

Introduction



Why New Testament Textual Criticism Matters: A Non-Critic's Perspective

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I thank God for text critics. Everyone who reads the New Testament owes them a debt. This is not merely an opinion, it is a fact—a fact of which many are blissfully unaware. The debt that readers of the New Testament who have no training in biblical languages owe translators is obvious. But even those who can read the Bible in its original languages owe a debt to text critics. When I read from a modern edition of the Greek New Testament, I am not reading *the* Greek New Testament but *a* Greek New Testament. In other words, I am reading an *edited* Greek New Testament, the product of multitudinous editorial decisions, all of which were made by New Testament textual critics.

Both Bart Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace are well aware of this debt. In fact, as text critics, they occupy a privileged position from which to appreciate this fact and thus understand the issues involved in the thousands of decisions that text critics make. And make no mistake, New Testament text critics are faced with many more decisions than are critics of other ancient texts. This is because the New Testament is the best-attested book of antiquity—by far. This is good news

for those interested in knowing about Jesus and early Christianity. But this preponderance of evidence also complicates things. Simply put, the more manuscripts one has of any text, the more textual variants one is likely to encounter—and every textual variant demands a decision, a decision that will be made by a text critic.

As someone whose field is not New Testament textual criticism, I have tremendous respect for those who dedicate their lives to the sort of painstaking preparation and research that the field demands. A host of skills is required for this work. One not only needs to know several languages but also must be able to discern which words one is seeing on the page or digital copy of the page (to put it mildly, ancient copyists did not write as clearly as modern editions read—to say nothing of the difficulties that modern readers face when dealing with texts that have no breaks between words). One also has to learn how best to apply the general rules of textual criticism.¹ But at the end of the day, general rules are still only *general* rules, not hard-and-fast laws that can be applied in a one-size-fits-all manner and thus provide a guaranteed resolution to a problem. In other words, text critics must make judgment calls at times. New Testament textual criticism is as much an art as it is a science. Text critics thus have to combine the mind of a scientist with the heart of an artist.

Text critics are not always in agreement as to methodology. Although my look-around-town epistemology tells me that most of the leading text critics of our day would identify with reasoned eclecticism,² other approaches compete for the allegiance of text critics.³ More significant still is the fact that, even among those who are agreed as to the overall method that should be used, there is a bewildering difference of opinion. It is probably best to say that at this time, text critics are broadly agreed but at numerous particular points have significant differences of opinions. These differences can only be resolved by experts.

There is still more reason to be thankful for New Testament textual critics. Not only do they play the role of nursemaids in delivering a single usable text to Bible translators, who then pass on the product of their work to ordinary Bible readers, the work of text critics can also provide a window through which to view at least a sliver of the past, even if only indirectly. In similar fashion to how physicists

provide us a glimpse into how the universe came to be through the detailed analysis of fundamental particles of matter, text critics provide us a glimpse of the early church through the detailed analysis of manuscripts of the New Testament. Different scholars will disagree as to what the evidence they examine means or the degree to which we can gain insights from such investigation, but virtually all agree that, at least in theory, we can learn something about the early church in this way. For this we should be grateful.

In studying the manuscripts of the New Testament, text critics are confronted with some obvious challenges. For instance, not all New Testament manuscripts contain all the same books. Some contain books not retained in our “New Testament,” while others lack certain books that are part of the New Testament as we recognize it today. Still others feature differences in order among the books of the New Testament. These differences allow scholars a glimpse into how the New Testament canon developed. So historians and theologians are also in debt to text critics.

Despite its importance, New Testament textual criticism is generally seen by those outside the field as being about as exciting as watching mold grow on old bread. The reason for this is that the work of textual criticism is quite complex and detailed, and therefore proceeds at a snail’s pace. Most who study the New Testament, however, want to get on with the “real work” of exegesis, theology, preaching, and applied ministry, or at the very least devotional reading. But text critics do their work prior to the work of biblical studies or theology. Indeed, biblical studies and theology cannot be done apart from a biblical text, and in one very important sense, it is text critics who give—or at the very least deliver—the New Testament to us. Indeed, we mere mortals should be grateful for text critics every time we take up the New Testament.

