

New Testament Textual Criticism for the 21st Century

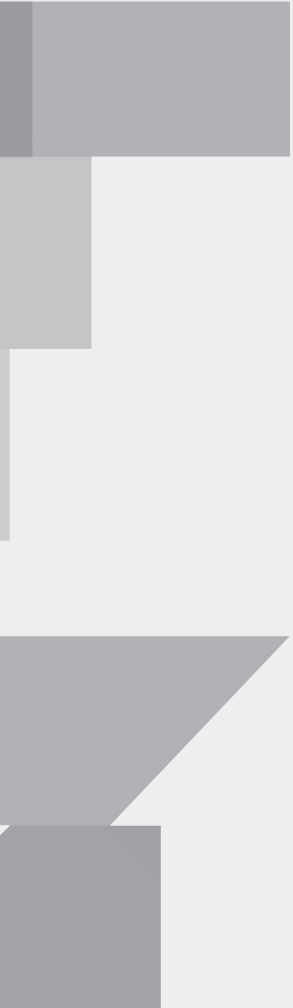
A PRACTICAL GUIDE



Charles L. Quarles

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Textual Criticism
for the 21st Century**





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 **HENDRICKSON
PUBLISHERS**

New Testament Textual Criticism for the 21st Century: A Practical Guide

© 2025 by Charles L. Quarles

Hendrickson Publishers
3 Centennial Drive
Peabody, Massachusetts 01960
www.hendricksonpublishers.com

ISBN 978-1-4964-7627-2

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing — March 2025

Cover design by Karol Bailey. Abstract geometric cover background © iStock.com/shuoshu.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024946100

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Expanded Table of Contents</i>		vii
<i>List of Illustrations</i>		xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>		xv
<i>Select Abbreviations</i>		xvii
PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO TEXTUAL CRITICISM		
Chapter 1	The Need for New Testament Textual Criticism	3
Chapter 2	The Sources of Evidence for New Testament Textual Criticism	7
Chapter 3	Approaches to New Testament Textual Criticism	24
Chapter 4	The Tools for New Testament Textual Criticism	35
PART TWO: THE METHOD OF REASONED ECLECTICISM		
Chapter 5	Preliminary Considerations	47
Chapter 6	Evaluation of External Evidence	49
Chapter 7	Evaluation of Internal Evidence	72
PART THREE: THE PRACTICE OF REASONED ECLECTICISM		
Example A	Matthew 16:2b–3	103
Example B	John 1:18	113
Example C	Colossians 1:12	128
Appendix I	A Guide to Assessing Variant Readings	137
Appendix II	Early Church Fathers	139
Appendix III	Problems with the Text-Type Approach	147
Appendix IV	Thoroughgoing Eclecticism	155
<i>Glossary</i>		163
<i>Bibliography</i>		167
<i>Index of Biblical References</i>		179

EXPANDED TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Select Abbreviations</i>	xvii

PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Chapter 1	The Need for New Testament Textual Criticism	3
Chapter 2	The Sources of Evidence for New Testament Textual Criticism	7
2.1	Papyri	8
2.2	Majuscules	11
2.3	Minuscules	17
2.4	Lectionaries	20
2.5	Early Versions	21
2.6	Early Church Fathers	22
Chapter 3	Approaches to New Testament Textual Criticism	24
3.1	Majority Text Approach	24
3.2	Reasoned Eclecticism	32
Chapter 4	The Tools for New Testament Textual Criticism	35
4.1	Nestle-Aland <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i>	35
4.2	United Bible Societies' <i>Greek New Testament</i>	37
4.3	Editio Critica Maior	39
4.4	Institute for New Testament Textual Research Website	40
4.5	Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts Website	40
4.6	The International Greek New Testament Project	41
4.7	The Center for New Testament Textual Studies NT Critical Apparatus	41
4.8	Websites Devoted to Important Manuscripts and Major Text-Critical Issues	42
4.9	Conclusion	43

