

A modest explanation for the layman of ideas related to determining the text of the Greek New Testament

ABSTRACT: There are almost 6,000 partial or complete manuscripts of the Greek New Testament extant. It is possible, by the application of certain principles outlined in this essay, to weed out errors that crept into the manuscripts during the process of copying and thus to reconstruct a text that is identical to—or at least very close to—the original text. This resulting text is called the Byzantine Textform, which we attempt to show is superior to the text arrived at by the other main approach to textual criticism, i.e., the eclectic approach, which seems to be an arbitrary “pick and choose” process. The Byzantine Textform has been dominant through the centuries of the church and, we believe, deserves that dominant position today, not because it is the result of some research, though extensive research supports it, but because it has always been there with historical and transmissional integrity in its favor.

Note: few of the following thoughts are original to the writer. He is only trying to facilitate for nonspecialists a wider understanding of the thoughts of others, largely through simplification and restatement. Technical terms italicized in the text are defined in the glossary at the end of the paper. All quotes not identified in the text are taken from the writings of Maurice Robinson, as noted in the bibliography.

Introduction: on paper, ink and writing styles

Things weren't always as easy as they are now. This is especially true in the area of written communication: personal computers (1970s), typewriters (from 1874), indeed even printing presses with movable type (1440s) just did not exist. Documents were written by hand, whether personal letters and notations or official decrees. If there was a need for multiple copies, additional handmade copies were made one at a time.

At the time of the writing of the individual books of the New Testament, the most common form of “paper” used was *papyrus* sheets (from about 2400 BC), frequently put together into longer rolled scrolls. Ink was made of different substances, some as common as *lampblack*; and pens were made of sharpened reeds and, later, quills. Animal skins (*vellum*, *parchment*), properly prepared, were also used as writing material (from as early as 1468 BC). Animal skins had the advantage of being more permanent. Their disadvantage lay in their greater cost. Paper, the precursor of what we know today, was introduced into the Middle East by Arabs (from AD 795), who acquired the material from its inventors, the Chinese.

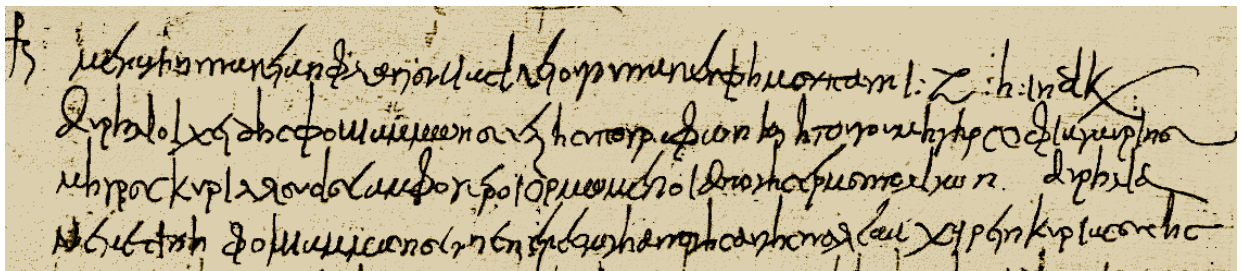
We cannot be absolutely sure of the materials on which the original New Testament writings were made, since those *autographs* (i.e., the original documents) have now all apparently perished. However, nearly all New Testament *manuscripts* available to us today from before the fourth century are found as papyrus documents, whereas nearly all manuscripts from the fourth to fourteenth centuries *extant* today were written on parchment. The early New Testament manuscripts could have been written in scroll format, but our existing evidence clearly shows that from the earliest time of *canonical* transmission, copies were made on another form of “book,” that of the *codex*, in which actual pages, as we know them today, were bound together along one edge.

Writing in Greek characters was first done in *uncial* form, not unlike our capital letters. *Cursive writing*, an adaptation from the uncials, was like current longhand and lower-case printing, and was used in writings that were of a more personal nature. Both uncial writing in formal documents and cursive writing in informal documents existed side by side for centuries. All manuscripts made prior to the tenth century that still exist for us to examine were written in uncials.

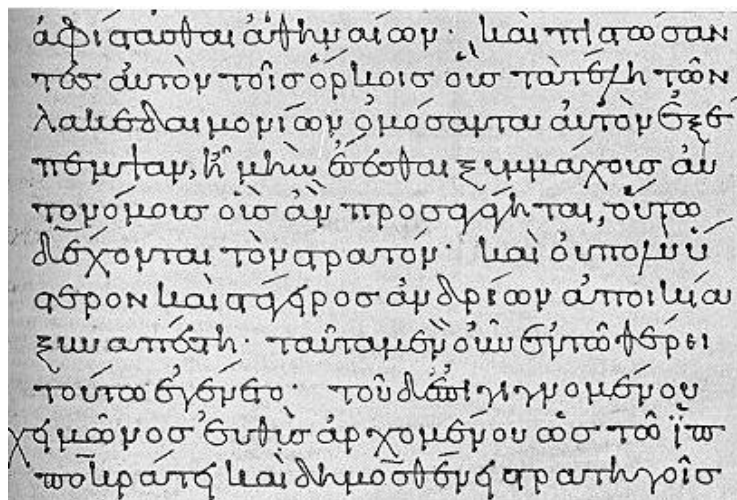
In the early ninth century a *minuscule* form of handwriting was developed, particularly by scribes interested in lightening their laborious duties with the efficiency of speedwriting. This new style was a modification of the cursive, being somewhat more formal in appearance. By the end of the tenth century all manuscripts copied (except for some *lectionaries*) were done in minuscule form.



(1) **Uncial.** Greek manuscript, 4th century, uncial script. Codex Sinaiticus, (Leipzig, Royal Library, Cod. Frid. Aug). Text: Bible, Esther 1:20–21. (from Wikipedia)



(2) **Cursive.** Greek manuscript in ancient cursive script, papyrus, dated 545 A.D., Brit. Mus. Pap. 1319. Text: Debenture (private contract). (from Wikipedia)



(3) **Minuscule.** Greek manuscript, earliest form of minuscule script (“codex vetustissimus”), 10th Century, (Florence, Laurentian Library, Plut. 1xix). Text: Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, book 4, chapter 88f. (from Wikipedia)

GREEK SCRIPTS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

CAPITALS	UNCIALS	CURSIVE	CURSIVE MINUSCULES
A	ΑΑΑΑ	Α α α α α	α α α α α
B	ΒΒΒΒ	Β β β β β	β β β β β
Γ	ΓΓ	Γ γ γ γ γ	γ γ γ γ γ
Δ	ΔΔΔΔ	Δ δ δ δ δ	δ δ δ δ δ
Ε	ΕΕΕΕ	Ε ε ε ε ε	ε ε ε ε ε
Ζ	ΖΖΖ	Ζ ζ ζ ζ ζ	ζ ζ ζ ζ ζ
Η	ΗΗΗ	Η η η η η	η η η η η
Θ	ΘΘΘ	Θ θ θ θ θ	θ θ θ θ θ
Ι	ΙΙΙ	Ι ι ι ι ι	ι ι ι ι ι
Κ	ΚΚΚ	Κ κ κ κ κ	κ κ κ κ κ
Λ	ΛΛΛ	Λ λ λ λ λ	λ λ λ λ λ
Μ	ΜΜΜ	Μ μ μ μ μ	μ μ μ μ μ
Ν	ΝΝΝ	Ν ν ν ν ν	ν ν ν ν ν
Ξ	ΞΞΞ	Ξ ξ ξ ξ ξ	ξ ξ ξ ξ ξ
Ο	ΟΟΟ	Ο ο ο ο ο	ο ο ο ο ο
Π	ΠΠΠ	Π π π π π	π π π π π
Ρ	ΡΡΡ	Ρ ρ ρ ρ ρ	ρ ρ ρ ρ ρ
Σ	ΣΣΣ	Σ σ σ σ σ	σ σ σ σ σ
Τ	ΤΤΤ	Τ τ τ τ τ	τ τ τ τ τ
Υ	ΥΥΥ	Υ υ υ υ υ	υ υ υ υ υ
Φ	ΦΦΦ	Φ φ φ φ φ	φ φ φ φ φ
Χ	ΧΧΧ	Χ χ χ χ χ	χ χ χ χ χ
Ψ	ΨΨΨ	Ψ ψ ψ ψ ψ	ψ ψ ψ ψ ψ
Ω	ΩΩΩ	Ω ω ω ω ω	ω ω ω ω ω

(4) Sample of Greek scripts of the Middle Ages, p. 80 from *The Languages of the World* by Stanley Wemyss (Philadelphia, STANLEY WEMYSS, 1950)

With great certainty, we may assert that in the case of all original, individual New Testament writings at least one single copy was made and carried to one recipient. In keeping with the practice of the day, authors usually made and retained another copy of their writings, possibly a draft of the finished work. Most New Testament writings were addressed to individuals or to individual churches; several (for example, Peter's) may have been made with the intention of being circulated among a larger prescribed circle of readers.

