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978-0-521-71989-6 - An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts

D. C. Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Textual criticism and editing of the New Testament have changed dramatically in the last quarter of a century. It is rather more than thirty years since I began my first researches in the field, and during this period of time I have had to learn new approaches in most of the things which I do. There are four main causes for this. Foremost among them is the introduction of the computer. In the last fifteen years the techniques of collecting manuscript evidence, analysing it, and making a critical edition have all undergone their greatest transformation. Secondly, the study of manuscripts has undergone significant changes. It has become plainer than ever before that the examination of manuscripts and of the variant readings which they contain is more than a means to recover a lost original text – it has also a part to play in the study of the development of Christian thought and in the history of exegesis. Thirdly, the publication of new manuscript discoveries continues to challenge traditional views of textual history and of the copying of texts. Fourthly, a number of research tools have been published which place far larger and better resources at the scholar's disposal than were ever available before. Nor does there seem to be any likelihood of the pace of change slackening in the near future. The advent of digital imaging heralds a new era, in which scholars and students everywhere will be able to view pictures of any page in any manuscript.

With these developments there are signs of a greater variety of scholarship in the field of textual studies. There is and always will be the need for the traditional textual critic, strong on philology and attentive to detail; and anyone working in the field will be wise to nurture these virtues. But there are now also researchers with speed and fluency in electronic media who are bringing new ideas and new skills to the discipline. So long as textual criticism was perceived (largely from outside) solely as the task of restoring an original text, it was always going to be practised only by a few specialists, since there are pragmatic and

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D. C. Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

The New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts

commercial reasons why very few editions of the Greek New Testament are made in any generation. Now that it is rightly seen as so much more than this, there are opportunities for many more researchers.

Textual criticism has been rather unsuccessful at publicising these changes. The first ports of call, the natural books to go on a student reading list, tend to present ‘business as usual’, describing things very much as they have been for several generations but are no longer. This book offers an account of textual criticism today. I have tried to write a book with as original a shape and as fresh a content as possible. I am more interested in explaining the questions than in providing the answers, with the result that I have regularly become distracted into various exciting forays. The consequence is that this book contains some original research as well as summaries of the state of affairs.

I hope to communicate the excitement of research in this field, the achievements of past and modern scholarship, the beauty and fascination of manuscripts, the intellectual challenges of textual criticism, the opportunities for research, and the significance of what we are doing for colleagues working in other fields of New Testament study, history and theology, as well as for the criticism of other texts.

Some definitions:

1. ‘Document’

The word ‘document’ is sometimes used to describe what in this book is called a ‘text’. Properly speaking, a document refers to an artefact. Documents such as charters or autograph letters easily give their own definition to the texts which they contain. In this book, ‘document’ means a manuscript. The following quotation underpins not only this definition, but the entire concept of the book:

The first step towards obtaining a sure foundation is a consistent application of the principle that KNOWLEDGE OF DOCUMENTS SHOULD PRECEDE FINAL JUDGEMENT UPON READINGS.

The source of this (the part in capitals is often quoted) is one of modern textual criticism’s key texts, Westcott and Hort’s introduction to *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (p. 31). The meaning of the quotation is this: before deciding which of one or more different wordings is likely to be the source of the others, the scholar should know about the character and nature of the documents which contain the different wordings. They go on to write that ‘If we compare successively the readings of two documents in all their variations, we have ample materials for ascertaining the leading merits and defects of each’ (p. 32).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

This book follows not only the implication of Hort's famous dictum but also the example of many predecessors by beginning with an introduction to the study of the manuscripts of the New Testament, in particular those in Greek and the oldest languages into which it was translated. The focus will be on two ways of studying a document: as a physical item, of a particular size, format, age, and so forth, and as what will be called a 'tradent' of the text or texts which it contains. The former belongs to the discipline of palaeography, the latter to textual criticism. It is possible to be a palaeographer and to study the documents almost to the virtual exclusion of the texts they contain. The results of such research will be valuable to the textual scholar. But to concentrate on the text without studying the documents will produce a far less satisfactory result, as will become apparent. This distinction between the documentary and the textual may seem surprising, since it seems obvious that the only purpose of a book is to be a copy of a particular text. In fact, at all levels of interest and knowledge, there are books whose main significance lies not in their textual but in their physical characteristics. The Lindisfarne Gospels, for example, is a ninth-century Latin manuscript in the British Library which for many people has a significance independent of its contents. They may appreciate it as a superb representative of Northumbrian art even though they know no Latin and nothing of the contents. The same is true of the Book of Kells: visitors queue in the library of Trinity College Dublin to see this manuscript alone, although there are in the same place other copies of the same texts which are textually much more significant. In fact, some of the most admired pages of both of these manuscripts contain no text at all. These remarkable examples demonstrate vividly how compelling the physical characteristics of a document may be. To the palaeographer every manuscript has its attractions. The textual scholar should feel the same.

