

DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Lesson #9

We hold to the belief that the Bible is God's Word, that it is inerrant, and that it is infallible. But how can we say that when the ancient manuscripts that we derive our Biblical text from have discrepancies? How can we determine what the original text is if the ancient manuscripts we have disagree? What criteria is used to select one reading over another? In this study we will look at the field of study which deals with these kinds of problems. It is the field of study known as Textual Criticism. We will attempt to answer some of the above questions and seek to understand how textual criticism relates to the accuracy of the Bibles we use today.

I. DEFINITION OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

- A. **Textual Criticism** is a field of study that examines the Biblical text and makes observations and conclusions based on those observations. Depending on the presuppositions, goals, and motivations, textual criticism can be both good and bad.
- B. **Higher Criticism** is a heretical field of study, which undermines the authority, inspiration, and divine nature of the Word of God. Higher Criticism ends up making conclusions that assume the Bible is not the Word of God, that it has no supernatural qualities, and implies that God and the writers of Scriptures are liars. Higher Criticism contradicts the Bible's claims for itself. It renders inspiration and inerrancy impossible. It turns the Bible into nothing more than your average work of fallible men, full of mistakes and lies. For instance, higher critics believe that the Old Testament was written by four different authors and pieced together by a redactor or compiler over a long period of time. This is called the J.E.P.D. Redactor Theory or the Documentary Hypothesis Theory. Higher criticism often buys into a field of study called form criticism, which often concludes that the Bible could not be the inspired Word of God. All of these fields of study undermine Biblical authority and orthodox Christianity. Most higher critics deny the divinity of Christ and the miracles of the Bible, such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, etc. Because of this, Higher Criticism is a destructive field of study and should be rejected. Higher Criticism should not be confused with the legitimate field of study referred to below as lower criticism.¹
- C. **Lower Criticism**
1. Lower Criticism is concerned only with the form of words—the text—of that document. The function of the textual critic is plain; he seeks by comparison and study of all the available evidence to recover the exact words of the author's original composition. The New Testament text-critic seeks, in short, to weed out the chaff of bad readings from the genuine

¹For a helpful and concise treatment of the history of higher criticism see R. Laird Harris's work, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures*, pgs. 15-21, or Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pgs. 157-163.

Greek text. . . Why is he so much concerned about the Greek text? Because he knows that the only way to have a reliable English translation is to make sure that the original fountain-head is free from all impurities. He realizes that if the Greek text is faulty, all translations from the Greek will likewise be at fault.²

2. Lower Criticism is concerned with the form or text of the Bible and attempts to restore the readings of the original text, the autograph. Not to be confused with higher criticism, which studies the value of a document, lower critics study the form of the words and structure of a document.³

Note: From this point on, any references to textual criticism will refer to Lower Criticism unless otherwise noted.

II. THE AMOUNT OF DISCREPANCIES AMONG ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS OF THE BIBLE

During our last lesson we discussed how errors might be introduced into the Biblical text as the original autographs were copied and then as copies of copies were made over the centuries. Neil Lightfoot has said:

The evangelical view of inspiration relates to the Scriptures in the form in which they were originally given. No addition or modification of the original, therefore, no matter how long enshrined in the MSS [manuscripts] or trs. [translations], partakes of this inspiration. The determination of the original form of the text as nearly as possible is, therefore, a solemn responsibility. At the same time, the precise original wording of the New Testament cannot be determined with finality in every instance. Consequently the best form of the text that can be reached will be, from a technical point of view, only an approximation to the original. From a practical view, however, the difference involved in most variants is so slight that little or no difference of meaning is involved.⁴

You might be wondering just how many variants or errors there are in the ancient manuscripts that we have. Well, first we need to realize that there are some 50,000 ancient manuscripts, portions and fragments of the New Testament.

It must be realized that the greater the number of manuscripts, the greater chances there are of mistakes being made, but also, on a positive note, the greater number of comparisons that can be made. In short, with more than 50,000 manuscripts, portions of manuscripts and fragments, there is a lot of opportunity for copyists to make mistakes! The variants within the manuscripts we have may be well over 200,000 in the New Testament alone.⁵ When most people hear that number, they are very concerned and wonder if we are sure if any part of the New Testament is accurate. Yet, when you study up on what constitutes those errors, it is anything but terrifying.

