

## **Preliminary Questions and Answers**

by

James Arlandson

This article is the first in a four-part series on New Testament textual criticism. It provides the basics on this science and art, answering such questions as these:

Did scribes make errors as they copied down holy Writ? If so, what kind of errors are they? Why wouldn't God protect his Word from such errors? What's the goal of the science and art of textual criticism? Should we even engage in criticism of the Bible? Isn't that blasphemous? Should I trust the New Testament?

These questions and more are explored in a basic Question and Answer format, for ease of understanding. This article is written by a nonspecialist and is intended for the laity.

This article has three companion pieces. This present one should be read first, and then the other three should be read 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

The entire series assumes the basic Christian doctrine of inspiration. The original authors of the New Testament were inspired. But we no longer have their very original manuscripts. Rather, they 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 and Question One). Where any uncertainties remain, they do not overturn New Testament doctrine, which is supported by other verses.

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. The New Testament (and the Old Testament) is a highly accurate, reliable, and faithful record of the words and ideas of the original authors, as inspired by God.

This article (and the entire series) is about the nonoriginal manuscripts. Let's educate ourselves about them so we won't be caught unprepared when the needlessly and heedlessly harsh critics appear in the media.

## **1. What is the original language of the New Testament?**

Since the question and answer is so fundamental, I have repeated them in the other parts in this series. It was written in common Greek of the first century, in a vocabulary and sentence structure that most people could understand. This is especially true of the four Gospels. Christianity is a missionary religion, so it had to use the language that everyone knew in the cities in the first century. And that language was Greek. Not much later, as Christianity expanded farther, scribes translated the Greek New Testament into other languages.

It must be emphasized that ancient Greek (even koiné or common Greek of the New Testament) is a remarkably precise and nuanced language. It was conditioned, after all, by the two greatest philosopher who ever lived: Plato and Aristotle, not to mention other great geniuses in the Greek-speaking world, such as Sophocles and Euripides. The New Testament authors, though not indebted to them directly, drew from this deep source, ancient Greek.

## **2. What does *criticism* mean?**

*Webster's Dictionary* says that it means “the act of criticizing, usu[ally] negative.” This is the typical definition that first comes to mind because of its widespread use.

However, the third meaning in the dictionary is more relevant to New Testament criticism. It is “the scientific investigation of literary documents (as the Bible) in regards to such matters as origin, text, composition, character, or history.”

The two key words are “scientific investigation.” They do not mean negative criticism.

Further, this specialist in New Testament textual criticism says:

Textual critics . . . sort through these [New Testament] manuscripts and the variant readings therein in an effort to reconstruct the original wording of the Greek New Testament. (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 289)

Note how he also states the goal in his definition: “to reconstruct the original wording.”

Next, the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* says that “textual criticism sets out to establish what a text originally said or meant to say.”

Another specialist says:

*Textual criticism is the study of copies of any written work of which the autograph (the original) is unknown, with the purpose of ascertaining the original text* (Greenlee, p. 1, emphasis original).

Finally, this specialist defines it thus:

Briefly stated, *textual criticism is the science and art that seeks to determine the most reliable wording of a text.* (emphasis original)

He goes on to say that it is a “science because specific rules govern the evaluation of various types of copyist errors and readings, but it is also an art because these rules cannot be rigorously applied in every situation” (Wegner, p. 24).

### **3. What do MS, MSS and NT mean?**

The abbreviations stand for *manuscript* (singular), *manuscripts* (plural) and *New Testament*, respectively. Hereafter, I will use them.

### **4. What does variant mean?**

It means a range of readings or words or phrases or clauses that could be inserted into a verse. It is any difference in two or more MSS in a verse from the NT.

This textual critic says:

The details of which texts are composed (letters, words) are “readings,” and, accordingly, all readings that differ from the accepted text as central are usually variant readings or variants. The term . . . refers to the existence of a deviation between the accepted text and another text. (Wegner p. 309)

See Questions Nine and Fifteen, below, for examples.

### **5. Isn't it close to blasphemy to “criticize” the Word of God?**

Not according to the third definition in *Webster's Dictionary*, quoted in Question Two. In fact, we would not even have a Bible if scholars did not sacrifice their time and energy to get things right. Therefore, just the opposite from the assumed answer is true. No one doing this hard work would be close to blasphemy.

### **6. Why is it necessary to do textual criticism?**

Necessity goes to need, and there is a definite need to do this.

The NT was written by scribes before the age of printing presses, computers, word processing programs, email attachments, and faxes. If twenty persons, sitting in far different places and without communicating with each other, were to copy by hand all of the four Gospels from an exemplar (a MS from which a copy is made), it is

one hundred percent certain that they would make errors. They might spell *their* for *there* or *form* instead of *from* or write *answer* for *answered*.

