

**Two articles on the preference for the shorter reading in New Testament textual criticism**  
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**Article 1: The Long and Short of *Lectio Brevior Potior***  
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The maxim *lectio brevior potior* (also called *lectio brevior praeferenda*) is among New Testament textual criticism's standard canons of internal evidence. Simply stated, this principle advises the textual critic to prefer the shorter reading unless faced with compelling reasons to prefer the longer reading. Bruce Metzger's statement serves as an example.

In general the shorter reading is to be preferred, except where (a) Parablepsis arising from homoeoarcton or homoeoteleuton may have occurred (i.e., where the eye of the copyist may have inadvertently passed from one word to another having a similar sequence of letters); or where (b) The scribe may have omitted material that was deemed to be (i) superfluous, (ii) harsh, or (iii) contrary to pious belief, liturgical usage, or ascetical practice.<sup>1</sup>

Though oft-stated, I reject the principle of *lectio brevior potior*, and the purpose of this article is to urge the reader to do the same. I am not the first to question the preference for the shorter reading. Early in the twentieth century, Albert C. Clark argued against it. A decade later B. H. Streeter insisted “the notion is completely refuted that the regular tendency of scribes was to choose the longer reading, and that therefore the modern editor is quite safe so long as he steadily rejects [longer readings].” Edward Hobbs pointed out the logical extreme of preferring the shorter reading, “if you have enough variations . . . if you follow the shorter readings, you will end up with no text at all.”<sup>2</sup> Studying the habits of the scribes of select papyri, Ernest Colwell (P<sup>45</sup>, P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>75</sup>), James Royse (P<sup>45</sup>, P<sup>46</sup>, P<sup>47</sup>, P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>72</sup>, P<sup>75</sup>), and Peter Head (fourteen shorter papyrus fragments) have found the scribal tendency to omit stronger than the tendency to add.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft and United Bible Societies, 1994), 13\*; compare Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 303.

<sup>2</sup> Albert C. Clark, “The Primitive Text of the Gospels and Acts, a Rejoinder,” *JTS* 16 (1915): 233; Burnett H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins: Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, & Dates* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 123; Edward Hobbs, “An Introduction to Methods of Textual Criticism,” in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts* (ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty; Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest C. Colwell, “Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits: A Study of P<sup>45</sup>, P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>75</sup>,” in *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1969), 106–24; James R. Royse, “Scribal Habits

Royse, for example, argues that P<sup>46</sup> adds fifty-five times but omits 167 times. Similarly, P<sup>47</sup> omits eighteen times but adds only five times. Other scholars as well have challenged *lectio brevior potior*.<sup>1</sup>

Four facts render this rule invalid for New Testament textual criticism. First, it has been inaccurately handed down from its early formulators, giving a false impression of its central importance. Second, it leaves too many questions unanswered. Third, its numerous exceptions make it impractical. Fourth, and most importantly, it is fundamentally flawed.

First, the legacy of *lectio brevior potior* has been mishandled. Johann J. Griesbach (1745–1812) is often claimed as the prime authority behind this principle. Indeed, he articulated reasons for preferring the shorter reading, in the first of his fifteen canons. What is generally ignored, however, is that Griesbach also went on to discuss the longer reading. That is, he first mentions the shorter reading, adding five conditions that strengthen its probability, and then mentions the longer reading with six similar comments. Griesbach’s first canon follows.

The shorter reading (unless it lacks entirely the authority of the ancient and weighty witnesses) is to be preferred to the more verbose, for scribes were much more prone to add than to omit. They scarcely ever deliberately omitted anything, but they added many things; certainly they omitted some things by accident, but likewise not a few things have been added to the text by scribes through errors of the eye, ear, memory, imagination, and judgement. Particularly the shorter reading is to be preferred, even though according to the authority of the witnesses it may appear to be inferior to the other, –

- a. if at the same time it is more difficult, more obscure, ambiguous, elliptical, hebraizing, or solecistic;
- b. if the same thing is expressed with different phrases in various manuscripts;
- c. if the order of words varies;
- d. if at the beginning of pericopes;
- e. if the longer reading savours of a gloss or interpretation, or agrees with the wording of parallel passages, or seems to have come from lectionaries.

But on the other hand the longer reading is to be preferred to the shorter (unless the latter appears in many good witnesses), —

- a. if the occasion of the omission can be attributed to homoeoteleuton;

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in Early Greek New Testament Papyri” (Th.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1981), 602; Peter M. Head, “Observations on Early Papyri of the Synoptic Gospels, especially on the ‘Scribal Habits,’” *Bib* 71 (1990): 242.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Augustinus Merk, ed., *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1933), 12\*–13\*; George D. Kilpatrick, “A Textus Receptus Redivivus?” in *Protocol of the Thirty-Second Colloquy* (Berkeley: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1978), 7; Emanuel Tov, “Criteria for Evaluating Textual Readings: The Limitations of Textual Rules,” *HTR* 75 (1982): 429–48.

