

TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN THE EXEGESIS OF THE NEW  
TESTAMENT, WITH AN EXCURSUS ON CANON

ELDON JAY EPP

THE ROLE OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN NEW TESTAMENT  
INTERPRETATION

In the broad sweep of biblical interpretation, textual criticism logically and traditionally has preceded 'higher criticism'; hence, textual criticism is known as 'lower criticism'—though these two hierarchical terms, while instructive, are no longer widely used. 'Higher criticism' encompasses all other forms of biblical criticism, interpretation, and exegesis; during the modern period, it culminated in source, form, and redaction criticism and has mushroomed in recent decades as several new modes of criticism and interpretation have emerged, most notably perhaps the various rhetorical, literary, ideological, and sociological methodologies employed to illuminate and interact with the New Testament texts.

This accumulation of interpretative methodologies over the past century and a half has increasingly pushed textual criticism into the background of the exegetical process when, in fact, no hermeneutical procedure that takes seriously the ancient New Testament text can logically or legitimately do so. Part of this eclipse is due to the 'information explosion', which has constantly pushed scholars toward greater specialization and, in turn, toward an increasing neglect of specializations not their own, especially ones as complex as textual criticism. As a result, only a minority of commentators on New Testament writings, for example, *independently* treat text-critical issues in the texts they interpret; rather, if they explore textual variations at all, many rely on the data provided and even the decisions made for them by the popular critical hand-editions of the Greek New Testament, the Nestle–Aland Greek text (27th edn, 1993) and that of the United Bible Societies (4th edn, 1993), both with the same text, but with varying apparatuses of variant readings. In addition to these excellent resources, exegetes commonly, and wisely, use the companion volume to the latter text, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Metzger [ed.] 1994), which provides text-critical analyses of some 2,050 sets of variation units in the New



Testament that are of both textual and exegetical significance.

That this is a realistic assessment of the use—or non-use—of textual criticism in New Testament scholarship is confirmed by a perusal of the hundreds upon hundreds of books and articles that appear annually on myriad topics across the vast range of New Testament studies, including investigations of the historical Jesus, treatments of biblical theology, literary and sociological studies, and even commentaries, to mention only a few broad categories. How many of these, after all, move beyond the text presented in Nestle–Aland and the *UBSGNT*? How many pause to consider the options and probabilities concerning what the author most likely wrote or, as we usually say, the most likely ‘original’ text of passages under study? How many stop to ask how the other readings in a given variation unit might disclose different socio-cultural contexts and various ancient interpretations of that text?

Text-critical specialists will have mixed feelings about the shortcuts and compromises made by many exegetes. On the one hand, they will applaud at every turn the utilization of textual variants in interpreting crucial passages, while, on the other, lament the pandemic lack of serious engagement with the theory and principles of New Testament textual criticism, and the consequent infrequency of independent text-critical judgments. Textual critics, of course, are well aware that neither they nor those who emphasize one or another of the numerous sub-specialties in New Testament criticism can master everything, and will continue to offer the requisite handbooks with their principles and examples, all the while hoping to draw more exegetes into those substantive text-critical discussions that would not only enlighten but enliven their interpretative endeavors.

This may appear to be a highly arrogant view of the current situation—a view of textual criticism as a basic discipline that all exegetes should ideally master, yet as an esoteric field that only an elite few will be willing or able to comprehend, let alone practice. In adopting such a stance, are not textual critics isolating themselves and, in the process, encouraging exegetes to ignore them? While discussing the merits and demerits of basic text-critical theory and debating the validity of criteria for determining the priority of readings, should textual critics not be more attentive to the practical needs of exegetes? Should they not be more eager to be servants of exegesis by providing, for example, compendia of predigested decisions on hundreds of variation units?

A quick example may suggest an answer. Mark’s opening words as usually given, ‘The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’, veil a rather evenly divided textual tradition regarding these divine titles. On one hand, Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ) and others have the full phrase, ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God’, while Codices Vaticanus (B), Bezae (D), and Washingtonianus (W), and other witnesses, have only ‘Jesus Christ’. A decision made solely on the basis of manuscript evidence (external evidence) would have to cope with the unsettling fact that the two manuscripts generally deemed ‘best’, Ⲛ and B, go their separate ways in this instance. With closely divided manuscript evidence, however, the textual critic would move immediately to internal evidence (evidence from the transcriptional process—how scribes worked—and from the immediate and larger context of the variation unit). Assessing rudimentary transcriptional evidence would support the shorter reading in this case (‘Jesus Christ’ without ‘Son of God’), for Christian scribes, especially when encountering divine names, would be more likely to add the common words ‘Son of God’ to an existing ‘Jesus Christ’ than to remove the former phrase if it were in the manuscript being copied. But the larger issue is context, which is here perhaps the *entire* Gospel of Mark! Are the words ‘Son of God’ likely to have been part of the author’s original text because Jesus as ‘Son of God’ or Jesus’ sonship is a major or even a crucial theme of the Gospel? If so, to rule it out by various other text-critical criteria might be to remove from the opening sentence the author’s dramatic announcement of a major theme for the entire work that follows. Naturally, whether ‘Son of God’ serves Mark’s Gospel in this way is a question for exegetes to answer, and indeed they have answered it both ways.

The point, however, is that a compendium approach to textual criticism—helpful as the *Textual Commentary*, for example, might be—is not adequate. Just as exegesis often involves and needs textual criticism, so textual criticism often involves and needs exegesis. Decisions frequently cannot be made merely on external evidence, or by using internal criteria such as preference for the harder reading (since scribes tend to smooth out difficulties), or even by assessing the immediate context; rather, larger issues of conformity of a variant to the writing’s entire ideological context or to the author’s distinctive style or theology, or a reading’s conformity to extrinsic heterodox or orthodox doctrinal views must be taken into account.

Another complicating, though nonetheless positive, aspect of the



overlap of textual criticism and exegesis that should not be overlooked is that competing readings, even those judged not the most likely original, often have the power to illuminate a text by disclosing alternative 'readings' or interpretations of that text in the early Church. These interpretations (when it can be assumed that they were conscious alterations) may reflect either the solo view of a thinking scribe, or the convictions of a local or regional church or even of an entire doctrinal tradition. Thus, textual criticism, often conceived as having a singular goal of establishing the 'original' text, is in reality a discipline with broader goals, including the display of the variety of opinions and convictions that enlivened the life of the Church throughout its early history. Exegetes, therefore, should never consider the New Testament text to be static or inert, for it was and remains a living text that in turn reveals the living Church that transmits it.

Two additional examples of the intersection of exegesis and textual criticism involve a contemporary issue in much of Christianity. First, the paragraph comprising 1 Cor. 14:34-35 contains the vexing words, 'Women should be silent in the churches', followed by a further statement of submission to husbands and a reinforcement of silence by asserting that 'it is shameful for a woman to speak in church'. Exegetes for generations have observed the difficulties in defending these verses as consistent with Paul's preceding and following arguments, giving rise to a variety of interpretations that attempt, on the one hand, to justify its place in this context and, on the other, to dismiss it as an interpolation into the text—whether by Paul but not belonging here or not Pauline at all. Can textual criticism contribute to a solution?

At first glance, the expected answer might be negative, for these two verses are present in all extant textual witnesses—no divided tradition here and no textual variants in the usual sense. However, a group of Greek and Latin manuscripts including Codex Bezae (the so-called 'Western' manuscripts) place the two verses after v. 40, that is, between the conclusion of a lengthy, connected argument by Paul and the abrupt beginning of a new discussion (ch. 15). Already this dislocation in the textual tradition suggests some uncertainty among scribes about the appropriate place for vv. 34-35 in 1 Corinthians. Moreover, recent investigation shows that vv. 34-35 are invariably treated as a separate paragraph—not connected with v. 33b—in early Greek manuscripts (including  $\mathfrak{p}46$  B & A D<sup>P</sup> 33). More telling, in the

Latin Codex Fuldensis (F, 547 CE), which contains vv. 34-35 in its usual place, the original scribe placed a siglum after v. 33 that referred the reader to a portion of text in the bottom margin, namely, vv. 36-40 recopied *in toto*. This almost certainly indicates that vv. 34-35 are to be omitted; the scribe (or more likely Bishop Victor, whom we know to have supervised the copying of Fuldensis) had evidence or was otherwise convinced that these verses were not part of the text of 1 Corinthians. More significant still, the original scribe of perhaps our most important uncial manuscript, Codex Vaticanus (B, fourth century), used distinctive sigla to mark vv. 34-35 as a known textual problem, strongly supporting the view that vv. 34-35 is an interpolation and may not be Pauline at all (see Payne 1995). In this striking example, we observe exegesis alerting us to a text-critical problem and textual criticism, in turn, assisting in a solution to the exegetical difficulty. (On the whole issue, see also Fee 1987; Petzer 1993.)

A second example involves the mere difference of a Greek accent in a proper name in Rom. 16:7, which, depending on the decisions made, could offer the one text in which Paul used the word 'apostle' to describe a woman. Again there are both text-critical and exegetical complications. Paul here requests his readers to 'Greet Andronicus and IOYNIAN [accusative case]...; they are prominent among the apostles'. The accusative singular form IOYNIAN can be either Ἰουνιᾶν (masculine, 'Junias', a hypothetical shortened form of Junianus; but see Cervin 1994: 468-70) or Ἰουνίας (feminine, 'Junia'). Accents, however, seldom occur before the seventh century in New Testament manuscripts, but the second correctors (in the sixth/seventh and ninth centuries, respectively) of two major manuscripts, B (fourth century) and D<sup>P</sup> (sixth century), accent the word as feminine, as do many of the later Greek manuscripts, and the Sahidic Coptic (see Plisch 1996) and Chrysostom also understand it as feminine. Indeed, the latter (c. 390 CE) comments on Junia, 'How great the wisdom of this woman that she was even deemed worthy of the apostles' title' (Fitzmyer 1993: 738).

Normal text-critical procedure, such as relying heavily on the earliest manuscripts, is not particularly helpful here because of the lack of accents in these early manuscripts, and Chrysostom's statement becomes the earliest useful witness, affording confirmation of the feminine form that appears as soon as accents come into play.

Contemporary social usage and Greek grammar, however, must also



be applied in this case: 'Junias' as a male name is nowhere to be found, but 'Junia' as a Latin woman's name is common in Roman literature and occurs more than 250 times in inscriptions in Rome alone (see Metzger [ed.] 1994: 475; Cervin 1994: 466-69). Grammatically, the rendering, 'they are prominent among the apostles' (i.e. 'as apostles') is preferable to 'they are esteemed by the apostles' (but are not apostles) (see Cervin 1994: 470; cf. Fitzmyer 1993: 739-40).

Though evidence for apostleship of women in the early Church is not restricted to this passage, the term 'apostle' applied to a woman is found only here. Elsewhere in the same chapter (16:6, 12), four women are said to have 'worked very hard' (κοπιᾶω), a term Paul uses of his own apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 4:12; 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16) and that of others (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:12), and other women are called Paul's 'coworkers' (Rom. 16:3; Phil. 4:2-3) or 'deacon' (NRSV 'minister', Rom. 16:1) (see Scholer 1995). Exegetes must determine what these expressions imply in their various contexts, but the female apostle Junia seems well established through a combination of textual criticism, contemporary evidence from Rome, Greek grammar, and plausibly complementary passages in Paul.