How do we establish the correct readings? The process would be tedious, but it could be done by collating the twenty handwritten MSS (note the Latin word for “hand” in “*manuscript*”). Collation is the “comparison of one manuscript against a known printed text for the sake of producing a list of the differences” (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 381). Most of the errors are accidental, such as spelling and omitting words and jumping from one line to another one below or above, as the copyist’s mind wanders or he gets distracted.

However, now let’s take away the exemplar of the four Gospels. We could produce the original or autograph by coming up with a list of differences. It is extremely rare to have two or more copyists making the same error in the same place and in the same way. Therefore, most of the twenty MSS would lead us to the autograph.

However, this brief example is highly simplified because it too neatly assumes one generation and one exemplar. The NT MSS were written over centuries and from different exemplars that range in quality. In fact, each book of the NT has its own history and audience at the beginning. It was only gradually, but early, that the whole NT as we know it was put together. But the example illustrates the essence of the task and goal of textual criticism: sorting out MSS and eliminating errors so we can find the original wording.

### **7. What does *autograph* mean?**

In short, it means the *original* MS. But according to a standard and longer definition, it means:

The authored manuscript, whether penned by the author, dictated by him, or endorsed by him. By comparison, the “original manuscript” is the archetypal exemplar from which other manuscripts were made for publication and distribution. This could be one-and-the-same with the autograph but not necessarily so, especially if editing occurred between the time of the author’s composition and publication. None of the original manuscripts of any book of the Bible are extant [exists and known] (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 380).

As noted in that excerpt, these originals no longer exist; otherwise, we would not need to do textual criticism.

### **8. What’s the goal of textual criticism, in the first place?**

This textual critic offers a clear purpose or goal:

The purpose of textual criticism, classically defined, is to recover the original wording of an ancient text, no longer extant [existing and known] in its original form, by means of examining the extant manuscript copies and then

applying the canons [rules] of the discipline for determining the wording most likely original. (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 289)

Other textual critics say virtually the same thing. (See the excerpts in Question Two).

### **9. So what kind of scribal errors are there, anyway?**

The vast majority of errors are accidental. Here are some examples that have been classified and labeled.

- Mistaken letters is the confusion of similar letters, such as *i* for *j*.
- Homophony substitutes a similar sounding words, as in *there* for *their*.
- Haplography omits a letter or word usually due to a similar letter or word in context, as in *occurrence* written incorrectly as *ocurrence*.
- Dittography means that a letter or word has been written twice rather than once, such as *latter* written as *later*.
- Metathesis is the reversal in order of two letters or words, as in *dog* for *god*.
- Homoioteleuton is an omission caused by two words or phrases that end similarly. For example, in 1 John 2:23 in a MS or two the clause “he who confesses the Son” has been accidentally omitted because originally it was sandwiched in between the same clause appearing twice, “has the father.” The scribe skipped down to the similar two ending clauses and omitted the middle clause.

But are there some deliberate changes? Yes, but they amount to comparatively few and are not always difficult to correct.

- Changes in spelling or grammar. In Matthew 1:7-8 the name Asaph has been “corrected” in some MSS to Asa, the king of Judah, in conformity to 1 Kings 15:9-14.
- Clearing up difficulties. According to some MSS, in Mark 1:2-3 the composite quotation from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 is attributed only to Isaiah the prophet. But some later copyists changed it to “the prophets” to clear up any confusion.

Are there theological changes? Yes, and they also amount to comparatively few. Some scribes, motivated out of zeal or their need to protect doctrine, added or substituted or altered words, phrases, and clauses. Here is an example.

- In Luke 2:41, 43 the words “his parents” have been changed in a few and late MSS to “Joseph and Mary” (verse 41) or “Joseph and his mother,” “possibly to safeguard the doctrine of the virgin birth.” (Wegner, pp. 53-54)

That is, according to some scribes, saying that Joseph was a *parent* of Jesus may imply that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus. But the scribes’ “improvement” was unnecessary. It is possible to be a parent outside of physical procreation.

However, these “zealous improvements” do not negatively impact Christian doctrine because other passages in fact support a given doctrine. Other verses, for example, support the doctrine of the virgin Birth. Indeed, it is these undisputed verses supporting doctrine that inform the zealous scribe to “fudge” the text in the first place. The scribe needs a textual starting point before he slips in his “improvements,” long before theologians developed and crystallized theology, derived directly from the Bible.

All of these examples are adapted from Wegner, pp. 44-55, and Metzger and Ehrman, pp. 250-71. For other categories of variants, go to Part Three and Question One.

### **10. How is textual criticism done?**

Broadly speaking, the technique and art of textual criticism is divided into two main approaches: examining the external and internal evidence.