- b. if that which was omitted could have seemed to the scribe to be obscure, harsh, superfluous, unusual, paradoxical, offensive to pious ears, erroneous, or in opposition to parallel passages;
- c. if that which is lacking could be lacking without harming the sense or the structure of the sentence, as for example incidental, brief propositions, and other matter the absence of which would be scarcely noticed by the scribe when re-reading what he had written;
- d. if the shorter reading is less in accord with the character, style, or scope of the author;
- e. if the shorter reading utterly lacks sense;
- f. if it is probable that the shorter reading has crept in from parallel passages or from lectionaries.<sup>1</sup>

Griesbach does, in his opening paragraph, state a preference for the shorter reading, but his preference is not based on length. To make this clear, he goes on to state circumstances that commend the longer reading. It is, therefore, inappropriate to appeal to Griesbach's rule of *lectio brevior potior*, for it exists only in the context of his rule of *lectio longior potior*—two paragraphs juxtaposed in one canon.

It is often assumed that, after Griesbach, *lectio brevior potior* was passed on by the giants of textual criticism. This assumption, however, is exaggerated. The rule is absent, for example, from the works of Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), who focused almost exclusively on external evidence. It is not one of the canons of Constantin von Tischendorf (1815–1874).<sup>2</sup> And it is not part of the theory of B. F. Westcott (1825–1901) and F. J. A. Hort (1828–1892).

The case of Westcott and Hort deserves further comment. A careful reading of Hort's *Introduction* will reveal the absence of a principle such as *lectio brevior potior*. Hort rightly affirms the “tendency of transcribers to make their text as full as possible, and to eschew omissions,”<sup>3</sup> but he neither states this as a maxim nor follows it as a rule. In fact, Westcott and Hort are unhappy even with the idea of a list of canons.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Griesbach's canons of textual criticism are in his *Symbolae Criticae ad Supplendas et Corrigendas Variarum N. T. Lectionum Collectiones* (Halle, 1785, 1793), which is difficult to access. The translation above is quoted from Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 166–67.

<sup>2</sup> Tischendorf's six central canons are difficult to access in his own works. They are, however, readily available in English translation. See, for example, Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 63; and a fuller treatment in Marvin R. Vincent, *A History of the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 125–28.

<sup>3</sup> Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort, eds., *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1881, 1882), 2:175, see also 2:235.

<sup>4</sup> Westcott and Hort, *Original Greek*, 2:23.

Westcott and Hort divide internal evidence into internal evidence of readings, internal evidence of documents and internal evidence of groups. The genius of their method is that, while external evidence is highly valued, this judgment is based on internal considerations. Stated differently, the external merit of a manuscript depends on the internal qualities of that manuscript (internal evidence of documents) and manuscripts like it (internal evidence of groups). Internal evidence of groups caused Westcott and Hort to denounce the Syrian (Byzantine) text and describe it as prone to “completeness” and abundant “new interpolations.” “Both in matter and in diction the Syrian text is conspicuously a full text. It delights in pronouns, conjunctions, and expletives and supplied links of all kinds, as well as in more considerable additions.”<sup>1</sup> Thus Westcott and Hort consider the expansive tendency to be a negative tendency. But this is only true in a cumulative sense and is not even mentioned by Westcott and Hort at the level of individual readings.

Moving into the twentieth century, *lectio brevior potior* is absent from other important works.<sup>2</sup> We do, on the other hand, find the principle passed on in brief handbooks such as those by David A. Black and J. Harold Greenlee.<sup>3</sup> More alarming, however, is its inclusion in the influential introductions of Barbara and Kurt Aland and of Metzger.<sup>4</sup> Unless one has the time and resources to investigate the history of the principle of the shorter reading, the reader of these handbooks will overestimate it as a time-honored and well established rule.

Second, *lectio brevior potior* attempts to answer a specific question: which reading should be preferred when two or more readings of different lengths exist? But consider the questions it leaves unanswered. One unanswered question is, How short is short? Certainly the rule does not apply when the difference is a single letter, such as the choice between γένεσις and γέννησις in Matt 1:18 or ϛς and ϛ in Eph 1:14. Does it, then, apply to the inclusion or omission of a single

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<sup>1</sup> Westcott and Hort, *Original Greek*, 2:191, 134–35.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Frederic G. Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1912); Vincent Taylor, *The Text of the New Testament: A Short Introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Macmillan, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> David A. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 35; J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 114–15; Greenlee offers a more balanced statement in his more recent *Scribes, Scrolls, and Scripture: A Student's Guide to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 60–61.

