

The Manuscripts Tell the Story: The New Testament Is Reliable

by

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This article, the fourth in a four-part series, has a focused goal. It provides evidence from the best New Testament textual critics that it is possible to reach back, as much as humanly possible, to the original (autograph) books and letters of the New Testament, though the originals no longer exist. And there are no originals of any classical text that has survived the ancient Greco-Roman world.

As noted in the previous parts, the entire series assumes the basic Christian doctrine of inspiration. The original authors of the New Testament were inspired. Their writings were transmitted by scribes and copyists who took their work seriously, but were not inspired as the original authors were. They made typical errors that all scribes and copyists do before the age of copy machines, word processors, and spell checks.

Textual criticism attempts to recover the originals, as much as humanly possible. Have textual critics succeeded? By any reckoning, we have 95% of the inspired words, and some scholars place the number as high as 99% (see Part Three, Question One). That is a remarkable achievement for any text coming out of the Greco-Roman world. Web readers need to know this, so they can be reassured about their Bible when they hear its critics misleading the public about the complete trustworthiness of Scripture.

When we hold in our hands the New Testament, we hold the Word of God, an accurate, reliable, and faithful record of the words and ideas of the original authors, as inspired by God.

A few New Testament textual critics, such as Bart D. Ehrman, who have frequent access to the national media, assert or imply that the New Testament has undergone such a degree of prejudicial corruption that its message and theology is shaky and biased. No one can be sure of its original doctrines, such as the deity of Christ.

However, many world-class textual critics disagree with him if not directly, then indirectly. So this article has the second goal of providing web readers with information that balances out hyper-skepticism employed by some scholars.

Three main facts give these reasonable textual critics their confidence.

First, we have a vast number of manuscripts. How is this an advantage? “The plethora of New Testament manuscripts is a great benefit when trying to determine the original reading of the New Testament, for it is easier to sift through and evaluate the various extant [existing and known] readings than to emend [correct]

texts with no evidence” (Paul D. Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, p. 41)

Second, the New Testament has many, many more manuscripts backing it up than do classical texts, such as those written by Herodotus, Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Tacitus, and Livy. Moreover, the interval of time between the originals and the earliest copies is much shorter for the New Testament than for those classical texts, often by hundreds, even a thousand years.

The textual critics draw the right conclusion from this second fact: if scholars accept the classical texts as accurate, then why not accept the New Testament as accurate?

Third, the scribal variants do not overturn any doctrine. Where one word or clause in a verse may be scrutinized to determine the best reading among many variants, the entire sweep of the New Testament assures us that these doctrines stand on bedrock.

The textual critics about to be quoted repeat these three points in one way or another. It is time to bring their views into focus in one article for web readers. This article has three companion pieces that should be read first, in this order:

1. Preliminary Questions and Answers
2. Basic Facts on Producing New Testament Manuscripts
3. Discovering and Classifying New Testament Manuscripts
4. The Manuscripts Tell the Story: the New Testament Is Reliable

Westcott and Hort

In 1881 B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort produced a Greek New Testament from New Testament manuscripts. Their version is a landmark in textual criticism, though they did not have the advantage of the papyrus discoveries in the twentieth century. Before they analyzed the variant readings (differences in manuscripts), they wrote a brief chapter at the very beginning of their two-volume work. The manuscript differences are only a small fraction of all of the words in the New Testament. After following principles of correcting the variants, and setting aside the differences in spelling, they write:

The words in our opinion still subject to doubt only make up about one sixtieth of the whole New Testament (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, Macmillan, 1881, vol. 1, p. 2).

But then they break down the variants even further, to one thousandth of the entire text:

The amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation, is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text [of the New Testament]. (vol. 1, p. 2)

Westcott and Hort explain their purpose of writing their three-page first chapter. The vast majority of the New Testament is in no need of discussion or correction.

