
One of the more common attacks on Christianity throughout the centuries has been that of the reliability (or lack thereof) of the New Testament canon. Were these books really the authoritative words of God, written by the apostles and associates of the apostles who walked with Jesus? Or were these texts later creations that lack apostolic foundation? Even if one believed the New Testament texts to be the authoritative word of God written by the apostles and their associates, how can one have confidence that the texts we possess are in fact accurate representations of what the apostles wrote? These are but a few of the questions leveled against Christians and the reliability of their Scriptures. The continued recovery of ancient documents and the rise of interest in textual criticism, however, have demonstrated a remarkable accuracy of transmission. While the New Testament “autographs” remain (and likely will remain) elusive, the care with which the text has been preserved over the years does present a greater and greater confidence that the texts we possess would look remarkably like the original manuscripts. In *The Text of the New Testament*, Kurt and Barbara Aland have attempted to provide a “college text or home study manual for students using the modern text of the Greek New Testament in any of its various editions” (v), answering many of these questions along the way. They have modeled this text after Wurthwein’s text on Old Testament textual criticism, but they put more emphasis on reader’s practical needs (v). Their primary aim is to provide help for those using the Greek New Testament and aiding the reader in making independent judgments on variant readings (v). Most simply stated, Aland and Aland assert that the purpose of the book “is to introduce readers[...]step by step to the difficulties of the material” (v).
Summary

Aland and Aland organize their work into eight chapters. Chapter one provides a survey of editions of the New Testament from Erasmus up to the “New Nestle”. Among the numerous texts discussed, the authors pay particular attention to Griesbach, von Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, Nestle, Von Soden, and Aland. One key aspect of the later parts of chapter one is to demonstrate the large percentage of agreement between the seven major editions of the Greek New Testament (Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort, von Soden, Vogels, Merk, Bover, and Nestle-Aland, 29).

Chapter two then moves on to discuss the transmission of the Greek New Testament. This chapter considers many various issues related to the transmission of the Greek New Testament. One issue that the authors spend some considerable time discussing is the issue of text-types. In addition to surveying the origin of text-types, the authors also consider the possibility of a “western” text-type that many have supposed. Though they agree that an “early text” may have many characteristics similar to the West, it is better not to posit a “western” text-type along the lines of Westcott and Hort’s argument (55). The authors also point out in this chapter the significance of the second century as the time when the Gospels first began to be circulated as a collection. This time period was also significant due to the rise of use of Latin manuscripts. Finally, the authors speak of the New Testament as a “living text,” meaning that later scribes harmonized and altered the text as they saw fit in order to clarify meaning (69).

Chapter three provides the reader with a survey and brief description of the manuscripts that play an important role in the transmission and textual criticism of the Greek New Testament. The authors provide lengthy lists of the various papyri, uncial, minuscules, lectionaries, and patristic citations that are referenced in textual apparatuses. Chapter four takes a brief look at the
early versions of the New Testament, beginning with the Old Latin and Vulgate and moving through the Syriac versions (most importantly the Diatessaron), the Coptic versions, and numerous other versions in various languages, concluding with a list of patristic citations from Latin and Eastern Church Fathers.

Chapter five then compares the two major modern editions: the *GNT* and the *Novum Testamentum Graece (Nestle-Aland)*. This chapter aims to provide readers with an understanding of the structure, critical apparatus, punctuation apparatus, reference apparatus, and symbols used in each of the modern editions. In an attempt to supplement the many terms and issues mentioned in chapter five, the authors include a list of resources in chapter six that can aid in the various issues involved in the discipline. The chapter is broken up into six categories: concordances, dictionaries, grammars, synoptic editions, special literature, and commentaries. For each category, Aland and Aland provide a brief introduction, a list of helpful resources, and some additional discussion about the use of these resources.

Chapter seven focuses on the task of textual criticism. The authors frame their discussion in two primary ways: rules and examples. They begin their discussion of textual criticism with twelve basic rules. The first rule is that only one reading can be original. Rule two states that the best reading of both the external and internal criteria is the original, but criticism must always begin with external evidence before moving to internal evidence (rule 3). Closely related is rule four, which states that internal criteria alone can never be the sole basis for a decision on the original reading. Rule five says that the primary authority rests on Greek manuscript tradition, not the Fathers or other versions. Rule six reminds that no group of manuscripts can be followed mechanically, but rather “the peculiar traits of each manuscript should be duly considered” (281). Rule seven concludes that any variant that exists in only one manuscript is not the
original. Rule eight suggests that the reading that can best account for the derivation of the others is the best reading. Rule nine asserts that variants must always be considered in the context of the tradition. Rule ten reminds that while the more difficult reading is usually the original, it is not always, and must be applied with care; similarly, rule eleven posits that the shorter reading is usually, though not always, original. Rule twelve states that the best training for textual criticism is “a constantly maintained familiarity with New Testament manuscripts themselves” (281).

Chapter eight concludes the work with an evaluation of manuscript texts by means of proposing a methodological tool. This chapter also revisits the five categories of manuscripts. Category I denotes manuscripts with a high proportion of the early text. Category II denotes manuscripts with a considerable proportion of the early text. Category III denotes manuscripts with small, though not negligible, proportion of early readings. They also have polished readings and some unidentified sources. Category IV denotes manuscripts of the “Western text.” Finally, Category V consists of a predominantly Byzantine text (335-336).

