

The Coherence Method and History

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Abstract: The categorical distinction between manuscripts as artifacts and the texts they carry is a cornerstone in the theoretical framework of the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM). As a consequence a textflow diagram shows a structure that integrates states of text and must not be confused with an outline of actual historical processes or a stemma of manuscripts. The structure reflects the degrees of agreement between texts (*pre-genealogical coherence*) and philological assessment of the relationship between the variants found in them (*genealogical coherence*). Abstracting from the relationship between actual manuscripts has been criticized as unhistorical. However, the ability of the CBGM to cope with contamination hinges on this abstraction.

1. A crucial distinction: work, text, and document

In the first of his 2011 Lyell Lectures, David Parker defines three different focuses of research regarding the New Testament tradition:

- “the reader, exegete, and the historian are interested in the *work*, a single form of text distilled from all the varied forms in which it is known;
- the textual critic is interested in the *text*, the form in which the work appears in each manuscript;
- the art historian and the palaeographer are interested in the *document*, the manuscript in which the text is found.”¹

At first glance, these distinctions look like a basis for a neat division of labour. However, Parker also points us to the complexities we have to deal with as textual scholars when he says,

The work exists as a number of texts, and these texts only exist as documents.²

This statement makes it clear that the *work* as “a single form of text” is an entity created by editors, not provided by one of the documents. As an historical object the text exists in as many forms as are extant in manuscripts.

At any rate, the aim of a textual critic as editor of an ancient text traditionally is to establish the text of a work on the basis of the varied forms it has taken in the documents by which it was transmitted to us. The exegete, on the other hand, should not simply take the editor’s reconstruction as the work of the author; if the critical apparatus is worthy of its name, it will present the evidence in a way that enables exegetes to put the editor’s decisions to the test.

The perspective of art historians and palaeographers can be distinguished from that of the textual critic more clearly because the text can easily be distinguished from its carrier, the manuscript. The rule “*recentiores non deteriores*” refers to this distinction. Pasquali dedicates a whole chapter of his *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* to verifying this rule,³ and it can-

¹ David C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship and the Making of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11.

² Ibid.

³ Giorgio Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1952), chapter 4 (41–108).

not escape anybody that a young manuscript can carry an old text. The date of a manuscript as determined on palaeographical or other grounds can only be the *terminus post quem non*, the point in time up to which the form of text preserved in the manuscript was produced.

Likewise, the history of the text has to be distinguished from the history of the manuscript tradition as such. Two manuscript texts may be closely related while the manuscripts as artifacts may belong to different eras.⁴

2. Authorial text, initial text, archetype

It has to be emphasized that there is a gap between the text as written by the author and the archetype, the *vorlage* of the entire subsequent manuscript transmission. In particular, if we reconstruct a form of text against the entire manuscript tradition by conjecture, we claim to reconstruct a state of transmission antedating the archetype because it is likely that an error leading to false rendering in all extant copies goes back to the very first exemplar.

Both archetype and authorial text have to be distinguished from the *initial text*, a term coined in the context of the Editio Critica Maior. Gerd Mink, who developed the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) with the aim of reconstructing the initial text, defines the term as follows:

The initial text is a hypothetical, reconstructed text, as it presumably existed, according to the hypothesis, before the beginning of its copying.⁵

Hence the initial text is neither the same as the archetype nor the authorial text. The archetype marks the beginning of the manuscript tradition, being itself a manuscript now lost. It is separated from the authorial text by a span of time which may be called the initial phase of transmission. We cannot say what exactly happened to the authorial text in the initial phase. Oral tradition may have had an impact, or revisions, perhaps by the author himself, or other kinds of editorial work on the text. The initial text, as a hypothesis about the text from which the manuscript tradition started, is the result of a methodical attempt to get as close as possible to the authorial text, carried out in the knowledge that this aim cannot ultimately be reached. The reconstruction of the initial text can never be more than a hypothesis which may be convincing at most places, while serious doubts remain at some.

3. Coherence and its use for reconstructing the initial text

The reconstruction of the initial text cannot be achieved by tracing the exact paths of transmission through all the manuscripts, simply because so many of them are lost. For the same reason we cannot construct a stemma of manuscripts that leads back to the archetype. What we can do is search for structures in the development from early to late states of text. Therefore

⁴ This was demonstrated recently by Kathleen Maxwell in two articles from an art historian's perspective: "The Afterlife of Texts: Decorative Style Manuscripts and New Testament Textual Criticism," in *Images and Afterlife: Essays in Honor of Annemarie Weyl Carr*, ed. Lynn Jones (Aldershot: Ashgate Press 2014) 11–38; "The Textual Affiliation of Deluxe Byzantine Gospel Books," in *The New Testament in Byzantium*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Derek Krueger (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, forthcoming in 2015).

⁵ Gerd Mink, "Problems of a highly contaminated tradition: the New Testament—Stemmata of variants as a source of a genealogy for witnesses," in *Studies in Stemmata II*, eds. Pieter van Reenen, August den Hollander and Margot van Mulken (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2004), 13–85, here 25.

the Münster Coherence Method does not claim to show the actual historical development but helps to find genealogical structures in the preserved tradition on the basis of comparison of all relevant witnesses and of philological assessment of the variant passages.⁶

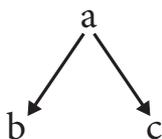
To say it in the words of Gerd Mink, “The CBGM deals with texts, not with manuscripts. The text is the witness.”⁷

For grouping the witnesses and for describing the structure of the NT tradition it is very helpful to know which manuscript texts are of more or less than average similarity.

The kind of coherence that becomes visible by comparing manuscript texts with each other and may be used for clustering is called *pre-genealogical coherence* in the CBGM terminology because it derives entirely from summing up instances of agreement. Correspondingly, *genealogical coherence* is based on analyses of the differences we encounter when we compare manuscripts. This is done by constructing local stemmata of variants.

4. Local stemmata and the genealogy of textual witnesses

The reconstruction of the *initial text* is based on analyses of the relationships between the forms of text carried by the manuscripts and not of the manuscripts themselves, the latter being artifacts with their codicological and palaeographical data. In fact, we abstract away from the historical form that the texts took. Then we collate the texts and filter out idiosyncrasies of the individual copies, like merely orthographical differences and obvious scribal errors. That means we focus on the textual variants proper. Next we examine each passage of variation and construct a *local stemma of variants*. A simple example may look like this:



If we make a statement about the relationship between variants as preserved in manuscript texts, we simultaneously make a statement about the relationship between the texts containing these variants. If we say that variant *a* is prior to *b* and *c*, we also say that this passage is an instance of variation where the states of text containing *a* are prior to those containing *b* and *c*.

Hence we arrive at the following principle of the CBGM:

A hypothesis about genealogical relationships between the states of a text as preserved in the manuscripts has to rest upon the genealogical relationships between the variants they exhibit. Therefore a systematic assessment of the genealogy of these variants (displayed as local stemmata)⁸ is a necessary requirement for examining the genealogy of textual witnesses.

Having constructed local stemmata for each variant passage we will be able to say in how many instances witness *X* has the prior variant as compared with witness *Y* at the places where they differ. As we are dealing with a contaminated tradition, there will also be a number of instances where *Y* has the prior variant. Finally there will be a number of unclear cases where the variants of *X* and *Y* are not directly related or the priority has to be left as an open question.

⁶ Cf. Mink, “Problems,” 29, and idem, *The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method—CBGM: Introductory Presentation* (2009, online at <http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/service/downloads_en.shtml>, 33–38.

