

Dialogue between Mr. Critical Text and Mr. Byzantine Text

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Mr. B: The Byzantine text, as embodied in the TR and the Patriarchal text and the Byzantine majority text, differs from the critical text like NA or UBS in over 5,000 places (out of 138,000 words), but according to Daniel Wallace, only 1/5th of 1% of those 5,000 differences are meaningful. Why would a GNT reader advocate replacing the Byzantine text with the critical Alexandrian text? The Byzantine text family was handed down by the church and has always been the heart of the living church, but the Alexandrian text was only resuscitated 200 years ago after a hiatus of 1300 years from 500 AD to 1800 AD. It was reborn in partisanship.

The Alexandrian text was prevalent in the local region of Egypt in the early centuries of the church, when Alexandria was the center of learning and book-making in the ancient Greco-Roman world, but the Alexandrian GNT family lapsed into disuse and stopped being copied as a living church Bible, as Islam took over. It was not preserved by the Copts in their worship, because it was Greek, and the Copts spoke Coptic. The Greeks also continued to live in Egypt under the Muslims, but they eventually decided to replace their ecclesiastical Bible with the Byzantine text.

In the 4th century, when Jerome translated the GNT MSS known to him into the Latin Vulgate, he sometimes took from the Byzantine text and at other times from the Alexandrian text. There is no evidence that the Alexandrian text was generally used instead of the Byzantine text in the Greek speaking homeland that centered in Constantinople where the creed of the Christian faith was first formulated, starting with the First Ecumenical Council.

The Vaticanus (Alexandrian) has existed in the Vatican library from a very early but unknown time. It was not used by Erasmus for the TR, possibly because it was so different from the Byzantine texts in use by the living church and its Greek-speaking priests.

Then, in the early 1800's Tischendorf discovered the Sinaiticus at the St. Catharine's monastery. It differed in hundreds of places from the Vaticanus, but was a contemporaneous sister copy, perhaps even from the same scriptorium. The critical GNT enterprise, which had been struggling to replace the TR since 1700, suddenly took wing. The Westcott and Hort 1881 text is essentially a blending of these two resuscitated Alexandrian MSS. The current critical text is little different from that of Westcott and Hort of over 100 years ago. A perusal of the two texts together on Bible Hub will prove this. So why not stick with the Bible family that has continued with the church down through the ages?

Mr. C: Both text lines were selected and synthesized by critical editors from a variety of old MSS, but the TR was based on only about six main MSS, and in the case of Revelation mostly on a single MS. In contrast, the modern critical text is based on the comparison of thousands of MSS. Many of these are much older and closer to the autograph than anything available to Erasmus when he edited the TR. Through the study of the oldest MSS, critical scholars like Daniel Wallace at the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM) say we have gotten closer to the autograph.

Every day, new readings of the oldest MSS are being deciphered through advanced photographic technology. That is one reason why the new critical text is better than the older Byzantine texts. It is cutting edge—really quite exciting. I can't wait to find out what new discoveries the project is going to make next on the path back to the autograph. We want to recover the exact words of the apostles as nearly as we are able.

Mr. B: “Based on” is a slippery term, and the autograph will forever shimmer just beyond the horizon. Have these exciting new discoveries of older and older MSS resulted in theological progress?

Mr. C: Yes, I think that any time we get closer to the truth of the exact original words of the GNT authors, we make progress in the quest for truth. The exact words of the Bible are the bedrock of our faith.

Mr. B: All the great creeds and classics of the faith were written before the last 200 years when there was no critical text. No valuable new theologies have come out of the critical variants. The Jehovah’s Witness heresy claims the critical text, but Arianism has been around since the beginning, and who is bragging about that?

The rise of the critical text has coincided with the rise of degeneracy and rebellion against Christ and religion in the West. The one did not cause the other, but both spring from the same lack of self-criticism. The old theologies formulated under the Byzantine Bible are still the only theologies around. Those textual advances you are talking about are trivial and of no theological significance. Christianity would not have missed anything essential in the faith if the entire critical project had never existed. According to Daniel Wallace, all but 1/5th of 1 percent of those 5,000 variations are not theologically meaningful, and the few meaningful variants do not impact the faith.