<sup>4</sup> Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 281; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 303.

word? If so, is the principle stronger when the allegedly added word is long (e.g., ἀσπόνδους, “implacable,” in Rom 1:31 or κάλυμμα, “veil,” in 1 Cor 11:10) as opposed to short (e.g., the ubiquitous option of including or omitting an article)? Is the rule reserved for phrases and sentences? Is it, perhaps, only instructive for interpolated verses such as Acts 8:37 and 15:34? Or is it germane only for longer passages such as the Romans doxology, the *Comma Johanneum*, the ending of Mark, and the *pericope de adultera*?

Consider another unanswered question: How does the rule apply beyond binary variation units – choices between more than two alternatives? If three variant readings are of different lengths, is the longest of the three doubly improbable? If the shortest of three is ruled out on other grounds, how then does *lectio brevior potior* apply to the remaining two options?

Third, *lectio brevior potior* is impractical. Whenever the rule is carefully stated, it is accompanied by numerous exceptions—so numerous, in fact, that the exceptions begin to negate the rule. Vaganay and Amphoux agree, “The problem with the rule ... is that there are too many exceptions.”<sup>1</sup> Such exceptions are present in Griesbach’s original statement and Metzger’s modern restatement, both quoted above. Other examples are from Black and the Alands.

*Prefer the shorter reading*, since scribes more often added to the text than omitted words. However, this principle must be used cautiously, since scribes sometimes omitted material either accidentally or because they found something to be grammatically, stylistically, or theologically objectionable in the text.<sup>2</sup>

The venerable maxim *lectio brevior lectio potior* (“the shorter reading is the more probable reading”) is certainly right in many instances. But here again the principle cannot be applied mechanically. It is not valid for witnesses whose texts otherwise vary significantly from the characteristic patterns of the textual tradition, with frequent omissions or expansions reflecting editorial tendencies (e.g., D).<sup>3</sup>

When evidence seems divided equally, one would expect textual critics to make practical use of *lectio brevior potior* and come to a final decision. This expectation is heightened in a source which has a stated preference for the shorter reading, such as Metzger’s *Textual Commentary*.<sup>4</sup> That is, if shorter readings really do have an inherently higher probability for originality, one

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Vaganay and Christian-Bernard Amphoux, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; trans. Jenny Heimerdinger; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Black, *Concise Guide*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 281.

<sup>4</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 13\*.

would expect difficult decisions to take the rule into account. But this is not the case. Consider, for example, the treatment of Mark 14:68 in the *Textual Commentary*.

It is difficult to decide whether these words [καὶ ἀλέκτωρ ἐφώνησεν, “and the rooster crowed”] were added or omitted from the original text. It is easy to explain their addition: copyists would have been tempted to insert the words in order to emphasize the literal fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy in ver. 30 . . . It is also easy to explain the omission of the words: copyists wished to bring the Markan account of two cock-crowings into harmony with the narratives of the other three Gospels, which mention only one cock-crowing . . .

In the face of such conflicting possibilities, and with each reading supported by impressive external evidence, the Committee decided that the least unsatisfactory solution was to include the words in the text, but to enclose them within square brackets.<sup>1</sup>

One might expect the immediately preceding paragraph to begin, “In the face of such conflicting possibilities, and with each reading supported by impressive external evidence, the Committee decided *to follow the principle of the shorter reading and omit the words in question.*” But the principle is simply not used in this way.

And neither should other textual critics defer to the shorter reading when other evidence conflicts. Consider the example of Eph 1:1. Most manuscripts identify the recipients as the saints ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, but about six manuscripts do not include the words “in Ephesus.” Scholars have considered this textual question from every angle—every angle except one: no serious scholar would argue against retaining the two words on the basis of *lectio brevior potior*. That is, no textual critic would argue that ἐν Ἐφέσῳ is secondary simply because of the theory that scribes more often lengthen than shorten their texts. An example of a scholar who has applied *lectio brevior potior* indiscriminately is M.-É. Boismard.<sup>2</sup> He has subsequently been taken to task by more balanced critics.<sup>3</sup>

In short, *lectio brevior potior* is only applicable *ceteris paribus*, “other things being equal.” That is, the rule applies only when other factors are not at work or are evenly balanced. In reality, however, other factors are always at work and are rarely evenly balanced. The rule, therefore, is impractical.

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<sup>1</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 97. Numerous examples of this phenomenon could be given; see, for example, Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 28, 39, 77, 80, 88–89, 532, 533.

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Émile Boismard, “Lectio brevior, potior,” *RB* 58 (1951): 161–68.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Metzger, “Patristic Evidence and the Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” *NTS* 18 (1971–72): 391; James R. Royse “Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes; SD 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 242.

