

**THE ‘ORIGINAL TEXT’ OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:  
WHY THE LONG SILENCE?**

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**Abstract**

With the long silence in discovering or recovering the “original text” of the New Testament, it appears textual criticism as a discipline has failed and it remains a *mirage* in its inability to achieve the fascinating aim of the discipline, particularly the search for the original words of the New Testament. Using historical-critical method, this paper argues that the alternative eclectic “original text” of the New Testament (NA<sup>28</sup> or UBSGNT<sup>5</sup>) is attempting to paint a different and a misleading picture of the “original text” from the New Testament’s autographs of the first century and that the twenty-first century should not overstretch the search for the “original text” since originality depends on existing and quality evidences. Evaluating a number of new discoveries of manuscripts, new and quality discoveries would continue to surface and would help expand the critical apparatus of the Greek New Testament. However, reliance on manuscripts with Egyptian roots would enhance the discipline and drag us to achieving the proposed aims.

**Key words:** “Original Text”, Homer, Age of the Enlightenment, NA<sup>28</sup>, UBSGNT<sup>5</sup>, Manuscripts, New Testament

**Introduction**

In literary studies, criticism envisages the connotation not only of spotting fault, but of adequate and just judgment considering advantages and disadvantages.<sup>1</sup> Textual criticism started with the Greeks when they try to restore the original words of Homer’s *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Metzger 149). There were critical editions of Homer Theagenes of Regius and Aristotle, which Aristotle prepared for his pupil Alexander (Metzger 149). Such study was applied to the Bible called biblical criticism by Origen and has been developed with special recapturing and familiarization with the origin,

history of the development and the contemporary reconstruction of the original text of the Bible, predominantly by the Alexandrian scholars (Metzger 150).

As an aspect of criticism, New Testament textual criticism aims at restoring the authentic or original words of the original authors of the New Testament as credibly given in the early stage of biblical inspiration.<sup>3</sup> This is accomplished through the comparison of ancient biblical manuscripts to ascertain the original reading (Fee 3; Schnabel 59, 69). This field of study has concerned itself with this thrust since the Church patristic era and the beginning of critical-textual studies after the Age of the Enlightenment, a task every upcoming scholar in the field would find fascinating and motivational.

Unfortunately, as the field expands its boundaries through the help of biblical archaeological findings, predominantly since the nineteenth century, many problems and issues surfaced as “inabilities” to attain to the proposed aim in this field of study. Among many others, the issue of the “original text” has been a concerned to many scholars in view of the earliest incubated thrust of the discipline –the restoration of the original words of the Bible. Scholars began to question the terms “original text” since then, to the modern days, where studies are revealing the incompetent nature of the discipline, particularly its inability to restore any fragment, which belongs to the first century as an autograph.

Is it still possible to discover and restore the original text of the New Testament? Are there available and reliable evidences, which are capable of being the originals? Can the latest critical editions of the text of the New Testament claim being the originals? How did the interpolation in the scriptures occur? How do we reach to such a consensus despite many variants found within the available evidences? Is it possible for such a task to be accomplished? Can textual scholars ascertain the facts towards the discovering and deciphering of the text of the New Testament? Are the proposed aims of the discipline still valid as initially intended? What has been happening over the years in regards to the search for the original text of the New Testament? If the answers to all these questions seem to be on the affirmative, why the long silence? This paper delves into the critical issues surrounding the “original text” of the New Testament and challenges the thrust of the discipline, which has been incapable in view of the long silence, which is interrupting and rupturing the discipline since the modern expansion

in many textual writings.

### **The Proposed Aim and Its Scholarly Reconstruction**

It is widely accepted that the text of the New Testament has been lost. By these words, it means the autographs of the Bible writers such as Matthew, Luke, Mark, John, Paul, Peter, James and Jude. The available texts of the Greek New Testament (NA<sup>28</sup> and UBSGNT<sup>5</sup>) are the eclectic texts, which have been reconstructed using some sort of older manuscripts and in some passages, later manuscripts depending on the availability of the witnesses. The oldest found and internationally acceptable fragment is that of  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  dated around AD 100-125. The extant complete text of the New Testament in uncial is Codex Sinaiticus ( $\aleph$ ) (Metzger 42; Aland and Aland 106-108). The oldest codex is  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ , which is dated around AD 200. Other important manuscripts are Alexandrianus (A), Codex Vaticanus (B), Codex Ebraemi (C) and Codex Bezae (D) etc. (Metzger 46-51).