These various examples illustrate the broad scope and extensive relevance of New Testament textual criticism to interpretation, but especially its formidable complexity. Indeed, this complexity of the text-critical enterprise is a prominent reason (1) why textual critics resist the pre-packaging and isolation of most text-critical decisions, why they insist that the panoply of text-critical principles be brought to bear on each case, and why many textual 'decisions' remain open to new evidence, new methods, and new exegetical interpretations; and also (2) why interpreters tend to neglect textual criticism. This scholarly discipline, sometimes viewed as merely mechanical and perfunctory, in reality has both (1) objective, empirical and 'scientific' aspects (quantitative measurement of manuscript relationships, for instance) and (2) subjective and qualitative aspects, aspects of 'art' (such as balancing the probabilities when manuscript evidence is evenly divided or when a reading in a variation unit is both the smoother and yet conforms to the author's style [see further below]). In actuality, therefore, the lengthy history of text-critical studies to date has yielded few if any definitive methods or principles that function independently, much less automatically, and only

occasionally provides 'right' or 'wrong' answers in individual cases. Debate is lively between rival brands of eclecticism, on the notions of 'best' manuscripts and 'best' groups of manuscripts, and on the date and even the existence of various major text-types. In fact, text-critics have yet to reach agreement on two very basic matters: the reconstruction of the history of the New Testament text—showing its chronological evolution in relation to extant manuscripts—and the methods by which to do so. If that were not enough, research surprises us with increased complexity when it can be demonstrated, as has been done so well recently, that ancient textual alterations often issued from the will to support not only *heterodox* teaching (a view well established a century ago) but also *orthodox* theology (see Ehrman 1993; and Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 361-79, for many examples).

Thus, rather than merely dispensing simple or simplified principles or operating with 'cut-and-dried' methods—luxuries the discipline does not enjoy—New Testament textual criticism must attempt (1) to determine the most likely original reading through an eclectic and thereby complex methodology, one that utilizes an array of criteria that include both objective and subjective—and at times conflicting—guidelines; and (2) to elicit from variants their scribal or community motivations and their socio-cultural contexts in an effort to illuminate the thought and life of the Church.

This is not to say, however, that New Testament textual criticism is paralyzed and unable to function, or incapable of making useful decisions that will facilitate the exegete's work. It only means that it is often harder than might have been expected and that results are less definitive than might have been wished. A high degree of sophistication in the discipline and a fair measure of courage to apply it are required.

#### THE NATURE AND MAJOR ISSUES OF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

In view of these introductory remarks, New Testament textual criticism may be defined as the science and art of assessing the transmission of the New Testament text by (1) evaluating its variations, alterations, and distortions, and then attempting its restoration—its earliest recoverable forms—and (2) seeking to place variants within the history and culture of the early Church, both to determine the age, meaning, and motivation of variants and to extract from them some knowledge of the development and character of early



Christian theology, ecclesiology, and culture.

The requirements for pursuing these goals are essentially twofold: (1) familiarity with the textual transmission process, including the full range of scribal habits and other phenomena of textual variation that influenced it, and (2) knowledge both of the Greek manuscripts that preserve and transmit to us the New Testament text-forms and also of the early versions that delivered these Christian writings to non-Greek-speaking areas. Meeting the first prerequisite will require, in turn, the formulation of criteria for isolating the most likely original readings, while acquaintance with the thousands of manuscripts will require grouping them in some fashion according to shared characteristics. In most of these aspects, New Testament textual criticism is no different from that applied to other ancient literature, but in some ways it presents a special case.

It is well known that numerous writings of classical Greek and Latin authors are preserved in only a small number of manuscripts—often the earliest ones dating some centuries later than the origin of the documents—and that frequently these relatively few textual witnesses can quite conveniently be employed to construct stemmata (or family trees) of the manuscripts, thereby isolating the earliest forms of the text and facilitating the construction of critical editions, though often with the help of considerable textual emendation. However, in the case of the New Testament, or even its individual parts, a different situation dictates a different solution. The difference arises chiefly from the number and age of the extant manuscripts of the New Testament: Greek manuscripts alone run between 5,000 and 5,500 in number; at least one fragment (p52) dates as early as only a generation after the date of composition, while others, including a fair number extensive in their coverage of text, date from around 200 and into the third century (e.g. p45 p46 p66 p75). These earliest manuscripts still number fewer than fifty, with about 280 more up to the ninth century, and then the manuscripts burgeon in number so that nearly 4,800 date from the ninth through the sixteenth centuries. Versional manuscripts are also numerous, especially Latin, with about fifty early ones (Old Latin) and more than 10,000 of the Vulgate revision.

This situation—the vast breadth and depth of manuscript materials—affords us both opportunities and difficulties. An opportunity arises from the very mass of extant witnesses, for we may reasonably assume that, somewhere among the estimated 300,000

variant readings, reside virtually all of the original readings. Thus, the necessity for conjectural emendation is almost entirely ruled out (but see Delobel 1994; and cf. Holmes in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 347-49). Another advantage in the richness of variation is the greater ease with which we should be able to trace out the development and history of the text, as well as the ideological and doctrinal variants that illumine the history of the Church for us. On the other hand, the inherent negatives are obvious enough: the sheer quantity of witnesses and of textual variants vastly complicates the process of determining the most likely original text. For one thing, because of extensive textual mixture among the extant manuscripts, the genealogical method (forming stemmata) is not a viable procedure; hence, it is rarely used in New Testament criticism except, importantly, at the level of an *individual variation unit*, where an attempt is made to identify the one reading in each circumscribed group of variants that best explains the rise of all the others.

What is required (as earlier intimated) is, first, to group manuscripts that share similar textual complexions and to establish time-frames for each group. Smaller groups are called families and the largest groups are called text-types, though the process is not as streamlined as it sounds. In simplest terms, however, if early groupings can be isolated, it is more likely that their readings stand closer, not only in time but also in quality, to those of the original compositions (see further under 'External Evidence' below). Secondly, what used to be called 'canons of criticism', that is, criteria for determining the earliest or most likely original readings, need to be (and currently are being) refined so that they can be applied to individual variant units with more confident results. The massive quantity of variant readings, often with several in an individual variation unit, will, however, on numerous occasions yield closely competitive variants, each of which will command support from one or more criteria that, in a simpler situation, would accredit that particular variant as *the* one most likely original. But now we may have two or three readings, each one meeting different criteria and more than one, therefore, holding a plausible claim to originality. For instance, Luke 10:41-42 (NRSV) reads:

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

What words of Jesus to Martha did the author of Luke most likely write? Four basic readings survive: (1) The shortest reading (in the so-



called 'Western' textual tradition) omits everything between 'Martha' and 'Mary'. (2) The second (found in one Greek manuscript and some early versions) has 'Martha, Martha, a few things are needed...' This, in the context, is the most difficult reading. (3) The third, 'one thing is needed' (found in two very early papyri and numerous other witnesses), is adopted in the NRSV and selected by several modern critical editions of the Greek text because it has often been judged as best explaining the other variants and hence must have preceded them. (4) However, the fourth reading, 'a few things are needed, or only one' (found in two prominent codices,  $\aleph$  and B), is also seen as capable of explaining all the others.

So, at first glance, we have a shortest reading, meeting a long-standing criterion of authenticity (but see below); a most difficult reading, meeting another criterion suggesting authenticity; and two readings thought capable of explaining the others. Where does one turn? In this case, a fuller analysis shows that reading number 1 most likely involves an accidental omission that leaves little sense in the passage, so it drops out of contention. (The 'shorter reading' criterion has recently been questioned, though it never was accorded authority when an accidental omission could be argued.) Externally, reading number 2 is very weakly attested and likely represents a late corruption of either reading 3 or 4—both of which, by the way, are attested both within and outside of Egypt at an early date. The decision rests, then, on whether reading 3 arose from 4 or vice versa, a decision that, in turn, rests on judgments about transcriptional probabilities (what would a scribe most likely write?), on Lukan grammatical usage, and on the degree of sense in the context—an exegetical consideration. Taking these criteria into account, a case can be made that reading 4 is the more difficult of the two yet makes sense, and that reading 3, though the shorter, can plausibly have been derived from 4. Hence, reading 4 may best explain the rise of all the others (see Fee in Epp and Fee [eds.] 1981: 61-75).

New Testament textual critics, then, have to cope with complexity and conflict—and no easy answers—at almost every turn. Yet, they rejoice in the embarrassment of manuscript riches and much prefer that, with all of the complicating factors, to the situation in which their classical colleagues (or those in Mishnah and Talmud studies) find themselves.

#### THE TRANSMISSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT AND TEXT-CRITICAL PRACTICE

It is clear, however, that neither the grouping of manuscripts nor the clarification of criteria for assessing variants can be accomplished apart from a grasp of the process by which the New Testament text has been transmitted to us. Hence, textual critics—and exegetes—need to rehearse that story of transmission, understand its inner dynamics, and 'get the feel' of it in its ancient context. To do so requires acquaintance with the manuscripts themselves and knowledge of Greco-Roman writing materials, paleography (handwriting), scribal habits, scriptoria (the places where manuscripts were copied), ways that manuscripts were carried from place to place, and a bit of historical imagination.

Though we do not know much about early Christian worship services, except that they would likely follow the format of synagogue services (about which, in turn, all too little is known), we may be sure that early Christian writings were preserved and transmitted in ways that facilitated their use in the worship and life of the Church. Of course, as with all ancient literature, no autographs survive, but we may safely assume that, in the early decades of Christianity, a letter of Paul or, shortly thereafter, portions of a Gospel, would be read in worship services and that, on occasion, visiting Christians would request copies and carry these hitherto unfamiliar documents to their own congregations. At other times, writings would be shared with other churches, sometimes at the request of the writer (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16), and we may assume that a natural way to do this would be to produce copies (papyrus was the normal writing material of the ancient world and, at times, it was relatively inexpensive). As New Testament manuscripts were used and reused, and sometimes wore out, they were copied and recopied, whether privately, in churches, or later in scriptoria (c. 200 CE and after). Soon, we may imagine, some churches would possess several of these early Christian writings, and rudimentary collections of Gospels and/or apostolic letters would emerge, some possibly by the conscious act, for example, of a devoted pupil of Paul. In ways such as these, the centuries-long process of Christian manuscript-copying and circulation began, followed by copies of copies of copies, eventually leaving for us the rich, 5,000-plus legacy of widely divergent Greek manuscripts, plus the thousands of versional manuscripts and quotations of New Testament passages in patristic writings.



Beyond this sort of reasonable historical imagination (backed by fragments of evidence), we know precious little about the beginning stages of transmission, though the earliest New Testament manuscripts (as well as Old Testament Scriptures copied for Christian use) were in codex form, that is, our book form as opposed to the scrolls that functioned as the format for Jewish and secular literature prior to Christianity. If Christians did not invent the codex—a debated issue—they at least capitalized upon this recently-invented medium as a more convenient and space-saving format for the preservation and circulation of their writings, thereby enhancing the transmission process.

At times in this process, however, manuscripts were poorly preserved, and numerous early manuscripts are now highly fragmentary. Often a single leaf or only a few leaves remain. Very often, it is only a small portion of a single book. About two-thirds of the papyri and nearly one-third of the uncial manuscripts are preserved in only one or two leaves. Nearly all of the very early, more extensive manuscripts (such as  $\mathfrak{P}45$   $\mathfrak{P}46$   $\mathfrak{P}72$   $\mathfrak{P}75$ , but not  $\mathfrak{P}66$ ) contain more than one writing. It is significant, however, that, among the fifty-seven earliest manuscripts, four of those that contain no more than two leaves nonetheless contain portions of two New Testament books ( $\mathfrak{P}30$   $\mathfrak{P}53$   $\mathfrak{P}92$  and 0171). This opens the possibility, not yet subject to proof, that many, perhaps very many, of the fragmentary papyri originally comprised multiple writings, for when we move away from the third/fourth century, some sixty extant codices contain the entire New Testament, and many other manuscripts demonstrate that early Christian writings circulated in certain quite regular combinations rather than individually. Most often, for example, the four Gospels circulated together in a single codex (as in the third century  $\mathfrak{P}45$ ), as did the Pauline letters (see the very early  $\mathfrak{P}46$ ), though Acts might join either group (as in  $\mathfrak{P}45$ ); or Acts and the general Epistles might form another group (as in  $\mathfrak{P}74$ ); and there were other combinations. (These conventions in the circulation of groups of early Christian writings, as well as the contents of manuscripts and the sequence of books in them, have implications for the lengthy process by which the New Testament canon was formed; see the Excursus below.)