Bart Ehrman is the rare writer who can make textual criticism interesting to the layperson. His *Misquoting Jesus* is a clear and provocative book that makes basic New Testament textual criticism understandable to the novice as it popularizes some of the major points in his earlier work *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.⁴ In the introduction to *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman shares some of his personal journey from fundamentalist Christianity, emphasizing the inerrancy of Scripture,

to liberal Christianity.⁵ To the best of my knowledge, *Misquoting Jesus* is the only book on New Testament textual criticism ever to be on the *New York Times* best-seller list. All New Testament textual critics should thank Ehrman for making their discipline relevant to the masses. In a very real sense, the dialogue and essays in this book result from the popularity of *Misquoting Jesus*. *Misquoting Jesus* has sold extremely well not only because it is very well written (although it certainly is) but also because it raises some fundamental questions as to the textual reliability of the New Testament and insists that these questions have significant ramifications for all of us.

One question that must be answered when considering the question of the textual reliability of the New Testament is this: What exactly does one mean in asking whether the New Testament is textually reliable? For instance, what does it mean to speak of the New Testament? Of what exactly does the New Testament consist? Does the New Testament contain the longer ending of Mark's Gospel? Does it contain the story of the woman taken in adultery? Does it contain 1 John 5:7 or Acts 8:37 as recorded in the King James Version?⁶ These are only a few of the most obvious passages that are seriously questioned as to whether they actually are part of the New Testament.

Still, the fundamental question is not simply whether a given verse or pericope is included in the final edition but rather, "Is there any such text as the 'New Testament'?" In one sense, the answer is surely no. The New Testament is no single text but rather a *collection* of individual texts penned by ancient Christians. But for our purposes, let us say that the "New Testament" text refers to the New Testament that text critics provide for scholars to use in translation and critical research (including the critical apparatus).⁷ Obviously, this is no single translation, nor any single ancient manuscript, but rather an edited text composed from numerous ancient manuscripts. It is from such a text that modern translations are derived. Still, this doesn't get us to one single text, because there are different edited Greek New Testaments still in use, as is clearly demonstrated by the fact that at least one modern edition of the Bible, the New King James Version, translates a different Greek text than most others. It is probably best to say that when text critics speak of the New Testament text, they generally refer to the latest edition of the Nestle-Aland *Greek New Testament*.⁸

What does it mean for a text to be textually “reliable”? Is textual reliability like balancing a checkbook (either it balances to the penny, or it does not)? Is anything less than 100 percent certainty deemed unreliable? Not unless we are prepared to consider virtually every extant Greco-Roman document unreliable and cease talking about what notable ancient authors, religious and secular, taught. For our purposes, I suggest that we think of textual reliability in terms of probability, or failing that, plausibility.⁹ We simply cannot have certainty about historical texts whose originals are not available. But we can have confidence that the wording of contemporary critical New Testament texts reflects what the autograph most likely said, given the available evidence. Textual reliability is more like a legal verdict than it is like the balancing of a checkbook: given the available evidence, we can be confident beyond a reasonable doubt that this reading is most likely the original.

The answer, then, to the question of New Testament textual reliability depends, at least in part, on what one thinks of New Testament textual criticism. In other words, it seems that we are actually questioning how reasonable it is to believe that text critics, given the data and resources available to them coupled with their training and skill, can be trusted to deliver a reliable edition of the New Testament using the methodological procedures of the discipline. Make no mistake here: the critics are also on trial. On this point, Georg Luck comments, “Our critical texts are no better than our textual critics.”¹⁰ Some, no doubt, would have more serious questions about the state of the evidence—qualitatively or quantitatively, or both—while others would have concerns about the methods being used, or those evaluating the evidence. Still others are confident that the text of the New Testament is at least reliable, even if we don’t know all the answers to all the questions that can be raised concerning it.