Fourth, and most importantly, the inherent claim of *lectio brevior potior* as a maxim is fundamentally flawed. A basic difference exists between *lectio brevior potior* and *lectio difficilior potior* (a preference for the more difficult reading). The difficult reading is usually preferable precisely because of its difficulty. The shorter reading is also often preferable, *but always for reasons other than its length*. Because the length of a reading is a symptom and not a cause, the maxim has no convincing *raison d'être*.

When we consider the statement, ‘the shorter reading is preferable’, can we see any reason, apart from repetition and tradition, why it should be right or wrong? We can produce reasons for thinking sometimes that the longer text is right and sometimes that the shorter text is right, but that will not demonstrate our maxim.<sup>1</sup>

Another look at the *Textual Commentary* will illustrate the bankruptcy of *lectio brevior potior*. A careful reading reveals that while the *Textual Commentary* does use designations such as “the shorter reading,” “the shorter text,” and “the longer reading,”<sup>2</sup> they are simply that—designations. There is only slight, if any, overstatement in my claim that the *Textual Commentary* never appeals to the principle of *lectio brevior potior*. While the shorter reading is often preferred, this preference is not because the preferred reading is shorter.

When the committee behind the *Textual Commentary* does opt for shorter readings, they give reasons other than length to support their opinions. These reasons include scribal errors, such as dittography in Eph 2:5, where  $\sigma\upsilon\nu\epsilon\zeta\omega\sigma\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\hat{\omega}$ , “made alive together with Christ,” has been lengthened to  $\sigma\upsilon\nu\epsilon\zeta\omega\sigma\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\hat{\omega}$  (notice the added preposition, which duplicates the preceding verb ending). Intentional changes are more frequently suggested. Intentional expansions may serve to improve style (e.g., Matt 11:17; Col 1:3, 6), clarify ambiguities (e.g., Matt 18:29; Eph 2:5, 21), or add emphasis (e.g., Matt 6:4). Harmonizing, which can be accidental or intentional, frequently receives blame for expanding texts. Finally, in most cases where the shorter reading is preferred, the preponderance of external evidence is cited as well.

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<sup>1</sup> George D. Kilpatrick, “Griesbach and the Development of Text Criticism,” in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-Critical Studies* (ed. Bernard Orchard and Thomas R. W. Longstaff; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 140.

<sup>2</sup> About twenty times, for example, in Matthew: Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 2, 9, 12, 15, 18, 23, 24, 28, 34, 37, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 49, 51, 53, 54.

In summary, the principle *lectio brevior potior* is inappropriate as a maxim in New Testament textual criticism. While the shorter reading is often, perhaps usually, preferable, this is only a symptom and not a cause. Reasons other than length must motivate the critic's choice.

On balance, an additional comment is appropriate. A *prima facie* preference for the longer reading is similarly to be rejected. This reversed rule, *lectio longior potior*, has found favor with some rigorous eclectics.<sup>1</sup> In the end, however, scholars must admit that the length of a reading is the result of other factors and therefore irrelevant to the reading's merit.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Keith Elliott and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 33; Elliott, "Thoroughgoing Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism," in *Contemporary Research*, ed. Ehrman and Holmes, 327.



**Article 2: Breaking the Rules: *Lectio Brevior Potior* and New Testament Textual Criticism**  
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The maxim *lectio brevior potior* (hereafter *LBP*) advises NT textual critics, when considering the merit of varying readings, to prefer the shorter reading unless faced with compelling reasons to the contrary. In descriptions of the text-critical task written for broad consumption rather than for specialists, this preference is often prominent and expressed without nuance. Two examples will suffice: “In general, text critics follow two rules as they sort out internal evidence: 1. The shorter reading is to be preferred (since it is more likely that words, explanatory glosses and the like would be added rather than deleted, except where the accidental omission can be detected)” (deSilva 2004, 303). “All things being equal, the shorter reading is to be preferred (since the manuscripts tended to expand with time). But scribes also abbreviated and omitted, so this rule cannot be applied mechanically” (Boring 2012, §3.3).

Several scholars have, to varying degrees, been critical of this maxim for reasons that will be summarized below.<sup>1</sup> After this summary, I will pursue the thesis that *LBP* is indeed not a canon of NT textual criticism. That is, it is utilized so rarely that it does not merit a place among the standard rules of NT textual criticism.

**A summary of arguments against *LBP***

To begin, the legacy of *LBP* has been mishandled. The rule’s formulator was Johann J. Griesbach (1745–1812). He does state a preference for the shorter reading, but his preference is not based on length. To make this clear, he goes on to state circumstances that commend the longer reading. It is, therefore, misleading to appeal to Griesbach’s rule as *LBP*, for it exists only in the context of his tandem rule of *lectio longior potior*—two paragraphs juxtaposed in one canon (Griesbach 1785; Metzger and Ehrman 2005, 166–67).

