

Restoration of the *Original Text*: A Mere Deceptive Claim

As to the New Testament, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand, we have the very word of the original.

— Emery H. Bancroft, *Christian Theology*, pp. 39-40

It may not be appropriate for an author to begin a book with the conclusion, or to jump to the terminus of the journey right from the start, but our subject matter here may call for an exception to this convention. Christian apologists, in their generous optimism, are claiming that the restoration of the original text of the New Testament is now a *fact*.¹ As a result, prevalent Church rhetoric refers to the printed text of the Holy Book as *the exact word of God*; there is an absolute certitude that every text in the traditional King James Version or the New International Version (the translation most widely used by Americans), or in any other old or modern Bible, is the true word of the authors of the New Testament. So, let us start our journey from the end.

Backed up by solid evidence, the author can declare firmly and confidently that there is no guarantee that what we read now in the printed New Testament has indeed come from the pens of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and Jude, who are nevertheless nearly always cited as the authors of the New Testament books.

The Arrogance of Textual Criticism

There is no doubt that the discipline of textual criticism has offered researchers many benefits, clarified many mysteries, and cleared the murkiness of many issues related to the text of the New Testament. However, these developments themselves have resulted in what I choose to call an inflated arrogance within those who practice this discipline—just as has occurred in every branch of science once it has achieved some noticeable advancement. This is a human trait whose origin is human beings' pride in their own achievements and their tendency to rid themselves of the constraints of reality in their desire to reach far-off or impossible ends.

¹ See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent In The Light of the Cross*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002, pp.237-41

HUNTING FOR THE WORD OF GOD

The discovery of many manuscripts and the evolution of research methods related to the origin of manuscripts, versions, and the Church Fathers' citations have led textual critics to believe that textual criticism is capable of actually deriving the original text of the New Testament. They have extended this belief to allow the assertion that the classical goal of textual criticism, "to restore the original text," has actually been achieved. In fact, this is a simplistic view that fails to grasp the difficulties of the issue, and a purely emotional one, although it attempts to cloak itself in science. Textual criticism is a discipline that is directly dependent on whatever written texts of the New Testament are available, in order to extract from them a (better) text. Therefore, abstract study is not its forte, because it is a discipline intimately linked to direct physical details that govern its course and its deductions. (Textual criticism is not the same as *higher criticism*, a science that aims to discover the literary form of the text, its author, the date and place of its composition, the method of its composition, its integrity, and the later editing of it. Higher criticism moves in a larger circle and deals with broader data, and although its results are less precise and less specific, it tends to provide more general inferences and offer conclusions within wide temporal and spatial margins.)

Textual criticism today has come to the conclusion that the simplistic study previously practiced in analyzing problems and demanding solutions needs radical revision. Today the whole discipline appears to be slipping away from its classical goal and is in need of rediscovering its substantial essence. In a summary of the current situation regarding the classical goal of textual criticism as being the restoration of the original text of the New Testament, Michael W. Holmes declared that the target of traditional textual criticism should be reconsidered because of its inadequacy or deficiency in at least two major respects: First, many scholars consider that the study of the history of the transmission of the text should be shifted from being a mere means to reach the original text, to a legitimate goal in its own right. Consequently, the variants of the text as they appear through the living history of the scripture should be taken seriously as a window to the individuals and communities that transmitted them. Second, the term "original text" as a goal of New Testament textual criticism is inherently ambiguous and therefore subject to the serious question of whether it can or ought to be a goal.²

² See Michael W. Holmes, "From 'Original Text' to 'Initial Text': the Traditional Goal of New

Eldon Epp, the most influential scholar in the most recent decades of New Testament textual criticism, elucidates in his sound article, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text,’” how naïve our understanding of the term “original text”³ has been, and how complex and hard to grasp is its meaning. He skillfully deconstructs the notion of “original text,” showing how deep and tangled is this seemingly simple term. He makes us confront this multi-faceted problem by delving deeply into the near-geological history of decades and centuries of scholarly works and attempts to solve the textual problems of the New Testament. He states that the issue of “original text” is more complex than the issue of canon, because the former includes questions of both canon and authority. It is more complex than possessing Greek gospels when Jesus spoke primarily Aramaic, because the transmission of traditions in different languages and their translation from one to another are relevant factors in what is “original.” It is more complex than matters of oral tradition and form criticism, because “original text” encompasses aspects of

Testament Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion.”

<http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cnes/news/Holmes%20From%20Original%20Text%20to%20Initial%20Text%20of%20M%20version%201%20Feb%202011-1.pdf>, (3/6/2011)

3 Ironically, the *passé-partout* apologist James R. White, who immersed himself in “scholarly” (!) debates with almost everybody, writes, “Over the past fifteen years or so a movement has come into prominence, championed by scholars like D. C. Parker, Bart Ehrman, and even Eldon Epp, that questions the wisdom of even speaking about the ‘original text’ and attempts to shift focus from the classical goal of all textual critical study (the restoration and verification of original readings) to an exegesis of the variants themselves. These scholars insist that ‘every manuscript has a story to tell’ and that they can determine this story by discerning a pattern of purposeful scribal emendation. This represents a radical departure from long-held standards and is deeply troubling.” (White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?*, second edition, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009, pp.193-94). This is a bad résumé of (1) the state of this movement, (2) its message, (3) goal, and (4) leaders.

It is really bizarre to include Ehrman in the list of the leaders of this movement. While we know that he does not have a clear opinion about this matter, he just alludes to the problem in few paragraphs scattered in his books and articles. Even some scholars have accused him of holding a position and its opposite in this subject, and we all did read that he said in his misquoting (p.210): “A number of scholars [...] have even given up thinking that it makes sense to talk about the ‘original’ text. I personally think that opinion may be going too far [...]. So at least it is not ‘non’-sense to talk about an original text.” I think it is a type of “Ehrmanophobia” that has spread in the apologist circles! (It is only while the book you are reading is being edited that we finally had a clear vision about Ehrman’s view, in his debate with Daniel L. Wallace, whose topic is “Is the original New Testament lost?” Ehrman denied in it the possible fidelity to the original text.) But what is worse is the phrase “and even Eldon Epp,” when actually Epp is the head of this movement!

the formation and transmission of pre-literary New Testament tradition. It is more complex than the Synoptic problem and other questions of compositional stages within and behind the New Testament, because such matters affect definitions of authorship, and of the origin and unity of writings. More directly, it is more complex than making a textual decision in a variation unit containing multiple readings when no “original” is readily discernible, because the issue is broader and richer than merely choosing a single “original” and even allows making no choice at all. Finally, what “original text” signifies is more complex than Hermann von Soden's, or Westcott-Hort's, or any other system of text types, or B. H. Streeter's theory of local texts, or various current text-critical methodologies, including the criteria for originality of readings, or “rigorous” versus “reasoned” eclecticism, or claims of theological tendencies or ideological alterations of readings and manuscripts, because *the question of “original text” encompasses all of these and much more.*⁴

Epp takes us on a whirlwind tour of the stories of our failure to provide reasonable answers for the New Testament puzzles, and then makes an urgent call for us to be painstakingly realistic and to explore just how deep the riddle of the concept of an “original text” is. He has meticulously disassociated the discipline from the immature, enthusiastic, and theological motives of its pioneers.