PART TWO: THE METHOD OF REASONED ECLECTICISM

Chapter 5	Preliminary Considerations	47
5.1	Identify the Variant Readings	47
5.2	Analyze the Nature of the Differences Between the Variants	48
5.3	Reflect on the Implications for the Text's Meaning	48
Chapter 6	Evaluation of External Evidence	49
6.1	CRITERION 1: Prefer readings that can be shown to be early	50
6.1.1	ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 1: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings found in early witnesses from various regions	56
6.1.2	ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 2: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings shared by early witnesses that are not closely related to each other	60
6.2	CRITERION 2: Prefer readings in witnesses that are known to be reliable and accurate	63
6.3	CRITERION 3: Prefer readings found in multiple early witnesses	68
6.4	Summarizing the External Evidence	70
Chapter 7	Evaluation of Internal Evidence	72
7.1	Transcriptional Evidence	72
7.1.1	Methods for Discovering the Tendencies of Ancient Scribes	74
	<i>Anecdotal Method</i>	74
	<i>Singular Reading Method</i>	74
	<i>Close-Copy Method</i>	75
7.1.2	Common Errors of Ancient Scribes	78
	<i>Unintentional Changes</i>	79
	<i>Intentional Changes</i>	84
	▪ Does the reading seem to be an attempt to clarify the meaning?	85
	▪ Does the reading seem to be an attempt to improve the style or grammar?	86
	▪ Does the reading seem to be an attempt at harmonization?	87
	▪ Does the reading seem to be a conflation of other variants?	89
	▪ Which reading seems initially difficult but makes better sense after further study?	89
	▪ Which reading best explains the origin of the other readings?	90

7.2	Intrinsic Evidence	93
	7.2.1 Which Reading Is Most Consistent with the Author's Grammar, Style, and Vocabulary?	93
	7.2.2 Which Reading Best Fits the Immediate Context?	94
	7.2.3 Which Reading Best Fits with the Author's Theology?	94
7.3	Exploring Other Potentially Relevant Evidence	95
7.4	Weighing the Evidence	97

PART THREE: THE PRACTICE OF REASONED ECLECTICISM

Example A	Matthew 16:2b–3	103
A.1	Preliminary Considerations	103
	A.1.1 Identify the Variant Readings	103
	A.1.2 Analyze the Nature of the Differences Between the Variants	103
	A.1.3 Reflect on the Implications for the Text's Meaning	104
A.2	External Evidence	104
	A.2.1 CRITERION 1: Prefer readings that can be shown to be early	104
	<i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 1: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings found in early witnesses from various regions</i>	105
	<i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 2: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings shared by early witnesses that are not closely related to each other</i>	106
	A.2.2 CRITERION 2: Prefer readings in witnesses that are known to be reliable and accurate	106
	A.2.3 CRITERION 3: Prefer readings found in multiple early witnesses	108
	A.2.4 Summarizing the External Evidence	108
A.3	Internal Evidence	108
	A.3.1 TRANSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading <i>least</i> likely to have resulted from common scribal changes	108
	<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from common errors related to sight, hearing, or memory?</i>	108
	<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from the scribe's effort to correct a perceived error, clarify the meaning, improve the style or grammar, harmonize to a parallel or the context, or conflate variants?</i>	109
	<i>Which reading initially seems difficult but makes better sense after further study?</i>	109
	<i>Which reading best explains the origin of other readings?</i>	110

	A.3.2	INTRINSIC EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading that the author was <i>most likely to have written</i>	110
		<i>Which reading is most consistent with the author's grammar, style, and vocabulary?</i>	110
		<i>Which reading best fits the immediate context?</i>	111
		<i>Which reading best fits with the author's theology?</i>	111
	A.4	Exploring Other Potentially Relevant Evidence	111
	A.5	Weighing the Evidence	112
Example B	John 1:18		113
	B.1	Preliminary Considerations	113
		B.1.1 Identify the Variant Readings	113
		B.1.2 Analyze the Nature of the Differences Between the Variants	113
		B.1.3 Reflect on the Implications for the Text's Meaning	114
	B.2	External Evidence	114
		B.2.1 CRITERION 1: Prefer readings that can be shown to be early. <i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 1: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings found in early witnesses from various regions</i>	114 115
		<i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 2: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings shared by early witnesses that are not closely related to each other</i>	117
		B.2.2 CRITERION 2: Prefer readings in witnesses known to be reliable and accurate	119
		B.2.3 CRITERION 3: Prefer readings found in multiple early witnesses	121
		B.2.4 Summarizing the External Evidence	121
	B.3	Internal Evidence	122
		B.3.1 TRANSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading <i>least</i> likely to have resulted from common scribal changes	122
		<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from common errors related to sight, hearing, or memory?</i>	122
		<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from the scribe's effort to correct a perceived error, clarify the meaning, improve the style or grammar, harmonize to a parallel or the context, or conflate variants?</i>	122
		<i>Which reading initially seems difficult but makes better sense after further study?</i>	122
		<i>Which reading best explains the origin of other readings?</i>	123
		B.3.2 INTRINSIC EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading that the author was <i>most likely to have written</i>	123
	B.4.	Exploring Other Potentially Relevant Evidence	126
	B.5.	Weighing the Evidence	126