²Niel Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, pg. 60.

³Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pgs. 433-434.

⁴J. H. Greenlee, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, pg. 713.

⁵Lightfoot, pg. 68.

Let's say an early copyist made a mistake and spelled a word incorrectly. Then his manuscript was copied and the copyist was loyal to the incorrect spelling. Let's say this continued for centuries as many other manuscripts were faithfully copied from one generation to the next, being faithful to write down exactly what the scribe before wrote, going all the way back to the scribe who misspelled a word. And this continued until a line of 4,000 copied manuscripts were in the family of the manuscript, which contained the misspelled word. This would constitute 4,000 errors!⁶ And there are many such errors, misspellings and punctuation variations, which all have long lines of manuscripts following in their tradition. This causes the number of variants to sky rocket. But in reality, only a very small number of these variants change the meaning of the text and none of them impact any significant doctrinal issue. They are easily spotted as errors and fixed.

When the bulk of variants are examined, one realizes that out of the 20,000 lines of the New Testament, only 40 lines of text have readings that present even a minor change of meaning. What this means is that we are sure of the accuracy of 99.5 percent of the Biblical text! Percentage wise, this means that only one half of one percent of the variants actually change the meaning of the text, and none of those variants change any significant doctrine! There is no other ancient book that even comes close to the textual integrity of the Bible. In fact, if we said that the Bible was unreliable because of the number of variants it contains, then we would have to throw out every other ancient book known to man, for they all have far more errors.

So after fixing the obvious spelling errors, transposed words, repeated words, etc., and when you get down to variants that are difficult to decide between, which actually make some difference in the meaning of a sentence, what do you do? How do you decide which variant is the original Word of God and which are the mistakes of men?

III. THE METHOD OF LOWER CRITICISM

Textual criticism has changed over the years and the principles for determining or identifying the original text of the Bible have improved and become more exacting. The rules applied by lower criticism in trying to identify the original text is called the canons of textual criticism.⁷ These rules or canons, as they are called, are principles that can be applied to textual variants in order to help determine which variant is the most accurate. The application of the methods of lower criticism is both an art and science. It is art because the person who applies the principle must determine which principles are to be applied and how they are to be applied. It is a science because the principles are set and defined. The textual critic's job is to evaluate the nature of a variant and then to apply the appropriate principles so that the most likely variant can be selected.⁸

⁶Ibid. pg. 68.

⁷Ibid, pg. 62.

⁸ The principles discussed in this lesson were taken from Bruce Metzgers, *The Text of the New Testament*, pgs. 205-210; Neil Lightfoots, *How we Got The Bible*, pgs. 62-65; and Dennis McCallum and Gary DeLashmutt's paper, "Verbal Plenary Inspiration," <http://www.xenos.org/classes/papers/vpi1.htm>.

A. Choose the reading which best explains the origins of the others

This principle is an overarching principle and the first rule usually applied. Bruce Metzger illustrates:

For example, two editions of John Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, diverge in the story of Christian's finding and using a key by which he was able to make his escape from Doubting Castle. One edition reads "The lock went desperately hard," while another reads "The lock went damnable hard." Which is the original reading and which had been altered? Did Bunyan write "desperately" and a modern editor change it to "damnable" for some inexplicable reason? Or did Bunyan write "damnable" (using the word in its non-profane sense) and someone subsequently alter it in order to remove what was deemed to be an offensive expression? There can surely be no doubt what the answer is.⁹

Metzger goes on to explain that several other readings have been discovered i.e., "extremely hard" and "very hard." When this is compared to the first eleven editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which all read "damnable," then there is absolute certainty. This illustrates how *the reading which best explains the origins of the others* works. Knowing that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written during the height of Elizabethan Puritanism and knowing that the Puritans were very pious people, one can easily understand how "damnable hard" might be changed to a less offensive term.

B. The text with the best pedigree is to be preferred

Another rule that is applied to textual variants is to determine which text has the best textual pedigree. Certain text types or families have been found to be generally more reliable than others. A reading that could be traced back to a more reliable group of texts would be preferred over a reading that was traced back to a generally less reliable group of texts.

C. The older reading is to be preferred

Another criteria used is that of age. This principle states that, generally speaking, the older text is to be preferred over the younger text. This is obvious, as the older the text is, the nearer it is to the original autograph, the number of copies between it and the original are fewer, and the less likely it is to have been corrupted by copyist errors.