How did documents actually move about in the Greco-Roman world? The New Testament letters confirm what is abundantly evident from many hundreds of private papyrus letters preserved in Egypt, that letter writers frequently utilized secretaries to write for them and

then used the informal 'mail service' to secure delivery to their addressees. The latter typically consisted in finding someone sailing up the river or travelling the Roman roads to the destination of one's letter. This process is abundantly illustrated in the everyday Egyptian papyri, but also in the New Testament letters: Paul in his own hand, for example, adds his 'greeting' to letters otherwise written by amanuenses (1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Thess. 3:17; Phlm. 19; cf. Gal. 6:11), and in Rom. 16:22 the amanuensis refers to himself, 'Tertius'. Presumably (*apud* Phlm. 19) Onesimus carried Paul's letter to Philemon; Silvanus carried 1 Peter (5:12); and possibly Phoebe was the carrier for Romans (16:1) and Titus (plus two 'brothers') for 2 Corinthians (8:16-24). Other early Christian writers reflect the same practice: Burrhus carried Ignatius's *Philadelphians*, and Crescens, Polycarp's *Philippians*.

More significant for the transmission of the New Testament, however, is the speed with which private letters (and other documents) travelled in the Greco-Roman world. It can now be documented from extant papyrus letters that show both their date of writing (a customary feature) and their docketed date of receipt (much less commonly done) that letters travelled, for example, 800 miles from Asia Minor to Alexandria in two months; from Transjordan to Alexandria, about 350 miles, in thirty-six days; from Philadelphia to Syria, some 400 miles, in fourteen days; 150 miles from Alexandria to Philadelphia in four days and another in seven days; from Alexandria to another Delta city in nineteen days; and from Memphis to Alexandria, about 125 miles, in three weeks.

This casual but prompt transfer of letters functioned both in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and operated not only within Egypt (between the Delta, the Fayyûm, and upper Egypt), but also between Egypt and places far removed, such as Ostia in Italy, Cilicia in Asia Minor, Sidon in Syria, and Arabia (taking some actual examples in addition to those cited above).

From data of this kind we can draw important conclusions about the transmission of the early Christian writings and the kinds of text they contained. First, wherever they might have originated in the broad Mediterranean region, the writings that were to form the New Testament could very rapidly have made their way to any other part of the Roman world, and, more significantly, this could have been accomplished in a matter of days, weeks, or a few months. Indeed, it is no longer necessary to assume a long interval of years between the



time a New Testament letter or Gospel was written and its appearance in other places, even distant places. The Gospel of John, extant in several very early manuscripts, is a good example; wherever it may have been written, its text (whether in a form like that now in  $\mathfrak{p}52$  or  $\mathfrak{p}66$  or  $\mathfrak{p}75$ —all Egyptian papyri) could have reached Egypt quickly; if such a text were then modified during Christian use there, those ‘revisions’ could rapidly be transported to another part of the Christian world anywhere in the Roman Empire. In view of this situation, it must be granted that various forms of text in the early Christian world could not have been confined to one region for any length of time in any single form. Early Christian writings, regardless of their place of origin, could very quickly move to all other Christian areas, burdened or blessed with all of the unconscious and conscious alterations that accumulated during their active use in a vibrant church.

Secondly, as a consequence of the quick-paced intellectual commerce demonstrable in the Mediterranean area (especially to and from Egypt), we may reasonably assert, although not yet easily prove, that the various textual complexions evident in our very earliest manuscripts, the Egyptian papyri, very possibly and quite plausibly represent texts from that *entire Mediterranean region* (including, of course, forms of text that might have originated in Egypt itself). Thus, in contrast to the common view that the papyri represent only the text of provincial Egypt, it is much more likely that they represent an extensive textual range (if not the full textual spectrum) of earliest Christianity. (On the preceding several paragraphs, see Epp 1989: 8-10; Epp 1991: 43-56; Epp and Fee [eds.] 1981: 274-83; and the detailed documentation provided.)

This is, in many ways, an enlightened and enlightening view of the transmission of the New Testament writings in the period of earliest Christianity, for it brings us into closer touch with the dynamic, vibrant activity within the emergent Church that, in turn, was situated in a real Greco-Roman life-setting that was equally vigorous and robust in its intellectual commerce. We can well imagine the excitement of discovery when Christians of different localities encountered new apostolic letters or Gospels, whether personally while visiting another church, or through the private exchange of letters and documents. We can imagine the strength and comfort that arose from the knowledge that others, near and far, held the same spiritual convictions and doctrinal beliefs and were eager to share the

documents in their possession that embodied and expressed those convictions. We can imagine the justifiable pride that congregations would develop as they acquired increasing numbers of these documents, which they would be quick to test by reading from them in services and utilizing them in their teaching, evangelism, and public defense.

This combination of data and scholarly speculation may stretch our minds in other ways. All the New Testament papyri issue from Egypt, but, most of the time, exact geographical locations of their use or even of their discovery elude us. The town of Oxyrhynchus, however, yielded thirty-nine of our current 108 different New Testament papyri; while fragmentary, they contain portions of fifteen of our twenty-seven books; and thirty of them date to the second, third, and early fourth centuries. What do these random discoveries from the rubbish heaps and ruined buildings of this district capital in Upper Egypt tell us about its Christian churches or the role of the Christian writings in those churches? We know from other papyri found there that, in the second century, this small city had twenty temples, a theater accommodating eight to twelve thousand people, and a Roman garrison, and the papyri attest the names of some 5,700 individual inhabitants between 30 BCE and 96 CE. Yet we know virtually nothing about Christianity there, and very little about Christianity in Egypt in general at this time. Does the sizable horde of randomly surviving New Testament papyri indicate many Christians and/or several churches in Oxyrhynchus, a significant collection or even a library of Christian documents, that numerous copies were moving to and from Oxyrhynchus, or perhaps that it was a center of Christian scholarship or even text-critical activity (because we have evidence there of critical editing and annotation of Greco-Roman literary works)? (See Epp 1991: 7-8.) These are tantalizing questions, but currently they do not have answers. Yet, the mere raising of the questions in a real socio-historical context gives a ‘feel’ for the transmission process of our New Testament text, and provides an agenda for further research.

We do, however, have better knowledge of the technical and mechanical aspects of the process: the nature of scribal activity in copying manuscripts.

### 1. *The Role of Scribes in Textual Transmission*

The influence of scribes or copyists was crucial in the whole New Testament transmission process prior to the invention of movable type in the mid-fifteenth century. As these scribes or copyists churned out



copies of New Testament writings, both their inadvertent errors and their quite conscious improvements (as they would view them) created the tens upon tens of thousands of textual variants that now present themselves to us for analysis and decision. Scribal 'errors' (better: scribal alterations), however, must be seen in proper perspective because the copying of manuscripts by its very nature is a conservative process (in both meanings of 'conservative') and the overwhelming majority of copying was accurately accomplished. Nonetheless, the most attentive and dedicated scribe, even the slavish scribe, suffered inattentive moments and lapses of connection between eye or mind and hand. Subtle influences such as parallel passages, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, or daily familiarity with liturgical forms of biblical passages led scribes to conform the texts they were producing to those more familiar parallel forms that were fixed in their minds. A greater threat, if that is the appropriate word, to the transmission process, however, was the 'thinking' scribe who felt compelled to assess the meaning or meaningfulness of the text being copied rather than merely to do the job. Some were bold enough to 'correct' the text before them or to include extraneous material familiar to them from other contexts or manuscripts or even from the margins of manuscripts. Numerous variant readings arose in these ways, yet we should not miss noticing that this scribal activity is another vivid piece of evidence that the New Testament text was a living text subject to the vicissitudes of existence—a living, breathing organism reflecting and reacting to its social and theological environment as it moved along in the stream of the vibrant Christian community of which it was a part.

Technically, scribal alterations customarily are placed under the two categories implied above. First, *unintentional scribal alterations* comprise what are often characterized as errors of the eye, of the ear (if copying by dictation), and of the memory or (unthinking) judgment. These include (1) confusion of letters or letter-combinations having similar appearance (or sound); (2) mistaken word division (since uncial manuscripts, including the papyri, were written without spaces or punctuation); (3) misread abbreviations or contractions; (4) interchanges in the order of letters or words (metathesis); (5) substitution of a more familiar word for a less familiar one, or writing a synonym when the meaning but not the exact word is in the copyist's mind; (6) omission of one word when it occurred twice, or skipping material between two similar words or

letter-groups (haplography); (7) repetition of a letter, word, or passage when the eye returns to a place already copied (dittography); (8) careless spelling and failure to correct such errors; and (9) unconscious assimilation to similar wording in a parallel passage or lection (on occasion this may be intentional), or harmonization with wording in the immediate context.

Secondly, *intentional scribal alterations*, inevitably well-intentioned, correct or otherwise improve the text in accordance with what the scribe believed to be its original or intended form or meaning—or even a meaning more relevant to the scribe's present ecclesiastical context or theological orientation. Thus, sometimes, though still with worthy motives from the scribe's standpoint, changes were made to promote a doctrinal or ideological view not in the text being copied, making the text say what the scribe 'knew' it to mean. These conscious alterations, to be sure, are usually subtle in nature and modest in scope; yet inevitably they shaped the transmission process more than did accidental alterations.

Intentional alterations include (1) changes in grammar, spelling (often proper names), and style; (2) conscious harmonization with parallel passages (often in the Synoptic Gospels, in Old Testament quotations, or in lectionaries), motivated perhaps by the wish to present the 'complete' text in a given context; (3) clarification of geographical or historical points (e.g. time or place; or authorship of Old Testament quotations); (4) conflation of differing readings in two or more manuscripts known to the copyist—again, to be complete; (5) addition of seemingly appropriate material (such as expanding 'Jesus' to 'Jesus Christ' or to the 'Lord Jesus Christ'); and (6) theological or ideological alterations, often small changes in the interest of supporting accepted doctrine, especially issues of Christology, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, asceticism, etc., or longer additions such as found in manuscripts of the 'Western' textual tradition, where anti-Judaic, anti-feminist, pro-apostle, and other tendencies have been detected.

## 2. *Internal Criteria*

Making textual decisions depends very directly on acquaintance with these scribal habits as they functioned in the copying process, for textual critics move from this knowledge to the formulation of *internal criteria* that will assist in distinguishing the most likely original reading among those in a given variation unit. The criteria in this category are labeled 'internal' because they relate to factors or



characteristics *within* the text itself (as opposed to 'external' criteria, which relate to the nature of manuscripts, e.g. date and provenance, as something 'outside' or separate from the texts they enshrine). Text-critical criteria have evolved over nearly the whole history of Christianity, for rudimentary 'rules' can be found as early as Origen in the third century, with their modern history beginning in the early eighteenth century. Essentially, the textual critic asks various questions of each variant reading in a variation unit: Can this variant account for the rise of all the others? Does this variant agree with the writer's literary style, or theology? Is this variant 'harder', that is, rough or unrevised when compared with others in the unit? And so forth. Not all criteria will be relevant in all cases, so they are tested for relevance and the results are compared. Not infrequently (as noted earlier) one variant will be supported as the most likely original by one or more of the criteria, while a competing variant is supported by other criteria, or one criterion may support a reading while another discredits it. (An example is Matt. 6:33, where a reading that explains the others competes with one that conforms better to Matthew's style.) At the same time, not all criteria carry the same weight, and the validity of some is now under debate (notably numbers two and six below). So, after analysis, the decision will often have to be made on the basis of 'the balance of probabilities'. There is, however, general agreement on what Constantine Tischendorf noted long ago, that the first criterion below takes precedence over all the others, if it works in a given case. (In general, see Epp in Epp and Fee 1993: 141-73; and Epp 1992; Royse in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 239-52.)

The criteria that follow are phrased so that, if a criterion accurately describes a textual variant (other things being equal), that variant would have the presumption of being the most likely original.

#### CRITERIA RELATED TO INTERNAL EVIDENCE

1. A variant's fitness to account for the origin, development, or presence of all other readings in the variation-unit. Such a variant logically must have preceded all others that can be shown to have evolved from it. K. Aland calls this the 'local genealogical method'.

2. A variant's status as the shorter/shortest reading in the variation-unit. Scribes tend to expand the text rather than shorten it, though this is now debated (see Royse in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 242-43, 246-47; thoroughgoing eclectics, such as Elliott, are inclined to prefer the longer reading; see Elliott in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 327-28).