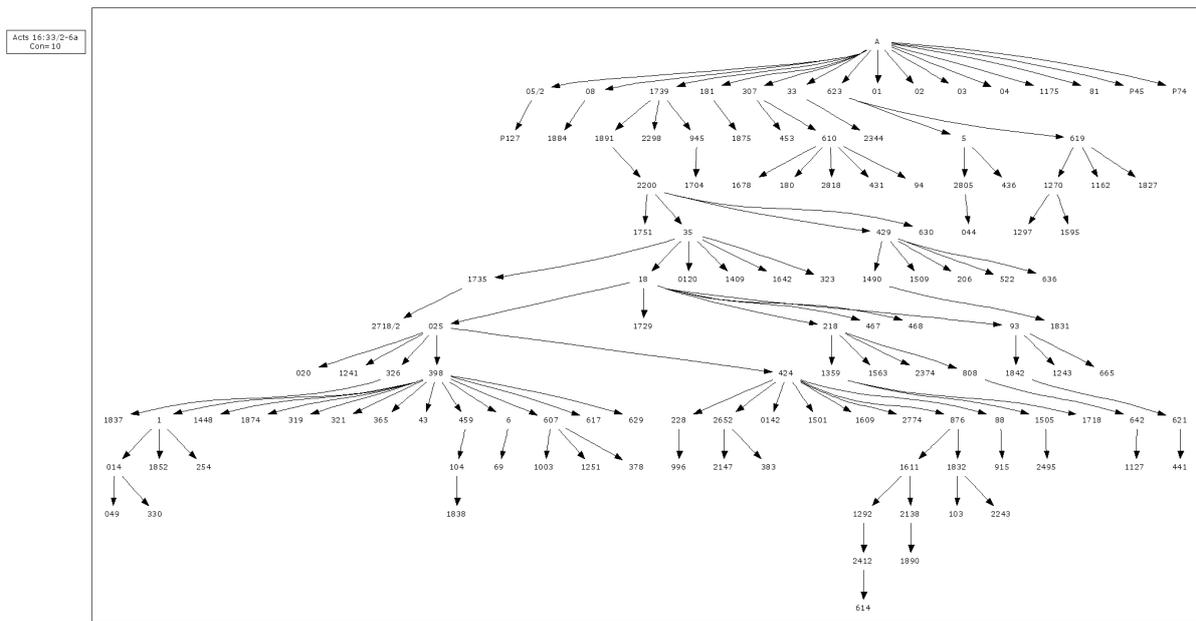
⁷ Cf. Mink, *Introductory Presentation*, 38.

⁸ The basis for this comprehensive analysis is a critical apparatus comprising all variants of every Greek textual witness selected for the edition.

Once we have tabulated these numbers for all the witnesses included, an overall structure emerges which shows the relationships between them in terms of ancestry and descent, their *genealogical coherence*. This kind of coherence involves editorial assessment. *Pre-genealogical coherence*, however, is independent of any subjective element. It is based solely on the degree of agreement between witnesses.

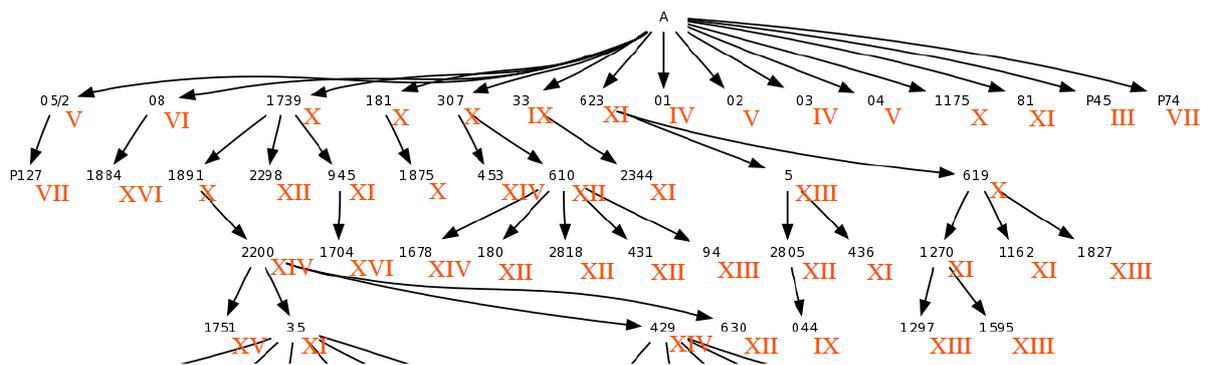
5. Outlining the structure of the Greek manuscript transmission of Acts

5.1 An overall textflow diagram



The first textflow diagram shows 128 witnesses supporting variant *a* at Acts 16:33/2-6. The arrows point from potential ancestors to descendants, the ancestors being the manuscript texts with the higher number of prior variants. For each witness one potential ancestor is displayed in the graph, namely the one which is most closely related in terms of *pre-genealogical coherence*. *A*, at the top, is the reconstructed initial text.