The use of the word 'document' in this book illustrates the differences between the world of manuscript transmission and the world of the printed book. If we go to buy a book, the shop will contain a number of identical copies of the text, and we will know that whichever we choose, it will contain exactly the same text. By contrast, the documents with which we are dealing are all unique items, both physically and in the wording of the text. Even on the rare occasions when we can identify copies by the same scribe, the modern eye will be struck as much by the differences between them as by the similarities. These differences may be immediately obvious in the layout of the text on the page, or in the details of the presentation. A more careful study of the text will reveal places where this manuscript contains sequences of wording not found elsewhere. In fact, it

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D. C. Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

The New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts

will contain variant readings. Whether any text exists in an identical form in two documents I could not know without reading every copy of every text until I found one. But (except if it were very short) I do not believe that I would find any.

Westcott and Hort. For the Lindisfarne Gospels, see, e.g., J. Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, Oxford, 1981; for the Book of Kells, P. Brown, *The Book of Kells*, London, 1980.

2. 'Variant reading'

A working definition of a variant reading is that it is 'a place where the wording exists in more than one form'. This is a statement about the text. The statement that 'each manuscript contains a unique form of the text' is a description of the same phenomenon. But this wording draws our attention to the fact that variant readings occur as a part of the text as it is contained in a single manuscript, much of which will be in common with that found in other documents. If we consider the concept of a variant reading from this point of view, a variant reading should be defined as 'the entire text as it is present in a particular copy'. This primary definition must be borne in mind as a principle when the term is being used normally. Because two copies of a text will have wording in common between them, in practice a variant reading describes the places where the common text ceases, and each has its own form. 'Variant reading' is in fact a simple tool for breaking down the differences between two or more copies into manageable units.

An example taken at random: John 7.40 is found as follows in two of the oldest copies:

ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου οὖν ἀκούσαντες αὐτοῦ τῶν λόγων ἔλεγον ἀληθῶς οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ προφήτης (Codex Sinaiticus, fourth century)

ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου οὖν ἀκούσαντες τῶν λόγων τούτων ἔλεγον ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης (Codex Vaticanus, fourth century)

We could express the differences as a single variation. But for practical purposes it is easier to treat them as three variations:

- (1) either αὐτοῦ τῶν λόγων or τῶν λόγων τούτων (which could in fact be treated as two variants, the one being the presence or absence of αὐτοῦ and the other the presence or absence of τούτων)
- (2) the presence or absence of ὅτι
- (3) either ἀληθῶς οὗτός ἐστιν or οὗτος ἐστιν ἀληθῶς

Stating the differences like this breaks them into simple units, and avoids stating the pieces of wording where the two copies agree (ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου

οὖν ἀκούσαντες, ἔλεγον and ὁ προφήτης). It also makes it easier to express the differences between more copies. The Nestle–Aland critical apparatus records that there are three possible openings to this verse:

Ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου οὖν

or

Πολλοὶ ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου

or

Πολλοὶ οὖν ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου

It was convenient to the editors of this edition to present the evidence in this way. But this presentation, with three variant forms of these words, is not the only possible way of describing the variation. It would also be possible to define it as two variants: the presence or absence of πολλοί and the presence (in a choice of locations) or absence of οὖν. How differences between documents are presented is the choice of the editor. The differences certainly exist, but there is more than one way of describing them. The only definition of a variant reading which is not pragmatic is that which defines it as the entire text. So I repeat: a variant reading is to be defined as ‘the entire text as it is present in a particular copy’.

