

# The Basics of New Testament Textual Studies

To err, the saying goes, is human. This is certainly the case when dealing with the editing, translation, and copying of texts. Any time words have to go through someone's eyes (or ears) and brain to get to their hands, things will go wrong. Modern technologies such as xerography and word processing merely make it easier to mass produce mistakes.

Even when dealing with modern scripture, where the texts have been handled by a relatively small number of people almost all of whom have a divine commission to do so, there are errors introduced and mistakes made. When the Church republished the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price in 1981, the fact that it corrected mistakes that had been introduced in earlier editions made newspaper headlines.

There are over 5,000 manuscripts from the days before printing that contain the New Testament in whole or in part, the earliest dating from the second century. The job of correlating them and trying to piece together from them the closest approximation possible to the original penned by the evangelists and apostles is truly daunting, and more difficult than for any other ancient work, including the Old Testament. This is primarily due to the fact that there are so many New Testament manuscripts; no other ancient work exists in nearly as many copies; for some works, there is exactly one extant copy that antedates printing.

Textual criticism is that branch of the humanities that deals with the attempt to determine the original or correct text for a work. The word criticism has an unfortunately negative connotation in modern English, but it comes from the Greek word for judgment. A critic is merely a judge of the relative merits, in this case, of various versions of a text.

Textual criticism is sometimes referred to as "lower criticism." This is to contrast it with "higher criticism," which endeavors to determine the authorship and original meaning of a text. Lower criticism deals with the history of a text after it has been written; higher criticism deals with the history of the text before it was written. Lower criticism is frequently contentious; higher criticism almost always so, with some genuinely bizarre hypotheses put forth. The output from the so-called "Jesus Seminar" is one of the more unfortunate examples of higher criticism; the scholars involved color code the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels based on their feelings of the likelihood that Jesus actually spoke them. Their conclusions are widely dismissed by most scholars.

A particular version of a passage, sentence, or phrase is called a reading. A copy of a text that contains a particular reading is said to be an exemplar of that reading. To use a particularly LDS example, there are two main readings for 2 Nephi 30:6. The first is that the Lamanites would become a "pure and delightsome people" (with the 1840 and 1981 editions as exemplars) and the other that the Lamanites would become a "white and delightsome people" (with the 1830 and 1922 editions as exemplars).

Ideally, the textual critic would like to reconstruct the text exactly as the author left it. In practice, this is impossible in the absence of a copy actually penned by the author personally—and even then, the same author is frequently responsible for multiple variants of his own work. In the case of the New Testament, our oldest reasonably complete copies of individual books still come centuries after the books were written. There was more than enough time for the text to have changed between the time when it was written and these oldest manuscripts.

One goal of textual criticism is the publication of a critical edition of the text. This is a version of the text that includes in the body the various readings which the editors feel to be most

likely the correct ones. Footnotes or other marginalia (referred to as the edition's apparatus) then contain alternate readings with an indication of which manuscripts are exemplars of the main text and which exemplars of the variant readings.

There are two main critical editions of the Greek New Testament. The first is the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (named for its editors), currently in its twenty-seventh edition, and the other is the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*, currently in its fourth edition. The two editions are, in fact, identical in their main text apart from occasional punctuation (a deliberate decision on the part of their editors). They differ substantially in their apparatuses.

The Nestle-Aland text is aimed at the textual critic, with the goal of providing as complete a set of variant readings as is possible in a relatively compact space.

The UBS text is aimed at Bible translators. It has fewer alternate readings, and those which it gives are categorized as A, B, C, or D, depending on the degree of plausibility the editors feel these alternate readings have. Some editions of the UBS text also have a nice Greek-English lexicon in the back, and there is a companion volume, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (TCGNT), which explains the reasoning behind many of the decisions of the editors.

Some scholars feel that the predominance of the Nestle-Aland/UBS text is unfortunate, as some of the decisions made by their editors are far less clear-cut than they would imply. We will deal with some of the issues involved in the following sections. There is, however, no readily-available critical edition which can supplant them.

