The evaluation of variant readings has stood at the center of NT textual criticism since its beginnings as a discipline. The evaluation of readings presupposes a familiarity with the MSS that support them, and this in turn assumes a clear understanding of the textual affinities of the MSS, a sense of how they relate to one another. Moreover, the evaluation of a reading in any early version or patristic witness must be based on an understanding of the relationships among Greek MSS. Thus the knowledge of MSS lies at the heart of what textual critics have traditionally seen as their primary goal—making judgments about different readings so as to establish the most ancient text of the NT as possible.

A knowledge of the MSS is equally important for a secondary concern of NT textual criticism—writing the history of the NT text. Nonetheless, even though Westcott-Hort clearly and emphatically stated that “KNOWLEDGE OF DOCUMENTS SHOULD PRECEDE FINAL JUDGMENT UPON READINGS,” still, more than a century later, we know of few MSS with any sophisticated level of precision. Yet, recent developments in methods of encoding the text of MSS in computer databases, of analyzing the genealogical direction of variant readings, and of applying more sophisticated statistical tools to the analysis of textual data make it possible to significantly improve the classification of MSS and hence to better map the history of the NT text.

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1 There is certainly value in examining each MS in its own right and not in relation to others; but any discussion that evaluates a variation unit requires some knowledge of how the MSS that support other readings relate to each other. In addition, such information is crucial for any writing of the history of the NT text.

I. COLWELL AND HIS LEGACY

Since John Mill first brought to light the sheer number of variants involved in NT Greek MSS, textual critics have attempted to find some appropriate way of analyzing the large number of MSS that support them. Most of the critical energy, however, has been expended in discovering methods of making the process as quick and painless as possible. This has led to at least two serious methodological problems for the discipline: (1) MSS have almost always been examined exclusively at certain points of variation, and (2) until about the mid twentieth century, MSS have almost always been studied in relation to their variation from the TR. Compounding these methodological problems is the circumstance that some of the most influential textual critics of the modern era (e.g., Westcott and Hort) have actually worked very little with Greek MSS, while those who have undertaken detailed MS analyses have sometimes been less than careful in their work (e.g., von Soden).

The pioneer of the newer methods of analyzing and categorizing NT Greek MSS was E.C. Colwell, who over a five-year period wrote several groundbreaking articles that established some principles necessary for identifying textual affinities among textual witnesses. Beginning with E.A. Hutton's method of triple readings, Colwell developed a system that con-

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4 This allows one to see immediately how a particular MS relates to the Byzantine tradition of which the TR serves as a representative. Sixty-seven years ago, Bruce Metzger challenged the prevailing methodology of comparing MSS against the TR and initiated a significant shift in MS studies: "For obviously it is of slight value in determining family relationships to know only that in a certain area a given manuscript agrees with, say B and 8 ten times in differing from the Textus Receptus. If Band 8 should in addition differ from the Textus Receptus in ninety instances, the Neutral element in the given manuscript would be slight indeed." B.M. Metzger, "The Caesarean Text of the Gospels," JBL 64 (1945): 488.


6 In the early twentieth century, Hutton had suggested the use of "triple readings" for determining the textual affinities of MSS. A "triple reading" is a variation unit at which the three major textual traditions each support a different reading. See, e.g., Acts 15:7:

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\begin{array}{c}
\text{εν υμιν εξελεξατο} \text{ P75 } \text{ A B C } 81 \text{ (206) } 429 \text{ 453 (522) } 549 \text{ 1739 } 1891 \text{ 2200}
\\
\text{ο θεος εν ημιν εξελεξατο} \text{ E H L P } 049 \text{ 105 MT}
\\
\text{εν ημιν ο θεος εξελεξατο (D) } 323 \text{ (613) gig Ir Amb}
\end{array}
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