

EH Bible 101, part 5

Textual Criticism

Textual Criticism is the science of reconstructing original texts from the witnesses of variant copies and translations of literature. Textual Criticism of the Bible is specifically aimed at reconstructing the original manuscripts of Biblical texts.

To understand how textual criticism works, and to benefit from the labors of those who have applied it to the mass of manuscripts preserved through history, it is helpful to know something about the nature of scribal errors.

Common Manuscript Errors (Hebrew OT)¹

1. Writing a word, letter, or syllable only once when it should have been written more than once (haplography).
2. Writing something twice that originally appeared only once (dittography).
3. Reversing the correct position of words or letters (metathesis).
4. The combining of two words into one (fusion).
5. The dividing of one word into two (fission).
6. Replacing a word with its homonym (homophony).
7. Misreading of similar appearing letters.
8. The omission of a section between two similar endings (homoeoteleouton).
9. The omission of a section between two similar beginnings (homoearkton).
10. Accidental omission.
11. Misreading vowel letters as consonants.
12. Variants based on the vowel points only.

¹ This list and its descriptions are taken from Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 60-63.

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Common Manuscript Errors (Greek NT)²

Unintentional Changes

Eyes:

1. Poor eyesight and poor handwriting.
2. Omission of sections (Homoeteleouton / Homoearkton).
3. Writing a word, letter, or syllable only once when it should have been written more than once (haplography).
4. Writing something twice that originally appeared only once (dittography).

Ears:

5. Homophones
6. Spelling errors (same sounding consonant or vowel combinations)

Mind:

7. Substitution of synonyms.
8. Variation in sequence of words.
9. Alteration of letters producing totally different words.
10. Assimilation from parallel, familiar passages.

Judgment:

11. Margin notes included in text (definitions, corrections, comments).
12. Following lines across two columns (see Metzger, p.195 for an egregious example).

Intentional Changes

1. Spelling, grammar, and style "corrections".
2. Harmonizing alterations.
3. Addition of natural complements (especially divine names/titles).
4. Clearing up historical or geographical difficulties.
5. Conflation of readings.
6. Changes made for doctrinal considerations (the removal of something inconvenient, or insertion of a "proof").
7. Addition of miscellaneous details (like identifying by name unnamed persons).

² This list is a summary of material taken from Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Third Enlarged Edition*, 186-206.

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The Canons (Rules-of-Thumb) for OT Textual Criticism³

"In all textual-critical work, due regard must be given to the psychology of the scribe himself. We must always ask ourselves the question, How might this error — if error there be — have originated from his hand? Does this accord with his type of habit of mind as observed elsewhere in his work?"⁴

1. The older reading is to be preferred.
2. The more difficult reading is to be preferred.
3. The shorter reading is to be preferred.
4. The reading that best explains the variants is to be preferred.
5. The reading with the widest geographical support is to be preferred.
6. The reading which most conforms to the style and word-choice of the author is to be preferred.
7. The reading which reflects no doctrinal bias is to be preferred.

The Canons (Rules-of-Thumb) for NT Textual Criticism⁵

Choose the reading which best explains the origin of the others. Reconstruct the history of the variant, giving attention to the following considerations:

1. Date — older is better, but....
2. Geographical distribution — broader distribution is better.
3. Text-family tree — some family trees are better than others.
4. The more difficult reading is to be preferred.
5. The shorter to be preferred (except for tendencies toward omissions).
6. Dissonance of parallels is to be preferred.

It should be born in mind that while some scribes were careless, some thoughtless, some too thoughtful, the vast majority of manuscripts represents a remarkable scribal adeptness at faithfully transmitting the text.

The take-away from a study of textual criticism is the reality that we have a VERY reliable witness to the original manuscripts of the Old Testament and New Testament. You can trust that the Bible you have now⁶ is effectively the Bible that was written by God through men in its original form.

³ As summarized by Archer, 64-67.

⁴ Archer, 67.

⁵ Metzger, 207-246.

⁶ to the degree that your modern-language translation faithfully represents the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew text that we have today.

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Preservation of the Old Testament

Factors in preservation of the OT:

- Jewish reverence for the written Word of God
- Tedious copying of manuscripts
- Burial of worn parchments
- Oldest extant manuscripts were from 900 A.D.

The Masoretes:

- 7th-11th centuries A.D.
- Counting the numbers of letters in books
- Identifying the middle letter of a book
- Aleph occurred 42,377 times in Hebrew OT
- Hebrew vowel pointings

The Dead Sea Scrolls:

- Discovered by two Bedouin shepherds in the winter of 1946-47.
- Some manuscripts as old as 125 B.C. (1000 years older than anything previously known!)
- No significant difference between Qumran scrolls and Masoretic texts!

Other Language translations (LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, Aramaic Targums).

Preservation of the New Testament

- We do not possess the original manuscripts.
- We do have papyrus from the 3rd century (2nd century, even?).

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- Uncials (all capital letters) from the 4th century
- Minuscules in the thousands from the 4th to 7th centuries

Some statistics:

- The NT is the best attested of all ancient books.
- We possess 5000 Greek mss from which to discern originals (some to the 1st half of 3rd century).
- The closest comparison is the Roman poet Virgil, a contemporary of NT. We possess lines from 4th century, mss from the 5th.
- No major doctrine rests on disputed texts.
- There is not a single passage in which scholars agree that the original NT text is not extant. (In the Old Testament, 1Sam 13:1 might be the only Hebrew text with no original. See Acts 13:21.)
- The expositor today must make decisions about textual variants in less than ½ of 1% of Biblical texts.

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Resources for further study:

On Inspiration:

R. Laird Harris *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*
B.B. Warfield *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*
Gleason Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Revised and Expanded*.

On Canonization:

Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology*, chapter 3.
F.F. Bruce *The Canon of Scripture*
R. Laird Harris *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*
Bruce Metzger *The New Testament: It's Background, Growth, and Content*
Michael Kruger *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate*
Gleason Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Revised and Expanded*.

On Preservation:

James White *The King James Only Controversy*
Jon Rehurek "The Preservation of the Bible: Providential or Miraculous? The Biblical View" in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Spring 2008.
Bruce Metzger *The New Testament: It's Background, Growth, and Content*
David Daniel *The Bible in English*
William Barrick "Ancient Manuscripts and Biblical Exposition" in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 9, Spring 1998, pp 26-38.

On Biblical Criticism (The Bad Kind):

Thomas and Farnell *The Jesus Crisis*
Eta Linneman *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*
Gleason Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Revised and Expanded*.

On Biblical Criticism (The Good Kind - Textual Criticism):

Bruce Metzger *The New Testament: It's Background, Growth, and Content*.
Bruce Metzger *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Third Enlarged Edition*.
Gleason Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Revised and Expanded*.
www.csntm.org

General:

Don Kistler, gen ed. *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*
Erwin Lutzer *Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible*
Gleason Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Revised and Expanded*.

A helpful resource on the clarity of Scripture (which makes hermeneutics possible!):

Mark D. Thompson *A Sure Ground on Which To Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture*