

# New Testament Textual Criticism & Bible Translation

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## 1. Introduction

Ideally, the translation of any text should start with the original copy (called “autograph”); but for most ancient documents, including the Old and New Testaments, the original copy does not survive. In a situation as such, the translation should start at least with a text which is as close as possible to the autograph if the translation is to be faithful. To achieve this, the reconstruction of the original by using extant handwritten copies (called “manuscripts;” MSS) is then necessary before translation.

For any document produced before the invention of modern printing, it could be transmitted only by copyists’ laboriously copying. The MSS of the ancient books, including the New Testament (NT) writings, are therefore prone to contain errors due to the copyists’ oversights as well as the changes (either intentionally or unintentionally) made by them. Therefore, the extant MSS and relevant documents (together called “witnesses”) should be studied and examined closely so that a text close to the autograph can be reconstructed. A task as such is normally known as “textual criticism;” and the aim of this article is to provide a brief introduction to NT textual criticism and then to the way of using its outcomes in Bible translation.

## 2. The Formation and Early Transmission of the New Testament Documents

As noted earlier, the task of the textual criticism of the NT documents is to reconstruct a text close to the original writings by way of studying the witnesses.<sup>1)</sup> The value and significance of the witnesses, however, cannot be

properly appreciated unless we know something about the formation and early transmission of those documents.<sup>2)</sup>

The NT is a collection of twenty-seven books written independently and at first transmitted separately. Each of the original NT writings was handwritten in Greek<sup>3)</sup> during the second half of the first century.<sup>4)</sup> The collection of the NT writings was a gradual process. The earliest to be collected were probably the letters of Paul; and all the fourteen Pauline letters (including Hebrews) were gathered as one collection about the mid-second century.<sup>5)</sup> But not until A.D.180 do we hear of the tetraeuagglion.<sup>6)</sup> For Acts, Revelation and the Catholic letters, it was not until late in the fourth century their authorities were recognized.<sup>7)</sup> In view of the textual history described as above, the NT

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1) Whether it is possible to determine the exact text of the original writings and whether this should be the primary purpose of textual criticism are much debated issues. Regarding this, a good bibliography can be found in Roger L. Omanson, *The Text of the New Testament*, in *Discover the Bible* (ed. Roger Omanson; UBS, 2001), 135n1. However, as far as Bible translation is concerned, the reconstruction of the original text is still the primary reason that we engage in the textual criticism of the New Testament documents.

2) This is rightly stressed in Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (2nd ed.; trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 49-50.

3) It should be noted that, for Matthew, the external evidence, such as Papias (ca.60-130) and Irenaeus (ca.130-200), points to a Hebrew or Aramaic autograph while the internal evidence points to a Greek autograph which used Greek sources. See W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew* (3 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997), 1:7-9.

4) While, for some scholars, some of the original NT writings may be handwritten as late as the first half of the second century.

5) As early as about A.D.95, a collection of Pauls letters has been hinted in 1 Clement, the earliest Christian document outside the NT. See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 49.

6) That is, a collection of four Gospels regarded as equally authoritative accounts of the gospel story; see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 48-49.

7) However, it should be noted that, although the authority of Revelation has been recognize as early as in the second and third century in the Western churches, it took much longer for the Eastern churches to recognize its authority and even today the Eastern Orthodox and the Nestorians still do not fully recognize its canonicity. See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 49-50; also L.M. McDonall, *Canon*, in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (eds. R.P. Martin and P.H. Davids; Dawners Grove: IVP, 1997), 134-44.

documents should not be seen as a single product from the textual-critical point of view. The textual criticism of the NT writings, then, should be dealt with individually. There are also other things about the history of the text of the NT that we can learn from the church history. Firstly, if following the expansion of the early Church closely, we should find that the production of the MSS in the first three to four centuries was probably mainly a phenomenon in the east of Mediterranean, Asia Minor, the Aegean coast of Greece, Palestine, and North Africa.<sup>8)</sup> The role of the West and of Rome in the early period of church history with regard to theological and scholarly interests was mainly a subordinate one.<sup>9)</sup> Any theory of the development of text types (see below), then, should take this factor into account.

