

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



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Tried, Tested & Trustworthy Text-Types

--By Ryan Cox

The manuscript sources for the New Testament scriptures printed in Bibles today come from three (some scholars say four) text-types. A text-type is "the loosest sort of kindred relationship between manuscripts that can be recognized short of the autograph."¹ In essence, manuscripts are grouped into regional families.

The three most commonly accepted text-types are the Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine texts.² A fourth often accepted text-type is the Caesarean text.^{3,4,5} The Alexandrian texts contain the oldest discovered manuscripts.

These copies of the New Testament scriptures originated in Egypt. The Western texts contain some manuscripts as old as those in the Alexandrian. These texts contain copies from North Africa, as well as Italy, Gaul, and Syria. The Byzantine texts, adopted in Constantinople, are a few centuries younger than the Alexandrian, but were predominantly used by translators after the eighth century, including the translators of the King James Version. The Caesarean texts arose out of the Alexandrian texts and mixed with the Western texts.⁶

With the numerous manuscript copies of the scriptures available to scholars and translators today, questions

¹ "History of the Study of Text-types", <http://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/TextTypes.htm>, accessed 12/29/14.

² "Textual criticism", [Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism). 29 September 2014 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism accessed 12/29/14.

³ R.C. Briggs, *Interpreting the New Testament Today*. 1982, p. 45.

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2005, p. 215.

⁵ "New Testament Textual Criticism", http://www.theopedia.com/New_Testament_Textual_Criticism, accessed 12/29/14.

⁶ R.C. Briggs, *Interpreting the New Testament Today*. 1982, p. 45-47.

regarding accuracy, authenticity, and reliability most assuredly ensue. These questions can even arise in the minds of Christians during daily Bible reading because of printed footnotes in their Bibles. For example, the NASB Study Bible contains this footnote for **Matthew 17:21**, "Early mss do not contain this verse". Other such footnotes state "Some early mss read..." (**Matthew 19:9**), "This clause not found in early mss" (**Matthew 6:13**), or "Late mss add..." (**Matthew 18:15**). What is a Christian to think? "Do I trust the early manuscripts?" "Why are verses added when they were not in the oldest manuscripts?" "Does that mean I cannot trust my Bible because people have added to it over the centuries?"

Thus study of the text-types is certainly warranted for the edification of brothers and sisters in Christ. Research into the manuscripts will reveal several factors affecting the transmission of the texts throughout the centuries. They are 1) liturgical adjustments, 2) linguistic adjustments, 3) theological adjustments, 4) anti-Judaic adjustments, 5) Septuagint conformation, 6) retro-translation ("Greek translation of material that originated in a non-Greek manuscript"), 7) contracted sacred names, and 8) scribal formats.⁷

Insight into these factors is greatly increased when one knows the history of a manuscript. Research of the text-types, therefore, is essential to one's efforts in establishing textual reliability. What is meant by that is students of the Word want to know if what they are reading is as accurate to the original autograph as possible. Simple translation from the original language to the reader's language presents a few difficulties in and of itself. But with the fact that the words we read today are the results of nearly 2,000 years' worth of copying and translating copies of copies of the original manuscripts, the task might seem daunting at first.

However, the sheer volume of ancient manuscripts from the second through fifteenth centuries is unprecedented (unless they were believed to be the inspired Word of God by those who copied and read them; then it would

⁷ James Snapp, Jr., "Unique Factors in New Testament Textual Criticism", <http://curtisvillechristianchurch.org/TCGoals.htm>, accessed 12/29/14.

be warranted to make so many copies). As of 2013, the accumulation of manuscripts numbered 5,836.⁸

The text-types could be said to be “local texts -- forms of the text endowed with unique traits and unique readings in different locales.”⁹ This means that the wording of a verse of Scripture in the Alexandrian text-types may be different from that of a Western text, but agree with a copy in the Byzantine text. Within each of these text-types are codices (books) of the New Testament. These compilations relate to scholars today the accepted readings of Scripture in different geographic locations during the history and spread of Christianity.

Codex Sinaiticus, *Codex Vaticanus*, Papyrus 66, and Papyrus 75 are some of the manuscripts comprising the Alexandrian text. *Codex Bezae* is the most famous manuscript of the Western text. The Byzantine text includes *Codex Alexandrinus*, *Codex Ephraemi*, and *Codex 666*. The Caesarean contains the *Washington Codex*, Papyrus 45, and two groups of lectionaries and minuscules.¹⁰

The ages of the text-types vary greatly as well. The manuscripts of the Alexandrian text are the oldest, dating from the second through fourth centuries A.D. Those of the Western text date to the third through ninth centuries A.D. The most recent manuscripts belong to the Byzantine text, dating to the fifth through sixteenth centuries A.D.¹¹

Since the Alexandrian texts are the oldest and, therefore, the closest in time to the original autographs, these manuscripts are often given pre-eminence over the other texts. For example, some authors make comments regarding the Alexandrian text, such as, “This text arose in Egypt and is generally conceded to be the most important one.”¹² Wikipedia even notes, “It underlies most modern translations of the New

Testament.”¹³ Those versions would include the NIV, NASB, ESV, RSV, LB, and ASV.¹⁴

Is that a wise assumption? Should the oldest manuscripts be accepted as the most reliable, trustworthy, and most accurate transmissions of the original autographs? Or should what the majority of the manuscripts say be what is copied in our modern translations?

Researcher James Snapp, Jr. presented these very important insights during a lecture on textual criticism at Summit Theological Seminary:

“You would think the earlier ones would be more reliable because they are closer to the original. Well age is determined by survival, obviously. Survival is not determined by textual quality; climate is the reason why the oldest manuscripts have survived in Egypt. Just because we find this papyri only in Egypt doesn’t mean they didn’t have any Bibles in, say, Antioch or Turkey. They just lasted longer than the manuscripts did in other places. The appeal to the earliest manuscripts is like an appeal to the manuscripts that were preserved the longest. So would it be logical to say, “Adopt the reading of the manuscripts that were made under the best weather conditions”? Well that’s basically what you’re doing when you’re saying, “Let’s always use the ones that are the oldest,” because that’s always going to be the Egyptian manuscripts because it had the preservative climate.”¹⁵

What matters more, Mr. Snapp went on to say, is proximity to the autograph – the generations of copies between the original and the current copy. A copy might be newer, but what if that copy was made directly from the original autograph? Then the age of the copy is meaningless. Consequently, proximity is more important than age. However, accuracy is more important than proximity. A good, accurate copy that is more recent is far better than a bad, inaccurate copy that is old. This is why Mr. Snapp said, “All the canons must be in play.”¹⁶ There are younger manuscripts that have been proven to be more accurate than older manuscripts.

The task of textual criticism may seem overwhelming at times, but when one realizes the gift God has given us through the thousands of ancient manuscripts and the tens of thousands of ancient translations, the science of textual criticism should be of great encouragement to any Christian.

⁸ James Snapp, Jr., “Thy Word is Truth”, lecture at Summit Theological Seminary, 7 November 2014.

⁹ James Snapp, Jr., “Unique Factors in New Testament Textual Criticism”, <http://curtisvillechristianchurch.org/TCGoals.htm>, accessed 12/29/14.

¹⁰ Dr. Timothy W. Seid, “Textual Criticism”, [Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts Web](http://legacy.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/text_crit.html), < http://legacy.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/text_crit.html > accessed 12/30/14.

¹¹ “Textual criticism”, [Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism). 29 September 2014 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism accessed 12/29/24.

¹² “New Testament Textual Criticism”, http://www.theopedia.com/New_Testament_Textual_Criticism, accessed 12/29/14.

¹³ “Textual criticism”, [Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism). 29 September 2014 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism accessed 12/29/24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ James Snapp, Jr., “Thy Word is Truth”, lecture at Summit Theological Seminary, 7 November 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid.

An article on skypoint.com entitled "An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism" concluded with this thought:

There is an interesting analogy in Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva's Introduction to the Septuagint (page 124): Consider purifying our water supplies (or anything else involving sanitation, e.g. washing hands or pasteurizing milk): No matter how hard you try, none of these activities will eliminate all contamination. Does that mean that it's not worth purifying water -- that we should drink dirty water and assume it's clean? Only if you like typhoid fever. We can't reconstruct the original text perfectly because we are human, and it is a text copied by humans. But we can produce better and purer text. We can -- but only if we're willing to concede the need. Textual criticism does not threaten the Bible. Refusing to engage in TC is the threat.¹⁷

With 5,836 copies, the odds of obtaining an accurate rendering of the Word of God are extremely high. Praise God! Every Christian should be confident in taking their stand upon the Word of God. Because men labored and toiled to research the thousands of manuscripts discovered throughout the centuries, renowned paleographer and textual critic Fredric Kenyon was right when he said, "The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries."¹⁸

Therefore, "Preach the Word!" (**II Timothy 4:2**)

¹⁷ "An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism", <http://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/intro.html>, accessed 12/29/14.

¹⁸ Neil R. Lightfoot, How We Got the Bible, 2003, p. 126.