The singular aim of every textual critic has been, as put in simple terms, the discovering or restoring of those lost autographic texts of the New Testament. This assertion is evident in many writings by textual critics of every century. For example, Souter states, “If we possessed the twenty-seven documents now composing our New Testament exactly by their original authors, there would be no textual criticism of the New Testament” (3). This means that textual criticism exists because of the lost copies of the original texts of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and the series of hand-written copies that preserved them. With this, Souter also states that “every fresh copy introduces fresh possibilities of errors” (3) and also directed our attention toward the old copies and efforts put by the earlier copyists. Souter states, “As a rule, the old copyists did their best to make an accurate copy of what they saw before them, and it is in so far as they saw that their work has real value” (4).

Similarly, J. Harold Greenlee defines the discipline to be the “study of copies of any written work of which the autograph (the original) is unknown, with the purpose of ascertaining the original text” (11). Like Souter, Greenlee expresses that “textual criticism is not limited to the New Testament” and “it is necessary for any piece of literature which was written, and of which copies were made, before the invention of printing” (11).

In a more recent thought, Michael W. Holmes also considers textual criticism to be “a discipline which involves the art and science of recovering

the original text of a document” (101). Holmes states how difficult it is to interpret a document without the original (101). This makes textual criticism meaningfully important as efforts are made to read through the originals of the New Testament but whether such efforts are feasible is still entirely a crack on the rock. According to Holmes, New Testament textual criticism involves gathering and organization of the evidence, the evaluation and assessment of the significance of the evidence and the reconstruction of the history of the text (101-102). It becomes more difficult in that “this history” is nothing but “Western history” of the discipline. Accurate historic framework has not been able to inculcate the earliest textual criticism from the second century and beyond who started the discipline and transmitted the text, which today has generated the search for the corrupt forms in the text. Such an alternative history of the text of the New Testament can extend its winds to the second century and beyond for Africans started the ancient textual collations in Egypt. The history of the discipline is underestimated for the West is neglecting the early engagements before Christianity was invaded by Islam in North Africa.

A late twentieth and twenty-first centuries textual critic who has been an influential figure is Eldon Jay Epp.<sup>2</sup> Epp observes that, “...the issue of original text is very old, but one that has emerged during the past dozen years in a fresh, challenging, and perhaps disturbing fashion” (70). Adding to this, Epp reveals the initial and ancient aim of the discipline, which has been proposed long ago to have been the quest for the “original text” of the New Testament. Epp writes:

It will surprise no one that virtually all textual critics from the outset of the discipline have assumed that their goal is to discover and restore the original text of the New Testament or, taking a narrower view, to isolate the original reading at each given point of textual variation between our New Testament manuscripts (70-71).

Some very old scholarly assertions could be seen to have existed since the modern emergence of the discipline. For example, Souter asserts that “Textual criticism seeks, by the exercise of knowledge and trained judgment, to restore the very words of some original document which has perished” (3). A similar statement could be seen in the writing of J. Harold Greenlee that “Textual criticism is the study of copies of any written work of which the autograph (the original) is unknown, with the purpose of ascertaining the original text” (1). To this, Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland state amidst the

many discovered readings, “Only *one* reading can be original” (280).

The tracking of this “one available reading” has been in the dark for centuries. With such motivated intent, J. Eugene Botha in an article entitled, “New Testament Textual Criticism is Dead! Long Live New Testament Textual Criticism,” questions the claim that the discipline is fundamental to New Testament studies which Botha calls “fundamental assumptions underlying the discipline of New Testament textual criticism” (562). Botha criticizes the field of study because of the comments of Barbara Aland and the work of David Parker and claimed they were all revelations and expressed his agitation which he has held concerning the discipline for a long time (563), though he had a “great admiration for textual critics and their skills and sophisticated methodologies...” (Botha 563). Botha calls the intent of the discipline “the received view” i.e. a long time view of textual criticism as “recovering the original text” (563).

In this effort, a parallel understanding has been that a reading will be discovered which will be “unique” to other readings. But with the long silence, many textual critics started rethinking their use of the terms “original text.” Scholars have been cautious,

...for they realized increasingly that any certainty about the text that New Testament authors wrote was more and more elusive, especially as new manuscript discoveries brought into view more and more variant readings and as increasing complexity accompanied the application of the critical canons that were supposed to facilitate the identification of the original readings (Epp 71).