## Text Families

With as many manuscripts available as the Greek New Testament has, it is possible to categorize the manuscripts into "families" that show a tendency to have a common set of readings. There is no universally accepted division into manuscript families, and to a certain extent all existing divisions are arbitrary. Nonetheless, the most common grouping for the Greek New Testament involves four families:

1) Alexandrian. This is a relatively older family of manuscripts mostly from the area around Alexandria. Alexandria was the capital of Greek and Roman Egypt, the second largest city of the Roman Empire, and a center for higher education until its capture by Muslims in the seventh century. Alexandria was also an important center for Christian learning.

2) Caesarian. This is a family centered in Palestine. The existence of the Caesarian family is frequently disputed.

3) Western. This is a diverse family of manuscripts mostly from the western Mediterranean, where Latin and not Greek was the dominant language.

4) Byzantine. This is the largest family; whose readings in general give rise to what is called the Majority Text, symbolized with a script M. The name comes from Byzantium, the Greek city which was rebuilt by Constantine the Great in the fourth century as Constantinople (and which is now Istanbul). The Byzantine family is relatively late, and many of the Byzantine manuscripts date from a time when Constantinople was the only large center of Greek Christianity left.

The main controversy in New Testament textual studies is between preference for the Alexandrian text family and the Byzantine one.

The Alexandrian text family is somewhat older, and (all things being equal) an older manuscript is more likely to be accurate than a younger one. It is also relatively shorter in most

cases.

On the other hand, Alexandria was also a center for Greek philosophy and Christian heresies, which may have contaminated the text. Since there are fewer Alexandrian manuscripts in existence, and many of those which do exist are fragmentary, reconstructing an Alexandrian text relies heavily on two manuscripts (see below), one of which has a significant number of corrections, and both of which have been criticized for being unusually error-prone.

The Byzantine text family has the most exemplars, but they tend to be late. They also show a tendency to be longer than Alexandrian readings, which many explain by saying they are expanding the text somewhat. For example, places where an Alexandrian text has “Jesus” or “the Lord,” a Byzantine text may have “the Lord Jesus.” Advocates of the Byzantine family feel that the text is derived from now-lost manuscripts from such first-generation centers of Christianity as Ephesus and point out that the lack of early exemplars for a reading does not make the reading itself late.

Each side has its advocates, with (on the whole) advocates of the Alexandrian family being more liberal and those of the Byzantine text family more conservative. Among English-speaking scholars, there is a pronounced tendency for one’s position on the issue to be tinged by one’s feelings towards the King James Version, which is based on a Greek text derived from the Byzantine family (see below). Scholars who feel that the King James Version should be supplanted by more modern translations often favor a Greek text which would necessitate that; scholars who feel that the King James Version should be retained must perforce prefer the Byzantine family.

Both the Nestle-Aland and UBS texts are derived mostly from the Alexandrian family.

Note that in actual practice, translators and editors tend to use eclectic texts. Blind acceptance of one family over all the others is generally considered sloppy work. It is better to consider the merits of each individual case.

There is one more text “family” which should be mentioned. This is the so-called *Textus Receptus*, which is not a manuscript family but a series of printed editions. The first TR text was that published by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) in 1515. The book was rushed into the press in order to beat another printed Greek New Testament to market, and the original edition is notoriously faulty. (For example, Erasmus could find no manuscript containing the last six verses of Revelation and so supplied them by translating them back to Greek from the Latin Vulgate.) Erasmus published four later editions with numerous corrections. The work was continued by Robert Estienne (Stephanus, 1503–1559). Stephanus’ fourth edition, published in 1551, is particularly notable as the first Bible published with modern verse divisions. Some later editions were published by the Calvinist scholar, Théodore de Bèze (Beza, 1519–1605).

The text was later published in 1624 by the brothers Bonaventure and Abraham Elzivir of Leiden, using Beza’s 1565 edition as their primary source. In their second edition of the text, published nine years later, they boast that it is “the text which is now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted.” It is from this publisher’s blurb that the name “*Textus Receptus*” is derived (Latin for “received text”).

