Ad Fontes, Week Five: How Textual Critics Actually Work

Chapter 4: How Textual Critics Actually Work

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Five

This is the workshop week. Every textual decision comes down to one question: which reading better explains how the other came to be? Today we learn the tools that answer it, then use them together on Mark 1:2. This is the most technical chapter in the book, with the most new words. Stay with it. Every chapter after this one simply puts these tools to work.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 12	Report back: the Greek text behind your Bibles
12 to 18	The master question
18 to 30	External evidence: what the manuscripts say
30 to 43	Internal evidence: what copyists and apostles were likely to do
43 to 60	Work it yourself: Mark 1:2
60 to 65	When the evidence pulls different ways
65 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: the Greek text behind your Bibles

Last week you checked the front of every Bible in your house to see which Greek text it follows. Let’s pool the results.

- How many of the Bibles in the room follow Nestle-Aland or the United Bible Societies text? How many follow the Textus Receptus?
- Did any say nothing at all? Did any surprise you?
- Did anyone find a Bible that footnotes both streams, as many New King James editions do?

Last week was the history of the Greek text. This week is the method. When two of those Bibles disagree, how does anyone decide which one has the apostle's words?

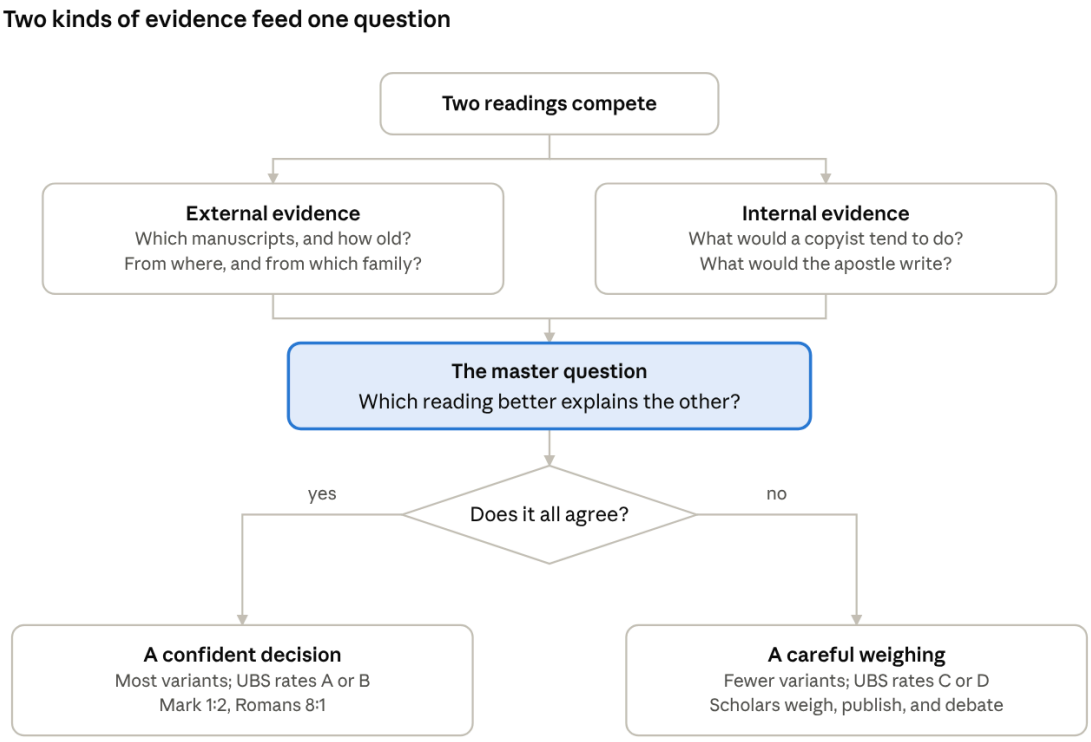
2. The master question

Suppose two readings compete, A and B. Ask it both ways:

1. If A were original, can I picture a copyist turning it into B? What slip or habit would do it?
2. If B were original, can I picture a copyist turning it into A?

Almost always, one path is easy to picture and the other is not. The reading that explains the other is the one that earns its place in the text.

Not which reading we like better. Not which one we are used to. Not which one helps our theology. Which one explains the other.



How a textual decision gets made

The rest of today fills in the two boxes at the top: external evidence and internal evidence.

3. External evidence: what the manuscripts say

The first question is which manuscripts support which reading. But **manuscripts are weighed, not counted.** A handful of early witnesses from across the Christian world outweighs a thousand late copies from a single stream. Three things give a manuscript its weight:

- **Date.** Every round of copying is a chance for a slip. A copy from the 200s has passed through far fewer hands than one from the 900s.
- **Spread.** A reading found in Egypt, Italy, and Syria alike is no local quirk. Independent witnesses in distant places point back to a common, earlier source.
- **Family.** A copy made from a copy made from a copy is not an independent witness. It is one more link in a single chain.