Scholars in earlier centuries dealt with the concept of original text with an indefensible simplicity, a rather artless way of perceiving and analyzing sophisticated entities. The concept of original text when studied in early Christian history should be seen as a long-term goal that cannot be achieved unless all of the taxing questions surrounding it have been cogently answered. The realistic view of the emerging of the canonical texts and their early transmission should make us acknowledge that the concrete tools we possess are not sufficient or effective enough to surpass the obstacles of the first centuries that block the path to the text in its initial state. We should learn from the scholars’ failure to solve the subsidiary difficulties that there is no chance today to succeed in unraveling the awkward problem.

We need to realize that we are facing problems that are complex and deep-seated within the discipline, and that the bridge between textual

4 Eldon J. Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Harvard Theological Review*, 1999, Volume 92, No. 3, pp.246-47

criticism and its classical goal has been severed. Such an appalling fact should help us to better realize how lengthy and tiresome our journey is, and how weak and cloudy our vision has been. Accurately scrutinizing the problem will help not only in reframing the goal of our textual studies, but will also serve to establish a new starting point. Epp concludes his article by urging a break with the past and the shedding of whatever remains of the innocence of New Testament textual criticism. Reality and maturity, as he says, should make us see how the term “original” has exploded into a complex and highly unmanageable multivalent entity.⁵ Ultimately, in this *post*-modern age, we need to face the real dilemma of the *subject* and *method*. This same idea, although less maturely framed, was put forth a century ago by Conybeare at the beginning of the twentieth century, “the ultimate (New Testament) text, if there ever was one that deserves to be so called, is *for ever irrecoverable*.”⁶

This statement did not make an impression at that point in time; it was overshadowed by the enthusiasm and momentum which resulted from the recovery and scholarly study of numerous old manuscripts (papyri, early Syriac manuscripts...) and the early beginnings of what was becoming a foundation of more elaborate textual methods. Robert M. Grant was clearer and more precise on the aim of restoring the original text of the New Testament when he said, “To achieve this goal is *well-nigh impossible*. Therefore we must be content with what Reinhold Niebuhr and others have called, in other contexts, an “*impossible possibility*,”⁷ and he clarified his point by commenting that we now live in “a time when *it is generally recognized that the original text of the Bible cannot be recovered, unless by some lucky chance a New Testament autograph might come from the sands of Egypt*.”⁸ The term “original text” is transformed in the light of the newest methodological evolution from a goal to a seductive mirage that disappears when we get close to it. Carl P. Cosaert admits that this term is complex and

5 Ibid., p. 280

6 Fredrick C. Conybeare, *History of New Testament Criticism*, London; New York: G. P. Putnam, 1910, p.168 [italics mine].

7 Robert Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p.51

8 Robert Grant, “The Bible of Theophilus of Antioch,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol.66, No. 2 (Jun., 1947), p.173 [italics mine].

phantomlike in essence, which is why he proclaimed that “the meaning of the phrase ‘original text’ has become problematic, so its use here deserves some qualification. [...] the term refers to the reading that is most likely representative of the oldest reading available from the extant evidence—regardless of whether it dates back to a single ‘original’ autograph or *an early correction that became dominant*.”⁹

The discipline of textual criticism is reaching the first phases of its maturity in our era, and it starts—under the leadership of pragmatic scholars and with more developed methods—to differentiate between mere pleasant wishes and attainable goals. Therefore, we can read at present about constructing a new goal after deconstructing the old one.

It is again Eldon Epp who fashioned the cornerstone of the discipline into its new shape by stating in a revolutionary article that the unitary goal of textual criticism is “establishing the earliest attainable text.”¹⁰ The same determination was made by another important scholar, Reuben Swanson, who declared firmly that *the old fixed goal is a delusion, fictional, mythical, and impossible*. He based his conclusion on two facts: “(1) we possess only fragments of copies of the autographs from any period earlier than 350 A.D., none of which may preserve “the original pure text” and (2) any “final judgment” between readings “can only be subjective,” inasmuch as “each of us comes to the task with our own agenda conditioned by our background, training, and theological bent.”¹¹ (I think, that we have to agree with the statement made by Eldon Jay Epp, in his essay “The Eclectic Method in New Testament Textual Criticism: Solution or Symptom?” that the most accepted textual critic method, that is eclecticism, is in fact symptomatic of the deep deficiency of the discipline, which is the lack of objective criteria to reach the “original” readings.) Those two reasons drove Swanson to reject textual criticism itself, with critical judgment to be replaced by *reportage*.¹²

9 Carl P. Cosaert, *The Text of the Gospels in Clement of Alexandria*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008, pp.278-79 [italics mine].

10 Eldon J. Epp, “It’s All about Variants: A Variant-Conscious Approach to New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007), p.308

11 Reuben J. Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines against Codex Vaticanus: Romans*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House; and Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2001, p.xxvi

12 See Michael W. Holmes, “From ‘Original Text’ to ‘Initial Text.’”

The *Obscure Zone* and the Failure of Textual Criticism

Christian apologists intentionally skip over a crucial truth that undermines their whole work, which is that, as Colwell stated, “Without a knowledge of the history of the text, the original reading cannot be established.”¹³ We should review the history of the text which can lead us back to its starting point and thus to the autograph.¹⁴

Today, we are in absolute ignorance about the early history of the text: the authors, the date of composition, the early receivers, and the early circulation. We have no certitude about the exact details of the emergence of the early translations, e.g. the Old Latin¹⁵, the Old Syriac¹⁶, and this ignorance is the stumbling block that keeps us away from the original text.

The problem of finding the autographs of the New Testament books is that much more grave and disheartening when we know that the disappearance of the originals “is readily understood when we consider that *the greater portion of the New Testament, viz. the Epistles, are occasional writings never intended for publication, while others were meant to have only a limited circulation.*”¹⁷ These attributes may rule out any chance to get to the autographs, or the very early copies before their contamination by the scribes’ own ideas and views. The preserved copies cannot reflect the virgin status of the text.

13 Ernest C. Colwell, “The Greek New Testament with a Limited Critical Apparatus: Its Nature and Uses,” in Allen Paul Wikgren and David Edward Aune, eds., *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian*, Netherlands: Brill Archive, 1972, p.37

14 For the purpose of clarification, the problematic terms “original text” and “autograph” will be used in this book as synonyms, meaning the text written by the author.