Example C	Colossians 1:12	128
C.1	Preliminary Considerations	128
	C.1.1 Identify the Variant Readings	128
	C.1.2 Analyze the Nature of the Differences Between the Variants	128
	C.1.3 Reflect on the Implications for the Text's Meaning	128
C.2	External Evidence	129
	C.2.1 CRITERION 1: Prefer readings that can be shown to be early	129
	<i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 1: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings found in early witnesses from various regions</i>	130
	<i>ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION 2: Reevaluate the date assigned to readings shared by early witnesses that are not closely related to each other</i>	130
	C.2.2 CRITERION 2: Prefer readings in witnesses that are known to be reliable and accurate	131
	C.2.3 CRITERION 3: Prefer readings found in multiple early witnesses	131
	C.2.4 Summarizing the External Evidence	132
C.3	Internal Evidence	132
	C.3.1 TRANSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading <i>least</i> likely to have resulted from common scribal changes	132
	<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from common errors related to sight, hearing, or memory?</i>	132
	<i>Which reading did NOT likely result from the scribe's effort to correct a perceived error, clarify the meaning, improve the style or grammar, harmonize to a parallel or the context, or conflate variants?</i>	132
	<i>Which reading initially seems difficult but makes better sense after further study?</i>	133
	<i>Which reading best explains the origin of other readings?</i>	134
	C.3.2 INTRINSIC EVIDENCE: Prefer the reading that the author was <i>most</i> likely to have written	135
	<i>Which reading is most consistent with the author's grammar, style, and vocabulary?</i>	135
	<i>Which reading best fits the immediate context?</i>	136
	<i>Which reading best fits the author's theology?</i>	136
C.4	Exploring Other Potentially Relevant Evidence	136
C.5	Weighing the Evidence	136
Appendix I	A Guide to Assessing Variant Readings	137
Appendix II	Early Church Fathers	139

Appendix III	Problems with the Text-Type Approach	147
Appendix IV	Thoroughgoing Eclecticism	155
<i>Glossary</i>		163
<i>Bibliography</i>		167
<i>Index of Biblical References</i>		179

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

Figure 2.1	Examples of Majuscule Script	12
Figure 2.2	Examples of Minuscule Script	17
Figure 6.1	Witnesses to Acts Most Closely Related to the Initial Text	67
Figure 7.1	Examples of Potential Genealogies of Variants	91
Figure 7.2	Proposed Stemma of Variants in Luke 4:44	92
Figure A.1	Witnesses to Mark Most Closely Related to the Initial Text	107
Figure B.1	Witnesses to Mark Most Closely Related to Vaticanus (03)	118
Figure B.2	Witnesses to Mark Most Closely Related to the Initial Text	120
Figure C.1	Local Stemma of Variants in Col 1:12	135

TABLES

Chapter 4	The Tools for New Testament Text Criticism	
Table 4.1	Comparison of the Apparatuses for John 1:18	38
Chapter 6	Evaluation of External Evidence	
Table 6.1	Age of Witnesses Supporting Each Reading	53
Table 6.2	Early Greek Manuscripts	54
Table 6.3	Early Church Fathers	54
Table 6.4	Geographical Distribution of Readings in the Early Church Fathers and Versions	59
Table 6.5	Texts Most Closely Related to 05 in the Synoptic Gospels	62
Table 6.6	Preferred Witnesses in Matt 18:15	66
Table 6.7	Witnesses Closest to the Initial Text in the Synoptic Gospels	68
Table 6.8	Early Witnesses to Matt 18:15	70
Table 6.9	Summary of the External Evidence for Matt 18:15	70

Example A	Matthew 16:2b–3	
Table A.1	Manuscripts of the Greek New Testament	104
Table A.2	Early Church Fathers	104
Table A.3	Geographical Distribution	105
Table A.4	Percentages of Agreement between Witnesses to the Longer Reading (Mark)	106
Table A.5	Percentages of Agreement between Witnesses to the Longer Reading (Parallel Pericopes)	106
Table A.6	Category I and II Witnesses	107
Table A.7	Evaluation of the External Evidence	108
Example B	John 1:18	
Table B.1	Manuscripts of the Greek New Testament	115
Table B.2	Early Church Fathers	115
Table B.3	Early Geographical Distribution	116
Table B.4	Category I and II Witnesses	120
Table B.5	External Evidence	121
Example C	Colossians 1:12	
Table C.1	Manuscripts of the Greek New Testament	129
Table C.2	Early Church Fathers	129
Table C.3	Geographical Distribution	130
Table C.4	Category I and II Witnesses	131
Table C.5	External Evidence	132

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to several people who have contributed to this book in a variety of ways. Students in my 2022 Doctor of Philosophy New Testament Textual Criticism seminar and 2023 graduate-level New Testament Textual Criticism class offered helpful feedback on an early draft of the book. Three scholars, Christian Askeland, Greg Paulson, and Pat Sanders, kindly read the first draft and offered helpful comments and corrections. My research assistants Seth Ellington, Tyler Craft, and Eli Stanley gathered data for Appendix II. My administrative assistant Anthony Ingram worked to secure permissions for the manuscript images used to illustrate majuscule and minuscule scripts and extrapolated the bibliography entries from the footnotes. He and research assistant Abigail Prejean worked together to produce the Scripture index. The keen editorial gifts of Jonathan Kline and Phil Frank of Hendrickson have significantly improved the book. Dr. Kline recognized the importance of this project from our very first discussion. In every interaction he has been unusually kind and encouraging. I am especially grateful for the careful work of Dr. Jason Driesbach, whose editorial feedback was truly invaluable.

SELECT ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Byz</i>	the variant reading contained in the majority of Byzantine manuscripts
CBGM	Coherence-Based Genealogical Method
CNTTS	Center for New Testament Textual Studies
CSNTM	Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts
ECM	Editio Critica Maior
IGNTP	International Greek New Testament Project
INTF	Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung (Institute for New Testament Textual Research)
LDAB	Leuven Database of Ancient Books
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
MT	Majority Text
NA	Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
NT	New Testament
NTVMR	New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room
OT	Old Testament
SBLGNT	Greek New Testament: Society of Biblical Literature edition
UBS	United Bible Societies editions of the Greek New Testament

Part One

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

1

THE NEED FOR NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

In the study of literature, the term “criticism” refers to “the scientific investigation of literary documents (such as the Bible) in regard to such matters as origin, text, composition, or history.”¹ *Textual* criticism refers to the scientific investigation that seeks to determine and restore the original text of a document or collection of documents by removing the errors introduced into it as it was copied and recopied. All ancient texts were corrupted as scribes made mistakes in the process of hand-copying the text century after century. Thus, all ancient texts need restoration. Scholars in classical studies must work to restore the original texts of works like Homer’s *Iliad*. New Testament scholars must also compare the different readings in ancient manuscripts of the NT and seek to identify the original text of the NT. Textual criticism is “scientific” since it seeks to understand a phenomenon by following a systematic method based on evidence. Many consider modern textual criticism to be one of the most scientific disciplines in the realm of biblical studies because researchers utilize high-tech tools such as high-resolution photography and multispectral imaging and methods such as archaeology, paleography, and statistics.

Textual criticism is necessary because scribes sometimes changed the text unintentionally or, more rarely, intentionally as they copied it. The first Bible to be printed using the printing press was a Latin Bible printed by Johannes Gutenberg between 1452 and 1456. Prior to the mid-15th century, scribes hand-copied the NT. These scribes had different levels of proficiency, skill, and education. However, they all shared something in common. They were human, and, as ordinary human beings, they all made mistakes. Human scribes are copyists, not copy machines. No scribe was able to perfectly replicate the text of the manuscripts they attempted to copy. Some scribes were better than most and some were truly outstanding. None of them were perfect.

Twenty-first-century scholars are not the first to recognize that ancient scribes made errors. Ancient readers of the Greek NT sometimes pointed out the different and even contradictory readings that appeared in the copies of the NT available to them. In his *Commentary*

1. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “criticism.”

on *Matthew* in the early 3rd century, Origen complained: “But it is clear that the differences between the copies have become numerous, either from the shoddy work of copyists, or from the wicked recklessness of some either in neglecting to correct what is written, or even in adding or removing things based on their own opinions when they do correct.”²

The ancient scribes humbly acknowledged their weaknesses and deficiencies in notes written in the margins of the copies they produced. C. Wendel gathered many of the self-deprecating epithets of the monastic scribes.³ The scribes described themselves using such terms as χαμαλός (lowly), ἀνάξιος (worthless), ἀνάξιος τοῦ ζῆν (unworthy to live), ἀνάξιος παρὰ πάντας (undeserving above all), ἀδόκιμος (reprobate), εὐτελής (worthless), εὐτελέστατος (most worthless), ὕστατος (most inferior), ἐλάχιστος (least), ἀχρεῖος (useless), δύσχητος (no good), and ἰδιώτης (unskilled amateur).⁴ They assessed their skills and abilities using expressions such as ἀφυής (untalented), φρενόλειπος (brainless), ἀφρονέστατος (most foolish), ἀσύνητος (without understanding), ἀβέλτερος (stupid), ἀμαθέστατος (most ignorant or unskilled), σκαϊότατος πάντων ἀνθρώπων (most unskilled of all people), χωρικός (country bumpkin), and ἀγροικικός (parochial—in the negative sense of being small-minded and unsophisticated).⁵ These self-assessments show that the scribes did not believe that even their best efforts were sufficient to copy the NT perfectly.

Scribes recognized that their predecessors had the same weaknesses with which they struggled. Ancient copyists sometimes complained about the poor quality of the work of the scribes who copied or influenced their exemplar.⁶ The medieval monastic scribe Neilos, for example, complains of the poor eyesight of another scribe that introduced an error in the text: “The error of Theodore the squinter.”⁷ A late scribe who sought to correct the text of Codex Vaticanus (03) vented his frustration with one of his predecessors in a note in the left-hand margin beside the text of Heb 1:3: “Terribly ignorant and unskilled scribe, leave the old reading alone! Do not change it!”

Scribes often corrected errors that they spotted in the manuscripts that they used. The oldest complete manuscript of the Greek NT is Codex Sinaiticus (01). Scribes corrected this manuscript more thoroughly than any other. Some of the corrections were made very early before the manuscript left the scriptorium. Many others were made by later generations of scribes who used the codex up through the 12th century. The manuscript has an average of about thirty corrections per page for a total of nearly 23,000 corrections!⁸ The

2. *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15.14.

3. C. Wendel, “Die ΤΑΠΕΙΝΟΤΗΣ des griechischen Schreibermonches,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 43 (1950): 259–66.

4. Wendel, *Die ΤΑΠΕΙΝΟΤΗΣ des griechischen Schreibermonches*, 260.

5. Wendel, *Die ΤΑΠΕΙΝΟΤΗΣ des griechischen Schreibermonches*, 261.

6. An “exemplar” is the manuscript that the scribe follows in making his own copy.

7. A. C. Myshrall, “An Introduction to Lectionary 299,” in *Codex Zacynthius: Catena, Palimpsest, Lectionary*, ed. H. A. G. Houghton and D. C. Parker, TS 3.21 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2020), 197–99.

8. D. C. Parker, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World’s Oldest Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 3, 89. This estimate includes the corrections in both the OT and the NT and corrections of all kinds, including spelling corrections and reinking fading letters.

many corrections show that later generations of scribes respected and continued to use the ancient codex. Yet, they also show that the scribes recognized even the ancient copies were not perfect. Scribes worked to identify and correct errors in hopes of restoring the original text of the NT.