⁹Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pg. 207.

D. The older type of writing is to be preferred

Sometimes texts of the same time period have different writing styles. In this case a principle that may help distinguish which might be the most reliable text is that of an older writing style. The older writing style is to be preferred over the newer writing style. The reason for this is that the older writing style may indicate the text is a little older. It also can be argued that errors increase when copying from one writing style to another. A scribe who might copy a section from an older all capital letter version of a New Testament book into lower case Greek with spaces would have to pay much closer attention to the text to keep from making copying errors than if he copied into an identical style. Also, the copyist who copied into an older writing style might also be less likely to introduce newer thoughts in grammar, sentence structure and spelling that were not present in the original.

E. Texts from certain geographical locations are to be preferred

The area where a manuscript comes from may give us clues to the reliability of the text. If we know that certain places were strongholds for Christianity and were known for faithful scribes and copyists, then we would tend to trust a manuscript from that area, than from an area where manuscripts were copied with carelessness and less stringent standards.

F. The more difficult reading is to be preferred

Another principle applied to variants is that the more difficult reading is to be preferred over the easier reading. The reason for this becomes clear as textual critics have discovered that a scribe would never try to obscure the meaning of the text. There are many examples of scribes who copied a difficult to understand text and smoothed it out by simplifying the reading. Whether the scribes simplifications were accurate or not make no difference. If the text was altered, it would still be a variant that deviated from the original autograph. Yet this principle cannot be pushed too far. Sometimes a scribe made such a huge blunder by parablepsis, or by mis-reading the exemplar, and the text is so obviously corrupted that the textual critic would not prefer the harder nonsensical reading to the easier to understand reading.

G. The shorter reading is to be preferred

In general, the shorter reading is to be preferred. Textual critics have discovered that the scribe who intentionally changes the wording of the text usually uses more words to explain a text which might be obscure or hard to understand. Hence manuscripts, over time, would tend to grow as scribes would add clarifications or as marginal notes crept into the text. But rarely, if ever, would a scribe take an obscure text and make it shorter and more obscure. There would be no reason to do that. So, when variants are compared, the shorter reading is to be preferred.

H. The oldest quotations of the Biblical text from great centers of ancient Christianity are to be preferred

This principle says that if there are other ancient extrabiblical works, like commentaries, which quote the Scriptures, then those quotations are to be preferred over later copies of the Bible which differ. Let's say you have several manuscripts of the Bible from 800 AD and several others between 1000 and 1300 AD. There is a specific text you are looking at and there is a variant that seems to be equally distributed among the older and younger manuscripts. But let's say you were able to look at several works from early church fathers from 100 AD to 350 AD who either preached or commented on that text and quoted it in their works. If the older works were unified in their quotation of the text, then you would be wise to seriously consider their reading above a reading that you had no proof was familiar to the early Christians. Commentators are usually not motivated to comment on the text, nor change it.

I. In parallel accounts the different text is to be preferred

Because it was normal for scribes to try and harmonize differing texts and because it was common for scribes to accidentally fill in extra words and phrases from parallel texts they were familiar with, the differing text is to be preferred. Let's say that two gospels have one reading and a third gospel has some manuscripts that have a shorter different reading and some which have the same reading as the other two gospels. It would be very unlikely that a scribe would purposely disharmonize the Scripture but it is very likely that a scribe may fill in a common saying or verse, which he is familiar with, from a parallel text. In our last lesson we learned that Jesus in **Mt. 9:13**, speaks of calling sinners. Yet he leaves off the well known phrase from **Lk. 5:32**, to repentance. Because of this, the non-harmonious text is to be preferred.

J. The text which contains the less familiar grammar and syntax is to be preferred

This principle, which is similar to some of the other above, states that the less known word, the less familiar grammar and syntax, the more unusual construction of words, or the less well known synonym is to be preferred. For the same reasons given for some of the other principles above, the scribe, if he did make a change, would be moved to use the more familiar and easy to understand grammar and syntax, not the harder more obscure.