The TR is based on excellent scholarship from the early modern period, but is considered hopelessly undermined by more recent discoveries by all but the most conservative scholars. It is a slightly eclectic text, mostly based on Byzantine manuscripts but with some irregularities. A version of the TR is the basic Greek text underlying the King James Version.

Note that the TR is not, strictly speaking, a member of the Byzantine text family and not,

strictly speaking, an exemplar of the Majority Text. (Indeed, strictly speaking, there is not a single “TR,” and the “TR” is not the same thing as “the Greek underlying the KJV.”)

One particularly important departure of the TR from the Byzantine family is the inclusion of the Johannine Comma. 1 John 5:7–8 in the KJV reads, “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.” The words “that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three” (the Johannine Comma) were missing from the Greek manuscripts Erasmus originally used, so he omitted them, although they are present in the Vulgate and were very popular as a proof text of Trinitarianism. The story goes that when Erasmus was criticized for leaving them out, he rashly agreed to insert them if a Greek manuscript containing them were to be found. Miraculously one was, a late manuscript probably prepared for the express purpose of making Erasmus keep his promise. He was true to his word, and so the Johannine Comma is found in the KJV even though it is not found in any of the early Greek manuscripts, translations, or quotations from Church Fathers and is clearly spurious.

## Manuscripts

Individual manuscripts are generally given names and designations according to a complex system depending on the date, writing material, writing style, and manner of binding. The most important—certainly the most controversial—single manuscripts are probably:

*Sinaiticus* (represented by the Hebrew letter **ש**). This is a fourth-century codex discovered in 1853 at the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai by Count Constantin von Tischendorf. It currently is found in the British Museum. It is one of the chief exemplars of the Alexandrian text family.

*Alexandrinus* (represented by the Latin letter A). This is a fifth century codex presented to King Charles I of England in 1627 by the Patriarch of Constantinople. It also is found in the British Museum. Despite its name, its Gospels are the oldest extant example of a Byzantine text; the remainder of its New Testament is of the Alexandrian text family.

*Vaticanus* (represented by the Latin letter B). This is a fourth century codex held at the Vatican Library at Rome. It is considered one of the best exemplars of the Alexandrian text type, but is frequently attacked by some extremist scholars who feel that it has been deliberately distorted by the Roman Catholic Church.

*Codex Bezae* or *Codex Cantabrigiensis* (represented by the letter D). This was presented to Cambridge University in 1581 by Theodore Beza, a French scholar who is one of Erasmus’ successors as the editor of what is now considered the Textus Receptus. It dates from the fifth or sixth century. It is generally considered the chief exemplar of the Western text tradition but is notorious for some rather idiosyncratic readings.

In some cases, a later scribe has gone through and added corrections to a text. The work of the corrector is often referred to by adding an asterisk to the manuscripts designation. Thus A may have one reading and A\* another. If multiple correctors worked on a manuscript, their work can be indicated by superscript Latin letters.

The oldest witnesses to the Greek New Testament are the various papyrus fragments found in the Egyptian desert. Papyrus was the earliest reasonably inexpensive, permanent writing material in the ancient world, made from a reed that grows along the Nile, and the Egyptian desert provides an ideal climate for preserving papyrus for centuries. There are roughly one hundred papyrus manuscripts used by New Testament textual scholars, some dating from the

second century AD (that is, within a century of the time parts of the New Testament were committed to writing). Papyri are generally designated using a stylized P and a superscript number, such as P<sup>45</sup> for an important papyrus manuscript containing parts of the Gospels and Acts now in the Chester Beatty Museum in Ireland.

## The Practice of Textual Criticism

Textual criticism is really more of an art than a science. The critic has to examine possibly dozens of different readings and try to determine which is the most likely to be original. There are a number of general principles used, but their relative importance and how to apply them to individual cases varies from case to case and from critic to critic.