Second, *LBP* is unclear. Consider some questions it leaves unanswered: How short is short? Does the rule apply to differences of a few letters, to a short word, a long word, a phrase, a sentence, a passage? Does the rule grow stronger as the invasive reading grows longer? How does the rule apply when the choice is between more than two alternatives?

Third, *LBP* is impractical. Numerous exceptions routinely accompany expressions of the rule, especially those intended for specialists. These exceptions are so numerous, in fact, that

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<sup>1</sup> The summary that follows utilizes the author’s earlier article (Miller 2006).

they risk negating the rule. Consider an example from David Alan Black: “*Prefer the shorter reading*, since scribes more often added to the text than omitted words. However, this principle must be used cautiously, since scribes sometimes omitted material either accidentally or because they found something to be grammatically, stylistically, or theologically objectionable in the text” (1994, 35).

Fourth, the rule is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Though the shorter reading is indeed often preferable, this is always for reasons other than its length. The statistical dominance of shorter readings is a symptom, not a cause. George Kilpatrick has said it well: “When we consider the statement, ‘the shorter reading is preferable,’ can we see any reason, apart from repetition and tradition, why it should be right or wrong? We can produce reasons for thinking sometimes that the longer text is right and sometimes that the shorter text is right, but that will not demonstrate our maxim” (1978, 140).

To be sure, the several maxims of NT textual criticism are to be used in concert. As a result, it sometimes seems that *LBP* is one of a cluster of rules being jointly applied to a textual question. Upon closer investigation, however, it will regularly become clear that *LBP* is not an actual reason for a decision, but rather a way to refer to a reading that has been chosen on other grounds. A statement from David C. Parker is fitting: “The canon ‘*lectio brevior potior*’ is in any case a rule to be applied in a certain type of circumstance, namely in a place where one suspects either an expansion which is intended to clarify the text, or a conflation of several older forms of text” (2008, 296). Following Parker, the NT textual critic should indeed be watchful for expansions aimed at clarity and for conflation. These two scribal tendencies result in longer readings, and detecting them is an important skill for the NT textual critic. But when one of them is identified, and the shorter reading is therefore preferred, should we say that the very fact that it is shorter bolstered the critic’s choice? No, the length of the preferred reading is the result of the application of other principles, not the principle itself.

Having summarized arguments against *LBP*, we now move to an investigation of the claim that *LBP* is surprisingly rare in NT textual criticism. Indeed, its rarity displays its bankruptcy. To demonstrate the truth of this simple yet bold claim, I examine six sources or clusters of sources.

### **Looking back: *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament***

The two editions of Bruce Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* appeared in 1971 and 1994. Though these dates precede the current state of affairs in NT textual criticism, the ubiquity of the *Textual*

*Commentary* as a starting point for textual decisions makes it a sensible place to begin demonstrating the bankruptcy of *LBP*. A careful reading reveals that, while the *Textual Commentary* does use designations such as “the shorter reading” and “the shorter text,” they are simply that—designations. I contend that the *Textual Commentary*, and thus all editions of NA and UBS since they began sharing a text in 1979,<sup>1</sup> do not utilize *LBP*. When the committee behind the *Textual Commentary* does opt for shorter readings, they give reasons other than length to support their opinions.

When evidence seems divided evenly, one would expect the UBS committee to make practical use of the time-honored canon of *LBP* to come to a final decision. This expectation is indeed sensible, for the introduction to the *Textual Commentary* itself states a preference for the shorter reading (Metzger 1994, 13\*). But it is clearly not the case that the *Commentary*’s subsequent textual decisions utilize the rule. Consider, for example, the conclusion regarding “and the rooster crowed” at Mark 14.68. “In the face of such conflicting possibilities, and with each reading supported by impressive external evidence, the Committee decided that the least unsatisfactory solution was to include the words in the text, but to enclose them within square brackets” (Metzger 1994, 97). One might expect the sentence quoted above to read, “In the face of such conflicting possibilities, and with each reading supported by impressive external evidence, the Committee decided *to follow the principle of the shorter reading and omit the words in question.*” But the principle is simply not used in this way.

In preparing this article, I have read the *Textual Commentary* on Matthew, Acts of the Apostles, Romans, and Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> I chose these four books because they are sizeable representatives from different sections of the New Testament; that is, a sample of small books or books of only one type might result in certain evidence being overlooked. In so doing, I have not found any instances of *LBP* being applied. The closest case, it seems, is Rom 16.27, where we read that the “shorter text [αἰῶνας] . . . was preferred on the ground that the expansion of the doxology by the addition of τῶν αἰώνων . . . was as natural for scribes as it would have been unusual for them to delete the words had they been original” (Metzger 1994, 477). Metzger here uses the phrase, “shorter text.” Nevertheless, his explanation is actually an appeal to the more

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, NA26 (1979) and UBS3 (1975).