We desire to make it clearly understood beforehand how much of the New Testament stands in no need of a textual critic's labors. (vol. 1 p. 3)

Westcott and Hort explain the large goal of textual critics: To recover an exact copy of the original. Specifically, textual criticism's progress consists in:

Recovering an exact copy of what was actually written on parchment or papyrus by the author of the book or amanuensis [scribe] (vol. 1, p. 3)

Finally, has the New Testament been restored, in their view, after their hard labor? What about all of the manuscripts? Classical ancient texts, such as Herodotus, Thucydides and Roman authors, seem to be restored easily and accepted as such without doubt. How does the New Testament measure up to them? Westcott and Hort write in volume two, at the end of their labors:

The apparent ease and simplicity with which many ancient texts are edited might be thought, on a hasty view, to imply that the New Testament cannot be restored with equal security. But this ease and simplicity is in fact the mark of evidence too scanty to be tested; whereas in the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among ancient prose writing (vol. 2, p. 561)

Westcott and Hort say here what other textual critics repeat again and again, as we will see in this article. Classical texts are accepted as genuine after they have gone through an editing process of purging out errors, but these texts have much fewer manuscripts behind them. On the other hand, the New Testament has far more manuscripts behind it, which works to its advantage. The more manuscripts, the better, because they can be cross-checked with others. (The problem emerges when there are only a few manuscripts.) Therefore, the New Testament should also be accepted as genuine and restored, even more so than classical texts.

Sir Frederick Kenyon

Sir Frederick Kenyon (d. 1952), a premier New Testament textual critic of the first half of the twentieth century, is optimistic about the general result of all of the hard work done by many scholars.

It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial

integrity, the veritable Word of God (qtd. in Paul D. Wegner, *Textual Criticism of the Bible*, p. 25).

After Kenyon labored, other manuscripts have been found since his time. However, nothing has cropped up that challenges in a substantive way the meaning and content of the New Testament. “Still there are relatively few significant variants in the Bible, and among these variants there is very little difference in meaning and content” (Wegner, p. 25).

Jack Finegan

Jack Finegan is Professor Emeritus (retired) of New Testament and Archeology at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. This is not a conservative institution. He wrote *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts* (Eerdmans, 1974). He opines that the work of the copyists or scribes was careful on the whole:

The work of the copyists of the NT [New Testament] was, on the whole, done with great care and fidelity. (p. 55)

The differences in the huge number of New Testament manuscripts can be overcome, and the writings and intentions of the original authors can be reached.

It is obviously desirable to try to discern among the variant reading that which is most probably the closest possible to what was written originally and what was intended by the original authors (p. 55)

Finally, Finegan sums up his study of the rigorous methods that must be followed (though not mechanically) to get back to the originals, as far as this is possible. Indeed, this has been the purpose of his entire book.

Indeed the entire book is intended to provide background for reading with understanding the texts that lie before us and for finding our way in them as far as possible toward the original word. (p. 187)

Note how he uses the singular *word* at the end. Textual critics quibble over the right word—and, yes, a phrase or clause—but they do not overturn basic Christian doctrine or the sweep of the entire New Testament or of a single book.

Gordon D. Fee

Gordon D. Fee wrote an introductory article in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 1, Zondervan, 1979) on New Testament textual criticism. And he assumes that the original Greek New Testament can be reached (as much as is humanly possible), as the original authors intended their books and letters to be read. Thus, textual criticism accomplishes at least two tasks for the interpreter of the Bible.

(1) It helps to determine the authentic words of [a Biblical] author . . . (2)
The majority of Christians have access to the NT [New Testament] only in

translation, and the basic consideration in choosing a translation is its accuracy in representing the original text of the author. (pp. 419-20)

Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland

Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, two of the highest ranking textual critics of any generation, are not known for overstatements. Yet they say that the editors of the two main editions of the Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland and the United Bible Societies) are likely satisfied with their achievements:

On the whole each of the editors is probably satisfied that the new text represents the best that can be achieved in the present state of knowledge . . . (p. 34).

