

WEB REVIEW: Working Virtually on the Text and Manuscripts Behind the Document: Doing New Testament Textual Criticism on the Web

by Thomas E. Phillips and Mark Glen Bilby

In a recent introduction to New Testament textual criticism, David C. Parker distinguishes between “documents,” “texts,” and “manuscripts.” “Documents” are critical editions of the Greek New Testament as constructed by a group of modern scholars. “Texts” are modern transcriptions of individual ancient manuscripts. “Manuscripts” are the actual ancient codices and papyri on which the texts were written.¹

New Testament students and scholars are increasingly finding that the World Wide Web is an important venue for doing serious critical work on documents, texts, and manuscripts, using an array of freely available tools and resources. Some sites, however, should be approached with care.

Parker reminds his readers that most New Testament scholars work almost exclusively with the “document,” modern critical editions of the New Testament — typically the [Society of Biblical Literature’s critical edition](#),² the [Nestle-Aland 28th edition](#),³ or a print version of the United Bible Society’s fifth edition.⁴ The main Greek text in all three of these “documents” is nearly identical except for the critical notes and treatment of textual variants. (A reliable comparison of the Nestle-Aland and UBS editions is available online through the [German Bible Society](#).⁵)

Copyright restrictions limit online access to the most up-to-date critical editions of the documents, but older editions are widely available — often accompanied by sophisticated parsing guides, English translations, and lexical aids. Sites like [New Testament Gateway](#)⁶ and [Bible Research](#)⁷ maintain useful lists of the most important repositories for various versions of the New Testament documents. [The Online Greek Bible](#)⁸ has an interactive parsing guide for the Nestle-Aland 26th edition and [Scripture 4 All](#)⁹ provides a complete parsing guide for the much older 1984 edition of the Textus Receptus,

¹ *An Introduction to New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-11. Two other recent publications are also essential reading for those wishing to engage the current state of textual criticism: Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (2nd ed.; Boston: Brill, 2014) and David C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship and the Making of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford, 2014). Also see: H.A.G. Houghton, “Recent Developments in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *Early Christianity* 2.2 (2011): 245–68. An open access pre-print of this article is available at: http://eprints.bham.ac.uk/627/2/2011_EarlyChristianity-preprint.pdf.

² <http://sblgnt.com>

³ <http://www.nestle-aland.com/en/read-na28-online/>

⁴ The SBL’s online edition includes textual variants with critical notes; Nestle-Aland’s online edition does not contain textual variants. Unfortunately, due to [copyright concerns](#), the German Bible Society’s critical edition (*The Greek New Testament* [5th, revised ed.; ed. Institute for New Testament Textual Research; Münster: German Bible Society, 2014]) is not available via open access.

⁵ <http://www.academic-bible.com/en/home/scholarly-editions/greek-new-testament/vergleich-na28-ubs5/>

⁶ <http://www.ntgateway.com/greek-ntgateway/greek-new-testament-texts/>

⁷ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/links03.html>

⁸ <http://www.greekbible.com>

⁹ http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

Thomas E. Phillips is Dean of the Library, Claremont School of Theology and Mark Glen Bilby is Reference Librarian, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California.

while [Perseus](#)¹⁰ provides a complete parsing guide for the 1885 edition of the Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament. Even though none of these parsing guides includes textual variants, they are each beneficial to readers who struggle with Greek parsing. [Open Scriptures](#)¹¹ even allows users to compare five older and/or public domain versions of the Greek New Testament side-by-side. Parsing guides and lexical aids are available for each document.

When one moves behind the “documents” and seeks to examine the underlying “texts” and “manuscripts,” Parker is certainly correct to assert that “[t]extual criticism and editing of the New Testament have changed dramatically in the last quarter century” due especially to the use of the computer.¹² There are a number of websites that introduce New Testament textual criticism, but the most popular sites tend to rely upon scholarship that is seriously dated. Almost all of these sites fail to interact with the significant conceptual advances in textual criticism that Parker has observed over the last quarter century. For example, the popular site [Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts](#)¹³ attempts to popularize the scholarly work on textual criticism from the 1960s to the 1980s. The similarly popular [Center for New Testament Restoration](#)¹⁴ is committed to recovering the original text of the New Testament, a dubious mission which most contemporary textual critics would greet with disinterest. In spite of the CNTR’s “fool’s errand,” the site provides a modestly useful side-by-side display of five ancient texts and four modern documents.