Critical Evaluation

It would be difficult to enumerate even half of the strengths in this work. The degree of detail in both the historical surveys and the description of various text-types, markings, and processes for doing text criticism are astonishing. Though perhaps at times overwhelming, the authors have provided an incredible reference tool in many respects. One example is the brief summary of the material found in each of the main papyri, uncials, minuscules, lectionaries, and patristic citations. Not only do the authors explain text critical markings in the apparatus, but once the reader has found a text variant and traced it to its appropriate source, the list of these manuscripts provides the readers with the appropriate context to explore the issue further. Another example of helpful detail is the chart with the percentage of verses in each New
Testament book that occur without variant in all seven major editions (29). When one considers seven different editions based on over hundreds of years of various types of manuscripts, and when one considers that the change of a single word’s spelling disqualifies a verse from complete agreement, the amount of verses that have no textual issues is remarkable.

Another significant strength of the work is the inclusion of twelve rules for textual criticism. The authors not only give the twelve rules, but they also provide a brief discussion that helps explain what the rule is and how it is applied. While these twelve rules are relatively standard in the field and quite helpful, perhaps two improvements could be made. First, moving the inclusion of these rules earlier in the book would help give the reader a framework for the guidelines that the various text transmitters were using when they established their manuscripts. Second, giving specific biblical examples in which one would need to apply the rules would help the reader in the area of praxis. Though the concepts seem clear enough, there is little to no application of the rules to specific texts, leaving the reader a little unsure as to their usefulness.

Other strengths regarding the historical survey of text transmission, the discussion on the diacritical marks, and other minor issues could be presented as well, but space constrains a full explication of them here. There are, however, a couple weaknesses worth mentioning.

The first weakness relates broadly to the authors’ goal of providing a text for college students. While some college students will no doubt be able to understand portions of the book, the material largely lacks sufficient background information to make some of the assertions that the authors make. For example, they simply state that 1 and 2 Peter are clearly written by different authors (49). While this is a widely recognized argument in scholarly circles, it is unlikely that most college students would be sufficiently informed about this issue to understand Aland’s point. At the very least, the authors should provide a footnote that mentions the
discussion and points readers to a more thorough treatment elsewhere. Other similar assumptions are made without support that may leave the student confused. The authors seem to admit this possibility when they write: “But we are ahead of ourselves again, constantly mentioning things which are unfamiliar to beginning students of the Greek New Testament” (67). If the text is for college students, as they suggest in the preface (v), then this admission of “constantly” failing to communicate with their intended audience is a significant weakness. Similarly, if the audience is a beginning student of the Greek New Testament, it is perhaps too much to expect that he or she could quickly look at examples that are entirely in Greek. For example, chapter seven uses specific passages that demonstrate some of the issues related to praxis of New Testament textual criticism. However, all of the example texts are entirely in Greek. Providing readers with an English translation (or for their original audience, German) would aid in the student’s ability to grasp the material.

Another weakness is the statement that lectionaries are only used in text critical issues in exceptional instances (169). This statement would seem to need clarification because there seems to be at least one good reason for consulting lectionaries. The authors admit that one of the problems with using lectionaries for text criticism is that the lectionaries do not always follow the original text, but rather reflect changes in the text to meet liturgical needs (168). However, if such is the case, would not this be an extremely helpful piece of the puzzle? If one can find variants in the lectionaries, especially those that match other text types or variants, and if one can understanding the theological or liturgical reasons for making such a change, would not it be helpful as a means of explaining how, when, and why a text has a variant reading? Yet Aland and Aland do not discuss this possibility.
Finally, the authors use Mark 16:9-20 as an example of material that seems clearly to be secondary. By secondary, the authors argue that it is therefore not original, and by not original, they do not accept it. Yet this approach needs further clarification. What should one do with material such as John 21:24 that appears to be a later addition by the community? Is this not original, and therefore in need of removal? The authors’ only mention of this text is to note that it is included in uncial 0299 in the Coptic (128). Other material exists as well that seems to be editorial in nature. This then raises the question of whether all additions, editorial or “authorial” (i.e. additional periscopes like Mark 16 or John 8), ought to be omitted. This issue seems to tie in closely with the authors’ claims that the New Testament was a “living text,” but they do not draw out this important implication. Moreover, they assert that the New Testament exhibits this living quality in a way that is absent in the Old Testament since the Old Testament had strict controls (69). Yet the Old Testament itself exhibits editorial work markedly similar to that of John 21:24. For example, the notations that Moses was the most humble man to walk the earth (Num. 12:3) and that no prophet has arisen since whom the Lord knew face to face (Deut. 34:10) seem to be latter editorial comments. If the Hebrew audience viewed these additions (especially additions to the Torah!) as inspired and worthy of acceptance, it would seem that much more work would need to be done to differentiate between secondary that warrants omission and secondary editorial work that remains part of the text.

**Conclusion**

Along with Bruce Metzger’s work, Kurt and Barbara Aland’s *The Text of the New Testament* is a standard in the field that will remain for many decades to come. Though some weaknesses are present, they are by no means any reason to set aside this important text. For all those studying the New Testament and the Greek text, as well as any interested in textual
criticism in general, this work is a must read. Moreover, though their work is perhaps a bit beyond their audience of students (at times implying beginning Greek students), it nevertheless provides sufficient understandable information to make it a worthwhile, though difficult, read for that audience.