

Sacred Words? or Words about the Sacred?

A Basic Introduction to the Issues of Text Criticism

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Introduction: Taking the Biblical Text Seriously

For many Christians who have not studied the matter in much detail, the individual words of the Bible are in some way sacred, something akin to the words of God. Since many confess the Bible as “the Word of God” it is then easy to assume that the individual words of the Bible as they are written in physical form, the words that we can hold in our hand in a modern book, are the very words of God (see [The Word of God and God’s word](#)). In one sense, this attitude is a positive reflection of a very high regard for the authority of Scripture. This is especially true among Protestants who are suspicious of ecclesiastical dogma developed from the vicissitudes of history and culture. The desire is to place Scripture as the basis of the Faith and practice of the Church rather than the decisions of Church Councils and ecclesiastical authorities. This positive dimension of a high authoritative role for Scripture is reflected in the faith statements of various church traditions. For example:

4. We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith. (*Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, “[Articles of Faith](#), IV. The Holy Scriptures”)

However, some traditions of Protestantism, and much popular Christian thinking, have taken this idea much further. They contend that the very words of the Bible are, if not dictated directly by God, at least inspired by God (various forms of verbal inspiration; see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)). In this view, the authority of Scripture lies in the precise words of the biblical text.

This has led to some very good work in analyzing the physical writing of the biblical text by conservative evangelicals, precisely because they make the assumption that the message of God, and therefore the line between truth and falsehood, between orthodoxy and heresy, depends on the individual words of the Bible being correct. Thus there is great incentive to recover the “original” words or the *autographs* as they were first penned by the author. The problem, of course, is that none of these autographs exist; only many hundreds and thousands of copies made over the course of 4,000 or so years.

Some church traditions want to maintain that the Bible is without any error of any kind without qualification (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)). Yet, it does not take too much work in the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek texts in which the biblical traditions were originally preserved to understand that at the very least there are errors of copying, spelling, and grammar throughout the Bible in both Testaments. There are also verses in the Hebrew of the Old Testament that defy translation simply because they do not make any sense as they are written. This incongruity between what some want to maintain *about* the Bible and what can actually be demonstrated *from* the biblical texts themselves has been the source of much and sometimes bitter acrimony in the church in the past three or four decades.

Other church traditions have attempted to deal with this obvious problem while still maintaining some form of absolute inerrancy view of the biblical text. They do this by logical deduction based on a prior faith assertion about inerrancy and declare that the original autographs must have been perfect in every way (inerrant) and were only corrupted by the process of copying. This logically maintains the faith confession about an absolutely inerrant Bible while acknowledging that the form of the Bible that we now possess does, in fact, contain such physical errors.

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Of course, never dealt with in such declarations is why God would allow the Bible to deteriorate from its original perfection if he had enabled human beings to produce it without error at the beginning, or what value a hypothetical perfection of the original non-extant text has for us today. Also, modern biblical study has raised serious questions about the traditional model of a single author sitting down and writing a biblical book, a model drawn far more from modern Western notions of authorship and ownership of ideas than from the realities of the biblical world and Near Eastern culture.

Most biblical scholars now acknowledge that the majority of the Bible was produced in a long process of the growth of traditions over many years and centuries as the community of Faith remembered, applied, and reinterpreted their experiences amid changing historical circumstances that demanded new responses. This idea fits well with what we know about Eastern culture where the idea of authorship and ownership of ideas is totally foreign, at least until the influence of modern ideas from the West. Ideas are shared and passed down from one generation to the next in community. While there may be significant thinkers who produce new ways of viewing the world, those ideas are the property of the community as a whole and of later generations so that it is difficult to distinguish between the “original” and the dynamic of those ideas through the centuries (Confucius is a good example of this). In applying this idea to the Bible, one noted biblical scholar commented, “The Bible was not [just] written; it grew.” This renders the idea of a perfect “autograph” less viable.

We cannot really deal with the issue of autographs since they are no more than a mental construct reached by logical conjecture. What we actually have is the Biblical text in many hundreds (OT) and many thousands (NT) of handwritten manuscripts dating back over 2,000 years. If we are to take the Bible itself seriously, then it is these existing manuscripts that must be taken seriously as evidence for any conclusions we might reach.

The Role of Textual Criticism in the Church

Many people react to the idea of *criticism* of the Bible, assuming that this is something negative in the sense of disapproval or disparagement. However, in its technical sense, “criticism” simply means “the scientific investigation of literary documents (as in the Bible) in regard to such matters as origin, text, composition, character, and history” (Webster’s). “Critical” study of the Bible, then, is “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation” (Webster’s). A “critical edition” of a biblical text includes, along with the biblical text in its original languages, variant manuscript readings as well as scholarly evaluation of possible errors in the text and suggested corrections (called emendations).

In its early practice, Text Criticism had as its goal the reconstruction as well as possible of the most original reading of the text before errors were introduced or before later developments changed the form of the text. However, as mentioned above, to talk about an “original” text to some degree assumes that there was a single initial copy that has deteriorated for various reasons. Indeed, biblical scholarship has shown that some biblical traditions, such as the letters of Paul, can be traced to a single author and are, for the most part, intact and continuous (scholars speak here of the “integrity” and “authenticity” of the text). Still, we do not have any of the original manuscripts of these writings.

However, most biblical traditions are much more dynamic and did not have a single author or an “original” stable form that can be recovered (for example, the Pentateuch; see [JEDP: Sources in the Pentateuch](#)) or existed in more than one form (for example, the books of Samuel or the Book of Jeremiah). In light of this understanding of a dynamic biblical tradition, the role of Textual Criticism as understood by most biblical scholars today is to establish and trace, “by careful judgment and judicious evaluation,” the development of the biblical text as it was used by the community of Faith. While the goal in some cases may be to try to determine the earliest wording of the text, there is recognition that even when there is a high degree of confidence in the conclusions, this is not an arrival at *the* truth. It is only the identification of a stage in the development of the textual tradition.

For some textual critics, their goal is to establish the earliest stable form of the text. That is, they seek to find what the text looked like at the point in history when it was no longer being changed through re-application, expansion, or through the corrective work of scribes and reached a fixed and somewhat authoritative form.