In any case, the canonical New Testament writings were recognized as the word of God, therefore valuable, and copies were made from them soon after the time of their composition. Some of what we know of the process has been told us by church fathers; other matters we know by inference. In time there were multiple copies in circulation. And after an unknown passage of time the autographs apparently perished.

By whatever means, the Scriptures were copied and circulated throughout an ever-enlarging area. Today nearly 6,000 partial or complete manuscripts of the Greek New Testament exist. We may assume that at least that same number of other copies was made over the centuries—indeed probably a far greater number than that—but that those copies perished for one reason or another. For all practical purposes manual copying of manuscripts ceased in the 1500s after the first published printing of the Greek New Testament (1516).

What New Testament manuscript groups exist today

If we look at extant manuscripts, we see that they are not identical (see the discussion under the section “Why there are differences between manuscripts” below). They seem to fall into four individually related groups, commonly termed *texttypes*. The first of these has been termed the **Western Text**. Its member manuscripts are characterized by “free expansion, paraphrase, and alteration of previously existing words.” There are relatively

few manuscripts of this type of *text*, its most famous member being manuscript D/05. (For easy reference manuscripts are catalogued by either an Arabic numeral or a numeral associated with a capital letter-symbol [Latin, Greek or, in one case, Hebrew] attached.)

The second texttype is termed the **Alexandrian Text**. It is an important group, if only for the relatively early date of its primary manuscripts. Although its proponents might deny this, it seems to be correctly characterized as *recensional*, that is, it is considered by Byzantine priority theory to be a critical revision of other manuscripts, possibly a revision of the alterations and additions of the Western Text. The most famous manuscripts in this texttype are the Aleph (Ⲁ) and B codices, both fourth century, and a number of early papyri found preserved in Egypt, some dated before AD 200. As with any texttype, the Alexandrian is not uniform; indeed, its two main manuscripts differ from each other 3000 times over the course of the four Gospels alone.

The **Caesarean Text**, though distinct enough to be called that, is not generally assumed to be a serious reflection of the autographs. It appears rather to be a blend of readings from various Byzantine and Alexandrian texts.

The **Byzantine Text** reflects a large body of data, represented by numerous manuscripts, supported by many *variant readings* found in early translations and commented on by the early church fathers. Approximately 95% of all Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contain a Byzantine type of text. The manuscript center for all this was the primarily Greek-speaking world of southern Italy, Greece and most of Turkey from the fourth century until the invention of printing. (Note in passing that this is also the geographic area that possessed a majority of the original manuscripts of the New Testament at the beginning of the Christian era.) Evidence from this region before the fourth century is scant or lacking; this will be discussed below where objections to the Byzantine-priority model are noted.

Why there are differences between manuscripts

If we assume that there was one original text, why are there any differences at all and why the four text groupings in particular? The primary reason is that the process of copying resulted in variations from the *exemplars*, that is, the manuscripts being copied. There were two major types of variations. First, there is inadvertent scribal error. The adage “to err is human” merely comments on what is prevalent in the copying process. However careful a scribe might be, he would make errors in his efforts to produce a faithful copy of the source text before him. Granted, there are different types of copyists. Some are more careful, whether by nature or training; some are more careless. It can be shown that New Testament copyists were overwhelmingly of the more careful variety, though they still inevitably made inadvertent copying mistakes.

To clearly understand how there can be two texts otherwise identical but for a couple of variant readings, consider the following from 1Corinthians 13 (base text NIV):

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

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In the preceding display the left column is the NIV text, and the right column is the same except for three different readings. The differences are underlined in both texts. For example, on the left is the phrase “to the flames,” whereas on the right is the phrase “that I may boast”; these two phrases are very similar in Greek: *kauthésomai* “to be burned” vs. *kauchésomai* “to boast.” One is the original reading, the other was probably an unintentional error. The ultimate source of these variant readings among the manuscripts need not concern us here.

If you doubt whether scribes easily made errors in the copying process, try to copy several chapters of the New Testament for yourself. Then go back and check the correspondence between your printed text and your effort at copying. You might also try to copy the same several chapters from a Greek text (or any other language that you aren't perfectly at home in). The incidence of errors from your efforts will be shown to have increased greatly when copying from a text in a language other than your own. This is important, for many scribes through the centuries were not comfortable in Greek.

The second type of variation is that made intentionally. This type of variation is logically either of two kinds. First, there were intentional efforts to correct errors (whether real or perceived) introduced into previously copied manuscripts. Potentially, this effort corrected inadvertent errors in the text being copied (this effort to correct is easily demonstrated) and may have even “improved on” perceived original rough expressions (such efforts to improve are theoretically possible, but ever so much more difficult to demonstrate). Second, there were deliberate alterations in the copying process, to include harmonization, religious “improvement,” and finally doctrinal alteration.

Harmonization involves, especially in the *Synoptic Gospels*, making a given passage more like a known parallel passage. We have numerous instances, of course, in which parallel synoptic passages have identical wording, with no variants. So when one of two variants is identical with its synoptic parallel, we should not automatically jump to the conclusion that the other is original and this one was a harmonization. Religious “improvement” is the process of adding to the text to make it more devout; thus, for example, a scribe might add “Lord” to a text containing simply “Jesus Christ.” Finally, doctrinal alteration involves just what it says, namely, adjusting the text to make its reading more fully support a particular doctrinal position.

Before we move on, it is important to stress by way of summary that of the thousands of existing New Testament manuscripts no two are completely identical, even while nearly the whole of the text of all manuscripts is seen to be 94% or more identical. Since there was only one autograph or original writing, the fact that the many copies made are not identical means that at various places in each there are copying errors. The major task of *textual*

criticism is to determine what the original looked like from the copies that exist—all of them showing differences at various points, most of which originated as copying errors.

The two main texttypes

Today there are two main schools of thought in the matter of the identity of the New Testament text. One school of thought we can call **Byzantine priority**, i.e., that the text found in the vast bulk of New Testament manuscripts is most likely to represent the original. The other school of thought we can call the **eclectic** approach, which picks and chooses each reading based on a set of principles. In practice, the eclectic approach, which has dominated the scholarly world of New Testament textual criticism for the past century or so, heavily favors the manuscripts of the Alexandrian texttype. In this essay the terms “Alexandrian texttype” and “eclectic” are largely interchangeable, though each retains its own lexical intent.

The Byzantine Text is often maligned for no other reason than that in large part it corresponds with the long-belittled so-called *Textus Receptus*. (The *Textus Receptus* is admittedly a poor representative of the Byzantine Text. In fact the *Textus Receptus* and the Byzantine *Textform* of today differ in more than 1800 places throughout the text of the New Testament. The differences between them are extensive enough to invalidate automatically extending criticism of the one to the other.) Apart from that largely irrelevant objection, the Byzantine Text is a reality that must be accounted for. Those that would seek to fault it must at the very least speak to its origin, rise and near dominance within the *stream of textual transmission* from at least the fourth century to the invention of printing. Indeed, since observable facts are best discussed in terms of an underlying theory, critics of the Byzantine Text need to address its dominance throughout history by developing a theory of textual transmission of their own.

Currently, objections raised for their own sake and not based on a true deficiency are the best that can be raised against the Byzantine Text, including two in particular. The first is an objection first put forth by Westcott and Hort some 130 years ago. They suggested that the Byzantine Text arose as a critical revision in the second half of the fourth century, perhaps commissioned by a church council, endorsed by the local churches, and then that went on to gain increasing, then near-universal, acceptance. The problem with this explanation is that there is not a shred of historical evidence to support it. The second objection (more fashionable today) hypothesizes that the Byzantine Text is the result of a process, but we find that the suggested details are at best sketchy and insufficient to explain the data. Both of these objections are based on the fact that we have no early (pre-fourth century) Byzantine manuscripts. But this fact is far from proof for or against any text type. Remember that we have only a very small number of pre-fourth century manuscripts of **any** type—and of those, only **one** manuscript (P75) is thoroughly of one particular texttype (Alexandrian).