*Provenance.* This is fairly controversial. Most textual critics will tend to trust certain families more than others, or certain manuscripts more than others, and there is no general agreement as to which manuscripts or families are the most trustworthy. The 19th century critical edition of the Greek New Testament edited by Westcott and Hort, for example, is generally believed today to have relied on Sinaiticus and Vaticanus more than the manuscripts deserve, and some modern critics feel that the Nestle-Aland/UBS text continues the trend. As mentioned, whether the Alexandrian text family is to be preferred on the whole or the Byzantine one is still a controversial point.

*Age.* As a rule, all else being equal, an older reading is more likely to be correct than a younger one. This is based on the observation that a manuscript which is a copy of a copy of a copy has had more stages at which errors could be introduced than one which is merely a copy of a copy. Of course, a young manuscript may be an exemplar of an older reading, and an older manuscript may simply have a whopper of a mistake in it.

*Lectio brevior.* This is Latin for “the shorter reading,” and means that, as a rule, all else being equal, a shorter reading is more likely to be correct than a longer one. A scribe who deliberately changes a manuscript is more likely to do so in such a fashion as to make it longer than shorter. We have already mentioned an example of this sort of thing. A scribe may feel that a bare reference to simply “Jesus” is irreverent or impious and expand it to the more reverential “Lord Jesus Christ.” On the other hand, a scribe who accidentally changes a manuscript is more likely to leave things out than put things in.

*Lectio difficilior.* This is Latin for “the more difficult reading,” and means that as a rule, all else being equal, the reading which makes less sense is more likely to be correct than the one which makes more sense. This is somewhat counter-intuitive, but is based on the idea that a scribe who introduces a deliberate change is more likely to change the text so that it’s easier to understand or more grammatically correct. We see this sort of thing occasionally in the JST of all places. There are a number of changes Joseph Smith introduced which do not have any impact on meaning but merely make the older English of the KJV easier for a 19th century American to understand. Some texts, however, have readings that are simply nonsense and should be rejected on that basis.

*Harmonization.* This is particularly found in the Gospels. Where a passage is well-known from one Gospel, but exists in a parallel version in another Gospel, the second Gospel is frequently changed to match the first. The scribe who makes the change either feels that the familiar form is the correct one and the second Gospel has to be fixed to contain it, or the scribe might accidentally slip and use the more familiar form as he writes, particularly if he memorized passages.

There are also a number of well-known categories of (largely accidental) changes the

critic looks for:

*Dittography.* Where a scribe accidentally doubles a letter or a word.

*Haplography.* Where a scribe accidentally leaves out a letter, word, or even several words. This sometimes happens when the same word occurs twice relatively close together; in such a case, the eye can accidentally skip from the one instance to the other. This is by far the most common form of accidental change.

*Marginal notes creeping into the text* or “*glossing.*” When a scribe encountered a marginal note in the text he was copying, he could be at a loss. The margins were places for corrections to a defective manuscript to be placed, as well as for the sort of marginal notes we still write in our scriptures today. Does, therefore, the marginal note merely indicate an explanation added by someone else? Or was it a correction? Rather than leave something out which should have been included, the tendency would be to incorporate the note into the text itself.

*Similar-sounding words.* If a manuscript was read by one person and copied by someone listening to them, the auditor may well hear something slightly different from what was being read. This could also happen if the scribe was reading aloud to himself as he copied. There are also cases where similar-looking letters can be mistranscribed, particularly when copying a manuscript written by someone with bad handwriting.

*Word division problems.* Greek was originally written with all upper-case letters and no spaces or other punctuation to indicate word breaks. Abbreviations for common words were frequently used to save precious parchment or vellum. The result is, on occasion, a case where a word break is ambiguous and may have an impact on the meaning.

Add to this the fact that scribes frequently worked under less than ideal conditions, sitting in awkward positions, without heat, without adequate light, and with uncooperative materials. It is literally a miracle that the New Testament text has come through as unscathed as it has.