15 See Robert Casey, “The Patristic Evidence for the Text of the New Testament,” in Merril M. Parvis and Allen Paul Wikgren, eds. *New Testament Manuscripts Studies, the materials and the making of a critical apparatus*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950, p.76

16 See Sebastian Brock, “The Use of the Syriac Fathers for New Testament Textual Criticism,” in Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes, eds. *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research, Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995, p.230

17 Eberhard Nestle, *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the Greek New Testament*, tr. William Edie. Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1901, p. 29 [italics mine]. Daniel B. Wallace alluded to 2Thessalonians 3:17, where Paul refers to “every letter” that he has written to churches. Yet, only Galatians (assuming the South Galatian theory) and 1Thessalonians are prior to 2Thessalonians in the corpus Paulinum! This indicates that many of Paul’s letters disappeared. (Wallace, *Did the Original New Testament Manuscripts Still Exist in the Second Century?* <http://bible.org/article/did-original-new-testament-manuscripts-still-exist-second-century-0> (12/4/2011))

Christian apologists did not lose hope in giving a simple version of the history of the text. Robert Price summed up their methodology, breaking up the history of the text block, by saying, “one posits some scenario that would make accurate transmission of gospel materials possible and then adopts it as if its convenience for apologetic made it true.”¹⁸ It is as simple and naïve as that. We can detect nothing in the apologists’ literature that can offer any positive argument for a fixed status of the text starting from its day of composition. There are only flimsy theories and very general and fuzzy ideas, with no details or precise factual proofs.

The earliest and little-known phases of the text (starting from the end of the second century) reflect clearly the larger absence of the original text. William L. Petersen asks if “the original text” of the Gospel of Mark is what is found in our fourth century and later manuscripts, or if it is, rather, the “Mark” recovered from the so-called “minor agreements” between Matthew and Luke. He answered by stating, “It is clear that, without even having to consider individual variants, determining which “Mark” is “original” is a difficult- and *perhaps even impossible* - task.”¹⁹

He added that among other problems that made the “original text” out of our reach is the large number of diverse witnesses (Greek manuscripts, versions, and Church Fathers’ citations), which poses a problem well-known for centuries. This drove Richard Bentley in 1720 to suggest abandoning the search for a text that was “as close as possible to the original,” and instead to be content with an edition of the Greek New Testament exactly as it was in the best exemplar at the time of the Council of Nicaea.²⁰

Petersen affirmed that the modern critical editions, which are based on a large number of witnesses, are still far from the “Autograph . . . To be brutally frank, *we know next to nothing about the shape of the ‘autograph’ gospels*; indeed, it is questionable if one can even speak of such a thing. [...] the text in our critical editions today is actually a text which dates from no

18 Robert M. Price, *Review: J. Ed. Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and other Novel Speculations Don’t Tell You*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2006

http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/reviews/reinventing_jesus.htm (3/26/2011)

19 William L. Petersen, “What Text Can New Testament Textual Criticism Ultimately Reach,” in Barbara Aland and Joel Delobel, eds., *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis, and Early Church History, A Discussion of Methods*, Netherlands: Peeters Publishers, 1994, p. 137 [italics mine].

20 *Ibid.*, p. 137

earlier tha[n] about 180 CE, at the earliest. *Our critical editions do not present us with the text that was current in 150, 120 or 100—much less in 80 CE.*²¹

I think it would be more accurate to say that scholars have not yet reached that late text; they are still only working on it. This tragic darkness of the early decades of the history of the text made the well-known scholar Helmut Koester propose, concerning the second Gospel, that “one can be fairly certain that *only its revised text has achieved canonical status.*”²²

All the preceding developments in the field of textual criticism have taken many scholars away from the myopic concern of getting to the autograph, and made that aim a religious concern for the people of the church, who do not accept anything less than *surety*.

Escaping the *Obscure Zone*

The Christian apologists counteract the utter obscurity surrounding the first phase of the promulgation of the New Testament, which includes the factors of (1) authorship, (2) revision, (3) distribution, (4) and proliferation, with an argument that they wish would appear historically valid. And yet it is, in fact, just an emotional plea, disconnected from the real objections and disregarding the reality of the religious movement of that period, stating that we have manuscripts of the second, third, and fourth centuries that are in agreement in validating the core of the text and that negate the possibility of any radical change of the original form of these books. The response to the apologists is that they ignore a number of important, obtrusive facts:

1. The issue here is not *radical* change, but change/distortion in and of itself, which would deny the text its stability, its robustness, and its freedom from change.
2. There are no traces of *the most* important Church doctrines in the Gospels—such as the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and Original Sin—so these Gospels, to start with, are not arguments in favor of the theological structure of the Church, as its defenders would argue.

21 See William. L. Petersen, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” in A. Denaux, ed. *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis*, BETL 161, Leuven: Peeters and University of Leuven Press, 2002, p.62 [italics mine].

22 Helmut Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels: interpreting the New Testament in its context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p.52 [italics mine].

3. We have only two papyri (manuscripts made of the papyrus plant) dating back to the second century. The very tiny texts they cover do not constitute an argument for a unique, stable form of the New Testament.
4. Most of the so-called “Christian heretics” stemmed from the first century or the beginning of the second century, as doctrines, not necessarily religious groups (Unitarianism, Docetism, adoptionism), and that historical fact proves that the radical divergences in viewing Jesus and interpreting his message coexisted with the emergence of the four Gospels.

The apologist allegation is based on the claim that, since the text of the New Testament was not radically changed in the first centuries after Christ, starting from the second half of the second century, we have to infer that the stability of the text was the rule in the century before that. The problem with this claim is that, first, it is not based on direct fact or impressive early evidence. Second, it ignores the drastic differences between the transmission of a text not yet canonized, circulating among small group of believers, and the distribution of a canonized text in an era where the communities of the believers are growing faster. Third, it ignores the existence of different text-types from the earliest known phase of the transmission of the New Testament text. Therefore, we know that the obscure zone of the history of the text was not as elaborate as the apologists’ claims make it out to be.

Spotlights in the *Obscure Zone*

When Christian apologists are forced to face the dilemma of the *obscure zone*, they tend to run away from this challenge by asking their counterpart for positive arguments that prove the corruptions of the scriptures in that period.