This aim got reconstructed since 1854, instead of recovering, to an effort to restore and reconstruct the text of the New Testament as “nearly as can be done on existing evidence” (Tregelles 174; Epp, “Multivalence” 252). Similarly, scholars of New Testament textual criticism have employed carefulness in the usage of terms. Hort asserts that the entire process of searching for the “original text” is “to present exactly the original words of the New Testament, so far as can now be determined from surviving documents” (WH 2:1). B. B. Warfield also states that “The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring ... His (God) book, word for word, as He gave it to be inspiration to men” (15). Metzger also states that the ultimate goal of textual criticism is “to ascertain from the divergent copies which form of the text should be regarded

as most nearly conforming to the original” (v). Fee carefully observes that “The task of textual criticism is to sift through all these materials, carefully collating (comparing) each MSS with all others, in order to detect the errors and changes in the text, and thus to decide which variant reading at any given point is more likely to be the original” (Fee “Textual Criticism” 828).

In all these citations by Hort, Warfield, Metzger and Fee, one finds a community of doubt and careful selection of terms to configure and capture the recent searches. Textual researches and assertions have been suspicious and identifying the ultimate aim i.e. the search for the “original text” of the New Testament as being a mirage. As a result, the words, “original text,” have been used with quotation marks enveloping caution, which challenges the surety of the terms in actual sense, and whether or not the original words can be retrieved.

It can be said that despite that the Classical and German Philologist of Berlin, Karl Lachmann, who lived 1793-1851 was known for a critical edition of the New Testament, which has high application of all textual criticism principles at the expense of the *Textual Receptus* (Neill 64-9), Lachmann’s aim was not “to reproduce the original text which he believed to be an impossible task, but to present on purely documentary evidence, apart from any previously printed editions...” (Metzger 124). Such a task has become more difficult as many manuscripts are being discovered and considered to reflect some other forms of manuscripts rather than the autographs and thereby creating more problems and variants.

J. K. Elliott exposes the impossibility of discovering the original text in terms of being less confident on the side of modern critical-textual scholars. Elliott states:

...modern textual criticism is less confident about the need to, or its ability to, established the original text and that its best contribution to biblical studies is to show how variations arose, ideally in what directions, and to explain the significance of all variants (124).

In the midst of all these uncertainties in the search, scholars continue to attribute meanings to the “original text.” This has led to a variety of observations by Epp:

1. That impetus came from views that our present Gospels utilized pre-existing sources or existed in earlier (e.g. precanonical) forms or versions.
2. Prompting came from the recognition that Acts, for example,

has come down to us in two differing textual streams, with the distinct probability that numerous readings in one stream represent intentional scribal alterations (or even reflect the possibility that the author wrote two versions of Luke-Acts).

3. That the doxology occurs after 14:23 in some manuscripts of Romans rather than in its usual place in 16:25-27, suggesting that Romans earlier existed in a short, fourteen-chapter version.
4. Also of interest is the lack of *in Rome* in Romans 1:7, 15 in a small number of witnesses, and the similar lack if *in Ephesus* in Ephesians 1:1 in some manuscripts (Epp “Issues” 73; Epp “Multivalence” 262-3).

These and many other observations make the uncertainty feasible. As a result, scholars have come up with the idea of the “autographic textform”. Epp in his analytical presumption introduces the idea of “interpretive textform” for it represents an interpretation through alteration of the text. Epp argues that if the interpretive textform existed when the Gospels and the epistles were written then the interpretive textform and the canonical textform are the same. Epp also employs the understanding of the “predecessor textform” to refer to the various roles Q source played (Kee 102-105; Guthrie 147-179; Sato “The shape of Q-Source”; Witherington III 33-36; Keener 61), the several earlier versions of Mark, John and Romans among many others. Epp states:

In less careful language, one might speak of an ‘autographic original,’ a ‘canonical original,’ or an ‘interpretive original,’ but regardless of the terminology, there is a real sense in which every intentional, meaningful scribal alteration to a text –whether motivated by theological, historical, stylistic, or other factors –creates a new textform, a new original (“Issues” 75).

Epp concludes that the “term ‘original text’ has been fragmented by the realities of how our New Testament writings were formed and transmitted,” and as such, “‘original’ henceforth must be understood as a term designating several layers, levels, or meanings,” though Epp prefers to call them “‘dimensions’ of originality” (“Issues” 75). The search can be said to be lost even when some modern critical editions are claiming to be closer to the originals.<sup>4</sup> Affirming this Robinson states, “The original text of modern eclecticism thus becomes a phantom mirage with no real existence as soon as its readings are taken in sequence” and that “the proffered original is a text

whose distinctive pattern of agreement is far more likely *not* to reflect that lost autograph than to restore such” (126).