Here is an analogy: Suppose that in a particular rural county in Kansas we examine boxes of old files in the back room of the county clerk’s office. We find almost 6,000 receipts for hunting licenses. The vast majority of these licenses are for deer hunting, only a few hundred are for quail hunting. Almost all of these licenses are dated after 1950. Only a small number of pre-1950 licenses can be found, off in a corner somewhere—apparently someone tossed out most of the old files long ago. None of the pre-1950 licenses are for deer hunting; some are just general hunting licenses, a few are quail-hunting licenses. Would it be logical to conclude, “No deer hunting licenses were issued in this county prior to 1950”? Certainly not. Most of the pre-1950 files no longer exist, and the few that we have are insufficient to draw conclusions from. It is quite likely that deer hunting licenses were issued prior to 1950, but that the old records are no longer available. Indeed, based on the post-1950 trends, it is logical to assume that in pre-1950 times more deer-hunting licenses were issued than quail-hunting licenses.

Perhaps the problem of acceptance is partly to be understood in this way: the position that the Byzantine Texttype is indeed the best representation of the autographs (Byzantine priority theory) is so straightforward as to be thought too simple by its critics. On the contrary, taking it as the explanation for the data found in the manuscripts more greatly simplifies the approach to the issues and problems before us than the explanation that advocates the Alexandrian Text.

The other texttype is the Alexandrian. Unlike the manuscripts of the Byzantine Texttype, which are found spread across the Aegean homeland of traditional Greek language and usage and also across the centuries, the Alexandrian is represented by manuscripts that come mainly from bilingual (Greek and Coptic) Egypt and from the early centuries of the Christian era only.

No single manuscript fully represents a single texttype—whether Byzantine or Alexandrian. Therefore there has to be an evaluation of the existing manuscript evidence based on some theory. For both the Byzantine and the Alexandrian texttypes there must be an underlying theory that motivates the choices made in the course of determining which texttype best represents the autographs. For the Byzantine Texttype the theory generally begins by tracing the history of how texts were copied and distributed (transmissional history). At every point these considerations are given priority and carefully weighed. Following this, the data from external sources are evaluated, and finally internal considerations are weighed. If at any point variant readings are found, the above considerations are applied by the theory in order to choose among the variants.

The eclectic approach to recovering the original text

On the other hand, preference for the Alexandrian Texttype is based on an apparent predisposition to favor a certain small selection of older manuscripts sharing a generally common minority (Alexandrian) texttype. Its advocates really have little or no theory of transmission of the text on which to base their decisions. What is certain is the disposition of the Alexandrian partisans to favor the text generally found in the Alexandrian manuscripts and to disfavor that found in the Byzantine manuscripts. In particular, scholars that practice the eclectic approach usually cite these two arguments to explain why they favor Alexandrian manuscripts: 1) The Alexandrian manuscripts are mostly from the early centuries of the Christian era and thus closer to the original manuscripts—the clear assumption is that, all other things being equal, an early manuscript is more likely to better represent the original than a later manuscript. 2) Also, these scholars favor Alexandrian manuscripts because of their assumption that the huge bulk of Byzantine manuscripts is the product of “mass production” by professional scribes of a smoothed-out officially-sanctioned church text. Both these points will be addressed below.

Moreover, advocates of the Alexandrian Texttype seem to assume some sort of radical textual dislocation very early on that left no single manuscript untouched. In their view, there is no single surviving text or texttype that can be used authoritatively to guide their decisions about the texts. Rather, the shredded remnants, as they might be called, must be pieced together on an item-by-item basis. The result of such an improvised process is a text that in some places of variation no longer represents what is found in any existing manuscript.

In the world of eclectic approach we remain dependent on the wit and skill of the textual critic. The decisions of the editorial committee are taken as nearly final. According to the Alexandrian Texttype practitioners, there is no basis in history for determining the original text; our own learned judgment is the ultimate authority. The analysis itself decides what theoretically was in the original. The testimony of countless generations of scribes and readers from the autographs through the present is simply discounted. To see how bad the result really is consider the following.

In a single given verse of the text of the Greek New Testament, assume that two competing variant readings are identified, A and B. The original was not A and B, but A or B (or some other reading). Reading A is supported by manuscripts *a, b, c, d, e, f*, whereas reading B is supported by manuscripts *g, h, i, j, k, l*. There is also in that same verse another set of competing readings, X and Y, supported, respectively, by manuscripts *k, l, m, n, o, p* and *a, b, g, h, s, t*. Our deliberations and discussions conclude that readings A and X are original. What does this say about the presumed autograph? And what does this say about our method of determining the original text/reading? It is a method that has produced a text found in not a single existing manuscript!

To underline this important point in the most transparent terms, consider this analogy: Suppose that five people have copied a list of twenty items. Now the original list has gone missing, and we must reconstruct it from the five copies. Persons A, B, and C produced identical lists. Person D’s copy, however, differs from the copies of A, B and C in one item, let’s say item 12. Person E’s copy also differs from the copies of A, B and C in one item, but it is item 18. The eclectic approach may conclude that the original list from which all five people copied agreed with person D on item 12 and agreed with person E on item 18. But in fact that approach to reconstruction produces a list that is found in **none** of the five existing copies. What does this say about our method of determining the original reading?

The choices made among the readings for this verse (two paragraphs above), which now produce a combined or consecutive reading, are not found in any manuscript available to us, for the simple reason that the supporting manuscripts of A and X are mutually exclusive sets—in other words, no manuscripts contain both reading A and reading X. The committee has determined a hypothetical form of this verse, as they think the original manuscript read, that is at complete variance with what (so far as anyone can determine) any reader of the same verse through

nearly twenty centuries ever laid eyes on. With regard to the other logical possible readings, namely, AY, BX, and BY, each has support from at least two manuscripts in our contrived example.

Now we illustrate with actual data. In John 5.2 there are two sets of variant readings found in existing manuscripts. First there are roughly seven readings that reflect various combinations on the phrase “(in/at) the sheep gate a pool called”; second there are six variants with respect to the name of the place: Belzetha, Bethesda, Bethsaida, Bedsaida, Bedsaidan, Bethzatha. The combined and consecutive reading of the eclectic approach is “There is in Jerusalem *at the sheep gate a pool called* in Hebrew *Bethzatha*, having five porticoes.” The problem with this is that in determining the first reading, which incidentally follows the Byzantine Text, they followed the witness of a set of manuscripts that is mutually exclusive with those supporting their second-reading choice, Bethzatha. The simple fact is that their combined reading does not occur in any manuscript known to us. The Byzantine Text, on the other hand, reads “There is in Jerusalem *at the sheep gate a pool called* in Hebrew *Bethesda*, having five porticoes”; this is the text of John 5.2 as it occurs in many existing manuscripts and demonstrates the historical and transmissional integrity of the text.

What is shocking is that there are at least 105 single verses in the modern eclectic text of the Greek New Testament (i.e., the UBS and Nestle-Aland Greek texts) that, as in our illustrated choice AX above for consecutive variant readings within single verses, are demonstrably without any tangible manuscript support whatsoever. These verses therefore are “contrived.” When two consecutive verses are examined—and then three—the resultant condition of “no supporting manuscript evidence” will continue to balloon—and that geometrically! (When we actually take two consecutive verses, the total jumps to 315.) The sad conclusion is that the predominantly Alexandrian reconstruction produced by the eclectic method and found in published Greek texts today *never* existed for *any* reader in the history of the Christian era. That is to say, “in short stretches of text, the best modern eclectic texts simply have *no* proven existence within transmissional history, and their claim to represent the autograph or the closest approximation thereunto cannot be substantiated from the extant manuscript, *versional* or *patristic* [see glossary] data.”