At its most basic level, then, textual criticism assumes change. It attempts to track and explain changes in the physical writing of the biblical text. However, it is not purely an historical discipline as this might imply. One of its

primary goals is to understand the variant readings of a text within the sociological and religious milieu of how the text was used and transmitted in a living community (see Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*). Textual Criticism also aims to recover the best possible form of the text, especially in instances where the biblical text is ambiguous or obviously corrupted, or where there are significant variants among the manuscripts or versions. It is this latter goal that is of most concern to those wishing to study Scripture for preaching or teaching in the church.

Textual criticism is necessary for both Testaments. However, because of the short time of the development of the New Testament, and the lack of major upheavals of history before the New Testament text was widely circulated and stabilized, there are far fewer textual issues than there are in the Old Testament. Also, the nature of the Hebrew language and the fact that Hebrew had been virtually lost for nearly a millennium also makes Old Testament textual issues vastly more complex than in the New Testament. So, while New Testament textual issues are important, we will focus here primarily on issues of Old Testament textual study, although many of the same basic issues exist for the New Testament.

The Issues of Text Criticism

While most Christians would not agree if they thought about it for very long, some assume without thinking that there is a somewhere a master copy of the Bible that serves as a source for all copies and translations. Unfortunately, for many people in the USA who are influenced by subtle forms of cultural imperialism, they unconsciously assume that this master copy is in English. Of course, there are many conservative Protestant Christians who fully understand that the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek. Many others understand that the Bible was transmitted by handwritten copies over a span of perhaps 4,000 years. Yet it is still difficult for many who want to maintain a high regard for Scripture to come to terms with the difficulties that these very facts raise.

On one level, a reverence for the specific words of Scripture as carrying the authority of God sounds defensible as a high view of the role of Scripture in the Church. However, it presents nearly insurmountable problems from a variety of perspectives, as we shall see. It is to address these problems that the discipline of Text Criticism has developed and is practiced.

The Nature of Hebrew

For those not familiar with the Hebrew language, it may be difficult to understand the magnitude of the problems associated with the text of the Old Testament. Of course, we cannot come close to providing enough information here to comprehend Hebrew. Finally, text criticism, more than most other disciplines of biblical study, is the domain of experts in linguistics, paleography, epigraphy, and a range of related scientific disciplines. But we can note a few factors that make the translation and understanding of the Old Testament much more complex than most people in the church imagine.

For many people in the West, Hebrew is an alien language. Unlike Greek, it does not use letters that resemble anything with which they are familiar. Like many ancient and Eastern languages Hebrew reads from right to left on the page rather than left to right as most Western languages. In early written forms there were no spaces between words, no punctuation, and no capital letters.

And perhaps most importantly, for the purposes of textual criticism, Hebrew is a consonantal language. That is, all of the letters in Hebrew are consonants. A few letters sometimes serve as “vowel carriers” to aid in pronunciation, but the text is basically only consonants with no vowels. That is something like a sentence in English reading:

nthbgnnngdcrttdthhvnsndthrth

Of course, if we know what we are looking at and are familiar enough with the language, we might be able to figure out that this is the first line of Genesis 1:1. So we can supply the vowels:

inthebeginninggodcreatedtheheavensandtheearth

In the ancient biblical text, the pronunciation of the words was nowhere indicated in the text itself; it had to be supplied from oral tradition, that is, from memory. The scrolls used in modern Jewish services of worship contain no indicators for vowels. When the Rabbi or cantor reads the Scriptures, s/he must know the text well enough to know from memory how to pronounce the words. While that might not seem like a significant task, we might note that minor differences in pronunciation can make a great deal of difference in the meaning of words even in English. For example, the English word PN can have a wide range of meaning depending on what vowels are added (pin, pan, pane, pain, pen, peen, peon, paeon, pony, piano, open, upon, etc.).

Eventually later scribes, who inherited a relatively stable consonantal text and only an oral tradition of pronunciation, developed a system of preserving the consonantal text as written yet providing a guide for pronunciation by adding marks to indicate the vowels used in the oral tradition. There were actually two systems in use for centuries, but one eventually dominated and is the system used in most modern Hebrew texts. These marks, called **vowel points**, consist of dots or lines above, below, and inside the consonantal text:

1.1 Gen בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

Because the consonants of the biblical text are much older, most scholars consider them to be much more stable and reliable than the vowel points. That is, there is a longer textual tradition of the consonantal text than there is of the text with the vowel points. Many textual critics will consider changing vowels to correct errors much quicker than they will change the consonants.

The Masoretic textual tradition

As seriously as we need to take the textual evidence that we will review below, we should not overemphasize the variant readings and conclude that the Bible is so corrupt that it cannot be trusted. There is a remarkable record of faithful copying of the biblical text. Before 1947, the earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament that we possessed dated to about AD 1000-1200 in the medieval period. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, suddenly we had manuscripts of most of the Old Testament that dated to 300-200 BC, a thousand years earlier than anything we had before. As might be expected, scholars were anxious to see how well the Old Testament text had been preserved in those 1,000 years. While there were a large number of variant readings among the Dead Sea Scrolls, most were minor and insignificant. Even with a number of significant variants, none affected any major theological teaching of the Old Testament.

Over the years, the scribes who were entrusted with preserving the biblical texts developed strict guidelines for copying the manuscripts. This scribal tradition could be traced to Ezra in the fifth century BC. These scribes were called *sopherim*, from a word meaning “to count,” which suggests a meticulous attention to detail. The copying process itself became almost a liturgy of worship. By the early medieval period, anywhere from AD 300 to 700, a group of Jewish scholars called the Masoretes emerged who codified the long standing scribal traditions governing the copying of manuscripts and the study of the Hebrew text. They meticulously compiled data on the texts, such as the number of occurrences of certain words, the number of words in a book or a section such as the Pentateuch, the mid-point word and letter, the number of verses, etc. This information was used not only to aid the study of the texts, but also as a check for the accuracy of the texts being copied.