Also, Botha questions the NA<sup>27</sup> and the UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> with the collation of manuscript traditions (564) and suggests the use of individual texts for the translation of the Bible rather than having grooves of compiled manuscripts, which text of such individual texts should be used since the NA<sup>27</sup> and UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> are far from the originals (569). Botha is convinced that considering his suggestions will make the discipline to “have a new lease on life and break out of the prison of many years for isolation and specialization” (571). Botha’s use of individual texts for translation could create more problems rather than solving problems associated to the text because such an idiosyncratic approach would lack the freedom of being exposed to other variant readings and determining the best reading. Botha reassesses the original intention of the discipline taking to recognition the work of Parker, which informed his critical basis against New Testament textual criticism (564-5) and his new understanding of textual criticism which he calls for the need for “a different perspective” (561) in agreement with Parker (Botha 568). Botha observes that the role of the NA<sup>27</sup> and UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> needs to be specified or we will end up with “human compilation texts based on old manuscripts” (569). But whether autographic original, canonical original or interpretive original, the search for the autographs needs to be focused rather than distracted using terminologies, which might result to an alternative “original” as autographs as in the case of the available eclectic text of the Greek New Testament (NA<sup>28</sup> or UBSGNT<sup>5</sup>). These texts have succeeded in becoming variety of compilations, which relied on older manuscripts, and product of conjectural emendation making them stand apart with the product of the first century autographs of the New Testament.

### **Modern Search for the Original Text Evaluated**

It is clear that the “original text” of the New Testament has been in a long silence. Although scholars have proven the impossibility for the discovery of the “original text,” efforts have been put across in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One of the recent works, which questioned the matrix is the work of Bart Ehrman’s *Novum Testamentum Graecum Editio Critica Maior* that “if the primary purpose of this discipline is to get back to the original text, we may as well admit either defeat or victory, depending on how one chooses to look at it, because we’re not going to get much closer to the original text

than we already are.” This is evident in the twenty-first century text-critical studies, which have been quite forcefully involved in the effort of making textual criticism interesting and fascinating through the alleged rally in the advancement of trying to reclaim the only singular thrust of biblical textual criticism.

Perhaps because of source criticism,<sup>5</sup> many of these modern searches for the “original text” of the New Testament are geared toward Matthean or Markan priority. One of the dominant instances was in 1860 when Constantine Simonides announced three parts of the Gospel of Matthew, which were written fifteen years after the ascension of Jesus (Simonides *Fac-Similies*) but Simonides’ argument did not survive the flames of academic rigor. Josep O’Callaghan in 1972 also announced another piece and published the remaining fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls and discovered to be the New Testament text of Mark 6:52-53 about AD 67 or 68 (McRay 359) but his work portrayed a weak state of identification.<sup>6</sup>

In 1984, Carsten P. Thiede continues the work of O’Callaghan and dates three tiny pieces of the Dead Sea scroll papyrus fragments of Mark (7Q5) to the middle of first the century. Thiede states that “fairness therefore demands that we admit Josep O’Callaghan was right as early as 1972. 7Q5 is Mark 6:52-53” (41; cf. Blomberg 18) although Thiede’s work has been judged to be an inappropriate attempt. Such a Markan priority approach is also evident in the so-called Jesus Family Tomb, the *Titanic*,<sup>7</sup> James Osuary, and Tomb of Peter. J. D. Crossan had made a similar claim on the *Gospel of Thomas* that it predates the canonical Gospels (*The Birth of Christianity*).

Despite such efforts in the search for the “original text” of the New Testament, it has been impossible to lay hands on a first century New Testament document. One concurs with Millard that such documents dated to the first century by those questers have not won support and are disregarded (53-7) and Millard states that “no first century Christian books have yet been found although there can be no doubt they existed” (58). Merrill C. Tenney also states, “It is not unlikely that a first century papyrus of some Gospel or epistle may yet be discovered that will carry the written text back to the second generation of the Christian church” (416).