Here is another way of stating the error that the eclectic approach makes in its attempt to reconstruct the original text. The textual critic that follows the eclectic method usually rejects the Byzantine texttype as “late” and favors the Alexandrian texttype. In rejecting the vast majority of manuscripts, all of which agree with each other, he is forced to pick and choose readings from what is left—manuscripts that vary widely from each other, even at the level of a single verse, clause or sentence. And after carefully applying his blend of rules for considering internal and external evidence, he is left with yet another text that lacks a pattern of agreement with any manuscript in existence. Having first rejected the reading of the majority, he has now gone on to even reject the reading of every other manuscript, including those in his favored Alexandrian texttype! Such is the text found in the modern eclectic edition.

The basics of Byzantine priority

Just what is the essence of the method giving priority to the Byzantine Texttype? It is best stated by Hort, though he championed the Alexandrian Texttype based on various anti-Byzantine presuppositions: “A theoretical presumption indeed remains that a majority of extant documents is more likely to represent a majority of ancestral documents at each stage of transmission than [a minority]” [Westcott and Hort, *Introduction*, 45].

In the nonbiblical realm of scholarship, this statement is considered a basic assumption. It is assumed that a normal means of textual spread underlies the dissemination of all handwritten documents, whether secular or sacred. If we look at the writings of one secular and classic author (Homer), we find the same situation among the surviving manuscripts of his works. Indeed, there are three broad categories for these manuscripts: shorter text, longer text and in-between text.

Manuscripts containing the shorter texts of Homer are taken to show “Alexandrian critical know-how and scholarly revision.” (Remember, Alexandria was the great library center of the world of that time, second only to Rome in general importance.) And this shortening is seen in the Alexandrian Texttype of the Greek New Testament manuscripts as well: they clearly show editorial processes that (among other things) shortened the text being revised.

The longer texts are noted as reflecting popular expansion and improvement by scribes. Note the similarity of Homeric manuscripts of this kind with those roughly fitting the Western Texttype among New Testament manuscripts.

Finally, between the sidelines is the playing field where texts of a “medium” or “vulgate” nature are found. As with secular texts, so with sacred: the preponderance of manuscripts is of this kind. Without any imposed prejudice that would favor another conclusion, it appears that “normal scribal activity and transmissional continuity would preserve in most manuscripts ‘not only a very ancient text, but a very pure line of very ancient text’” (quote within single quotation marks from Hort).

The Byzantine-priority position is often dismissed as being only a counting of noses. But a simple mechanical counting is far from what this position actually does. Indeed, there are many cases (particularly in John 7.53-8.11 and in Revelation) where the testimony of the manuscripts is divided among not just two, but several variant readings; there is no majority reading. What would nose counters do then? No, Byzantine-priority theory is not correctly characterized in this way.

Rather the principles (discussed below) that lead to the Byzantine-priority position “reflect a *reasoned transmissionalism* [a theory of transmissional development applied to variant readings that] evaluates internal and external evidence in the light of transmissional probabilities.” **Internal evidence** includes those items that yield an “intrinsic probability quotient” for the analyst, that is, answers to questions asked regarding the scribe, and what he probably would have done, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in any given case. **External evidence** is the testimony of the manuscripts, early translations and comments of the fathers, all weighed to determine which reading has the best outside support.

Careful attention is given to the habits of scribes in preserving, altering or otherwise corrupting the text. This approach also recognizes that transmissional development does in fact lead to family and texttype groupings. Further, it emphasizes that the text in its general integrity has been maintained throughout transmissional history.

How we evaluate internal evidence

There is a large overlap between the principles used by those that practice Byzantine-priority theory and those that support the eclectic approach, which tends to favor the readings found in Alexandrian manuscripts. However, the Byzantine approach rejects one of the principles of the eclectic approach, namely, that the shorter reading is to be preferred as more likely to be the reading of the original manuscript. Whereas it might seem that the Byzantine outlook rejects this principle mainly to strengthen its case against the shorter Alexandrian Texttype approach (a difference of some two thousand words over the entire Greek New Testament, roughly 138,000 words in the Alexandrian Texttype versus 140,000 in the Byzantine Texttype), that is not the case. The reason it is rejected is simply that there is compelling evidence that errors made by the scribes tend to make the text shorter in far more cases than are alleged for intentional scribal expansion. Current and extensive studies regarding scribal habits provide clear indications of that fact. (See also principle eight below.) We will first cite the principles of internal evidence accepted by the Byzantine-priority theory. (These principles, in italics below, are taken directly from Robinson.)

Internal Evidence Principle 1: *Prefer the reading that is most likely to have given rise to all others within a variant unit.* This principle is accepted by both schools of thought, but with this difference: The eclectic approach uses this principle for each and every isolated variant. The Byzantine-priority theory, on the other hand, demands to know not only how the several competing variants could have derived from the first, but also how such a reading could have happened when a text was copied in relationship to neighboring variant units.

Specifically, note the following example from John 9.4. The modern eclectic critical text, found in the UBS Greek text, reads in translation: “WE must work the works of the one having sent ME”; the Byzantine text reads: “I must work the works of the one having sent ME.” The support for the combinations *WE/ME*, *I/ME* and *WE/US* is as follows:

- *WE...ME* = B 070;
- *I...ME* = Byz $\aleph^a$ A C Θ Ψ f1 f13 33 lat syr;
- *WE...US* = P⁶⁶ P⁷⁵ $\aleph^*$ L W bo;
- *I...US* –this combination is not attested.

It is not transmissionally logical that the reading found only in two manuscripts (B and 070) out of all the thousands of witnesses—manuscripts, early translations, commentaries of fathers—could have given rise to all other readings. It is far more likely that the Byzantine (Byz) reading (*I...ME*) is original, and was changed by Alexandrian scribes into a hortatory *WE...US*, which then became muddled in B 070 into the more problematic

WE...ME. (The abbreviations for various manuscripts used above should not intimidate the reader. The point illustrated may have its impact without his knowing specific manuscript identities, which can be found in many critical Greek New Testaments.)

Internal Evidence Principle 2: *The reading that would be more difficult for a scribe to create is to be preferred.* This principle is based on the assumption that a scribe would not choose to make a reading more difficult than a simpler one in the text he was copying from. That this happens accidentally cannot be denied. Considering the overall transmissional integrity of the text, the principle under consideration here needs to be modified as follows: *the more difficult reading is to be preferred when such is found in a larger transmissional body of witnesses rather than when such is limited to a single witness or an interrelated minority group.*

This principle is illustrated in Luke 6.1, where the Byzantine text reads *en sabbatō deuteroprōtō* (“on the second-first sabbath”), while the eclectic critical text reads only *en sabbatō* (“on a Sabbath”). The reading of the eclectic text avoids the difficulty regarding the interpretation of “second-first,”—the meaning of which no one today is certain, but it is a word that simply could not have been invented without reason, or produced by accident. The following discussion pushes the notion of “a modest explanation for the layman” to the limits, but will be found instructive to the reader that perseveres!

Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* can only “resolve” the problem of the Byzantine reading by a highly convoluted process, which is hardly convincing: (1) “a Sabbath” was original; (2) a later scribe saw there was *another* Sabbath described at 6.6, so he chose to insert “first” before “Sabbath”; (3) a *second* scribe remembered [!] that something relating to “Sabbaths” (plural!) occurred earlier at 4.31, but he took that reference as if it were singular, and thus considered 4.31 the “first” Sabbath, but this then made 6.1 the “second Sabbath”; (4) this scribe accordingly added the word “second” in the *margin* and placed dots over the word “first” in the main text to indicate that it should be removed; (5) following this, a *third* scribe copying the text duly inserted the word “second” but failed to notice the dots over the word “first,” and this left the nonsensical reading *deuterō prōtō* (“on a second on a first”) as the main text; (6) finally, a *fourth* scribe “resolved” the difficulty by combining the two-word form into the single *deuteroprōtō*, changing the spelling in the process and being unconcerned as to whether the reading made any sense (had clarity been a concern, he would have eliminated either *deuterō* or *prōtō* or both); (7) this one manuscript then became the parent of virtually all remaining manuscripts transmitted throughout history, with almost no correction whatever being made to “restore” the original, even if no one could comprehend the meaning of “second-first.”

The question of course is whether such a complex chain of events is at all likely, and even if so, whether on transmissional grounds anyone would claim that a single “corrupted” manuscript would even have become the parent of nearly all other manuscripts without massive attempts at correction of such an extremely difficult reading. Further against this hypothesis, there is no documentary evidence of any of the intervening steps along the chain.