A debate is raging among New Testament textual critics at the present time. Traditionally, the task of New Testament textual criticism was conceived as one of recovery. Text critics have sought, at least since the days of Westcott and Hort, the architects of modern textual criticism, to recover the original wording of the New Testament. But some leading scholars are arguing that the task should be reconceived as *discovery of the earliest available text*, rather than recovery of the original

text. Ehrman plainly believes that we cannot get back to the original (or autographic) text. Other critics agree that we cannot arrive at the original wording but hold that this inability is not too significant. David Parker, for instance, writes, “The recovery of a single original saying of Jesus is impossible.”¹¹ The text is thus irretrievable. Yet he also insists, “But the question is not whether we *can* recover it, but why we want to.”¹² Parker believes that instead of a single authoritative text, there are numerous, legitimate texts that represent the interpretations of differing Christian communities.¹³ At the end of the day, in Parker’s opinion, the manuscripts we have tell us about themselves and their communities, and he holds that seeing the primary purpose of New Testament textual criticism as one of arriving at the original reading is inconsistent with the nature of the texts with which the critic deals.¹⁴

Although Ehrman and Parker agree that we cannot recover the original wording of the text (for different reasons), they disagree as to the importance of this belief. For Ehrman, it matters a great deal; for Parker, not so much. Eldon Jay Epp follows Parker in holding that the role of the Spirit and the community take priority over a reliable text.¹⁵ In effect, Ehrman, Parker, and Epp seem to hold that recovery of the original text is no longer to be seen as an end, or as the critic’s primary point of focus; rather, the exploration of the manuscript tradition is to be used as a means, or as an instrument, through which one can see more clearly the early (and not so early) church as one seeks to understand how the text came to be as it is, rather than what the text says.

In contrast, Wallace and Moisés Silva reject this revisioning of the task of New Testament textual criticism. They grant that the text can reveal much about the early church—and that this is an important task that should be pursued. They do not, however, think recovering the original wording of the New Testament is in theory impossible or secondary in importance.¹⁶ And like Ehrman, they believe it matters a great deal whether this in fact can be done.

Few evangelicals would argue that, ontologically speaking, the Spirit does not take priority over a text, even the biblical text. Clearly, the presence of the Spirit moving, guiding, filling, blessing, and empowering the community historically precedes the original text. Indeed, the text would never have come to be apart from the Spirit

working among Christians. But the question at hand is not whether the Spirit and community are prior to or more fundamental than the text of the New Testament. The issue is what should the primary task of New Testament textual criticism be? It will certainly be interesting to see what direction the critical guild moves with regard to this issue.

As a philosopher, I find some areas especially interesting as I survey contemporary literature in New Testament textual criticism, particularly the work of Bart Ehrman. It is apparent that Ehrman is highly skeptical in some ways. Skepticism is generally a good thing for the scholar. (Please note that skepticism is not the same thing as cynicism. A skeptic insists upon evidence and/or reason for believing. A cynic will not believe in spite of evidence.) One thing that is abundantly clear to me is that New Testament textual criticism is an *evidential* discipline. Text critics critique the evidence they have—i.e., the available New Testament manuscripts.

Skepticism and its parent, empiricism, have a long and distinguished history in Western thought. But the line between proper skepticism and hyperskepticism is a fine one. Proper skepticism understands that evidence is required for one's beliefs about what is not the case, just as much as evidence is required for one's beliefs about what is the case. In other words, we must be as skeptical about our skepticism as we are of others' beliefs.

Bart Ehrman seems to hold that the New Testament that textual critics can deliver to us is unreliable because there are so many variant readings in the manuscripts and because our earliest manuscripts are copies of copies of copies, etc. But is this skepticism reasonable? Perhaps, but I have my doubts.