The three families

The three-way map goes back to Griesbach in the late 1700s and has been refined ever since; scholars now often say "textual cluster" rather than "family." It is still the most useful map for beginners.

Family	Home	Key witnesses	Habits
Alexandrian	Egypt	Codex Vaticanus (B), Codex Sinaiticus (א), Codex Ephraemi (C), many early papyri	Early, careful, conservative. What people mean by "the earliest and best manuscripts"
Western	Italy and the Latin West	Codex Bezae (D), the Old Latin	Early in places, but free: paraphrases, explains, expands
Byzantine	Constantinople and the Greek East	The great mass of medieval manuscripts; almost all of Erasmus's	The church's copying text for a thousand years. Smooths grammar, harmonizes parallels, expands

Be fair to the Byzantine text

It is not a corruption of the apostles' Greek, and no responsible textual critic says it is. Most of the time it agrees with the Alexandrian text. Where the two differ, the Byzantine reading is usually the later one. As a full text-form it is later, the product of centuries of gradual smoothing, though some of its distinctive readings are very early. A real and valuable witness, and a later form of the text: both are true.

Why the papyri matter so much

The papyri pushed our horizon back a century or more before Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. P75, a Luke and John papyrus from the early 200s, reads so closely with Vaticanus, copied more than a century later, that we can watch the Alexandrian text hold steady across that whole span. Where the early papyri and the great Alexandrian Bibles agree against the later Byzantine majority, the case is essentially closed.

4. Internal evidence: what copyists and apostles were likely to do

Internal evidence asks two questions. What would a copyist tend to do? (scholars call this *transcriptional* probability). What would the author tend to write? (*intrinsic* probability). The first half is simply Week Three's four stations, turned into rules of thumb.

What copyists tended to do

Rule of thumb	Latin tag	Why it works	Example we have seen
The harder reading is generally original	*lectio difficilior potior*	Copyists smoothed hard texts into easy ones. Almost none made an easy text hard	Mark 1:2 (today)
The shorter reading was long thought original; now used with caution	*lectio brevior potior*	Early copyists actually dropped words more often than they added them. A shorter reading still deserves a hearing where the longer looks like a gloss, a fuller title, or a borrowing from a parallel	Romans 8:1 (a phrase borrowed from 8:4)
A harmonized reading is suspect		Copyists drew one Gospel toward the wording they knew best	Luke 11:2 to 4, the Lord's Prayer
An eye-skip explains a missing line		When a dropped phrase begins or ends with the same words as its neighbor, the eye jumped	1 John 2:23

The last rule works hand in hand with the second. Length alone settles nothing: a shorter reading must also survive the question of whether a copyist simply dropped something, and the fingerprints of an eye-skip show how a reading lost its words by accident.

These are probabilities, not laws. Sometimes a reading is harder because a copyist botched it. Each rule is weighed with the rest of the evidence.

What the author tended to write

- **Style.** Each writer leaves fingerprints. Paul piles up long sentences. John keeps returning to light, life, love, abide, and truth. Mark says "immediately" more often than the other three Gospels combined. Luke writes the most polished Greek.

- **Theology.** An apostle does not contradict himself. But this one cuts both ways, because a copyist might also read his own theology into the text. Chapter 8 takes up the claim that copyists did this on purpose.
- **Context.** The apostles argued tightly. A line that breaks the flow of the argument deserves a second look.

5. Work it yourself: Mark 1:2

We met this verse briefly in Week Three. Today we run the whole method on it. Work in pairs, one step at a time, and write your answers in the margin before we compare.

Translation	Mark 1:2
KJV (also NKJV)	“As it is written in the prophets”
BSB (also ESV, NASB, NET)	“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet” (the BSB footnotes the other reading: “BYZ and TR in the prophets”)

Step 1: External evidence

Reading	Supported by
“Isaiah the prophet”	Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus (Egypt, 300s); Codex Regius (L); Codex Bezae and the Old Latin (the West); the Latin Vulgate; the Coptic translations; the church fathers Irenaeus (in Greek), Origen, and Eusebius
“the prophets”	Codex Alexandrinus (400s, Byzantine in the Gospels), Codex W, and the bulk of the later Byzantine manuscripts; some of Irenaeus’s Latin citations

Your turn. Which reading is earlier? Which is spread more widely? Which is found in more than one family?

Step 2: What would a copyist do?

Look up Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Mark’s quotation joins them: the messenger line is from Malachi, the voice in the wilderness from Isaiah. Yet Mark names only Isaiah.