Secondly, the persecution under Diocletian (ca.303-313) and the age of Constantine (d.337) were two significant periods in the textual history of the NT documents. One of the major characteristics of the Diocletianic persecutions was the systematic destruction of church buildings and also the MSS found in them. The result was a widespread shortage of NT MSS when the persecution ceased.<sup>10)</sup> The tremendous growth of Christianity after Diocletianic persecutions caused the problem of the shortage of MSS even more acute. The outcome was then a period of “mass production” of MSS by large copying houses. The exemplar used in those production centers was mainly related to the exegetical school of Antioch, which provided bishops for many dioceses throughout the East; and in such a way this text type soon widely spread and eventually influenced the text type used in the Imperial capital, Constantinople, later when entering into the age of Constantine.<sup>11)</sup> The only region that was not influenced by this text type was probably the region around Alexandria of North Egypt, where the church was governed with a tightly centralized administrative structure. A different text type was then probably produced here due to different church administration.<sup>12)</sup>

Thirdly, the mission activity of the early Church produced several ancient versions (Syriac, Latin, and, Coptic)<sup>13)</sup> during the period when the NT canon

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8) Cf. Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 53-54.

9) Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 54.

10) Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 65.

11) See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 65-66.

12) See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 65.

13) Other early versions that are of value in the textual criticism of the NT

was still in the stage of collection and formation. Therefore, these early versions are of special value in understanding the textual history of the NT documents,<sup>14)</sup> as all these versions had existed even before the NT canon was officially established.

### 3.The Witnesses and Their Symbols

The above brief discussion shows that the witnesses of the NT documents should include the extant Greek NT MSS as well as the MSS of the early NT versions. In addition to the above two sets of witnesses, two more sets should be also considered: the Greek NT lectionaries and the patristic citations of the NT.

The Greek MSS can be divided into three sub-categories: the papyrus MSS, the uncial (or majuscule) MSS, and the minuscule MSS. All the NT writings were very probably written on papyrus, as was all the literature of the time, and were then copied on papyrus. Therefore, the earliest MSS are on papyrus, using the capital script (called the “uncial” or “majuscule”). Not until the beginning in the fourth century did the use of parchment for writing material become increasingly popular and the script used then was still the uncial. About the beginning of the ninth century, the lower case of Greek alphabet (called “minuscule”) was invented and the practice of copying soon reflected this change of script as the earliest extant minuscule MSS date in the ninth century.<sup>15)</sup>

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include Ethiopic, Armenian, and Georgian. For detailed discussions of the early versions, see B.D. Ehrman and M.W. Holmes (eds.), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (Studies & Documents 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), chs. 5-11.

14) The earliest extant MSS of Syriac versions of the Four Gospels reflect a form of text which dates from the end of the second century or the beginning of the third century; the Old Latin version or versions emerged and circulated in North Africa and Europe during the third century; while in the beginning of the third century portions of the NT had been translated into Sahidic, one of the dialect of Coptic. See B.M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (3rd, enlarged ed.; Oxford: OUP, 1964, 1992), 68-69, 72, 79.

15) For detailed discussion of this topic, see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 75-77; Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 1-19.

For the symbols representing the MSS, the old system, which is still in use for uncial MSS discovered earlier, uses Latin and Greek capital letters to identify the uncials (e.g., A, B, and C), sometimes superscript letters are used to indicate the portions contained (e.g., D<sup>ca</sup> and D<sup>p</sup>). Very rarely Hebrew letters are also used (e.g., Ⓢ). When the number of uncial MSS grew so large to exceed the number of letters of Latin and Greek alphabets, a new system was devised by Caspar René Gregory (1846-1917) and this system has been used to the present. Since Gregory, the papyri have been indicated by an initial  $\mathfrak{P}$  with a superscript numeral (e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ ), the uncials by numerals with an initial 0 (with = 01, A = 02, B = 03, C = 04, D<sup>ca</sup> = 05, D<sup>p</sup> = 06, etc.), the minuscules with simple Arabic numerals (e.g., 1, 13, 33, etc.), and the lectionaries with a prefixed  $\ell$  (e.g.,  $\ell$  1).<sup>16)</sup>