Some of this information, generally referred to as the Masora, began to be included in the manuscripts along with the actual biblical text. The manuscripts using this information are called Masoretic texts. While there are many variants in these texts, the basic text of the Old Testament that we use today is called the **Masoretic Text (MT)**.

The Masora consists of several types of scribal notations. The *Masora Finalis* (“ending masora”) is a type of colophon (Gk: “finishing touch,” an informative inscription at the end of a book) that concludes most books of the Old Testament. A longer *Masora Finalis* concluded larger sections of the Old Testament, such as the Torah or Pentateuch. These usually included word and verse counts, midpoint letters or words, and other information that could serve as checks in the copying process. For example, at the end of the MT of Deuteronomy, there is information about the Book of Deuteronomy as well as information about the entire Torah. The *Masora Finalis* tells us that there are 955 words in the book, that it contains 31 reading sections, and that the midpoint of the book is

parva to footnotes along the bottom of the text that refer to pages or sections in the *Masora Magna* (published separately as the *Masora Gedolah*). These are mostly concordance-type lists of words and word frequency. Because of their incomplete nature along with the rise of modern concordances of the Hebrew text (for example, Even-Shoshan, Abraham, ed. *A New Concordance of the Bible*. Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1985), the *Masora Magna* finds little practical use today.

However, the side margin notations of the *Masora parva* provide helpful information, especially for textual criticism. One of the most common of these notations occurring between 800 and 1500 times in various textual traditions, is called *kethib-qere* (*kethib*, pronounced *kuh-tiv*, “what is written;” *qere*, (pronounced *quh-ray*, “what is read”). The Masoretes used this note when they recognized an error in the text and wanted to correct it without changing the actual text, or wanted to preserve a variant reading or pronunciation. Some of these instances were not errors in the strictest sense but were instructions from the Masoretes about how to read the text. What was actually “written” in the MT was the *kethib* and the correction or suggestion to “read” in the margin was called the *qere*, indicated by the abbreviation ק (the first letter of the word *qere*) in the margin above the correction. The note, in effect said, **read** this rather than what is **written**. In most cases, the consonants of the *kethib* were retained in the text with the correction written in the marginal *qere* without vowels. The vowels for the *qere* were then added to the consonants preserved in the text.

This led to some interesting anomalies for those not familiar with the Hebrew text. By the time the Masoretes were active, the proper name of God (YHVH) was considered too sacred to be pronounced aloud. So, there had developed the tradition of saying the word ‘*adonay* (“lord”) whenever the name of God was encountered in the text. To preserve this oral tradition, early MT manuscripts marked these with a *kethib-qere*, using the consonants of the proper name YHVH with the vowels of what they should “read” instead. But since this “correction” to the written text occurs so many times in the Old Testament (3,001) it became what is called a *qere perpetuum*, an “automatic correction” of the text. The vowels of the *qere* were written in the actual text rather than in the margins, with no mark indicating the correction.

Renaissance and Reformation linguists translating the Bible into European languages, primarily German, had by that time lost much of the Hebrew language tradition (it was largely preserved in the Arab world of the medieval era). They were unfamiliar with the Masoretic tradition, and assumed that the conflated word in the text was the actual proper name of God. So, they ended up adding the consonants of YHVH (only in German it came out as JHVH) to the vowels of ‘*adonay* and came up with the word **Jehovah** as the proper name of God (the “e” of “Jehovah” is actually a short “a” vowel, as it is in ‘*adonay*).

The only problem is that **this is a totally artificial word that never appears in the Bible as a name of God**. What the Masoretes had done to try to clarify the text actually led moderns to make a significant error in reading and translating the text because they did not understand the Hebrew tradition well enough! This is a reminder that we cannot treat our conclusions too dogmatically without adequate information and a thorough understanding of the issues.

There are many other Masoretic textual notations that are helpful in textual study, or at least are interesting. For example, sometime before the medieval period, the scribes added markers to the text to indicate main section divisions (marked with ׀) and subdivisions (marked with ׁ) in the text, something akin to paragraph marks. In some cases these divisions were somewhat arbitrary depending on the interpretation of the passage. The scribes also functionally divided the text into verses by a system of accent marks, and later added “end of verse” markers. Verse numbers did not originate in Jewish tradition but were adapted from Latin Christian manuscripts (the Vulgate).

Other notations require more technical expertise in Hebrew. Surrounding two passages (Num 10:35-36, Ps 107:23-28) there are placed inverted Hebrew letters (either ׀ or ׁ). This notation marked the scribes’ conclusion that these passages do not belong in their present context and should be removed, without actually removing them. To accomplish the same thing with letters or words, in fifteen places in the text there are placed dots above letters or words, in effect erasing them without actually physically removing them from an already stable text (Gen 16:5, 18:9, 19:33, 33:4, 37:12, Num 3:39, 9:10, 21:30, 29:15, Deut 29:28, 2 Sam 19:20, Isa 44:9, Ezek 41:20, 46:22, Ps 27:12; see below #14, p.13). Other special marks or letters written in certain ways indicate important passages (the Shema in Deut 6:4), the middle letter of the Torah (Lev 11:42), or the middle of the Psalms (80:14).

the errors and variants in the manuscripts exist. So perhaps the question is not what God *can* do or *could* do, but what he, in fact, **does do**. And it certainly seems that he has entrusted the record of his revelation to human beings, much as he entrusted a new-born child to a very young Jewish maiden. That does not mean we have no truth; it only means that we human beings have a tremendous responsibility to be sure that the testimony to God is faithfully transmitted, evaluated, and understood.

Kinds of Textual Issues

There are three basic kinds of textual problems that are most directly relevant to the student of Scripture: scribal errors, intentional changes, and differences between ancient versions (translations). We could also add lack of knowledge of the intricacies of biblical Hebrew or the Masoretic system, since some of the issues are really more problems of interpretation than of text. However, it is not always easy for the scholar to determine exactly what was an error of copying and what was a deliberate change in the text. And of course, there is always the possibility that the copyist was working from a different version of the text (called a *vorlage*, “that which lies before”) than the one that produced the copies we have. That would result in variant readings that are not errors at all, just variations between different versions of the same tradition. But that does not solve our problem of coming up with a readable text, unless we want to accept more than one version of Scripture as equally authoritative.

