



Comfort, Phillip

Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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I have to admit that textual criticism has never been my greatest interest; in all honesty I find it terribly boring. But the fact remains that there are times in my study (and presumably the study of others) when it is a necessary evil. Comfort's work here has not changed my mind or opinion about textual criticism but it has made the subject more accessible for those times when I have no choice but to engage in it. It's hard to fathom how *Encountering the Manuscripts* can be subtitled "An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism" given the volume of material and painstaking attention to detail in this book. How much more in-depth can NT textual criticism or paleography get?!! I shudder at the thought that the discipline is more complicated, rigorous, and detailed than presented in this volume. So it is from the perspective of a textual criticism novice that I can only comment on the copious amount of information that Comfort provides in this book; I can't offer any real criticism since this is far from an area in which I have any expertise.

The introduction begins by teaching the reader about ancient scribal practices and the publishing of early NT texts. Comfort sees publishing process as threefold: (1) "get the book written," (2) "get it distributed and circulated," and (3) "get it out to the members of the congregation by oral reading." (50) In the second and third chapters Comfort takes to introducing the reader to various important manuscripts and printed editions of the Greek New Testament (GNT). Chapter 2 gives detailed lists of the the most significant papyri, uncials, minuscules, and ancient versions (mainly Syriac & Old Latin). He also mentions the Textus Receptus, the Majority Text, the texts of Bengel, Lachman, Tregelles, Tiscendorf, Alford, Westcott & Hort, and finally the Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies' GNTs.

Comfort says that the "third way to become familiar with the significant manuscripts is to begin reading them. The student can do this with good photographs." (55) Chapter 3 which focuses on the earliest NT manuscripts provides 38 pages worth of photographs (although the 'goodness' of them is questionable) for just such a purpose. Comfort also

lays out the method and criteria used for dating manuscripts in this chapter. This is really where paleography comes into play since certain styles of writing can be reasonably attributed to certain periods of time.

The fourth chapter on the Nomina Sacra was one of the more educational and entertaining chapters of the book. I learned that the nomina sacra are present in the earliest manuscripts when previously I had thought it was a later development. I was also unaware that there were at least three ways of writing a nomen sacrum, i.e., (1) 'suspension,' (2) 'contraction,' and (3) a longer form of 'contraction.' Comfort is able to conveniently point to the pictures from the chapter before to show examples of this in actual manuscripts. It was interesting to learn that the nomina sacra were instrumental in determining Christian copies of the Old Testament since this was a distinctly Christian practice. Plus as an avid student of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity I can now see the relevance of the manuscript tradition with the titles Father, Son, and Spirit all appearing as nomina sacra at various points.

The fifth chapter focuses on textual variation from the late first to late fourth centuries. Comfort says that it is unlikely that any major (i.e., doctrinally significant) variation would have occurred in the first century when the apostles or those directly associated with the apostles were alive. From the second century onward the story changes a bit and we have to ask:

Did scribes making copies of various New Testament books see their task as (1) reproducing a text word by word, (2) re-presenting the message with allowance for some verbal variance, or (3) reshaping (redacting) the text for theological and/or ecclesiastical reasons? (258)

At times we find examples of all of the above. In this chapter Comfort also suggests that we describe the textual fidelity of manuscripts according to the categories: "reliable," "fairly reliable," and "unreliable" (267) as opposed to the Alands' categories of "strict," "at least normal," "normal," and "free." This is followed by a list of early papyri manuscripts which evince that the majority of early manuscripts are reliable to fairly reliable. This gives the believer in the NT a certain degree of confidence in the text. The remainder of the chapter shows various alterations between the second to fifth centuries.

Chapter 6 addresses theories and methods of NT textual criticism. Comfort explains things such as "reasoned eclecticism" which focuses on internal and external evidence and the "local-genealogical" method which "*assumes that for any given variation unit, any manuscript (or manuscripts) may have preserved the original text.*" (298) The problem with this according to Comfort is that it produces "*an extremely uneven documentary presentation of the text.*" Our current UBS4/NA27 as their text exists was never read by an ancient reader of the GNT. Comfort also favors Wescott and Hort's "documentary approach" which contrary to "reasoned eclecticism" and the "local-genealogical" method favors external over internal evidence. He also covers textual grouping, assessing the manuscripts according to the study of singular variants, and judging variants according to text types in this chapter.

The final chapter shows actual examples of engaging in textual criticism. First the various transcriptional errors and purposeful alterations are named and explained. Then Comfort goes through a handful of verses from the NT ranging from Mark to Revelation and gives a textual commentary (not unlike Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*) explaining the various variants and their strengths and weaknesses. The chapter is closed out with an "Excursus on P39 Excluding John 7:53-8:11" (a.k.a. the Pericope Adulterae) at which time Comfort concludes that it is "very likely that P39 did not contain the Pericope of the Adulteress..." (354)

Other features of the book are a 14 page glossary of terms (379-93), a 10 page bibliography (935-405), and five indices: Photographs (407); New Testament Papyri (409-10); Uncials (411); Christian Old Testament Greek Manuscripts (413); Scripture References (415-20). To my utter shock and horror the text went with end notes. This type of book, tedious as it is, needs footnotes!

My final estimation of this work is that it is extremely helpful and thoroughgoing in its presentation. Comfort isn't afraid to disagree with the experts where he feels they have missed and he does a great job of explaining textual criticism in a way that is easy to understand. Unfortunately, textual criticism is still quite boring for me and Comfort hasn't been able to make it exciting, but he has been able to teach me things that I didn't know prior to reading this work, as well as reinforcing some things that I did. I'd recommend *Encountering the Manuscripts* to any beginning student of textual criticism. I even think that the salty veterans could benefit from this volume for quick reference when something isn't fresh in their memory.