They go on to say that their edited Greek texts enjoy widespread use in universities and in a variety of Christian confessions or denominations.

In any event, the new text is a reality, and as the text distributed by the United Bible Societies and by the corresponding offices of the Roman Catholic Church (an inconceivable situation until quite recently) it has rapidly become the commonly accepted text for research and study in universities and churches. (p. 35)

Of course, Aland and Aland are open to challenges, and perhaps a scholar will quibble with some variants (alternate readings) of verses here and there, but for the church, the Greek New Testament texts that the team of editors edited is completely acceptable (pp. 35-36).

In one sentence in 1979 Kurt Aland says of the Nestle-Aland Greek text:

The desired goal now appears to have been attained, to offer the writings of the New Testament in the form of the text that comes nearest to that which . . . [the New Testament authors and redactors] set out on their journey in the church of the first and second centuries. (Quoted in P. W. Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, p. 290)

It should be taken into account that the Alands stand in the tradition of German Biblical scholarship which is infused with heavy skepticism. It would be a mistake to interpret them as fundamentalists or supportive of a pure text through and through. But when they endorse a text as “the best that can be achieved in the present state of knowledge,” this is substantial. At least their Greek New Testaments enjoy the support and use of many different churches and universities.

David Alan Black

In his introduction to textual criticism (*New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide*, Baker, 1994), he says that the huge number of witnesses (Greek manuscripts,

ancient translations, and quotations from the church fathers) implies that we have the original text of the New Testament somewhere among all the words:

The sheer number of witnesses to the text of the New Testament makes it virtually certain that the original text has been preserved somewhere among the extant (existing) witnesses. (p. 24)

What does the large number of variants mean to Biblical doctrines? These variations may affect them, but a doctrine will always be supported by other passages, so there is no net loss. Black writes:

No biblical doctrine would go unsupported if a favorable reading was abandoned in favor of a more valid variant. This does not mean, as is sometimes said, that no doctrine of Scripture is affected by textual variation. Rather, a doctrine that is affected by textual variation will always be adequately supported by other passages. (p. 25)

J. Harold Greenlee

J. Harold Greenlee wrote an introduction to textual criticism (*Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, rev. ed., Hendrickson, 1995). He briefly totals the number of manuscripts for non-Christian Greek and Roman authors (e.g. fifty manuscripts for the Greek tragedian Aeschylus; one hundred for the tragedian Sophocles; three for the Roman poet Catullus; a few hundred known for Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil). Then he provides us with the interval of time between these Greek and Roman authors and the existing manuscripts, which vary from three hundred years for a few Roman authors and to a thousand or more years for most of the Greek classical authors. The New Testament, on the other hand, has thousands of manuscripts and the interval is much shorter. With these data in the background, Greenlee draws this conclusion:

Since scholars [classicists] accept as generally trustworthy the writings of the ancient classics, even though the earliest manuscripts [MSS] were written so long after the original writings and the number of extant manuscripts [MSS] is in many instances so small, it is clear that the reliability of the text of the NT [New Testament] is likewise assumed. (p. 6)

Greenlee is exactly right. Every classicist accepts or assumes the reliability of non-Christian Greek and Roman authors. So why should we not accept and assume the reliability of the New Testament authors, especially when the number of manuscripts is much greater and the interval much shorter?

J. K. Elliott and Ian Moir

Ian Moir set out to write a non-technical introduction to textual criticism, but his sudden death stopped the project. J. K. Elliott, with the support of Moir's family, completed the task from Moir's notes. (Their book is *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament*, T & T Clark, 1995). They cite the wide chronological gap

between the originals of the Greek and Latin classics and their comparatively few surviving manuscripts. Classicists sometimes have to make educated guesses about a reading. However, as for the New Testament, they write:

It is worth stating now that unless a foolproof case can be made that all of the many surviving manuscripts have failed to preserve the original text, then it should not be necessary to resort to guesswork which can lead to a modern rewriting of the New Testament text. (p. 7)

As for the reliability of the New Testament and the task of the textual critic, they write, first, that about 95 percent of the Greek New Testament is settled.