Unintentional scribal mistakes

“Scribal errors” are generically used to describe mistakes that are common to human beings, the same kinds of mistakes that we all make in writing or typing. Given the tediousness of copying thousands of words and lines of texts over periods of years, we should not be surprised that some mistakes would creep into the copying process in spite of the best intentions of the scribes. In many cases these mistakes are easy to spot, much the same way that a mistyped “teh” (a mistake that I make all too frequently!) is easily seen and corrected. These mistakes are so common in our writing that we can now develop computer programs to recognize and correct them. It is this recognition of the tendency of human beings to repeat the same kinds of mistakes in writing or copying that helps scholars develop principles for analyzing the existing biblical texts for scribal errors.

Other mistakes, however, are much more difficult to identify, especially in the Hebrew text. Biblical Hebrew uses words that are mostly built from three root consonants and originally had no markers for vowels. Common errors, such as the reversing of two letters, rather than producing gibberish as would often be the case in English (as in the example of “teh”) ,often make perfect sense in Hebrew but with a radically different meaning. The same problem exists with other errors, such as writing a wrong vowel or confusing similar appearing letters.

Take this fictitious example. In Hebrew, Psalm 23:1 reads:	אָחַסְרִי	לֹא	רַעִי	יְהוָה
With the vowel points added, it looks like this:	אָחַסְרִי	לֹא	רַעִי	יְהוָה
(English equivalent)	I will lack	not	my shepherd	[is] YH

This gets us the familiar translation, “The Lord [YHVW] is my shepherd, I shall not lack.” However, if two slight changes are made to the text, one a different vowel and the other a confusion of letters, the meaning becomes something quite different:

אָחַסְרִי	לֹא	רַעִי	יְהוָה
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In changing *ro‘iy* to *ra‘iy*, the change of one vowel point, the word “my shepherd” now reads “my misery” or “my trouble,” and in changing *’echsar* to *’echsad*, the interchange of very similar appearing letters, “I will not lack” now reads “I will not show compassion.” So our beloved text, with two very minor and barely perceptible changes in the Hebrew text, can read “The Lord is trouble (or evil) to me, I shall not show compassion.” While this particular example does not occur in the biblical manuscripts it illustrates how drastically differently a text can read when only slight changes are made. In some cases these are easy to identify; in other cases it is a matter of debate as to which word should be read since, as in the example above, different spellings could both make sense.

Of course some want to insist that the biblical text is so sacred that somehow God has miraculously preserved it from any such human errors. Given the possibilities of scribal mistakes across 4,000 years of copying, there is certainly a sense in which this is true. The scribes and others who preserved, copied, and transmitted the biblical manuscripts to us through the most adverse conditions showed a remarkable commitment to preserve the integrity of

the text. It is not too much to say that God has worked through the community of Faith to give us the biblical text that we have today.

And yet, anyone who looks at a variety of manuscripts of the biblical text will immediately recognize that there are, indeed, errors that have crept into the text. Rather than having one master copy of the Bible locked away in vault we have literally thousands of manuscripts of the Bible in all states of preservation and conditions. And each of these manuscripts differs from each other in small ways.

Some errors are recognized because of actual differences between existing manuscripts. In this case, the manuscripts are compared and through a complicated process of determining which is the better of two or more readings a decision is made as to which is the most original or earliest reading. In other instances, the text as it stands either has no meaning, sometimes not even preserving any known words or grammar, or makes no clear sense even though a series of Hebrew words are there. In these cases, reconstruction of the text is a matter of careful and informed analysis of the text to try to figure out what errors might have been made in the text in order to restore a reading.

There are many instances of these in the Hebrew Old Testament that are concealed in translations. Since the translators must say something, most of these read smoothly in translation even though they are virtually unintelligible in the original texts. Older translations tended to gloss over such difficulties so that the reader was unaware of the problem. However, in most modern translations, such as the NRSV, there is a footnote that says something like “meaning of Hebrew uncertain.” In almost all such cases, this is an admission that we simply do not know how the text should read at this point. Textual scholars have made informed attempts to reconstruct the text in order to translate it, but with the admission that however the text reads in English we are not sure of the meaning in Hebrew.

One of many examples of this is 1 Samuel 1:18. In this passage Hannah has just prayed for a son in the sanctuary at Shiloh and received a blessing from Eli the priest. In this verse she is returning to her husband Elkanah:

1:18 And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, **and her countenance was sad no longer.**

The final phrase is marked in the RSV with the note “GK: Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.” This indicates that the English reading is based on the Greek translation (Septuagint) rather than the Hebrew text because the Hebrew does not make good sense here. In Hebrew the text reads as a series of four words that have little meaning:

לֹא-הָיָה-לָּהּ עוֹד: (not-was-her-again). However, the Greek translation reads: **το\proswpon aut\hj ou) sunepesen eki**, which can be translated as “her face no longer fell,” an idiomatic Hebraic way of saying, “her countenance was no longer sad.”

Scholars usually recognize several categories of scribal mistakes. The examples given here are not exhaustive, since there are many different kinds of variants among the manuscripts. These are given to suggest the kinds of variant readings, recognized errors in the existing manuscripts, or the kinds of problems with which textual critics must deal to establish a readable text. On a more immediate practical level for most people in the church, those who value the authority of Scripture must take these issues into consideration in developing a theology of inspiration or in establishing the meaning of biblical passages.

1. Confusion of similar appearing letters or words

There are several sets of Hebrew letters that appear very similar, differing mainly in the length of a stroke, the amount of curve, or in the addition of a “tittle”, a slight extension of a stroke that distinguishes one letter from another. Depending on the skill of the scribe, these letters can be difficult to distinguish.