What these apologists offer is not an effective answer, because the *obscure zone* prevents them from making a positive argument for the preservation of the scriptures, so if they claim that a positive argument for the corruption of the New testament has not been offered, it is easy to conclude that they do not have the positive argument for the preservation of the New Testament in that gloomy period. Unlike the Christian apologists, we have positive proof that in the *obscure zone*, the New Testament was altered. The major signs of a huge wave of corruptions occurring in the *obscure zone* are as follows:

1. The Text Itself as a Witness

Philip W. Comfort, the most famous Christian²³ scholar, in claiming that we can restore the original text of the New Testament, stated that we can talk of two categories of texts in the New Testament. The first category consists of the texts that kept the same shape from their initial time (the autograph), and the second consists of texts that passed two phases: 1) the composition, the edition, then the distribution, and 2) the re-edition, then the distribution. And he cited as examples for the second category the twenty-first chapter of the fourth Gospel, the Acts of Apostles that was published in two different versions, one by Luke and another longer version edited by another editor, and the Pauline Epistles (minus the Pastoral Epistles.)²⁴

Comfort did not use extant scriptures to prove his classification, but he used inclusively the philological studies which proved that, for some of the books of the New Testament, it is impossible to speak of a sole author, and it is very well known that it is almost unanimously agreed that the last chapter of John was added by another author(s).²⁵ Parker proclaimed that “the final chapter has every sign of being a later addition to the Gospel. That its twentieth chapter is enough on its own, and that 20.30-1 provide an excellent conclusion, has long been widely agreed.”²⁶

What Comfort declared is the same thing we want to prove: the New Testament was corrupted in the *obscure zone* by unknown authors who added verses or chapters and extended or abridged the text. We do not have

23 He is a devoted Christian who believes sincerely that the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, is the word of God. He said in his book “*The Complete Guide to Bible Versions*” (Wheaton, IL: Living Book, 1991, p.3): “Of all the millions of books there are in the world, there is only one that was authored by God. And there is only one book that reveals God’s plan for man. It is an amazing book because it has a divine author and because it tells the wonderful story of God’s love for us.”

24 See Philip W. Comfort, *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, pp.19-20

25 Father Raymond Brown started his comment on the twenty-first chapter by saying, “From textual evidence, including that of such early witnesses as P66 and Tertullian, the Gospel was never circulated without ch. 21. (A fifth- or sixth-century Syriac ms. [British Museum cat. add. no. 14453] that ends with John 20/25 has apparently lost the final folios.) This still leaves us with two basic questions. First, was ch. 21 part of the original plan of the Gospel? Second, if not, was it added before “publication” by the evangelist or by a redactor? With Lagrange and Hoskyns as notable exceptions, few modern scholars give an affirmative answer to the first question. (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, 1077-78).

26 David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.177

scriptural proof, but we have clear philological proofs coming from the text itself.

Any serious study about the books of the New Testament will lead to the conclusion that many of these books were the result of the work of more than one author. We can notice inconsistent ideas in the same book, or apparent non-justified shifts that broke the flow of the narration, that is, different signs for later additions or changes in the text. Here are some examples.

The Gospel of Matthew. The attempt to clarify the attitude of the first Gospel towards the Law of Moses will reveal two sharply contradictory views. The first insists that Jesus' mission did not break with Mosaic Law; but rather held tightly to its commandments. The second view portrays the mission of Jesus as a revocation of the Law of Moses.²⁷

Pro-Law:

- The fundamental affirmation of the Law (cf. Matthew 5:17-20; 23:3a, 23b).
- The sustained reference to the Old Testament and the emphatic application of the idea of fulfillment of the law (cf. e.g. Matthew 1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15:17-18; 3:3; 4:4-16; 8:17 and others).
- The fundamental limitation of Jesus' mission to Israel (cf. Matthew 10:5-6; 15:24).
- The Matthean community still keeps the Sabbath (cf. Matthew 24:20).
- The Matthean community still lives within the jurisdiction of Judaism (cf. Matthew 17:24-27; 23:1-3).
- The Moses typology in Matthew 2:13ff.; 4:1-2; 5:1 and the five great discourses in the Gospel present Jesus as having an affinity to Moses.
- The language, structure, reception of the Scripture, argumentation, and history of the influence of the Gospel of Matthew point to a Jewish Christian as its author.

Against the Law:

- The Gospel's offer of salvation to all clearly points to a Gentile mission that has been underway for some time (cf. Matthew 28:18-20; 8:11-12; 10:18; 12:18, 21; 13:38a; 21:43-45; 22:1-14; 24:14; 25:32; 26:13).
- The nullification of ritual laws (cf. Matthew 15:11, 20b; 23:25-26).

²⁷ The coming points are taken from Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 220-1

- The Matthean critique of the Law. Especially in the Antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48), Jesus places his own authority higher than that of Moses, for which there is no parallel in ancient Judaism.
- Matthew presents a thoroughgoing polemic against Pharisaic casuistry (cf. Matt 5:20; 6:1ff.; 9:9ff.; 12:1ff., 9ff.; 15:1ff.; 19:1ff.; 23:1ff.)
- Matthew avoids Aramaisms (cf. Mark 1:13/ Matthew 4:2; Mark 5:41/ Matt 9:25; Mark 7:34/ Matthew 15:30; Mark 7:11/ Matthew 15:5).
- The Matthean community understands its life to be at some distance from that of the synagogue (cf. Matthew 23.34b ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς ὑμῶν [in your synagogues]; Matt 7.29b καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν [and not as their scribes]).
- Ritual prescriptions for the Sabbath have lost their significance (cf. Matthew 12.1-8).
- The rejection of Israel, i.e. that Israel has lost its distinct place in the history of salvation, has been accepted by Matthew as reality for some time (cf. Matthew 21:43; 22:9; 8:11-12; 21:39ff.; 27:25; 28:15).

It is really hard to believe that these two opposite views about a central Christian tenet were written down by the pen of a single author. And on what basis do we make a choice about the background of the author, gentile or Jew, though many scholars do?²⁸ It is more plausible to argue that the theological aspect of a primitive text was melded with paradoxical views at the hand of a later scribe(s) or community who held totally different views about the inherited Jewish Law.

The Gospel of John. The text of the Fourth Gospel bears fingerprints of varying, non-homogenous ideas and numerous indications of rupture in the narratives and discourses.²⁹ Father Raymond E. Brown, a worldwide authority on the Johannine literature, posits five stages in the composition of the Gospel. Stage 1: The existence of a body of oral tradition independent of the Synoptic tradition. Stage 2: Over a period lasting perhaps several

28 For a Jewish Christian author, see for example Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, pp.79-80; Roloff, "Das Kirchenverständnis des Matthäus im Spiegel seiner Gleichnisse," in *NTS* 38 (1992), p.339. For a Gentile author, see for example John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel: A Redactional Study of Matt. 5:17-48*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1976, pp.14-21.