There are 94 extant papyrus MSS. The earliest one is  $\mathfrak{P}^5$ , dated ca.125, containing merely five verses of John 18 (31-33, 37-38) and the latest ones are in the eighth century.<sup>17)</sup> There are 299 uncial MSS registered at present. The earliest one comes from about the end of the second or the beginning of the third century and the latest one comes from the eleventh century.<sup>18)</sup> The number of the registered minuscule MSS is about 2,800, dated starting from the ninth century and onwards.<sup>19)</sup>

The purpose of lectionary system is to provide fixed lessons, which are pericopes from the Bible, for the church to read on particular days during the year. The Greek lectionaries, therefore, contains separate pericopes extracted from the text of the NT. There are 2,280 more lectionary MSS registered at present. All of them are on parchment, and 286 of them are uncial MSS.<sup>20)</sup>

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16) See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 72-3.

17) Detailed discussions see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 81-102; Eldon Jay Epp, *The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament*, in Ehrman and Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, ch. 1.

18) Detailed discussions see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 81-2, 103-28.

19) Detailed discussions see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 81-2, 128-58; Barbara Aland and Klaus Wachtel, *The Greek Minuscule Manuscripts of the New Testament*, in Ehrman and Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, ch. 3.

20) Detailed discussions see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 81-2, 163-70; Carroll D. Osburn, *The Greek Lectionaries of the New Testament*, in Ehrman and Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, ch. 4.

The Gregory system does not provide standardized symbols for early versions and patristic witnesses. For the early versions of the NT, the two critical editions of the Bible Societies (which will be introduced below) use similar symbols and they can be found in the introductory sections.<sup>21)</sup> NT citations in the Church Fathers are normally referred by the names of the Fathers or their abbreviations in critical editions and the names or abbreviations can also be found in the introductory sections.<sup>22)</sup>

#### 4. Methods and Guiding Principles in Reconstructing the Original Text

As introduced earlier, contemporary NT textual criticism needs to deal with about 3,200 Greek text MSS, 2,200 more Greek lectionary MSS, several early language versions, as well as the NT citations of a very long list of names of the early Church Fathers in reconstructing a text very close to the original. Therefore, textual critics need to formulate a certain method or a certain set of guiding principles to do the job. Since the advent of modern NT textual criticism in the beginning of the nineteenth century, several methods have been formulated in tackling this very challenging task.<sup>23)</sup>

Two very important general principles, though not the only two to be taken into account in practice, have been agreed among most textual critics after the

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21) See Barbara Aland et al (eds.), *The Greek New Testament* (4th revised ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 22\*-29\*; Barbara Aland et al (eds.), *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1898, 1993), 63\*-72\*.

22) E.g., Aland et al (eds.), *The Greek New Testament*, 29\*-36\*; Aland et al (eds.), *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 72\*-6\*.

23) Anyone who is serious in NT textual criticism is advised to be familiar with the history of the development of methods of NT textual criticism. A starting point can be Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, ch. IV and VI. The development of *Textus Receptus* and its problems is also a topic with which one should be familiar; a good discussion can be seen in Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, ch. III. For advanced discussions, see Ehrman and Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, chs. 16,17,19-21 and Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee (eds.), *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Studies & Documents 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

development in the past two hundred years: (1) the dates and the quantity of the evidence, though not insignificant, are not as important as the quality of the evidence in deciding which reading is closer to the original; and (2) to reach an appropriate textual judgment, both the external evidences as well as the internal evidences should be properly evaluated.<sup>24)</sup>

