

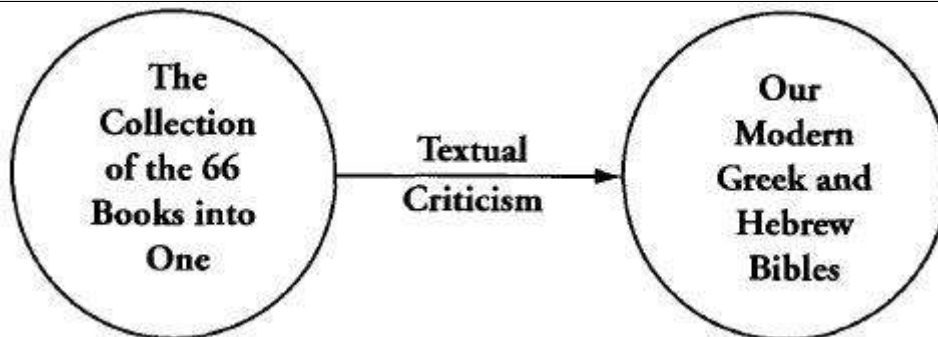
Part VI: TEXTUAL CRITICISM — Chapter Eight: Constructive Criticism

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<https://bible.org/seriespage/part-vi-textual-criticism-chapter-eight-constructive-criticism>

Preparing the Way

1. What is textual criticism?
2. How does lower criticism differ from higher criticism?
3. What are the two main problems of a textual critic?
4. How many original manuscripts of the Bible do we have today?
5. What are the two oldest complete manuscripts?
6. What is a textual variant?
7. There are 150,000 variants in the New Testament. True or false?
8. What doctrines are seriously affected by textual variations?
9. In what sense can we say that we have today the content of the original manuscripts?
10. What raging controversy in textual criticism today touches every one of us because of the influences in our translations?



Can I really trust my Bible? I have asked myself that question a hundred times. It is very important to me personally. Before I can stake my future on its teachings, before I can commit my life to obey it, I have to know, Is it really trustworthy? As a young man this question constantly haunted me. Having no answer would leave me in a state of limbo: neutral, uncommitted, insecure and frustrated. A negative answer would hurl me into a state of reckless despair. A positive answer would give me an anchor, a rudder, a compass and a course.

I have since discovered that such a dilemma is no unique experience. It is par for the course. Most thinking and sensitive Christians sooner or later enter into that valley of decision and wrestle with the trustworthiness of their Bible. How they emerge often determines the course of their lives.

This was certainly true of Billy Graham. As a young preacher of the gospel, he fought this very same battle. He loves to tell of that moment of triumph when, by God's great grace, he quietly accepted the Bible from God as His Holy Word, to believe it, to preach it and to live it. That step of faith set the direction for his life. It turned the tide in his ministry. It has affected the nations of the earth. How we have all thrilled to his decisive and dynamic declarations, "The Bible says...." In the final analysis, of course, every such decision is a step of faith. But faith is not blind. It is not

Our interest in this chapter is not in the higher critic, but in the lower critic, the textual critic. This critic has served us well. And yet the work has not been easy.

II. A Double Distress

The textual critic in every age has faced two major problems. Initially they appear insurmountable. To many Christians, uninitiated into the problems of the text, they at first are very disturbing. Opponents of the Scriptures constantly revert to them for ammunition in their assaults on the reliability of the Bible. We must know and understand both problems if we ever are to be able to give an answer to an anxious enquirer, or to contend earnestly for the faith with an antagonist. It will surely go a long way toward establishing your faith and confirming you in it too. Now, what are these two problems?

A. THE PROBLEM OF NO ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS

As a matter of fact, the situation is even worse than this. The earliest complete extant Hebrew manuscript is dated at the eleventh century A.D. That is fourteen centuries after the closing of the Old Testament canon! Here are fourteen hundred years of constant copying by hand, fourteen hundred years for errors to creep into our manuscripts.

The situation is somewhat better in the case of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. The earliest complete extant manuscript in this category is dated at A.D. 350. Once again, however, we have 250-300 years of copying, often under the poorest of circumstances. Imagine the potential for errors to creep into the text.