Following such assertions and searches, in March 2012, a fragment of the Gospel of Mark was announced and it claimed to be dated to the first century with some superiority over all manuscripts which has helped New Testament textual criticism to be closer to the original texts of the New

Testament (Wallace “Earliest”). Thorough studies have challenged the credibility of this document and assertion, for example, in the work of Acharya S. that:

With all these factors, I suspect the provenance of this papyrus fragment is Egypt, possibly from or near St. Catherine’s Monastery. Again, I see no reason from a palaeographical analysis of this small fragment alone to push its date into the first century, especially since it certainly could be from the second, third or later centuries and since there is no evidence that the canonical gospel of Mark as we have it existed at that time. Indeed, none of the canonical gospels clearly emerges into the historical record until the end of the second century.<sup>8</sup>

There is a need to be careful in the search for the “original text” of the New Testament. Depending and concentrating on significant manuscripts rather than depending on the majority of the manuscripts will be of great help. Holmes adds that “the phenomenon of genealogical relationships is important not only for classifying MSS but for evaluating them as well. When evaluating witnesses and text-types, the genealogical principle means that MSS must be weighed rather than counted” (107).

Also, D. C. Parker states that there are two misunderstandings in this regard, which need clearance. The first is the belief that the “original text” of the New Testament has been reconstructed and that the scholars need no longer worry about the possibility that the text may be corrupt. The second is that the researches and findings of textual critics are only useful to textual critics (Parker 181; Blomberg, *Can we still* 13-42; Ankerberg and Burroughs 129-139). In the same line of reasoning, Philip W. Comfort also observes that:

Some scholars think it is impossible to recover the original text of the Greek New Testament because they have not been able to reconstruct the early history of textual transmission. Other modern scholars are less pessimistic but still quite guarded in affirming possibility. And yet others are optimistic because we possess many early manuscripts of excellent quality and because our view of the early period of textual transmission has been getting clearer and clearer (“Texts” 190,199).

Comfort proceeds to elaborate that “When we speak of recovering the text of the New Testament, we are referring to individual books of the New Testament, not to the entire volume *per se*, because each book (or group of books –such as the Pauline Epistles) had its own unique history of textual

transmission” (“Texts” 190). Comfort believes that “Each of the books of the New Testament has had its own textual history and has been preserved with varying degrees of accuracy. Nonetheless, all the books were altered from the original state due to the process of manual copying decade after decade and century after century. And the text of each books needs to be recovered” (“Texts” 190).

Textual critics and biblical archaeologists should devote themselves to authentic and absolute studies of the text of the New Testament with much zeal and exposure as evidently witnessed in the effort being put by the nineteenth century textual critics in humility rather than searching for popularity in the case of the twenty-first century scholars, when many want to be recognized to have discovered the “original” fragment of the text of the New Testament.

Clearer insights have been suggested in regard to discovering the original text. Holmes believes that for us to recover the “original text” of the New Testament, there is a need for thorough study of the manuscript and other evidence (including versions and patristic citations) (78). This means the study of the “origin and history of the surviving manuscripts, the habits and characteristic of the individual scribes who copied (and sometimes corrected) them, the textual traditions to which the manuscripts bear witness, and the interrelationship between them (to the extent that they exist and can be determined)” (78). For this origin and history of preservation to be very helpful today as Holmes observes, it would mean tracing back to the early African Christian community. Also, there is the need to evaluate the “variant readings that represent the earliest recoverable stages of the text, with an eye to assessing, on the basis of transcriptional and intrinsic considerations, other claims to originality” (Zuntz 12-3).

The history and theory of the text have attracted the attention of scholars as an approach for such task of reconstruction particularly in the works of Eldon Jay Epp. In the closing age of the twentieth century, Epp considers the railing merger of the history and practice of the text as fundamental to understanding the “original text” of the New Testament, an imitation of the work of Westcott-Hort. Epp laments that the twentieth century has not been able to project its lenses beyond the past understanding (Westcott-Hort) rather than contributing in the locale of critical editions of the text. Epp states:

After all, Westcott and Hort had written, to their satisfaction, a rather

clear history of the text ... why couldn't we do much better since they had virtually no early papyri to aid them...? Should we not be able to write the very early history of our text—something that the vast majority of textual critics are convinced would improve our external arguments? (*Perspectives* 656).

