Modern editions of the Greek New Testament are products of an eclectic method of textual criticism. In editing the text, most text critics claim that they balance internal criteria or transcriptional probability with an assessment of the age, geographical spread, and reputation of the external (i.e., manuscript) evidence. Differences in the editions resulting from this balancing act are the cause of heated scholarly debate. Further differences would occur if the methodology and principles of thoroughgoing eclecticism were applied. Thoroughgoing text critics prefer to edit a text by solving textual variation with an appeal primarily to purely internal considerations.

“Thoroughgoing” is the adjective I prefer to use to describe this method, although other terms (e.g., “radical” and “reasoned”) have also been used. G.D. Kilpatrick, a prominent defender of this method, described it as “rigorous” and “impartial.” B.M. Metzger uses the term “judicious criticism” and refers to the earlier description of it as “rational,” following M.-J. Lagrange’s *La critique rationnelle*.²

Thoroughgoing eclecticism is the method that allows internal considerations for a reading’s originality to be given priority over documentary considerations. The thoroughgoing eclectic critic feels able to select freely from among the available fund of variants and choose the one that best fits the internal criteria. This critic is skeptical about the high claims made for the reliability of some manuscripts or about arguments favoring a particular group of manuscripts. For such a critic, no manuscript or group contains the monopoly of original readings. A thoroughgoing critic would not accept as

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reasonable the claim that the original text is located in the largest number of manuscripts—a claim that is sometimes supported by the astonishing statement made in some quarters that such a phenomenon is due to providential protection of Holy Writ. In many places the majority of manuscripts does indeed seem to preserve the original text, but that observation should not be a deciding factor when assessing variants. One should not be mesmerized by the sheer bulk of manuscript support for a reading. That the weight of manuscripts favors the Majority/Byzantine Text type is only to be expected: the later manuscripts, not surprisingly, have survived in greater numbers than earlier manuscripts, and it is these numerous later manuscripts that generally have a text that conforms to the ecclesiastical text of the Byzantine church.

Just as the number of manuscripts is not a relevant argument for thoroughgoing eclectic criticism, neither is the age of a manuscript of particular significance. Unless one can be sure how many stages exist between any manuscript and the original, and unless one knows what changes were made at each copying, then age alone is no help in recovering the original words. And no one has such information. The geographical spread of a reading is no guide to the originality of one reading over another either. The cross-fertilization of the New Testament manuscript tradition makes it difficult to pinpoint the provenance of readings or the history of a manuscript’s text. Apart from all this, the sheer element of chance involved in the survival of documents has meant that, despite the large numbers of manuscripts in existence today, our present documents represent only a partial picture; antiquity sometimes reported the existence of well-supported readings now unknown or scantily represented.3

On a positive note, the thoroughgoing method of textual criticism assumes that the original reading has been preserved somewhere among the extant manuscripts and that conjectural emendations are unnecessary. Such an assumption obviously requires a careful analysis of all collations