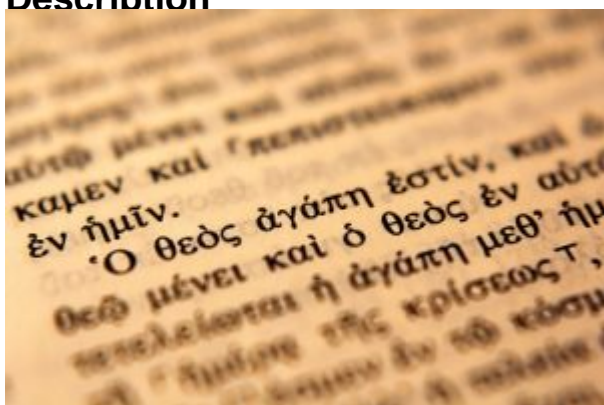




Majority Text vs. Critical Text vs. Textus Receptus – Textual Criticism 101

Description



There are three major competing Greek sources to use for

translating the New Testament: the Critical Text, the Majority Text, and the Textus Receptus. The science of assembling these manuscripts is called “Textual Criticism”, and you can consider this a complete Textual Criticism 101 article because we’ll look at these topics in exhaustive detail.

And I do mean exhaustive detail.

This is the second longest article on this website (*after [the one on Revelation](#)*), but that’s because it’s **extremely complete**. After reading this one article, you’ll know more about these topics than the overwhelming vast majority of Christians.

So let’s get started. ?

What is Textual Criticism?

Here is an excellent definition of Textual Criticism from Dan Wallace, who is one of the most respected Textual Critics in the world today.

Textual Criticism is:

The study of the copies of a written document whose original (*the autograph*) is unknown or non-existent, for the primary purpose of determining the exact wording of the original.

[Source](#).

The practice of Textual Criticism is not “criticizing the Bible”, it’s trying to recover the Bible’s original text. A “textual critic” is not someone who criticizes the Bible, but someone who tries their best to reconstruct the original text.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, but we don’t have the original documents that Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and other New Testament writers wrote. They were originally written on either [papyrus](#) (*essentially paper*) or possibly [parchment](#) (*animal skins*) which have long since degraded with time and use. However, the originals were copied many, many times. Those copies were copied, which were copied, which were copied, which were...

Well, you get the idea.

So what we have are copies of copies of the original (*sometimes many generations of copying deep*). Before Gutenberg invented the printing press in the early-mid 1400s, everything was copied by hand. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the scribes who did the copying occasionally made some mistakes.

When two copies disagree with each other, you have a variant in the text between two documents: this is (*unsurprisingly*) called a “Textual Variant”.

Clever, right? ?

What “Textual Variants”? How bad are They?

Fortunately, they just aren’t that bad. ? We can broadly class all Textual Variants into two classes.

- **Meaningful Variants.** These textual variants have an impact on what the text means. For example, if one manuscript said “Jesus was happy” and another says “Jesus was sad”, that’s a meaningful variant because it changes the meaning of the text.
- **Viable Variants.** These Textual Variants have a decent chance of having the wording of the original document. Some variants appear in only a single (*late*) manuscript, and thus the chances of them being in the original text are extremely low.

From those two options, we can create a list of four types of Textual Variant.

1. **Neither meaningful nor viable** (*they don’t change the meaning and have no chance of being original*)
2. **Viable but not meaningful** (*they don’t change the meaning and have a chance of being original*)
3. **Meaningful but Not viable** (*they do change the meaning, but have no chance of being original*)
4. **Both Viable and meaningful** (*they do change the meaning and do have a chance of being original*)

)

We'll look at #1 and #2 two together

Textual Variants that are NOT meaningful, even if viable.

These are Textual Variants which have no effect on anything. **These comprise over 75% of all textual variants**, which means over 75% of textual variants have no effect on anything whatsoever.

In fact, the most common type of Textual Variant is spelling differences, often a single letter.

Remember, there was no dictionary in ancient times, and thus no defined right or wrong way to spell a word. The single most common textual variant is called a "*moveable Nu*", with "Nu" being the Greek letter which sounds like our "N".

In English, we have this rule too. (*Sort of*).

In English the indefinite article "a" gets an "n" added when the next word starts with a vowel. For example:

- "This is a book."
- "This is an owl."

Greek applies this rule more frequently, and that's the most common textual variant. Does it matter much if Paul wrote "a owl" vs "an owl"? Exactly. It simply doesn't matter to the meaning. In fact, this Textual Variant (*movable Nu*) is the single most common Textual Variant.

Other examples include when one manuscript has "Jesus Christ", and another has "Christ Jesus", with only the order changed. Again, it simply doesn't matter which is original because there's no impact on meaning. (*You'll know this is especially true of Greek if you've read my [A Few Fun Things About Biblical \(Koine\) Greek](#) article*) Another example: perhaps one document will only have "Christ" and another only has "Jesus". Again, this doesn't change the meaning much, even if it does change the text slightly.

Again, over 75% of all Textual Variants are not meaningful, even if they are viable. (*Viable = possibly original*)

So don't worry, your Bible isn't filled with mistakes. ?

Textual Variants that are Meaningful, but not viable.

These are variants where it's essentially impossible for them to have been original, even if they would change the meaning of the text. Typically, these variants are found only in a single manuscript, or in a small group of manuscripts from one small part of the world. Most often, they are simple scribal errors.

I have a rather humorous example:

1 Thessalonians 2:7

But we proved to be **gentle** among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.

There's a Textual Variant on the word "gentle". Most manuscripts read "gentle", some read "little children" and one manuscript reads "horses". It's easy to explain these variants when you see how these words are spelled in the Greek, so here are the first three words of the verse in each Textual Variant:

- Alla Egen?th?men **?pioi** (*gentle*)
- Alla Egen?th?men **n?pioi** (*little children*)
- Alla Egen?th?men **hippiai** (*horses*)

Context tells us that **n?pioi** (*little children*) can't be intended, and since the previous word begins with "n", it's easy to see how the mistake was made (*doubling the "n"*). Often, one scribe would read while several other scribes copied. If you heard it read, you'd realize it's an easy mistake to make because they sound almost identical. (*Because the previous word ends with an "n" sound*)

Further, **there's no possible way** that **hippiai** (*horses*) was intended. It was a simple scribal error, easily noticed and just as easily corrected. (*With a good chuckle. ?*) Both Textual Variants are meaningful, but it's nearly impossible for them to be original (*they aren't viable*).

These types of Textual Variants make up ~24% of all Textual Variants.

Combined with the ones that aren't meaningful, you have **over 99% of all Textual Variants make no impact on meaning whatsoever.**

Pretty cool right? ?

Textual Variants that are Meaningful and Viable

These Textual Variants have a good chance of being original (*viable*), and change the meaning of the text (*meaningful*). They comprise less than 1% of all Textual Variants.

We've examined one of these Textual Variants here on Berean Patriot before, namely: [The Johannine Comma of 1 John 5:7-8: Added or Removed?](#) Other major Textual Variants include the story of the woman caught in Adultery (*Pericope Adulterae for short*) and the last 12 verses in Mark's Gospel. Those three are probably the most well-known, but there are many more.

Next, we'll look at the three competing theories on how to handle the less-than-1% of places where the text of the New Testament isn't completely agreed up on.

The Three Competing Theories – Overview

Here is a short summary of each theory, with more detail to follow in theory's section.

“Reasoned Eclecticism” or the “Critical Text” Theory

This method applies a series of rules to the various manuscripts we've found (*we'll look at those rules in a moment*). Using these rules – and a healthy dose of scholarly input – they decide what was likely added, removed, or changed, and therefore what's likely original. The result is called a “Critical Text”. This is the position held by a majority of New Testament Scholars, and nearly all modern Bible are translated from the Critical Text.

The Majority Text Theory

Majority Text scholars take a more mathematical approach to deciding what the original text of the New Testament was. Their approach is to take all the manuscripts we have, and find which Textual Variant has support among the majority of manuscripts, and given that reading priority. This is based on the assumption that scribes will chose to copy good manuscripts over bad ones, and thus better readings will be in the majority over time. There are good mathematical reasons (*which we'll look at*) for this method. Because most of our New Testament manuscripts come from the Byzantine Text family (*which we'll explain lower down*), the document that results is often called the “Byzantine Majority text”.

The “Confessional” Position, or “Textus Receptus Only”

This position takes its name from where it starts: a “confession of faith”. The Confessional view holds that God must have preserved the scriptures completely without error. (*We'll look at the verses they use to support this statement lower down.*) They believe that God kept one particular text completely free of error, and that text is the Textus Receptus. The Textus Receptus is a 16th century Greek New Testament on which the King James Bible is based (*in the New Testament*). They will typically only use the King James Bible (KJV) or New King James Bible (NKJV) as an English translation, but some will only accept the KJV.

Now that we have a basic overview, we'll look at each theory in (*exhaustive*) detail. Again, this is one of the longest articles on this website, but it's so long because the topic is complex and our treatment of it fairly complete. Hopefully, this can be a “one stop shop” for anyone wishing for an introduction on New Testament Textual Criticism.

Before we look at each theory though, we need to understand what are called “text types”

New Testament Textual Families or “Text Types”

Among the existing manuscripts of the New Testament, there are three major divisions based on their content. These divisions aren’t hard and fast, but rather provide a framework to talk about the different Textual Variants.

Each textual family (or “text type”) tends to contain similar readings to other manuscripts in its family, but the readings are different from the readings of other textual families. (*Again, in that less than 1% where it matters*) Notice they only “tend to”. There are variations within each family, but overall their Textual Variants share a familial linkage with other members of their family.

There are three major textual families/text types.

Alexandrian Text Type

The Alexandrian text type will need little introduction because nearly all modern Bibles are based on the Alexandrian text type. If you pick up any popular Bible (*except the KJV and NKJV*) it’s almost certainly translated primarily from the Alexandrian text type. Almost all of the oldest manuscripts we have are of the Alexandrian text type, probably due to the climate in the location where they are typically found (*Alexandrian is in Egypt, and their dry climate is ideal for preservation.*) The Alexandrian text type is slightly shorter than the Byzantine text type.

Western Text Type

The Western text type is different from the other textual families mostly because of its “love of paraphrase”. One scholar said of the Western text type: “*Words and even clauses are changed, omitted, and inserted with surprising freedom, wherever it seemed that the meaning could be brought out with greater force and definiteness.*” Unsurprisingly, they aren’t given too much weight because of this freeness. Further, we have relatively few Western text type manuscripts.

Byzantine Text Type

We have more manuscripts of the Byzantine text type ***by far*** than the other two families combined. Robinson-Pierpont said in their introduction to their Greek New Testament “*Of the over 5000 total continuous-text and lectionary manuscripts, 90% or more contain a basically Byzantine Text form*”. However, the majority of these manuscripts are later than Alexandrian manuscripts. The Byzantine text type does have some very early witnesses, (*in papyri from the 200s and 300s*) but these often contain Byzantine readings mixed in with the other text types. The Byzantine text type is noticeably

longer than the Alexandrian text type.

(Note: the Byzantine Text type has several names, including the Traditional Text, Ecclesiastical Text, Constantinopolitan Text, Antiocheian Text, and Syrian Text.)

Now that you understand the three text types/families, we'll move onto discussing the most popular of the three theories.

The “Critical Text” Theory, aka “Reasoned Eclecticism

Reasoned Eclecticism uses a set of rules to sift through all the Textual Variants and arrive at what they believe is original. Since the rules are so central to their philosophy, we'll take some time to examine them. Further, understanding how these rules work and their place in Bible history will help you understand the modern Critical Text.

The Rules of Textual Criticism According to Reasoned Eclecticism

There are several different sets of rules for Reasoned Eclecticism. (*You can look at several [here](#).)* However, we'll only concentrate on the two most influential. Those are the Westcott & Hort rules, and the Aland/Aland Rules.

