Is My Bible Reliable?
Cornerstone Community Church
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I want to remind of a few key terms

Textual Criticism: The science and art of determining the original text of the NT from the available manuscript evidence. The word "criticism" should not be taken to mean something negative. It refers to the process of analyzing something, in this case the Greek manuscripts.

Variant: The term used to describe differences in the particular word(s) in 2 or more manuscripts

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Let's revisit this from last week, we failed to cover it.

D   Geographical Text Families

The 5,800+ Greek manuscripts, not to mention the versions and Fathers, can be separated into geographical categories. We call these "geographical families."   These different families came from the fact that as the church was copying the NT, errors entered into the manuscripts. These errors were passed on in many occasions to the succeeding manuscripts. Since travel and communication were not highly advanced, these errors *tended* to represent the texts of a geographical area. Texts of a certain area also tended to take on certain characteristics that were not very prominent in another geographical area (e.g., harmonization in the Gospels). There are 3 basic families of manuscripts, ***Alexandrian, Western,*** and ***Byzantine***. Please remember that these types or families are not hard and fast. There is disagreement sometimes about which family a manuscript is placed. But overall textual critics agree on these categories.

1   Alexandrian

It is called by this name because many of its manuscripts were found in Egypt, where Alexandria was the intellectual center (though in reality none were found in Alexandria but in middle and upper Epypt. Alexandria's sand was wet due to the flooding of the Nile. This family represents the majority of papyri, early Uncials (e.g. א, B, & C), the Coptic versions, and some important church fathers (e.g., Clement and Origen). It has the distinction of being the oldest manuscript family. One of its characteristics is that it tends to have ***shorter readings***.

2   Western

Quoting Metzger, the western text type . . .

is usually considered to be the result of an undisciplined and 'wild' growth of manuscript tradition and translational activity. The western type can be traced back to a very early date, for it was used by Marcion, . . . Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Cyprian.[43]

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[43]Bruce M. Metzger, The Text Of The New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) : 213.

Codex Bezae (D, 05) is it most prominent Uncial.

This text type is characterized by longer readings that border on paraphrases. The Book of Acts in the Western text is 8% longer than the Alexandrian text of Acts. Most would agree that when a variant *only* has support from the Western family, it is not the best representative of the original.

3   *Byzantine*

"*The Byzantine Text is represented by the vast majority of Greek manuscripts* [mostly miniscule] *and most of the Later Church Fathers. This text is largely preserved in the area of the old Byzantine Empire, which is now Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, and the former Yugoslavia. . . Its readings are described as smooth and unobjectionable, and difficult readings appear to have been alleviated.*"[44]

This text family is well know for conflating two variants into one. If one manuscript used the phrase "Jesus" and another manuscript uses "Christ", then the Byzantine text would combine them to say "Jesus Christ." The Byzantine text has some early readings, but for the majority of variants, these manuscripts are quite late. (***The KJV comes primarily from this family; more on that later***)

> ***Q: Can anyone venture a guess as to why this family covers the majority of Greek manuscripts?***

F.   **The Number of Variants in the Manuscripts**.

1.   *The Number and Quality of Variants*

The following information has been gleaned from Dan Wallace's writings. Two sources are the following:

→ The first is an online article you can access at:
https://nt605.biblicaltraining.org/Textual_Criticism_Outline-Wallace.pdf,
→ The second comes from the book ***Interpreting the New Testament Text***, edited by Bock and Fanning; Wallace writes chapter 2 *"Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism."*

We have already established that there are over 5,800 Greek manuscripts, some are fragments of NT books, some contain a whole book, others contain several books (e.g., the Gospels, the Pauline corpus, etc.), and a few contain the entire New Testament (and even much of the Old).

We have also established that no two of these manuscripts are identical; they all contain variants concerning which the Textual Critic practices his/her trade to determine the original wording. When scholars are asked how many variants there are in these nearly 6,000 manuscripts, there is not a consensus on the answer. The reason is that no one has ever actually thoroughly examined every word of every available manuscript and thus counted the variants. But statistically speaking, there is the educated guess of between 200,000 to 400,000 variants. Now that sounds incredibly daunting and even disturbing.

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[44]Black, 33

> ***Reality Check***: There are over 140,000 words in the Greek New Testament. So, with over 5,800 manuscripts, 200,000 to 400,000 variants can be understood within this context.