Does this disturb you? We cannot ignore it. These are the facts. Now we can see the imperative for textual criticism. How this helps us appreciate the immense task of the textual critics. They are seeking to hurdle several silent centuries to recover for us the original text.

I have had this problem hurled at me dozens of times by college students, businessmen, skeptics and atheists. Some are serious seekers; others are vocal opponents. Their charge cannot be quickly dismissed. We claim to have an inerrant authoritative word from God on matters of creed and conduct, yet we have no original manuscripts of the word and there are actually hundreds of years between the alleged original and the extant manuscripts. This cannot be simply ignored.

In answer to the problem of no original manuscripts three points must be made.

First, there are no original manuscripts available for any writings of antiquity. Did you realize this? We have not one original manuscript of the writings of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero or any other writer of antiquity.

Author	Writing	Date	No. of Manuscripts	Years between Original & Extant
Caesar	Gallic War	58-50 B.C.	9-10 good	900
Tacitus	History, 14 books	A.D. 100	4?	800-1000
Tacitus	Annals, 16 books	A.D. 100	10	800-1000
Thucydides	History	460-400 B.C.	8	1300

After surveying this evidence, F. F. Bruce concludes:

Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.¹

We do not need to be apologetic about the Bible. No piece of ancient literature can make the claim of an extant original.

Second, there are significant parts of both the Old and New Testament dated many centuries earlier than the first complete manuscript. The John Rollins papyrus of [John 18:31-33](#) and 37-38 is probably the earliest fragment of any part of the New Testament. It dates back to A.D. 140.

Third, there is a vast abundance of biblical manuscripts available to us today for our study. There are more than 5,300 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament alone. Think of it. In addition to these, the textual critic has thousands of versions: 8,000 of the Latin Vulgate and another 1,000 of early translations into Egyptian, Syrian, etc. Add to these the many quotations from the New Testament in the writings of the church fathers of the first two centuries. It is estimated that much of the New Testament could be reproduced from the quotations of these early fathers alone. Still more early information is available from the lectionaries—the reading lessons in public church services.

Sir Fredric Kenyon, a world-renowned scholar in this field says:

The interval then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence, becomes so small as to be in fact, negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.²

It is clearly apparent then, to any careful reader that no writing of the ancient world is nearly as well-documented bibliographically as the New Testament. The problem of no original manuscripts is no problem to the average Christian today. It remains a problem for the textual critic alone, and thanks to the abundance of early manuscripts that problem can be virtually eliminated. But what about the other problem?

B. THE PROBLEM OF ERRORS

Because the printing press was not invented until the fifteenth century, the early copies of the manuscripts were made by scribes, professional copiers. In the process however, many errors were made by these scribes. Some were unintentional, others were intentional. Whatever, they are a major problem for the textual critic. Perhaps it will help you appreciate their problem if we pause for a moment to consider how these errors crept into the copied manuscripts.

First, some errors were unintentional. There were errors of sight when a scribe would skip a line or a phrase, or would confuse letters that were similar in form. After the fourth century the scriptorium emerged—a room where scribes sat at desks copying a manuscript that was dictated to them. Errors of hearing crept into the text as the scribes misunderstood words that sounded alike. Often there were errors of the mind as well. A lapse of concentration between hearing or reading and recording what they heard or read, resulted in reversed word order, transposed letters and even substituted synonyms. All such errors were unintentional, of course. They must be attributed to the frailty of the flesh. Not so, however, with the second category.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (London: The InterVarsity Fellowship, 1950), pp. 16, 17.

² Sir Fredric Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1940), pp. 288, 289.

Second, other errors were intentionally made by conscientious and pious scribes who had nothing but the best of intentions. Sometimes they were attempting to harmonize parallel passages such as the Gospel accounts of identical events. For example, we know one scribe added “It was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek” to his copy of [Luke 23:38](#) to make it agree with [John 19:20](#). In other instances intentional changes were made in grammar to correct what the scribe supposed was a grammatical error (see [Revelation 1:4](#)). Occasionally changes were made for theological purposes. One scribe left “neither the Son” out of his copy of [Mark 13:32](#) because it appeared to him that to say even the Son did not know the day of His coming was to deny the deity of Christ. Such errors were made intentionally by scribes with the highest of motives.