English examples: celebrate/celibate; relate/redate; den/ben; immorality/immortality

Heb: ר ד כ י ו י ח ה ש ע צ נ ב כ
 r d k y v n h x s sh ts ‘ k b n

33.8 Isa נִשְׁמוּ מִסְלֹת שָׁבַת עִבְרָ אֲרָח הַפֶּר בְּרִית מְאִס עָרִים לֹא חָשַׁב אֲנוֹשׁ:

Isa 33:8 The highways are deserted, travelers have quit the road. The treaty is broken, its **cities** [oaths] are despised, its obligation is disregarded.

Here a ד (d) has been misread as a ר (r), so instead of עָרִים (cities) read עָרִים (oaths).

2. Confusion of similar sounding letters

Given how the human mind works, it is easy to think of one sound and write a similar sounding letter. Also, Hebrew is much more an oral and aural language than modern English. This made it easier to interchange similar sounding letters, especially sibilants (s-words) and gutturals (sounds made in the throat or by breathing).

English examples: celebrate/celebate; relate/redate; den/ben; immorality/immortality

Heb: כ ח צ ש ס פ ת א ע (aspirated sounds)

k ch p s s sh ts z t t g ah h x

17.7 1 Sam וְחַיִּי חֲנִיתוֹ כַּמְנֹרֶת אֶרְגָּם

1 Sam 17:7 The **arrow** [shaft] of his spear was like a weaver's beam,

Here a ח (hard ch) has been misread as a ע (guttural gh), so instead of וְחַיִּי (arrow) read וְעַיִי (shaft).

3. Confusion of similar sounding words

One technique of copying manuscripts was to have several scribes writing while one would read aloud the text to be copied. This made it easy to misspell similar sounding words.

English examples: canon/cannon; pen/pin/paeon/pan; grate/great; there/their

Heb: לוּ לֹא (both pronounced *lo*)

his no/not

100.3 Psa דַּעוּ כִּי־יְהוָה הוּא אֱלֹהִים הוּא־עָשָׂנוּ וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ עָמַד וְצִנָּן מִרְעִיתוֹ:

Psa 100:3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are **not** [his]; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Instead of וְלֹא (not) read וְלוּ (his).

4. Transposition of letters or words (metathesis)

This is the common mistake known all too well by typists in which adjacent or proximate letters are interchanged or transposed. While most cases of this in English yields gibberish, far more often in Hebrew the result is a different word with a different meaning.

English examples: for/fro; eats/east; room/moor (**metathesis** usually refers to the transposition of two *adjacent* letters)

49.12 Psa קִרְבָּם בְּתַיְמוֹ לְעוֹלָם מִשְׁכַּנְתָּם לְדֶרֶךְ וְדָר

Psa 49:11 **Their inward thoughts** [their graves] are their homes forever

Instead of קִרְבָּם (their inward thoughts) read קִבְרָם (their graves)

5. Incorrect word Division

This is not a problem in modern languages because they exist as separate words. However, both Hebrew and early Greek were written without spaces between words, largely because of the expense of good writing materials. As the practice of indicating word divisions developed, sometimes mistakes were made in deciding where the division should occur.

English example: thereporterscantrust = the reporters can trust / there porters cant rust

6.12 Amos תִּירְצֹן בְּסֹלֶעַ סוּסִים אִם־יִחְרוֹשׁ בְּבִקְרִים
Amos 6:12 Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow with ~~oxen~~ [the sea with an ox]?

Instead of בְּבִקְרִים (with oxen) read בְּבִקְרַיִם (the sea with an ox)

6. Words omitted

There are places in the manuscripts where words were accidentally omitted. Usually, other manuscripts or versions can supply the missing word. However, in a few cases either the manuscripts all tend to omit the same word, or they supply a range of words that probably indicates that the scribes were trying to fill in an obvious void in the text.

13.1 1 Sam בֶּן־שָׁנָה שְׁאוּל בְּמָלְכוֹ וּשְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים מָלַךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:
1 Sam 13:1 Saul was...years old when he began to reign; and he reigned...and two years over Israel (NRSV).

We do not have enough manuscript evidence to reconstruct this verse; most modern translations mark the omissions with a lacuna.

7. Letters Omitted

Rarer than the omission of words is the accidental omission of a single letter. Once again, because of the nature of Hebrew, most frequently this error results in a different word that itself has meaning, but often does not go with the context.

2.20 וַיְבָרֶךְ עֲלֵי אֶת־אֵלְקָנָה וְאֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וַאֲמַר יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי יִהוּדָה לֵךְ
זָרַע מִן־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת תַּחַת הַשָּׂאֵלָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂאֵל לִיהוּדָה

1 Sam 2:20 Then Eli blessed Elkanah and his wife, and he said, "May the LORD **give** [repay] you children by this woman for the gift that she made to the LORD"

Instead of יָשָׁם (give) read יָשַׁל (repay).

8. Omission due to similar lines of text

This is referred to as **homoeoarchton**, "similar beginning," or **homoeoteleuton**, "similar ending." Since it is often difficult to determine which is the case, both types of errors are sometime referred to as **parablepsis** (scribal oversight). These two types of writing errors occur when parts of the text are omitted because the scribe's eye skipped in the manuscript from a beginning or a concluding word, phrase, or line of text to a later part of the text that is similar or identical.

13.15 1 Sam וַיִּקָּם שְׁמוּאֵל נִיעַל מִן־הַגִּלְגָּל גְּבַעַת בְּנִימָן וַיִּפְקֹד שְׁאוּל אֶת־הָעַם הַנִּמְצָאִים
עָמְדוּ כְּשֶׁשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ:

1 Sam 13:15 And Samuel left and went on his way from **Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin**. **The rest of the people followed Saul to join the army; they went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin**. Saul counted the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

Here the repeated phrase **גִּבְעַת בְּנִיְמִן**, Gibeah of Benjamin led to the omission of the intervening text. The Greek translation (Septuagint) preserves the omitted text.

9. Omission due to similar adjacent text

This is called **haplography** (writing once). It is similar to homoeoarchton and homoeoteleuton, except it occurs with similar letters or words that are immediately adjacent rather than being further down the manuscript.