29 See E. Schwartz, "Aporien im vierten Evangelium," in *Nachrichten von Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (1907), pp.342-72; (1908), pp.115-88; 497-560.

decades, the traditional material was sifted, selected, thought over, and molded into the form and style of the individual stories and discourses that became part of the Fourth Gospel. Stage 3: The evangelist organized the collected material and published it as a distinct work. Stage 4: The evangelist re-edited his Gospel to answer the objections or difficulties of several groups. Stage 5: A final editing or redaction by someone other than the evangelist, and whom we shall call the redactor.³⁰

2Corinthians. Even though the second letter to the Corinthians is one of the letters attributed to Paul that is considered to contain authentic Pauline material,³¹ many scholars are convinced it does not represent a solitary letter, but a combination of two different letters.³² Edgar J. Goodspeed observed that from the beginning of *2Corinthians* through Chapter 9, one senses harmony and reconciliation, whereas, abruptly, in Chapter 10, the mood changes to one of “personal misunderstanding and bitterness.” He opines, therefore, that “This undeniable incongruity between the two parts of II Corinthians naturally suggests that we have in it two letters instead of one—one conciliatory and gratified, the other injured and incensed.”³³

What did these two letters look like before being joined together? What did the scribe who joined them do to fuse them together? More probably, the primitive shape of the two letters differs from the canonical letter, because we can see that the scribe who promulgated them did try to hide his action of combining the two letters together.

We could enumerate more examples from the list of the books of the New Testament, and all of them would indicate that the body of each of these books sends signs of multi-authors or redactors.

2. The Earliest Extant Manuscripts

Helmut Koester gives us the big picture of the second century state of the text when he declares, “the second century was *completely a period of*

30 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, pp. xxxiv- xxxvi

31 The letters of Paul considered by the majority of scholars today as genuine are Romans, 1and 2Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1Thessalonians, and Philemon. See John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, p.105

32 Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.280

33 Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937, pp.58-9

*wild variation.*³⁴ He put his finger on the malady that explains our failure to keep faith with the originality of the text known from the third century: “The text of the Synoptic Gospels was very unstable during the first and second centuries [. . .] there is *no guarantee* that the archetypes of the manuscript tradition are identical with the original text of each Gospel. . . . New Testament textual critics have been deluded by the hypothesis that the archetypes of the textual tradition which were fixed ca. 200 CE [. . .] are (almost) identical with the autographs. *This cannot be affirmed by any evidence.* On the contrary, whatever evidence there is indicates that not only minor, *but also substantial revisions of the original texts have occurred during the first hundred years of the transmission.*”³⁵

D. Parker contends that the most substantial alterations in the text of the Gospels happened in the first hundred and fifty years, describing it as an “initial fluidity followed by stability.”³⁶ He studied the sayings of Jesus on marriage and divorce and the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospels, then concluded, “The main result of this survey is to show that the recovery of a single original saying of Jesus is impossible [. . .] What we have is a collection of interpretive rewritings of a tradition.”³⁷ The six main forms of the Lord’s Prayer, and the enormous mass of variants in just forty verses in Luke encountered by Parker, enabled a shattering of the text into a set of multi-faceted traditions created by the early communities. We can conclude from Parker’s painstaking study that the earliest available manuscripts sprouted in a time where the canonical text had lost its original form due to its flexibility after being detached from the vanished autograph. So, the earliest decades of the *enlightened zone* reveal a blurry text that had lost its original form and its unity in that *obscure zone*.

3. The Harmonization Tendency

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of the early transmission of the text of the four gospels is the heavy tendency in the scribal tradition to deliberately remove the discrepancies in the four gospels and to harmonize

34 Helmut Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century,” in William L. Petersen, ed. *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame, 1989, pp.19-37 [italics mine].

35 Ibid., p.37 [italics mine].

36 David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*, p.70

37 Ibid., p.92-93

their conflicting accounts. D. C. Parker concluded his interesting book “*The living text of the Gospels*” by declaring that “The reconstruction which has emerged from the present study is that the text and with it the traditions remained fluid for centuries, and that the work of the evangelists did not end when they laid down their pens. This may be demonstrated most clearly from the phenomenon of harmonisation [...]. That such harmonisations are found centuries after the compilation of the Gospels is incontrovertible evidence that the traditions continued to live, that is, to grow.”³⁸

Now, if the text from the earliest known phase of the New Testament’s transmission shows clear signs of a flexible content that pruned to fit the orthodox creed of the inerrancy; we have a compelling reason to believe that the *obscure zone* was the stage of a more insidious scribal attempt to make the four distinct gospels conform more and more to each other, and to eliminate the disturbing discrepancies.

To counter our argument, Christian apologists are challenged to bring up a valid reason to break up the history of the scribal history into a neutral harmonization era in the *obscure zone* and a buoyant action era from the dawn of the *enlightened zone*. Tracing that history in such a way counters the common logic of the transmission of the Holy Scriptures and lacks positive evidence as well.

4. The Location of the Earliest Extant Manuscripts

The earliest manuscripts were found in one geographical area far from the place of composition of the autographs, which is Egypt. It is hard to believe that the Egyptian text is a faithful copy of the originals, which were brought from different areas, some from Europe. The Egyptian manuscripts are an *Egyptian version* of the text in the first centuries.

It has been argued that finding these manuscripts in Egypt does not mean that they came from Egypt, and that they may have been produced in other areas. I hold that a manuscript found in Egypt is an Egyptian manuscript until the opposite is proven. The burden of proof is on those who give such an unusual explanation. Moreover, Finney demonstrates that various early papyri and uncials (P¹³ P⁴⁶ Ⲛ A B D I) have similar orthography, and on the hypothesis that shared orthography implies shared provenance, Finney suggests that these witnesses were copied in the same region, possibly Egypt.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., p.205

³⁹ Timothy J. Finney, “*The Ancient Witnesses of the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Computer-Assisted*

It should be noted here that these Egyptian manuscripts differ from the text used by most of the Church Fathers of the same period in which the manuscripts were copied. The earliest extant manuscripts belong to the Alexandrian text-type. (Text-type: A major grouping of biblical manuscripts based on textual affinity in a large number of passages. The different text-type names—Alexandrian, Byzantine, Western—were coined based on the supposed origin of the manuscripts⁴⁰), while the manuscripts of the earliest Fathers belong to the Western text-type as we will see it later.

5. The Patristic Citations

The available Church Fathers' citations coming from the second century give us evidence of the alteration of the New Testament. L. W. Hurtado reported that only a few explicit citations of New Testament writings were found in the writings of the second-century Christian authors, and even in these few cases, the citation "*often exhibits curious differences from the text of the writing that is dominant in the extant manuscripts.*"⁴¹

The manuscripts used by the Church of the second century provide us valuable evidence that should not be overlooked, which is the disturbing dissimilarities between them and the manuscripts of subsequent centuries. This highlights the historical fact that whenever the circulation of the manuscripts is meager, the chances for corruption are larger. What is striking in this testimony is that it is based on the data provided by the Church Fathers of the second century, which is much more extensive than that which we can get from the manuscripts of the second century.

In a very interesting essay, William P. Petersen concluded his study of the use of the New Testament in the second century, as it appears in the extant writings of that time, with some striking observations.