Project Number 3

Consider the variants in the following texts. Is it intentional or unintentional? Into which sub-category does each one fall?

[Revelation 1:5](#)—to loose or to wash.

[1 Corinthians 6:20](#)—the last phrase of the verse.

[John 19:14](#)—some manuscripts read the “third” hour.

[Acts 9:5, 6](#) and 26:14, 15—See the KJV and NASB.

Now, note this very carefully. Strictly speaking, such changes in the copies are not errors. They are *variants*—variations that have crept into copies of manuscripts. There are about 150,000 textual variants or various readings! The work of the textual critic is to identify the variants and to recover the original reading.

Lest we misunderstand, however, and discredit the work of the scribes, we must consider the extreme care of these ancient copies. They so revered the text of Scripture that they went to unbelievable lengths to preserve its exact words. They actually counted not only the words but every letter in the Old Testament and made records as to where and how often each letter was found.

Sidney Collett helpfully points out the care that was taken:

Moreover, each new copy has to be made from an approved manuscript, written with a special kind of ink, upon sheets made from the skin of a “clean” animal. The writers also had to pronounce aloud each word before writing it, and on no account was a single word to be written from memory. They were to reverently wipe their pen before writing the name of God in any form, and to wash their whole body before writing “Jehovah,” lest that holy name should be tainted even in the writing. The new copy was then carefully examined with the original almost immediately; and it is said that if only one incorrect letter were discovered the whole copy was rejected!

The Rev. J. P. Smyth tells how one rabbi solemnly warned a scribe thus, “Take heed how thou doest thy work, for thy work is the work of heaven, lest thou drop or add a letter of the manuscript, and so become a destroyer of the world!”³

One check on the accuracy of the New Testament manuscripts was by means of measuring the number of lines in a manuscript. Bruce Metzger points out that several manuscripts speak of 2,560, 1,616, 2,750 and 2,024 lines respectively for the four Gospels. This, by the way, implies the presence of [Mark 16:9-20](#), and the absence of [John 7:53-8:11](#), in those writings.⁴

³ Sidney Collett, *All About the Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1959), p. 15.

⁴ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 16.

In the scriptoria of the monasteries, certain rules and penalties were enforced to secure a high degree of accuracy in copying. Somewhere I came across the following example of such regulations prepared for the renowned monastery of the Stadium at Constantinople.

About A.D. 800, the abbot of this monastery, Theodore the Studite, who was himself highly skilled in writing an elegant Greek hand, included in his rules for the monastery severe punishments for monks who were not careful in copying manuscripts. A diet of bread and water was the penalty set for the scribe who became so much interested in the subject matter of what he was copying that he neglected his task of copying. Monks had to keep their parchment leaves neat and clean, on penalty of 130 penances. If anyone should take without permission another's quaternion (that is, the ruled and folded sheets of parchment), fifty penances were prescribed. If anyone should make more glue than he could use at one time, and it should harden, he must do fifty penances. If a scribe broke his pen in a fit of temper (perhaps after having made some accidental blunder near the close of an otherwise perfectly copied sheet), he had to do thirty penances.

In spite of such dedication and discipline, "errors" or variants did creep into the manuscripts as they were copied by hand before the days of the printing press.

Here is the double distress of the textual critic. There are no original manuscripts and there are 150,000 New Testament textual variants. It is toward resolving the difficulties raised by these problems that the textual critics devote their scholarly lives. How effective have they been?

III. The Results

The results of textual criticism are most helpful. Thanks to copyists' diligent work and God's providence in making available so many manuscripts, their variants can be easily detected and, as a rule, corrected by the reading of other manuscripts.

While the number of various readings is large, and therefore disturbing to many Christians, the facts are really very reassuring.

Of the 150,000 various readings, we are now able to discuss nineteen-twentieths. No textual critic regards them as having any serious claim to reception. This leaves us with about 7,500.

Nineteen out of twenty of these remaining variations are matters of word order, grammar and spelling. They do not concern the meaning of the text in any way.

Now we have remaining about 400 variations. Sometimes it is omission or addition of words. They make no difference in the meaning of the text, and are the objects of curiosity and interest. A very few exceptional cases may be considered important.

