METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 
ANALYSIS AND CLASSIFICATION 
OF NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

by

BART D. EHRMAN
Rutgers University

NT scholars agree that it is impractical to consult every textual 
witness when analyzing a variant reading. A primary task of NT 
textual criticism, therefore, is to organize the sheer mass of NT 
documents into large groups and to ascertain subgroups within 
each. Since these documentary groupings must be made on the 
basis of textual consanguinity, the process of analyzing and classifying 
textual witnesses serves as the prerequisite of all text-critical 
work.

---

1 This article is a revision of the first chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation “The 
Gospel Text of Didymus: A Contribution to the Study of the Alexandrian Text” 
(Princeton Theological Seminary, 1985).
2 This is due, of course, to the extent and diversity of the documentary 
evidence. Greek mss of all or part of the NT now number 5366 (Bruce M. 
Metzger, Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Paleography [New 
York: Oxford Press, 1981] 54). With the exception of the smallest fragments, none 
of these mss has a text identical to any other. The situation is the same with the 
early versions and Patristic sources. All of these witnesses preserve numerous 
variations both among themselves and with all the Greek mss. See the discussion 
of Bruce M. Metzger, The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and 
3 Textual scholars are generally agreed on three advantages of determining textual 
groups. First, although such a determination does not obviate a consideration 
of the texts of important individual witnesses, it does save the critic from the nearly 
impossible task of consulting each and every NT document before coming to a textual 
decision. Readings attested by groups of witnesses can be ascertained simply 
by consulting the group’s best representatives. Next, establishing textual 
alignments naturally leads to an assessment of the relative quality of each group 
text. That it to say, the kinds of variant readings that characterize textual groups 
are frequently those that are judged, on other grounds, to be more likely authentic 
or corrupt. Finally, most scholars agree that the combined support of certain textual 
groups frequently indicates true rather than corrupt readings (as, e.g., when 
Western and early Alexandrian witnesses agree against all others).
Only in recent years have accurate methods of documentary analysis and classification been devised. Since these methods are now becoming firmly entrenched in the discipline, it may prove helpful to understand their advent in light of the impasses reached by earlier methods. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to discuss the newer methods of textual analysis and to show their superiority by sketching the rise and decline of earlier approaches. It should be noted at the outset that no attempt will be made to rehearse the history of textual criticism per se. Our only concern will be with significant methodological developments in analyzing and classifying documentary evidence from the inception of NT textual criticism to the present day.

**Early Methods of Analysis and Classification**

As is true of many disciplines, methodological advances in NT textual criticism were born of a despair generated by complications arising from the available data. In this case the problems derived from the pervasive corruption of the entire ms tradition of the NT. Although the phenomenon of textual variation had been known from the earliest of times, scholars did not perceive the magnitude of the problem until the eighteenth century. The floodgates opened in 1707, when John Mill, Fellow of the Queen’s College, Oxford, published his *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Mill had spent the final thirty years of his life analyzing and collating Greek, versional, and Patristic sources in preparation for this edition. In it he chose to print the received text (Stephanus’ 1550 edition), but attached a critical apparatus of variant readings uncovered during the course of his study.

---


5 Eusebius, e.g., mentions the second-century Theodotians who were excommunicated by Pope Victor, in part because they emended the text of the NT without ms support! (*Hist. Eccl.* v. xxxviii 13-19). See further, Metzger, *Text*, 149-54.