20.13 Jud ועָתָה תָּנוּ אֶת־הָאָנָשִׁים בְּנֵי־בִלְעֵל אֲשֶׁר בְּגִבְעָה וְנִמְיָתָם וְנִבְעָרָה רָעָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא אָבוּ בְּנִיְמִן לִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹל אֲחֵיהֶם בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Jud 20:13 Now then, hand over those scoundrels in Gibeah, so that we may put them to death, and purge the evil from Israel." But **Benjamin** [the sons of Benjamin or Benjaminites] would not listen to their kinsfolk, the Israelites.

Because of the repeated letters **בְּנִי בְּנִי**, the phrase **בְּנִי** was omitted. It was marked as an error by the Masoretic scribes.

10. Addition due to similar adjacent text

This is called **dittoagraphy** (writing twice), in which similar adjacent letters or words are accidentally duplicated. It is the opposite of haplography.

7.13 2 Kng וַיַּעַן אֶחָד מֵעֲבָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר וַיִּקְחוּ־נָא חֲמִשָּׁה מִן־הַסּוּסִים הַנּוֹשָׂאִים אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָרוּ־בָהּ הַנֶּזֶם כְּכֹל־הַחֲמוּן הַמְּנוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָרוּ־בָהּ הַנֶּזֶם כְּכֹל־הַחֲמוּן הַמְּנוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־תָּבוּ 2 King 7:13 One of his servants said, "Let some men take five of the remaining horses, since those left here will suffer the fate of the whole multitude **multitude** of Israel that have perished already."

Instead of **הַחֲמוּן הַמְּנוֹן** (the multitude multitude) eliminate the repeated word and read **הַחֲמוּן** (multitude).

11. Doublets

This is a case where a text is repeated in slightly different form. Scholars think that this occurs inadvertently because of the proximity of two versions of the same text, or perhaps because the scribe knew two slightly versions of the text and wanted to preserve both versions.

4.21 1 Sam וַתִּקְרָא לְנֶעֶר אֵי־כְבוֹד לֵאמֹר גָּלָה כְּבוֹד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַלְקָח אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶל־חַמִּיָּה וְאִישָׁהּ: 4.22 וַתֹּאמֶר גָּלָה כְּבוֹד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי נִלְקַח אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים פ:

1 Sam 4:21 She named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 4:22 She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

In many cases doublets will be retained in translation. Even though it is redundant, many scholars are hesitant to remove such variations because it is difficult to determine what part is more original since they may represent two different versions that are both authentic.

12. Ligatures

This is really a problem of handwriting. **Ligatures** are ways that writers join letters or words together. While Hebrew manuscripts are not written in cursive scripts, the orthography of Hebrew (how letters are written) can vary widely according to individual scribes or traditions and allow for ornate calligraphy (decorative writing). This allows letters or words that should be separated to be read as if they were one, or vice versa, which often alters the meaning.

Josh 5:1 וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע כָּל־מְלְכֵי הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן יָמָּה
וְכָל־מְלְכֵי הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֲשֶׁר עַל־תַּיִם אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הוֹבִישׁ יְהוָה אֶת־מַי
הַיַּרְדֵּן מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־**עֲבַרְנוּ** וַיִּמָּס לְבָבְכֶם

Josh 5:1 When all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the Israelites until **we** [they] had crossed over, their hearts melted

Instead of **עֲבַרְנוּ** (“we crossed over”) read **עָבְרוּ** (“they crossed over”). The letter **ם**, which marks a third person plural verb (“they”), was mistakenly read as if it were **נו**, which marks a first person plural verb (“we”).

Intentional scribal changes to the Text

For various reasons the scribes sometimes made deliberate changes to the text. Some of these are rare while others are more common. There are basically four types of these intentional changes: simplification of the text, linguistic or stylistic changes, to eliminate objectionable content, or changes for theological reasons. These changes are evidenced in manuscripts variants, although it is not always clear what was original and what was the changed version. In some cases scholars must do some linguistic detective work to reconstruct what the original text would have been before the changes. Some of these textual issues are too technical to illustrate easily without some knowledge of Hebrew.

13. Added letters

Besides the marginal notations, the scribes also made some corrections within the actual text. This is an example of an added letter.

Jud 18:30 וַיִּקְיִמוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי־דָן אֶת־הַפֶּסֶל וַיַּהֲנִיחֵן בֶּן־גֶּרְשֹׁם בֶּן־**מְנַשֶּׁה**
הוּא וּבָנָיו הָיוּ כַהֲנִים לְשֵׁבֶט הַדָּנִי עַד־יוֹם גְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

Jud 18:30 Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of **Moses** [Manasseh], and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity.

The scribes corrected the original **מֹשֶׁה** (Moses) to **מְנַשֶּׁה** (Manasseh) by adding the omitted letter slightly above the original text.

14. Marked Deletions

In some cases the scribes thought that certain words, letters, or phrases should be omitted from the text. Because the text was already stable by the medieval period when the Masoretes were active, they did not actually remove the words, but marked them with a series of dots as needing to be omitted.

Gen 33:4 וַיָּרֵץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקוּהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוְאָרוֹ **וַיִּשְׁקְהוּ** וַיִּבְכוּ:

Gen 33:4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck **and kissed him**, and they wept.

The scribes thought that the word **וַיִּשָׁקְדוּ** (and kissed him) had been added as an expansion to the text and concluded that it should be omitted.

15. Assimilation to parallel passages

This is called **harmonization** and is similar to the problem of doublets. A word or phrase is added to a text by a scribe because that phrase occurs in a parallel or proximate passage, and the scribe wanted to harmonize the passages or make them more consistent.

Lev (5:25) (ET 6:6) adds “to the priest” to correspond to Lev 5:18

5.25 Lev **וְאֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ יָבִיא לַיהוָה אֵיל תָּמוּם מִן־הַצֹּאן בְּעֶרְבָה, לְאִשָּׁם אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן:**

Lev 6:6 And you shall bring, as your guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering **to the priest**.

Lev 5:18 You shall bring **to the priest** a ram without blemish from the flock, or the equivalent, as a guilt offering; and the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for the error that you committed unintentionally, and you shall be forgiven.