Mr. C: We’re not saying that users of the TR or Orthodox Patriarchal text are not good Christians. We just think that it is obvious that if you have a choice between the older texts and later ones, the older ones are better, because they are closer to the autograph.

Mr. B: Do you think that the Alexandrian texts preserve the autographs?

Mr. C: Well, Daniel Wallace says that we will never recover all of the autographs for sure, but we are getting closer and closer.

Mr. B: Closer and closer is no cigar. Close only counts in horseshoes. Is there a list of words we are sure were in the autograph?

Mr. C: Yes, Jesus was in the autograph.

Mr. B: There are over 380,000 words in the GNT and 1 out of 14 are the word “the.” We can be sure the word “the” was in the autograph. Not very impressive.

Mr. C: Look, we are not claiming that we know the autograph in any particular passage. But Wallace says that our problem is an embarrassment of riches. We have so many MSS that we can be sure that we are generally close to the autograph.

Mr. B: How close? Nobody has any idea. Is the TR generally close to the autograph? Yes. It differs very little in substance from the critical text.

Mr. C: The TR is further away from the autograph because now we are able to look at a lot of older MSS.

Mr. B: Will reading the critical text make a follower of Christ more faithful?

Mr. C: “Faith comes by hearing,” but faith needs a commitment, and the help of the Lord.

Mr. B: You are unable to say that readers of the critical text or NIV are better Christians than readers of the TR or the KJV.

Mr. C: I am not going to speculate about all those people I don't know. All I know is that I would rather read the older and better-supported text.

Mr. B: The only reason we have older Alexandrian MSS than Byzantine is because of the accident of climate, not closeness to the originals. What is the proof that the "older is better" mantra is false?

Mr. C: What do you mean? It is obviously true.

Mr. B: We have half a million variant readings. Many of them come from the papyri discovered after the Westcott and Hort 1881, which came mainly from only a few old Alexandrian vellum uncials, mostly from the two. These papyri introduced a wealth of new variants, but most of them were rejected by the critical editors as errors. Most variants are simply scribal errors. And there is no sure way to tell some errors from variants that make sense. No two MSS are identical, and every MS has some scribal errors. Critical scholars like Bart Ehrman, Dirk Jongkind and Edward Andrews criticize the critical editors for failure to incorporate the older papyri readings. Why do you think that the critical editors rejected most of the older papyri variants?

Mr. C: Maybe they did incorporate them and you just don't know about it. The critical editors say in the introduction that they incorporate some papyri readings.

Mr. B: They fail to disclose how many or what they are. They could post it on a website if they did not want to take up space in the introduction. The reason they did not incorporate many of them is because they are mostly obvious scribal errors. The critical editors did an objective job of preserving the best Alexandrian readings, which were the later ones. In other words, older was worse! The older the Alexandrian MS, the worse—the exact opposite of the favorite critical mantra. In the early days, the scribes were in a hurry to get the Word out and did not pay as close attention to exact copy fidelity. However, they kept the gist, just as Byzantine scribes who created variants did.

Mr. C: Yes, I agree that the critical editors have a standard of scholarly excellence and do a good job of selecting the oldest and best texts.

Mr. B: But the best that they selected were not the oldest.

Mr. C: The reason I trust the expert critical editors is because of their high standards and their widespread academic acclaim. They have been preferred by publishers and most of the seminaries.

Mr. B: Academia has gone downhill in the last 100 years. You began by telling me that your main reason for preferring the Alexandrian family is because older is closer to the autograph, but since we have proven that that is not true for the papyri, we cannot assume it to be true for any of the Alexandrian uncials either. You are caught in a logical trap. The entire critical enterprise is caught in this trap.

Mr. C: I don't think I am logically trapped at all. It is obvious that the older MSS have a better chance of approximating the autographs.

Mr. B: Not only is that not obvious, but we have just proven that assumption false with the papyri and the critical editors' own selection. You seem to think that plausibility makes it obvious. But we go by the actual evidence of the older and worse papyri as decided by your own team. This evidence trumps your obvious plausibility, which is just speculation.