<sup>2</sup> Because Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* represents decisions made from the mid-1960s through 1994, it is not essential to examine the entire book to demonstrate my thesis that *LBP* is *currently* not a factor in NT textual criticism.

dependable maxim about the strength of the more difficult reading, *lectio difficilior potior*, for in this case scribal lengthening is labelled “natural” and scribal shortening “unusual.”

Including Acts in my search of the *Textual Commentary* has proven useful, not only because Acts is sizeable, but also because it exists in two forms of considerably different length. One study estimates that the Western text of Acts is about 8.5 percent longer than the Alexandrian text (to use designations in vogue at the time of the study) (Kenyon 1939, 26).

Most editions of the Greek text of Acts, including those in the NA/UBS tradition, choose shorter readings more often than longer readings. Thus it bears repeating that the thesis being argued here is not that the shorter readings are not to be preferred, or even that they are not to be preferred frequently. Instead, the present argument is that shorter readings should not, and indeed are not, chosen because of their length. The chapter on Acts in the *Textual Commentary* bears this out. Shorter readings are preferred, among other reasons, because of theology (e.g., 1.14), style (e.g., 4.8; 5.37), reverence (e.g., 4.24), and, of course, because of manuscript support (e.g., 6.3; 10.19; 13.45). In contrast, the frequent preference for shorter readings is not because of their length.

Acts 11.22 provides an instructive example, one in which the committee behind the *Textual Commentary* considered the longer and shorter readings to be essentially balanced. External evidence favors Barnabas being “sent *as far as* (ἕως) Antioch” (the shorter option). Internal evidence favors Barnabas being “sent *to go through as far as* (διελθεῖν ἕως) Antioch.” Like Mark 14.68, the first example given above, one might expect this balance of factors to result in an appeal to *LBP*. Instead, however, the *Textual Commentary* simply concludes with, “the word is retained in the text, but enclosed within square brackets to indicate doubt” (Metzger 1994, 343).

***The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis***

In the second edition of this important essay collection (Ehrman and Holmes 2013) we find several statements that challenge *LBP*. In the opening essay, “The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament,” Eldon Epp argues that the length of a reading is not a salient factor: “In a variation unit containing a shorter/shortest reading and a longer/longest reading, the preferable variant depends on the circumstances” (2013, 34).

James Royse’s essay, “Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the New Testament,” emphasizes the need for study of the tendencies of individual scribes and documents and reminds

us that such study regularly concludes that scribes tend to omit more than add. A few of Royse's examples reference Ernest Colwell, who demonstrated this tendency in P45, P66, and P75 (Colwell 1969). Royse himself had done so elsewhere with P45, P46, P47, P66, P72, and P75 (2008). Peter Head has come to the same conclusion regarding fourteen fragments of the Synoptic Gospels and regarding early papyri of John's Gospel (1990, 2004).

Tommy Wasserman's essay, "Criteria for Evaluating Readings in New Testament Textual Criticism," gives short treatment to *LBP*, noting that it is "one of the most debated criteria and has proven to be in such need of qualification that some regard it as relatively useless" (2013, 589).

Finally, J. Keith Elliott, in his essay, "Thoroughgoing Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism," states,

The accidental shortening of a text, especially if one can demonstrate homoeoteleuton or the like, is a commonplace. The thoroughgoing critic is inclined to the maxim that the longer reading is likely to be the original, other things being equal. To shorten a text is frequently accidental and a fault to which a careless or tired scribe may be prone. To add to a text demands conscious mental effort. (2013, 756–57)

### ***TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism***

I have examined the more than 250 publications in the twenty-three annual volumes of this online journal devoted to textual criticism. In no case does one of these articles or book reviews support or utilize *LBP*. Instead, we find numerous instances, from volume 2 to volume 23, where *TC* challenges the validity of *LBP*. Two examples will suffice. First, an article on Matt 21.44 argues in favor of the shorter reading, but it does not invoke *LBP* to do so (Lanier 2016). Second, and more notably, the lead article of the 2018 edition of *TC* looks back fondly on the text critical work of H. C. Hoskier (1864–1938). We read that "Hoskier regularly assaults the principle of *lectio brevior potior*" and that these assaults have "proved prescient" (Allen 2018, 15).

### **1 Corinthians 14.34-35 as an interpolation**

It has become increasingly necessary for commentaries on 1 Corinthians and similar studies to assess the theory that 1 Cor 14.34-35 is an interpolation and thus not original to Paul's letter. Only authors arguing in favor of interpolation are, of course, likely to give reasons (such as *LBP*) in support of interpolation. Such authors believe that the original letter lacked these verses and that certain copies from before Codex Vaticanus lacked them as well. For these scholars, therefore, the interpolation debate represents a choice between shorter and longer options.