(As an aside, we note that textual critics are themselves making the sort of deliberate changes the ancient scribes did: deleting words, adding words, mixing readings from different manuscripts, and so on. While one hopes that this is bringing us closer to the original text and not taking us farther away from it, there is no guarantee that this is the case. Some scholars would indeed argue that textual critics are simply making matters worse.)

## Translations

The earliest translations of the Greek New Testament date from a time preceding all but the oldest of our Greek manuscripts. This means that these translations may preserve older readings than those in any current Greek manuscript. (The equivalent statement is certainly true of the Septuagint, which preserves some old readings that predate any extant Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament.)

Non-Greek translations such as Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Aramaic, Coptic, and Gothic, must be used with extreme caution, however. For one thing, the apparent alternate reading may simply be a mistranslation. And each of these translations has its own textual transmission problems.

Similarly, quotations of Scripture by early Christian theologians, the Church Fathers, can be helpful—if we can really be sure that a quotation is intended, and that it was not freely adapted to make a point. Older Fathers are more likely to quote a version of the text with no manuscript exemplars; later Fathers are more likely to use quotations that match a known text family.

## Source Criticism and the “Synoptic Problem”

Since some of the notes in this volume refer to the results of modern source criticism, we should mention it briefly here. Source criticism is strictly speaking higher criticism, moving from the text itself to the issues underlying the text. It attempts to determine where each story or passage from Scripture came from. This is particularly important in the Gospels, where there is considerable overlap (implying common sources) and considerable divergence (implying different sources).

If we were to use the Book of Mormon as an example, the text itself provides the divisions between Mormon’s abridgement of the Large Plates of Nephi, the Small Plates of Nephi, Moroni’s abridgement of the Jaredite records found by the Nephites, and Mormon and Moroni’s own records. Within his abridgement of the Large Plates, Mormon occasionally quotes his sources directly without necessarily indicating the fact (for example in Alma 29). A source critic would attempt to examine Mormon’s abridgement carefully to determine precisely where and when he does this.

Source criticism is as hotly contested as text criticism. One of the controversial points has to do with a hypothetical source called “Q” by scholars (from the German *Quelle*, meaning “source”), which is related to what is called the “Synoptic Problem.”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a large amount of material in such a way that points to dependence on one another and/or a common source. The Synoptic Problem refers to attempts to explain both these similarities and the differences among these Gospels. The oldest theory, dating back to Augustine, is that the Gospels were written in their canonical order: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. A modified form of this theory, called the Griesbach hypothesis (1789), flipped the order of Mark and Luke, but maintained the Matthean priority in the order of writing. Most modern scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel written (this theory is called “Marcan priority”). In this view, both Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark (the material common to all three Gospels being called the Triple Tradition), while the material that is common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark (called the Double Tradition) derives from a common, otherwise unknown source, called Q.

It is not our intention to take any dogmatic stance with respect to this question either way in our notes, although we occasionally refer to such-and-such a passage as deriving from Q as a convenient shorthand identifying it as common to both Matthew and Luke. A full consideration of the Synoptic Problem is beyond the scope of this book. The issues are complex and likely irrelevant to the interests of most of the readers of this book, and they can be pursued more fully in any of the general introductions of the New Testament listed above. Although some scholars have made elaborate claims based on the posited existence of Q, and although some modern “Historical Jesus” research attempts to use Q to portray Jesus as nothing but a wandering philosopher, such claims go far beyond the evidence and cannot be substantiated. At its base, Q is simply a hypothetical source posited to answer some perplexing questions about the relationship among the Gospels. The existence or nonexistence of Q has no bearing on the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

LDS scholars generally assume that the Gospels derive from a combination of written sources (such as Luke mentions in Luke 1:1-4), and eyewitness accounts (such as John’s Gospel). In such a context, one may take Q as merely being a source (written or oral) available to both Matthew and Luke. The Q hypothesis in and of itself should not be taken as undermining the historical or spiritual accuracy of the Gospel records, despite some of the nonsense published in its name.