Most modern textual critics agree on the bulk of the text (some 95 per cent, perhaps). It is the remaining 5 per cent or so where disputes occur and differing conclusions may be found. (p. 8).

Second, Elliott and Moir are optimistic about reaching back to the text of the first-century.

There are a few textual critics who are skeptical of our ever getting behind the text groupings that can be detected in the second and third centuries, but most textual critics are relatively optimistic that one can reach back to the texts of the first century. (p. 8)

They also caution us against the common assertion that variants in the Greek New Testament do not *affect* (their word) Christian doctrine (p. 3). They are right about this, if they use the light word *affect*. However, it is accurate to say that Christian doctrine is not impacted negatively, as if the variants overturn or deny a doctrine, such as the Virgin Birth or the deity of Christ.

Finally, Elliott and Moir state that New Testament textual critics have confidence that the original text can be recovered:

Not only do we have many manuscripts and many manuscripts of an early date but recent scholarly attempts to edit the New Testament text is done with the confidence that the original text is there to be discovered in the manuscripts. Sometimes editors reach different conclusions, sometimes an editorial judgment is questionable, but behind the debate the assumption is that the manuscripts, supported or supplemented by the version and by quotations in the writings of the [Church] Fathers, will yield the original text. (p. 94)

Philip W. Comfort

Philip W. Comfort is another prominent textual critic, writing books that introduce students to this science and art. In his *Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament* (Wipf and Stock, 1990, 1992), he quotes a few brief pessimistic

pronouncements from textual critics, but then he is optimistic about the quest for recovering the original Greek New Testament.

I am optimistic because we have many early manuscripts of excellent quality and because our view of the early period has been getting clearer and clearer. I believe it is possible to recover the original text of the Greek New Testament. (p. 20)

Years later Comfort publishes another book on textual criticism (*Encountering the Manuscripts*, Broadman and Holman, 2005). His optimism does not seem to have flagged. He describes the difference among scholars on some variants that have an equal weight of manuscripts behind them, and maybe the scholars will never come to an agreement. But then Comfort puts this in perspective:

But this is, by no means, a large number of textual variants. And this should not cause us to abandon the task of recovering the original wording of the Greek New Testament. New insights have come and will keep coming, in the new form of actual documents, new methodologies, and new understandings. (p. 291-92)

Bruce M. Metzger

Bruce M. Metzger (d. February 2007) is on the same level as Aland and Aland as textual critics. He wrote the first three editions of the *Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford UP, 1964, 1968, 1992). For the fourth edition (2005) he was joined by Bart D. Ehrman. I quote from this edition, while noting that conclusions are found in the earlier editions.

In the preface to the first edition Metzger writes that the goal of textual criticism is to recover the original words.

The textual critic seeks to ascertain from the divergent copies which form of the text should be regarded as most nearly conforming to the original. (p. v)

After describing the poor showing of non-Christian manuscripts of ancient Roman authors, Metzger (and Ehrman, though the following passage exists in the third edition without him) draws this conclusion about the richness and variety of the New Testament manuscripts:

In contrast with these figures [about non-Christian Roman writers], the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of material. Furthermore, the work of many ancient authors has been preserved only in manuscripts that date from the Middle Ages (sometimes the late Middle Ages), far removed from the time at which they lived and wrote. On the contrary, the time between the composition of the books of the New Testament and the earliest extant [existing] copies is relatively brief . . . several papyrus manuscripts of portions of the New Testament are extant that

were copied within a century or so after the composition of the original documents. (Metzger and Ehrman, p. 51)

It should be pointed out that a footnote to this excerpt says that most of the papyri are relatively fragmentary and the great majority of other manuscripts contain only the four Gospels or only the Epistles. However, these manuscripts may still be used to cross-check the others. It is much better to have many manuscripts than few, as in the case of the Greco-Roman non-Christian manuscripts.