One of the factors contributing to the quality of a certain MS is related to the text type that it belongs to. The laborious studies of the MSS of textual critics have found that most MSS can be loosely grouped into one of three (or four) text types and MSS that belong to the same text type are characterized by having the same variant readings in a number of units of variation.<sup>25)</sup> These three (or four) text types are as follows:<sup>26)</sup>

The Alexandrian text type, represented by most of the papyrus MSS (e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{47}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{64+67}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  etc.) and several uncial MSS of the fourth and fifth centuries (such as  $\aleph$ , B, 057, and the Rev. of A), is considered by most of the textual critics today as the text type closest to the original. This text type was the one developed in the region around Alexandria of North Africa as discussed earlier.

The second text type is the so-called “Western” text type. The name of this text type comes from the misunderstanding of earlier textual critics and it was very unlikely developed in the West according to our earlier discussion of the formation and transmission of the NT. The main reason that it was thought to be “Western” is that the MSS of the Old Latin and the Vulgate reflect this type of text, while this text type was probably still a product of the East, a revision done without a concern about restoring the original. The major

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24) This represents the reasoned eclectic approach used for the production of the Bible Societies critical editions. Although it is the mainstream approach today, it should be noted that not all contemporary textual critics follow the same principle. For reasoned eclectic approach, see Michael W. Holmes, Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism, in Ehrman and Holmes (eds.), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 336-60; its practice, see Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 207-46.

25) A unit of variation is that in a passage there are two or more variant readings in MSS.

26) A good brief description can be seen in Omanson, *The Text of the New Testament*, 341-2. For the distribution of Greek MSS by century and category, see Table 8 in Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 159-62, 332-37.

representative of this text type is D<sup>ca</sup> or 05 (therefore sometimes called D text), and it is characterized by innumerable additions, transpositions, and omissions.

The third one is the Byzantine text type, which can be found in about eighty percent of the minuscule MSS and almost all the lectionary MSS. This text type was the one developed in the Imperial context of Constantinople. It is also considered by most textual critics as the least valuable one in reconstructing the original text because the editorial work done to this text type was mainly for practical, liturgical, or theological purpose and not for textual. The Byzantine text type was actually a further development of the text type developed by the Antiochene School. This pre-Byzantine text type is also known as the Koine text type.

For the students of textual criticism, it is very crucial to familiarize themselves with the most famous and important MSS and their text types from the very beginning of learning. Nevertheless, text types are only general descriptive terms. The students also need to be aware that there are always minor differences among MSS belonging to the same text type and even the best MSS of the Alexandrian text type are not free from errors. To reconstruct original text (or a text very close to the original) textual critics need something more than text types to operate. For this, textual critics have also developed certain guidelines in evaluating external evidences and internal evidences. A very succinct summary can be found in Omanson's article as quoted here:

(1) *External evidence.* (a) The oldest manuscripts are more likely to preserve the original reading. (b) A variant reading known in widely separated geographical areas is more likely original than one known only in one geographical area. (c) A reading supported by a vast majority of existing manuscripts is not necessarily the best reading since these manuscripts may all come from a common ancestor. Manuscripts, therefore, must be "weighed" (evaluated) and not just counted to see how many support certain variants.

(2) *Internal evidence.* (a) The shorter reading is more likely original. In most cases, scribes added words to the text rather than omitted words. . . . (b) The more difficult-to-understand reading should be followed since scribes usually altered a difficult text to make it easier, rather than vice



versa. (c) The reading which best fits the writer's style and vocabulary is more likely original. (d) Similarly, the reading that best fits the context is to be preferred.<sup>27)</sup>

These guidelines should not be applied blindly or formulaically. Students of textual criticism should understand that this discipline is partly a science and partly an art. Therefore, experience is crucial in arriving at sound and proper textual judgments.<sup>28)</sup>

## 5. Two Bible Societies' Critical Editions

For two different purposes, the Bible Societies provides two different critical editions of the NT: the twenty-seventh edition of *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland<sup>27)</sup> and the fourth edition of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS<sup>4</sup>). Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> is designed as a pocket scholarly edition to provide as much as information about the variants of the NT text in a handy volume. This edition can trace its tradition back to the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>29)</sup> As a pocket edition, Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> should be seen as a handy reference for those who need the textual information but not as the edition for specialized textual study for which one should refer to editions such as the older editions of von Soden and Tischendorf<sup>30)</sup> as well as the outcomes of the on-going International Greek New Testament Project (IGNTP).