The external approach studies the MSS themselves. How early or late are they? Where do they come from? How do they compare with known reliable ones? Do any of them depend on another, or not? Can they be put into families, as in a genealogy? What scribal style are they written in? Is the style early or late? Can it be used to pinpoint the date of other MSS?

Generally, the earlier and more numerous the MSS, the better, but the dating is not a fixed rule. Sometimes it may be assumed that a later MS (eighth or ninth century) may come directly from a reliable and early, but unknown, MS.

The internal approach evaluates the MSS’s words on the page and all the variants. It answers such questions as these: Are there spelling or grammatical characteristics that would favor one reading over the others? Does the author commonly use words, phrases, or clauses a certain way? Are there clearly accidental errors (see Question, Nine, above)? Is there an identifiable reason that a copyist would change a word or phrase? What is the overall theology of a NT author (Wegner, pp. 238-39)?

### **11. How many scribal errors are there? Are there hundreds of thousands?**

That number is misleading, because even the smallest spelling variant is counted. To use an example in English, a variant may be *-ed* after a word (*answered*) or without an *-ed* (*answer*). In Greek the word order of a sentence is much more flexible than in English. So if the word order changes in even the slightest way without changing the meaning (see Question Fifteen below, and Part Three, Question One), then this too is counted as a variant. Such trivial differences are counted in the grand total.

Plus, there are several million pages of manuscripts. If there are 500,000 variants (and that number is too high), then that would be much less than one variant per page, on average. Thus, saying that there are hundreds of thousands of variants turns the huge number of pages into a vice, when the huge number is in fact a virtue of

NT MSS. Critics want us to believe that even more MS pages would make the NT less reliable, but that is wrongheaded.

So what is the total of more significant variants? It amounts to a surprisingly small percentage of the entire NT.

Most modern textual critics can agree on the bulk of the text (some 95 percent of it perhaps). It is the remaining 5 per cent or so where disputes occur and differing conclusions may be found. These discrepancies are the cause for most of the variants to be seen in the footnotes of our translations (Elliott and Moir, p. 8). Also, some scholars put the number as high as 99% (see Part Three, Question One). We nonspecialists do not have to debate over trivial variants. For us, the Scripture is 95-99% established. No other text coming out of the Greco-Roman world comes even close to this startling outcome, but a very, very far distant second.

This is significant because textual critics focus on a very small number of variants. This also means that after the five or so or one percent of variants have been worked through, we have essentially the Word of God in our hands (See Sir Frederick Kenyon's verdict in Question Seventeen, below).

These variants do not overturn or negate Christian doctrine. If one word or clause is being scrutinized in one verse, then the entire sweep of the New Testament supports basic doctrine, such as the deity of Christ (see Question Fifteen, below).

We need, therefore, to get a perspective. No one should doubt the Bible's reliability in terms of the MS attestation.

## **12. What does *witnesses* mean?**

Scholars (and all of us) look for shorthand ways to communicate. In the context of NT textual criticism, "witnesses" means all of the MSS, every early version or translation of the NT (usually from Greek into other languages), and the quotations of the NT in the writings of the church fathers (early Christian leaders).

## **13. How many MSS are there?**

The official listing (as of 2006) of the several important categories of Greek New Testament manuscripts can be summarized as follows:

Papyri...118

Majuscule MSS...317

Miniscule MSS...2877

Lectionary MSS...2433

Total...5745

Source: Papyri

Hat tip: Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, p. 77.

Papyrus means writing material made from reed plants, in this case MSS that survive in fragments, but significant ones.

Majuscule (or uncials) denotes Greek MSS written in capital letters.

Miniscule indicates Greek MSS written in cursive.

And lectionary MSS mean books or lists of specific Biblical passages to be read (hence *lectionary*) in the church's calendar. The MSS in the latter category need more detailed study, though the significant MSS have been used in textual criticism of the NT. Not mentioned here are the 20,000 or more different early versions, that is, translations, from original Greek into another language such as Latin, Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian.

Different scholars come to slightly different totals, but this chart gives us a clear idea of how many manuscripts scholars have to sort through.

After describing the poor showing of non-Christian MSS of ancient Roman authors, Metzger (and Ehrman, though this excerpt is found in the third edition without him) draws this conclusion about the richness and variety of the NT MSS:

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 MSS contain only the four Gospels or only the Epistles. However, these MSS may still be used to cross-check the others. It is much better to have many MSS than few, as in the case of the Greco-Roman non-Christian MSS.

Further, the quotations of the NT 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 this excerpt 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)

The quotations from the Church Fathers are significant in attesting to the reliability of the NT that we have in our possession.