Further, the quotations of the New Testament in the writings of the church fathers have not yet been factored into the calculations. Though this fertile area is undergoing detailed study, Metzger (and Ehrman, though the following passage is found in the third edition without him) estimates:

Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament. (p. 126)

This is significant in attesting to the reliability of the New Testament that we have in our possession. To speak personally, this estimate by Metzger is stunning. He is saying that if our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were to be destroyed (this means, I assume, that the manuscripts would be destroyed), then we could reconstruct the New Testament from the quotations of the church fathers alone. For me, this fact by itself leaves no doubt about the reliability of the New Testament.

Sometimes academics need to get out from behind their computers and to dialogue with people other than their colleagues and students. Bruce Metzger graciously did this with Lee Strobel in the latter's *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1998). They met on a Saturday at Princeton University, where Metzger used to teach before his retirement. We listen in on four portions of their conversation.

First, Strobel asks why it is so important to have thousands of manuscript to support a document like the New Testament. Metzger replies:

Well, the more often you have copies that agree with each other, especially if they emerge from different geographical areas, the more you can cross-check them to figure out what the original document was like. The only way they'd agree would be where they went back genealogically in a family tree that represents the descent of the manuscripts. (p. 59)

Metzger says here that the copies would agree if and only if there really were originals. And the more manuscript copies we have, the better chance we have of finding the wording of the originals, after we sift through all of the manuscripts.

Second, Strobel asks Metzger about the comparison of the New Testament texts and later manuscripts with those of non-Christian texts and manuscripts, such as the Roman historian Tacitus, Jewish historian Josephus' *Jewish War*, and Homer's

Iliad. “How does the New Testament stack up against well-known works of antiquity?” asks Strobel.

“Extremely well,” [Metzger] replied. “We can have great confidence in the fidelity with which this material has come down to us, especially compared with any other ancient literary work.” (p. 63).

Third, Strobel asks about the variations in the manuscripts. “Do they tend to be minor rather than substantive?”

“Yes, yes, that’s correct, and scholars work very carefully to try to resolve them by getting back to the original meaning. The more significant variations do not overthrow any doctrine of the church. Any good Bible will have notes that will alert the reader to variant readings of any consequence. But again, these are rare.” (p. 65).

Fourth and finally, Strobel asks what Metzger’s scholarship has done to his personal faith.

“Oh,” he said, sounding happy to discuss the topic, “it has increased the basis of my personal faith to see the firmness with which these materials have come down to us, with a multiplicity of copies, some of which are very, very ancient.” (p. 71).

Then Strobel started to ask, again, if scholarship has diluted Metzger’s faith.

He jumped in before I [Strobel] could finish my sentence. “On the contrary,” [Metzger] stressed, “it has built it. I’ve asked questions all my life. I’ve dug into the text, I’ve studied this thoroughly, and today I know with confidence that my trust in Jesus has been well placed.” . . . Then he added, for emphasis, “*Very* well placed.” (p. 71)

At the time of this interview Metzger was eighty-four years old. He is a highly regarded scholar from a wide spectrum of his colleagues. It is refreshing to see a man like this declare his faith openly.

Moisés Silva

Moisés Silva attended an academic conference in 2000, on which he was invited to comment or respond to other guest speakers (the book of this conference was published as *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. David A. Black, Baker Academic, 2002). At least one of the conference speakers was skeptical about recovering the original New Testament, but Silva affirms this possibility.