## Some General Considerations

It must be emphasized that the overall message of the Greek New Testament is not materially affected one way or the other by the results of textual or source criticism. Textual criticism does have an impact on the meaning of specific verses, but this is mostly a danger to those who want to use isolated verses as proof texts. Despite strident arguments to the contrary on the part of some people, modern textual studies do not seriously undermine the divinity of Jesus Christ or the centrality of the Atonement. The vast majority of verses in the New Testament have no variant readings that affect meaning in any serious way.

We repeat: The overall message of the New Testament is not materially affected by any school of textual criticism, particularly when the New Testament is studied in conjunction with the Book of Mormon and modern revelation.

As Latter-day Saints, we must also remember that the only technique for the actual restoration of the original text would be a revelation from God or some other supernatural act. The techniques of secular scholarship can frequently be informative, but they must always be used cautiously and in connection with prayerful, Spirit-guided study.

While we sometimes use proof texts in our missionary work, we should bear in mind that if a particular point or doctrine is based on the precise reading of a single verse, it rests on a shaky foundation. If a proof text of which we are fond should be rejected for textual reasons and we cannot find a substitute, we may need to rethink what it is we are trying to prove.

We must also be very careful to separate textual problems from issues of whether or not a particular reading is “true.” We may agree with a reading that we must, in good conscience, reject on textual grounds. These are separate issues. We could, after all, insert thirteen Articles of Faith almost anywhere inside the biblical text. They would certainly be true, but they would be intrusions in the text regardless.

For Latter-day Saints in particular, there is no need to be particularly bothered or disturbed by the conclusions of textual critics. We know that the Bible has suffered seriously in the process of transmission and translation. We also know that we have modern scriptures that have not suffered to such an extent and that contain the fulness of the Gospel. We should not depend on proof texts from the Bible as the basis for our understanding of God; we have the Book of Mormon, we have the Doctrine and Covenants, and we have modern prophets.

And, as is true generally, scholars will disagree with one another. As Becker’s Law puts it, “For every expert, there is an equal and opposite expert.” Even the contributors to this volume disagree with one another on fairly basic matters of textual scholarship. Latter-day Saints are used to consensus and clear revelation to determine doctrinal positions, and so such differences of opinion can sometimes be disquieting. There is no reason why they should be, so long as there is no formal revelation on the subject and the disagreements do not become contentious.

If a particular passage or verse or reading is historically important in the development of LDS doctrine, that should not be taken as an indication that it should be retained over textual considerations to the contrary. That a particular reading should be rejected for textual reasons does not mean that it is not true, or that it cannot be used by God as a means of turning a prophet towards him for answers to questions. Indeed, important revelations such as D&C 76 were received by Joseph Smith precisely because of the errors in the Greek New Testament, and although the Song of Solomon was omitted from the JST as uninspired, it nonetheless provides modern revelation with a very pregnant image (see D&C 5:14).

It is certainly true that the waters are somewhat muddied for us by the Joseph Smith Translation. As mentioned, sometimes the JST merely clarifies the KJV. Sometimes the JST



introduces harmonizations. Sometimes the JST expands on a given text. While we accept that the JST was produced under divine inspiration, that does not mean that we can always tell what bearing it has on textual issues. It is not the purpose of the JST to decide the correct text of the Greek New Testament in the fashion a scholar would do, any more than it is the purpose of the gift of tongues to enable one to give a university-level lecture in Russian on quantum mechanics. If the JST harmonizes Matthew and Luke, it may mean that Matthew and Luke originally wrote the same thing, or it may mean that one or the other of them wrote something which was incorrect for some reason and is being fixed, or it may mean that the harmonized text will have the most meaning and impact in our lives today. God has a broader agenda than the mere restoration of letters on papyrus.

### References

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. Third, enlarged edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. This is the best one volume introduction to New Testament textual criticism. Metzger is one of the editors of the UBS text and provides here an excellent overview of the history of textual criticism, its modern practice, the available mss of the Greek New Testament, and details of some particular textual issues.

Aland, Kurt and Barbara Aland *The Text of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. This book is a kind of companion volume to the critical editions of the Greek New Testament, and gives an excellent explanation of how to use such editions.