In 1881, Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort published “*The New Testament in the Original Greek*”, which is the grandfather of the Greek Critical Text that most modern Bibles translate from. It's so well known, it's often just called “Westcott & Hort”.

Their rules for textual Criticism are below:

(Note: I condensed these from [here](#), at the bottom of the page.)

1. Older readings, manuscripts, or **manuscript groups** should be preferred
2. Readings are approved or rejected by reason of the quality, and not the number, of their supporting witnesses
3. **A reading combining two simple, alternative readings is later than the two readings comprising the combination.** Manuscripts that rarely or never combine readings are of “special value”.
4. The reading that best conforms to the grammar and context of the sentence should be preferred
5. The reading that best conforms to the style and content of the author should be preferred
6. The reading that explains the existence of other readings should be preferred.
7. A reading that shows better grammar at the expense of theology is likely not original.
8. The more difficult reading should be preferred.
9. **Prefer readings in manuscripts that habitually contain better readings, which is more certain if it's also an older manuscript and if it doesn't contain combinations of other variations (as in rule #3). This also applies to manuscript families.**

Please notice, Westcott & Hort's first rule is basically “older is better”. (*Majority Text advocates disagree, but we'll look at their objection later.*) Now, because all the oldest manuscripts we've found are of the Alexandrian text type/family, it's unsurprising that they ended up with a basically Alexandrian document. Further, they didn't include any Western or Byzantine readings on purpose.

Why?

Well, remember how the Western text type was famous for paraphrasing and the quote for it? Well, it was Westcott & Hort who said of the Western text: “*Words and even clauses are changed, omitted, and inserted with surprising freedom, wherever it seemed that the meaning could be brought out with greater force and definiteness.*” Therefore, it shouldn't be surprising that they basically ignored the Western text type.

I really can't fault them for that.

To understand why they didn't use any Byzantine readings, we need to look at their 3rd rule again: “*A reading combining two simple, alternative readings is later than the two readings comprising the combination.*” Further, remember that “latter readings” were ignored by Westcott & Hort.

So here's the why:

Westcott & Hort believed the Byzantine text type was a combination of the Alexandrian and Western text types.

More recent manuscript findings have proved this wrong, but more on that later. Westcott & Hort thought the Byzantine text family resulted from some scribes combining the other two text types to try and get closer to the original document (*much like they were doing*).

Remember the rules:

- **If** the Byzantine text type was a combination of the Alexandrian and Western text types,
- **And if** “combination” manuscripts were always later, (*rule #3*)
- **And if** “earlier is better” (*rule #1*)

- **Then** the Byzantine text type should be ignored as a latter, less-authentic text type.

So that's exactly what they did.

They ignored all Byzantine readings and rejected them as being later and therefore not worth looking at. In their own words:

"All distinctively Syrian (Byzantine) readings must be at once rejected." – Westcott & Hort

Again, in the last 100+ years we've found manuscripts that prove the Byzantine text type isn't a combination of the Western and Alexandrian text types. Unfortunately, this bias against Byzantine readings persisted until later, to Kurt Aland. (*He was the primary editor of the modern Critical Text, which is the basis for nearly all modern translations.*)

In a similar vein, **Kurt Aland considers Greek manuscripts which are "purely or predominately Byzantine" to be "irrelevant for textual criticism."**

[Source.](#)

Again, Westcott and Hort were mistaken as nearly all major textual variants had appeared before the year 200. From another article on the topic:

However, Hort acknowledged that such a clear-cut genealogical model would be out of place if a transmission-model persistently involved readings which all had some clearly ancient attestation. [See Hort's *Introduction*, page 286, § 373.]

This very thing, or something very close to it, was subsequently proposed by textual critics in the 1900's. Eminent scholars such as E. C. Colwell, G. D. Kilpatrick, and Kurt and Barbara Aland maintained, respectively, that **"The overwhelming majority of readings," "almost all variants," and "practically all the substantive variants in the text of the New Testament" existed before the year 200**. Nevertheless the Hortian text has not been overthrown.

[Source.](#)

Again, the Westcott & Hort Critical Text is the grandfather of nearly all modern Bibles, KJV and NKJV excepted. We'll look more at how we got to the present Greek Critical Text soon.

As an aside:

There remains a persistent bias against the Byzantine Text type in Reasoned Eclecticism/Critical Text advocates. Here's Dan Wallace – arguably the most respected New Testament textual critic alive today – talking about one of our oldest manuscripts, specifically Codex Alexandrius.

“Codex Alexandrius is a very interesting manuscript in that **in the Gospels, it's a Byzantine text largely**, which means it agrees with the majority of manuscripts most of the time. While as, **in the rest of the New Testament, it is largely Alexandrian**. These are the two most competing textual forms, textual families, text types if you want to call them that, that we have for our New Testament manuscripts. **So when you get outside the Gospels, Alexandrius becomes very important manuscript.**” – Dan Wallace

[Source: YouTube](#). (Only 1:35 long, starting at about 0:53)

Please notice the casual dismissal of the Byzantine text type by one of the most respected textual critics of our age. I'm honestly not sure why it's dismissed so easily. [Codex Alexandrius](#) is the third oldest (*nearly*) complete manuscript, dating from the early 400s. Why dismiss the Gospels just because they are a different text type?

But I digress...

The Aland Rules of Textual Criticism

We won't spend much time on these because the Westcott & Hort rules were more influential. However, they're worth noting.

The “Aland” rules get their name from Kurt and Barbara Aland, who were instrumental in the publication of the Greek Critical Text that nearly all modern New Testament are based on: The Nestle-Aland “*Novum Testamentum Graece*” (*The New Testament in Greek*)

The first edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* was published by Eberhard Nestle in 1898, but an updated version was introduced in 1901. It was a combination of primarily Westcott & Hort's work, along with two other Greek New Testaments. Later it was taken over by his son, and eventually by Kurt Aland and his wife, along with others. It's commonly referred to as the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* after the two most significant contributors. (*Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland*)

It's often abbreviate as “NA” plus the version number. For example: “NA28”.

It's currently in its 28th edition (*as of spring 2020*).

The Aland rules generally follow the Westcott & Hort rules with one major difference. I've copy/pasted the two rules that conflict just below:

Westcott & Hort rule #9: **Prefer readings in manuscripts that habitually contain better readings**, which is more certain if it's also an older manuscript and if it doesn't contain combinations of other variations (*as in rule #3*). **This also applies to manuscript families.**

Aland rule #6: Furthermore, manuscripts should be weighed, not counted, and the peculiar

traits of each manuscript should be duly considered. **However important the early papyri, or a particular uncial, or a minuscule may be, there is no single manuscript or group or manuscripts that can be followed mechanically, even though certain combinations of witnesses may deserve a greater degree of confidence than others. Rather, decisions in textual criticism must be worked out afresh, passage by passage** (the local principle).

(Note: I've copy/pasted the only relevant difference, but you can: [Click here to expand the full list of the Aland rules of Textual Criticism.](#))

1. Only one reading can be original, however many variant readings there may be.
2. Only the reading which best satisfies the requirements of both external and internal criteria can be original.
3. Criticism of the text must always begin from the evidence of the manuscript tradition and only afterward turn to a consideration of internal criteria.
4. Internal criteria (the context of the passage, its style and vocabulary, the theological environment of the author, etc.) can never be the sole basis for a critical decision, especially when they stand in opposition to the external evidence.
5. The primary authority for a critical textual decision lies with the Greek manuscript tradition, with the version and Fathers serving no more than a supplementary and corroborative function, particularly in passages where their underlying Greek text cannot be reconstructed with absolute certainty.
6. Furthermore, manuscripts should be weighed, not counted, and the peculiar traits of each manuscript should be duly considered. However important the early papyri, or a particular uncial, or a minuscule may be, there is no single manuscript or group or manuscripts that can be followed mechanically, even though certain combinations of witnesses may deserve a greater degree of confidence than others. Rather, decisions in textual criticism must be worked out afresh, passage by passage (the local principle).
7. The principle that the original reading may be found in any single manuscript or version when it stands alone or nearly alone is only a theoretical possibility. Any form of eclecticism which accepts this principle will hardly succeed in establishing the original text of the New Testament; it will only confirm the view of the text which it presupposes.
8. The reconstruction of a stemma of readings for each variant (the genealogical principle) is an extremely important device, because the reading which can most easily explain the derivation of the other forms is itself most likely the original.
9. Variants must never be treated in isolation, but always considered in the context of the tradition. Otherwise there is too great a danger of reconstructing a "test tube text" which never existed at any time or place.
10. There is truth in the maxim: *lectio difficilior lectio potior* ("the more difficult reading is the more probable reading"). But this principle must not be taken too mechanically, with the most difficult reading (*lectio difficilima*) adopted as original simply because of its degree of difficulty.
11. The venerable maxim *lectio brevior lectio potior* ("the shorter reading is the more probable reading") is certainly right in many instances. But here again the principle cannot be applied mechanically.

12. A constantly maintained familiarity with New Testament manuscripts themselves is the best training for textual criticism. In textual criticism the pure theoretician has often done more harm than good.

Westcott & Hort preferred to take manuscripts they deemed as “more reliable” (*read: “early and Alexandrian”*) and rely of their readings more. However, Aland took the opposite approach, preferring to look at all the evidence on each passage. These different philosophies naturally produced slightly different results...

...but only *slightly* different

Overall, the Critical Text of the modern Greek New Testament bears a remarkable resemblance to the original work done by Westcott & Hort. The following is a quote from the (*excellent*) blog [The Text of the Gospels](#), doing a comparison of Westcott & Hort’s original 1881 text (*WH1881*) to the modern NA27 (*Nestle-Aland 27th edition*) and NA28. (*34 readings were changed from the NA27 to the NA28*)

Adding to this the 34 new readings in NA28, **the total number of full disagreements in the 28th edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece* against WH1881 is 695.**

This is particularly interesting when one turns to the *Editionum Differentiae* (Appendix III) in the 27th edition of NTG, which lists (among other things) the differences between NA27 and NA25. (The text was essentially unchanged in the intervening 26th edition, which had essentially the same text as the third edition of the UBS *Greek New Testament*.)

There one can observe that between NA25 and NA27, there were 397 changes in the Gospels, 119 in Acts, 149 in the Pauline Epistles, 46 in the General Epistles, and 29 in Revelation, for a total of 740.

(*Emphasis added*)

The modern NA27 and NA28 are closer to Westcott & Hort’s 1881 text than the NA25.

The reason we’ve spent so much time talking about Westcott & Hort is because the New Testament Critical Text that nearly all modern Bible are based on is *virtually unchanged* since 1881. Now, that could be a good thing if you believe Westcott & Hort did a good job originally.

So let’s look at their methodology, and the methodology of Reasoned Eclecticism in general.

Reasoned Eclecticism Methodology

Again, we’ll go back to Westcott & Hort because they did the original work that virtually all modern New Testament translations are based on. Remember, their #1 rule was “earlier is better”. Consequently, their New Testament relied heavily on the two earliest (*nearly*) complete manuscripts we have:

[Codex Vaticanus](#) and [Codex Sinaiticus](#), which we'll look at in detail shortly

Since these were the two oldest (*nearly*) complete texts available at the time, Westcott & Hort gave them **tremendous** weight. Remember their #1 rule was "Older is better". And if "older is better", then it follows logically that the two oldest manuscripts are the best. (*Others disagree, but we'll get to those arguments later.*)

There is a system for naming manuscripts of the New Testament. In this system, Codex Vaticanus is also called manuscript "B", and Codex Sinaiticus is also called manuscript "?" (*aleph, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet*)

Westcott & Hort believed that any place where those two manuscripts agreed:

"...should be accepted as the true readings until strong internal evidence is found to the contrary,"

They also said of where those two manuscripts agreed:

"No readings of ?B can safely be rejected absolutely,"

Yes, they believed these two manuscripts were that important, and this understanding follows naturally if you believe their #1 rule that "earlier is better". (*Which many dispute, but we'll get to that later.*)

These two codices – Codex Vaticanus ("B") and Codex Sinaiticus ("?") – are the foundation for nearly all modern New Testaments.

We have 5000+ manuscripts of the New Testament, though many are smaller fragments. In the last ~140 years since the Westcott & Hort 1881 Critical Text, we've discovered Papyri from the 300s, 200s, and even a few from the 100s. Despite this, the Critical Text of the New Testament remains virtually unchanged from ~140 years ago.

No joke.

In fact, when you see a Bible footnote that says "the earliest and best manuscripts", they are almost universally talking about these two manuscripts, and only these two manuscripts.

Please remember that.

It is no exaggeration to say that Codex Vaticanus ("B") and Codex Sinaiticus ("?") are the foundation for virtually all modern New Testament Bible translations. Because these manuscripts are so foundational to modern Critical Text, they bear a closer look.

Codex Vaticanus – aka Codex "B"

The Codex Vaticanus gets its name from the place where it was stored, the Vatican library. It is regarded as the oldest extant (*existing*) Greek copy of the Bible, and has been dated the early-mid 4th century. It's over 90% intact/complete, which is incredible for a manuscript of its age.

The Codex Vaticanus also contains several of the deuterocanonical books, namely: the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (*Sirach*), Judith, Tobit, Baruch, and the Letter to Jeremiah. (*There's an article about these other books here on Berean Patriot entitled: [The Bible: 66 books vs 73 and Why \(the "Apocrypha" Explained\)](#).*)

Codex Vaticanus ("B") is an excellent example of the Alexandrian Text type, and many scholars think it's the most important Greek manuscript we have (*again, because it's the oldest.*) In fact, the primary author/editor of the modern Critical Text (*Kurt Aland*) said this:

"B is by far the most significant of the uncials" – Kurt Aland

Source: "*The Text of the New Testament*" By Aland

(Note: "*Uncials*" is the plural of "*uncial*", which refers to an all capital font. We have four nearly complete Uncial manuscripts dating from before the year 1000. These four are often called the "[Great Uncial Manuscripts](#)")

It's curious that Codex Vaticanus is given the position of "most important" when the actual quality of the transcription leaves something to be desired.

Dean Burgon describes the quality of the scribal work in Vaticanus:

Codex B [Vaticanus] comes to us without a history: without recommendation of any kind, except that of its antiquity. **It bears traces of careless transcription in every page. The mistakes which the original transcriber made are of perpetual recurrence.**

The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible concurs,

"It should be noted, however, that there is no prominent Biblical MS. in which there occur such gross cases of misspelling, faulty grammar, and omission, as in B [Vaticanus]."

Now, I think they are overstating the case slightly (*as you'll see when we look at Codex Sinaiticus*). But the principle remains that the Vaticanus scribe certainly wasn't top tier. Some scholars would say he wasn't even middle of the pack. Probably the most balanced view of the Vaticanus scribe is found in the quote below, in an article published to respond to someone claiming the Vaticanus Scribe made very few errors.

It seems to me that **while the scribe of Codex Vaticanus is certainly not the worst scribe ever (a title that must go to the scribe of Old Latin Codex Bobbiensis), his execution leaves something to be desired**, and the claim that he hardly ever made blunders must be

regarded as an exaggeration.

[Source](#). (*Emphasis added*)

In the 10th or 11th century, at least two scribes made corrections to the Codex Vaticanus. This isn't altogether uncommon with ancient manuscripts, but it does mean some places represent a 10th or 11th century version, not a 4th century version.

That leads to the possibly the most humorous – and unsettling – thing about these correctors: the addition of a rebuke by one corrector to another.

The copyist of Codex Vaticanus had written ??????? in Hebrews 1:3, and a corrector had replaced that with the correct reading, ????? (which is supported by all other manuscripts, including Papyrus 46). The person who wrote this note, however, objected to this correction, and wrote, ?????????? ??? ?????, ??? ???? ???????, ?? ??????????. Metzger translated these words as, “**Fool and knave, can't you leave the old reading alone, and not alter it!**” Another rendering: “*Untrained troublemaker, forgive the ancient [reading]; do not convert it.*” He re-wrote ???????, erasing most of the corrector's ??????. **Apparently, the note-writer regarded Codex Vaticanus as a museum-piece to be protected and preserved, rather than as a copy of Scripture to be used as such.**

[Source](#). (*Emphasis added*)

To be clear, the scribal quality of Codex Vaticanus isn't terrible, but neither is it incredible. Mediocre might be the best description, though some would say “poor”. There is some disagreement on the actual level of quality.

Again, Codex Vaticanus is regarded as the single best New Testament manuscript by the adherents of the Reasoned Eclecticism/Critical Text theory. There are only two reasons for this: (1) it's nearly complete, (2) the “*older is better*” mantra.

Codex Sinaiticus – aka Codex “?”

Codex Sinaiticus takes its name from where it was found: at the base of Mount Sinai. There is much propaganda and misinformation regarding its finding. Many claim it was “found in the trash” while other claim it was carefully preserved by monks. To dispel the confusion, I'm going to quote from the primary source: the finder's own account of how he found it.

Codex Sinaiticus was found by a man named [Lobegott Friedrich Constantin \(von\) Tischendorf](#), at St. Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. [You can read Tischendorf's entire account of finding it – in his own words – here](#). The two relevant excerpts are below.

It was at the foot of Mount Sinai, in the Convent of St. Catherine, that I discovered the pearl of all my researches. In visiting the library of the monastery, in the month of May, 1844, **I perceived in the middle of the great hall a large and wide basket full of old parchments;**

and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that **two heaps of papers like these, mouldered by time, had been already committed to the flames**. What was my surprise **to find amid this heap of papers** a considerable number of sheets of a copy of the Old Testament in Greek, which seemed to me to be one of the most ancient that I had ever seen. The authorities of the convent allowed me to possess myself of a third of these parchments, or about forty-three sheets, all the more readily as they were destined for the fire. **But I could not get them to yield up possession of the remainder. The too lively satisfaction which I had displayed had aroused their suspicions as to the value of this manuscript**.

He was able to view 43 sheets, which was a third of the sheets that were to be burned. Therefore, ~130 pages were going to be burned. It's worth noting that Codex Sinaiticus is **far** longer than 130 pages. The British museum has 694 pages, which is over half the original length.

So no, the entire Codex Sinaiticus wasn't going to be burned.

It seems likely from Tischendorf's description that only some worn out pages from Sinaiticus were going to be burned, but it's hard to be sure. Tischendorf himself might not have been sure.

He returned to the monastery some 15 years later, partially in hopes of recovering the manuscript.

On the afternoon of this day I was taking a walk with the steward of the convent in the neighbourhood, and as we returned, towards sunset, he begged me to take some refreshment with him in his cell. Scarcely had he entered the room, when, resuming our former subject of conversation, he said: "**And I, too, have read a Septuagint**"—i.e. a copy of the Greek translation made by the Seventy. **And so saying, he took down from the corner of the room a bulky kind of volume, wrapped up in a red cloth, and laid it before me. I unrolled the cover, and discovered, to my great surprise, not only those very fragments which, fifteen years before, I had taken out of the basket, but also other parts of the Old Testament, the New Testament complete, and, in addition, the Epistle of Barnabas and a part of the Pastor of Hermas.**

From this account, the accusation that "it was found in a wastepaper basket/trash can" is technically true, but is rather misleading. It seems obvious that the entire thing wasn't going to be burned.

BTW, you can read all of Codex Sinaiticus online if you wish at the [Codex Sinaiticus Project website](#).

Now, about the quality of Codex Sinaiticus.

Even those who love the manuscript will admit it has serious quality problems. Even the official Codex Sinaiticus Project website ([link above](#)) admits this:

No other early manuscript of the Christian Bible has been so extensively corrected. A glance at the transcription will show just how common these corrections are. They are especially frequent in the Septuagint portion. They range in date from those made by the

original scribes in the fourth century to ones made in the twelfth century. **They range from the alteration of a single letter to the insertion of whole sentences.**

They aren't the only ones to say this either. The manuscript's finder Tischendorf – who reckoned it as the greatest find of his life – said the following:

On nearly every page of the manuscript there are corrections and revisions, **done by 10 different people.**

Tischendorf also that said he: *“counted 14,800 alterations and corrections in Sinaiticus.”* He goes on to say:

The New Testament...**is extremely unreliable**...on many occasions 10, 20, 30, 40, words are dropped...letters, words, even whole sentences are frequently written twice over, or begun and immediately canceled. **That gross blunder, whereby a clause is omitted because it happens to end in the same word as the clause preceding, occurs no less than 115 times in the New Testament.**

By any conceivable metric (*except age*), Codex Sinaiticus is one of the worst manuscripts that we've found. You probably couldn't find a scholar who would praise the scribal work in Sinaiticus, and it's easy to find those who deride it as the worst scribal work among the manuscripts we've found.

Comparing Vaticanus and Sinaiticus

As we've just seen, Codex Vaticanus is a mediocre-to-poor quality manuscript. Codex Sinaiticus is among the worst manuscripts we have. Now, let's look at how they compare to each other, and how much they agree with each other.

(Note: the “He” in the quote below is Dean Burgon)

He also checked these manuscripts for particular readings, or readings that are found ONLY in that manuscript. In the Gospels alone, **Vaticanus has 197 particular readings, while Sinaiticus has 443.** A particular reading signifies one that is most definitely false. Manuscripts repeatedly proven to have incorrect readings lose respectability. Thus, manuscripts boasting significant numbers of particular readings cannot be relied upon.

[Source.](#)

The Textual Variants between them are numerous.

According to [Herman C. Hoskier](#), there are, without counting errors of [iotacism](#), 3,036 textual variations between Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in the text of the Gospels alone

Assuming that the same ratio of variants persists in the rest of the New Testament and doing the math, that's ~3434 additional variants, for a total of ~6470 variants between them. There are 7956 verses in the New Testament. That's an average of 0.81 variants per verse between Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. **Therefore, roughly 4 out of every 5 verses (81.3%) in one manuscript disagrees in at least one place in the other.** (*On average. In reality, the distribution is never that perfect.*)

According to [Dean Burgon](#):

"It is in fact easier to find two consecutive verses in which these two MSS differ the one from the other, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree."

Despite the numerous Textual Variants between them, there's an interesting theory about their origin.

The manuscript is believed to have been housed in Caesarea in the 6th century, **together with the Codex Sinaiticus, as they have the same unique divisions of chapters in Acts.**

There's no other evidence for this – so take with a grain of salt – but they are the only two manuscripts that share that characteristic. The fact that they share a unique characteristic makes it more likely they came from the same general area. That's pure theory without other evidence, but it's interesting.

Corruption of the Alexandrian text type?

I'm almost hesitant to include this, as it comes close to an [Ad Hominem attack](#) on the entire Alexandrian Text type/family. However, I have included it for completeness.

The following is regarding the Alexandrian text type manuscripts.

However, the antiquity of these manuscripts is no indication of reliability because a prominent church father in Alexandria testified that manuscripts were already corrupt by the third century. Origen, the Alexandrian church father in the early third century, said:

"...the differences among the manuscripts [of the Gospels] have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they lengthen or shorten, as they please."

(Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (1991), pp. 151-152).

Origen is of course speaking of the manuscripts of his location, Alexandria, Egypt. **By an Alexandrian Church father's own admission, manuscripts in Alexandria by 200 AD were already corrupt.**

Irenaeus in the 2nd century, though not in Alexandria, made a similar admission on the state of corruption among New Testament manuscripts. Daniel B. Wallace says, “Revelation was copied less often than any other book of the NT, and yet Irenaeus admits that it was already corrupted — within just a few decades of the writing of the Apocalypse”

[Source.](#)

There’s an argument to be made that the Alexandrian Text type was corrupted very early. It’s by no means an ironclad argument, but I would’ve been remiss if we didn’t talk about it here. (*We’ll come back to it later.*)

Westcott & Hort Had... Questionable beliefs?