What prompted Epp was the fascinating nature of the discovered documents, which are perfect witnesses to the text over the years chiefly in the coast of Africa and Mount Sinai. But when Epp observes, "Should we not be able to write the very early history of our text...?", what was the motive behind the usage of "very early history of the text"? Did he refer to the "very early history" in absolute terms or in superficial terms? Epp laments over the need for the twentieth century to extend its lenses beyond the nineteenth century textual critical studies. Epp states, "...why couldn't we do much better since they had virtually no early papyri to aid them...?" Epp also believes in the reconsideration of the early Christian circulation of text around the Roman world, but also took note of evidence from the copying and circulation of non-Christian texts as well. This resulted in his contention that the NT papyri from Egypt may well be sufficiently representative of the copying and circulation of text in Christian circles more widely (*Perspectives* 364-5).

Alongside Epp, majority of textual critics believe that the reconstruction of the history of the text would improve the pious knowledge of the "originals." When Epp refers to "the vast majority of textual critics" above, one does not need special insights to clearly comprehend the usage of concepts; hence, the Africans are far below board in the understanding of the text-critical issues. Even when the phrase "history of the text" is used in many modern textual writings, a fresh look reminds us that what is called history in textual studies by virtually all the scholars is nothing but Western history rather than encompassing the proper propelled force of history; hence, majority of the scholars view history from the seventeenth century rather than from the second century (Tambiyi 51-68). History is depicted to have ultimate and feasible limitation in this context. It can be said that reasonable number of works by many Westerners have been swimming in the ocean of text-critical studies yet the contribution or involvement of Africans and Africa, like in other disciplines,<sup>9</sup> has been neglected and marginalised. The past of text-critical studies has quickly been forgotten and westernized.

Such observations need to be given a second-thought i.e. the rapid

exploration of witnesses, which had been discovered at Mt. Sinai and Egypt (Africa) etc. “Very early history” in the work of Epp in unconditional terms should mean a touch on African voices in the early centuries of the Church. Let me make it clear that Africa has been the place for majority of papyri in the twentieth century and it has contributed in expanding the boundaries of the discipline and the twenty-first century has been at the forefront in making critical judgments. Egypt has played vital role and has laid legacies in the whole discipline of textual discipline. In line with that, Scott Carroll states that “Africa has a legacy that is older than the conversion of the Roman Empire” (122). Africans were involved in the transmission of the texts and making them have complicity, the total sense of reconstruction, which many of the early African Church fathers started in the early centuries. Such early contribution has been surveyed by Bruce M. Metzger in *The Text of the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), particularly the contributions of Origen, Jerome and St. Augustine of Hippo, who have engaged the text of the Bible although adopted the practice from the Greek text-critical studies of the Homeric documents (149-55).

It is gnomic as pious textual critics believe that a better knowledge or mean of returning to the originals is to venture into the history of the text. However, Africans are left out in this quest even when they surfaced at the front covers of the discipline as ancient as the AD second century. African story and presence in the text is not being told accurately as argued evidently in the work of Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Times of Jesus*, on the place of Africa for proper history, particularly about the library of Alexandria (17). We see papyri to have originated from the African soil. Even some of the majority texts have African origin as in the case of the Syriac, Byzantine and Latin texts, which contain influence of the Alexandrian text and all aspects of the discipline entirely have rested on Africa’s shoulder yet these stories are left on the fence and are not told or reconstructed precisely. In addition, Comfort states,

The first ones to attempt a recovery of the original text were scribes in Alexandria or scribes familiar with Alexandrian scriptural practices – for in the hellenized world there were many who had come to appreciate the scholarly practices of Alexandrian scribes, associated with or actually employed by the scriptorium associated with the Catechetical School at Alexandria (called Didaskelion) were trained philologists, grammarians, and textual critics (“Texts” 191-2).

Comfort also observes that “The Alexandrian Christians were probably the first ones to attempt a recovery of the wording of the Greek New Testament. From the second century to the fourth century, the Alexandrian scribes worked to purify the text from textual corruption” (“Textual Criticism and Theology” 1179).

The results of this long study within this discipline, among many western textual critics, have been witnessed and translated in many modern critical English versions of the New Testament, which have some critical statements at the footnotes such as “many ancient manuscripts do not have...”, “ancient manuscripts omit...” and “some manuscripts add...” These statements have been undergoing reconstructions by many Western text-critical scholars and are quite explainable within their context with a long silence within the African context.

As a result, asking the question “what else Africa?” is timeous in biblical studies in the African twenty-first century as far as textual controversies continue in search for the “original text” of the New Testament. Africa housed majority of the manuscripts in the early centuries of the Church. Although paradigm shift has been witnessed in recent years as textual documents and discussions got invaded by the Westerners and those centres have been transferred from their homes in Africa to numerous countries in the West. Majority of these texts were discovered in Africa but a survey of the list of manuscripts with “P number” and their venue in the critical texts of the New Testament (NA<sup>27</sup>) would reveal about 99% are housed in the West.

This “Western textual criticism,” which was rooted in Africa, has challenged and has proven the authority of the scriptures in the ultimate order of high Western worldviews as conflicting to the Jewish and African worldviews. With the quest for knowledge, Western scholarship has discovered since the past century the role of archaeological findings and has helped in proving the authenticity and reliability of the biblical texts although some are on the opposite.<sup>10</sup>

It can be stated that the challenge, which Western textual criticism is posing to the African context cannot be overemphasized. Materials for this area of study have been gathered from many places, predominantly by Western scholars within the coasts of Africa, which are strongly proving the legitimacy of Christianity on the African soil in early centuries AD. Comfort observes that “...the manuscripts discovered in Egypt are legitimate sources

for reconstructing the original text of the Greek New Testament” (“Texts” 205).

With the long silence in terms of discovering the “original text” of the New Testament, it seems textual criticism as a discipline has failed in its inability to maintain the aims, which were formed and coined that made people to see the discipline as fascinating and encouraging particularly the search for the original words of the New Testament. Unless it achieves this singular thrust, the discipline would still remain a mirage although it has made some contributions to the text of the New Testament. On the contributions made by the twentieth century scholars, Epp states that the twentieth century has been known for,

...massive increase in manuscript evidence (including majuscules such as the Freer Gospels Codex, and also the Chester Beatty and then the Bodmer papyri), the preparation of a number of critical editions of the NT, some noteworthy developments in the analysis of the relationships of manuscripts (especially deriving from the adaptation and application Colwell’s pioneering proposals), and, of course, the massive amount of activity and the projects undertaken in the Munster Institute for Text-Critical Research (Hurtado 2).

This means re-limiting its aims for one can easily see the inability for the discipline to go beyond what the nineteenth and twentieth century critics achieved. Even with that, these achievements are efforts to attain the copying and transmission undergone in the ancient Christian community predominantly in Egypt.

But there is still a belief that progress can be achieved as archaeological findings are helping in expanding the boundaries of textual studies through discovered manuscripts. There is a need for most of the textual critics to return to God and seek him to contribute immensely for this task to be achieved. God has a better view of history and has stored it for future generation. The “original text” of the New Testament belongs to him and therefore, discovering it would mean getting in contact with him to enable us access to the lost or hidden manuscripts, if they still exist.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed claims of textual criticism have not been able to be achieved to the extent that the usage of words such as “original text” have been challenged of genuineness and several meanings are generated. Epp calls

this, “multivalence of the term ‘original text’” and many scholars are less confident to state in clear terms their *fide* within the discipline despite that their works have been old ashes. While this inability generated various meanings of original text, this paper argues that the alternative or eclectic “original text” of the New Testament (NA<sup>28</sup> or UBSGNT<sup>5</sup>) is attempting to paint a different and misleading “original text” from the autographs of the first century. It also cautions that the twenty-first century should not overstretch the search for the “original text” since originality depends on existing and quality evidences. Africans should join in the search for the “original text” of the New Testament. With quite a number of new and unpublished discovered manuscripts, it is hoped that these new discoveries would surface and help expand the critical apparatus of the Greek New Testament. That means scholars should focus on reconstructing the ideals of the discipline through expanding its frontiers in search for more evidence to ascertain the proposed aims of the discipline. Alexandrian and particularly Oxyrhynchus manuscripts should be highly prioritized for a feasible search for the originals of the New Testament.

