



INTRODUCTION

A. DEFINITION

What did a book of the New Testament look like when it was first written? How were the books of the New Testament handed down through the centuries so as to reach us as we now know them? Can we safely conclude that the New Testament today accurately represents what the authors of these books originally wrote? These and related questions are considered in the study of the *textual criticism* of the New Testament.

Textual criticism is the study of copies of any written work of which the autograph (the original) is unknown, with the purpose of ascertaining the original text. Textual criticism is therefore not limited to the New Testament. It is a necessary study for almost any piece of literature which was written, and of which copies were made, before the invention of printing. The principles, moreover, are the same for the New Testament as for any other work, although there are additional factors, which will be discussed in due course, which modify the application of these principles in particular circumstances.

Textual criticism, which has sometimes been called “lower criticism,” must be distinguished from literary criticism, or “higher criticism.” While textual criticism seeks to determine the original wording of a document, literary criticism takes this original text and seeks to determine any sources which may underlie it. Textual criticism deals primarily with manuscripts;

literary criticism deals largely with elements such as style, vocabulary, and historical background.

B. PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

Only since the invention of printing a mere five centuries ago has it been easy to determine the original contents of a book. In our day we are able to take it for granted that the printed form of a book accurately represents the author's original manuscript (although minor errors appear even in printed books). We can also be certain that every copy of the same edition of a book will be exactly alike. Before the invention of printing, however—a period which includes three-fourths of the time the New Testament has been in existence—each copy of a document had to be made individually by hand. If a document was of any appreciable length it would be virtually certain that no two copies would be exactly alike and that no copy would be identical with the original.

If the original manuscript of a document is preserved, and is known, then of course textual criticism is not necessary for that document. Unfortunately, the originals of ancient literature, including the New Testament, have long since perished. Even if by some near-miracle one of these autographs should be discovered, it would have to be subjected to the principles of textual criticism in order to identify it as the original, and certainty might not even then be possible.

If copying a document by hand leads to *variants* (variations and errors in the text), then each subsequent copy will contain most of the variants of its "parent" copy plus some additional variants of its own. This means that a manuscript which is many copies removed from the original will normally contain more errors than one which is an immediate copy of the original or only a few copies removed. The difficulty is to know how many copies lie between a manuscript at hand and the original. For this reason, it is assumed that, in general, a later manuscript (e.g., one written in the tenth century) is probably separated

from the original by more intervening copies than is an older manuscript (e.g., one written in the fourth century). There are of course exceptions to this rule. A manuscript copied in the twelfth century might be six copies removed from the first-century original, while a manuscript copied in the ninth century might be twenty copies removed from the original. Yet since it is generally impossible to tell how many copies lie between a given manuscript and its original, the age of a manuscript must be presumed to give some indication of the number of copies which separate it from the original. This tentative judgment must then be weighed against other evidence derived from an examination of the text of the manuscript to reach a final decision concerning the accuracy of the text of the manuscript.

The probability that the original text of a document has been preserved in part depends upon two factors concerning the manuscripts. In the first place, the shorter the interval of time between the original document and the date when the earliest available manuscript (or manuscripts) was written, the more likely it is that only a few copies intervene between this manuscript and the original and therefore the greater the probability that the text of this manuscript accurately reflects the text of the original. In the second place, the greater the number of available manuscripts the greater is the probability that all of the original text has been preserved accurately among them. At the same time, the greater the number of manuscripts the greater will be the number of variants and hence the greater the complications in determining the true text from among the variant readings of the manuscripts.

Ideally, a chart illustrating the successive copies made from an original document would resemble a "family tree" showing the descendants of one person, as illustrated in Fig. 1. In actual practice, however, any manuscript in this genealogy may have been copied from two different manuscripts or may include readings or variants introduced from manuscripts other than the "parent" copy, which may give a picture more nearly resembling Fig. 2. The implications of this factor will appear later.