Mr. C: The critical text is the eclectic text. The scope of their input is a thousand times bigger than the scope of the TR input. Of course they are going to come to a better conclusion.

Mr. B: When you open the critical text, you see a long list of Alexandrian and Byzantine MSS. Daniel Wallace collects and photographically records and digitizes all kinds of GNT MSS. Is that list what makes you mistakenly believe that the critical text is eclectic?

Mr. C: Yes, certainly. The editors state that they look at all the manuscripts, Alexandrian and Byzantine. Wallace says the same thing.

Mr. B: But the witnesses are weighted for age. Read Metzger's book describing the selection criteria per verse. "Looking" at does not imply using. In practice, editors use only the oldest witnesses, which are all Alexandrian. The criteria are a closed circular loop. All Byzantine MSS are disqualified by your criterion of age, that the critical editors use. So how can you say that they're eclectic?

Mr. C: Daniel Wallace says that the Tyndale GNT is 100% from the the 5th century or before, but the NA UBS critical text sometimes uses later texts.

Mr. B: There are holes in the early texts and in a few places they have to use later texts because they are the only good texts. Tyndale wants to show the earliest readings, but they are not always the best Alexandrian. And just because they are the best Alexandrian does not prove they are closest to the autographs.

You can't name those passages in the critical text that come from later MSS. There might only be a handful, all trivial—what Wallace calls not meaningful variants—and none Byzantine.

Looking at Byzantine texts is not the same thing as *using* them for positive selection. I have already explained to you the reason the critical text rejects them all: because of their later age. Age is a two-edged sword. I understand that you firmly believe that the critical text is eclectic, even though the critical editors are careful not to make that false claim, but thinking people go by tests. If it were eclectic in the sense of including Byzantine readings, you would be able to find one example of that. But you cannot; there is not one such example, because the critical text is now and has always been 100% Alexandrian. Every text you are going to read is either Alexandrian or Byzantine. No eclectic blend exists or is possible. Anyone who tried would come up with the Byzantine majority text, because the Byzantine Bible came down through the church; it has most of the MSS, and swamps the Alexandrian.

Mr. C: You know there are more than just the Byzantine and Alexandrian MSS families.

Mr. B: There is the old Western MS Bezae, and a few copies, but it is obviously an expansion, and no one uses it in worship or makes a translation from it. You can't name any other MSS families. All edited texts are 100% Byzantine or 100% Alexandrian, because the selection criteria are different. There is no in-between.

Mr. C: I still think of the critical text as eclectic, because of all the MSS the editors of these texts look at.

Mr. B: And you still refuse to take up my challenge and prove your false assumption by finding even one exception to prove your claim. This is an easy task to perform. Just go on Bible Hub or read Swanson and compare. Whenever they are different, you can look up the witness for the selection. It is always Alexandrian. There are no exceptions, because they are older. But as we have already proven with the papyri, older is not better or closer to the autograph.

Mr. C: All of the ministers and seminaries I know support the critical text. How could they all be wrong?

Mr. B: The majority has been proven wrong countless times in history. All those experts go by the false mantra “older is better”—closer to the autograph. We have already proven that mantra wrong for the papyri. Now let’s circle back to the vellum uncials. Do you know the proof that older is worse for the Alexandrian uncials too?

Mr. C: No. You tell me. There is probably a big hole in your logic or facts somewhere.

Mr. B: The Patriarchal text editors have a much larger but later MSS collection to select from than the small base that the critical Alexandrian editors have available. First, they require a good readable MS as the source, and they copy the whole section. That means without errors. The criterion, according to Maurice Robinson, is that they do not chop and paste every few words the way the critical editors do. Only entire passages of a verse or longer passages can be copied without splicing.

The reason that the Patriarchal editors can afford this luxury is because the Byzantine scribes were more careful and faithful copyists than the Alexandrian scribes. This is not my judgment; this is the judgment of the critical team itself. The critical editors consider all the Alexandrian scribes—even the best—to be so careless and sloppy that they are unable to preserve any long passage from any one of the Alexandrian manuscripts the way the Patriarchal text editors do.