### Notes

1. To George E. Ladd, criticism means making “intelligent judgments about historical, literary, textual, and philological questions which one must face in dealing with the Bible, in the light of all the available evidence, when one recognizes that the Word of God has come to men through the words of men in given historical situations,” *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), 37.
2. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, v, 150. Alexander Souter defines the intention of textual criticism as seeking “by the exercise of knowledge and trained judgment, to restore the very words of some original document which has perished and survives only in copies complete or incomplete, accurate or inaccurate, ancient or modern”, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (Rev. ed. by C. S. C. William; London: Gerald Guckworth & Co Ltd, 1954), 3.
3. On the contribution of Eldon J. Epp, see Larry W. Hurtado, “Going to the Biggest Picture: Eldon Epp as Textual Critic,” *Textual Criticism: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*, 2010. The paper was originally presented on a special session of New Testament Textual criticism programme unit in honour of Prof. Epp at 80 years in the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 2010 in Atlanta.
4. Irving Jensen has this to say: “So when you are holding a copy of the New Testament in your hands, you may rest assured that it is a wholly dependable translation, which represents the original, inspired autographs of the first century” *Jensen’s Survey of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 22. Also see Danny McCain, *Notes of New Testament Introduction* (Rev. ed.; Bukuru: ACTS, 2005), 103. Find a contrary view and more conventional by dominant scholars, for example, Epp, “Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism”, 44.
5. Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Illinois: IVP, 1995), 51-55. McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, 111-5. Evangelically, there are basically some sources for the Gospels that we have today. These are written documents which one expects to have been under the same sources because they agree with the ancient and modern means of documenting. These are the eyewitnesses, oral

tradition and the apostles. For a concise study see Gideon Y. Tambiyi, “A Critical Appraisal of the Current State of the Historical Jesus Research with Higher Implications to African Biblical Scholarship,” (A Master of Arts Thesis in Biblical Studies (New Testament) at the University of Jos, May 2012), 122-125. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 141, 145, 146. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 124.

6. Further studies revealed that such pieces made reference to the Greek version of the Book of Enoch. See E. A. Muro, “The Greek Fragments of Enoch from Qumran Cave 7,” *Revue de Qumran* 18.2, 70 (1997), 307-312.
7. The most recent development of the Jesus research in this twenty-first century is the *Titanic*. The document for *The Titanic* was said to be discovered by the filmmaker James Cameron and colleagues who displayed the Ossuaries and they are believed to belong to Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene in a press conference in New York, February 26, 2007, in connection with a documentary which Cameron has produced. In the article *Titanic Claim: Jesus still Dead*, Tim McGirk from Jerusalem observes that James Cameron and his director, Simcha Jacobovici, make the startling claim that Jesus didn't resurrect –the cornerstone of Christian faith –and that his burial cave was discovered near Jerusalem. A similar view is held by Robert M. Price when he wrote *Jesus is Dead* (2007). There is also the claim that Jesus had a son with Mary Magdalene, not a daughter (named Sarah) as in the case of Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*, [D. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2003)], Barbara Thierring in her *Codes* and the movie *The Last Temptation of Jesus* among many others. But unfortunately for Cameron, the Israel's prominent archeologist Professor Amos Kloner didn't associate the crypt with the New Testament Jesus. His father, after all, was a humble carpenter who couldn't afford a luxury crypt for his family. See Tambiyi, “Historical Jesus Research,” 181. Tim McGirk, “The Titanic Claim: Jesus Still Dead,” [www.time.com/time/letters/email\\_letters.html](http://www.time.com/time/letters/email_letters.html) accessed 12 May, 2011.
8. Acharya S. has reacted to the claim of the earliest nature of the papyrus. She argued on the limitations of palaeography, Acharya S., “1<sup>st</sup> century Gospel of Mark Fragment Found,” [www.freethoughtnation.com/contributing-writers/63-acharya-s/654-1st-](http://www.freethoughtnation.com/contributing-writers/63-acharya-s/654-1st-)

century-gospel-of-mark-fragment-discovered.html posted 19 February 2012 and accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2012.

9. Ali A. Mazrui stated “Africans have often complained about how different branches of knowledge that developed in the Western world have over time attempted to scale down everything African, sometimes consciously and at other times subconsciously,” *The African Condition* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980), 5. To this, Mazrui considered the field of Biology, physical anthropology, psychology, history, social and cultural anthropology (5-6). Similar “issues” have been raised among many African theologians and scholars about the domination of Westerners in theology and biblical studies. African scholars and theologians have attempted to react and reconstruct this in the modern quest for contextualization. The same can be said for textual criticism.
10. There are many scholars of the Bible that because of the nature and inquisitiveness into textual criticism instead of defending the authenticity of the Bible are debasing the validity of the Bible. Bart Ehrman because of textual variations in the Gospels ended up calling himself an agnostic. Bart Ehrman who was educated in Wheaton and Princeton Theological Seminary derailed as a result of textual criticism and variant readings in the Gospels which he found to be errors in scriptures (cf. Mark 2:25:26 with 1 Sam. 21:16). Bart Ehrman no longer views the Bible as a credible God’s word. See Tambiyi, “Historical Jesus Research,” 160. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 26.

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