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# The Text of the Gospels

A blog by James Snapp, Jr. about New Testament textual criticism, especially involving variants in th

Wednesday, April 25, 2018

## Glossary of Textual Criticism: A-C

*“Understandest thou what thou readest?”*

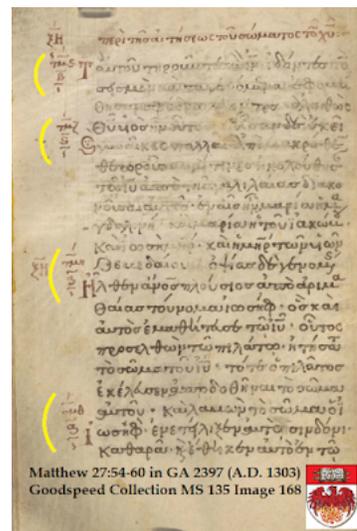
That was Philip’s question to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:30, as rendered in the KJV. Every field of scientific study involves some specialized terms, or jargon, which might initially be difficult to understand, and New Testament textual criticism is no exception. It is easier when you know the jargon. The [website of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library](#) offers a helpful multi-part review of terminology relevant to the study of Latin manuscripts. The [British Library’s online glossary](#) of terms used in its descriptions of illuminated manuscripts is also informative. And Robert Waltz’s [Encyclopedia of New Testament Textual Criticism](#) includes a very thorough review of the terminology used in this field. Here is the first of several parts of a concise introductory list of some of the technical terms used in New Testament textual criticism, with their definitions.

**Alexandrian Text:** The form of New Testament text which was dominant in Egypt in the early church, displayed most accurately by Codex Vaticanus and the early Sahidic version. Since papyrus tends to naturally rot away except in low-humidity climates such as the climate of Egypt, almost all surviving papyrus manuscripts – especially the ones found as the result of excavations in or near Oxyrhynchus, Egypt – support the Alexandrian Text. Where Alexandrian readings deviate from the Byzantine Text, the Alexandrian reading frequently has internal characteristics that commend it as original. In some cases, however, Alexandrian variants can be plausibly attributed to scribal carelessness and conscious editing. The Nestle-Aland compilation of the Greek New Testament, the primary basis for most modern English versions (the ESV, CSB, NIV, NLT, etc.) is mainly based on the Alexandrian Text.

**Ammonian Sections:** The segments into which the text of the Gospels was divided for identification in the cross-reference system developed by Eusebius of Caesarea. There are 355 sections in Matthew, 234 in Mark, 343 in Luke, and 232 in John – at least, these are typical. This system of text-segmentation is named after Ammonius of Alexandria, who, according to Eusebius in his letter *Ad Carpianus* (which often precedes the Canon-Tables), developed a cross-referencing method in which the text of Matthew was supplemented by the parallel-passages, or the numbers of parallel-passages, in the other Gospels. It was Eusebius, however, who developed the Sections as we know them, for they cover passages in Mark, Luke, and John that are not paralleled in Matthew.

In very many Gospels-manuscripts, the Section-numbers appear in the margin alongside the text, accompanied by the canon-number (written below it, separated by a horizontal line). The numerals are typically written in red. It is not unusual to see that in the text itself, the first letter on the first line after the beginning of a Section is given special treatment – either by being written larger, or by being written in different ink (often red) slightly to the left of the left margin, or both.

**Bifolio:** A sheet of writing-material (whether parchment, or papyrus, or paper), vertically folded in the middle so as to form four pages upon which text could be written. Typically, groups of four bifolium were combined – picture a stack of four flat sheets; then picture



Yellow arcs (added) accompany Section-numbers and Canon-numbers in the margin of this Gospels-manuscript.

them vertically folded, all at once, so as to form a small blank 16-page book. Such a 16-page book is called a **quire**, or quaternion. (Quires could take **other forms** – consisting of different numbers of sheets – and could be supplemented and repaired in a variety of ways.)

Another way to picture a quire is as a booklet consisting of eight *leaves*, or *folios*, each leaf consisting of the front (*recto*) and back (*verso*) of half of a bifolio. To prepare books large enough to contain all four Gospels, or large enough to contain the book of Acts and the Epistles, or even the entire New Testament, quires were sewn together to make a **multi-quire codex**. Not all quires consisted of only four sheets – for example, Papyrus 45 is a **single-quire codex**; all its sheets were laid flat in a single stack before being sewn together.

**Breves:** chapter-summaries, especially those that appear in Latin manuscripts. Some forms of breves appear to have originated very early in the Old Latin transmission-line, including one form – developed in the mid-200s or slightly thereafter – that includes a reference to the *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11, which is absent from most early Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of John) in its usual location in the text of John.