3. ‘The New Testament’

While the previous paragraphs have tried to provide a rather careful definition of some terms, they have not been so precise in the use of the word ‘text’ with regard to the New Testament. It is common to speak about ‘The Bible’ and even ‘The New Testament’ as though one was speaking about a single text by a single author. But the New Testament is not a single text by a single author. Nor is it the apparent alternative, a collection of texts each with its own author. It is in fact a hybrid, being a collection which may be subdivided in various ways. One could see it as composed of three collections of texts:

Four Gospels

Seven Catholic letters and fourteen letters attributed to St Paul

Two single texts (the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation to John).

Or one could divide it by traditional authorship:

St John: one Gospel, three epistles and Revelation

Luke: one Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles

Mark: one Gospel

and so on.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

As it happens, traces of both of these understandings may be found in the manuscripts. The important thing to note is that the sets of texts may be described in various ways. Each of the texts included in the Greek and western canon of twenty-seven books is (and I am trying to pick my words carefully) a separate literary creation. Each of them therefore once existed as a separate document, and some of them survive in separate documents. But most of them were made into collections, notably the Gospels and two sets of epistles, one of them including Acts. These collections were sometimes brought together in larger compilations, most commonly comprising Acts and the two sets of epistles, sometimes with the Gospels as well, and occasionally (rarely) even Revelation.

For too long have broad generalisations been made about these texts and sets of texts under the heading 'the textual criticism of the New Testament'. There is no longer such a thing, unless as a useful definition of a field of research, as opposed to the textual criticism of Homer or Shakespeare. It is true that some aspects of the study of these twenty-seven books are very similar. But so would textual criticism of the New Testament have similarities of approach to the textual criticism of any early Christian writer, such as Origen or Augustine, as well as differences from it. Nothing more than the broadest of generalisations can be applied to all of these twenty-seven texts together. For the following reasons, a textual criticism of the entire New Testament cannot be practised, and must be replaced with a separate treatment of the different texts and sets of texts:

- (1) The first reason is their differences in literary character, which had a strong influence on the way in which each text and collection was copied. For example, it is inevitable that the Gospels should be especially liable to confusion between each other, but this confusion is greater between the Synoptic Gospels, while John, which is less similar to the other three than they are to each other, is less affected. The unique content and narrative of the Acts of the Apostles is partially responsible for the fact that the textual situation is also unique.
- (2) These different texts had different uses within early Christianity, which influenced the way in which they were copied. The absence of Revelation from the Byzantine lectionary is one reason why there are far fewer surviving copies, but the fact that it so often circulated with a commentary attached locates many of the copies within the textual tradition of the several commentaries.

- (3) A complete New Testament as a single document containing all the books was always a rarity in the ancient world (see 1.8). The vast majority of manuscripts contain only one of the four sections. In practice, it is therefore rather misleading even to speak of them as manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. They are better described as Gospel manuscripts, or manuscripts of Paul's letters, or whatever larger combination they might contain.
- (4) Since behind the three collections and Revelation lie various previous forms of collections and single texts, one has to be careful even in making general statements about all members of any of the smaller collections.

As a result of these differences in literary character, function within Christianity, and history of copying, I consider the phrase 'The Textual Criticism of the New Testament' to be a misleading one. This work therefore adopts a different approach. Having described the manuscripts and other materials for research in Part I and after an introduction to textual criticism in Part II, Part III will be in four sections, each of them devoted to a section of the New Testament. Revelation will be taken first, because it provides the easiest approach to textual criticism, and its history is most fully understood. This will be followed by the Pauline letters, Acts and the Catholic letters, and finally the four Gospels.

Having read this argument, the reader may be surprised that I continue to refer to the New Testament. I reply that to avoid it would be to overstate my case. I freely admit that to describe the documents as 'documents of the New Testament' is to overlook the real differences in content between them and that to describe the texts as 'New Testament texts' is to ignore the fact that while they *became* New Testament texts, they were not so in the beginning. At the same time, it would be pedantic to avoid 'the New Testament' entirely, perhaps with a phrase such as 'the writings later known as', or 'what was to become the New Testament', or 'manuscripts of some or all of the New Testament'. Sometimes I refer to the text of the New Testament simply for the sake of convenience.