- Harmonization of the quotations from the Gospels seems to be omnipresent and prominent.

Analysis of the Papyrus and Uncial Manuscripts of PROS EBRAIOUS" (PhD Diss., Murdoch University, 1999), pp.194-211. (See Maurice A. Robinson, "The Case for Byzantine Priority," in Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform*, Southborough, MA: Chilton Book Pub., 2005, p. 570)

40 M. S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, p.121

41 L. W. Hurtado, "The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon," in J. W. Childers and D. C. Parker, eds., *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies*, Piscataway, NJ: Georgias Press, 2006, pp.14-5 [italics mine].

- Extra-canonical material is prominent, and mingled with the canonical texts. There seems to have been no clear demarcation between traditions that were “proto-canonical” and those that were “proto-extra-canonical.”
- The passages that have a parallel in the canonical Gospels are usually riddled with variants.
- Even where we can recognize a passage as having a parallel in what we now call the canonical Gospels, the sequence of the recognizable material has often been altered.
- The earlier we go in the second century, the more the parallels with our canonical Gospels fall off, and the citations grow vaguer and vaguer.
- The earlier we go, the less emphasis is placed on the words and life of Jesus.⁴²

Then he concludes that these six characteristics which were indisputably present in the second century should make us believe strongly that more evidence pointing to the same historical phenomenon was existent in the first century, especially when we know that the standards of the notion of “orthodoxism” and its derivative were not clear nor fully developed.⁴³

6. The Western Text-type

The Western text-type was the text-type used by almost all the Christian Fathers of the early centuries. This text-type is not actually a homogeneous group of texts; its entities are so dissimilar that Metzger said, “so diverse are the textual phenomena that von Soden was compelled to posit seventeen sub-groups of witnesses which are more or less closely related to this text.”⁴⁴ Holmes notes, “This Type of Texts represents a tradition of uncontrolled copying, editing, and translation: it exhibits harmonistic tendencies, paraphrasing and substitution of synonyms, additions (sometimes quite long).”⁴⁵ These characteristics tell us clearly that modifying the Holy Text was an early Christian habit.

The peaceful coexistence of the Western text-type—which is already a blend of readings—with the Alexandrian text-type informs us that the early

42 See William. L. Petersen, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” pp.54-5

43 Ibid., p.45

44 Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, fourth edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.187

45 Michael W. Holmes, “Reconstructing the Text of the New Testament,” in David E. Aune, *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.82

“orthodox” Christians knew that the annoying mass of divergent readings was not an easy problem to resolve, and they confessed that they had deep roots in the history of the texts.

7. The Use of Mark by Matthew and Luke

Due to the compelling arguments for the use of Mark by Matthew and Luke, which is a hypothesis accepted by the majority of scholars today, Helmut Koester worked on the agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark (called “the minor agreements”) to find out the reason for this odd disagreement. He finished by concluding that the authors of Matthew and Luke did use a copy of Mark (Proto-Mark) different from ours, so the disagreement noticed today between Mark and the other two Gospels was not there in the first century when these three Gospels were written. Koester’s suggestion is not just a plausible explanation for the enigmatic disagreement between Matthew and Luke against their shared source, which is the only serious apparent defect⁴⁶ in the “two source-hypothesis” to explain the inter-relationship between the synoptic Gospels, but it is also a successful attempt to throw light on the *obscure zone*.

The oldest⁴⁷ discoverable text of the Gospel of Mark differs from ours in many instances; it includes “cases in which Matthew and Luke agree in the wording of a phrase or sentence that is different from Mark’s text; and cases in which Markan words, sentences, or entire pericopes are absent from both Matthew and Luke.”⁴⁸

Daniel B. Wallace goes on to say that the differences between Matthew and Luke against Mark (in the parallel passages) are hints that “the copies of Mark that Matthew and Luke used were not identical to Mark’s original.”⁴⁹ Wallace opts for the opposite inference to Koester’s hypothesis by claiming

46 See R. M. Wilson, “Farrer and Streeter on the Minor Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark,” in *Studia Evangelica* 1 (1959) 254-7; E. W. Burrows, “The use of textual theories to explain agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark,” in J. K. Elliott, *Studies in New Testament Language ad Text*, Leiden, 1976; R. B. Vinson, “*The Significance of the Minor Agreements as an argument against the Two-Document Hypothesis*,” unpublished PhD dissertation.

47 We are still not talking about the “original text,” because a copy used in the first century (by two evangelists) needs to show real positive proof for its faithfulness to the lost autograph.

48 Helmut Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second century,” p.21

49 Daniel B. Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011, p.50

that the text of Mark's Gospel used by the two other evangelists is not the earliest version of Mark. Wallace makes the case worse for the quest for the original text of the earliest canonical Gospel, because he is proving that the corruption of Mark's Gospel started from the very early years, before even the use of the text by the two holy authors in the golden era of the inscription of the Word of God.

8. The Hereticals' Text

Eberhard Nestle pointed at a very crucial fact when he said, "Nearly all the heretics were in turn accused of falsifying the scriptures."⁵⁰ For instance, Epiphanius accused Marcion of altering some of the Gospels' passages⁵¹, and Irenaeus claimed that Marcion "dismembered the epistles of Paul, removing all that is said by the apostle respecting that God who made the world, to the effect that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also those passages from the prophetic writings which the apostle quotes, in order to teach us that they announced beforehand the coming of the Lord."⁵²

Now we know that the "heresy" is not "a deforming of the truth"; it is rather a mere disagreement with the Christians who had the upper hand politically, starting from the fourth century. And because of a general lack of proof in the charge made by the "orthodox" Church Fathers, we have the right to doubt the trustworthiness of the accusation, and to ask if the Nicaean Church is the one which tempered the New Testament to make the "heretics" lose their proof-texts.

Bart Ehrman turned our doubt into a conviction when he stated that "recent studies have shown that the evidence of our surviving manuscripts points the finger in the opposite direction. Scribes who were associated with the *orthodox* tradition not infrequently changed their texts, sometimes in order to eliminate the possibility of their "misuse" by Christians affirming heretical beliefs and sometimes to make them more amenable to the doctrines being espoused by Christians of their own persuasion."⁵³ More recent scholars are defending the view that Marcion did not alter the manuscripts he received from the previous generation, but rather, he largely preserved readings already available in his days.⁵⁴

50 Eberhard Nestle, *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the Greek New Testament*, p.197

51 See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42. 10. 4-5

52 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.2

53 Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, p.53

54 See G. Quispel, "Marcion and the Text of the New Testament," in *Vigiliae Christianae* 52,

On the other hand, Celsus, a Greek philosopher and opponent of Christianity who lived in the second century (the *obscure zone*) declared, as quoted by Origen, that some Christian believers “alter the original text of the Gospel three or four or several times over, and they change its character to enable them to deny difficulties in face of criticism.”⁵⁵ This accusation has a lot of credibility because it is confirmed by the core of recent studies.