Accordingly, I have confined my investigation to authors who argue that 1 Cor 14.34-35 is indeed an interpolation. Whether they are correct is immaterial to the question at hand; rather, it is their argumentation that is relevant here.

The theory that 1 Cor 14.34-35 is a non-Pauline interpolation dates back at least to the late nineteenth century (Holsten 1880, 2/1:404–5; Schmiedel 1892, 180–82). A leading candidate for introducing the interpolation theory to modern scholarship is Hans Conzelmann (1969, 1975). More recently, Gordon Fee and Philip Payne have energized the theory. Fee begins by emphasizing the uniqueness of these verses' differing positions, after v. 33 or after v. 40. He goes on to name his primary reason for considering the verses to be an interpolation, which he also calls "the primary rule for all text-critical decisions: the reading that best explains the existence of *all* the others most likely represents the original text" (2014, 780). Payne, who prefers "gloss" as more accurate to this textual question than "interpolation," has championed the non-originality of these verses more than any other scholar (Payne 2009, 225–67; 2017). Though Payne has argued extensively and from every angle that 1 Cor 14.34-35 is a gloss, at no point does he invoke *LBP* to do so.

*LBP* is absent from the writings of these three major voices (Conzelmann, Fee, Payne) on the interpolation theory. Moreover, though I have found twenty-seven additional scholars who argue for an interpolation here in 1 Cor 14, none of them invokes *LBP* as part of their argument. The one author I have found who comments on *LBP* in the context of the interpolation theory is Winsome Munro. Though she mentions the "text-critical principle that the shorter version of the text is usually to be preferred to the longer," Munro goes on to "plead that length or amount of material involved in interpolation hypotheses not be allowed to influence scholarly judgment" (1990, 437–38).

### **Exegetical commentaries**

Many of the sources mentioned thus far are from textual specialists; perhaps those who focus instead on NT exegesis are more inclined to utilize *LBP*. To explore this possibility more fully, I have included in my search three commentary series: the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (ZECNT), the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (BHGNT), and the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT). I have chosen these series because they comment frequently on textual matters and because they are recent. Of the forty-seven completed volumes in these three series, only Luke and Romans, both in the

BECNT, predate the twenty-first century, and about seventy-five percent of the volumes have been completed in the last decade. Several other commentary series, though important for textual criticism, are too early to directly address the thesis that the *current practice* of textual criticism does not employ *LBP*.<sup>1</sup>

I have found no evidence of *LBP* being employed in the twelve available volumes of the ZECNT. In contrast, consider this typical statement, addressing whether to include the phrase “of his flesh and of his bones” at Eph 5.30: “Granted, the longer reading has the support of two textual families, the criterion of the harder reading conflicts with the criterion of preferring the nonharmonized reading. Seeing the shorter reading as original more easily explains the origin of this variant” (Arnold 2010, 392 n. 76). Here the shorter reading is preferred and is indeed described as shorter, but reasons other than *LBP* justify preferring it. The only reference to *LBP* I have found in the ZECNT concerns Jesus’ words in Luke 22.19b-20: David Garland’s volume on Luke, though mentioning *LBP* as a reason one might give for omitting these words, nevertheless prefers the longer reading (2011, 855).

Seventeen volumes of the BHGNT have been completed. I have found only a single instance where one of these handbooks employs or discusses *LBP*. This sole reference concerns θέλων in 2 Cor 11.32, which various manuscripts include either after or before πιάσαι με, thus changing “to arrest me” into “wishing to arrest me.” BHGNT here cites *LBP* as one of three reasons not to include θέλων: “the NA27/UBS4 text is shorter, slightly more difficult, and has good and broadly distributed support” (Long 2015, 221). In strong contrast, consider the following comment in the BHGNT volume on Ephesians, which occurs after a discussion of two competing readings at Eph 6.20: “The first reading is preferred as both the longer and more difficult reading” (Larkin 2009, 166).

Eighteen volumes of the BECNT have been published. As one of hundreds of examples from this lengthy commentary series where *LBP* could have been applied, but was not, consider the note on Matt 6.25, where the inclusion of ἢ τί πίητε (“or what you will drink”) is uncertain: “The lack of preponderance of either internal or external evidence renders a decision . . . very difficult” (Turner 2008, 202). Has the author of this commentary not been told, as have the rest of us, to prefer the shorter reading when all else is equal (Boring 2012, §3.3)? In this case,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, NT volumes in the Word Biblical Commentary began to appear in 1982, the Hermeneia series in 1973, and the Anchor Bible series in 1970.

according to Turner’s commentary, all else is indeed equal. Yet the supposed tie-breaking rule is not utilized.