Modern-day textual critics continue this aspect of the work of ancient scribes. Although textual critics are not *copyists*, they are *correctors*. They compare the texts of the NT that appear in the ancient manuscripts. When these texts are different, they analyze these different readings (called variants) and attempt to identify and restore the text of the original.

The modern practice of textual criticism involves far more than the work of restoring the original text.⁹ Yet the primary goal of the discipline continues to be the restoration of the original text. This is true whether we are referring to the textual criticism of the NT or the textual criticism of the Greek classics. Paul Maas, a textual critic working mainly in classical literature, wrote: “The business of textual criticism is to produce a text as close as possible to the original.”¹⁰ New Testament textual critics such as B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, Kirsopp Lake, Samuel P. Tregelles, F. H. A. Scrivener, Bruce Metzger, J. Harold Greenlee, Philip Comfort, and many others agree that the restoration of the original text is the fundamental task of the discipline.¹¹ As Constantin Tischendorf famously wrote in a letter to his fiancée, textual criticism is a “sacred task, the struggle to regain the original form of the New Testament.”¹²

Textual critics today often specify that the goal of textual criticism is the “initial text” (German: *Ausgangstext*), the archetype of the texts preserved in the extant Greek manuscripts and early translations. Gerd Mink, who coined the term “initial text,” defined it as “the reconstructed form of text from which the manuscript transmission started.”¹³ Scholars

9. For example, textual criticism often provides helpful insights into the history of interpretation.

10. Paul Maas, *Textual Criticism*, trans. Barbara Flower (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), 1.

11. See B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek with Notes on Selected Readings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 3; Samuel P. Tregelles, *An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament: With Remarks on Its Revision upon Critical Principles* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1854; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 174; F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, ed. Edward Miller, 4th ed., 2 vols. (1894), 1:5; Kirsopp Lake, *The Text of the New Testament*, 6th ed., Oxford Church Text Books (London: Billing and Sons, 1959), 1; Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xv; J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 11; and Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 289. The expression “most nearly conforming to the original” was used by Metzger in his preface to the 1st edition of *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. The recent 4th edition clarifies that the “original text” referred to the “‘final published’ edition that served as the basis for all later copies” (273–74).

12. As quoted in Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 172.

13. Gerd Mink, “Contamination, Coherence, and Coincidence in Textual Transmission: The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) as a Complement and Corrective to Existing

acknowledge that this initial text probably differs at some points from the “authorial text,” the final draft of each of the twenty-seven NT books that the author approved for publication. Holger Strutwolf has suggested that this initial text is in most cases a very early text that may be traced to as early as the middle of the 2nd century.¹⁴ Obviously, some changes may have entered the tradition in the decades between the final draft of each NT book and the reconstructed initial text. For example, the reconstructed initial text of the Gospel of Mark ends with Mark 16:8. Many scholars argue that the original Gospel of Mark must have continued with an account of Jesus’ resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. Since they reject alternative endings to the Gospel in the manuscript tradition, they conclude that the original ending of Mark must have been lost in the decades between the completion of the final draft of Mark and the initial text.¹⁵ However, Holger Strutwolf correctly observed that “as long as we have no evidence that suggests a radical break in the textual transmission between the author’s text and the initial text of our tradition, the best hypothesis concerning the original text still remains the reconstructed archetype to which our manuscript tradition and the evidence of early translations and the citations point.”¹⁶ He encouraged scholars to continue to pursue the goal of restoring the authorial text by noting that “the reconstruction of the original text of the New Testament is of vital theological and historical interest: we want to know what Paul really wrote to the Romans and what was the original form of the Gospel of Luke. The quest for the original text does not as such involve contradictions and logical impossibilities.”¹⁷

Approaches,” in *The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research*, ed. Klaus Wachtel and Michael W. Holmes (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 143.

14. Holger Strutwolf, “Original Text and Textual History,” in Wachtel and Holmes, *Textual History of the Greek New Testament*, 41.

15. See, for example, J. K. Elliott, “The Last Twelve Verses of Mark: Original or Not?,” in *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views*, ed. David Alan Black (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 80–102. For a brief introduction to this textual issue, see Charles L. Quarles and L. Scott Kellum, *40 Questions about the Text and Canon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2023), 163–74.

16. Strutwolf, “Original Text and Textual History,” 41.

17. Strutwolf, “Original Text and Textual History,” 41.