The inclusion of both *manuscripts* and *texts* in the title is important. If one were to restrict the study of the documents to the texts which they contain, it would be possible to limit their use to the practice of textual criticism, that is to the study of variant readings and their placing in a chronology by which one, therefore to be adjudged the oldest, accounted for the formation of the others. But documents consist of more than the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

texts they contain, and their layout, their design and the material of which they are made, their ink and script, their marginalia and the ornamentation, paintings and bindings with which they may have been adorned all provide evidence about cultural as well as religious history and even cast light on economic, social and political matters. The study of scripts has reached the point where the date of most manuscripts and the place of writing of many may be fairly accurately determined, while the growing discipline of book history finds new kinds of evidence and new research questions in the physical characteristics of the volume. The texts they carry are also much more than potential sources of the oldest form of text. Each, in its textual uniqueness, is a witness to a particular form of the text that existed, was read, recited, remembered and compared with other texts, at certain times and in certain places. The variant readings which are not the oldest are not therefore without interest. They provide information about subsequent interpretations of the text and understandings of Christian faith and practice, including the fact that the oldest form had been modified. The title is intended to reflect this wider value of the manuscripts for historical study.

At this point I would like to avow my intention to make no further reference to a number of documents or theories which, although they are sometimes used in text-critical arguments, I do not accept as reasonable. These are: first, the Secret Gospel of Mark, which I have never believed to be genuine; second, the Gospel of Barnabas as anything other than a late-medieval text dependent on other medieval texts of interest to students of Christian-Islamic dialogue; third, the claim that there are any New Testament manuscripts among the Dead Sea Scrolls; fourth, all extravagant claims that any New Testament manuscripts known to us were written in the first century.

This book sets out to introduce the reader to the habits and practice of New Testament textual research. I have not always selected what I believe to be the most important topics or the best theories, but I have tried to introduce material which explores the major contemporary questions. Some of what I have written is about current projects in which I am involved, both because they happen to be some of the major current undertakings of New Testament textual scholarship and because by describing them from the inside I hope I can better introduce the reader to the ways of study and thinking that belong with the discipline.

I see no point in repeating things which have been much better expressed by someone else. On those occasions I simply refer the reader to that authority. As a result, this book will be of little use to anyone who

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D. C. Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

hopes that it will tell them all they need to know: a bluffer's guide to New Testament textual criticism. This book is an introduction, and it attempts to imitate the skilled host in performing introductions between its readers and its topics, and then leaving them together.

I have often provided references to literature which I hope will be an Ariadne's thread for readers to find their own way through the subjects I cover. I certainly have not set out to be comprehensive, but I hope that the bibliography I have selected is such that the reader will never be more than one or two further bibliographies away from most of the materials. Where I have included a reference to collected papers or works with several authors, such as conference papers and *Festschriften*, the reader is invited to scan the other contributions which are not mentioned in search of further enlightenment.

My grounds for including topics are various: some are present because I have been asked about them at one time or another, some because I have needed to explain them to students, others because they are things I wanted to find out for myself. Sometimes I have described a contentious issue in some depth, not necessarily for its own sake but because it illustrates the way that textual critics argue or the development of ideas.

I have generally tried to discuss theoretical topics in the context of a specific problem, and to use an argument or a point of view to illustrate ways of studying manuscripts and texts. I have also taken representative topics in another way. For example, the only chapter in Part III to contain a history of research is the chapter on Revelation. That is because the story of the research upon this text is a microcosm of the whole, and can easily be told in some detail. In the same way, I do not have a chapter on the historical development of textual criticism. Instead, aspects of that history are told in the context of theoretical and practical problems (for example, in the history of the Christian book and the description of different kinds of edition).

More attention is paid in this book to Greek manuscripts than to those in any other language. This seems reasonable when one is writing about texts first written in Greek. After Greek, it is Latin manuscripts which receive the most attention, for several reasons. One is that they have been more thoroughly studied than those of the other translations of the New Testament. Another is that they are particularly significant to a northern European as the vehicle for the transmission of the biblical text into western cultures. A third rather less satisfactory reason is that my own studies have principally been in these areas.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

A word about the structure of the book is necessary. I find footnotes unsatisfactory, because they interrupt the argument and distract the reader. Instead, I have followed the layout which I adopted in *Codex Bezae* of pausing at certain points to provide bibliographical and subsidiary information on the preceding paragraphs. These passages are set in a smaller font.