There is some evidence that Westcott & Hort didn’t have a high opinion of the Bible. There’s further evidence – based on quotes they said – that they didn’t take the Bible seriously, literally, and endorsed the Theory of Evolution.

However, to simply say their Critical Text is bad because of their personal views is... problematic.

While the character of the workers can shed some light on the work, I prefer to judge a work based on its merits, not what the authors *might* have believed. Therefore, if line of reasoning interests you, you can read more [here](#). I will devote no more space to it in this article because I don’t think it relevant, and only mentioned it for completeness.

The one thing I will mention is Hort at least was motivated to eliminate the Textus Receptus from the public eye, as he considered it “vile”.

“I had no idea till the last few weeks of the importance of text, having read so little Greek Testament, and dragged on with the villainous Textus Receptus ... Think of the vile Textus Receptus leaning entirely on late MSS; it is a blessing there are such early ones.” – Fenton Hort

Again, this is because of his “earlier is better” philosophy.

Reasoned Eclecticism / Critical Text Conclusion

In the end, the greatest strength of the Critical Text is also its greatest weakness: man’s involvement. If you forced me to pick one of the three major theories (*instead of the blend I prefer*) I’d pick Reasoned Eclecticism... but with a different set of rules.

The problem was Westcott & Hort’s application of the theory.

The original rules set down by Westcott & Hort aren’t consulted terribly often anymore. However, their

original work is still with us. All the modern Greek Critical Texts bear an *extremely strong* resemblance to Westcott & Hort's original 1881 Critical Text. Their text was heavily based on the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. These two documents are rather flawed, especially Sinaiticus.

They also discounted the entire Byzantine text type based on an assumption which has now been proved wrong. Despite the Byzantine text type being vindicated by extremely early manuscript findings, there remains a persistent bias against Byzantine readings for no apparent reason.

Further, it means all the manuscript findings of the last 140+ years are given very little consideration in modern Bibles.

Personally, I think that's a problem.

To be clear, the **theory** of Reasoned Eclecticism is very sound; it's the **application** of it (*thus far*) that leaves something to be desired.

Please don't mistake the one for the other.

The modern Critical Text is based primarily on two flawed documents, without the benefit of the findings of the last ~140 years. If you could alter the rules – or simply remove the bias against the Byzantine text type – Reasoned Eclecticism stands a very good chance of producing the best results.

The Majority Text Theory

Einstein once said:

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

The Majority Text theory is that to a "T". It's simplicity itself, but under-girding that simplicity is profound sophistication. It definitely has flaws (*which we'll discuss later*), but it also has some significant strengths.

What is the Majority Text methodology?

The basic premise is extremely simple:

"Any reading overwhelmingly attested by the manuscript tradition is more likely to be original than its rival(s)."

Source: *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*, p. xi.

Essentially, whenever one reading has more manuscripts supporting it than the other variants readings, it's more likely to be the original reading. Or to put it another way:

The Majority Text method within textual criticism could be called the “democratic” method. Essentially, each Greek manuscript has one vote, all the variants are voted on by all the manuscripts, and whichever variant has the most votes wins.

[Source.](#)

It might sound simplistic, but there's a good mathematical reason and a good common sense reason behind it.

Further – and I can't stress this enough – there is more to the Majority Text theory than simply counting manuscripts.

At face value, that's it.

However, real Textual Criticism with a set of rules still must be applied. Very few – if any – scholars would argue that the Majority wins all the time. You still need to sift through the manuscripts and apply more careful methodology than simple “nose counting”. We'll talk more about this later.

For now, let's look at the underpinnings for the Majority Text theory.

Note: it will sound like I'm strongly biased in favor of the Majority Text while I present the “pro” side of the argument. I'm not. It has significant downsides which we'll look at after the “pro” side.

The Mathematical Case for The Majority Text

This is easiest to explain with an example.

Several of Paul's letter were encyclical, meaning they were intended to be passed around from church to church. So let's say one of Paul's letter arrives at your church and you're supposed to pass it on. However, you'd like to keep a copy, so you hire a scribe to copy the letter before passing it on.

For simplicity's sake, let's assume the letter went to five churches, and then is accidentally destroyed. Now you have five copies in five different locations, but no original. Further, let's assume that each scribe accidentally made a different error while copying, as happens when copying by hand.

The odds of all the scribes making the same error are extremely low. Even if two scribes (40%) did, the majority of scribes (60%) will have preserved the correct reading.

Now, let's take it a step further.

Let's say that the five original copies each had five copies made of them, all made by faithful scribes. That brings us to 30 total manuscripts. Further, we'll assume the "persistence of errors", meaning faithful scribes will copy even the errors of previous scribes.

Again, the odds of all those scribes making the same error is vanishingly low. (*In most cases, more on that in a minute*)

Now, let's assume at this point intentional corruptions enter into the manuscripts that were copied from those 30. Let's say 2 or 3 scribes start making changes to suit their own theological biases. Under ordinary circumstances, they will never be able to outnumber the scribes who tried to be faithful.

Further (*unless they are working in concert*) the odds of them coming up with identical changes is minuscule. So instead of creating a new popular reading, they're more likely to create several unique readings... and even these are in a small minority.

Thus, the theory goes that in most any given time span, the readings in a majority of manuscripts are most likely to reflect the original.

Ironically, Westcott & Hort recognized this too.

As soon as the numbers of a minority exceed what can be explained by accidental coincidence, ... their agreement ... can only be explained on genealogical grounds. We have thereby passed beyond purely numerical relations, and the necessity of examining the genealogy of both minority and majority has become apparent. 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 vice versa... [but this] presumption is too minute to weight against the smallest tangible evidence of other kinds.

"Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings"
by Westcott & Hort.

Notice that Westcott & Hort recognized the Majority Text theory, but then summarily dismissed it saying "*the smallest tangible evidence of other kinds*" was enough to overthrow it. That seems more like personal bias talking than scholarly work, and it persists to this day. (*As we've seen*)

Interesting, no?

Again, they believed that the Byzantine Text type was a combination of the Alexandrian and Western text types. Thus, they felt free to ignore them (*as we've already discussed*). Their theory has since been categorically proven wrong, partially by new manuscript findings. These findings include – but aren't limited to – Papyrus from the 200s and 300s.

However, Some say this mathematical model is Wrong

The typical examples of how to break this model are well-covered in [this YouTube video](#). However, the examples leave out one very important factor (*which we'll get to in a moment*.)

For an example, let's say we're copying the shortest book of the New Testament, 3 John with 219 words (*in Greek*). It seems likely a decent scribe could copy 219 words without error. For a sense of scale, there's exactly 219 words from the beginning of the last quote to the end of the last section. (*Don't ask how much re-writing that took.*)

Further, let's tip this ***against*** the Majority Text.

We'll assume two scribes copy correctly and one incorrectly. Let's further assume the "persistence of errors", which assumes every mistake is copied down to every manuscript after it. So each correct manuscript will always spawn 2 more correct manuscript, but also 1 incorrect manuscript will spawn 2 more incorrect manuscripts (*and no correct manuscripts*).

Here's what we get.

- 1st generation: 2 correct copies, 1 incorrect copy (*2/1 ratio*)
- 2nd generation: 4 correct copies, 3 incorrect copies. (*1.75/1 ratio*)
- 3rd generation: 8 correct copies, 7 incorrect copies (*~1/1 ratio*)
- 4th generation: 16 correct copies, 22 incorrect copies (*~1/1.4 ratio*)
- 5th generation: 32 correct copies, 60 incorrect copies (*~1/2 ratio*)

By the 5th generation, you can see that the number of manuscripts with errors outnumber the ones without errors nearly 2-1.

This looks like it completely destroys the Majority Text theory... but does it?

First, remember that the worst manuscript at the 5th generation has exactly – and only – 5 mistakes (*one added every generation*). 5 mistakes in 219 words is still pretty good. Over a quarter (16) of the incorrect manuscripts will only have a single mistake, most of the rest will only have 2-3.

If you assume the mistakes are fairly randomly distributed, the Majority holds up quite well. Further, remember that 99% of Textual Variants don't change the meaning, even if they are original. (*And many of these variants would be spelling errors.*)

Further, this method of disproving the Majority Text makes an incorrect assumption: that errors are tenacious, i.e. that errors never disappear but instead are copied down through the generations. (*Which they aren't.*)

The Myth of Tenacity (of errors)

The basic idea is explained below.

On page 78 of *The King James Only Controversy*, author James White states: “**Once a variant reading appears in a manuscript, it doesn’t simply go away. It gets copied and ends up in other manuscripts.**” To support this statement, White appealed to Kurt & Barbara Aland’s similar statement: “**Once a variant or a new reading enters the tradition it refuses to disappear, persisting (if only in a few manuscripts) and perpetuating itself through the centuries.** One of the most striking traits of the New Testament textual tradition is its tenacity.” – Aland & Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 56.

[Source.](#)

However, this can be easily disproved using common sense and touch of data. For context, a “singular reading” is a Textual Variant that appears in only one manuscript and no other manuscripts whatsoever.

Now consider the mass of evidence *against* the concept of tenacity: the hundreds of singular readings that appears in ancient manuscripts, but of which ***there is no trace in later manuscripts***. How many such readings are there? [Greg Paulson](#) wrote his 2013 thesis on singular readings in the codices Vaticanus (B), Sinaiticus (A), Bezae (D), Ephraemi Rescriptus (C), and Washingtonianus (W) **in the Gospel of Matthew**, and he mentioned how many singular readings – i.e., readings that do not recur in any other Greek manuscript – each one of these codices has in its text of Matthew. Paulson’s data:

- Vaticanus: 97.
- Sinaiticus: Scribe A: 163.
- Bezae: 259.
- Ephraemi Rescriptus: 75
- Washingtonianus: 112.

I emphasize that these numbers – **showing that five important early manuscripts combine to produce a total of 706 singular readings** – only taking the text of Matthew into consideration.

And that’s not all the singular readings. If you look at the earlier papyrus, there’s even more singular readings.

Royse provides a chart which conveys that Papyrus 45 has **222 significant singular readings**; Papyrus 46 has **471 significant singular readings**; Papyrus 47 has **51 significant singular readings**; Papyrus 66 has **107 significant singular readings**; Papyrus 72 has **98 significant singular readings**; Papyrus 75 has **119 significant singular readings**. (In a footnote, Royse helpfully defines “significant singular readings” as “those singular readings that remain after exclusion of nonsense-readings and orthographic variants.”)

[Source.](#)

The existence of these “singular readings” disproves the myth of the tenacity of errors completely. If mistakes were tenacious, then there would be very few singular readings because these mistakes

would've been passed down to each successive manuscript.

But they weren't.

These singular reading disappeared, *never* to be seen again. Presumably the scribes didn't keep the errors because they recognized them as errors. This brings us to one of the strongest arguments for the Majority Text theory: that scribes preferred to copy better manuscripts.

Was There a Scribal Preference to Copy Better Manuscripts?

This could be called the "common sense" side of the Majority Text theory. It goes like this:

Please imagine that you were a scribe charged with copying the New Testament. Further assume you had two manuscripts to choose from when copying. One appears to be of mediocre quality, the other of good quality.

Which text would you copy?

One of the major underpinnings for the Majority Text theory is that scribes will generally choose to copy better manuscripts over worse manuscripts. (*Assuming they had multiple manuscripts to choose from.*)

I think this makes sense.

It's what almost anyone would do.

Again, let's assume you were in charge of copying the New Testament with several manuscripts to choose from, say five. One of them appears to be of poor quality, one of mediocre quality and the remaining three appear to be of decent quality and – a few small variants aside – appear to be in near perfect agreement. Nearly everyone would choose one of the three to copy from. Or perhaps you'd use all of three, using the combination to correct the few small variants between them.

And by the way, I do mean "near perfect agreement" even according to Westcott & Hort.

"The [fourth-century] text of Chrysostom and other Syrian [= Byzantine] fathers ... [is] substantially identical with the common late text"

"The fundamental text of late extant Greek MSS generally is beyond all question identical with the dominant Antiochian [= Byzantine] ... text of the second half of the fourth century... The Antiochian Fathers and the bulk of extant MSS ... must have had in the greater number of extant variations a common original either contemporary with or older than our oldest extant MSS"

"Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings" by Westcott & Hort

The (*Byzantine*) manuscripts from the Medieval period were “substantially identical” and “beyond all question identical” to those known in the “second half of the fourth century”. That’s from the 4th century to the ~15th century; a period of 1,100 years (*over a millennia*) with virtually no change.

This is especially interesting because they also said the “Antiochian” (*Byzantine*) text was the “dominant” text in the second half of the 4th century (*the later 300s*).

Further, Westcott and Hort agreed that the “common text” (*Byzantine text*) had at its root a text that was as old as – or older than – their oldest manuscripts (*Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus*). Again, the only reason they didn’t give them any weight was because they (*incorrectly*) believed the Byzantine text was a combination of the Western and Alexandrian Text types.

Again, we now know this isn’t the case.

Eminent scholars such as E. C. Colwell, G. D. Kilpatrick, and Kurt and Barbara Aland maintained, respectively, that “**The overwhelming majority of readings,” “almost all variants,” and “practically all the substantive variants in the text of the New Testament” existed before the year 200**. Nevertheless the Hortian text has not been overthrown.

[Source](#).

Plus, there are papyrus fragments from quite early that contain Byzantine readings, though often mixed with the other text types.

Further, this argument for Scribes choosing better manuscripts has parallels from the Textual Criticism of non-Biblical works too.

It’s true.

Parallels with Textual Criticism of Non-Biblical works

In the Textual Criticism of Homer’s works, we see excellent parallels with the New Testament, even so far as reproducing similar “text types”.

17. A transmissional approach to textual criticism is not unparalleled. **The criticism of the Homeric epics proceeds on much the same line**. Not only do Homer’s works have more manuscript evidence available than any other piece of classical literature (though far less than that available for the NT), but Homer also is represented by MSS from a wide chronological and geographical range, from the early papyri through the uncials and Byzantine-era minuscules. **The parallels to the NT transmissional situation are remarkably similar**, since the Homeric texts exist in three forms: one shorter, one longer, and one in-between.

18. The shorter form in Homer is considered to reflect Alexandrian critical know-how and **scholarly revision applied to the text**; the **Alexandrian text** of the NT is clearly shorter, has apparent Alexandrian connections, and may well reflect recensional activity.
19. The longer form of the Homeric text is characterized by popular expansion and scribal “improvement”; the NT **Western text** generally is considered the “uncontrolled popular text” of the second century with similar characteristics.
20. Between these extremes, a “medium” or “vulgate” text exists, which resisted both the popular expansions and the critical revisions; this text continued in much the same form from the early period into the minuscule era. The NT **Byzantine Textform** reflects a similar continuance from at least the fourth century onward.
21. Yet the conclusions of **Homeric** scholarship based on a transmissional-historical approach stand in **sharp contrast** to those of NT eclecticism:

We have to assume that the original ... was a medium [= vulgate] text... The longer texts ... were gradually shaken out: if there had been ... free trade in long, medium, and short copies at all periods, it is hard to see how this process could have commenced. Accordingly the need of accounting for the eventual predominance of the medium text, when the critics are shown to have been incapable of producing it, leads us to assume a medium text or vulgate in existence during the whole time of the hand-transmission of Homer. This consideration ... revives the view ... that the Homeric vulgate was in existence before the Alexandrian period... [Such] **compels us to assume a central, average, or vulgate text.**

(Source for this quote is: “*Homer: The Origins and the Transmission*”, by Thomas W. Allen)

22. Not only is the parallel between NT transmissional history and that of Homer striking, but the same situation exists regarding the works of Hippocrates. Allen notes that “**the actual text of Hippocrates in Galen’s day was essentially the same as that of the mediaeval MSS ... [just as] the text of [Homer in] the first century B.C. ... is the same as that of the tenth-century minuscules.**”⁴³
23. **In both classical and NT traditions there thus seems to be a “scribal continuity” of a basic “standard text” which remained relatively stable,** preserved by the unforced action of copyists through the centuries who merely copied faithfully the text which lay before them. Further, **such a text appears to prevail in the larger quantity of copies in Homer, Hippocrates, and the NT tradition.** Apart from a clear indication that such consensus texts were produced by formal recension, it would appear 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.**”

[Source.](#) (An excellent article BTW, though a bit technical.)

So in the “text types” of Homer, you have:

- Short = Alexandrian, reflecting “scholarly revision”
- Medium = Widely believed to be the true/original because it maintained a near-identical form over 1000+ years, and most manuscripts are of this type
- Long = characterized by Scribal “improvement” and expansion.

In the New Testament you have:

- Short = Alexandrian Text type,
- Medium = Byzantine Text type, characterized by near-identical form over 1000+ years, and most manuscripts are of this type
- Long/paraphrase = Western Text type, characterized by its “love of paraphrase” is like the “uncontrolled popular text” of Homer

Among scholars, there’s little doubt that the “medium” text type of *Homer* is the original, while the short is the result of “scholarly revision”. (*The long is discarded because of its poor quality*) In the *New Testament* it’s the complete opposite, except the discarding of the poor quality of the Western Text. The “medium” Byzantine text with its near identical form for 1000+ years is ignored, and the shorter Alexandrian text is preferred.

Why?

Why discard a Text Type that remained virtually unchanged for 1000+ years?

It doesn’t make sense (*to me*).

Notice too, that – in Homer – the shorter Alexandrian “text type” was regarded to be the result of “scholarly revision”. I’m going to re-quote something we looked at earlier.

(*Note: The following is regarding the Alexandrian Text type manuscripts.*)

However, the antiquity of these manuscripts is no indication of reliability because a prominent church father in Alexandria testified that manuscripts were already corrupt by the third century. **Origen, the Alexandrian church father in the early third century, said:**

“...**the differences among the manuscripts [of the Gospels] have become great**, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they lengthen or shorten, as they please.”

(Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (1991), pp. 151-152).

Origen is of course speaking of the manuscripts of his location, Alexandria, Egypt.
By an Alexandrian Church father’s own admission, manuscripts in Alexandria by 200 AD were already corrupt.

Irenaeus in the 2nd century, though not in Alexandria, made a similar admission on the state of corruption among New Testament manuscripts. Daniel B. Wallace says, “Revelation was copied less often than any other book of the NT, and yet Irenaeus admits that it was already corrupted — within just a few decades of the writing of the Apocalypse”

[Source](#).

As we’ve already seen, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus were certainly of mediocre to poor quality. It has often been stated by Majority Text advocates that “*good money pushes out bad*”, and the same principle can be applied to Textual Criticism. They believe that – over time – good manuscripts will push out bad manuscripts.

Scribes more likely to add or subtract?

One of the major arguments against the Majority Text by those who prefer the Critical text is the accusation that scribes added the “extra” content. One of Aland’s rules for Textual Criticism is:

The venerable maxim *lectio brevior lectio potior* (“the shorter reading is the more probable reading”) is certainly right in many instances. But here again the principle cannot be applied mechanically.

As you may remember, both Aland and Westcott & Hort had trouble sticking to their rules (*except “older is better”*). They both believed that scribes were more likely to add content than remove content. Therefore, they had the saying “the shorter reading is the more probable reading.”

But is the shorter reading more probable?

There is a well-known error when copying manuscripts by hand called “parablepsis”. (*It’s also called “Haplography”, but the two are technically slightly different*) This error occurs when two words or phrases end with the same letters/words, and the scribe accidentally skips everything in between.

For example:

This is our example, but
we’ll need some words so
This is our sample **text**
You’re copying it down,
but this clause in red is
sadly skipped because
because the next line also
contains the word **text**
Thus your eye jumps from
the first occurrence of the
word “text” to the second,

and you accidentally skip
everything between them,
which is every-thing in **red**.

The scribe's line of sight skips from the first instance of the word "text" to the second instance of the word "text", accidentally skipping everything in between (*the red text in the example*). This is a well-known, well-documented scribal error, even having its own name. You might've even made this error yourself, just not on New Testament manuscripts. ?

Further, this can happen in smaller increments too.

The original texts were written in all capital letters and there were no spaces between the words. Therefore, it wouldn't be hard to skip some intervening letters to drop a word. (*Greek words often have similar endings because of the nature of the Greek language.*) These errors of parablepsis and haplography are commonly known and well-documented.

These errors alone account for hundreds of differences between the Alexandrian and Byzantine Text types.

Seriously.

As we've seen, the Byzantine Text type is significantly longer than the Alexandrian Text type. This accidental skipping could account for a very significant portion of the longer Byzantine Textual Variants. If you'd like to read a longer treatment of this topic, I highly recommend [this article](#).

Further, if you remember from our discussion of Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, this type of omission is recognized in them.

"It should be noted, however, that there is no prominent Biblical MS. in which there occur such gross cases of misspelling, faulty grammar, and **omission**, as in B [Vaticanus]."

Source: The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible

And the man who found Codex Sinaiticus (*Tischendorf*) considered it the greatest find of his life, but still said:

The New Testament...is extremely unreliable...on many occasions 10, 20, 30, 40, words are dropped...letters, words, even whole sentences are frequently written twice over, or begun and immediately canceled. **That gross blunder, whereby a clause is omitted because it happens to end in the same word as the clause preceding, occurs no less than 115 times in the New Testament.**

So, is there a Scribal preference to add rather than subtract?

Certainly not in all cases.

There are plenty of Textual Variants between the Alexandrian and Byzantine Text types (*where the Alexandrian is shorter*

) which can't be explained this way. However, a significant number of variants can be explained by this simple scribal error.

This author is completely unaware of any proof that scribes preferred to add rather than subtract. It might be out there, but I haven't see it. (*Please send me an email via the [contact page](#) if you find some.*)

Now, let's look at the arguments against the Majority Text.

Arguments Against the Majority Text

Despite the strong support we've just seen, the Majority Text theory does have some significant weaknesses.

One of the greatest supporters of the Critical Text is Daniel Wallace. He wrote a long "rebuttal" of the Majority Text entitled: "[The Majority Text and the Original Text: Are They Identical?](#)" That appears to be the standard "go to" article for rebutting the Majority text. James Snapp Jr. wrote a rebuttal to Wallace's article in four parts. ([Part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#).)

Majority of What Manuscripts?

The early Christians translated the New Testament into other languages, and we have many of these translations. If you only include the Greek manuscripts, then indeed the Byzantine Text type is the majority. However, the picture changes if you include translations into other languages.

While translations aren't very useful for deciding the exact wording of Greek, they can be very useful in deciding if certain words, phrases, and/or verses were included.

The translations into other languages are called "versions", and Dan Wallace said this:

Second, **the extant versional manuscripts are virtually triple the extant Greek manuscripts in number** (i.e., there are about **15,000 versional manuscripts**). **The vast majority of them (mostly 10,000 Vulgate copies) do not affirm the Byzantine text.** If one wishes to speak about the majority, why restrict the discussion only to extant Greek witnesses and not include the versional witnesses?

[Source](#). – Daniel Wallace

And from another source:

However, it must be noted that the Western church changed languages in the 600's with the adoption of the Vulgate as its official version. **From that point forward, the Roman Catholic Church preferred to keep their manuscript tradition in Latin rather than Greek. In the Vulgate, we find over half of the Alexandrian readings.** The Alexandrian text is about 5% smaller than the Byzantine text, and there are some differences in words between the two texts. No Christian doctrine is omitted from the Alexandrian text, but some appear strengthened in the Byzantine text.

[Source.](#)

So the Majority Text changes very significantly when you include just the other versional manuscripts. (*And that's not including quotes by including the early church fathers*). That alone changes things a ***lot***. So if you hold to the Majority Text theory, you'll need to decide if you'll only include Greek manuscripts. If so, you'll need a good reason to exclude the various versions.

One reason could be that "something is always lost in translation". A poor translation can obscure many things about the original language, making it difficult to know. For example, imagine trying to reconstruct the Greek text by having several different English translations. If you were working from an NASB or NKJV, you might have some luck. But if you're working from poor translations like the NLT, NIV, or any of the paraphrase translations, you're basically out of luck.

However, even the worst of these can tell you about the presence or absence of a verse.

Majority at What Time?

Let's assume – for the sake of argument – that the Majority Text is essentially identical to the original. The question then becomes:

The Majority Text at what time?

If you take the Majority Text theory and apply it to modern times, then there's clearly more copies of the modern Critical Text than the Majority Text. Whether you count Bible translations based on the Critical Text vs Bible translations based on the Majority Text; or copies of the Greek Majority Text vs the Greek Critical Text, the Critical Text becomes the ***clear*** winner.

If you backup to the first 500 years of the Church, the Byzantine Text type is in the clear minority of the manuscripts we've found. (*Though as we've already seen there's reason to think it was the dominant text.*)

Disproportionate Copying

The mathematical model for the Byzantine Majority Text relies on an assumption. The assumption is

that each manuscript was copied a relatively equal number of times. However, that not necessarily the case.

For example, let's say that three scribes copied from the original, and one of them made an error. But what if a very passionate scribe decided to make a lot of copies... but what if he was copying from the manuscript with the mistake? It's easy to see how you could end up with a disproportionate number of copies with errors. It doesn't mean they will enter the majority, but it's a possibility.

You might say, "But that wouldn't happen."

Actually, we know it did... we just don't know if it happened with errors.

The fact that the Byzantine Text type dominates the manuscript copies is proof of disproportionate copying. (*Or that other manuscripts were destroyed, which we'll look at more in a minute.*)

This disproportionate copying could be a good thing, as we saw in the section on whether scribes copied better manuscripts. However, that doesn't mean it was a good thing. There's simply no way to know if the more accurate manuscripts were preserved this way. You have to trust that scribes did indeed copy the best manuscripts.

Removing Copies from the Stream of Transmission

Further the Majority Text theory could be in trouble if it could be proven that large chunks of manuscripts were lost. Unfortunately, we know that happened in at least two ways.

Accidental Loss Through Age and Use

The first manuscripts were copied onto either papyrus (*ancient paper*) or parchment (*animal skins*). Neither survives through the ages well. That's why the overwhelming vast majority of our earliest Greek manuscripts come from one of the driest climates on the planet: Egypt. Being so dry, Egypt has an ideal climate for such preservation.

Majority Text advocates will typically argue that the earliest Byzantine manuscripts were lost because no other climate on earth is as favorable for preserving documents as Egypt. Thus, they say there were Byzantine Text type manuscripts elsewhere, but they didn't survive because the climate wasn't as suitable for preservation. That's definitely possible – maybe even likely – but by no means certain.

Intentional destruction via persecution

A sad fact of history is that when Christians are persecuted, copies of the Bible are usually caught in the crossfire. In fact, it was Roman policy to destroy Biblical manuscripts at one time.

A vast number of early manuscripts were destroyed in the early persecutions of the Church. There were already ten major periods of persecution of Christians before Nicea:

1. Persecution under Nero (64-68).
2. Persecution under Domitian (90-96).
3. Persecution under Trajan (112-117).
4. Persecution under Marcus Aurelius (161-180).
5. Persecution under Septimus Severus (202-210).
6. Persecution under Decius (250-251).
7. Persecution under Valerian (257-59).
8. Persecution under Maximinus the Thracian (235-38).
9. Persecution under Aurelian (270-275).
10. Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius (303-324).

One of the most ruthless of these persecutions was that of Diocletian in the early 4th century. **Eusebius, Church historian of the same era, recorded that many “Scriptures” were burned during the Diocletian persecution.** He writes in *Church History* (VIII:2):

“All these things were fulfilled in us, when we saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and **the Divine and Sacred Scriptures committed to the flames** in the midst of the market-places, and the shepherds of the churches basely hidden here and there, and some of them captured ignominiously, and mocked by their enemies. When also, according to another prophetic word, “Contempt was poured out upon rulers, and he caused them to wander in an untrodden and pathless way.”

[...]

It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, that **royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire,** and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.”

Many Christians who could not withstand the persecution handed over their Scriptures to the authorities to be publicly burned.

[Source](#). (*Emphasis added*)

That same article goes on to reason that:

Since so many approved manuscripts were deliberately destroyed, the body of extant evidence most likely does not reflect the text which the early Church upheld to be the best text.

Now, this argument can be used both for **and** against the Byzantine Text type.

As the quote above indicates, it's possible the best copies of the scriptures were destroyed. This is usually the position taken by Majority Text advocates to explain why there are no purely Byzantine manuscripts in the early centuries. It makes sense, but that doesn't mean it's what happened. It's possible, but definitely not certain.

That covers the early manuscripts, but what about the later ones?

However, this argument can be reversed later as evidence against the Byzantine Text type. The short version is this.

The western part of Christendom stopped using Greek as their primary language in the mid-1st millennium. They began speaking Latin, and thus moved away from Greek scriptures and into Latin translations. Because of this, there are nearly no Greek manuscripts from the west. (*Though there's an abundance of Latin manuscripts*)

Meanwhile, North Africa and the East were conquered by Muslims. The Muslims destroyed Biblical manuscripts as a matter of course, meaning very few manuscripts survived from the regions they controlled.

Thus, the only major Christian center left is Byzantine Empire.

So it's possible that without the south and east falling to the Muslims and the West turning to Latin, the majority of manuscripts wouldn't be of a Byzantine Text type. There's no proof of that, but it's possible.

Majority Text Theory Conclusion

The Majority Text position does have some strong arguments for it. The idea that Scribes chose to copy better manuscripts makes perfect sense. Further, the Byzantine texts went 1000+ years with manuscripts changing very little. It's not hard to imagine they were fairly pure for the ~300 additional years it would take to get back to the originals. (*Majority Text advocates will say this is the most likely scenario.*)

On the other hand...

However, things change if you include the Latin manuscripts we've found. If you do, the Majority Text would look radically different than the mostly pure Byzantine Majority Text that currently comprises the Majority Text. It would likely end up looking like an Alexandrian/Byzantine hybrid.

Further, there are actual rules for Textual Criticism in the Majority Text theory.

It's not as simple as simply "counting noses" as its critics say. And further, the rules only have a few small differences from the typical Critical Text rules. However, small changes can have large effects. (*You can see one such set of rules [here](#), as part of a longer treatise on the Majority Text.*)

The “Confessional” Position

The foundational premise for the Confessional Position is quite different than the other two theories. The Reasoned Eclecticism and the Majority Text theories are two different ways to take the manuscripts we have and try to assemble the original text.

The Confessional Position is the exact opposite.

The Confessional Position says the God must have “kept (the scriptures) pure in all ages”. By this, they mean that God wouldn’t allow the true version of the Scriptures to be replaced with a corrupt version of the scriptures. Or at least, He would preserve a true version for His faithful followers. They have several verses they use to support this (*which we’ll look at in a moment*).

Another stating of their position goes like this:

“The letter of Scripture has been preserved, without any corruption, in the original tongue. The Scriptures were not corrupted before Christ’s time, for then Christ would not have sent the Jews to them. He said, ‘Search the Scriptures’. He knew these sacred springs were not muddled with human fancies.” – Thomas Watson (from “A Body of Divinity”)

Most people who hold the Confessional Position would say that a Bible from other Greek texts (*such as the Majority Text or Critical Text*) contain the scriptures, just not all of them. They would say they are incomplete and/or corrupted, so why use them?

(Note: there are some who are near militant on the importance of the Confessional Position. Some even go so far as to say that other Bibles/translations are heretical and you can’t truly be saved with them. We will be ignoring this segment and focusing on their more genial and reasonable counterparts .)

In the end, the entire Confessional Position can be boiled down to a single question:

Did God Preserve the Scriptures Perfectly in All Ages?

This is the issue for the Confessional Position. Like most Christians, they affirm that the original text of scripture in the original language – as penned by the original authors – is completely without error. However, the Confessional Position argues that it doesn’t matter if God inspired the Scriptures if He didn’t preserve them too.

They argue that “any uncertainty is 100% uncertainty”.

There’s a certain sense where this is true, but in practice it simply doesn’t matter.

For example. I’m writing this paragraph very early in the morning. My wife didn’t sleep very well last

night so she's still in bed... or is she? There's a closed door between us (*so I don't disturb her sleep*) so I can't actually see her in bed. There's a window in our bedroom she could've climbed out of. I haven't heard a sound from the bedroom, but perhaps she suddenly learned how to be ninja-quiet? So who's to say that my wife isn't running around town in her Pajamas? (*Even though it snowed last night and she wouldn't be caught dead outside our apartment in her pajamas*) I mean, it's possible... Right?

"Any uncertainty is 100% uncertainty"... Right?

Regardless, that is the Confessional Position. Again, it takes its name from a "confession of faith". The most commonly cited confession of faith from Confessional Position Christians is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Westminster Confession of Faith & The Doctrine of Preservation

VIII. **The Old Testament in Hebrew** (which was the native language of the people of God of old), **and the New Testament in Greek** (which, at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), **being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic**;(r) so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.

This is the basic view held by the Confessional Position. This is the essence of what's called the "Doctrine of Preservation". The idea that God – through His power and wisdom – perfectly preserved the scriptures for faithful Christians to use in all ages.

I have yet to hear of a person who holds the Confessional Position who doesn't chose the "Textus Receptus" as the text that was "kept pure in all ages". As this is the text chosen by the Confessional Position, it obviously bears some looking at.

The Confessional Position Text: The "Textus Receptus".

The "Textus Receptus" is Latin for "Received Text". If you ask most people, the "Textus Receptus" is the Greek text assembled by Erasmus from which the King James Version was translated.

Unfortunately, that's not quite true.

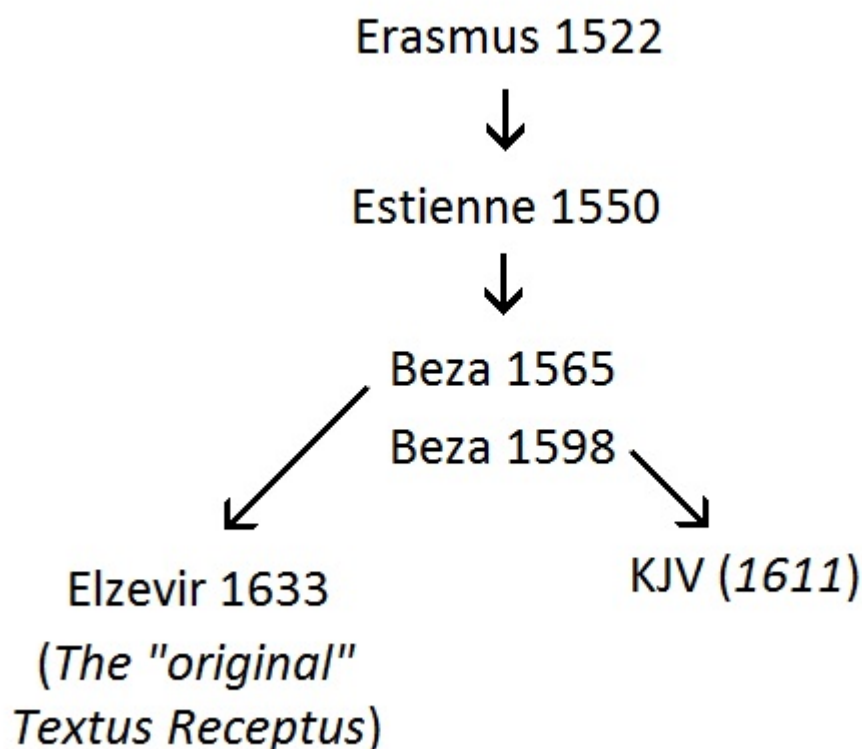
It's close-ish, but the actual path was slightly more convoluted than that.

The History of the Textus Receptus

The primary Greek source for the King James Version was the 1598 version of Theodore Beza's Greek New Testament. The main source for Beza's New Testament was Robert Estienne's 1550 Greek New

Testament. (*Estienne was also known as Stephanus.*) Estienne's New Testament is remarkably similar to Erasmus' Greek New Testament, but Estienne claimed he didn't use Erasmus' work as a source. The first document to be called "Textus Receptus" was the 1633 printing of the Elzevir Greek New Testament, which was substantially identical to the 1565 version of Beza's Greek New Testament.

Yeah, that's a lot; so here's a picture to make sense of it.



(Each had several editions; I've only included the relevant ones for clarity)

Note, all of the above are very similar. There are differences, but they aren't large (*relatively speaking*).

Now, the first document to be called "Textus Receptus" – was published in 1633. The name "Textus Receptus" comes from the preface to the 1633 edition of Abraham & Bonaventure Elzevir's Greek New Testament. The relevant portion says:

"**Textum** ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus **receptum**: in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus"

(Roughly Translated: "so you hold the **text**, now **received** by all, in which nothing (is) corrupt".)

The two words "textum" and "receptum" were changed from the Latin accusative case (*direct object*) to the Latin nominative case (*subject*) to render it "Textus Receptus". That's how it got its name... because of a marketing ploy. Let me say that again:

The “Textus Receptus” got its name because of a marketing ploy.

The Elzevirs might have thought it was without error (*doubtful*) but remember that all marketing is subject to hyperbole. It's far more likely that the sentence was there as a not-so-subtle marketing tactic. Who wouldn't want to have a Bible in which “nothing was corrupt”? The Elzevir 1633 text promised just that in their marketing.

It remains effective to this day.

(Side note: I've spent some time in the marketing world in my life. I'm truly awed that someone created a single sentence for marketing that has echoed through the centuries. That one sentence defines a whole doctrine – the Confessional Position – for millions of Christians. That's both amazing and very scary.)

The 1633 Elzevir was extremely similar to the other editions mentioned, especially the Beza 1565

The Elzevir text is practically a reprint of the text of Beza 1565 with about fifty minor differences in all. The Elzevirs were notable printers, and their editions of the Greek New Testament were accurate and elegant. Throughout Europe the Elzevir editions came to occupy a place of honor, and their text was employed as the standard one for commentary and collation.

[Source](#).

As an aside – because the KJV is often central to the Confessional Position – it's worth noting that the KJV wasn't translated from any one single text. Again, Beza's 1598 text formed much – but definitely not all – of the basis for the KJV. (*Also known as the “Authorized Version”, or “AV” for short.*)

F.H.A. Scrivener identifies 190 readings where the Authorized Version translators depart from Beza's Greek text, generally in maintaining the wording of the Bishop's Bible and other earlier English translations. In about half of these instances, the Authorized Version translators appear to follow the earlier 1550 Greek Textus Receptus of Estienne. For the other half, Scrivener was usually able to find corresponding Greek readings in the editions of Erasmus, or in the [Complutensian Polyglot](#). However, in several dozen readings he notes that no printed Greek text corresponds to the English of the Authorized Version, which in these places derives directly from the Vulgate.

Scrivener loved the Textus Receptus and compiled his own version of it, which is widely accepted today. More on that in a moment. He wasn't the only one who thought this either:

In this connection, it is worth noting that the translators of the King James Version did not follow exclusively any single printed edition of the New Testament in Greek. The edition most closely followed by them was Beza's edition of 1598, but they departed from this edition for the reading in some other published Greek text at least 170 times, and in at least

60 places, the KJV translators abandoned all then-existing printed editions of the Greek New Testament, choosing instead to follow precisely the reading in the Latin Vulgate version.

[Source](#).

Further, if you take Robert Estienne at his word when he says he didn't use Erasmus' Greek Text as a source for his Greek text, then Erasmus had literally ***nothing*** to do with the King James Version ***or*** the "original" Textus Receptus. The claim seems very unlikely though because Estienne's Greek Text is very close to Erasmus'... but it's possible.

In modern times, *all* of these various Greek manuscripts we've just discussed are called the "Textus Receptus".

While the name was originally only applied to the 1633 printing of Elzevir's Greek text, it eventually came to include all of them. The first was Erasmus' though, so let's take a closer look at it.

Erasmus' Textus Receptus

Erasmus originally assembled his Greek text based on 7 Greek manuscripts and published it in 1516 as the "*Novum Instrumentum omne*". In the second edition, he changed the title to "*Novum Testamentum omne*", and used an additional manuscript for the compilation. There's good evidence that he had more manuscripts to choose from, but decided to use only those 7 (*presumably because they were of the best quality, but we don't know for sure*). The table below shows the texts from which Erasmus assembled his Greek New Testament.

[table id=9 /]

It's worth noting that:

Erasmus adjusted the text in many places to correspond with readings found in the Vulgate or as quoted in the Church Fathers; consequently, although the Textus Receptus is classified by scholars as a late **Byzantine text**, it differs in nearly 2000 readings from the **standard form of that text-type**, as represented by the "Majority Text" of Hodges and Farstad (Wallace 1989).

Erasmus' Text Receptus maintained a text form that's similar to the Byzantine Majority Text, but they're definitely not the same. Again, they differ in ~2000 places. That might seem like a lot, but remember the New Testament is just shy of 140,000 words (*in Greek*). That's a ~1.4% variation, which is still fairly significant.

So when you see people (*mostly Confessional Position and/or KJV-Only Christians*) try to use the Majority Text to bolster their case for the Textus Receptus, please realize they're misinformed. The two definitely share similarities, but they definitely aren't the same.

For a sense of scale, we've already seen that (*doing the math and estimating*) there are ~6470 textual

variations between the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. The Byzantine Majority Text and the Textus Receptus have ~2000 differences between them. So the Textus Receptus is definitely a Byzantine text, but far from a purely Byzantine text. (*More on this in a moment.*)

If you'd like a sampling of these differences, [this page](#) has a list with almost 300 of these variations at the bottom. To be clear, this list isn't exhaustive. However it's a good representation of the differences and contains many of the major points of variation. You can read the full list [here](#), but it contains the actual Greek variations so you'll need to know Greek to read it.

(One of the major places they differ is in [The Johannine Comma of 1 John 5:7-8](#), and there's an article about whether it was added or removed right here on Berean Patriot.)

Scrivener's Textus Receptus

Of the various different version of the Textus Receptus, Scrivener's is notable. The following quote is from the Trinitarian Bible Society, who publishes the "Textus Receptus"

"The AV [Authorized Version, i.e. the KJV] was not translated from any one printed edition of the Greek text. The AV translators relied heavily upon the work of William Tyndale and other editions of the English Bible. Thus there were places in which it is unclear what the Greek basis of the New Testament was. **Scrivener in his reconstructed and edited text used as his starting point the Beza edition of 1598, identifying the places where the English text had different readings from the Greek.** He examined eighteen editions of the Textus Receptus to find the correct Greek rendering, and made the changes to his Greek text. **When he finished he had produced an edition of the Greek New Testament which more closely underlies the text of the AV than any one edition of the Textus Receptus.**"

G. W. Anderson and D. E. Anderson, "The Received Text: A Brief Look at the Textus Receptus." (Trinitarian Bible Society, 1999)

Scrivener's Textus Receptus is the closest to the Greek text which underlines the KJV. However, it's an attempt to reconstruct that text, not that actual text itself. It's almost certainly extremely close, but it's almost certainly not identical.

The Biblical Case for the Doctrine of Preservation

Now that we know what Greek text the Confessional Position uses, let's take a closer look at the various scriptural passages they use to support the doctrine of Preservation (*which says God kept His Scriptures "pure in all ages"*).

Psalm 12:6-7

The root of this is an error in translation, as we'll see in a moment.

Psalm 12:6-7 KJV

6 The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.

7 Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve **them** from this generation for ever.

Read simply, you can see how someone would get the Doctrine of preservation from this passage. However, the word I've highlighted in red isn't plural (*them*); it's singular (*him*). You can double check me by looking at [Psalm 12:7 in an interlinear Bible](#). However, don't trust the English there, look at the shorthand underneath the English words.

Notice: it's singular:

V?Qal?Imperf?2ms | 3mse

Other translations render this correctly, and we'll add verse 5 for some context.

Psalm 12:5-7 NASB

5 "Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, Now I will arise," **says** the LORD; "**I will set him in the safety for which he longs.**"

6 The **words** of the LORD are pure words;
As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times.

7 You, O LORD, will keep them;
You will preserve **him** from this generation forever.

God "will keep them" (*His words*) by setting "him" (*the man*) in safety like He said He would in verse 5.

Now some might object by saying the King James translators used a better source document. However, the King James Translators used the 1525-1525 [Masoretic Text](#) by Daniel Bomberg as the basis for the Old Testament. (*The Masoretic text is the traditional Hebrew text, and contains **far** fewer textual variants than the New Testament.*) Every other modern translation I'm aware of – including the NASB – uses the Masoretic text also. Further, the NASB uses a modern reprint of the exact same text underlying the KJV.

So no, this verse doesn't teach the Doctrine of Preservation.

Psalms 100:5

Psalms 100:5 (KJV): For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his **truth** endureth to all generations.

Psalms 100:5 (NASB): For the LORD is good, and His loving devotion endures forever; His **faithfulness** continues to all generations.

I think how you can see how they get the Doctrine of Preservation, but it seems quite a stretch. It seems even more like a stretch when you know the definition of the Hebrew word. The word that's highlighted is Hebrew word "???????" ([emunah](#)). And it means:

1. literally *firmness, steadiness*:
2. *stead-fastness*,
3. *faithfulness, **trust**: a. of human conduct*

So, "truth" in the KJV isn't unwarranted, but hardly the primary meaning. Therefore, this verse doesn't teach Preservation either.

Psalms 117:1-2

Again, this is a stretch but we'll deal with it.

Psalms 117:1-2 KJV

1 O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.

2 For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the **truth** of the LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye the LORD.

The Hebrew word there is "?????" ([emeth](#)), and it means:

1. **reliability, sureness**
2. **stability, continuance**
3. **faithfulness, reliability**
4. truth
 - a. as spoken
 - b. of testimony and judgment
 - c. of divine instruction

- d. truth as a body of ethical or religious knowledge
- 5. adverb in truth, truly

Nearly every translation (*besides the KJV, NKJV, and NASB*) translate it as “faithfulness” or something similar.

Psalms 119:160

You can see where they get it, but it’s such a stretch.

Psalm 119:160 (KJV)

Thy word *is* **true** *from* the beginning: and every one of thy **righteous judgments endureth for ever**.

Clearly, it’s the judgements that are enduring, not “the word”.

Isaiah 40:8 & 1 Peter 1:24-25

These two passages go together because 1 Peter 1:24-25 is quoting Isaiah 40:8. However, truly understand these verses, we need to consider the context. Let’s look at Isaiah 40:8 first.

Isaiah 40:8 KJV

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but **the word of our God shall stand for ever**.

Now just taking this verse by itself, it’s easy to see the Doctrine of Preservation. However, proper context changes the sense radically. First, let’s look at a passage that will become important to understanding these two verses.

John 1:1 (KJV)

In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word** was with God, and **the Word** was God.

Remember “The Word” is one of Jesus’ main titles, especially in the writings of John. Now, let’s look at Isaiah 40 in greater context, and you’ll see it’s clearly a Messianic passage. Let’s go through it one chunk at a time.