K. The normal style and vocabulary of the author is to be preferred

This principle states that when a textual variant is identified, that other instances of the words should be studied first in the same book and secondly, in other books by the same author to see if a normal pattern or usage appears. Often authors will have a specific way of saying things and if there is a pattern, and a variant has some reading which matches the author's normal pattern and others which do not, the normal way the author uses words is to be preferred over a strange or unusual usage that does not match the author's usual way of saying things.

L. **The reading which matches the flow of the immediate context is to be preferred**

This principle recognizes that the reading that most closely matches the flow of the near context is to be preferred over the reading that does not match the near context.

M. **Summary of the canons of textual criticism**

Metzger writes:

Not all of these criteria are applicable in every case. The critic must know when it is appropriate to give primary consideration to one type of evidence and not to another. Since textual criticism is an art as well as a science, it is understandable that in some cases different scholars will come to different evaluations of the significance of the evidence. This divergence is almost inevitable when, as sometimes happens, the evidence is so divided that, for example, the more difficult reading is found only in the later witnesses, or the longer reading is found only in the earlier witnesses. One of the perennial dangers which confront scholars in every discipline is the tendency to become one-sided and to oversimplify their analysis and resolution of quite disparate questions.¹⁰

IV. **EXAMPLES OF SOME OF THE CLASSIC VARIANTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In this section we will point out some of the more significant variants of the New Testament. We will summarize some of the conclusions textual critics have arrived at using the canons of textual criticism.¹¹

A. **Mt. 6:13** And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [*For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*]

1. The end of the Lord's prayer occurs in several forms.
 - a. Some have, For yours is the kingdom the power and glory.
 - b. Others leave off the kingdom and the reading is, For yours is the power and glory.
 - c. Others read, For yours is the kingdom and the glory omitting the power.
 - d. Others have For thine is the power forever and ever.
 - e. Some have forever and others have forever and ever.
 - f. A large majority of texts which contain a form of this ending also have the amen tacked on to the end.

¹⁰Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pg. 210.

¹¹ Summaries of observations and conclusions from Bruce Metzger's work, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*.

g. A few contain a Trinitarian ending that reads, For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

2. The two best and oldest Manuscripts from the Alexandrian tradition do not contain this ending. One of the most reliable texts from the Western tradition does not contain the ending, and most of the oldest Latin texts do not contain the ending.
3. Some of the oldest commentaries by the earliest church fathers do not mention this ending.
4. So, does the ending belong in the text? If not, then how do we explain its existence? Some believe that the text was used in an early church liturgy and possibly was adapted or read together with **I Chron. 29:11-13** which reads, *Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. 12 Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name.* Later a scribe must have thought the words of the liturgy belonged in the text and added it. Then later, other scribes added the Trinitarian ending, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

B. **Mk. 7:16** [*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*]

1. This particular ending does not appear in any of the most reliable and older manuscripts.
2. Does it belong in the text? Some believe a scribe accidentally put the ending in the text as Jesus says the same thing in **Mk. 4:9 and 4:23**.

C. **Mark 16:9-20** [Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons. 10She went and reported to those who had been with Him, while they were mourning and weeping. 11When they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they refused to believe it. 12After that, He appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking along on their way to the country. 13They went away and reported it to the others, but they did not believe them either. 14Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. 15And He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. 17 These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; 18they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. 19So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. 20And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with

them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.] [*And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.*]

1. The end of Mark contains the longest and most disputed textual variant in all of the Bible. There are four different endings to be found in the manuscripts. They are often referred to as 1) the short ending, 2) the intermediate ending, 3) the long ending, and 4) the long ending expanded.
2. The last twelve verses are lacking the two oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts, in one of the old Latin manuscripts, in the Sinaitic Syriac, many old Armenian versions, the Adysh and Opiza manuscripts of the old Gregorian version, and number of manuscripts of the Ethiopic version.
3. Early church fathers Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Ammonius show no knowledge of the last twelve verses. Jerome knew of the ending but comments saying, almost all the Greek manuscripts do not contain it. Other manuscripts, which do contain it, have a note saying that older Greek manuscripts do not contain the reading.
4. The intermediate ending (which is only part of the twelve verses discussed above in pts. 2 & 3), is present in some seventh and eighth century manuscripts, some older Greek manuscripts, as well as some ancient versions of the Bible in other languages.
5. The long ending, found in the King James Version and other translations of the Textus Receptus tradition, contain the long ending except for a few which contain the intermediate ending. It is found in most of the Old Latin manuscripts, the Latin Vulgate, and one of the Syriac and Coptic manuscripts. It is possible that Justin Martyr of the middle of the second century AD knew of this ending for his disciple, Tatian, and included the ending in his parallel Bible called the *Diatessaron*.
6. The long ending, according to Jerome, existed in some of the manuscripts of his day.
7. The long ending is very apocryphal sounding which is a strike against its authenticity. For instance, it claims that believers will be able to *pick up serpents and drink any deadly poison*. Things that many have died trying to perform.
8. Also in the long ending are seventeen words not found anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark. This is unusual for a text of only twelve verses.
9. Some see the transition between vss. 8 & 9 as abrupt and forced. For instance, the subject in vs. 8 is the women whereas Jesus is the implied subject in vs. 9.

10. The very end of the long reading sounds nothing like Mark *the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation* and seems to point to the writing of a later Greek theologian.
11. So, which one of the four different endings, if any, belong at the end of Mark's gospel?

D. **Jn. 7:53-8:11** [Everyone went to his home. 1But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. 3The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 4they said to Him, Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say? 6They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her. 8Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. 10Straightening up, Jesus said to her, Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you? 11She said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.]

1. This text is absent from the great majority of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts.
2. The oldest Syriac version, the Sahidic, the Achmimic, the Bohairic versions all omit it. Some of the Armenian and Gregorian manuscripts omit it. The Gothic version omits it and several old Latin manuscripts omit it.
3. No early church Father, prior to the twelfth century, comments on it.
4. The story interrupts the sequence of John's gospel, which flows most naturally from 7:52 to 8:12ff.
5. Yet, in favor of the reading is that it sounds like a legitimate story and is not apocryphal sounding. It may be that the story was true and was passed down by oral tradition over the centuries, finally making it debut in the text of a sympathetic scribe. This would account for the fact that the story was inserted by scribes in different places in the manuscripts which do contain it. But there is a very strong evidence against it being part of the original inspired text.

E. (King James Version of **I Jn. 5:7-8**, New King James is very close) *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.* Almost all other literal translations read something like the New American Standard Bible e.g., *For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.*

1. The text, as it is found in the King James Version, is missing from every known Greek manuscript but eight. The eight that do contain it seem to be translations of later versions of the Latin text.
2. The passage is quoted by none of the Greek Fathers. This is unusual as the Trinity was a hot topic of debate in the early church. The first time it appears in a Greek text is in the twelfth century AD, in the Latin Acts of the Lateran Council.
3. The text is absent from all ancient versions of the Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Arabic, and Slavonic manuscripts.
4. It is not found in the oldest Latin Texts or in the Latin Vulgate by Jerome, or the copies of the Vulgate in 541 or 716 AD or the ninth century.
5. The only time the text is quoted is by an early church heretic of the fourth century named Priscillian, who died about 385 AD.
6. If the text is part of the original, no one has been able to come up with a reason why almost every reliable manuscript omits it.
7. The text makes an awkward break in the sentence.
8. So, does the text belong, or not?

V. THE TEXTUAL APPARATUS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

- A. The Box to the right contains the bottom half of the first page of the Hebrew Old Testament, Genesis chapter one in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The textual apparatus is located at the bottom and discusses variants and the manuscripts that support them.



B. The Box below contains a page out of the *Nestle Aland, United Bible Societies 3rd edition of the Greek New Testament*. The text contains the disputed ending of Mark's Gospel. Notice the textual apparatus at the bottom of the page. The textual apparatus indicates what verse is being discussed i.e., vss. 9" and following. The next letter in brackets {A} indicates the certainty of the conclusion proposed in the apparatus which is that vss. 9-20 should be omitted. A being the highest level of certainty and D being the lowest level of certainty. One of the reasons given in the textual apparatus for omitting the end of Mark is that it is not found in the oldest most reliable manuscripts of or Codex Sinaiticus, B Codex Vaticanus, and mss 304, etc.

C. **CONCLUSION**

While the number of variants between the many thousands of manuscripts may seem significant, it must be remembered that we are absolutely certain about 99.5 percent of the text of the Bible. Though one half of one percent of variants are difficult to decide between, textual scholars are confident that all of the inspired text has been preserved and is included in the options of the variants in the textual apparatus.