By comparison the simpler (Byzantine-priority) solution is obvious: regardless of what “second-first” may have meant in the first century, the term was clearly difficult, and the meaning became unknown by the mid-second century. Thus, since it was the “more difficult” reading, a small number of scribes (mostly Egyptian or copying an Alexandrian type of text) simply omitted the term (P⁴ & B L W f1 33 579 1241 2542 pc it sy-p, sy-hmg sa bo-pt).

Internal Evidence Principle 3: *Readings that conform to the known style, vocabulary and syntax of the original author are to be preferred.* This assumes that, all things being equal, scribes would be more likely accidentally to alter the style and vocabulary of the author they are copying than deliberately to conform to it. This principle must be used with caution, however. For example, *oun* “therefore” is characteristic of John’s style. But *de* “but” is used more frequently in John than *oun*. So when two manuscripts vary between *oun* and *de*, this principle cannot tell us which to choose; either reading is characteristically Johannine. Historical-transmissional considerations may lend more weight to the manuscripts that read one way over those that read the other.

Internal Evidence Principle 4: *Readings that clearly harmonize or adapt the wording of one passage to another are to be rejected.* While harmonization can occur during copying, its frequency is overemphasized. Proponents of the eclectic position seem quick to label a Byzantine reading as a “clear case of harmonization”; they assume that scribes copying Byzantine texts made a normal practice of harmonizing. But it does not seem reasonable that only Byzantine scribes would harmonize. If this were a normal scribal habit, would it not be expected of all scribes whatever kind of manuscript stream being copied? In fact, actual cases of harmonization are relatively

infrequent, appearing only sporadically. Besides, we have numerous instances of word-for-word agreement between parallel passages in the Gospels, with neither text in doubt. So when there is a variant, why assume that the variant that agrees with the parallel passage in another Gospel is a scribal harmonization and not due to the writer? We also have instances of parallel passages in the Gospels in which there are differences in wording between one Gospel and another, with neither text in doubt; yet Byzantine scribes did not harmonize these differences! It therefore is unreasonable to reject a particular reading primarily or solely on the assumption that it is the result of harmonizing by Byzantine scribes. Again, the *apparatuses* show us that harmonization or assimilation simply did not occur to any great extent. This again demonstrates that the history of transmission must be considered for all cases of possible harmonization.

Internal Evidence Principle 5: *Readings that could be viewed as reflecting the piety of the scribe or as reflecting religiously motivated expansion and alteration are considered secondary.* (By “secondary” we mean that the reading was not in the original manuscript but was created by scribes.) With variants of this type, it is naïve to pick a shorter reading as being original, calling all others pious expansions. In the case of 1Corinthians 5.5, for example, the Byzantine Text reads “the day of THE LORD JESUS”; this reading is supported by the large number of Byzantine manuscripts, as well as the Alexandrian codex 8. The eclectic text, however, has chosen the shortest reading: “the day of THE LORD”; this reading is found in the Alexandrian manuscripts P⁴⁶ and B, and a few other manuscripts. The reading with the fullest expansion is “the day of OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST”; this long reading (with or without the “OUR”) is found in the uncial A plus a few other manuscripts. Transcriptional probabilities point clearly to the middle form of the Byzantine Text as the reading from which all others are derived: “the day of THE LORD JESUS.” Critics of the Byzantine text accuse it of having “expanded readings that reflect the piety of the scribe”; but these critics should explain why the Byzantine text of 1Corinthians 5.5 contains a middle form (“the day of THE LORD JESUS”)—why did the Byzantine scribes not expand the text to “OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST”? In fact, there are numerous “longer forms” of the divine names throughout the Greek New Testament that show *no* variation whatsoever; obviously, all these were original.

Internal Evidence Principle 6: *The primary evaluation of readings should be based on transcriptional probability.* This principle is as old as Westcott and Hort, who first published their eclectic Greek New Testament in 1881, but it is inconsistently applied. Put simply, a single error or deliberate alteration is unlikely to be perpetuated in any quantity. The many singular readings that were *not* copied, but died with the manuscript containing them, or at most were limited to only a few manuscripts, are proof that most cases of deliberate alteration or inadvertent error were *not* incorporated/perpetuated by later scribes into the various texts they copied.

Internal Evidence Principle 7: *Transcriptional error rather than deliberate alteration is more likely to be the ultimate source of many sensible variants.* Many variant readings are the result of transcriptional errors. This includes all purely nonsense readings, but also many sensible readings arising from the omission of a letter, a syllable or words, on the one hand, and from *haplography*, *dittography*, *homoioioteuton* [see glossary] and other similar errors, on the other hand.

The intent of this principle is that we should seek a transcriptional explanation for a variant reading *before* resorting to an explanation that assumes deliberate alteration.

Internal Evidence Principle 8: *Neither the shorter nor the longer reading is to be preferred.* The hypothesis of eclectic textual critics is that scribes have a strong tendency to expand, whether in sacred names or by combining dissimilar narratives. And yet habits of the scribes as evidenced in the existing data simply do not support such a hypothesis. Had their habits been such, divine titles should have been expanded far too frequently, parallel passages would have been more extensively harmonized and a far more *conflated* text would have resulted. Such is not the case. That is, this primary working assumption of eclectic critics is refuted, an assumption that inherently favors the Alexandrian Text. At the same time, however, an assumption that the longer reading is to be preferred—an assumption that favors the Western Text—is equally without support.

How we evaluate external evidence

The Byzantine-priority method is not primarily concerned with how many manuscripts support a given reading, but with how these manuscripts interact over an extended portion of text (this involves what should be termed “transmissional considerations”). A textual sequence of readings, each supported by a reasonably significant number of manuscripts, suggests transmissional consistency. Readings that lack such a level of sequential transmissional support would therefore be suspect, and the sequence involved would not likely reflect the original

form of the text for that portion of Scripture. We will now look at several principles of external evidence accepted by the Byzantine-priority theory. (Again, these principles, in italics below, are taken directly from Robinson.)

External Evidence Principle 1: *The quantity of preserved evidence for the text of the New Testament rules out pure guesswork (conjectural emendation [see glossary]) regarding how a supposedly erroneous text originally might have been written.* Only presuming that the original wording of the text totally disappeared from among all existing witnesses (manuscripts, versions, church-father commentaries) can justify the use of conjectural emendation. Since the New Testament is more widely attested than any other piece of hand-copied literature from ancient times, there is no justification for such an approach when its text is being established.

External Evidence Principle 2: *Readings that appear only sporadically within transmissional history are suspect.* The root (the autographs) is expected to produce the branches (the transmissional outcome, i.e., the manuscripts that were copied throughout the centuries, whether still extant, lost, destroyed, or not yet discovered). This is the normal way a text is transmitted. In their growth and spread all subsequent generations of copies should deeply reflect the autographs.

- *A reading preserved in only a single manuscript, early translation or church-father commentary is highly suspect.* It is unreasonable to think that all but one manuscript have strayed from the original wording.
- *Readings preserved in only a few manuscripts are suspect.* The fewer the texts containing a given reading, the more suspect it is of not being original. Even if the reading is found in several manuscripts that form a small group or text type, that reading is still suspect, so long as that group of manuscripts or texttype remains smaller than a larger texttype.

External Evidence Principle 3: *Variety of testimony is highly regarded.* In other words, if evidence for a certain reading is found in diverse kinds of sources, that reading is more likely original than if evidence for that reading is found only in one kind of source. This principle has two parts, neither sufficient by itself to establish the text, but either of which lends support to a given reading.

- *A reading supported by various early translations and fathers demonstrates a wider variety of support than a reading lacking such.* The greater the variety of support, the better. But it is not sufficient that a reading is supported by various early translations and early fathers. Unless such a reading is evidenced in the **Greek** manuscripts, that reading is secondary.
- *Among Greek manuscripts, a reading found in manuscripts of differing texttypes is more strongly supported than that reading that is localized to a single texttype or family group.* The Byzantine Texttype benefits most frequently from this principle: that is, there are far more cases where a reading is found in both Alexandrian and Byzantine texts, or in both Western and Byzantine texts, than cases where a reading is found in both Alexandrian and Western texts but not in Byzantine texts.