#### **14. Are there different levels of reliability or accuracy in the MSS?**

Textual critics in fact see different levels of quality in MSS, and this is taken into account when they engage in their studies. For example, two scholars, Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, have five categories, but only the first three are mentioned here, for the latter two are for specialists and pertain to classifying the less reliable MSS (pp. 106 and 159).

I. Very special quality

II. Special quality

III. Distinctive character

Specialist may quibble over which MS belongs in which categories, but the main point here is to demonstrate that different levels of MS quality exist. Sometimes this fact is not always pointed out by skeptics, who may use a known weaker MS to score polemical points.

However, it should be noted that “the early church seems to have taken great care to monitor errant theology and their sacred texts” (Wegner, p. 38-39).

#### **15. Don't all these scribal errors and the great number of MSS cause confusion?**

It poses challenges, but not confusion in a negative sense. With more MSS comes the risk of more scribal errors, but also the opportunity to cross-check the MSS and eliminate the errors. Scholars have to puzzle over a wide range of witnesses as they settle on the correct reading. The fourth edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek NT discusses some variants in one clause of Luke 16:21. It tells the story of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus. Should the verse include the word *crumbs* or not?

19 There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat **what fell** from the rich man's table.

There are three basic variants (genitive plural).

1. *Tōn piptontōn* means *what fell*; this is the best rendering according to the witnesses, so the New International Version uses it.

2. *Tōn psichiōn tōn piptontōn* means *the crumbs that fell* or *the crumbs falling*; the witnesses are strong, but not quite as strong as the first variant.

3. *Tōn piptontōn psichiōn* means *the falling crumbs* or perhaps also *the crumbs falling*; the witnesses for this variant are few.

Do these variants in Luke 16:21 cause confusion for the textual critic? No, but they pose a challenge. In this case, the challenge is overcome because critics have boiled down certain MSS that are the most accurate, and they support the first variant. Still, though, the scholars at United Bible Societies, an organization under which they have united to produce a highly accurate NT, rate their certainty about the correct reading in Luke 16:21 as “some degree of doubt” their letter B, as compared with “virtually certain” for their letter A. The letter C indicates “considerable degree of doubt.” To finish off their rating system, D signals a “very high degree of doubt” about the strength or weakness of their decision about a variant.

However, does this example of Luke 16:21 impact basic Christian doctrine negatively? Not in the slightest. Textual critics may wrestle with variants like these, but web readers do not need to do this in most cases. Sometimes a good translation of the NT will signal in the footnotes important variants, and readers should pay attention to them. Perhaps the footnotes mean that we should not be too dogmatic about specific verses here and there, though essential doctrines are not seriously called into question when all the witnesses are collated properly, doctrines such as the deity of Christ.

Before leaving Question Fifteen, this should be repeated and emphasized: by far the vast majority of variants discussed by specialists have nothing or little to do with the solid meat of Christian doctrine. Rather, they concern “crumbs,” so to speak. And no variant overturns Christian doctrine, such as the deity of Christ, which is supported by other verses.

## **16. Why wouldn't God protect his Word from all of this?**

I have asked and answered this question in the other parts in the series. Christians believe that God works through history and humans. C. S. Lewis' preliminary study on miracles is relevant. Once the inspired original manuscripts get assimilated into history, they undergo the effects of time:

The moment [the newcomer, e.g. miracle] enters [Nature's] realm, it obeys her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. (*Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, p. 81)

Recall our twenty scribes. What if you were one of them? Would you make mistakes? However, these errors have been purged out (and continue to be), with very few remainders. Why can't devout believers today conclude that God is in fact

working through humans in the purging process? Isn't this a kind of divine protection that is worked out over time and history?

### **17. Should I have any doubts about my NT?**

I have also asked and answered this question in the other parts in the series. Sir Frederick Kenyon (d. 1952), a premier NT 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 Wegner, p. 25).

Kenyon worked in an earlier generation, and other MSS have been found since his time. However, nothing has cropped up that challenges in a substantive way the meaning and content of the NT. "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).

Christians should have gratitude, if I may intrude with my own opinion, for scholars putting in so much time and energy and for clarifying the NT. Somebody has to do this thankless yeoman's work, done often behind the scenes, with no glamour.

Therefore, far from losing your confidence, it should increase.

See the final article in the series: *The Manuscripts Tell the Story: the New Testament Is Reliable*. It surveys the optimism of specialists and other scholars about the NT.

This article has many links to other scholarship and sites. If the readers would like to click on them, they are encouraged to go to American Thinker, click on "Archives," find "James Arlandson" and then click on the article "New Testament Manuscripts: the Basic Facts"; or they may follow this URL:

[http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/new\\_testament\\_manuscripts\\_the.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/new_testament_manuscripts_the.html)

The article hosted by [biblicalstudies.org.uk](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk) has been updated in other areas.

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