UBS<sup>4</sup> aims at a different concern, which is the provision of a base text for Bible translation, and, as a result, only the units of variation which are significant for translators or necessary for the establishing of the text are selected.<sup>31)</sup> The units of variation in UBS<sup>4</sup>, then, are fewer than those in

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27) Omanson, *The Text of the New Testament*, 142. A more detailed and elaborate guidelines can be found in Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 280-82.

28) For those who are new to this field, it is advisable to start with the examples in Alands and Metzgers textbooks. See Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 282-316; Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 219-46.

29) The history of this edition, see Alands, *The Text of the New Testament*, 19-36 and Aland et al (eds.), *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 44\*-45\*.

30) Hermann Freiherr von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (1913); Constantin von Tischendorf, *Editio octava critica maior* (1869-72).

31) See the Preface to the First Edition in Aland et al (eds.) *The Greek New*

Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> but with fuller list of representative evidence for each variant. One very unique feature of UBS<sup>4</sup> is the evaluations given to each unit of variation. This is designed to help the translators how to make decisions on the selection of readings for the main text as well as for the notes. Since it is very relevant to Bible translation, the last section of this article will be devoted to the discussion of this evaluation system.

## 6. The Use of the Textual Apparatus in UBS<sup>4</sup> in Bible translation

In UBS<sup>4</sup>, 1,438 passages are marked with textual apparatus and at the beginning of each apparatus one of four levels of certainty (i.e., the evaluations, from {A} to {D}) is also marked. According to the introduction of the edition:

The letter A indicates that the text is certain.

The letter B indicates that the text is almost certain.

The letter C, however, indicates that the Committee had difficulty in deciding which variant to place in the text.

The letter D, which occurs only rarely, indicates that the committee had great difficulty in arriving at a decision.<sup>32)</sup>

The practical meaning of this evaluation system can be understood as this: the translators are encouraged to follow the main text of UBS<sup>4</sup> when the editors have given an {A} or a {B} evaluation to the printed text; while for the printed text to which the editors have given a {C} or a {D} evaluation the translators should feel more freedom to translate the variant readings in the critical apparatus.<sup>33)</sup>

If the translation is to use footnotes to indicate variant readings, it is in principle no need to insert a note for a passage whose apparatus comes with an {A} or a {B} evaluation if the printed text is translated, while it is recommended to put a footnote for a passage whose apparatus comes with a {C} or a {D} evaluation. Of course these guidelines cannot be applied

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*Testament*, viii-x.

32) Aland et al (eds.), *The Greek New Testament*, 3\*.

33) Cf. Omanson, *The Text of the New Testament*, 150.

blindly, either. The translators should take into account the tradition of the faith community and deal with the cases individually.

## 7. Final Comments

In view that the issues behind two passages that have been given the same level of evaluation may actually very different from each other in terms of the rationales behind the evaluations, an accompanying *Textual Commentary* has been supplied since the third edition of the UBS *Greek New Testament* to provide further discussion about the evaluations.<sup>34)</sup> This commentary provides valuable information about the nature of the issues as well as the rationale and, sometimes, the process behind the evaluations. However, this commentary assumes certain basic knowledge of the textual criticism of the NT. Therefore, even with the help of the *Textual Commentary*, the translators are still advised and encouraged to gain proper knowledge of NT textual criticism if they want to reflect the textual phenomenon of the Greek text in their translation.

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34) The one accompanying UBS4 is Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).