critical apparatuses found in the printed editions of the Greek New Testament (especially the Nestle-Aland 26th edition), is 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* (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leiden: Brill, 1989).

For an up-to-date survey of developments in text criticism over the past fifty years, see the essay by Eldon Jay Epp, "Textual Criticism," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress/Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 75-126. Full essays on each of the major aspects of the discipline (all the various kinds of Greek manuscripts, each of the early versions, the Patristic citations in Greek, Latin, and Syriac, and various methods and tools used by textual scholars) are now available in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, SD 46 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

For an exhaustive discussion of all the major early versions, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977). A useful introduction to the Greek biblical manuscripts (of both Old and New Testaments) can be found in Metzger's *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Paleography* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1981).

A particularly useful tool that shows textual critics "at work" is Bruce M. Metzger's volume, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971). Here Metzger indicates the reasons behind the major textual decisions made by the five-person editorial committee responsible for producing the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*, the standard Greek text available today.

Finally, those interested in the importance of textual criticism not only for establishing the original text but also for seeing how and why the text came to be changed by theologically invested scribes can consult Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1993).