External Evidence Principle 4: *Wherever possible, the raw number of manuscripts should be intelligently reduced.* It is possible to show genealogical relationships among some manuscripts. For counting purposes, each group or family should be counted as a unit. But it is not legitimate to impose a genealogy that presumes an entire texttype to be a single unit for counting purposes (as Byzantine-Texttype opponents tend to assume for it), while treating manuscripts of other texttypes as valuable individual witnesses.

The texttype that is assumed to be original on the basis of transmissional factors can be termed the “original textform”, i.e., the exact wording of the original manuscript as accurately as the evidence can determine it; from this textform all texttypes are derived. On this basis, the Byzantine Texttype alone becomes truly worthy of the designation “original textform.” All other competing forms of the text reflect (in order of declining size) “texttypes,” or “subtypes” or “families of manuscripts,” each of which ultimately developed transmissionally out of the single original textform.

External Evidence Principle 5: *Manuscripts still need to be “weighed” and not merely counted.* Though principle four above is true, all manuscripts still need to be categorized regarding their text-critical value, or “weight.” Basic to “weight” is how reliable a manuscript might be transcriptionally. For example, a later manuscript may preserve a much earlier form of the text; a well-copied manuscript may preserve an inferior form of the text; a poorly copied manuscript may preserve an otherwise superior form of the text. Therefore, a determination of individual scribal habits becomes very important. A scribe that shows a tendency for skipping

words or phrases (haplography) is of no value in determining whether inclusion or omission of a questionable word, phrase or verse was in the original, even though the same scribe may be accurate in relation to other kinds of variation, such as substitution or transposition. Though much importance historically has been attached to this principle, relatively little work has been done regarding the evaluation of the habits of individual scribes. More often than not, this principle is cited solely to discredit the Byzantine Textform, and nothing more.

External Evidence Principle 6: *It is important to seek out readings with demonstrable antiquity.* The age of a **manuscript** is not as significant as the age of the **text** that was copied on to that manuscript. Keep in mind that the age of a text is always older than the manuscript containing it—after all, the job of the scribe was to copy an old manuscript and thus make a newer one—and the age of a text is at least as old as the readings that are found in the text. Still, it is important to seek out the earliest known authentication for a particular reading within the existing evidence. When there is no early support for a given reading, it *may* be suspect; however, merely because a reading can be assigned an “early” date, it does *not* follow that it is any more likely to be “original” based on that fact alone.

How does one determine what is “early” and what “late”? In the nineteenth century, Westcott and Hort called many readings secondary (i.e., nonoriginal) and late. But manuscripts discovered since the time of Westcott and Hort—in particular among Egyptian papyri—proved many of those “late” readings to be extremely early. It now is well accepted that most, if not all, sensible readings very likely were in existence before the year AD 200; thus, we need to be careful when claiming a lack of antiquity for a given reading merely on the basis of the late date of manuscripts currently at our disposal containing that reading.

It is known and well accepted that some “late” manuscripts—even some manuscripts produced in the minuscule era, which began in the ninth century—have preserved early non-Byzantine readings or non-Byzantine types of texts. Is it then not reasonable to assume that some minuscule manuscripts containing a Byzantine type of text may also reflect a similar early character? If that is granted, we need to ask where we should draw the line of demarcation. There are valid reasons for considering all manuscripts extending into the late tenth or early eleventh century as containing an “early” text type with “early” readings.

How can this be? The following paragraphs explain this. There were two major transitions in the history of New Testament textual transmission (we call them “copying revolutions”) that may account for the fact that later manuscripts reflect much older texts. At these two points numerous ancient manuscripts were subjected to massive recopying efforts that replaced *en masse* their source manuscripts.

The first of these occurred when Emperor Constantine legitimized Christianity in AD 313 with the Edict of Milan. Overnight the church went from a persecuted minority to an approved entity with government sponsorship. Not coincidentally, the change of writing material from cheap and fragile papyrus to costly and durable vellum (noted earlier) increased dramatically at this time. Suddenly there was a new demand for the Scriptures and on vellum at that. This resulted in a frenzy of copying activity. It is likely that some churches made careful copies of their New Testament manuscripts on to expensive vellum, and then respectfully destroyed their old tattered papyrus manuscripts.

The significance of this first copying revolution is this: There are some uncial manuscripts that have a very similar text and were almost certainly copied from a common ancestor; E, F, G, and H comprise one such a set of closely related uncials, and another such set is S, U, V and Ω . There are also some relatively independent uncial manuscripts that were made as late as the ninth century. It is likely that all of these uncials were copied from early papyrus manuscripts. There is no more reason to doubt this than to doubt that the uncials Aleph ($\aleph$) and B were copied from early papyrus manuscripts. ($\aleph$ and B are two old uncial manuscripts that are highly preferred by eclectic textual critics of today.) If so, then *all* vellum uncials should be utilized when attempting to restore the original text of the New Testament.

The second copying revolution occurred in the ninth century (AD 800-900), when handwriting switched rapidly from uncial to minuscule script. Within 150 years uncial writing ceased to exist among continuous-text New Testament manuscripts. The impact of this second copying revolution was similar to the first: within a short span of years, uncial manuscripts of far earlier date were copied into the new popular script and then destroyed. This development, coupled with a revival of learning in the Byzantine world, caused scholars to seek a better text by going back to more ancient manuscripts. That this actually occurred is demonstrated by the existence of various minuscule manuscripts with acknowledged “early” (generally Alexandrian) types of text. It is therefore quite

possible that various "later" minuscule manuscripts may be separated from the original manuscript by a small number of copying generations, while some "earlier" uncial manuscripts or even papyri may be the result of many copying generations.

External Evidence Principle 7: *The concept of a single "best" manuscript or "best" small group of manuscripts is unlikely to have transmissional evidence in its favor.* Some poorly copied manuscripts can contain "good" texts, and carefully copied manuscripts can contain inferior texts. Within various texttypes some manuscripts will be more representative than others. All that being true, transmissional considerations tend to rule out the concept that a single manuscript or a small group of manuscripts holds a superior status. This principle holds true even for the set of manuscripts that support the Byzantine Textform. No one manuscript can be considered best.

External Evidence Principle 8: *The concept that we should rely exclusively on the oldest manuscripts or witnesses is flawed on the basis of transmissional considerations.* That the "oldest is best" is a fallacious principle, since later manuscripts may well preserve a text more ancient than that of earlier witnesses.

External Evidence Principle 9: *Transmissional considerations coupled with internal principles point to the Byzantine Textform as a significant force in the history of transmission.* The Byzantine Textform is not, before analysis, asserted to be the original form of the text or even the superior texttype. The conclusion follows only as a logical deduction from internal and external considerations regarding transmissional probabilities as viewed in an historical framework on a parallel with what is recognized in the transmission of other ancient works of antiquity.

"Note that the Byzantine-priority hypothesis can do nothing to resolve the many cases where the external evidence is divided and where no reading clearly dominates [the transmissional tradition]. In such cases, internal principles coupled with transmissional probabilities must be invoked to determine the strongest reading. Similarly, in many cases internal principles offer no clear decision, and external principles must take a leading role. Cases also exist where the manuscripts are divided and where internal evidence is not determinative, in which cases a reasonable scholarly estimate is the best that one can expect. [Note in passing, however, while there are cases where the reading of the original text is difficult to determine, almost all such cases concern minor details, and none significantly affects the basic integrity of the New Testament text as we have received it.]

"The primary rules for balancing internal and external evidence are simple, and are ordered in accordance with known facts regarding scribal habits: (1) one should evaluate [variant] readings with the intention of discovering [what in the process of transcribing would have caused an accidental variation]; (2) readings [also] should be considered in the light of possible intentional alteration; (3) finally, [competing units of variant readings] must be evaluated from a transmissional-historical perspective to confirm or modify preliminary assessments. The rigorous application of this methodology will lead to valid conclusions established on a sound transmissional basis. [This agrees] with what we [find by studying] scribal habits and the extant manuscript evidence [when] considered in [the] light of [the] transmissional process."

Some objections to the theory of Byzantine priority addressed

This elaboration of ideas underlying the Byzantine Textform necessarily supports that textform, and argues strongly for its transmissional priority over that of other texttypes. Yet there are some objections to the Byzantine-priority theory that should be discussed.