3. A variant's status as the harder/hardest reading in the variation-unit. Scribes tend to smooth or fix rough or difficult readings.

4. A variant's conformity to the author's style and vocabulary. The original reading is likely to follow the author's style as observed in the bulk of the writing. (Challenged recently by Petzer 1990.)

5. A variant's conformity to the author's theology or ideology. The original reading is likely to display the same convictions or beliefs found in the bulk of the work. A scribe, however, might 'correct' an author's statement to conform it more closely to that author's theology, thus altering what would have been a 'harder' reading to a smoother reading.

6. A variant's conformity to Koine (rather than Attic) Greek. Scribes show a tendency to shape the text being copied to the more elegant Attic Greek style. (This is now debated; see Martini 1974.)

7. A variant's conformity to Semitic forms of expression. The New Testament authors, being either Jewish or familiar with Septuagint/Greek Old Testament style, are likely to reflect such Semitic expressions in their writings.

8. A variant's lack of conformity to parallel passages or to extraneous items in the context generally. Scribes tend, consciously or unconsciously, to shape the text being copied to familiar parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels or to words or phrases just copied.

9. A variant's lack of conformity to Old Testament passages. Scribes, who were familiar with the Old Testament, tend to shape their copying to the content of familiar passages.

10. A variant's lack of conformity to liturgical forms and usages. Scribes tend to shape the text being copied to phraseology in the familiar liturgical expressions used in devotion and worship.

11. A variant's lack of conformity to extrinsic theological, ideological, or other socio-historical contexts contemporary with and congenial to a text's scribe. Scribes unconsciously, but more likely consciously, could bring a text into conformity with their own or their group's doctrinal beliefs or with accepted socio-cultural conventions (see Ehrman 1993; and Ehrman in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 361-79; but contrast Wisse 1989). Naturally, difficulties exist in identifying both the contemporary context and the copyist's time-frame and provenance.



The judicious application of these criteria to competing readings within each variation unit fulfills a major but single part of the twofold methodological process for decision-making: treating phenomena *within* the transmitted text. The *externals* of the matter, the manuscripts themselves as artifacts and each treated as an entity, a 'whole', are the focus of the other major task.

### 3. *The Source Materials of Textual Transmission*

Just as 'internal evidence' must be analyzed and evaluated by 'internal criteria', so 'external evidence' must be subjected to 'external criteria'. This involves scrutiny and assessment of the manuscripts, especially with respect to their age, their provenance, the nature of the text they contain, and the manuscript company that they keep: Is the text rough, or smooth and/or revised? Was it copied with care, corrected? Does it share distinctive readings with other manuscripts? Can it be placed into a family or text-type with other similar manuscripts? It is the scribal process just described that has brought us the Greek manuscripts that now constitute the primary sources for establishing the New Testament text—along with the versional manuscripts, which, in their respective traditions, have experienced the same phenomena of shaping and alteration. Only a very brief survey of these primary sources can be provided here.

*a. Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.* Since the New Testament books were composed in Greek, the Greek manuscripts that preserve them are of primary importance. Unfortunately, some unnecessary complexity has crept into their classification: Greek manuscripts take two forms and are written in two kinds of handwriting on three different writing materials.

1. *Format.* The two basic forms are *continuous-text* manuscripts, which contain (or originally contained) at least one New Testament writing in continuous fashion from beginning to end, and *lectionary* manuscripts, which developed later and bring together those portions of Scripture appointed to be read in services. Lectionaries do not have the New Testament text in continuous form or in canonical order, but rather provide readings arranged either according to the church year or the calendar year. Often an introductory phrase (called an *incipit*) had to be added to adapt the selected portion to liturgical use (e.g. 'Jesus said...' or 'In those days...').

2. *Paleography.* As to handwriting, New Testament manuscripts were written in large unconnected letters (uncials or, better, majuscules) into the tenth century, using both papyrus and parchment.

Beginning in the ninth century, smaller (minuscule) and cursive ('running') or connected letters were used, employing parchment and paper.

3. *Media.* With respect to writing materials, papyrus was used from the beginning into the eighth century, though nearly 75% of New Testament manuscripts were written on parchment (also called vellum)—from the eighth century to the sixteenth; and paper was employed from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. Papyrus manuscripts are all continuous-text manuscripts (108), while parchment was the vehicle for both continuous-texts (about 2,400) and lectionaries (about 1,700). Paper manuscripts used for minuscules and lectionaries total about 1,300.

4. *Current classifications.* To add to the confusion, textual critics ignore some of these categories (continuous-text, parchment, paper) and classify Greek manuscripts using four terms: *papyri*, *uncials*, *minuscules*, and *lectionaries*. The papyri are in majuscule script (though not counted among the uncials!), but have been placed in a separate category due to their early date and greater significance, and also for historical reasons: the first was not published until 1868. Reckoned in these categories, different 'papyri' number 108, 'uncials' more than 260, 'minuscules' more than 2,800, and 'lectionaries' nearly 2,300. 'Papyri', 'uncials', and 'minuscules' are all continuous-text manuscripts, while lectionaries are written in both uncial (numbering about 270) and minuscule hands and on both parchment and paper and date from the fourth century on (though only ten originated before the eighth century). To complicate matters further, some manuscripts are bilingual, mainly Greco-Coptic and Greco-Latin (including thirty-four uncials), while others are palimpsests—manuscripts, usually parchment, recovered from a parchment reused by scraping off the original text and writing on the newly prepared surface. There remain more than a hundred New Testament uncials and lectionaries that have been overwritten in this fashion.

In summary, then, the term 'papyri' includes only manuscripts written on papyrus; 'uncial' means only non-papyrus continuous-text manuscripts written in majuscule hand (and does not include the lectionaries so written); 'minuscule' includes only continuous-text manuscripts written in cursive hand (and not the many lectionaries so written); and 'lectionary' means portions for liturgical use regardless of the script or writing material employed. Although many statistics are cited above, the total number of different Greek manuscripts of the



New Testament is difficult to determine, since some thirty papyri and uncials are actually portions of others, as are numerous minuscules and lectionaries. Raw numbers for manuscripts in the latest lists total more than 5,660 (K. Aland 1994), but when duplicates are noted and improperly classified lectionaries are subtracted, the actual total is reduced by perhaps a few hundred, and the safest statement, therefore, is that more than 5,000 different Greek New Testament manuscripts are presently extant.

More important than script, writing materials and format is the value placed on these Greek witnesses. Simply put, beginning in the early eighteenth century and decisively by mid-century, it was agreed that early manuscripts, though fewer, are generally to be preferred to the agreement of a larger number of later manuscripts; hence, the papyri and early uncials assumed the position of prominence. Two groups stand out in importance: first, the fifty-three oldest papyri, plus the four oldest uncials, all of which date prior to the early fourth century; and, secondly, the great uncial manuscripts of the fourth and fifth centuries, primarily Codices Sinaiticus (Ⲙ, fourth century), Alexandrinus (A, fifth century), and Vaticanus (B, fourth century), which contain all or most of the New Testament, but also Codex Bezae (D, fifth century) containing the Gospels and Acts, and Codex Washingtonianus (W, fifth century) with the four Gospels. The standard handbooks describe these manuscripts and many others of importance (see Metzger 1992; Aland and Aland 1989; cf. in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: Epp on papyri, pp. 3-21; Parker on majuscules, pp. 22-42).

As for the minuscules, about 80% of them are solid representatives of the Majority text (i.e. the Byzantine or Koine text), a text-type that developed in the fourth century and beyond, and become the official ecclesiastical text of the Byzantine Church. While it may contain some early readings, it is a full or conflate text that collected numerous expansive and harmonizing readings and developed over time into a smooth and refined text that has been preserved in hundreds upon hundreds of mostly late manuscripts. However, about 10% of the minuscules are important in establishing the original text, because they preserve elements of the early text (Aland and Aland 1989: 128; in general, see Aland and Wachtel in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 43-60).

To a high degree, though not exclusively, the lectionaries also represent the Byzantine text-type, and have not been considered of

primary importance in establishing the most likely original text. Still, they are likely to have been preserved with a high degree of conservatism because of their official role in church services, doubtless carefully preserving texts much older than their own generally late dates; hence, they assist in tracing the transmission of the New Testament text and cannot be overlooked in seeking the most likely original (see Osburn in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 61-74).

It will be obvious then—though it took generations of fierce intellectual struggle to reach the conclusion (see Epp in Epp and Fee 1993: 17-25, 144-64; Epp 1992: 427-30)—that textual critics will spend most of their efforts with the readings of the papyri and of the uncials up to about the tenth century, for the presumption is that (1) the most likely original readings are apt to be found here, as are (2) the earliest and most important theological alterations to the text. Always, however, the early versions and patristic citations must be checked in comparison with the Greek witnesses.

*b. Versions of the New Testament.* Textual criticism would be much simpler, but also much impoverished, if the New Testament text were preserved only in Greek manuscripts. The earliest translations were the Latin, Syriac and Coptic versions (though not necessarily in that order), and they retain the greatest importance. Though their actual origins and early histories are obscure, Latin, Syriac and Coptic versions of the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament were widely circulated in the third century, though the earliest extant Coptic manuscripts date only in the fourth, and late in that century for Latin and Syriac.

Difficulties arise in the use of these and other versions, for no language mechanically reproduces another. For instance, Syriac has no comparative or superlative; Syriac and Coptic have no case endings, and the latter employs strict word order to show subject, object, indirect object, etc.; Gothic has no future form; and even Latin, generally a fine medium for translating Greek, cannot distinguish between the aorist and perfect tenses or the lack of a definite article. Such factors diminish the certainty of recognizing exactly the Greek text behind the versions. Also, some translations are secondary; that is, not translated directly from the Greek text, but from another translation. For example, the Armenian and Georgian possibly have been based on the Greek, but more likely the Armenian stems from Syriac and the Georgian either from Armenian or Syriac or both jointly. In spite of these hindrances, the ancient versions are



significant in the search for the most likely original Greek text, especially the three earliest ones, Coptic, Syriac and Latin.

Actually, the earliest version of the Gospels was not a straight-text translation but the famous *Diatessaron* of Tatian, most likely composed in Syriac about 172 CE. It is a harmony of the Gospels with a complex history, since it influenced all further Syriac texts and then appeared in Persian, Armenian, Arabic, and Georgian forms in the east and in Latin, Middle Dutch, Old French, Old and Middle German, Middle English, and Middle Italian in the west (see Petersen 1994a, and in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 77-96).

The *Latin versions*, the largest tradition of any version, comprise more than 10,000 manuscripts. More than fifty of these (dating from the fourth to the thirteenth centuries) represent the Old Latin version, known from the earliest period in both North Africa and in Europe, and perhaps originating in North Africa in the late second century, though these matters are highly debated. The language of the Old Latin was rough, and no unitary form of text existed; this was recognized already by Jerome, who was asked by Pope Damasus to prepare a revision of these diverse texts, a task which Jerome and others completed in 383. This 'common' version was known as the Vulgate. Old Latin manuscripts continued to be used, however, long after Jerome's time, and these Old Latin texts are particularly useful in understanding the history of the Greek text of the New Testament (see Petzer in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 113-30).

The *Syriac versions*, like the Latin, have an earlier phase followed by a 'common' edition, the Peshitta (fifth century). Opinions on the date of this version's origin vary from the end of the second century to the mid-fourth. For the Gospels, Acts, and Pauline letters (the limits of the canon in the early Syriac Church), an Old Syriac form survives in continuous-text manuscripts for the Gospels (the Curetonian and the Sinaitic), but virtually only in patristic quotations for the Acts and Paul. Like the Latin, the Old Syriac is more useful in textual criticism than the Peshitta. (See Baarda in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 97-112.)

The *Coptic versions* are known from third-century Egypt in several dialects: Sahidic, the language of Upper (southern) Egypt; Bohairic from the Delta region of Lower (northern) Egypt; and lesser dialects, such as the Achmimic, sub-Achmimic, Middle Egyptian, and Fayyûmic. The manuscripts are largely fragmentary or late, though a few extensive ones from the fourth-fifth centuries are extant for

Matthew, John, and Acts. (See Wisse in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 131-41.)