Isaiah 40:1-5 (NKJV)

1 “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the Lord's hand
Double for all her sins."

3 **The voice of one crying in the wilderness:**
"Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God."

4 Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;

5 **The glory of the Lord shall be revealed,**
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

All four Gospel writers apply verse 3 to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. (*Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4-6, John 1:23*) Luke also applies verses 4-5 to the Messianic age. Please note how "The glory of the Lord" will be revealed. In so many places, Jesus is called the Glory of the Lord.

Let's continue.

Isaiah 40:6-8 (NKJV)

6 The voice said, "Cry out!"
And he said, "What shall I cry?"
"All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever."

Hmm, could "the Word" here be Jesus? It's get clearer in a few verses, and even clearer when you read 1 Peter 1.

Isaiah 40:9-11 (NKJV)

9 O Zion,
You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem,
You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;
Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

10 Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand,
And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.

11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry them in His bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.

Notice, "Like a Shepherd", appears to be an obvious reference to Jesus given the context. However, we don't have to guess, as Peter – under the Holy Spirit's inspiration – explicitly applied this passage to Jesus. Let's back up to get some context.

1 Peter 1:18-23 (NKJV)

18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers,

19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

20 He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you

21 who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

22 Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart,

23 having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,

Please remember, the original Greek texts were all capital letters, so the translators added the capitals. Further, no Christian was ever "born again" through the Bible; we are "born again" through

Jesus' blood and His work on the cross. The whole passage so far has been talking about Jesus, who is the "Word of God" as in John 1:1.

Why would Peter suddenly be talking about the Bible?

Further, the Bible doesn't "live" or "abide" because it's a book. (*And before you bring up Hebrews 4:12, realize that in context it's talking about Jesus there too*)

Now let's look at the rest, starting with verse 23.

1 Peter 1:23-25 (NKJV)

23 *having been born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the Word of God (*Jesus*) which lives and abides forever,

24 because

"All flesh is as grass,
And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.
The grass withers,
And its flower falls away,

25 But the Word of the Lord (*Jesus again*) endures forever."

Now this is *the Word* (*Jesus yet again*) which by the gospel was preached to you.

Certainly, the Word of God (*Jesus, as in John 1:1*) will live and endure forever. Amen! But Jesus isn't the Bible, and neither Peter nor Isaiah were talking about the Bible; they were talking about Jesus.

Matthew 5:18

Context helps a lot here too.

Matthew 5:17-19 (NKJV)

17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

In context, Jesus is simply saying that the law wouldn't end until "all is fulfilled". Notice, he specifically

said “the law”. He didn’t say the scriptures, and not even “the word”; just the (*Mosaic*) law. Jesus Himself said it was fulfilled when he said “It is finished” on the cross. Christians don’t need to obey the Mosaic Law anymore. (*Read Galatians if you disagree.*)

Further, The Greek lends more clarity on this.

The Greek word that’s translated “pass” is “?????????” ([parerchomai](#)). It means:

I pass by, pass away, pass out of sight; **I am rendered void**, become vain, neglect, disregard.

You could translate it “will by no means be **voided from the law”.** Same idea. Remember the verse before Jesus talked about how He wasn’t going to destroy the (*Mosaic*) Law. However, the New Covenant superseded the Old, and at that point, the Old “passed away” or was rendered void... Just like Jesus said.

Words That Won’t “Pass Away”

This is also recorded in Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33, but we’ll look at the Matthew version because it’s more commonly cited.

Matthew 24:35

Heaven and earth shall pass away, **but my words shall not pass away.**

First, please notice that it’s “words” (*plural*) not “word” (*singular*). God didn’t write multiple Bibles did He?

Second, this is Matthew 24; nearly the entire chapter is prophecy. Is it possible that Jesus is talking about His prophecies in that chapter? This actually makes a lot of sense if you look at the Greek word used. It’s “?????????” ([parerchomai](#)), just like in Matthew 5:18 which we just looked at. It means:

I pass by, pass away, pass out of sight; **I am rendered void**, become vain, neglect, **disregard**

Could it be that Jesus was saying “my words shall not **be rendered void**”? i.e. His prophecy won’t fail. That makes sense, or at least more sense than applying it to the Bible.

The Biggest Problem with the Confessional Position

We’ve just seen that it doesn’t originate in the scriptures. That begs the question: “Where did it come from?” The answer is in the name: it comes from a (*man-made*) confession of faith. There’s no

problem with confessions of faith in general. However, there's a very big problem when someone makes a dogmatic doctrinal position without the support of scripture. While the Confessional Position does claim that support, they don't have it.

That means the only support for the Doctrine of (*perfect*) Preservation is the tradition of men.

There is no other support pillar.

Now, it's clear God did preserve His scriptures extremely well over the years. That much is obvious. But nowhere did God claim He would preserve it perfectly and without error.

He just didn't.

That's makes the Confessional Position interesting, but ultimately not rooted and grounded in scripture. If the basis of your faith is the Westminster Confession of Faith, I would humbly suggest you move to a firmer foundation.

I humbly suggest what was breathed-out by God and "is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness". Just be careful that you aren't "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.", which honestly is the biggest problem with the Confessional Position.

However, there's another problem that's far more practical.

Which Textus Receptus?

According to Textus Receptus Bibles (.com), there are no less than **27 different versions of the Textus Receptus!**

Here is their list:

Complutensian Polyglot

- 1514 (Complutensian Polyglot)

Desiderius Erasmus

- 1516 (Erasmus 1st Novum Instrumentum omne)
- 1519 (Erasmus 2nd)
- 1522 (Erasmus 3rd Novum Testamentum omne)
- 1527 (Erasmus 4th)
- 1535 (Erasmus 5th)

Colinaeus

- 1534 (Simon de Colines)

Stephanus (Robert Estienne)

- 1546 (Robert Estienne (Stephanus) 1st)
- 1549 (Robert Estienne (Stephanus) 2nd)
- 1550 (Robert Estienne (Stephanus) 3rd – Editio Regia)
- 1551 (Robert Estienne (Stephanus) 4th)

Theodore Beza

- 1565 (Beza 1st)
- 1565 (Beza Octavo 1st)
- 1567 (Beza Octavo 2nd)
- 1580 (Beza Octavo 3rd)
- 1582 (Beza 2nd)
- 1589 (Beza 3rd)
- 1590 (Beza Octavo 4th)
- 1598 (Beza 4th)
- 1604 (Beza Octavo 5th)

Elzevir

- 1624 (Elzevir)
- 1633 (Elzevir) edited by Jeremias Hoelzlin, Professor of Greek at Leiden.
- 1641 (Elzevir)
- 1679 (Elzevir)

Oxford Press

- 1825

Scholz

- 1841 (Scholz)

Scrivener

- 1894 (? ????? ????????)

[Source.](#)

So if the Confessional Position wants to say the Textus Receptus was perfectly preserved by God and inerrant, then then we must ask: “which Textus Receptus?” You need to ask which of the 27 possible versions they will pick, because none of them are identical with another.

It’s a problem.

Further, all of these manuscripts which can be called the Textus Receptus contain unique readings not

found in any other manuscripts whatsoever. How can the scriptures have been “kept pure in all ages” when – if the Textus Receptus is “pure” – it has readings that never existed before?

“Okay, But is the Textus Receptus a good Document?”

Even if you don’t hold to the Confessional Position, you might think the Textus Receptus is the best/most accurate edition of the New Testament. You might think this based on empirical/research grounds, not on a “confession of faith”. This might be surprising to hear after what you’ve just read, but you might be right.

Seriously.

There are definitely places in the Textus Receptus that are wrong, and we know this from manuscripts we’ve found that they didn’t have access to then, but overall it’s a very good document. One could even make the case that the Textus Receptus is overall the best Greek New Testament out there. I’m not sure I would agree, but I’m not sure I’d disagree either.

It certainly agrees with the Byzantine Majority Text quite well, and the differences are not typically very large (*though certainly some are*). Personally, I would say the Textus Receptus is overall a very good document. Not perfect by any stretch and it definitely has mistakes, but very good overall.

Confessional Position Conclusion

God certainly preserved the scriptures through the ages. However, He never promised to preserve them perfectly and to assert that He did is to put words in God’s mouth. That’s a bad idea. There’s no scriptural basis for the idea whatsoever, and so asserting it dogmatically is a very bad idea.

We know God preserved the scriptures because even in the New Testament, over 99% of the Textual Variants have no effect on anything. The remainder don’t impact major doctrines, and certainly nothing concerned with salvation or the Gospel. I believe God preserved it, I’m just don’t think the preservation was word-perfect.

While the Confessional Position holds no water, the Textus Receptus itself is a very good document. Not perfect by any stretch, but very good.

Summary of the Critical Text vs. The Majority Text vs. The Textus Receptus

First, we should reiterate that the differences we’re talking about here occur in less than 1% of the New Testament. The core message of the gospel isn’t compromised in any of these documents. Some lesser, non-salvation related doctrines are affected, but many of those are arcane topics that rarely – if ever – touch on the Christian life. Some doctrines are certainly strengthened in the Byzantine Majority

text and the Textus Receptus, but no major, central part of the gospel is affected.

With that said, let's do a quick recap:

The Reasoned Eclecticism theory created the modern **Critical Text** (NA28/UBS5), which is what most modern New Testaments are based on. They use a set of rules to create their text, but never got very far away from Westcott & Hort's original 1881 work. There remains a persistent bias against the Byzantine Text type in the Critical text, which is very unfortunate. Its major weakness is outright dismissal of certain readings (without evidence), and that it's based on essentially only two manuscripts of dubious quality.

The Majority Text theory gives an *extremely high* weight to readings that are supported by the majority of manuscripts. This results in a text that aligns extremely closely with the text the church has used since the 4th century, and it has changed very little in that time. However, it completely ignores evidence from versional manuscripts (*translations*) and the early church fathers. Despite this weakness, in this author's humble opinion it's more likely to have the closest readings to the original in a majority of places. Certainly not all, but quite possibly a majority.

The Confessional Position maintains that God must have perfectly preserved the Bible "pure in all ages". Besides the obvious problem with saying that God "must" do something, there's no basis for that assertion besides a few man-made creeds. The scriptures certainly don't support it, and therefore the Confessional Position simply holds no water. However, the text they've chosen (*the **Textus Receptus***) isn't a bad text. There's good reason to think it's actually a very good document, and it aligns well with the Majority Text. It's by no means perfect and certainly has flaws, but overall it's quite good.

My Personal Opinion

As I said, I prefer a blend.

My personal opinion is that the Majority text is an excellent starting point. Given its long history of transmission with very little change and the common sense idea that scribes will choose better manuscripts, I think that makes sense. However, I would only make that the starting point. The Majority Text isn't perfect, and there are places where adjustments need to be made based on the evidence. (Like [the Johannine Comma](#), which the Majority text doesn't include)

By evidence, I mean quotations from the early church fathers and looking at the versional manuscripts (*translations*). I would give the translations somewhat less weight than Greek texts, but not discard them entirely.

There is one man who has proposed another model I find agreeable, and I confess I got many of my ideas from him. His name is James Snapp Jr. and he owns the blog: [The Text of the Gospels](#), which I highly recommend. In fact, it's usually the first place I look for answers on questions relating to Textual Variants. He proposed an approach which he calls "Equitable Eclecticism" which he explained in two articles. [Part 1](#) is mostly a history lesson for context, and is well worth reading. [Part 2](#) focuses more on the actual methodology.

Conclusion

Wow, if you've stayed to the end I congratulate you on your tenacity. Not many people would sift through an 18k+ word article. Hopefully you found it useful, complete, and you now have a good understanding of Textual Criticism. However, this will hopefully provide a better background for you when making your own decisions about source texts.

God Bless, and venture forth armed with knowledge. ?

(Note: I have an article on [What's the Best Bible Translation? And More Importantly, Why?](#) It goes into just as much depth as this article, and even includes short reviews on the most popular Bible translations at the end.)