In conclusion, I would like to affirm . . . that the recovery of the original text (i.e. in its initial form, prior to the alterations produced in the copying process) remains the primary task of textual criticism [Silva briefly describes the difficulty in the process of recovery] . . . But neither these truths nor the

admittedly great difficulties involved in recovering the autographic [original] words can be allowed to dissolve the concept of an original text. (p. 149)

Then Silva mentions that some variants may never be resolved to every critic's satisfaction. But this should not deter the recovery process partly because of the advantage New Testament textual critics enjoy. What advantage?

But we cannot allow the exceptional [unresolved rare issues] to determine our course of action. Let us not forget that the distinctive challenges in our field are actually the result of enormous quantities of data (unavailable for other documents whose originality we take for granted!) and of extraordinary scholarly advances. Encouraged by this reality, we have plenty of good reasons to press on. (pp. 149-50)

As seen with other scholars quoted in this present article, Silva's positive assessment is based, in part, on the thousands of New Testament manuscripts compared to the manuscripts of Greco-Roman and non-Christian texts. This numerical fact puts everything in perspective.

Paul D. Wegner

Paul D. Wegner's book on textual criticism, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2006), also affirms the reliability and accuracy of the Bible. In this passage he defines a variant; then in the last sentence he draws the natural inference about the Bible and its variants.

A variant is any difference between the texts in the numerous manuscripts of the Greek New Testament (e.g., spelling differences, missing or added words, different word order). Some variants are significant; for example, the last eleven verses of the Gospel of Mark. But the vast majority have little effect on the translation of a passage and are relatively insignificant, a fact that underscores how accurate our Bibles actually are. (p. 231)

As we have seen with the textual critics cited in this present article, Wegner puts the process of purging errors in perspective.

It is important to underscore two facts near the beginning of our discussion on New Testament textual criticism: (1) the verbal agreement between various New Testament manuscripts is closer than between many English translations of the New Testament, and (2) the percentage of variants in the New Testament is small . . . and no matter of doctrine hinges on a variant reading (p. 231)

The first fact is remarkable. The Greek manuscripts from divergent places and times agree more often than our English translations.

This next assessment by Wegner of both the Old and New Testaments expresses confidence in the reliability of the Bible.

It is humbling and reassuring to realize that the Old and New Testaments have been handed down through many generations as accurately and as completely as they have. Many scribes and copyists spent many countless hours copying and checking their work to ensure an accurate text for later generations. (p. 310).

Why did the scribes and copyists spend so many hours doing their job?

All of their effort was expended because they realized just how important the Word of God is and how crucial it is to maintain an accurate record of God's revelations. (p. 310).

So what is the bottom line on textual criticism? Wegner writes:

Careful examination of these manuscripts has served to strengthen our assurance that modern Greek and Hebrew critical texts are very close to the original autographs, even though we do not have those autographs. (p. 301)

Conclusion

It must be pointed out that these scholars are not directly refuting a specific skeptic in the above quotations, for the most part. Instead, they have examined all of the evidence of the New Testament manuscripts and drawn similar conclusions, namely, that we have reached back as close to the originals as any human effort can. This positive result has been brought about in large part by the huge number of manuscripts, and by the short interval between the (now lost) originals and the nearest surviving manuscripts.

We may not have the very original books and letters of the New Testament (and no text today coming from the ancient world has the originals), but we can reconstruct it as accurately as possible in our present state of knowledge. If we consider Greco-Roman classics as accurate, though they do not have as many manuscripts so soon after the originals, then why not accept the New Testament as accurate?

After the arduous process of applying scientific methods to the New Testament to determine the best reading, where uncertainties remain, Christian doctrine is never overturned or negated. Where one verse may have a word or clause undergoing the arduous process of textual criticism, the entire sweep of the New Testament assures us that the doctrines stand on solid ground. The earliest church enjoyed high-level unanimity on such doctrines as the virgin birth and the deity of Christ.

We have come as close to the originals or autographs of the New Testament as is humanly possible, after textual critics have sifted through all of the evidence.

The Bible is the Word of God. We can put our confidence and trust in it.

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