**Byzantine Text:** The Greek text of the New Testament that is supported by a strong majority of manuscripts, as represented in the Byzantine Textform compiled by Robinson and Pierpont. This form of the text was dominant in Constantinople and its environs (i.e., **Byzantium**) from the 400s onward. Many Byzantine readings are supported by patristic testimony from the 300s and earlier; the Gothic version and the Peshitta version also provide strong (but not uniform) support for the Byzantine Text. Compared to the Alexandrian Text, the Byzantine Text tends to be longer and easier to understand. This is, however, a general description; there are variant-units in which the Alexandrian reading is longer.

When Westcott and Hort issued the 1881 **Revised Text**, Hort maintained that all distinctly Byzantine readings (which he described as “Syrian,” reckoning that the core of the Byzantine Text had previously been developed at Antioch, in Syria) should be rejected, on the grounds that the Byzantine Text as a whole was the product of a recension, that is, a carefully edited form of the text made by someone – perhaps Lucian of Antioch – whose editorial work consisted of selecting variants from exemplars drawn from Alexandrian and Western transmission-lines. Readings that deviated from the Alexandrian and Western variants, Hort theorized, must have originated in the mind of the editor who produced the Antiochan text. Since Hort proceeded to reject the Western Text as having been thoroughly contaminated by expansions, the 1881 Revised Text was almost 100% Alexandrian at points where these three major forms of the text disagree – and distinctly Byzantine readings, despite being supported by almost all surviving Greek manuscripts, were very few and far between.

Hort’s theory, however, was greatly weakened by the discovery – in papyrus manuscripts which had been excavated in Egypt, and which appeared to have been produced before or during the lifetime of Lucian of Antioch – of readings which did not agree with the flagship manuscripts of the Alexandrian Text, nor with the Western Text. This implied that whatever the origins of every distinctive Byzantine reading might be, they could not all have originated during the undertaking of a recension made in the late 200s or early 300s, because at least some distinctive Byzantine readings already existed at that time. If the Lucianic recension ever happened, it had to involve the consultation of not only Alexandrian and Western exemplars, but also exemplars containing at least some Byzantine readings – in which case, Hort’s basis for rejecting all distinctive Byzantine readings falls to the ground.

Nevertheless, even after the discovery of distinctive Byzantine readings in Egyptian papyri, the heavily Alexandrian Revised Text continued to be promoted, especially in Nestle’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*, and in the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*, which are the primary base-texts currently used by most translators. In *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, author Bruce Metzger – a member of the UBS compilation-committee – defended over 1,000 rejections of Byzantine readings that have an impact on translation.

**Caesarean Text:** The form of the text of the Gospels displayed in manuscripts 1582, 1, and some Armenian and Georgian manuscripts. The testimony of manuscripts 1 and 1582 is augmented by support from an assortment of other manuscripts including 118, 131, and 209). Researcher Kirsopp Lake established that the distinct readings shared by 1, 118, 131, and 209 descend from a shared ancestor in 1901 in the volume *Codex 1 of the Gospels and Its Allies*. (The recognition of 1582 as a member of the same family – and as its best Greek representative – came later). This cluster of Greek manuscripts is called *family 1*, and is generally (but not always) characterized by its members’ unusual treatment of the *pericope adulterae*: the

passage is put after the end of John 21, having been uprooted and transplanted as the note in 1 and 1582 explains:

*“The chapter about the adulteress: in the Gospel according to John, this does not appear in the majority of copies; nor is it commented upon by the divine fathers whose interpretations have been preserved – specifically, by John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria; nor is it taken up by Theodore of Mopsuestia and the others. For this reason, it was not kept in the place where it is found in a few copies, at the beginning of the 86th chapter [that is, the 86th Eusebian Section], following, ‘Search and see that a prophet does not arise out of Galilee.’”*

The Caesarean Text is also notable for referring to “Jesus Barabbas” in Matthew 27:16-17. Advocates of the genuineness of this reading argue that early Christians suppressed it, considering it to be embarrassing that a criminal such as Barabbas had the same name as the Messiah. Others have noted that appearance of the name “Jesus in this passage may have originated when an early scribe accidentally repeated the letters IN at the end of the word YMIN in verse 17, and this was misunderstood as the contraction for the word Ἰησοῦς (that is, “Jesus”).

It is evident that a Caesarean Text exists for all four Gospels. It is less evident that there is a Caesarean Text of Acts and the Epistles; however, minuscule 1739 represents a distinct transmission-line, and it was copied by the same copyist who made minuscule 1582, so this should not be ruled out.

**Cancel-sheet:** a parchment sheet, folded in the middle and written on both sides, so as to constitute four pages of a manuscript, made to replace the work of the main copyist. The most well-known examples of cancel-sheets are in [Codex Sinaiticus](#), including the bifolium that contains Mark 14:54-Luke 1:76 (without Mark 16:9-20).