9. The Non-canonical Gospels

The mass of the early non-canonical Gospels reveal that there have been other of Jesus’ traditions circulating in the first century,⁵⁶ and that may be a good reason, if connected with the early theological controversies, to reflect upon existing relationships between the canonical traditions and the non-canonical ones in the early stages of the shaping of the four Gospels after writing the autographs. The extra-canonical texts quoted by the early Church Fathers, such as Tatian⁵⁷ and Clement of Alexandria⁵⁸, prove that at least a century after the writing of the Gospels, many sayings of Jesus were circulating as authoritative words even though they are not included in the later copies of the New Testament.

1998, 349-60; cf. U. Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos: Rekonstruktion und historische Einordnung der marcionitischen Paulusbriefausgabe*, New York: de Gruyter, 1995; and J. J. Clabeaux, *A Lost Edition of the Letters of Paul: A Reassessment of the Text of the Pauline Corpus Attested by Marcion*, CBQMS 21; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989, as mentioned by Amy Donaldson, “Explicit References to New Testament Variant Readings Among Greek and Latin Church Fathers,” 1/289, unpublished manuscript. Graduate Program in Theology, Notre Dame, Indiana, December 2009. Retrieved from: http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-12112009-152813/unrestricted/DonaldsonA122009_Vol_I.pdf

55 Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.27

56 See Paul Foster, “Is it possible to dispense with Q?,” in *Novum Testamentum*, Oct 2003, Vol. 45 Issue 4, p. 316

57 For instance,

(1) At Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River (Matthew 3/15-16), a “light” is reported to have shone in the water.

(2) At Matthew 8/4, Jesus apparently instructs the healed leper to “Go, fulfill the Law.”

(3) At Luke 4/29-30, Jesus is apparently thrown from the hilltop by the mob, but flies away unhurt, eventually landing in Capernaum.

(4) At Luke 23/48, the Jews apparently say something like, “Woe to us, what has befallen us? The destruction of Jerusalem is nigh!” (William. L. Petersen, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” p.42)

58 See M. Mees, *Die Zitate aus dem Neuen Testament bei Clemens von Alexandrien*, Bari: Istituto di Letteratura Cristiana Antica, 1970

William L. Petersen finds the extra-canonical clauses in the Diatessaron to be “evidence that, by 172 or so, there appears to have been neither an established text of the Gospels nor a reverential attitude towards their text; rather, the traditional we now regard as parts of the canonical Gospels were malleable, rearrangeable, and subject to the whims of any writer, editor, or harmonist.”⁵⁹

10. The New Critical Texts

The current critical editions, as a whole, are not found in any extant manuscript, version, or Father citation. Textual critic scholars are creating a text from variants dispersed in a huge mass of witnesses. These artificial entities are concrete evidence for early waves of corruptions that start from a time earlier than the date of the copying of our earliest witnesses. Thinking that the *obscure zone* was an era of a perfect and faithful transmission of the autograph must be far from true, because that would mean that a sharp, abrupt shift had occurred at the earliest years of the enlightened zone, from a strict copying of the exact words of the authors to the loss of any copy that held the exact original text.

What can we conclude? As a matter of fact, we are, on the one hand, missing arguments for a genealogical map that proves a safe transmission of the autograph throughout the first two centuries, and we possess, on the other hand, clear signs for a *live* text throughout the same period.

Show Me the Way?

The witnesses of the New Testament text that we possess are, in one way or another, an unpleasant burden, because they are the main reason for the emergence of the conflicting textual methods which all have one claim: the restoration of the original/best attainable text from the available witnesses (manuscripts, versions, and patristic citations). Today, these conflicting methods demonstrate that the path to the oldest text is not straight and, sadly, they do not give us assurance that they would lead us to the exact destination. These methods strive to restore the original/best attainable text, but the fact that we are far away from the desired text cannot be hidden. Our search shows how hard it is to derive the best reading from the medley of fabricated readings. The main actual methods are as follows:

⁵⁹ William L. Petersen, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” p. 43

Textus Receptus. This is the Greek text prepared by the Dutch scholar Erasmus in the sixteenth century. The basis of this text is six old manuscripts with a Byzantine type of text. It became standard in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This text has been almost universally abandoned by scholars since the end of the nineteenth century.

Majority Text. Some scholars embrace the theory that the original text is preserved in the majority of manuscripts. It is a statistical construct of the text that focuses on the number of times the variant reading (a different wording or reading of a biblical text that is found in a manuscript)⁶⁰ is repeated in the manuscript. So, according to this theory, recovering the original text needs only that one collect the most repeated readings.⁶¹

Traditional Critical Method. This method was prevalent in the nineteenth century, and it was used by famous scholars like Lachmann, Tischendorf, Westcott, and Hort. It consists of choosing a good manuscript to be the base of the new constructed text, and evaluating its reading when compared with other manuscripts.

Eclectic Method. This method states that the best readings are not found in a sole manuscript; rather, they are scattered in the mass of manuscripts. A scholar has to select the best reading based on the rules that he has pre-adopted, and he is supposed to deal solely with each variant reading. This method is usually classified according to the use of the internal and external criteria. We have two main categories, general eclecticism and radical eclecticism.

1. General Eclecticism: The majority of scholars today adopt the general eclecticism method. It is based on concern for the internal (the contents of the text and the peculiarities and habits of scribes) and the external evidences (the manuscripts) when weighting the different variant readings. Moreover, it is characterized by its preference for the Alexandrian text-type. Within the general eclecticism method, we can make a distinction between a reasoned eclectic method and a local-genealogical method.
 - o Reasoned eclecticism is the widely accepted textual technique, the main characteristic of which is that it first clearly

60 M. S. DeMoss, *Pocket dictionary for the study of New Testament Greek*, p.127

61 See John William Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, London: John Murray, 1883, Wilbur Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977

distinguishes between internal and external evidence, so it is possible to consider the two kinds of evidence apart from each other. The same, too, is applicable to the scribal customs and the author customs. Secondly, this technique focuses more on the external evidence than the internal kinds.⁶²

- The local-genealogical method was formulated or at least named and promulgated by Kurt Aland. It is based on drawing a stemma for each variant reading, not the entire book⁶³. This method works on a number of broad general principles, rather than detailed formulated criteria, and emphasizes more the external evidence, while refusing partly the Hortian model of the history and the classification of the text-types.⁶⁴

2. Radical Eclecticism: Advocated in many articles and books by G. D. Kilpatrick and J. K. Elliott, this method focuses almost solely on the internal aspects of the text, by choosing the reading that explains the first century language and the style of the author and his theological background.⁶⁵ This textual approach starts from a conviction that all the variant readings arose prior to the time of the earliest surviving manuscripts, so these manuscripts cannot be the decisive factor in reaching the original or the most satisfactory reading.