Objection 1: *There are no early Byzantine manuscripts prior to the fourth century.* There are several responses to this objection, the combination of which makes a strong reply.

- For classical works it has been noted that "the possibility exists that the extant copies (when few) do not accurately represent the original proportion [of variational types of the text]" [Bowers, *Bibliography*, 75]. Why not also for biblical texts? It is not only that no support for the Byzantine Texttype can be shown before the fourth century: the supporting manuscripts of the Alexandrian Texttype number only sixty-three papyri from those early years, and many of these are extremely fragmentary. Most of the more than 5000 manuscripts applicable to reconstructing the original form of the text date from later centuries.
- The two copying revolutions noted above seriously disrupted the transmissional stream. In the first revolution (fourth century), preexisting papyrus manuscripts were destroyed or otherwise abandoned. Similarly, in the second revolution, the need to preserve uncial manuscripts was effectively eliminated

once minuscule copies had been made. No manuscript is inherently preferable just because of its age, material or script, particularly when the genealogically independent early minuscules appear to stem from now-lost independent uncials, which themselves appear to stem from independent early papyri. The fact that there are no early pre-fourth-century Byzantine manuscripts should not be taken as too problematical.

- The local form of the text found in Egypt must be considered just that. It strains the imagination to suggest a situation in which the Egyptian Alexandrian text predominated in the primarily Greek-speaking regions of the empire during the first four centuries and then disappeared almost entirely. On the other hand, it is far easier to maintain that the Byzantine manuscripts, which dominate all later eras throughout the Byzantine Empire, must have descended from earlier manuscripts in that region, now lost due to the deteriorating effects of climatic conditions outside the deserts of Egypt.
- Most modern eclectics seem to assume an early dominance of a *non*-Byzantine text in those areas that later became the strongholds of Byzantine support. Byzantine advocates, in contrast, claim that later dominance as strong evidence for an earlier dominance in that same region. As texts spread geographically from their point of origin, closeness to “home” may have provided some built-in control regarding the integrity of the text. If there was any question about a certain reading, it was easy to check with the congregation that still had the original manuscript as long as one were not too far from that congregation, but with increasing distance this became increasingly difficult. Increasing distance would most likely loosen that integrity because of a greater likelihood of localized alteration in more remote regions. If so, the primarily Greek-speaking region during the period of “geographical silence” would be expected to retain a purer text—a text that in its New Testament origins primarily began to be transmitted from that region, whether due to localized authorship or localized recipients in that region and would have been carefully maintained there, even through the silent years—and then that text would show itself as clearly dominant once the solid evidence from that region had appeared. That text is the Byzantine Text.
- By analogy to the source-theories of the Synoptic Gospels, just as the so-called Q document (meaning ‘source’) is argued for strongly, though not a shred of evidence for its existence has ever come to light, why should virtually the same scholars adamantly deny the pre-fourth-century existence of the Byzantine Textform, even though there exists far more abundant evidence than for Q? Presuppositions and biases do not die easily.
- Codex Vaticanus (identified as B or 03 in all references/apparatuses) contains a text that is of the Alexandrian Texttype and dates from the fourth century. Prior to the discovery of the third century papyrus P⁷⁵ in 1955, there was no certain proof that the Alexandrian Text existed before the fourth century. But then, there it was. Similarly, opponents of Byzantine Textform originality cannot rule out the possibility of a similar find of a second or third-century Byzantine manuscript in the sands of Egypt. Yet, should such a find be forthcoming, it would probably still get the usual and expected reaction from Alexandrian-based textual critics, as only “containing” more “Byzantine-like” readings than other early documents, without actually being “Byzantine.”

Objection 2: *Major disruptions in transmissional history eliminated non-Byzantine predecessors.* Two such disruptions are normally cited, namely, the persecutions under Emperor Diocletian and the Muslim conquests of the seventh and following centuries. Though both of these are historically validated events, there is no likelihood that non-Byzantine texts would have been singled out for elimination any more than Byzantine texts. The people that were destroying Christian Scriptures during those two time periods would not have asked about the texttype before deciding to light the fire. Therefore, it would be expected that manuscripts would survive persecution in a proportion relative to their former frequency.

Objection 3: *The influence of Chrysostom (who lived AD 347-407) or other church leaders made the Byzantine the preferred text of Constantinople; this text later was imposed on the Eastern Greek church by imperial or ecclesiastical decree.* It is not reasonable that a single father, however popular and influential he may have been, could have introduced a new or localized text (the Byzantine being intended by its critics) and thus cause the abandonment of a previously dominant text (here presumed to be the Alexandrian Text). Furthermore, there is no evidence regarding a later imposition of a different textual basis by an imperial or ecclesiastical decree. Even if such had occurred, it would be difficult to imagine how the total replacement of a previously dominant text would

come about; but when the decree itself is imaginary, the claim totally breaks down. Furthermore, the Byzantine Texttype evidences internal differences, i.e., it is composed of several independent strains, a fact that is not easily explained by a single-event replacement theory.

Objection 4: *The Byzantine Textform is the result of a process that over the centuries steadily moved away from the original form of the text in the interest of smoothness, harmonization, grammatical and other “improvements.”* The support usually given to buttress this objection is two-fold: (1) scribes do not automatically copy accurately, as they would if they were computer-controlled, and (2) close agreement among a myriad of manuscripts is possible only when there is some “control.”

In answer to the first point: on the contrary, it has been demonstrated (Royse, Colwell, Head) that most scribes were generally careful and reasonably accurate in their copying.

As to the second: there is no demonstrable enforced unity within the Byzantine Textform manuscripts and no evidence for any early imposition of “controls.” Hodges has dismantled the process-through-centuries objection with a classic statement: “No one has yet explained how a long, slow process spread out over many centuries as well as over a wide geographical area, and involving a multitude of copyists, who often knew nothing of the state of the text outside of their own monasteries or *scriptoria*, could achieve this widespread uniformity out of the diversity presented by the earlier [Western and Alexandrian] forms of text.... An unguided process achieving relative stability and uniformity in the diversified textual, historical and cultural circumstances in which the New Testament was copied imposes impossible strains on our imagination” [Hodges and Hodges, *Implications*, 132].

Summary and conclusion

In the foregoing pages we have tried to simplify a portion of the rather technical discussion that underlies Byzantine-priority theory. In short summary, this approach is decisive in this writer's evaluation because of two overriding concerns.

First, the Byzantine-priority theory is just what it claims to be: a theory. A theory explains data, but is also accountable to the data. In modern eclecticism—the other main approach to textual criticism (though there are several schools of thought within that approach)—there is no theory, but much presumption. The Byzantine-priority theory is testable against the data and invites vigorous testing. At least here we have a theory. In the eclectic approach, although the data remain identical, it seems impossible to move from the data into a developed theory of the text. Thus the Byzantine-priority theory better meets the criteria of a theory than does eclecticism.

Second, this approach involves text. As speakers and writers—indeed as hearers and readers—of language, we process texts. Whether oral or written, texts have a history of transmission provided that they are recorded or memorized and passed on. To examine a text without a sense of its transmissional history is at best frustrating, at worst impossible. The extant Greek New Testament manuscripts are copies of original texts. And except for a small minority of manuscripts on the “fringes,” the vast majority of those copies contain a text that is remarkably consistent. That text has not been created for this moment, but has rather endured through long centuries in such a manner that every generation and century of the church has had a basic possession of that text, most generally in its clearly dominant form—that of the Byzantine Textform.

Note: the writer considers all quoted material to be understandable to the layman (except as altered and there noted by square brackets, []) and with good effect on the reader's understanding.

Timothy Friberg, PhD
January 2011, revised January 2018

This Layman's Guide has received generous corrective input from scholars—not all favorable to its purpose—and laymen over the five years of its refining. The thirty or so that have contributed are too many to acknowledge here, though that doesn't lessen my debt of gratitude to them. Suffice it here to name one as representative. Michael Martens has been a faithful and insightful editor over the many versions of this undertaking (and in both English and Indonesian) from the very beginning to this point. Even as I sought to clarify Byzantine priority theory, Michael has bested me by clarifying my attempt. Thank you, Michael.