In dealing with the majority of these exceptional areas, we have such an abundance of excellent critical helps that textual critics are able to determine the original and true text with a high degree of confidence.

Philip Schaff, in *Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version*, concluded that only 400 of the 150,000 caused doubt about the textual meaning and only 50 of these were of great significance. Not one of the variations, Schaff says, altered "an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching."⁵

Geisler and Nix say, concerning the observation of F. J. A. Hort:

Only about one-eighth of all the variants had any weight, as most of them are merely mechanical matters such as spelling or style. Of the whole then, only about one-sixtieth rise above

⁵ Philip Schaff, *A Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1883), p. 177.

“trivialities,” or can in any sense be called “substantial variations.” Mathematically this would compute to a text that is 98.33 percent pure.⁶

F. J. A. Hort says that apart from insignificant variations of grammar or spelling, not more than one thousandth part of the New Testament is affected by differences of reading.⁷

These witnesses adamantly affirm the reliability of our Greek New Testament text. The same can be said for our Old Testament text. Paul Little wrote:

In 1947, the world learned about what has been called the greatest archeological discovery of the century. In caves, in the valley of the Dead Sea, ancient jars were discovered containing the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls. From these scrolls, it is evident that a group of Jews lived at a place called Qumran from about 150 B.C. to A.D. 70. Theirs was a communal society, operated very much like a monastery. In addition to tilling the fields, they spent their time studying and copying the Scriptures. It became apparent to them that the Romans were going to invade the land. They put their leather scrolls in jars and hid them in caves in the side of the cliffs west of the Dead Sea.

In the providence of God, the scrolls survived undisturbed until discovered accidentally by a wandering Bedouin goat herdsman in February or March of 1947. The accidental discovery was followed by careful exploration, and several other caves containing scrolls have been located. The find included the earliest manuscript copy yet known of the complete book of Isaiah, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. In addition, there is a fragmented copy containing much of [Isaiah 38-66](#). The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found, along with two complete chapters of Habakkuk. A number of nonbiblical items, including the rules of the ancient community, were also discovered.

The significance of this find, for those who wonder about the accuracy of the Old Testament text, can easily be seen. In one dramatic stroke, almost 1,000 years were hurdled in terms of the age of the manuscripts we now possess. By comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Massoretic text, we would get a clear indication of the accuracy, or lack of it, of transmission over the period of nearly a millennium.⁸

What was actually learned? In comparing the Qumran manuscripts of [Isaiah 38-66](#) with the one we had, scholars found that “the text is extremely close to our Massoretic text. A comparison of [Isaiah 53](#) shows that only 17 letters differ from the Massoretic text. Ten of these are mere differences of spelling, like our “honor” or “honour,” and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction, which is often a matter of style. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for “light” which is added after “they shall see” in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the sense of the passage. This is typical of the whole manuscript.”⁹

This is but a sample of the evidence that could be marshalled in defence of the reliability of our Old Testament Hebrew manuscripts.

Therefore, for all practical purposes, although we do not have the original manuscripts, we can say that we have the *content* of the original manuscripts in our modern Hebrew and Greek Bibles.

⁶ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968), p. 365.

⁷ B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort (eds.), *New Testament in Original Greek* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1881), Vol. II, p. 2.

⁸ Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1967), pp. 41, 42.

⁹ Laird R. Harris, *How Reliable Is the Old Testament Text? Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1963), p. 124.

It is surely obvious, then, that in spite of having no original manuscripts and of having many variants in our available manuscripts, the substance of our Bible is very reliable. As with no other book of antiquity there is an abundance of manuscripts, translations and quotations from which our textual critics are able to affirm the content of the originals.

Although we have considered the two primary problems encountered in textual criticism, today there still remains however, lurking in the shadows, a third problem. A brief exposure to it here will pave the way for our study of translations in the upcoming chapter.

IV. A Raging Controversy

A short time ago a devout evangelical pastor stepped into his pulpit to announce to his Sunday morning congregation that the only Bible to be used in the teaching of their church was the King James Version. His proclamation sent a shock wave through the crowd.

Last year a friend of mine candidating for a ministry in a mid-west evangelical church, was rejected because he used a modern version of the Scriptures in his preaching.