Mr. C: Well, the Byzantine scribes had centuries to iron out the errors. The Alexandrians would have had that kind of MSS if they had time.

Mr. B: Yes, I believe you are right there. In fact, many believe that Vaticanus was a cleanup job for the earlier papyri (older but worse) and that clean up is a good thing that does not violate the intent of the autograph. The old MSS—and probably the autographs—had lots of spelling errors. Daniel Wallace thinks we actually know the misspellings that John had in the autograph (preposterous as it seems to the average person like myself, that anyone could sort out a grain of sand in a sandbox). If John had lots of spelling errors, and the scribes did too, who could sort out the difference? However, here you have cycled back into another critical enterprise error.

Mr. C: What error?

Mr. B: The critical enterprise carefully cleans up thousands of scribal errors and then inconsistently claims that the original autographs had human errors and that the critical texts are better because they preserve those original anomalies while the Byzantine scribes spoiled the autographs by smoothing them out. You know the critical narrative.

Mr. C: Yes, the critical text preserves the rough originals, while the Byzantine scribes removed them to make the text read better; but the Byzantine scribes got further and further away from the autograph over time.

Mr. B: Yes, all readers of the critical GNT have internalized the storyline. So, are the critical editors getting further and further away from the autographs when they smooth out the spellings? In the MSS, *ἰωάννης* is often spelled with two v's and often with one, but the critical text cleans them all up so that the poor reader does not have to endure a variety of spellings. Either you leave the rough original or you clean it up; you can't have it both ways. But the critical editors sometimes go with cleanup and sometimes with original anomalies, inconsistently. Don't you see that the critical editors do exactly what they accuse the Byzantine copyists of doing? When the critical editors clean up, it makes the text better for the readers. When the Byzantine scribes do the same thing, it make the MS worse because it it takes it further away from the autograph. See the hypocrisy in the entire critical project from the start? With this kind of duplicity, I don't think the critical project has caused the salvation of a single soul by itself, but since the light of Christ is behind it, he can still use it like the TR.

Mr. C: The critical editors are persons of the highest integrity and academic credentials. Why would I go with some unknown person like you, against such wisdom and careful methodology?

Mr. B: OK. Let's say that, although the differences between the two text families are theologically insignificant, you like the Alexandrian because it is older, and you think that makes it closer to the autograph. If it is not closer to the autograph, there is not much point in the whole critical enterprise. That is its main talking point. The whole concept of originality or closeness to the autograph is pure Orwellian. Is Orwellian enough to hang your hat on? We don't have the autographs. We never will know them, even if CSNTM goes to nanotechnology. We live in a sea of a half-million variants. There is only one autograph for any particular verse, according to Aland. All the other many variants for each verse are errors, according to Aland. The contest has only one winner.

A set of people have convinced themselves that they have the magic tools to sort the needle in the haystack as to which is original or closest to the autograph. They are a mutual admiration society and form a tight ring around their particular set of choices. It would be an act of sheer audacity to claim that any one of these selections is actually the autograph, and these people are not dishonest enough to make such a preposterous claim. But "close" and "closer" is a different story. "Close" and "closer" are such stretchy Orwellian words that anybody can claim them, and anybody can believe it. That slippery slope is not good enough for skeptical people. We are warned against deceivers.

After all, there is no measure, no real test, just the solidarity of the credentialed academic team. Credentials are enough for most. It is enough for you. But I am not satisfied with weasel words like "close" and "closer." In the end you are supported by nothing better than the improbable claim of close and closer. The odds are too shaky. The church has already selected the Byzantine over the Alexandrian definitively long ago. The critical editors are not a church body, and many of them are not even good Christians. The fact that many nominal Christians hold secular academia in higher esteem than the choice of the church is not impressive. Much of the church that choses the critical text is now apostate anyway.

Mr. C: I believe that most of the critical editors are good Christians and are doing their best to find out what the GNT authors said, as exactly as possible. I trust them, and think they have studied the texts thoroughly.

Mr. B: The difference between us is that I am skeptical, but you think in platitudes. Platitudes are tautological. Different starting points lead to different conclusions.