The phrase **אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן** (to the priest) is added at the end of the verse assimilated from previous instructions given in Lev 5:18 that contained the phrase. Many modern translations do not remove these assimilations since they are a part of the text in other places.

16. Alternate spelling or ways of writing

This is a type of scribal variation that was only recently understood. It is not an error, but rather a difference in the way Hebrew developed as a language and how it was written over a period of time. For various reasons, certain grammatical markers (called *matres lectionis*, “mother of letters” or vowel carriers) could vary or be interchanged based on something like dialect or changes in the way the language was written over time. For example, in certain constructions the letter א (aleph) becomes silent, and some scribes simply omitted it in the text. In some cases, either an א (aleph) or י (yod) at the beginning of a word could serve the same function and could be interchanged (technically “initial aleph-yod interchange”), yet for us could be confused with different forms of the word where those letters signified something different.

1.11 Hab **אֵן חֲלָף רִיחַ וַיַּעֲבֹר וְאִשָּׁם נוֹ כַחַו לְאֱלֹהָיו:**

Hab 1:11 Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and **become guilty**; their own might is their god! (NRSV; the forms in Hebrew are singular but refer to the Chaldeans)

This is a difficult verse to translate as it stands in the MT, for a variety of reasons. Most translations take the word **וְאִשָּׁם** to be from the root אָשַׁם, “to incur guilt,” but smooth out other problems in the verse such as the presence of an indirect object marker with “god.” However, variant readings in other manuscripts including the Dead Sea Scrolls read **וַיַּשָּׁם**, where the initial א (aleph) has been replaced by a י (yod). If this is a case of an initial aleph-yod interchange, then the word can be read as from the root יָשַׁם, “to set up,” often used of worshipping idols. The last part of the verse would then read: “**they set up their own strength as their god.**” In cases like this, often the reading is a scholarly decision based on what we know about the language.

17. Removing objectionable content

These are the scribal corrections called *tiqqune sopherim* (abbr: Tiq soph, “corrections of the scribes”). Traditionally, there are eighteen of these corrections in the Masoretic Text: Gen 18:22, Num 11:15, 12:12, I

Sam 3:13, 2 Sam 16:12, 20:1, I Kings 12:16, 2 Chr 10:16, Jer 2:11, Ezek 8:17, Hos 4:7, Hab 1:12, Zech 2:12, Mal 1:13, Ps 106:20, Job 7:20, 32:3, and Lam 3:20. Most of these changes were made because the original reading appeared irreverent. There is ongoing debate whether there were other corrections made that were not marked by the Masoretes, or whether this was an exegetical or commentary tradition in the *Masora* rather than actual changes to the text.

1.12 Hab לֹא נָמוּת הֲלוֹא אַתָּה מִקְדָּם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי קִדְשִׁי
Hab 1:12 Are you not from of old, O LORD my God, my Holy One? [We] **You shall not die.** (NRSV)

Most modern translations follow the Tiq Soph notations and read לֹא תָמוּת (you will not die) instead of the MT לֹא נָמוּת (we will not die). The Masoretic notation suggests that the scribes thought that the original reading of “you will not die” was too irreverent since it suggests that God *could* die, so they changed “you” to “we.” The translation has restored the assumed original reading.

18: Synonyms

Occasionally a scribe would use a different word that meant essentially the same thing. In some cases, this was an attempt to clarify the meaning or to update older Hebrew to more current usage.

36.11 Isa הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלִיאִקִּים וְשִׁבְנָא וַיֹּאחַח אֶל־רַב־שָׁקֵהּ דְּבַר־נָא אֶל־עַבְדֵּיךָ אַרְמִי
כִּי שָׁמְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֶל־תְּדַבֵּר אֵלֵינוּ יְהוּדִית בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַחֹמָה:

Isa 36:11 Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of **the people** [the men] who are on the wall.”

In the Masoretic Text, the word הָעָם (the people) is used. In the Isaiah scroll from Qumran, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, instead of “the people” it reads הָאֲנָשִׁים (the men).

19. Theological changes

These are scribal changes made to the text based on theological grounds. Scholars are divided over the extent to which such changes actually appear in the text. One example of this kind of change about which there is widespread agreement are the anti-polytheistic alterations in which proper names compounded with the name Ba‘al, the Canaanite fertility god, were altered or turned into a polemic against Ba‘al worship. This was done by replacing the element “baal” in the name, often with the Hebrew word “boshet,” which means shame or shameful.

11.21 2 Sam יְרֻבְשֶׁת הֲלוֹא־אִשָּׁה הִשְׁלִיכָה
עָלָיו פֶּלֶחַ רֹכֵב מֵעַל הַחֹמָה וַיָּמַת בְּתִבְיָן לְמָה נִגְשַׁתֶּם
2 Sam 11:21 Who killed Abimelech son of **Jerubbaal**? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died (NRSV)

Here the Masoretic Text has the scribes’ corrected version of the alternate name of Gideon, יְרֻבְשֶׁת, **Jeruboshet**. However the NRSV follows the Greek and Syriac versions of this verse and translates **Jerubbaal**, which they assume to be the original version of the name as it appears in other places such as Judges 6:32.

The Practice of Text Criticism

As mentioned several times already, the actual practice of Old Testament text criticism requires a great deal of proficiency in Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as familiarity with the ancient versions, especially in Latin and Greek. While some knowledge of Hebrew and Greek will certainly make reading the text easier and will provide enough competence to recognize problems in the text, most detailed textual work is the domain of experts. Because of this,

it is beyond the scope of most pastors and students of Scripture who are not professional scholars. That means that they will have to depend on the work of the textual scholars and use the proper tools and biblical study aids, such as concordances and critical commentaries, to aid them in dealing with the biblical text.

There are three basic kinds of restoration that are attempted by textual scholars when encountering serious problems in the text, beyond comparing various manuscripts of the Hebrew text.

1) As already noted, the **Masoretic scribal traditions** provide invaluable information in dealing with problematic passages. While we have to keep in mind that these traditions date only to AD 700-1300 (some would argue as early as AD 500), they represent a much older textual and interpretive tradition in Judaism. These traditions cannot be used as the final word on the biblical text, because there are variant textual readings even within the Masoretic traditions. Also, we have to consider that as good as the Masoretes were in preserving the text, they could only preserve what they had received. In some cases they had no better information by which to reconstruct the text than we do. Still, this is one of the most valuable sources for Old Testament textual criticism.

