CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SCRIBAL TENDENCIES IN THE TRANSMISSION
OF THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The evidence used in textual criticism is usually divided into two major types, external and internal. Internal evidence is then further divided according to intrinsic probabilities (considerations of what the author probably wrote) and transcriptional probabilities (considerations of how scribes probably copied). The topic here is the final category. Ideally one wishes to know all one can about the practice of copying, but the primary interest is to use one’s knowledge of scribal tendencies to make judgments about the likelihood of particular errors in the transmission of the text. Indeed, almost any extended discussion of variant readings will consider scribal tendencies that are supposed to have played a part in the creation of the nonoriginal readings. Consequently, it is of importance to understand the sorts of errors that scribes might commit. Knowing which errors are likely and which are unlikely will help one to choose among the many possible sequences of variants in the transmission of the text and thus to decide (as reasonably as possible) what the original text was.

For instance, it is commonly noted that scribes tended to confuse letters or groups of letters that had a similar pronunciation. Indeed, since many letters or combinations of letters came to be pronounced alike, in the early period, probably the most common cause of variation was lack of consistency in spelling words that sounded alike. It is commonly accepted that


3 Among many surveys of such tendencies, Metzger and Ehrman, Text, 250–271, have a broad selection of examples.

4 See Ernest C. Colwell, “Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits: A Study of P45, P66, P75,” in
such errors are generally of no direct value for the history of the text (and
are thus usually omitted from critical editions), but may be of indirect value
by permitting one to see a pattern that may appear in more substantive vari-
ants. Such spelling errors may occasionally involve meaningful variation.
For example, since ο and ω were pronounced alike, scribes could confuse
ἐχομεν and ἐχωμεν at Rom 5:1; and since αι and ε were pronounced alike,
scribes could confuse προσευχεσθαι and προσευχεσθε at Luke 22:40. Knowing
that such confusions could occur does not tell one which reading is
original, but it does alert one to possible explanations of the textual history.

Again, it is observed that scribes tended to omit text by skipping from
one occurrence of some letters to another occurrence of the same (or simi-
lar) letters. When this occurs at the end of a word or line, it is called
homoeoteleuton, at the beginning of a word or line, homoeoarcton; more
generally, one speaks of scribal leaps that typically result in the loss of
text (haplography) when the leap is forward, but cause the duplication of
text (dittography) when the leap is backward. When one reading may be
explained as thus arising from a second reading, the second reading is con-
sidered the more original.

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Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament (NTTS 9; Leiden: Brill; Grand

⁵ Rom 5:1 is often discussed; see Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New
Testament (2d ed.; London: United Bible Societies, 1994), 452; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland,

⁶ Discrimination of this class of errors as well as of confusions of similar grammatical
forms has been greatly facilitated by the work of Francis T. Gignac, A Grammar of the Greek
Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods, vol. 1: Phonology, vol. 2: Morphology (Testi e

⁷ The precise statement of this common phenomenon is, however, often mistaken;
see my “The Treatment of Scribal Leaps in Metzger’s Textual Commentary,” NTS 29 (1983):
545. Maurice A. Robinson has a perceptive discussion of scribal leaps in “In Search of the
Alexandrian Archetype: Observations from a Byzantine-Priority Perspective,” in The New
Testament Text in Early Christianity / Le texte du Nouveau Testament au début du christianisme
(ed. Christian-B. Amphoux and J. Keith Elliott; Histoire du texte biblique 6; Lausanne:
Éditions du Zèbre, 2003), and presents many places where he thinks that the reading of the
Alexandrian archetype has arisen from the reading of the Byzantine text by a scribal
leap (although he uses the term “homoioteleuton” even when the beginning of a word is in
view). Robinson (63 n. 86 [–64]) takes issue with my criticism (in “Scribal Leaps”) of Metzger’s
description of this phenomenon, distinguishing between “direct homoioteleuton” (precisely
a scribal leap) and “inclusive homoioteleuton” (a scribal leap plus omission of the closing
occurrence of the letters involved). While omissions of varying sorts clearly occurred, scribal
leaps in the precise sense seem to be especially frequent and have an especially perspicuous
transcriptional explanation.