Ad Fontes, Week Fifteen: How the Discipline Works Now

Chapter 14: How the Discipline Works Now: Reasoned Eclecticism, Thoroughgoing Eclecticism, and the CBGM

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

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Week Fifteen

For fourteen weeks we have been using a method without naming it. This week we name it, meet two other ways scholars work, and look at a verse where a new computer-assisted method changed the Greek text in our lifetime. The big idea: the scholars disagree about method at the edges, but they agree on nearly every word, and their ongoing work is making the text better documented and more candid, not shakier.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: your one-sentence reasons
10 to 18	Reasoned eclecticism: the method we have been using
18 to 32	Work it yourself: 1 Thessalonians 2:7
32 to 36	What the A to D ratings mean
36 to 44	Thoroughgoing eclecticism
44 to 54	The CBGM, in plain terms
54 to 62	Jude 5: a change in our lifetime
62 to 66	Three methods, one text
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: your one-sentence reasons

Last week you reread the notes at Mark 16, John 8, 1 John 5, John 1:18, and Acts 8:37 and wrote one sentence for each: why the modern text reads as it does.

Listen for the words you used: “oldest manuscripts,” “harder reading,” “explains the other,” “not in the Greek until.” Those are the tools of a method. Today we give it its name.

2. Reasoned eclecticism: the method we have been using

The name sounds forbidding, but both words are simple.

- **Eclectic** means the editor does not pledge loyalty to any one family of manuscripts. Each variant is judged on its own evidence. Sometimes the Alexandrian reading wins, sometimes the Byzantine, sometimes the Western.
- **Reasoned** means the decision is made on stated grounds that another scholar can check, weighing external evidence (which manuscripts, how old, from where) against internal evidence (harder reading, shorter reading, the author's style, the reading that explains the others).

That is exactly what we have done since Week Five. It is the method behind the Nestle-Aland and UBS Greek text, and so behind the BSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, CSB, and NET.

Scholar	What he gave us
Bruce Metzger (1914 to 2007), Princeton	A leader of the UBS Greek New Testament from 1966, and author of *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, which explains the reasoning behind each hard decision. Its successor, H. A. G. Houghton's *Textual Commentary* (2025), now accompanies the sixth UBS edition
Kurt Aland (1915 to 1994), Münster	Founded the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (1959) and, with Barbara Aland, edited the Nestle-Aland text. He called the same approach the "local-genealogical" method

3. Work it yourself: 1 Thessalonians 2:7

A small variant most people have never noticed. Work through it in pairs, one step at a time.

Translation	1 Thessalonians 2:7
KJV, ESV	"we were gentle among you"
BSB	"we were gentle among you," with a footnote: "WH and NA we were like young children among you"
NET	"we became little children among you"
NIV	"we were like young children among you"

The difference is a single Greek letter: *ēpioi* ("gentle") or *nēpioi* ("infants"). Ancient manuscripts ran words together without spaces, and the word before it ends in *n*. So an eye or pen could easily double or drop that one *n*.

Step 1: External evidence

"Infants" (*nēpioi*)	"Gentle" (*ēpioi*)
P65 (200s), Sinaiticus and Ephraemi (first hands), Vaticanus, Claromontanus, Augiensis, Boernerianus, the Old Latin and the Vulgate (*parvuli*, "little ones")	Later correctors of Sinaiticus and Ephraemi, Alexandrinus, and the Byzantine majority

Your turn. Which side has the older and wider support?

Step 2: The harder reading

Read the verse with "infants": we became infants among you, like a nursing mother caring for her own children. Paul is the infant, then in the same breath the mother. That is a jarring mixed image. "Gentle" makes it smooth.

Your turn. Which way would a careful copyist "fix" it?

Step 3: Paul's style

Paul's pictures of himself shift freely in this very chapter: infant (2:7), nursing mother (2:7), father (2:11). And he uses "infant" elsewhere (1 Corinthians 3:1; 13:11; Galatians 4:1, 3).