2) As seen in examples above, another tool is to **compare the Hebrew text with other ancient translations or versions**. These include: a) the **Samaritan Pentateuch**, which is of marginal value because of theological changes made to the text by the Samaritans; b) the **Septuagint**, the second century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament that is considered the best ancient version for text critical studies; c) **revisions (rescensions) to the Septuagint**, later reworking of the Greek translation from both Jews and Christians, that are sometimes helpful but must be used critically; the three most well known of these are Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian; sometimes Origen's *Hexapla*, an edition of the Old Testament in Hebrew, transliterated Hebrew, and four Greek translations, is included here; d) the **Aramaic Targumim** (Targums, "commentaries"), collected rabbinic commentaries on the Hebrew texts in Aramaic, which are only marginally helpful since they are largely paraphrases; e) the **Peshitta**, a second century AD translation into Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic with wider variations from the MT than the Targumim; f) the **Latin Vulgate**, Jerome's late fourth century AD translation of the Old Testament into Latin; because of his careful work and close attention to the Masoretic text traditions, this is a good source to aid textual criticism.

There are other ancient versions for both Old and New Testaments that scholars use to aid in textual criticism. These versions present several possibilities that make them a valuable source of information. a) The ancient translators may have had access to manuscripts that did not contain an error that was transmitted through the Masoretic tradition, which is the basis for our preserved Hebrew text. b) They may have understood the language better than we do 2,000 years later (although some of the Greek Septuagint translation suggests that the translators did not know Hebrew very well at all). c) They may have had manuscripts from slightly different versions of the biblical books than we have preserved, which would allow us to see a broader basis for the text. For example, based on the Greek Septuagint, it is widely recognized that the Book of Jeremiah existed in at least two versions that differed in composition, length, and arrangement. However, the complications of such scenarios are the domain of linguistic and manuscript scholars and are far beyond the range of the average student of Scripture. Here, most laypeople as well as pastors and educators who do not fall into that category must rely on the technical work of such experts (see, for example, Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed., Fortress, 1992).

Of course, such an approach also must consider that the versions are only a tool in reconstructing the original text and not succumb to the temptation to take the versions as the final word on what the original text said. For example, there was a tendency in the versions to smooth out rough passages or to make clearer what was not at all clear in the Hebrew text. This involved a great deal of interpretation of the meaning of the text. And that interpretation was often influenced by later concerns rather than recovering and preserving the original words and meaning. Also, as mentioned, the ancient translations are of uneven quality. In some places the Greek Septuagint is superb in its translations of Hebrew, while in other places it is sloppily done and inferior.

In the illustration given above from 1 Samuel; 1:18, another ancient version provided enough information to reconstruct what the Hebrew most likely originally said but had been lost through errors in copying. However, in other cases, ancient versions provide little help, since they either preserve the words without much meaning or simply rewrite the verse to make better sense. This suggests that the ancient versions may not always be more accurate in telling us what the text originally said. The errors may have already corrupted the text in such a way that they did not know what it said either. Unfortunately, the ancient versions do not give us the same kind of footnotes

as the NRSV to let us know when this was the case. Or, the tendency to expand, simplify, or to add theological commentary to the text complicates their use as reliable sources.

3) For most textual scholars, an **emendation** (a correction) this is the least reliable way of reconstructing the text and is attempted only where there are problems that offer no other solutions. Often this is an educated and informed logical deduction as to the correct reading based on what we know about human errors, the Hebrew language, and the general sense of a passage. However, as such, we recognize the subjective element that goes into this approach, which explains the diversity of opinion about some very problematic passages (for example, the ending of Mark in the NT).

Some critics, especially those who were heirs of 19th and early 20th century preoccupation with historical issues and internal consistency, are quite willing to posit textual reconstructions based on emendations. However, since the rise of literary approaches to the text that are willing to deal with internal tensions in the text on other grounds than logical reconstruction, there has grown an increasing respect for the integrity of the Masoretic Text. This is not to say that the MT has become a “sacred cow,” unable to be touched by human reason. However, many scholars are now much more hesitant to attempt reconstructions when there is little or no external evidence upon which to base decisions. Also, many textual critics are far more willing to emend the vowel points, since they are a much later development in the tradition, than they are to change the consonants. And even then, many would prefer only to change the consonants by emendation according to kinds of known errors, such as given in examples above.

Textual critics use all of these methods to construct a **critical text** or **critical edition** of the text, with notes on variant readings, problems in the text, and often suggested emendations. These notes are called a **critical apparatus** (see graphic on page 5). In some sense, modern textual critics are carrying on the work of the Masoretic Scribes in preserving the text along with variant readings. Most modern translations into other languages, including English, work from critical editions of the text in both Old and New Testaments. We should keep in mind that these critical editions are hypothetical texts. That is, rather than being master copies of the Bible, they are modern constructions of a text based on the work of textual critics. But given the thousands of manuscripts at our disposal today, modern translations are based on far better textual evidence than, for example, the King James English of 1611, which in some cases used very poor manuscripts.

As suggested at the beginning of this discussion, dealing honestly with Scripture as we have it beyond making theological assertions about it while ignoring the text itself, requires an admission that the biblical texts that we have bear unmistakable human fingerprints. That is, for all that we want to say about the Bible being the word of God, which is certainly true on one level, the reality is that it is God’s word **in human words**. The physical writing that we have is very fallible, while at the same time communicating infallible truths. But those truths about God and about us and about our relationship with God do not just fall off the page because we read the text. They must be understood by careful and reasoned analysis beyond simply saying “God said.” And that analysis must begin by taking seriously the text of Scripture as we have it, with all of the errors in writing and copying that it contains. It then becomes our task to use every available tool at our disposal to better understand the word of God, the message that we can trust to be a faithful and true testimony to God and his work with us humans, that these very fallible human words communicate.