*Other early versions* of significance include the *Armenian*, probably made in the early fifth century; the *Georgian*, closely akin to the Armenian in origin and character and known from the fifth century; and the *Ethiopic*, perhaps stemming from the fourth or fifth century. Less important ancient versions are in Arabic, Nubian, and Sogdian (Middle Iranian) in the east; and in Gothic, Old Church Slavonic, and Old High German in the west. (See in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: Zuurmond on Ethiopic, pp. 142-56; Alexanian on Armenian, pp. 157-72; Birdsall on Georgian, pp. 173-87.)

*c. Patristic Quotations.* A final body of source material for establishing the text, and an important source if properly used, is comprised of New Testament quotations found in Church authors of the first several centuries, not only in Greek, but in all relevant languages. They are of special significance for providing closely dated and geographically located textual readings, thus indicating the form that a reading or a text had at a rather definite place and time. A comparison with similar readings in continuous-text manuscripts enables us to specify the antiquity of such readings in the textual tradition and, though less clearly, the possible provenance of the manuscripts containing them. Hence, patristic quotations are valuable evidence in individual cases, and can be especially useful in establishing text-types.

Regrettably, however, the use of patristic quotations is not a simple matter, for the entire text-critical process must first be applied to each of these Church writings to establish the text most likely written. Even the best critical editions, however, do not solve the further problems of determining whether the writer is (a) quoting the text of a New Testament book directly and exactly as it occurs in the text being used (a citation); (b) paraphrasing the text by adapting it to the discussion or to the writer's own syntax while generally maintaining verbal identity with the text being used (an adaptation); or (c) merely alluding to a text's content without substantial verbal correspondence (an allusion). Only when these questions are answered and we know each writer's citing habits and the type of citation in each separate case can patristic quotations be used as evidence for the New Testament text. It is more likely, for example, that long quotations were copied from a manuscript than cited from memory, but it is obvious how complex and difficult the entire matter is. (Lists of



patristic writings cited in critical editions can be found in Nestle–Aland<sup>27</sup> and *UBSGNT*<sup>4</sup>. On the whole subject, see Fee in Epp and Fee 1993: 344-59 and in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 191-207; Ehrman 1994; and Petersen 1994b; on Latin patristic writers, North in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 208-23; on Syriac, Brock in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 224-36.)

#### 4. External Criteria

From knowledge of these various sources arise two critical exercises: First, an attempt to reconstruct the history and evolution of the New Testament text. This would involve sorting the manuscripts according to their distinctive textual characteristics and then placing the groups or clusters of manuscripts into a chronological/historical continuum, which, in turn, would display temporally the various textual complexions inherent in each group. Families (such as Family 1 and Family 13) occasionally can be established, followed by attempts to identify the larger ‘text types’, classically defined in quantitative terms as ‘a group of manuscripts that agree more than 70 percent of the time and is separated by a gap of about 10 percent from its neighbors’ (Colwell 1969: 59; see Fee in Epp and Fee 1993: 221-43; Geer in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 253-67).

Though identifying text-types is a subject of current debate, all agree on the *Byzantine text type*, or Majority text, represented by Codex Alexandrinus (A, fifth century)—but only in the Gospels—and by the vast majority of all our manuscripts. It originated in the fourth century and, with rare exceptions, does not *exclusively* contain readings with high claims to represent the original text, though it can help us trace points of theology and ecclesiology during its long reign as the official text of the Church (see Fee in Epp and Fee 1993: 183-208; Wallace in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 297-320.)

Most agree that two early and therefore highly significant text types have their roots in the second century and are represented in identifiable groups or clusters: (1) the *Alexandrian text type* (or B-text, formerly called ‘Neutral’), exemplified predominantly in  $\mathfrak{p}75$  (third century) and Codex Vaticanus (B, fourth century), along with  $\mathfrak{p}66$  (c. 200 CE), Sinaiticus ( $\aleph$ , fourth century), and later Codex L (eighth century); and (2) the ‘*Western*’ text type (or D-text), represented by Codex Bezae (D, fifth century) and by the fragmentary  $\mathfrak{p}29$   $\mathfrak{p}38$   $\mathfrak{p}48$   $\mathfrak{p}69$  0171, and later (for Acts) 1739 614 and 383.

In addition, there exists an abortive text type, which we may call the C-text (formerly called the ‘Caesarean’) that presents a textual

complexion midway between the Alexandrian and ‘Western’ (i.e. midway between B and D, hence C-text). It is represented by  $\mathfrak{p}45$  (third century) and Codex Washingtonianus (W, fifth century, with origins certainly as early as  $\mathfrak{p}45$ ) in Mark, though its line does not move unambiguously beyond Codex W.

Textual critics, acting on their penchant for early manuscripts and groups, place the most weight on text types B, C, and D, though most recognize B and D as the earliest, even if no definitive decision has been reached as to which of the two had priority. Because of the high quality of text found in the B group in contrast to the often rough form in the D group, most critics favor B as the ‘best’ kind of text and generally accord to it preeminent authority in textual decisions. Others, recognizing the internal criterion favoring the ‘harder’ reading, suggest that D’s rougher text implies greater antiquity—and the debate goes on. The 1950s discovery of  $\mathfrak{p}75$  is often taken, however, as supporting the former view—the superior quality of the B-text: Codex Vaticanus, because of its smooth refined text, had often been viewed as a revised text, but the virtual identity of  $\mathfrak{p}75$ ’s text with that of Vaticanus, though  $\mathfrak{p}75$  is perhaps a century and a half earlier, automatically ruled out a fourth century revision as the source of the B-text, and pushed the existence of that high quality textual complexion back already to the beginning of the third century.

In summary, and despite much uncertainty and debate, knowledge of the manuscripts permits fairly confident groupings, yielding earlier and later text types, with the presumption of originality *ceteris paribus* resting somewhere in the readings of the early groups, predominantly the B-text, but also the D-text and the  $\mathfrak{p}45$ -W combination (C-text). This rough reconstruction of the history of the New Testament text and its groupings leads to the second set of criteria for originality of readings, which we call ‘external criteria’.

Again, these are phrased so that if a criterion describes the situation of one reading within a variation unit, that reading may be reckoned the most likely original.

#### CRITERIA RELATED TO EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

1. A variant’s support by the earliest manuscripts, or by manuscripts assuredly preserving early texts. Historians of the text conclude that old manuscripts have been less subject to conflation and other scribal alterations.



2. A variant's support by the 'best quality' manuscripts. Manuscripts evidencing careful copying are less likely to have been subject to textual corruption or contamination, and manuscripts that frequently and consistently offer readings accredited as most likely original thereby acquire a reputation of generally high quality—but it must be recognized that internal criteria are utilized to reach the conclusion that certain manuscripts are the 'best'.

3. A variant's support by manuscripts with the widest geographical distribution. Readings attested in more than one locality are less likely to be accidental or idiosyncratic.

4. A variant's support by one or more established groups of manuscripts of recognized antiquity, character, and perhaps location, that is, of recognized 'best quality'. Not only individual manuscripts, but families and text-types can be judged as to age and quality—again, internal criteria contribute to these judgments.

Naturally, what is true of internal criteria is also the case with external criteria: conflicting judgments on a single reading may arise from application of these various external criteria, or two competing readings may be supported by different criteria. More often, however, conflicts arise *between* the internal and external criteria: an external criterion may support one reading as original, while an internal criterion supports another, as when a variant in a very early manuscript or group is also the smoother reading or contains material from a parallel passage. There are many other possibilities. For example, in Matt. 27:17, was Barabbas's name really Jesus Barabbas? There is strong and widespread external support for 'Barabbas' only, but it is highly plausible that the most likely original is 'Jesus Barabbas' even though this reading has weak external support. Why? Because, on internal grounds (reverence for Jesus Christ), 'Jesus' was doubtless dropped from the text because, as Origen in fact says, 'no one who is a sinner [is called] Jesus' (see Metzger [ed.] 1994: 56).

Thus resolution, though rarely simple, is sought once again in the balance of probabilities—by using all relevant criteria and assessing their relative merits in answering the question, What would the author most likely have written? This last sentence describes the method currently dominant: 'reasoned eclecticism'. It represents middle ground between what might be called a 'historical-documentary' method—basically reliance upon documents or manuscripts, that is, external criteria; and 'thoroughgoing eclecticism'—a virtually

exclusive reliance upon transcriptional probability, that is, internal criteria. 'Reasoned eclecticism', then, combines the two approaches and employs all relevant criteria for a given case, external and internal, and attempts a resolution by weighing over against one another the various criteria: hence the phrase, relying on 'the balance of probabilities', when trying to decide on the most likely original reading. (On 'thoroughgoing [or rigorous] eclecticism', see Elliott in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 321-35; on 'reasoned eclecticism', see Holmes in Ehrman and Holmes 1995: 336-60; on both, see Fee in Epp and Fee 1993: 124-40; Epp in Epp and Fee 1993: 141-82; and Epp 1992. Numerous examples of how the various criteria function can be found in Metzger 1992: 207-46; Aland and Aland 1989: 280-316.)

#### CONCLUSION

In this essay we have journeyed through the relevance of textual criticism for interpreting the New Testament; through the lively story of how its text was transmitted to us, with all of its scribal exigencies that must be understood, evaluated, and often countervailed; through the oft-competing principles that apply both to the internal transcriptional and to the external documentary aspects of manuscripts; and through the description of these documents themselves. As we apply this entire text-critical endeavor to the textual variants of each New Testament writing, we discern multiple voices within the fabric of the text—voices of an ancient author; of the oldest attainable text; of a harmonistic amplifier; of a grammarian or stylist seeking improvement; of a heterodox propagandist or an orthodox 'corrector'; of an otherwise culturally conditioned interpreter; and even the voice of an editor or possibly a revisionist responsible for compositional levels that may lie behind some of our present New Testament writings. Discerning a particular voice is not easy and often nigh impossible, but each attempt is enlightening about the richness, the diversity, and the dynamism of the early Church and its authoritative collection of ancient writings.

#### EXCURSUS: THE INTERSECTION OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND CANON

Certain features of 'New Testament' manuscripts, such as their content and the order and combinations of books they contain, have long been recognized as carrying implications for the lengthy process



by which the New Testament canon was formed. Less well recognized are the canonical implications of two other matters related to textual criticism: the mere fact that competing textual variations exist (raising the issue of which text is canonical) and the possibility of discovering compositional levels behind our 'canonical' New Testament books or identifying later formulations of their texts (questioning the meaning of 'original text', among other matters). These three levels of interaction between text and canon deserve exploration, though resolution of the issues they raise is not easily reached.

### 1. *Manuscript Features with Implications for Canon*

The presence in manuscripts of books ultimately not retained in the New Testament, the absence in certain manuscripts of books normally expected there, and the sequence in which books are found in manuscripts, as well as the conventional groups and combinations in which early Christian writings circulated, have played a role—not always clearly identifiable—in the formation of the Christian canon. These are all features extraneous to the actual texts of the manuscripts.

A. *'Non-Canonical' Books in 'New Testament' Manuscripts.* Some 'New Testament' manuscripts, as is well known, contain writings that did not become part of the Christian canon. As examples:  $\mathfrak{P}72$  (3rd/4th century) contains Jude and 1–2 Peter, but they are interspersed among an array of other Christian writings, such as the *Nativity of Mary*, an *Ode of Solomon*, the *Apology of Phileas*, and others. Codex Sinaiticus ( $\aleph$ , 4th century) has the Old and New Testaments and, following the latter, the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (part of which is lost—it is not known whether additional works originally were included in the volume). Codex Alexandrinus (A, 5th century) also has the Old and New Testaments as well as 1–2 *Clement* (again, the manuscript breaks off after a portion of the latter). Codex Boernerianus (G<sup>p</sup>, 9th century) of the Pauline Epistles originally contained also the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*. Curiously, this (obviously spurious) letter can be found in more than a hundred (!) Latin Vulgate manuscripts (including the 6th-century F) and in Arabic and others, and was included in all eighteen German Bibles prior to that of Luther (Metzger 1987: 183, 239–40). As a final example, a twelfth-century Harklean Syriac New Testament contains 1–2 *Clement*, placing them between the Catholic Epistles and the Pauline epistles (Metzger 1987: 222).