The problem with hyperskepticism is that it sets the bar for knowledge impossibly high. In chapter 2 of his classic work, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell makes an important point. He takes up the question of whether there is in any sense an external world that we can know. He writes:

This question is of the greatest importance. For if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we cannot be sure of the independent existence of other people's bodies, and therefore still less of other people's minds, since we have no grounds for believing in their minds except such as are derived from observing

their bodies. Thus if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we shall be left alone in a desert—it may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist. This is an uncomfortable possibility; but although it cannot be strictly *proved* to be false, there is not the slightest reason to suppose that it is true.¹⁷

There is not the slightest reason to suppose that it is true. Can the same be said of Ehrman's skepticism? Perhaps, but probably not—and the real issue is not whether or not there is the *slightest* reason to believe that we can't recover the original, but whether there is *sufficient* reason to do so. No doubt, Ehrman believes that he has at least 300,000 reasons to hold that we cannot know what the originals said. But is this reasoning justified?

Clearly, there is evidence of corruption among the manuscripts we have. This is indisputable. But what does this evidence prove? It seems to me that evidence has to be evidence *for* something. In the case of textual criticism, it has to be textual evidence for a particular reading. The very nature of New Testament textual criticism means that we will have evidence for a select number of possible readings, not evidence for an unlimited number of possible readings. Is it possible that the original reading of any verse of the New Testament is one that we have no evidence for at the moment? Of course it's possible. But where is the evidence for such a reading? We have none. Indeed, by definition, we can have none. If we had such a reading, it would not be a reading that we do not have.

I am not playing language games here but rather insisting that as scholars engaged in an evidential discipline, text critics always have before them a range of possible answers. They may select between two readings or twenty (or more), but they will not choose from an infinite number of readings. And I have confidence that most of the time, text critics will be able to put forward a reading that is quite reasonably believed—and quite probably correct or at least more likely to be correct than any other single reading. This does not in any sense mean I think they *will* always get it right. But they *can* get it right.¹⁸ In fact, I have good reason to think that in many, if not most cases, text critics have gotten it right. How can I believe this? I believe this because

I believe in the rationality of the general rules of textual criticism and the integrity of text critics.

We must therefore insist not only that one must note *general* evidence of corruption over time but also that one's conclusions concerning any variant must be based upon *specific* evidence for a particular reading, rather than allowing evidence of alterations to lead one to a radically skeptical position with regard to the possibility of recovering the original wording. In other words, a variant creates a range of possibility—or, if one prefers, a degree of uncertainty—but we should not allow this degree of uncertainty to lead to unbridled skepticism. For the most part, we can certainly be confident of arriving at the point where we can responsibly say, “Given the available textual data and considering both internal and external factors, we may say that this reading is most likely to be the original.” We should thus take Russell's words to heart and not be bothered by things we have no reason (i.e., evidence) to believe.

I am, however, more skeptical than Bart Ehrman on at least one point. My skepticism concerns what can be proven as to changes in the text. It is clear that there have been changes. Most of these changes are inconsequential and easily explained. Indeed, for most of the variants, there is near-universal agreement as to how they arose.

There are, however, a number of textual variants that are truly significant. There are plausible suppositions as to why these occurred, but that is what they are—plausible suppositions—and most of them subject to serious challenge. The critics who make these suppositions presume that one can identify which party corrupted the text and for what reason. This is a somewhat dubious assertion. The probability of correctly identifying the earlier reading is considerably higher than the probability of correctly inferring the identity of the corruptor and the theological reason or motivation behind the corruption. It is difficult to ascertain the theological motivation of an author who often can be placed within a particular context (time, locale, belief system, worldview). It is even more difficult to divine the theological motivation of an unknown copyist who generally cannot be placed with any degree of certainty in such a context.

Even if it is possible, this difficulty is further conditioned by the fact that we know that generally the non-orthodox were not intending to be heretical but in fact saw themselves as defenders of what they believed was orthodoxy. Their unorthodox beliefs were in fact overreactions to beliefs that *they* deemed unorthodox (and which often were). The upshot is that in such a context, the “corruption” could have been a move away from what we now call orthodoxy rather than a move toward it, although it was clearly motivated by a concern for what the “corrupters” considered orthodox belief. In other words, it is likely that there was a whole lot of corrupting going on—and that those we today call orthodox were not the only corrupters.