While speaking at a Bible conference a year or two ago, a humble and faithful servant of the Lord poured out his broken heart to me. He had just been called a heretic. The charge? He was using a modern translation. His accuser was a loyal supporter of the King James Version who had launched a crusade in their church that threatened its very unity.

What is all the fuss about anyway?

Simply stated, the debate is between the oldest Greek texts and the majority Greek texts. The majority text is the Greek text found in the host of later manuscripts that formed the basis of Erasmus's Greek New Testament, and ultimately the King James Version. Since the publication of the Authorized Version in A.D. 1611, some much older manuscripts have been discovered, notably codex Sinaiticus and codex Vaticanus, both of the fourth century. In addition, papyri of the New Testament have been discovered that are dated in the third century. The differences between the Received Text, which formed the basis of the Authorized Version, and the older manuscripts has erupted into a controversy—in some circles, a very heated controversy.

The question is this, *Which text is the better text, the more reliable and authentic text—the majority text or the older text?* The overwhelming opinion of scholarship today is in favour of the older text.¹⁰ The oldest manuscripts are today commonly classified as “the best manuscripts.”

The discovery of many older manuscripts, and the above conclusion of textual criticism, have led to many revisions of the English Bible. Some of the changes in the text and explanatory notes in the margin of these revisions become intelligible only upon understanding this controversy in textual criticism. It may be of help to consider one or two examples.

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. (1 John 5:7 AV)

Yet this great “trinitarian witness,” as it is frequently called, is omitted entirely from the New American Standard Bible and most other modern translations. Why? Because there is no support for it whatsoever from the older manuscripts. Actually the oldest witness to it comes from a Latin treatise of the fourth century. It does not appear in the Vulgate until after A.D. 800. It was not included in the first and second edition of Erasmus's New Testament (1516, 1519) because he said there was no Greek witness whatsoever for its support. In the midst of protests, Erasmus promised to include it in his next edition if he could find one Greek witness. A manuscript appeared in 1520, and Erasmus was compelled to include it in his third edition (1522) with the footnote that he believed the manuscript had been expressly prepared to confute him. From this third edition of

¹⁰ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 124-146.

Erasmus, it found its place in the Received Text and the Authorized Version. But where was the support? Older manuscripts recently discovered have confirmed it to be unauthentic. It is therefore omitted from the text of most revised versions. This in no way affects the doctrine, of course. The truth of the Trinity rests upon the broad foundation of both the Old and New Testament ([Gen. 1:26](#); [Isa. 9:6](#); [Matt. 28:18-20](#); [John 10:30](#), etc.).

Consider a second example:

For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. ([John 5:4](#) AV)

Yet, once again, this verse is omitted from the text of the New American Standard Bible and most modern translations. Why? It is not found in the older and “better” manuscripts. It is missing from two early papyri, P66 (about A.D. 200) and P75 (early third century), and from both codex Vaticanus and codex Sinaiticus of the fourth century.

In all likelihood this verse originally was an explanatory note placed by some scribe in the margin of his manuscript. In the course of time it was eventually incorporated into the text itself as a helpful explanation of the incident. But there is no evidence from the earliest manuscripts that it was part of the original text. For this reason it is omitted from the modern translations, which are based upon the older manuscripts. It is this kind of thing that has unsettled many Christians, and occasioned many attacks against newer translations. The controversy is a matter of textual criticism.

Project Number 4

1. What is the textual problem in [Acts 8:37](#)? How do you explain this problem?
2. Consider carefully the textual problem of [Mark 16:9-20](#). What is the problem? How do you explain it?

Can I really trust my Bible? According to our textual critics: absolutely. They offer reassurance upon reassurance. How grateful to God we must be for the contributions of such scholars. And yet, you might protest, their product is the Greek and Hebrew Bible. Ours is the English Bible. Can the same thing be said for it? Just how reliable is it? Can I hold it in my hand and point to it as the Word of God? This question drives us to the next stage in the process. It takes us beyond the work of textual criticism to the science of translation.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Prepare a concise book review of *Which Bible?* by David Otis Fuller. (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1971). Fuller argues in support of the Received Text—the King James Version. How would you evaluate his case?

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