As is known from patristic sources, at certain times in certain places books like 1–2 *Clement*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Epistle to the*

*Laodiceans*, and many others, but especially the *Shepherd of Hermas*, were treated as authoritative (or 'canonical'). Three apocalypses, as is well documented, vied over a long period of time for a place among the authoritative writings (the Revelation of John, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*). Oddly, the *Apocalypse of Peter* has not been found as part of a New Testament manuscript, though it is included in the canon list attached to Codex Claromontanus (D<sup>p</sup>, 6th century, but the list is thought to be earlier); that list, incidentally, also includes the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as well as the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Acts of Paul*, though the scribe has placed a dash to the left of these books, as well as the *Apocalypse of Peter*, to note them as in some way exceptional (for the text and discussion, see Metzger 1987: 230, 310–11).

These data raise obvious questions: to what extent do our 'New Testament' manuscripts reflect the status of canon formation in their times? And, did they influence that process? Doubtless, there were effects in both directions, but proof is elusive. For example, in the first two centuries of Christianity, books like 1 *Clement*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and others were treated as authoritative by various patristic writers, especially Clement of Alexandria. In the third and fourth centuries—Codex  $\aleph$  being produced in the latter—writings such as these were known, used, and valued by the likes of Origen (185–254), Hippolytus (170–235), and Eusebius (c. 265–340). At the same time, Origen is reported to have called 2 Peter 'doubted' and 2–3 John 'questionable', and Eusebius, who designated *Barnabas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and *Hermas* as 'disputed books', also placed James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, and perhaps the Revelation of John in this same category. This reveals something of the fluidity still to be found on the fringes of the New Testament canon in the early fourth century—nor was there uniformity across the whole of Christianity on these matters, especially between east and west, and especially on books like Hebrews and Revelation; movement toward our twenty-seven-book canon accelerated as the fourth century closed, but not in all localities (see Gamble 1985: 48–56).

Returning to 'New Testament' manuscripts, it is difficult, therefore, to specify the significance that the presence of *Barnabas* and *Hermas* in the fourth century Codex  $\aleph$  has for canon, and the presence of 1–2 *Clement* in Codex A in the following century is even less clear.

B. *Absence of Expected Books in Manuscripts.* Some 'New



Testament' manuscripts do not contain certain books that might have been expected in their particular groupings. For example,  $\mathfrak{P}46$  (c. 200) originally had ten letters of Paul, including Hebrews, but not Philemon; it apparently never contained the Pastoral Letters (there is no room). Also, Codex  $G^p$  (9th century) lacks Hebrews (though the place of Hebrews in the canon was firm by the end of the fourth century). While three uncials and fifty-six minuscules contain the whole New Testament (that is, our twenty-seven books), two uncial manuscripts and 147 minuscules (including no. 33 of the 9th century) have the whole New Testament *except* the Revelation of John.

Anyone familiar with the history of canon will recognize that the Pastorals (which lack strong early attestation), Hebrews (which could not be linked with any known apostolic author), and especially the Revelation of John (with debated authority and strong rivals) are among those books that were problematic in the canon process (in addition to the perennially difficult, James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2–3 John). Hebrews is not in the Muratorian Canon (c. 200—though some date it in the 4th century), and Revelation's place in the canon was uncertain for some centuries, especially in Eastern Christianity.

So, again, the extent to which our manuscripts reflect or influenced canon formation is a relevant question, but only rather cautious statements can be made. One can attempt a few under three headings. (1) *Revelation of John*: The very number of extant manuscripts perhaps reflects the uncertainty about the canonicity of Revelation (though there could be other reasons for the phenomenon) in that there are 287 manuscripts of the Revelation of John over against 662 of the Acts and Catholic Epistles, 792 of Paul, and 2,361 of the Gospels (Aland and Aland 1989: 78-79, 83); note also that Revelation has never been a part of the official lectionary of the Greek Church (Metzger 1987: 217). (2) *Hebrews*: While *1 Clement* appears to be the only writing that quotes Hebrews prior to the oldest extant manuscript containing it, namely  $\mathfrak{P}46$  (dating c. 200), Hebrews is nonetheless firmly a part of the Pauline collection in that papyrus manuscript because it stands between Romans and 1 Corinthians. This cannot be based on length, because 1 Corinthians is longer than Hebrews, though its proximity to Romans could be based on doctrine (Hatch 1936: 134). (Hebrews, though of unknown authorship, very often circulated with the Pauline letters.) So, the unusual position of Hebrews in this very early manuscript reflects a conviction of Pauline authorship and, in addition, may constitute a canonical claim

contemporary with Clement of Alexandria (c. 200), who quotes Hebrews authoritatively and thought that Paul was in some way responsible for its content. (3) *The Shorter Catholic Epistles*: While the history of the canon shows that only 1 Peter and 1 John were quite well established in the third century, but that James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2–3 John were still striving for acceptance, the history of the text of these Catholic Epistles reveals that there is often no uniform textual character among them in a single manuscript; rather, each epistle may have a text quite different in complexion from the others. This suggests (1) that they had earlier circulated as independent writings and (2) that their differing textual character in a manuscript bringing them together is due to the earlier, most likely separate, manuscripts from which they were copied (Aland and Aland 1989: 49-50). For instance, Jude in  $\mathfrak{P}72$  (3rd/4th century), its earliest manuscript, shows a complex textual history (Aland and Aland 1989: 50); moreover, as noted earlier,  $\mathfrak{P}72$  contains not only 1–2 Peter and Jude, but an array of other early, 'non-canonical' Christian writings. Thus, not only might a book's absence from a manuscript—where it might be expected—reflect fluidity in canon formation, but fluidity can be inferred also from the varying textual complexions of books in a single grouping or collection, implying, for instance, that writings valued by some were copied and used as individual books until they were more broadly accredited by inclusion in a regular canonical grouping.

Finally, Codex Vaticanus (B, 4th century) is of more than passing interest with respect both to Hebrews and to the shorter Catholic Epistles, even though its New Testament section is assumed to have contained all of our twenty-seven books. The manuscript actually breaks off after Heb. 9:13 (and the 15th-century supplement [= minuscule 1957] that provides the rest of Hebrews and the Revelation of John is of no significance). The Alands (1989: 109) think it probable that, like  $\mathfrak{N}$  and A, Codex B contained writings of the Apostolic Fathers; B has ancient page numbers—a rarity among Greek manuscripts—that permit a calculation of how many pages were lost at the beginning (some 46 chapters of Genesis), but there is no way of telling how many leaves were lost at the end (Gregory 1907: 344-45). Nonetheless, on the assumption that it contained our present New Testament, it has been observed that the order of these books is identical to that of Athanasius's famous list (367 CE)—the first such list we have that contains all and only our New Testament



writings. On the surface, then, it might appear that Codex B, especially if (as has been speculated, but by no means substantiated) it were produced in Egypt or in Alexandria itself (where Athanasius was bishop), could be understood as supporting the fourth-century canon documented in Athanasius. Lacking knowledge of its provenance, however, it is safer to say that Codex B documents a fourth-century view of canon, though at some unknown locality or region in Christianity. Specifically, its chapter divisions, some of which show signs of considerable antiquity, permit two observations of interest. First, in the Pauline Epistles—unlike the common practice of separately numbering the sections of each writing—the chapter divisions of Codex B are continuous from Romans on; yet, they reveal that Hebrews, which follows Thessalonians, was placed after Galatians—hence, more firmly in the Pauline group (cf. ¶46)—in the manuscript that was the archetype of B (see below on the order of books), suggesting again an earlier conviction of Pauline authorship and perhaps thereby a stronger view of canonicity for Hebrews prior to Codex B. Secondly, and more significantly, is the fact that the ‘very old’ section divisions in the Catholic Epistles take no account of 2 Peter, suggesting that this often-disputed epistle was rejected also by the maker of these divisions in Codex B (Gregory 1907: 344).

*C. Order of Books in Manuscripts.* Thirdly, as already illustrated, some manuscripts have New Testament books in an order different from the traditional. For instance, the four Gospels are known in some nine different sequences. Most manuscripts follow the traditional order; the best known deviation occurs in Codices D and W (both 5th century), where the order is Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark. Acts nearly always follows the Gospels, but  $\aleph$  (4th century) and the Latin Codex Fuldensis (F, 6th century) place it after the Pauline letters. Hebrews was very frequently included among the Pauline letters and usually followed Philemon, though—as I have already noted—in ¶46 (c. 200) it follows Romans, while  $\aleph$ , B (both 4th century), and others place it between 2 Thessalonians and the Pastorals. (See Metzger 1987: 295-300.) ¶46 also has Ephesians before Galatians. Indeed, Greek and versional manuscripts have the Pauline Epistles in some eight different sequences.

The relevance of these data to canon is more complicated, with more subtle implications. Though arguments can be made that New Testament books were often arranged according to length, usually from the longest to the shortest (it was common to count and record

the number of lines, or *stichoi*, in a manuscript), sometimes counting the writings of one author as one work (see Metzger 1987: 296-300), yet it is possible also that fluctuating sequences of books may indicate canonical fluidity or uncertainty. The most plausible example is Hebrews and perhaps, as noted above, an issue is authorship—Pauline or not? Hebrews is found in nine different positions in New Testament manuscripts (see Metzger 1994: 591-92), including a location between Corinthians and Ephesians, between Romans and Corinthians (as in ¶46), between Corinthians and Galatians, after Philemon (that is, at the end of the Paulines), but usually between Thessalonians and the Pastorals ( $\aleph$  and B) (Frede 1966-71: 292-303). Though the criterion of length appears to be ruled out in all of these combinations, relevant issues might be the uncertainty of the destination or addressees of Hebrews, a desire to place it between the letters to churches and those to individuals, trying to cope with a Pauline Hebrews when it did not fit with the view—well established by the third/fourth centuries—that Paul wrote to seven churches (see Dahl 1962: 261-64 and below), or factors of doctrine. Thus, for whatever reasons, Hebrews was difficult to classify and this, for some early Christians, may have raised questions about its canonicity.

*D. Marcionite Prologues.* Some manuscripts contain what are generally called Marcionite prologues. They are found in a number of Latin Vulgate manuscripts (including the prominent Codex Fuldensis [F]) and provide, for the Pauline letters, short descriptions of the addressees and reasons for writing—stressing Paul’s conflict with false apostles. The current view, however, is that these are not of Marcionite origin, but were written for a Pauline corpus to seven churches that was not connected with Marcion’s canon and which later gave way to the fourteen-letter corpus, and that the prologues presuppose an earlier ‘seven church’ corpus that began with Galatians, 1-2 Corinthians, Romans—the same order found in Marcion’s canon, though the order is not to be attributed to Marcion (see Clabeaux 1989: 1-4; Schmid 1995: 287-89). These manuscript data are difficult to assess, but can potentially assist us in understanding the canon process and the controversies attendant to it, such as the long-standing but elusive role of Marcion, whose differing text of Paul was most likely not a new creation but ‘the adaptation of an already existing Pauline Corpus that began with Galatians’ (Clabeaux 1989: 4). (The so-called Anti-Marcionite prologues to the Gospels [Mark, Luke, and John only] are found in nearly forty Latin biblical manuscripts [5th-



10th centuries], though the prologue for Luke is also preserved in Greek. They were independently composed, and date in the fourth century, though that for Luke perhaps dates in the second century. Their relevance to canon is negligible, though the early Lukan portion does refer to Luke as a follower of Paul [see Koester 1990: 243, 335-36].)

The four issues treated above are illustrative of the long-standing connection between text and canon, but also of the difficulty of bringing or keeping them together. Natural connections become elusive, and the two disciplines have tended to distance themselves from one another more and more, though scholars like Nils Dahl, Harry Gamble, and John Clabeaux have attempted to clarify again the fruitfulness of their intersection.