Glossary:

apparatus the set of notes, usually at the bottom of a page of text, concerning manuscript readings found therein, intended to give in succinct form enough information for the reader to weigh the evidence for himself; examples of such apparatuses are those found in the UBS and Nestle-Aland Greek texts, in the Byzantine Greek text edited by Pierpont and Robinson and in the Majority Text edited by Hodges and Farstad

autograph literally, something made or written with one's own hand; derivatively, an original manuscript—not a copy

canonical relating to or forming a canon; **canon** literally, a measuring reed; 1. referring to the books of the New Testament that were accepted as authoritative by God's people; 2. a synonym for principle, as in such terms as principle (canon) of internal/external evidence

codex (plural **codices**) a manuscript book, bound on one edge (and thus an innovation from earlier single sheets and scrolls)

conflate (conflated, conflation) the combining of two or more readings of a given text as found in different manuscripts into a composite whole in another manuscript or manuscripts; for example, in text A the reading occurring is "He entered the house"; in text B the reading is "He sat in the house"; in text C the reading found is "He entered sat in the house"; the reading of text C is a conflation of the readings found in texts A and B

conjectural emendation correcting a text, not by choosing among alternate readings, but by inserting a scholarly conjecture—guesswork—without supporting evidence

cursive (writing) 1. a handwriting style in which the letters are generally rounded and flow one into the next; 2. a manuscript made in such handwriting; generally used interchangeably with "minuscule" when speaking of New Testament manuscripts

dittography writing a letter, a series of letters, a word or a line twice when it should be written once

eclectic 1. (adj) selecting what appears best from several alternatives; composed of elements drawn from various sources; every textual variant is decided on its own merit; 2. (noun) someone that uses such a method in his work

exemplar a manuscript used as a source text for copying a new manuscript

extant currently or actually existing; not destroyed or lost

external evidence that witness from the testimony of the manuscripts, early translations and comments of church fathers weighed to determine which reading has the best outside support (cf. **internal evidence** below)

haplography 1. writing a letter, a series of letters or a word once when it should be written twice; 2. also, any omissions that do not appear to be caused by **homoioleuton** or **homoioarcton**

homoioarcton a copying error caused when a scribe skips from one set of letters beginning a word or line to a similar set farther down the page, resulting in a loss of text in relation to the exemplar manuscript

homoioleuton a copying error caused when a scribe skips from one set of letters ending a word or line to a similar set farther down the page, resulting in a loss of text in relation to the exemplar manuscript

internal evidence those items that yield a certain degree of probability to the analyst; answers to questions asked regarding the original author or copying scribe, what he probably would have written, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in any given case (cf. **external evidence** above)

lampblack a finely powdered black soot, frequently taken from the chimneys of lamps, and used as pigment for making various types of ink

lectionary a book or list of lections for the church year; **lection** a liturgical lesson/reading for a particular day, comprising discrete portions of the New Testament text that are themselves manuscripts

manuscript (usually abbreviated **ms** in singular, **mss** in plural) [the word "manuscript" is to be distinguished from "text," which is the message contained on the physical medium; note the overlapping meanings of text and manuscript and our particular use of them in this glossary and essay]; 1. strictly speaking, the physical

material (papyrus or vellum, as the case may be) with a message written on it; what may be held, examined, read (for its message), copied, stored, worn out, lost or destroyed; 2. the kinds of writing style found on particular manuscripts sometimes substitute for the word manuscript that rightly accompanies it and is to be understood; for example, cursive (-written manuscript), uncial (-written manuscript), minuscule (-written manuscript); 3. the kinds of physical material constituting the manuscript sometimes substitute for the word manuscript that rightly accompanies it and is to be understood; for example, papyrus (manuscript), vellum (manuscript), parchment (manuscript)

minuscule 1. a more formal handwriting style developed from cursive, having simplified and small forms; 2. a manuscript made in such handwriting; generally used synonymously with “cursive” when speaking of New Testament manuscripts

papyrus (plural **papyri** or **papyruses**) 1. a plant found in marshes, particularly in the Nile River Valley; 2. writing material made from the pith of this plant, whether in single sheets or assembled scrolls; 3. a writing made on such writing material

parchment 1. the skin of an animal, usually sheep or goat, prepared as a material for writing; 2. often the writing made on this material

patristic of or relating to the early church fathers, as in patristic commentary

recension a revising of a text on the basis of a critical examination of sources; a text established by such a critical revision; **recensional** of or relating to a recension

reasoned transmissionism an attempt to determine the form of the autographs that weighs both internal and external evidence and recognizes the fact that the transmission of the text has a history

scriptorium (plural **scriptoria**) a copying room in medieval monasteries set apart for the scribes

stream of textual transmission the common flow of a transmitted text through multiple manuscripts; this stream can be narrow or wide, much as a stream or river, involving smaller or larger groupings of manuscripts

Synoptic Gospels the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so called because their content shares a common view; in counter-distinction to the Gospel of John

text (to be distinguished from “manuscript,” which is the physical medium [paper, ink, kind of letters] conveying the text; there is some overlap of meaning between manuscript and text, so, for purposes of this paper, we are here giving the meanings behind our vocabulary choices) 1. the message of the New Testament contained in Greek words of particular spellings, inflections and order; 2. what points to the text as contained in the original manuscript written by the initiating author 3. since the original manuscripts containing the original texts are now lost, what we try to reconstruct by comparing the various manuscripts extant; 4. the result of our efforts to reconstruct the text by comparing manuscripts; since our efforts will be ongoing, this sense of text is never quite final; 5. what was found written on the exemplar manuscript being copied by the scribe and transcribed to become another manuscript; 6. what is found on a given manuscript, to be read, examined, meditated on and, for professional scribes, to be transferred to a blank manuscript (virtually identical to 5. above; 5. refers to past time; 6. refers to present time); can refer to a single word or phrase all the way up through the entire manuscript being read/compared/reconstructed; the contents thereof; 7. what is accepted as original, what we try to arrive at through our textual criticism; scholars of differing points of view will differ on the wording at various points of this text and thus on the very text itself; 8. a shorthand way of referring to a “text type,” i.e., a grouping of manuscripts containing a text of specific characteristics; for example, Western Text, Caesarean Text; 9. what can be held in our hands, bound in a book, whether secular or spiritual, whether original or reconstructed

textform 1. the form of the text that most closely appears to reflect the original; 2. the earliest transmitted form of the text, equivalent to the autograph; in principle, advocates of any texttype may make that claim; it is usually, however, advocates of the Byzantine Texttype that use the term

texttype a grouping of manuscripts whose texts share some basic characteristics; larger than a family, but not having the status of textform; there are usually considered to be four major texttypes: the Alexandrian, the Byzantine, the Caesarean and the Western; frequently used almost interchangeably with text, for example, the Western Text or the Western type of texts, thus the Western Texttype

textual criticism the attempt to determine the original form of a text from more than one manuscript

Textus Receptus Latin for “Received Text” (abbreviated TR); the common text dating from the first printed Greek New Testament, first published by Erasmus in the early 1500s but going through various editions and revisions; the Textus Receptus was based on only a few Greek manuscripts, and although it is generally Byzantine in texttype, it differs from the Byzantine mainstream in numerous particulars; the King James translation was based on the Textus Receptus; advocates of Byzantine priority theory should not be confused with those that advocate a “Textus Receptus only” or “King James only” position

uncial 1. a handwriting style largely composed of capital letters, sometimes slightly rounded and nearly cursive; 2. a manuscript made in such handwriting

variant reading what is written as intended to be read; strictly, material read or meant to be read is a reading, whether a single word or the entire text; this comes to have special significance when two or more manuscripts give evidence of competing readings; the idea is to reconstruct the original reading, of which all others are variants; since scholars differ on what is to be reconstructed as original, in one sense all readings are variants one of another, competing for the status of “original”; from the thousands of manuscripts containing a particular passage, there are usually only two or three variant readings to be weighed, rarely upwards of ten; 94% of the text of the New Testament shows no variation whatsoever—that is, there is a unified text; on the other hand, the Alexandrian Text(type) and the Byzantine Text(type) differ from each other in some 6000 places

vellum 1. a fine-grained unsplit lambskin, kidskin or calfskin prepared especially for writing on; 2. often the writing done on such writing material

version usually an early translation of the Greek New Testament, whether into Coptic, Syrian, Gothic, Latin, etc.; **versional** of or relating to versions

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