The verdict

Older witnesses, harder reading, and Paul's own style all point to "infants." The Nestle-Aland and UBS texts print it; the UBS editors rate it a B. The ESV and the BSB keep "gentle" with a footnote, a judgment call by their translators; the NET, the NIV, and the NASB 2020 ("babies") follow the Greek text.

Notice what just happened. We sided with Vaticanus and the Latin tradition against the Byzantine majority, not out of loyalty to a family but because of the evidence at this one verse. That is reasoned eclecticism.

4. What the A to D ratings mean

Rating	Meaning	Examples
A	The text is virtually certain	Mark 1:2; Mark 16 ends at verse 8; John 7:53 to 8:11 not part of John; 1 John 5:7 to 8 without the Comma
B	Almost certain	John 1:18 ("only God"); 1 Thessalonians 2:7 ("infants"); in the sixth edition, the omission of Luke 23:34a

Rating	Meaning	Examples
C	The committee had difficulty deciding	Mark 1:1, “the Son of God” (printed in brackets in NA28)
D	Great difficulty	Rare

These are mostly the ratings of the fourth edition and Metzger’s commentary. The sixth edition (2025) reassessed every rating. It keeps an A at Mark 16:8 and at John 7:53 to 8:11, and it moved Luke 23:34a from A to B.

One caution: a footnote in your Bible does not mean the question is close. Some of the best-known footnotes, at Mark 16 and John 8, mark A-rated decisions. The rating tells you how sure the editors are; the footnote tells you the evidence is worth knowing.

5. Thoroughgoing eclecticism

A smaller school, led by G. D. Kilpatrick of Oxford (1910 to 1989) and his student J. Keith Elliott of Leeds, pushes the internal evidence much harder.

Their case

- **The families are messier than we pretend.** Most manuscripts are mixed, reading one way in one book and another way elsewhere. So judging a reading by its manuscript’s “family” is shaky.
- **The author is the real standard.** If we can tell what Paul or Mark would have written from his style and habits, that should decide the question, whatever the manuscripts say. The manuscripts are, after all, the very thing that got corrupted.
- **Early copyists polished the Greek.** Kilpatrick argued that some early scribes “corrected” the plain Greek of the apostles toward a more classical style, so the older manuscripts are not always the purer ones.

What they get right

The manuscripts really are mixed; the newest method (next section) was built partly in answer to that. And internal evidence really is evidence.

Where it goes too far

Internal arguments are flexible. A clever editor can build a case for almost any reading from style and theology. The surviving manuscripts are the brake on the editor’s imagination: a copyist either wrote a word or he did not. Take the brake off and the editor’s taste starts doing the work of evidence. Most scholars keep both kinds of evidence in the scale. Even so, the text Elliott would print differs from NA28 in dozens of places, not thousands.