Next, you need to understand that only 1% of these variants are ***meaningful*** and ***viable***. The overwhelming majority of them are *grammatical* (e.g., removable *nu*), *word order* changes, and *spelling variations*. None of these change the meaning of the text in any significant way.

- ***To be Meaningful***, the variant must change the meaning of the text
- ***To be Viable,*** the variant must have sufficient proof to represent the original wording of the text.

> ### 2.   *The Four Groups of Textual Variants*

- Viable but not meaningful
- Meaningful but not viable
- Neither meaningful nor viable
- Both meaningful and Viable

> ### 3.   A Few Examples

→ **1 Thess 2:7   "little Children" vs "gentle**

      nēpioi   vs   *ēpioi*

But one manuscript has *ippioi* (ἵππιοι). This is a clear example of a meaningful but not viable variant.   The same goes for the example below.

→ **John 1:30**   "after me comes a *man"* (anēr)
              "after me comes *air* (aēr)

Now for a few examples of variants that are both ***meaningful and viable***

→ **Romans 8:2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set ***you*** (*me* or *us*) free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

→ **Philippians 1:14** "and most of the brothers and sister . . . now more than ever dare to speak ***the word*** (*word of God*, or *word of the Lord*) fearlessly."

I want to reiterate that only 1 % of variants fall into the category of ***meaningful and viable***.

Discussion: Bart Ehrman's list of Bible passages that don't belong in your Bibles.

G   The Practice of Textual Criticism[45]

The Textual Critic looks at all the evidence and determines the wording of the original manuscripts with a certain level of ***probability***. There are two lines of evidence that a Textual Critic *may* use.

1   External Evidence

External evidence is referring to the examination of the manuscripts themselves. The following are considered to be the **three canons of external evidence**.

a   Prefer the older reading

The manuscript that is the closest in age to the original will most likely have a truer reading. This assumes that the more times a manuscript is copied, variants increased. This is a *general rule*, because all scholars recognize that a variant could have occurred very early in the copying process. That is the reason for the next criteria.

b   Prefer the reading that occurs in widely separated geographical areas.

***Show Map of Mediterranean World

A reading that occurs in manuscripts from many different geographical locales would be more likely original than a reading that is limited to one location. If one reading has Alexandrian support but another reading has broad geographical support from the rest of the Mediterranean, then the latter would be preferred.

c   Prefer the reading that is supported by the greatest number of text types.

A consensus from a multitude of manuscripts, versions, and fathers from the various text types would most likely be original. This states the obvious. If a variant only occurs in one text type, but all the other types, versions and Fathers have another reading, that would imply that the original would reside in the one with the most diversity of witnesses.

2   Internal Evidence

"The reading that best explains the origin of the other reading is probably original."[46]   This line of evidence is concerned with scribal habits and practices along with the original authors style and vocabulary.

a   Prefer the shorter reading.

Scribes tended *to add* to the text rather than *subtract* from it. While this in not absolute, it is the general tendency.

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[45]This is summarized from Black's book on Text Criticism in fn 41 above.
[46]Black, 35.

b   Prefer the more difficult reading

Since a scribe would have the tendency to make a difficult understanding text easier, then the more difficult variant would seem to have been original.

c   Prefer the reading that accords best with the authors style and vocabulary.

Words or phrases that are foreign to a biblical authors vocabulary might in fact be scribal errors. (e.g., Mark 16:9ff)

d   Prefer the reading that best fits the context and/or theology of the author.

You must be familiar with each biblical author's theology and the context of the variant in question to properly determine the correct reading.

e   Prefer the less harmonious reading in parallel passages.

The tendency of the Scribe was to make those parallel passages that disagreed into a harmonious reading. Matthew and Luke's form of the Lord's prayer is a good example.

Quoting Black,

> *Of course, the greatest caution must be exercised in applying these principles. They are inferences rather than axiomatic rules. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the two or more principles to conflict. Hence none of them can be applied in a mechanical or unthinking fashion. If in the end you are still undecided, you should pay special attention to external evidence, as it is less subjective and more reliable.[1]*

4   *Type of Errors*

See the hand out by Black on types of errors the scribes made. These fall under two categories: *Accidental* and ***Intentional***.

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[1] Black, 36.