## 2. *Textual Variants as 'Canon within the Canon'*

There is another level at which textual criticism and issues of canon intersect. One is seldom addressed by textual critics, but raises fascinating if intractable issues, and it may be introduced by invoking an old phrase in a new way: 'A canon within the canon'. This usually refers to defining one's beliefs and practice by relying only upon certain selected books from an authoritative canon (as in Luther's reliance upon Romans and Galatians and his virtual dismissal of James, or Zwingli's rejection of Revelation), though it may also refer to reliance upon selected ideas. If, however, we apply the phrase to the textual variants of an individual variation unit and to the selection of one variant over the others, rather penetrating questions arise: In what sense are competing variant readings canonical? More specifically, when decisions between or among readings are not easily made, in what sense are these competing readings, singly or collectively, canonical? Or, in what sense are readings canonical that are suspected of being theologically motivated—especially when a variant with an 'orthodox' bias can be shown to be secondary?

*A. Manuscript Indications of Textual Problems.* How do the manuscripts themselves deal with recognized textual variations? Scribal sigla have been mentioned above in connection with the 1 Cor. 14:34-35 illustration—a scribe marking a manuscript to alert the reader, in this instance, to a doubtful passage. When manuscripts contain the notable pericope of the adulteress (John 7:53-8:11), often an asterisk (Codices E M Λ) or an obelus (Codex S) accompanies the passage, which are customary signs of a questionable portion of text. Likewise, manuscripts with Mark 16:9-20 often contain such sigla or

even comments that older Greek manuscripts do not have the passage (see, for example, minuscule 1) (Metzger 1992: 223-24, 226). Varying locations also alert us to textual-canonical problems. The adulteress pericope is most often found after John 7:52, but sometimes after 7:36 or 21:24, and it can also be found after Luke 21:38, suggesting uncertainty about the pericope among scribes. Another indicator that a scribe's exemplar did not contain a portion of text, but that such texts were known to the scribe, is the use of blank space. Codices L and Δ have a blank space where John 7:53-8:11 would fall, and the scribe of Codex B, completely contrary to his practice when coming to the end of a New Testament book, leaves an entire column blank after Mark 16:8, 'evidently because one or other of the two subsequent endings was known to him personally, while he found neither of them in the exemplar which he was copying' (Hort in Westcott and Hort 1896: I, p. 29 notes). In what sense are these lengthier passages canonical?

*B. Authoritative Status of Textual Variants in the Early Church.* Some might say that readings clearly rejected on the basis of external and internal criteria should at once be labeled non-canonical. Decisions, however, are not often clear and simple; more importantly, significant variants (that is, those that make sense and are unlikely to be the result of accidental alteration) surely were part of some churches' authoritative Scripture as they were used in worship and as normative for Christian life—whether we now judge them as most likely original or not. To take an example mentioned above, neither appended ending of Mark (that is, beyond γάρ in 16:8) is likely to have been part of the early Gospel of Mark, yet both the so-called 'shorter' and 'longer' endings (and the latter's further expansions) surely were part of the canonical Mark as far as some churches were concerned; even the 'shorter' ending, with its grandiose, obviously non-Markan language, was used in Greek-speaking churches, as well as in churches using Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopian (as judged by manuscripts containing it). The same applies to 1 Cor. 14:34-35, which has not only long been considered canonical, but has also played a major role in shaping gender views in Christianity. So, to what extent are variants canonical that were treated as canonical by the early Church, but are now rejected by us?

Or, is the Matthean phrase, 'but rescue us from the evil one' (6:13), canonical also in Luke for the large number of manuscripts that add it to their text of the 'Lord's prayer' (Luke 11:4)? Or, is the final phrase in Matthew's version, 'For the kingdom and the power and the glory



are yours forever' (at 6:13), canonical for the many witnesses that carry it—against the clear evidence that it is a later, liturgical addition? What about the added v. 37 in Acts 8? This is another obvious liturgical (baptismal) formula not attested in most of the earliest textual tradition. What of the agraphon in Codex Bezae at Luke 6:4, addressed to a man working on the Sabbath: 'Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law'. Again this was canonical for some. Or, if the current revival of the view that the author of Acts wrote two versions of that book were to gain acceptance, would both editions be canonical?

A final example will illustrate an additional problem: Is the doxology in Romans canonical after 14:23, after 15:33, or after 16:23—or after both 14:23 and 16:23, where several manuscripts place it? Or was this doxology never a part of Romans, as other manuscripts and patristic witnesses testify? The further issue is whether Romans originally had 14 chapters, or 15, or 16—as demarcated by the various positions of the concluding doxology—and, more importantly, what does this placement of the doxology tell us about the textual history of Romans and therefore its canonical form? Tracing out the evolution and interrelation of these three forms of Romans is highly complex, to say the least, but it leads (among other matters) to the conclusion that a 14-chapter version of Romans (secondary to the 16-chapter original) was pre-Marcionite and came into existence prior to the collection of a Pauline corpus (see Gamble 1977: 15-35, 96-129; cf. Schmid 1995: 284-94; see Dahl 1962 below). These are issues closely relevant to canon in general and to canon within the canon.

*C. Assessing Textual/Canonical Variant Readings.* These various kinds of examples from several parts of the New Testament elicit a few observations. First, the Gospels in early Christianity doubtless were read holistically, and not discretely as we tend to do in critical scholarship. (Perhaps the appearance of Tatian's *Diatessaron* c. 172 CE may be viewed as a concrete and dramatic demonstration of such a holistic proclivity.) Therefore, the 'canonical' questions we raise when the 'Lord's prayer' is expanded in Luke by Synoptic harmonization or in Matthew by liturgical influence would not likely have occurred to early hearers of these Gospel passages. Rather, it would appear that canonical issues, to the extent that they were raised at all in the first couple of centuries, focused largely on whole writings ('We accept the

following writings...; we reject the following books...', etc.) rather than on what we would call textual variants (cf. Elliott 1993: 353).

A notable exception, however, is Origen, who shows a concern for a 'correct' text of the Old Testament in his *Hexapla* and for that of the 'New Testament'—as far as a New Testament was defined by him—through his numerous text-critical comments on various passages. In addition, his allegorical interpretation demanded a text exact in its details. Hence, he blames the textual aberrations that he finds in various manuscripts on heretics ('Jesus Barabbas' for 'Barabbas' in Matt. 27:16-17—no others would have joined Jesus' name with a sinner), on careless or arbitrary scribes, or on presumably orthodox Christians trying to solve theological or exegetical problems in the text. He himself selects certain readings based on his own investigations of geography (the problems of 'Bethany' or 'Bethabara' in John 1:28, or 'Gadara', 'Gergesa' or 'Gerasa' in Matt. 8:28) or history (preferring in Luke 23:45 'the sun was darkened' to 'the sun was eclipsed', since no eclipse was recorded in Jesus' time), among others (see Pack 1960). It would appear that, for Origen (in the middle of the 3rd century), variant readings did involve questions of a 'canon within the "canon"', though the latter for him was not yet fully defined.

Secondly, still in the context of ancient holistic reading, a larger corpus in the emerging canon may have shaped its individual parts; for instance, the 'longer' ending of Mark 'could have functioned to bring Mark's Gospel into harmony with the fourfold collection', or the inclusion of the Pastoral Epistles in the Pauline corpus could have been motivated by a wish to provide them a broader and more appropriate context (Childs 1985: 52-53). Such a context may also have been sought for the discrete 1 Cor. 14:34-35 segment.

Thirdly, it is commonplace to say that numerous textual variants arose in the early period because these Christian manuscripts were copied by non-professional scribes (for example, Vaganay and Amphoux 1991: 3) or because they did not yet have the status of Scripture (for example, Elliott and Moir 1995: 3). On the latter point, however, Ernest C. Colwell boldly stated forty-five years ago that 'The reverse is the case. It was because they were the religious treasure of the church that they were changed' and 'The paradox is that the variations came into existence because these were religious books, sacred books, canonical books. The devout scribe felt compelled to correct misstatements which he found in the manuscript



he was copying' (Colwell 1952: 52-53). Though this cannot account for all variants, and may not have obtained everywhere, it is a more compelling view than the carelessness theory. Undoubtedly, all of the significant variants (as earlier defined) 'are interpretations which were highly enough thought of in some place and at some time to be incorporated into the Scripture itself' (Parvis 1952: 172). On this view, a concept of canonicity has encouraged rather than discouraged textual alterations. Indeed, one may venture the affirmation that, when a scribe effected a theologically-motivated textual alteration, that scribe was making a canonical decision, an independent (or perhaps a community) contribution to the New Testament canon. If so, the process of canon formation was operating at two quite different levels: first, at the level of church leaders of major Christian localities or regions, even as large as the eastern or western church, seeking broad consensus on which books were to be accepted as authoritative for the larger church, and, secondly, also at the level of individual scribes (usually, perhaps, representing a monastic or some other small community) concerned about individual variants that properly expressed their theological or other understanding of the sentences and paragraphs within their already authoritative books.

### 3. *Text/Canon Intersection at the Composition Stages of the New Testament*

The issues I have raised go still deeper, to levels behind our canonical New Testament books to pre-canonical, pre-compositional stages in the formation of the early Christian writings.

A. *Introducing the Issues from the Four Gospels.* These further issues may be introduced and illustrated by referring to a 1988 conference at the University of Notre Dame on 'Gospel Traditions in the Second Century' (see Petersen 1989), where Helmut Koester, facing seven other participants from six countries—all specialists in textual criticism—opened his presentation with the appropriate observation that there is no second century manuscript evidence for the New Testament (except the tiny  $\wp$ 52) and that, therefore, immense problems attend the reconstruction of the textual history of the Gospels in their first century of transmission. Next, he turned on its head the New Testament text-critics' standard claim (imbedded also in my main article above!) that we are fortunate to have so many early manuscripts so close to the time the writings originated; rather, he aptly observed that 'the oldest known manuscript archetypes are separated from the autographs by more than a century. Textual critics

of classical texts know that the first century of their transmission is the period in which the most serious corruptions occur'. He adds the provocative note that 'textual critics of the New Testament writings have been surprisingly naive in this respect' (Koester 1989: 19).

Working then from textual agreements between Matthew and Luke when they use Mark, and from comparisons of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* with our Mark, Koester argues that an earlier form of Mark can be discerned behind our canonical Mark; the latter represents a revision, the former becomes our 'oldest accessible text of the Gospel of Mark'—accessible, that is, through the comparisons adduced. He also investigates the Gospel material quoted by Justin Martyr (c. 150), postulating that his aim was to produce 'one inclusive new Gospel' by harmonizing or by using a harmony of Matthew and Luke; in the process, Justin reveals a freedom to modify this material to demonstrate (as one of his purposes) a more complete fulfillment of prophecy in the events of Jesus. This quick summary cannot do justice to the much more complex study (Koester 1989; 1990: 275-86, 295-302, 360-402; cf. Wisse 1989, who argues against extensive pre-canonical redaction), but, whether these hypotheses are sustained in detail or not, Koester's point is clear and telling:

...the text of the Synoptic Gospels was very unstable during the first and second centuries. With respect to Mark, one can be fairly certain that only its revised text has achieved canonical status, while the original text (attested only by Matthew and Luke) has not survived. With respect to Matthew and Luke, there is no guarantee that the archetypes of the manuscript tradition are identical with the original text of each Gospel. The harmonizations of these two Gospels demonstrate that their text was not sacrosanct and that alterations could be expected... New Testament textual critics have been deluded by the hypothesis that the archetypes of the textual tradition which were fixed c. 200 CE...are (almost) identical with the autographs... Whatever evidence there is indicates that not only minor, but also substantial revisions of the original texts have occurred during the first hundred years of the transmission (Koester 1989: 37).