In many cases, researchers who want to dig even more deeply can move beyond the “texts” (i.e., modern transcriptions of the manuscripts) to study high resolution digital images of the actual “manuscripts.” The institutions that own the most important manuscripts (e.g., [Oxford University](#),¹⁵ [The University of Chicago](#),¹⁶ [The British Library](#),¹⁷ [The Vatican](#)¹⁸) have been quite aggressive about digitizing their collections and making them available on the open web. Although Google searches are effective for finding images of a particular manuscript when the researcher already knows the manuscript’s content and name, the [H. Milton Haggard Center for New Testament Textual Studies](#)¹⁹ at New Orleans Baptist Seminary, [BibleTranslation.ws](#),²⁰ and [Greek Language and Linguistics](#)²¹ each keeps an extensive and well-maintained set of links to images of the major NT manuscripts.²² Of course, many of these sites fall prey to a common problem — they are maintained by one individual or a very small staff, and the site maintenance quickly overwhelms human resources. Many of the most popular sites contain dead links, significant gaps in coverage, out-of-date information, and other obvious maintenance issues.

For researchers wanting to work on either the NT “texts” or “manuscripts,” one site clearly and undeniably leads all others. The [Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung/Institute for New Testament Textual Research](#)²³ is not only conducting the most important work at the textual level of New Testament scholarship, it is also leading the field by publishing its results on the open web via open access and strategic use of crowdsourcing. The researchers at the Institute have become leaders in the development of the [Coherence Based Genealogical Method](#)²⁴ of New Testament textual criticism. This approach uses sophisticated computer models to suggest the origins and descent of variations within the respective New

¹⁰ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0155:book=Matthew:chapter=1:verse=1&redirect=true>

¹¹ <http://prototypes.openscriptures.org/manuscript-comparator/>

¹² *An Introduction to New Testament Manuscripts*, 7.

¹³ http://legacy.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/interp_mss.html

¹⁴ http://bunning.gweb.io/CNTR/index_old.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.odl.ox.ac.uk>

¹⁶ <http://goodspeed.lib.uchicago.edu>

¹⁷ <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Default.aspx>

¹⁸ <http://opac.vatlib.it/iguana/www.main.cls?sUrl=homeMSS&language=eng>

¹⁹ <http://www.nobts.edu/CNTTS/resources.html>

²⁰ <http://www.bibletranslation.ws/manu.html>

²¹ <http://www.greek-language.com/Manuscripts.html>

²² Those with French reading skills will also find [Pinakes](http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr) <<http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr>> helpful.

²³ http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/institut/profil_en.shtml

²⁴ http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/service/downloads_en.shtml

Testament manuscript traditions. Although the German site uses English throughout, navigation can be intimidating. Fortunately, the site's creators have produced a [YouTube video](#)²⁵ to explain the major features.

In brief, the site allows users to view both transcriptions and images of all the available manuscripts. A list of available witnesses is available for every NT verse; the witnesses can be always viewed side-by-side in transcription and as images of the actual manuscripts (when available). Researchers who create a user account can highlight text and add comments and tags. Users can view the text and/or manuscripts with or without comments from others (the site encourages critical dialogue among its users). The site's software even allows users to create a chart showing the evolution of the text from the earliest witnesses to the present, using the coherence based genealogical method.

So, for example, a user searches for John 3:16 and immediately begins viewing transcriptions of that verse from all of the major witnesses. Then the user clicks through to images of the manuscripts from which the transcriptions are derived and highlights some portion of a manuscript to begin a scholarly conversation about that manuscript. The potential of crowdsourcing is tremendous. This process of scholarly dialogue has already exposed a host of transcription errors in the standard print reference sources (i.e., inconsistencies between the transcribed text and the original manuscript). The site is designed for scholars and offers no help with parsing, so the site is not ideal for beginners. However, for experienced researchers with strong Greek skills, the Institute for New Testament Textual Research's site offers an astronomical advance beyond any comparable site.

Finally, serious students of New Testament textual scholarship should be aware of the important open access journal, [TC: Textual Criticism](#).²⁶ This journal, founded in 1996, is unrivaled in the field.

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0-B4NgKveY&feature=youtu.be>

²⁶ <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/TC.html#page=about>