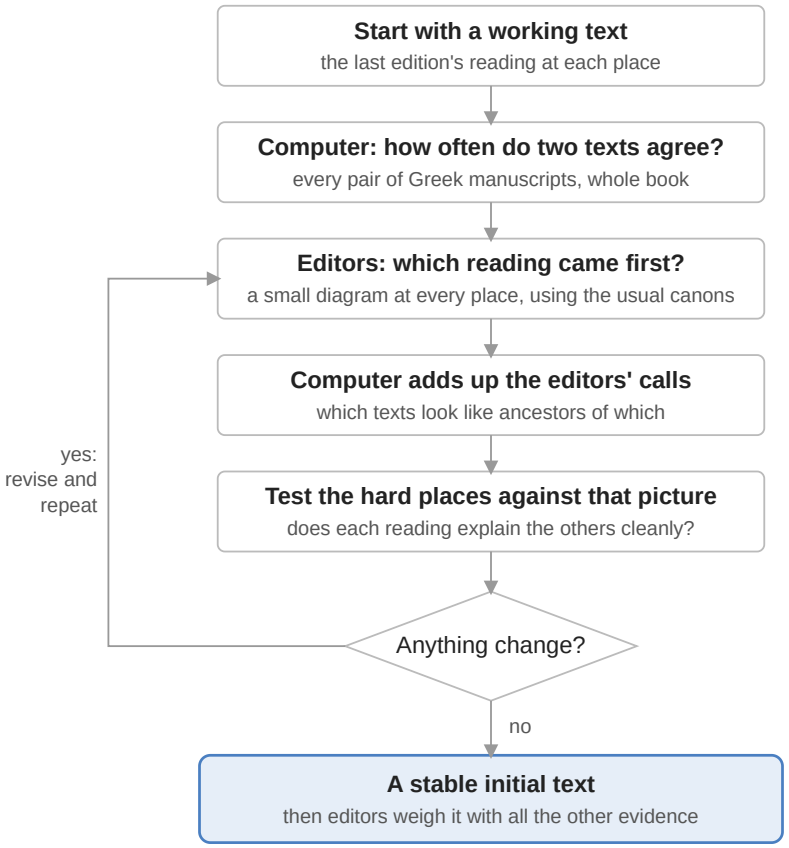
6. The CBGM, in plain terms

The **Coherence-Based Genealogical Method** was developed at Münster by Gerd Mink from the early 1980s, first used in the *Editio Critica Maior* we met in Week Four in 2000, and applied throughout the Catholic Letters in 2013.

The old way sorted whole manuscripts into families (Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine) and let each manuscript "vote" with its family everywhere. The CBGM's editors have set those families aside.

The new way takes each place of variation on its own. First, a computer measures how often the text of each Greek manuscript agrees with every other one across the whole book. Second, at every variant the editors themselves draw a small diagram showing which reading they judge gave rise to which, using all the familiar rules. The computer then adds up those editorial judgments: if the editors judged Vaticanus's reading earlier than Sinaiticus's 250 times and the reverse only 89 times, Vaticanus's text counts as a likely ancestor of Sinaiticus's text (the text, not the physical copy). That picture is then used to test the editors' decisions at the hard places.

The CBGM: computer counts, editors judge, repeat until stable



The CBGM in outline

Two things to hold on to:

- **It takes messy manuscripts seriously.** A manuscript can be a close relative of one copy in Mark and of a different copy in Paul. That answers the very problem Kilpatrick and Elliott raised.

- **It does not replace judgment.** The direction of every relationship comes from the editors' own decisions, and the results are only as good as those many small judgments. Editors still weigh the results alongside the age of manuscripts, the harder reading, and everything else we have learned.

It is still being studied. Tommy Wasserman and Peter Gurry, who are not part of the Münster team, call it "a valuable and important advance" and are frank about its limits: it uses about a third of the surviving Greek manuscripts and none of the translations or fathers, it prefers the simplest explanation (which is not always the true one), and its family tree is a hypothesis, not a photograph of history. It is, they write, "not a magic wand." It is a tool, not an oracle.

7. Jude 5: a change in our lifetime

Who brought Israel out of Egypt?

Translation	Jude 5
KJV	"the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt"
NASB 1995	"the Lord"
ESV	"Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt"
NET	"Jesus"
BSB	"Jesus had delivered His people out of the land of Egypt," with a footnote: "NE, WH, BYZ, and TR the Lord"

The evidence

Reading	Witnesses
"Jesus"	Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, minuscules 33 and 1739, the Vulgate, the Coptic; Origen
"the Lord"	Sinaiticus, Ephraemi (first hand), the Byzantine majority
"God"	A later corrector of Ephraemi, a few others
"God Christ"	P72 (about AD 300)

For decades the Nestle-Aland text (NA26 in 1979, NA27 in 1993) printed "the Lord," while Metzger himself thought "Jesus" was original. The committee worried that "Jesus" might be a copyist's theological addition, and it was far from sure of its own decision.

What changed

When the CBGM was applied to the Catholic Letters, “Jesus” fit the web of relationships among the manuscripts best. It is also the hardest reading: a copyist who saw “Jesus” delivering Israel from Egypt would be tempted to change it to the more expected “Lord” or “God,” not the reverse. The 2012 Nestle-Aland (NA28) now prints “Jesus,” and the ESV, NET, and BSB read the same. The coherence data are published online, so anyone can check the editors’ reasoning.