We can conclude the following from these diverse textual critic methods:

- How deceptive is the certainty of the Church that our copies contain the same words written by the so-called inspired authors, and that the original text was transmitted from one generation to another all the way through the history of the Christian nation.
- Even though it is accepted by the overwhelming majority of scholars, reasoned eclecticism cannot lead us to the first text. A. F. J. Klijn, a proponent of this method, declared that “those who, by the way of the eclectic method, try to restore the original text

⁶²See J. H. Petzer, “Eclecticism and the Text of the New Testament,” in Patrick J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer, eds., *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament*, Leiden: Brill, 1991, p.51

⁶³ See Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (26th ed.), p.43*

⁶⁴ See J. H. Petzer, “Eclecticism and the Text of the New Testament,” pp.52-4

⁶⁵ See J. K. Elliott and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers*, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995, pp.34-5

have reached markedly disparate results. *The eclectic method seems to be the only adequate method to regain the original text, but it also appears to lead us into complete chaos.*"⁶⁶

When Textual Criticism Is Confusing

The pop culture that the Church tries hard to imitate in the public domain *tends to simplify what is complex and to ignore its problems; so the message being conveyed will be easy to accept and be absorbed.* One of these problems is the search for the original reading.

It is very well known in academic studies that choosing the original or the best reading is an immeasurably hard and intricate task, and that the differences between the choices of the variant readings reflect the differences between the textual criticism methods. We can notice different results even in the same school, and that shows how delicate a matter it is to opt for a preferred reading. The actual situation appears to be even worse than this, given the fact that scholars often change some of their preferences when they reprint their own critical texts.

We can see most of the preceding assertions exemplified in the editions of the *United Bible Societies Greek New Testament* (abbreviated: UBS), from the first edition to the fourth one. K. D. Clark revealed the unexpected shifting of the UBS⁴ with the help of detailed charts and lengthy statistics and calculations.⁶⁷ Although the teams which worked on it were homogenous, we can detect changes in the preferred readings. The UBS committee, which follows one textual criticism school, introduced more than five hundred changes⁶⁸ in the third edition after only seven years of the publishing of the second one, in a period of time that did not know any significant discovery.⁶⁹ Silva, evaluating the rating's change for Romans to

66 A. F. J. Klijn, "In Search of the Original Text of Acts," in L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays Presented in Honor of Paul Schubert*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1966, p.104 [italics mine].

67 K. D. Clarke, *Textual Optimism: A Critique of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997

68 Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1975, p. viii

69 K. D. Clark, *Textual Optimism*, p.129: "The addition of these various witnesses has not necessarily brought new insight or fresh proof into the evaluation of variants, and hence the determining of a more likely reading" (even though what Clark said is about the difference between UBS3 and the UBS4, his statement is a fortiori applicable to the difference between UBS2 and UBS3.)

Galatians as recorded in the UBS³ and UBS⁴, writes, “How radically different is the resulting complexion of the material can be seen by comparing the totals from the third and fourth editions: Third Fourth A 20 93 B 62 64 C99 55 D 25 2...”⁷⁰

The way that scholars weigh the readings makes it clear that the original text is not yet close to being derived. For instance, the UBS⁴ committee did not treat the variants as “original reading” versus “fabricated reading.” The committee acknowledged that there are different degrees of determination, and it is not just “right” or “wrong,” which is the reason that the critical Apparatus (the data presented in footnotes at the bottom of the page in a critical biblical text in which the witnesses for the variant readings are cited)⁷¹ used variant letter-ratings:

- The letter A indicates that the text is certain.
- The letter B indicates that the text is almost certain.
- The letter C indicates that the committee had difficulty in deciding which variant to place in the text.
- The letter D indicates that the committee had great difficulty in arriving at a decision.⁷²

It is noteworthy that the UBS⁴ changed the definition of the A, B, C, and D ratings made in the UBS³, and in so doing, elaborated them to include the degrees of certainty of its ratings⁷³. The fourth edition’s preface declared, “The Committee also redefined the various levels in the evaluation of evidence on the basis of their relative degrees of certainty. Thus the evaluation of all the 1437 sets of variants cited in the apparatus have been completely reconsidered.”⁷⁴

When we reflect on the details of the UBS apparatus, we are shocked to discover that the ratings of the choices of the committee of the UBS³, for instance, are as follows:⁷⁵

70 Silva, “Symposium,” p.352 (Quoted by K. D. Clark, op. cit., p.120)

71 M. S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek*, p.40

72 See *The Greek New Testament*, fourth revision edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994, p.3*

73 See K. D. Clarke and K. Bales, “The Construction of Biblical Certainty: Textual Optimism and the United Bible Society’s Greek New Testament,” in D. G. K. Taylor, ed., *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts, Texts and Studies, third Series, 1*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999, pp.86-93

74 *The Greek New Testament*, p.v

75 E. J. Edwards, “On Using the Textual Apparatus of the UBS Greek New Testament,” in *The*

- A-Ratings: 8.7%
- B-Ratings: 32.3%
- C-Ratings: 48.6%
- D-Ratings: 10.4%

As J. H. Petzer writes, “If one distinguishes between the A and the B ratings on the one hand, assigning the broad classification ‘certain’ to them, and the C and the D ratings on the other, assigning the broad classification ‘uncertain’ to them, the decision of the committee is still uncertain in more than 59% of the more or less 1,440 variation-units included in the text.”⁷⁶

The Mercy Bullet

What text do we have? Is it the text written by the authors, or the text(s) used by the readers? There is no clear answer to the first question, and there is no reason to reject the second one. So, we are forced to admit that we do not have the exact words of the autograph.

When Bart Ehrman said, “What is remarkable is that throughout this history, *virtually no one has read them in their original form*,”⁷⁷ he simply shoots the Mercy Bullet into the dream of the “believers,” who think that they do hear the message of God throughout the New Testament text. This is not God’s voice, if we accept the claim that the original text was an inspired word; rather, it is a *mélange* of the authors’ texts and of later scribes’ additions.

Finally, if no one (known to us) has been able to read the original text, then no one will *ever* succeed in reading it, because they would be trying to grasp a vanished text that lost its original form in its first years or maybe even in its first days.

Bible Translator, 28, p.122

⁷⁶ J. H. Petzer, “The Papyri and New Testament Textual Criticism, Clarity or Confusion?” in J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin, eds. *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger During His Visit to South Africa in 1985*, Leiden: Brill, 1986, p.27

⁷⁷ Bart Ehrman, “The Use and Significance of Patristic Evidence for NT Textual Criticism,” in Barbara Aland and Joël Delobel eds., *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis and Early Church History: a Discussion of Methods*, Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Pub. House, 1994, p.127 [italics mine].