Nevertheless, BECNT does mention *LBP* in a small minority of the variation units its authors consider. I summarize these twenty-seven instances using two categories. The first of these categories involves places where BECNT authors mention *LBP* in their discussion of a variation unit but then dismiss it and opt for the longer reading. This happens in thirteen places.<sup>1</sup> To be clear, these thirteen instances support rather than challenge my claim that *LBP* is a non-issue in the current practice of NT textual criticism. The second category involves places where a BECNT author opts for a shorter reading and gives *LBP* as a supporting consideration alongside one or more other reasons for that preference. Such instances occur fourteen times.<sup>2</sup>

### **Looking forward: The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method and the *Editio Critica Maior***

The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) can be traced back to the 1980s and has since been developing in tandem with computer technology. It became a central feature of NT textual criticism early in the twenty-first century. This rise to prominence has prompted two recent book-length descriptions of the method, neither of which gives any attention to *LBP* (Gurry 2017; Wasserman and Gurry 2017). While this is not the place for a description or assessment of this complex method, the comment of coauthors Tommy Wasserman and Peter Gurry that CBGM does not supplant “the traditional tools of textual criticism” should be noted (2017, 31; cf. 56 n. 31). More to the point, Gurry states that CBGM “does not support a clear preference for the longer or shorter reading” (2017, 6).

CBGM is the method of the *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior (ECM)*, the major critical edition of the Greek New Testament being produced by the Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster, Germany. The Catholic Epistles and Acts have been completed (Aland et al. 2013, 2017). The Gospels of John and Mark and the book of Revelation are in process.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10.42; 22.43-44; 24.3, 36, 40; 1 Cor 4.17; 15.54; 2 Cor 1.14; 2 Thess 2.1; 1 John 3.14; 4.16; 2 John 11; Rev 14.13.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9.1; 10.38; 14.17; Acts 14.25; 1 Cor 15.47; Gal 4.26; 1 Thess 5.15; 2 Thess 1.2; 2.4, 10; 1 John 5.6; 2 John 13; Jude 22-23; Rev 22.21. See also the excursus in Moises Silva’s volume on Philipppians, “Scribal Tendencies in the Pauline Epistles,” which distinguishes between function words (articles, conjunctions, prepositions, etc.) and weightier additions/omissions (2005, 211–13).



NA28 and UBS5 became available in 2012 and 2014, respectively. In the seven Catholic Epistles, these two editions have adopted the text of *ECM*. This triply shared text of the Catholic Epistles differs in thirty-three places from NA27/UBS4 (NA28, 50\*–51\*; UBS5, 3\*–4\*; Gurry 2017, appendix A). Based on the word count of each of these thirty-three variation units, NA28/UBS5 has grown shorter in twelve places, longer in five places, and has stayed the same length in the remaining sixteen variation units. Two observations help demonstrate that *LBP* has not been a factor in these changes. First, ten of the twelve shortened readings are bracketed in NA27/UBS4, meaning that the editorial committee already considered the printed reading essentially equal in merit to the main alternative provided in the apparatus. Second, in all twelve cases the amount of shortening is negligible.<sup>1</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This article has surveyed several resources. It began with a look back, surveying a significant portion of Metzger's *Textual Commentary*. It proceeded to the second edition of *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, the twenty-three volumes of *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*, authors promoting 1 Cor 14.34-35 as an interpolation, twelve volumes of the ZECNT, seventeen volumes of the BHGNT, and the more than 12,000 pages of the BECNT. Our investigation then looked forward to the CBGM, taking special note of its role in producing the *ECM/NA28/UBS5* text of the Catholic Epistles. In the end, only fifteen instances of *LBP* contributing to a textual decision have been found (one in BHGNT and fourteen in BECNT), and in no case is *LBP* the sole or main factor. As a result, I stand by my claim that the maxim *lectio brevior potior* not only should not be, but in fact *is not*, a factor in the current practice of the textual criticism of the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> In all twelve cases the *ECM/NA28/UBS5* reading is shorter than the NA27/UBS4 reading by one word. The longest of these words are four letters, and each of these was previously bracketed (εἰμί at 1 Pet 1.16, ἡμῶν at 2 Pet 2.20, and ἀμήν at 2 Pet 3.18). The total amount of shortening resulting from all thirty-three changes is (by letter count) fifteen letters or (by word count) seven words. The *ECM* text of Acts differs from NA27–28/UBS4–5 at fifty-two places; because of its recent publication date it has yet to influence the NA/UBS text.

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### Abbreviations for Article 2

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHGNT	Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament
<i>ECM</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior</i> (Aland et al. in References)
CBGM	Coherence-Based Genealogical Method
<i>LBP</i>	<i>lectio breviar potior</i>
NA	Nestle–Aland <i>Greek New Testament</i> (27th ed. 1993; 28th ed. 2012)
UBS	United Bible Societies <i>Greek New Testament</i> (4th ed. 1993; 5th ed. 2014)
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament