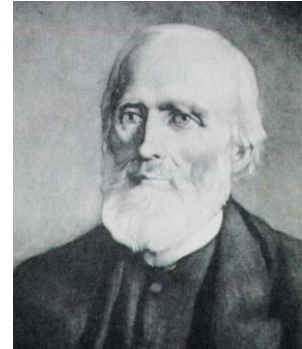


## SECTION II. INTERNAL EVIDENCE OF DOCUMENTS

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§38. Thus far we have been considering the method which follows Internal Evidence of Readings alone, as improved to the utmost by the distinction and separate appreciation of Intrinsic and Transcriptional Probability, and as applied with every aid of scholarship and special study. The limitation to Internal Evidence of Readings follows naturally from the impulse to deal conclusively at once with each variation as it comes in its turn before a reader or commentator or editor: yet a moment's consideration of the process of transmission shows how precarious it is to attempt to judge which of two or more readings is the most likely to be right, without considering which of the attesting documents or combinations of documents are the most likely to convey an unadulterated transcript of the original text; in other words, in dealing with matter purely traditional, to ignore the relative antecedent credibility of witnesses, and trust exclusively to our own inward power of singling out the true readings from among their counterfeits, wherever we see them. Nor is it of much avail to allow supposed or ascertained excellence of particular documents a deciding voice in cases of difficulty, or to mix evidence of this kind at random or at pleasure with Internal Evidence of Readings assumed in practice if not in theory as the primary guide. The comparative trustworthiness of documentary authorities constitutes a fresh class of facts at least as pertinent as any with which we have hitherto been dealing, and much less likely to be misinterpreted by personal surmises. The first step towards obtaining a sure foundation is a consistent application of the principle that



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SHOULD PRECEDE FINAL JUDGEMENT UPON READINGS.

§39. The most prominent fact known about a manuscript is its date, sometimes fixed to a year by a note from the scribe's hand, oftener determined within certain limits by palaeographical or other indirect indications, sometimes learned from external facts or records. Relative date, as has been explained above (§ 8), affords a valuable presumption as to relative freedom from corruption, when appealed to on a large scale; and this and other external facts, insufficient by themselves to solve a question of reading, may often supply essential materials to the process by which it can be solved. But the occasional preservation of comparatively ancient texts in comparatively modern MSS forbids confident reliance on priority of date unsustained by other marks of excellence.

§40. The first effectual security against the uncertainties of Internal Evidence of Readings is found in what may be termed Internal Evidence of Documents, that is, the general characteristics of the texts contained in them as learned directly from themselves by continuous study of the whole or considerable parts. This and this alone supplies entirely trustworthy knowledge as to the relative value of different documents. If we compare successively the readings of two documents in all their variations, we have ample materials for ascertaining the leading merits and defects of each. Readings authenticated by the coincidence of strong Intrinsic and strong Transcriptional Probability, or it may be by one alone of these Probabilities in exceptional strength and clearness and uncontradicted by the other, are almost always to be found sufficiently numerous to supply a solid basis for inference. Moreover they can safely be supplemented by provisional judgements on similar evidence in the more numerous variations where a critic cannot but form a strong impression as to the probabilities of reading, though he dare not trust it absolutely. Where then one of the documents is found habitually to contain these morally certain or at least strongly preferred readings, and the other habitually to contain their rejected rivals, we can have no doubt, first, that the text of the first has been transmitted in comparative purity, and that the text of the second has suffered comparatively large corruption; and next, that the superiority of the first must be as great in the variations in which Internal Evidence of Readings has furnished no decisive criterion as in those which have enabled us to form a comparative appreciation of the two texts. By this cautious advance from the known to the unknown we are enabled to deal confidently with a great mass of those remaining variations, open variations, so to speak, the confidence being materially increased when, as usually happens, the document thus found to have the better text is also the older. Inference from the ascertained character of other readings within the identical text, transmitted, it is to be assumed, throughout under identical conditions, must have a higher order of certainty than the inferences dependent on general probabilities which in most cases make up Internal Evidence of Readings.

§41. The method here followed differs, it will be observed, from that described above in involving not a single but a threefold process. In the one case we endeavour to deal with each variation separately, and to decide between its variants immediately, on the evidence presented by the variation itself in its context, aided only by general considerations. In the other case we begin with virtually performing the same operation, but only tentatively, with a view to collect materials, not final results: on some variations we can without rashness predict at this stage our ultimate conclusions; on many more we can estimate various degrees of probability; on many more again, if we are prudent, we shall be content to remain for the present in entire suspense. Next, we pass from investigating the readings to investigating the documents by means of what we have learned respecting the readings. Thirdly, we return to the readings, and go once more over the same ground as at first, but this time making a tentative choice of readings simply in accordance with documentary authority. Where the results coincide with those obtained at the first stage, a very high degree of probability is reached, resting on the coincidence of two and often three independent kinds of evidence. Where they differ at first sight, a fresh study of the whole evidence affecting the variation in question is secured. Often the fresh facts which it brings to light will show the discordance between the new and the old evidence to have been too hastily assumed. Sometimes on the other hand they will confirm it, and then the doubt must remain.

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*"If, as someone is reported to have said,  
Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato,  
then discussions of method in NT textual criticism since 1881  
may be likened to a series of footnotes to Hort.  
That's how fundamentally important his work on method  
(in contrast to his historical reconstructions) remains."*

Michael Holmes (tc-list, July 1997)