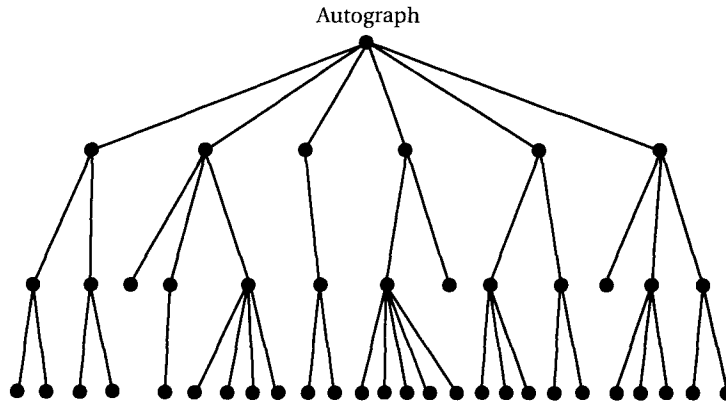


Figure 1

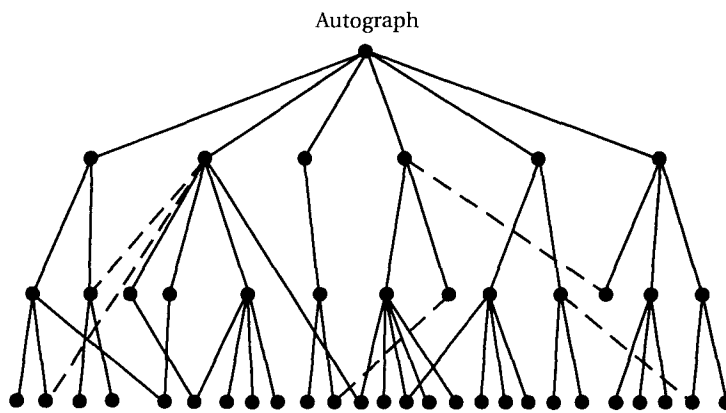


Figure 2

If all the copies which were made of a given original were extant (existing and known), it would no doubt be possible, in the ideal situation of Fig. 1, to place each MS (manuscript) in its proper place in the genealogy and to reconstruct the original with little hesitation. In actual fact, if many copies have been

made of an original, as is notably the case with the New Testament, only a very few of these copies will be extant, and the original must be reached by less direct means. This is especially true since there are other complicating factors as well, including that indicated by Fig. 2.

If examining the available MSS (manuscripts) fails to indicate satisfactorily the original text of a certain word or phrase, a scholar may resort to an "educated guess" known as *conjectural emendation*. In the case of literature where there are only a few extant MSS this procedure may sometimes be necessary. When large number of MSS are available, as in the case of the New Testament, conjecture is less often, if ever, necessary, and tends to become what Kenyon has called "a process precarious in the extreme, and seldom allowing anyone but the guesser to feel confidence in the truth of its results."¹

C. THE PLACE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Although the science of textual criticism is useful in the study of any piece of ancient literature, the most important branch of textual criticism is that which pertains to the New Testament. This is true for three interrelated reasons. In the first place, the NT is the most important piece of ancient literature. In the second place, the number of available MSS of the NT is overwhelmingly greater than those of any other work of ancient literature. In the third place, the earliest extant MSS of the NT were written much closer to the date of the original writing than is the case for almost any other piece of ancient literature.

The two latter points may be illustrated by a comparison. The plays of Aeschylus are known in some fifty MSS, the works of Sophocles in one hundred, the *Greek Anthology* and the *Annals* of Tacitus in one MS each, the poems of Catullus in three MSS of independent value, and there are a few hundred known

¹Frederic G. Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, 2d ed., 1926, p. 3.

MSS of works of Euripides, Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil. In the case of the NT, in sharp contrast, there are some 5000 extant MSS in Greek,² 8000 in Latin, and 1000 in other languages. As regards the time interval between the extant MSS and the autograph, the oldest known MSS of most of the Greek classical authors are dated a thousand years or more after the author's death. The time interval for the Latin authors is somewhat less, varying down to a minimum of three centuries in the case of Virgil. In the case of the NT, however, two of the most important MSS were written within 300 years after the NT was completed, and some virtually complete NT books as well as extensive fragmentary MSS of many parts of the NT date back to one century from the original writings.³

Since scholars accept as generally trustworthy the writings of the ancient classics, even though the earliest MSS were written so long after the original writings and the number of extant MSS is in many instances so small, it is clear that the reliability of the text of the NT is likewise assured.

D. THE AREA OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

In the NT and in other ancient literature as well, there is no question concerning the reading of most of the words. Textual criticism needs to operate in only a limited portion of the text. When one is engaged in this study, and the number and importance of the variants are made the center of attention, it is well to remember that the main body of the text and its general sense are left untouched and that textual criticism engages in turning a magnifying glass upon some of the details.

²These MSS vary greatly in the extent of their contents. About 200 contain all or most of the NT, about 50 contain all except the Gospels. Approximately 1500 contain part or all of the Gospels alone. A great number contain only part of a book or a few verses.

³At the same time, it must be admitted that the scribes who copied the MSS of the classics were normally more careful about accuracy of details than were the earliest copyists of NT MSS.

E. THE PRIORITY OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Textual criticism is the basic study for the accurate knowledge of any text. New Testament textual criticism, therefore, is the basic biblical study, a prerequisite to all other biblical and theological work. Interpretation, systematization, and application of the teachings of the NT cannot be done until textual criticism has done at least some of its work. It is therefore deserving of the acquaintance and attention of every serious student of the Bible.