A Textual Commentary on the Greek Gospels
by
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Analysis of the differences
between the text of
Westcott & Hort and NA

This commentary now features a complete evaluation of all variants where the WH text deviates from NA[27]. Still, the WH text is in wide use today, and it is generally considered to be the next best thing to NA.

It might therefore be in order to analyze the results a bit. Such a comparison is of course a little unfair, because since WH's times (1881) a lot of new evidence came to light. Nevertheless it will turn out that there is a surprisingly high number of variants, where WH is possibly right against NA.

Overall I have considered 451 differences between WH and NA. There are some more, e.g. WH omit the article before Jesus, wherever there is variation. To include all these variations would distort the picture a little bit. I have therefore included only those instances into the count, where the evidence is significant. Also there are some accent or punctuation differences, which I did not include. The absolute complete number would probably be around 475 differences.

Of the 451 WH readings 394 (87%) are supported by B. This is no wonder since WH follow B closely. Nevertheless WH follow the Majority text 54 times (12%) against NA.

Immediately striking is the twice as high acceptance of D readings in Lk compared to the other Gospels (35 vs. 18%). This, too, is a known characteristic of the WH text.

The highest number of changes (referring to the total number of words), compared to NA, occurred in the Gospel of Mark (0.85%), the lowest number in Lk (0.58%).

I considered 177 readings (39%) as important (= affecting the sense) and 274 as minor readings (61%).

Of the 451 WH readings 15 are supported by B alone. This is a comparatively small number. 31 readings are supported by 01 + B alone. 13 readings are supported by B + D alone. In Luke 7 readings are supported by D alone. Where WH accept a reading of the Majority text it is almost always supported by B also (43 out of 54 cases, 80%). The remaining ones are supported by 01 (except Lk 6:26).

Here are the main supporting witnesses:

1. Absolute number of supports:

	Mt	Mk	Lk	Jo	Total
B	109	88	90	107	394
U01	74	37	40	32	183
L	39	40	50	43	172
892	29	36	28	9	102
D	23	18	40	20	101
33	27	20	27	27	101
f1	26	15	31	25	97
579	12	16	36	22	86
C	12	20	16	36	84
Theta	20	16	20	15	71
W	14	11	19	24	68
f13	18	17	15	13	63
Maj	13	13	11	17	54
WH	128	96	113	114	451

2. support in %:

	Mt%	Mk%	Lk%	Jo%	%
B	85	92	80	94	87
U01	58	39	35	28	41
L	30	42	44	38	38
892	23	38	25	8	23
D	18	19	35	18	22
33	21	21	24	24	22
f1	20	16	27	22	22
579	9	17	32	19	19
C	9	21	14	32	19
Theta	16	17	18	13	16
W	11	11	17	21	15
f13	14	18	13	11	14
Maj	10	14	10	15	12
WH	100	100	100	100	100

Appraisal of the readings:

Coming to a more subjective evaluation, the application of a rating system gives the following results:

In 7 cases (2%) I consider the WH reading clearly superior over the NA reading. In 75 cases (17%) the WH reading is possibly superior. In 40 cases (9%) I consider the WH reading clearly wrong, and in 115 cases (25%) possibly wrong. 214 cases (47%) are left undecided.

The numbers are quite the same for all Gospels, but the highest number of superior WH readings appears in Mk.

1. Results in absolute numbers:

	Mt	Mk	Lk	Jo	All
1	2	3	1	1	7
1?	24	19	16	16	75
-	57	49	57	51	214
2?	33	20	29	33	115
2	12	5	10	13	40
	128	96	113	114	451

2. Relative numbers in %:

	Mt %	Mk %	Lk%	Jo%	All%
1	2	3	1	1	2
1?	19	20	14	14	17
-	45	51	50	45	47
2?	26	21	26	29	25
2	9	5	9	11	9

1 = WH clearly right against NA
1? = WH possibly right against NA
- = Indecisive
2? = WH possibly wrong against NA
2 = WH clearly wrong against NA

If one accepts this evaluation, it means that NA is improved in 155 cases over WH, but, at the same time, deteriorated in 82 cases. Of the variants at issue NA chose only in 65% of the cases the correct reading. If one accepts NA to be wrong in half of the undecided cases, this number is even reduced to 58%.

The number of undecided cases is very high, almost 50%. This shows that most of the WH variants are extremely difficult to judge.

Now it might be interesting to check which MSS support WH's superior readings and also which MSS support those readings where WH is considered wrong.

1. Mt: WH readings, which I consider possibly right against NA, are supported above average by 01, Z, Θ, f1, 33, 579. To the contrary, WH readings which I consider probably wrong are above average supported by D, L, 1424 (note that L and Θ are blockmixed). Undecided readings are above average supported by 892.

2. Mk: WH readings, which I consider possibly right against NA, are supported above average by L, Δ, 892. To the contrary, WH readings which I consider probably wrong are above average supported by D, f1, 28. Undecided readings are above average supported by 01, (Ψ).

3. Lk: WH readings, which I consider possibly right against NA, are supported above average by B, L, 070, 892. To the contrary, WH readings which I consider probably wrong are above average supported by 1342. Undecided readings are above average supported by 1342, too.

4. Jo: WH readings, which I consider possibly right against NA, are supported above average by P75, C, L, W, 892. To the contrary, WH readings which I consider probably wrong are above average supported by D, (f13). Undecided readings are above average supported by P66, 01, 579.

WH right: WH wrong:
Mt: 01, Z, Θ, f1, 33, 579   Mt: D, L, 1424
Mk: L, Δ, 892   Mk: D, f1, 28
Lk: B, L, 070, 892   Lk: 1342
Jo: P75, C, L, W, 892   Jo: D, (f13)

One should not make too much out of this, because the statistical error is high, but it is nevertheless interesting that WH readings which I consider wrong are above average supported by D.
This high esteem for D shown by WH is an often neglected factor of their text. Often the WH text is labeled as pure Alexandrian, and it is correct that NA follows D more often than does WH, but, as the above table shows, WH follows D 101 times, where NA does not.

Conclusions:

One will probably not agree with my estimation of the evidence in all cases, but I think it is clear that the WH text still has its value today. It is slightly inferior to NA, but one cannot say that it is wrong in all cases. About 60% of all differences are so difficult to evaluate, that there is a strong possibility that NA is, to some extent at least, wrong.

In light of the manifold criticisms of WH's opinions regarding the transmission of the text, it is astonishing that their text is so good still today. This is on the one hand probably primarily due to the fact that their basic result, to follow B wherever possible, is not so bad as it is normally accepted today, and on the other hand, that their opinions regarding the textual history are, with some qualifications, probably also basically correct.

"Seven times a day Satan tempts me to acquiesce
in Westcott's short and easy method with the scribes,
and print the New Testament on the model of a school Xenophon.
But I resist him ..."

(Hort to VanSittart, 1864)