Still, there is nothing that says that one *cannot* identify the theological reason behind a significant textual variant. I am proposing, however, that one proceed with caution and a bit of reasoned skepticism on this point, recognizing that equally plausible alternative theories may arise. Indeed, fair-minded text critics and early church historians frequently interpret the same data in differing ways. Therefore, one should hold one’s conclusions in this regard with a fair amount of epistemological humility.

This highlights the detective-like nature of the task. At the end of the day, the ultimate question in this regard is not only whether the explanation brought forward is plausible but also whether such an explanation is beyond a reasonable doubt.

In their masterful *The Text of the New Testament*, Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman cite the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in referring to John W. Burgon, a nineteenth-century supporter of the Majority Text, as “a High-churchman of the old school,” and as “a leading champion of lost causes and impossible beliefs.”¹⁹ Burgon “could not imagine that, if the words of Scripture had been dictated by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God would not have providentially prevented them from being seriously corrupted during the course of their transmission.”²⁰ I find it interesting that Ehrman agrees with Burgon on this point. Ehrman writes, “For the only reason (I came to think) for God to inspire the Bible would be so that his people would have his actual words; but if he really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he had miraculously inspired them in the first place.”²¹

Apparently, Burgon would argue *modus ponens*:²²

- (1) If God inspired the New Testament autographs, then he would also prevent them from being seriously corrupted.
- (2) God inspired the New Testament autographs.
- (3) Therefore, God has also providentially prevented the New Testament manuscripts from being seriously corrupted.

Ehrman, in contrast, seems to be arguing *modus tollens*:²³

- (1) If God inspired the New Testament autographs, then he would also prevent them from being seriously corrupted.
- (2) New Testament manuscripts show numerous signs of corruption.
- (3) Therefore, God did not inspire the New Testament autographs.

Both are valid argument forms. The major premise (1) is the same in both. Some will reject (2) in one or both arguments. I have no interest in rejecting (2) in either argument. I affirm the inspiration of the autographs. I also accept the fact that there has been some significant corruption in the transmission of the New Testament text. Bracketing the question of what one means by “serious corruption,” it appears then that the only issue is whether or not (1) is true.

I see no compelling reason to think that (1) is true. The Bible does not explicitly teach any such thing, although the Bible does affirm its own inspiration. (I am *not* arguing that the Bible is inspired because it says it is!) But more importantly, at least from a logical perspective, is the fact that the antecedent of (1), “If God inspired the New Testament autographs,” does not entail its consequent, “then he would also prevent them from being seriously corrupted.”²⁴ It is thus incumbent upon both Burgon and Ehrman to demonstrate the truthfulness of (1). I do not know upon what grounds they can do so if there is no biblical or logical warrant for believing (1).²⁵

I suspect that (1) “seems” logical to both Burgon and Ehrman because that’s what they would do if they were God. But *seeming* logical

is not the same thing as *being* logical. To think that one is the same as the other is to mistake psychology for logic. Furthermore, understanding how *I would act* is not a sound theological method for discerning how *God must act*. Both Burgon and Ehrman are mistaken in their reasoning. It appears then that Ehrman, like Burgon, is a “High-churchman,” so to speak: he just affirms a different creed.

So the question for now is this: How well have text critics done in delivering to us the Greek New Testament? Do we have good reason to believe that the fruit of their work is reliable—that is, close enough to what the original authors wrote to be trusted? Bart Ehrman and Dan Wallace disagree as to the reliability of the New Testament. Dan thinks it is reliable enough, although he grants that there are some viable variants that matter in terms of what the text means.²⁶ He holds that none of these variants, regardless of how one handles them, changes any cardinal doctrine of Christian faith. Therefore, modern Bible readers can trust that modern translations are generally based upon a reliable Greek text. Bart agrees that none of these variants changes any cardinal doctrine of Christian faith but does not think the issue is whether or not doctrine is affected.

In the dialogue that follows, Bart and Dan lay out their respective positions and then forcefully question each other. The discussion is lively, and the issues are important. I hope you benefit from reading it.