Why it matters

Jude is saying that the Son, before his birth in Bethlehem, was the one who brought Israel out of Egypt. Paul says something similar: “that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4 BSB). This is the Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament that Lutherans love, and here it came back into the Greek text through the newest method.

Notice too: the CBGM did not rewrite the Bible. It tipped a close decision, with documented reasons anyone can check. Not every such decision has gone unchallenged: at 2 Peter 3:10 (Week Thirteen) the same editors printed a reading no Greek manuscript has, and critics still dispute it.

8. Three methods, one text

	Reasoned eclecticism	Thoroughgoing eclecticism	CBGM
Leading names	Metzger, the Alands	Kilpatrick, Elliott	Mink, Strutwolf, the Münster Institute
Main weight	External and internal together	Internal evidence above all	Relationships among Greek texts at each variant, built from the editors’ judgments, plus the usual evidence
Where you meet it	Behind your BSB, ESV, NIV, NET	Scholarly articles and a few alternative readings	NA28, the UBS sixth edition (2025), and the *Editio Critica Maior*

All three are eclectic. None pledges loyalty to one family of manuscripts. That is what separates them from the Majority Text view of last week.

All three agree on nearly every word. Their Greek New Testaments would differ at a few hundred places out of many thousands, almost never touching doctrine.

Their arguments make the text better documented. Each school catches what the others miss, and the newer editions now say openly where the evidence is evenly balanced. A discipline that keeps checking its own work is not in crisis; it is doing its job.

For Lutherans

We do not need any one method to win. Our confession of preservation says God keeps his Word in the whole stream of witnesses. The methods are simply the careful, ordinary tools the church uses to read that stream well. And the work is ecumenical: Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, and Orthodox scholars labor side by side on the Greek text we all read.

For discussion

1. At 1 Thessalonians 2:7 the ESV and BSB keep "gentle" even though the Greek text they follow reads "infants." Is that a fair translation choice? Why might a committee make it?
2. Why is it dangerous to let an editor's sense of an author's style outweigh the manuscripts?
3. Does it unsettle you or reassure you that the Greek text changed at Jude 5 in 2012? Why?
4. What does Jude 5 add to your understanding of Christ in the Old Testament?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Reasoned eclecticism. Deciding each variant on stated grounds, weighing external and internal evidence together, with no loyalty to one manuscript family.

Thoroughgoing eclecticism. An approach that gives internal evidence (style, usage, the harder reading) nearly all the weight.

CBGM. The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method: it compares every pair of Greek manuscripts across the whole text, then uses those agreements, together with the editors' judgments, to test variant by variant which reading most likely gave rise to the others. Translations and fathers are weighed separately.

Coherence. How well a reading fits the web of relationships among the manuscripts' texts.

Initial text (Ausgangstext). The earliest form of the text the CBGM can reconstruct from the surviving evidence.

Scriptio continua. Latin, "continuous writing": ancient Greek written with no spaces between words.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 15, "What We Have, What We Don't, and Why It's Enough," the last chapter of the book.

Do this one thing. Choose the passage from this study that has stayed with you most. Read it slowly in your own Bible, footnotes and all, as someone who now knows what the notes mean. Write one sentence on how you read it differently than you did in September.

Bring. Your Bible, your sentence, all your vocabulary pages, and the “Think about” answer you wrote down in Week One.

Think about. In Week One we asked where your certainty about the Gospel came from. Has your answer changed?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for Bruce Metzger and the Alands, for Kilpatrick and Elliott, and for the scholars at Münster, who have given their working lives to reading the manuscripts with care. Thanks be to God that the church, across confessions and languages, still labors to hear exactly what the apostles wrote. And thanks be to God for the Lord who brought his people out of Egypt and has brought us out of death: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Hebrews 13:8 (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.