Thus, we are left not only with text-critical questions, such as, which variants of Mark are most likely original, but also penetrating canonical questions, such as, which Mark is original? (See Petersen 1994b: 136-37.) Similar issues pertain to the composition of the other Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel, the Pauline letters, and other portions of the New Testament. One such example is the relation of the well-known Egerton Papyrus 2 (currently dated c. 200) to the Gospel of John. This papyrus usually has been understood as a later excerpt



from all four Gospels, but Koester views it as representing a text older than John, because, 'with its language that contains Johannine elements but reveals a greater affinity to the Synoptic tradition, it belongs to a stage of the tradition that preceded the canonical gospels' (Koester 1982: II, p. 182). More recently, Koester has endorsed the view of J.B. Daniels that the Synoptic parallels in Egerton Papyrus 2 represent 'a separate tradition which did not undergo Markan redaction', and that the papyrus's author 'did not make use of the Gospel of John in canonical form' (Koester 1990: 207, quoting the dissertation of Daniels; cf. 206-16). If so, the Gospel of which these papyrus fragments were a part would have been read, without question, as authoritative in some early church or churches, and possibly could have played a role also in the composition of our Gospels. The question arises again: What or where is the original Mark? Or Matthew, or Luke, or John?

*B. Introducing the Issues from the Pauline Epistles.* When one turns to the (genuine) Pauline letters, it is easier to envision a specific moment at a specific place when a real, identifiable person placed words on papyrus that were to be carried to a congregation in Greece or Asia Minor, but even in these cases, is the 'original' the letter so penned or is it the form each letter had when a Pauline collection was formed? This would take into account the changes that the transmission process had wrought. After all, 'there is no simply "neutral" text from which one can recover a pure textual stream, but the early period reflects highly complex recensional activity from the outset' (Childs 1985: 525).

Two well-known variants, similar in form, raise questions about such recensional activity within the Pauline corpus. At Eph. 1:1, 'in Ephesus' is lacking in a small number of witnesses, but they include the old and venerable  $\mathfrak{P}46$   $\aleph^*$  and  $B^*$  (\* meaning the original hand, before a later hand 'corrected' the text). Based on the reading of these witnesses and the general or 'catholic' nature of Ephesians, several theories developed, among them that of Archbishop Ussher in the seventeenth century that it was a circular letter intended for several churches and that a blank was left in 1:1 for names of churches using it, and that of E.J. Goodspeed (1933) that 'Ephesians' was written to introduce the first Pauline collection. Nils Dahl takes this textual variant in a different direction, first rejecting the reading of the oldest manuscripts, suggesting that the context within Eph. 1:1 requires a geographical designation, but then allowing the possibility that

the letter was originally issued in several copies with a special address in each of them. In any case, the letter must have had a pre-history before it was published as part of the Pauline corpus. The text without any concrete address is to be understood as a result of a secondary 'catholicizing', to which we have an analogy in the textual tradition of Romans (Dahl 1962: 267).

This is a reference to Rom. 1:7 (and Rom. 1:15), where 'in Rome' is absent from a few witnesses. By an elaborate argument, Dahl contends that the absence of this geographical designation is as well attested as its presence; he then argues that the short, fourteen-chapter version of Romans, ending with 14:23 plus the doxology of 16:25-27 placed there by a number of manuscripts, circulated 'in early days' with no geographical reference and as another 'catholic' epistle of Paul. The complex text-critical problems involving the doxology have been referred to above, and they serve, in Dahl's view, as 'further evidence of the existence of more than one recension of Romans' (1962: 268). Like Ephesians, this fourteen-chapter version of Romans 'will have to be explained as the result of editorial activity...between the times of Paul and Marcion' (1962: 269). Finally, Dahl points out that the earliest patristic references do not easily support 'a standard edition of the Pauline corpus before 100 A.D.' and that 'the question whether our whole textual tradition goes back to one archetypal manuscript of the whole collection will need further investigation' (1962: 271 n. 2). What, then, is the 'original' text of these letters and how is that related to their 'canonical' text as embraced by the church?

*C. Various Meanings of 'Original Text' and 'Canon'.* So text and canon cross paths at basic and perhaps unsettling levels of inquiry. Whereas traditional textual criticism has contributed much by moving its textual investigations ever closer to the time that the New Testament authors wrote, more recently its tasks have become more intriguing and more challenging as the discipline turns its attention away from the search for merely one 'original' text to an understanding of earlier stages of composition and to earlier 'texts'—earlier 'originals'—that lie behind what we have become accustomed to consider the autographs of our 'canonical' New Testament writings. In addition, various other 'original' texts may have been defined by and during the lengthy canonization process, perhaps, for example, at the point when the Gospels or the Pauline letters were formed into collections, or when writings otherwise achieved a more formal kind of acceptance or canonization in a region of the church. As a result,



not only is the process of textual transmission extended farther into the past as the 'original' not only recedes in time but becomes less tangible and thereby more elusive, but the notion of 'original' also advances forward in time beyond what we have usually called the autographs and encompasses later reshaping of the texts. Within this complex tangle of texts and revisions, which finds its life setting in a multifaceted, vibrant, developing church, what, indeed, does 'original' mean? Which 'original' ought we seek? And what meaning or meanings does 'canon' carry?

In short, the question of the 'original' New Testament text has taken on extraordinary complexity. Yet the issue is not new, for aspects of the question were raised pointedly in the middle third of the twentieth century by members of the 'Chicago school' of New Testament textual criticism, who shifted the discipline's emphasis away from the search for the traditional 'original' text. For example, D.W. Riddle affirms:

The legitimate task of textual criticism is not limited to the recovery of approximately the original form of the documents, to the establishment of the 'best' text, nor to the 'elimination of spurious readings'. It must be recognized that every significant variant records a religious experience which brought it into being. This means that there are no 'spurious readings': the various forms of the text are sources for the study of the history of Christianity (Riddle 1936: 221).

Some years later, M.M. Parvis picked up this theme that there are no spurious readings because:

All are a part of the tradition; all contribute to our knowledge of the history of the text. And they are significant contributions because they are interpretations which were highly enough thought of in some place and at some time to be incorporated into the Scripture itself (Parvis 1952: 172).

To bring out the real thrust of his position, he adds that, even when we have approached the autographs, we still have only one form of the tradition (Parvis 1952: 173). Thus, there are other authentic forms of the tradition—he might well have said other 'originals'—that enshrine significant stages in the evolution of the New Testament writings or texts.

Brevard Childs, in his programmatic essay on 'The Hermeneutical Problem of New Testament Text Criticism', also wants textual criticism to move away from its traditional goal of attempting to recover the original text, as that term is commonly understood, to a goal of recovering the 'New Testament text which best reflects the

true apostolic witness found in the church's scripture', or 'searching for the best received, that is, canonical text'. Such a text, he believes, 'is by definition different from the author's autograph' but lies somewhere between that and the corrupt and uncritical *textus receptus* (1985: 527-28). Certainly this may qualify as one of the several goals of New Testament textual criticism, but it is unlikely that the discipline will wish to adopt this as its only goal.

Rather, through the examples cited above, various 'originals' or levels of 'originality' come more clearly into view: (1) a 'pre-canonical original' of the text of certain books, representing earlier stages in the composition of what became our New Testament books; (2) an author's 'autograph' of a writing, that is, the textual form as it left the desk of Paul or of a writer of Mark or of the other portions of our New Testament; (3) a 'canonical original', the textual form of a book at the time its canonicity was (perhaps more formally) sought or established, as at the time a collection was made of the Pauline letters or of the four-fold Gospels; and (4) an 'interpretive original', representing each interpretative iteration of a writing, as it was used in the life, worship, and teaching of the Church. This fourth type would not involve extensive rewriting in the New Testament, as might be the case in parts of the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translations (see Tov 1992: 164-80), but rather the creation of individual variant readings that 'clarify' or 'improve' a text, or move it toward or away from orthodoxy, or at most (as possibly in the so-called 'Western' text, if it is deemed secondary) a modestly systematic alteration of a larger text in accordance with an ideological bias. It is important to note also that number two above (an autograph) may really be, as far as we can tell, a number three or a number four kind of 'original'. That is another way of saying that these distinctions, while we may be able to delineate them in a descriptive paragraph like this, are in reality extremely hard to differentiate in any given case. Yet, the reality is that textual criticism can no longer retreat to a position of seeking 'the original' text of the New Testament; rather it must acknowledge and concern itself with multiple 'originals'.

#### 4. Conclusion

Whereas Carl Lachmann (1831) was willing to settle for the New Testament text of the fourth century and Westcott and Hort (1896) for that of the second, the late Kurt Aland quite recently (1981) expressed confidence that the current critical text (N-A<sup>26</sup> and *UBSGNT*<sup>3</sup>) could, for all practical purposes, only a hundred years after Westcott and



Hort, be reckoned as meeting the goal of an edition of the New Testament 'in the original Greek' (Aland 1981: 274-75). Many others, if unwilling to go that far, have been encouraged by our progress in moving from early manuscripts toward an even earlier form of the New Testament text. Now, however, new challenges arise as issues of canon and text intersect in fresh ways.

For one thing, when textual critics consider how the concept of 'canon', that is, 'authority', functioned in earliest Christianity, and especially how it may have influenced a thinking scribe's treatment of the text being copied, they will be the more inclined to view significant variant readings as reflective of real-life situations in the developing Church, and more often than not as events clarifying doctrine and practice within the community of faith. Also, certain sigla, blank spaces, and scribal comments in manuscripts will be examined for the same motivations. At the same time, the competing readings in a given variation unit, as well as varying locations of some lengthier variants, reveal a fluidity of 'canon' at the level of individual variants, just as fluidity at the level of writings and groups of writings is shown by the presence in 'New Testament' manuscripts of books not finally accredited as canon, by the absence of expected books or by the varying order of books in manuscripts.

Not least among the newer issues, however, will be reassessing our goals, including defining what we mean by 'original' and by 'canon', and even devising new approaches that can be utilized to probe into various 'pre-canonical', 'canonical' and 'post-canonical' textual stages of our so-called 'canonical' books.

To be sure, the two disciplines of canon and text parallel one another in that (1) the 'New Testament' canon, during three centuries and more, displays a fair measure of fluidity, and (2) the text of the New Testament evidences a similar fluidity over a similar period, a fluidity, moreover, that persisted at the level of individual variants as long as texts were copied by hand.

Yet, in spite of the interconnections between text and canon that have been highlighted here, the two disciplines are essentially distinct. Canon, by definition, is concerned with authoritative material—in the case of Christianity, with authoritative writings that are normative for faith and practice—and it is concerned with the process that led to canon formation. Canon, after all, involves 'measurement', meeting a standard, and by definition it has limits, even if those limits were not defined immediately or by easily recognized criteria. Yet, in essence

and in the final analysis, canon involves authority.

Over numerous generations we have been socialized into thinking of a single original text, and it may appear at first glance that textual criticism also is automatically concerned with authority, for, in simpler times, the original text was not uncommonly identified with the autographs, and the autographs with the canonical, authoritative New Testament text that formed the basis for Christian faith and practice. It has become increasingly clear, however, that the canonical texts of the New Testament are not necessarily the same texts as the autographs. Variants have intruded upon them, including harmonizations, clarifications, and theological alterations toward and away from orthodoxy (whatever that might mean in different times and localities in the early Church), and nothing is simple any longer. Nor are other earlier or later stages of the texts necessarily identical with the autographs, and the earliest attainable text is not necessarily to be identified with one or another of these 'originals'. No longer, in fact, can we expect to arrive at any single, objectively original text that, to some, would automatically be authoritative; even the earliest attainable text in individual variation units frequently falls short of consensus, to say nothing of certainty.

Though some textual *critics* may be searching for such an authoritative 'original' text of the New Testament and may wish to identify it with the authoritative canon (as a normative guide to faith and practice), that purpose is not intrinsic to textual *criticism* as a historical-critical discipline. That is, it is not of the essence or within the domain of New Testament textual criticism to accommodate a theological overlay upon its goals and results. Anyone, of course, may exercise the privilege of placing the discipline within such an ideological framework, but that constitutes a separate and further step, one not intrinsic to the discipline itself. Rather, textual criticism is concerned with the history and transmission of the text of what became and now is the New Testament, and (both at the levels of individual variation units and whole writings) it will still seek an 'earliest attainable' or 'most likely original' text (with all of the misgivings attached to such terms), but will do so only with the recognition that multiple 'originals' must be entertained. Additionally, it will strive to place variant readings within the history and culture of the Church to elicit from them some insights into early Christian theology, church life, and society. These purposes are not immediately, directly, or necessarily involved with issues of authority.



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