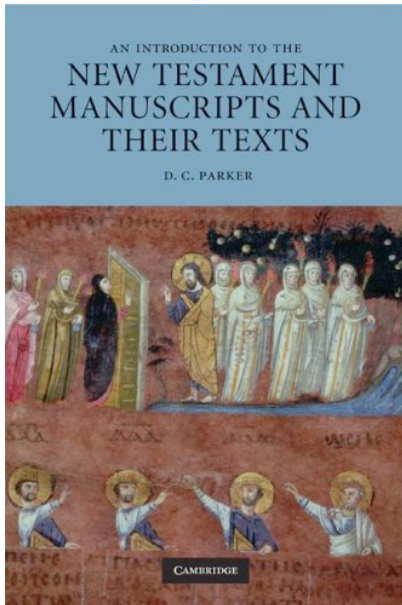


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Parker, D. C.

An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and their Texts

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Despite the chronic gap encountered by textual critics in assuring a broad diffusion to the achievements reached in their field, it is becoming clearer and clearer to specialists of cognate disciplines that in recent years the study of the New Testament manuscript tradition underwent a number of changes that reshaped it significantly. Take the development of digital technologies: as a matter of fact, within the main area of religious studies, it is hard to imagine a field that the use of the computer potentially impacted in a comparable way. Nevertheless, these transformations did not regard merely technological improvements. On an epistemic point of view, in fact, this discipline has been redirecting its main goal by progressively shifting from its traditional, Panglossian purpose (the recover of a supposed “original” text) to the analysis and description of the textual history of single books and passages (i.e., the account for the changing in their wording), a task that encompasses an impressive amount of interest in historical, exegetical, hermeneutical issues. Add the ongoing discoveries of early papyri and the publication of new resources that were not available to previous generations of experts, and it will be plainly manifest how compelling is the need, for students, teachers, and researchers, to rely on up-to-date reference tools. As a matter of fact, the excellent introductions provided by the field’s leading scholars in the last decades, which were still appropriate ten or fifteen years ago,

even retaining their indubitable validity in a number of topics, fail to reach the essential aspects that define what it is the practice of textual criticism *today*.

Such a crucial need has now been filled by David C. Parker with this comprehensive and innovative book. Indeed, an exclusive feature of this work lies in its merging of a methodical, scientifically well-grounded treatment of the subject with the high degree of originality granted by its approach. Such a distinctiveness is noticeable even from certain exterior characteristics. First, Parker does not burden this volume with a final bibliography and footnotes: instead, he provides the necessary information on secondary literature in apposite paragraphs printed in the body of the text in a smaller font. Each time, the reader can either go through, scan, or skip them; in none of these cases is the flow of the text interrupted. Nevertheless, a final index of names and subjects helps one to find the bibliographical indications presented in these paragraphs. Second, the fifty-one supplied plates are placed separately on a website, with the indubitable advantage of providing the reader with a large set of colorful, digital, quality pictures of original documents, without the cost of the book being increased. However, the most original features of this work pertain to its content. Certainly, this is not a handbook of New Testament textual criticism as such a genre has been traditionally conceived. Being rather *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* from a certain point of view, it offers much more: it starts from the specific treatment of the actual tradents of the New Testament text (the manuscripts), then covers the principal problems of the discipline. It is not just a matter of internal organization: the priority bestowed by the author to the manuscripts is palpable all through the book. Coherent with Westcott and Hort's golden rule, according to which "Knowledge of documents should precede final judgment upon readings," which Parker states in capital letters as early as page 2, his approach grants a special focus on the artifacts that carry the New Testament texts and the many ways to deal with them. In doing so, he effectively avoids the always impending danger of overlooking the fact that the text of the New Testament, as reconstructed in the various critical editions in use, is an abstract entity, while it existed (and exists) concretely in many different forms.

This volume is divided into three parts: (1) "The Documents"; (2) "Textual Criticism and Editions"; and (3) "The Sections of the New Testament." Part 1 is specifically devoted to the manuscripts, considered as physical documents; after providing an overview on the various forms the Christian books took over the centuries and an introduction to paleography, Parker offers a detailed presentation of the scientific tools and resources for the study of Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and plurilingual New Testament manuscripts. Notoriously, it is not an easy task for neophytes to familiarize themselves with tools such as Aland's *Liste*, Elliott's *Bibliography, Text und Textwert* and so on, but Parker is brilliant in explaining their correct use and in highlighting their potential value. An entire chapter

is devoted to the practical skills one must develop in the study of ancient codices: here the author is prodigal of technical advice on the various stages of the job, embracing the visit to a library, how to describe a manuscript, and how to make a collation or an electronic transcription. The last chapter of this section introduces the reader to the study of other groups of witnesses to the New Testament text: the so-called “indirect tradition” or the patristic quotations; the old versions (with sketches on Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Slavonic, Gothic, and other versions); and other kinds of support (as talismans and inscriptions).

Part 2 addresses pivotal aspects of New Testament textual criticism’s actual practice. As in the previous section, the approach is an experiential one: critical topics, such as the delineation of the transcriptional process, its circumstances, and the logic it obeys, are addressed through the exposition of specific test cases and practical examples, often driven from the author’s direct experience. In this way, more than once the reader can have the sensation of glimpsing his desk. One chapter is devoted to a survey of the evolution of the practice of textual criticism, from the Lachmannian stemmatic to the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method and other important theories that marked the history of the discipline over the last two hundred years. Then a particular focus is granted to the often unnoticed implications that textual criticism produces for history, exegesis, and theology. The subsequent chapter deals with the main tools of everyday use for scholars, namely, the editions of New Testament texts. First, a historical point of view is adopted, attentive to the multifold criteria followed by the editors for their presentation of the text and the variant readings; then the principal print editions are covered, as well as the electronic ones, while suggesting how to practically benefit from their use.

If, generally speaking, the category itself of “New Testament” is a problematic one, under different perspectives, on the philological ground the study of the textual history of the documents this corpus includes must necessarily face the fact that the majority of ancient manuscripts contained only a portion of those books, grouped as Gospels, or Paul’s Letters, and so on. Thus, the third part of the volume is subdivided into four chapters, each devoted to a section of the New Testament: Revelation; the Pauline corpus; the Acts with the Catholic Epistles; and the Gospels. For each section a detailed account of the witness and the specific problems their study presents is provided, as well as a number of examples that illustrate the complexity of the textual criticism practice applied to different New Testament books and the skills it requires. A brief chapter with the author’s final remarks concludes the volume.

The particular features of Parker’s *Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* allow a profitable use of it on different grounds; even if some will not agree on the treatment of single topics, trained researchers will find in this book an impressive

amount of useful and up-to-date information. On the other hand, those taking their first steps in this thorny field will unquestionably take advantage of this volume either as a textbook or as a reference tool. It is unlikely that, while reading it, they will not be captured by the deep fascination for manuscripts its author transmits in every single page; that, perhaps, is the best lesson he gives.