**Catena:** A commentary consisting of a series of comments by patristic authors who accompanies the Biblical text. Unlike commentaries written by a single author, a catena combines extracts from the writings of several authors, forming a chain (Latin: *catena*) of comments. The identity of the writer being quoted is sometimes, but not always, written in the vicinity of his comments. The earliest known Greek catena is in [Codex Zacynthius](#) (040, Ξ), an incomplete copy of the Gospel of Luke.

**Codex** (plural: Codices): A handmade book.

**Colophon:** a note added to the text of a manuscript. The contents of such notes can vary; the most useful colophons are those which mention the year and location where the manuscript was produced. They may also convey the name of the scribe, the name of the patron who sponsored the manuscript’s production, and even declare a curse against whoever might think about taking the manuscript away from the library to which it was entrusted.

**Commentary manuscripts:** A manuscript in which the text of a commentary by one individual accompanies the Biblical text. Such material is similar to a catena, especially since although a commentary may be written by a single individual, that individual may make free and generous use of the works of other commentators, sometimes acknowledging his source and sometimes not. As Robert Waltz mentions in his [article on Commentaries in the online Encyclopedia of New Testament Textual Criticism](#), manuscripts with commentaries tended to have one of two forms: one in which the commentary frames the text, and one in which segments of the text and segments of the commentary alternate. Frame-commentaries were capable of accompanying texts unrelated to the commentary itself; alternating-commentaries, meanwhile, were always copied at the same time as the Scripture-text they accompany. For this reason, whenever the same alternating-commentaries accompany the same text, their testimony should be “boiled down,” so to speak, to the testimony of their shared ancestor.

Some commentaries were more popular than others. For the Gospel of Matthew, [John Chrysostom’s commentary](#) was most popular; for Mark, the Catena-Commentary of Victor of Antioch (a.k.a. the *Catena in Marcum*) was widely disseminated (and sometimes wrongly attributed to other authors/compiler such as Cyril of Alexandria or Peter of Laodicea). The commentary of Titus of Bostra was the dominant commentary on Luke. And for the Gospel of John, copies of both the commentary by John Chrysostom and the commentary by [Theophylact](#) are abundant; the latter appears mainly in the alternating format. Among the other commentators whose work accompanies the New Testament text in some manuscripts are Andreas of Caesarea (in specially formatted copies of Revelation), Andreas the Presbyter (in some copies of Acts and the Epistles), [Oecumenius](#), and [Euthymius Zigabenus](#).

**Conflation:** a reading which is a combination of two earlier readings. The presence of conflation implies that the text containing them emerged later than the text that contains its component-parts. Eight apparent conflation in the Byzantine Text of the Gospels, comprised of component-parts that appear to be combinations of component-parts consisting of Alexandrian and Western readings, were a major part of Hort's case against the Byzantine Text.

However, conflation appear in major representatives of all text-types, not just in the Byzantine Text. In Codex Sinaiticus, in John 13:24, where the Alexandrian Text reads *και λεγει αυτω ειπε τις εστιν* and the Byzantine Text reads *πυθεσθαι τις αν ειη*, Sinaiticus' text appears to combine those two phrases, reading *πυθεσθαι τις αν ειη περι ου ελεγεν, και λεγει αυτω ειπε τις εστιν*. A conflation also appears in Codex Vaticanus at Colossians 1:12: the Western Text reads *καλεσαντι*, the Byzantine Text reads *ικανωσαντι*, and Vaticanus reads *καλεσαντι και ικανωσαντι*, a combination of the Western and Byzantine readings. And in Codex D, a conflation appears in John 5:37: the Alexandrian Text (supported by Papyrus 75) reads *has εκεινος μεμαρτυρηκεν*, and the the Byzantine Text (supported by Papyrus 66) reads *αυτος μεμαρτυρηκεν*; the reading in Codex Bezae is *εκεινος αυτος μεμαρτυρηκεν* and this is precisely what would be produced by a copyist wishing to preserve two different readings in two different exemplars.

Researcher Wilbur Pickering, in [Appendix D of his book \*The Identity of the New Testament Text\*](#), investigates several more cases of apparent conflation in non-Byzantine manuscripts; while some of his examples are capable of more than one explanation, it seems sufficiently clear that the appearance of conflation in a manuscript or text-type cannot validly condemn the entire text-type as late or as posterior to other text-types.

**Conjectural emendation:** A reading which is proposed as original but is not supported in any extant Greek manuscript. The apparatus of the 27<sup>th</sup> edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* mentioned many of these from a wide variety of sources, but only one was adopted in the text (in Acts 16:12). In the 28<sup>th</sup> edition, all mentions of conjectural emendations were removed from the apparatus – and one conjectural emendation was adopted into the text of Second Peter 3:10, altering the meaning of the sentence.

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Posted by [James Snapp](#) at [7:56 PM](#)

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