Your turn. Picture a devout copyist who knows his prophets. Which reading bothers him? Which way would he change it? Could you picture anyone changing “the prophets” into “Isaiah the prophet”?

Step 3: What would Mark write?

Read Mark 1:1 to 8. The voice in the wilderness, the prepared way, the Lord's arrival: Mark's whole opening is built on Isaiah 40. The Malachi line is a preface to it. By naming Isaiah, Mark names the lens for his whole Gospel.

Your turn. Does "Isaiah the prophet" sound like a mistake, or like Mark telling us where he is standing?

Step 4: The master question

If Mark wrote "Isaiah the prophet," "the prophets" is easy to explain: a copyist fixed an apparent error. If Mark wrote "the prophets," nobody can explain why a copyist would create the difficulty. (Copyists did sometimes add a prophet's name, but here adding one would have created an error, not fixed one.) External and internal evidence agree. The UBS committee rated "Isaiah the prophet" an A, their highest certainty.

What just happened

The copyists who tried to help Mark blurred what he was doing. Recovering the harder reading recovers Mark's own frame for his Gospel. Textual criticism did not weaken our reading of Scripture here. It sharpened it.

6. When the evidence pulls different ways

Mark 1:2 is a clean case. Some are not. The oldest manuscripts may favor one reading while the rules of thumb favor another, or the families may split, or the internal evidence may pull both ways at once.

Scholars do not throw up their hands. They weigh. They ask which evidence is more likely to mislead in this spot. They look at related variants in the same passage and the same author. They check the church fathers, who often preserve very early forms, and the Latin, Syriac, and Coptic translations as independent witnesses. Then they publish and debate. Over time a consensus forms, or an honest disagreement remains.

How sure are the editors?

UBS rating	What it means
A	The text is certain
B	Almost certain
C	The committee had difficulty deciding
D	Great difficulty; the least common rating

The great majority of rated variants are A or B. The C and D readings are the closest calls. The sixth edition of the UBS text (2025) reassessed every rating, so an older reference may give a different letter. A rating measures the editors' certainty, not how much a passage matters to us: some of the most beloved passages we will study are rated A.

Where we go next

The next three chapters take on the three most famous hard cases: the ending of Mark (Chapter 5), the woman caught in adultery (Chapter 6), and the Comma Johanneum (Chapter 7). They are harder than Mark 1:2, with mixed evidence and real pastoral weight. But the question does not change. We have it now. From here on, we are simply using it.

For discussion

1. "Weighed, not counted." Where else in life do we already judge evidence this way?
2. Why would a devout copyist be more likely than a careless one to "fix" Mark 1:2?
3. The theology rule cuts both ways. Why should we be careful about preferring a reading just because it supports a doctrine we hold?
4. After Mark 1:2, does the phrase "textual criticism" sound any different to you than it did in Week One?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

- **External evidence.** What the manuscripts say: which witnesses support a reading, how old they are, where they come from, and which family they belong to.
- **Internal evidence.** What copyists and authors were likely to do.
- **Transcriptional probability.** The side of internal evidence that asks what a copyist would tend to do.
- **Intrinsic probability.** The side of internal evidence that asks what the author would tend to write.
- **Lectio difficilior potior.** Latin, "the harder reading is preferred." Most often credited to the Lutheran scholar J. A. Bengel.
- **Lectio brevior potior.** Latin, "the shorter reading is preferred." Once a standard rule; since early copyists more often omitted than added, it is now used with great caution, mainly against deliberate additions.
- **Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine.** The three main families (or textual clusters) of New Testament manuscripts, named for their home regions.
- **Homoeoarcton.** Greek, "same beginning." The twin of homoeoteleuton: an eye-skip between two words that begin alike.

- **Sigla.** The short symbols for manuscripts: א for Sinaiticus, B for Vaticanus, D for Bezae, P plus a number for a papyrus.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 5, “The Ending of Mark.” It is a long chapter and the first of the famous hard cases, so start early.

Do this one thing. Open your Bible to Mark 16. Write down exactly what your translation does after verse 8: brackets, a heading, a footnote, a shorter ending, or nothing at all. If you have a second translation, do the same for it.

Bring. Your Bible, your Mark 16 notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. The copyists who changed Mark 1:2 loved Scripture and were trying to protect it. What is the difference between protecting the Word and listening to it?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the apostles, who wrote with care. Thanks be to God for the copyists, who copied, even when they “fixed” what we wish they had left alone, because the patterns of their fixing are how we trace what they fixed. And thanks be to God for a discipline that is simply the church loving her Bible enough to listen to every witness.

> “They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true.” Acts 17:11 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.