If a witness is directly connected with *A*, which is true for all in the first row below *A*, this means that among its potential ancestors there is none with which it agrees more frequently than with the reconstructed initial text.



In the second textflow diagram the upper part of the same diagram is displayed with Roman numerals for the century of a manuscript's production.

The structure that becomes discernible, if we analyse the textual transmission in terms of *pre-genealogical* and *genealogical coherence*, is ruled by ancestry and descent of witnesses which are primarily related by high degrees of agreement. This structure shows the relationship between states of text preserved in manuscripts, not between the manuscripts as such. Accordingly, the dates assigned to witnesses of the first generation after the initial text *A* range from the 3rd to the 11th century, and farther down we see potential ancestors whose manuscript dates are a few centuries earlier than those of their descendants. The structure of the textual tradition must not be equated with the history of manuscript production.

I just used a term that sounds familiar now, "potential ancestor." Readers of Mink's publications about the CBGM know that "potential ancestor" is short for "potentially stemmatic ancestor". A stemmatic ancestor is a witness necessary to account for a descendant in the global stemma. Mink describes at length the procedures necessary to construct the global stemma on the basis of optimal sub-stemmata in his 2009 *Introductory Presentation*.⁹ Unfortunately it has hitherto not been possible to finish the global stemma for the Catholic Letters. Mink has constructed the top of it,¹⁰ but could not accomplish the whole task due to a lack of computing capacity. This capacity is available now, and as Acts will be the next volume of the ECM to appear, the first global stemma will be related to this edition.

The global stemma will be the full hypothesis about the structure of the textual tradition and its relative chronology. It will be based on data already used for the textflow diagrams, but these represent only the preliminary stage we have now reached in applying the CBGM to the entire material. However, as is demonstrated by Annette Hüffmeier's contribution to the present volume of *TC*, the textflow diagrams already represent a stage of knowledge that far surpasses the conventional external criteria.

5.2 Textual Flow and Contamination

Once again, the CBGM is about relationships between states of text, not between manuscripts. From this premise it becomes clear how the method can cope with contamination or mixture, the mutual influence of different strands of transmission on each other. Paul Maas tried to reconstruct textual history on the basis of manuscripts without a categorical distinction between artifact and text. Given that condition he rightly states that there is no remedy for contamination: "Gegen die Kontamination ist kein Kraut gewachsen."¹¹ It is the distinction between manuscript and text that prepares the ground for a remedy. The remedy itself is the construction of optimal sub-stemmata which usually draws on multiple potential ancestors to account for the text of a witness.

In a textflow diagram the edges connecting witnesses use only one direction, from potential ancestor to descendant, to show the predominant textual flow. In a contaminated tradition, however, there is nearly always a flow in the opposite direction as well. Nearly every potential descendant contains a number of variants prior to those in its potential ancestor, and this is a fact that needs consideration when we draw conclusions from the position of a witness in a textflow diagram.¹²

⁹ *Introductory Presentation*, 161–78 and 475–574.

¹⁰ *Introductory Presentation*, 562.

¹¹ Paul Maas, *Textkritik* (Leipzig: Teubner, 31956), 31.

¹² *Introductory Presentation*, 115–20.

In an optimal sub-stemma variants in a descendant which are prior to variants in one stemmatic ancestor are explained by agreement with or dependence on the text of another ancestor according to the following principle:

The CBGM demands that at each variant passage the text of a descendant must be completely explained by text of the immediate stemmatic ancestors: as agreeing with at least one of them or, if not agreeing, as changing the text of at least one of them.¹³

By the construction of optimal sub-stemmata the effects of contamination can be largely neutralized.

6. Conclusions

1. Textual history, according to the CBGM approach, deals with texts carried by manuscripts, not with the manuscript traditions as such. The relative chronology of the textual development is quite independent of the history of manuscripts.
2. Guided by the predominant textual flow we gain an overall picture of the predominant relationships between all witnesses included in the CBGM procedures in spite of contamination or mixture.
3. Textflow diagrams must not be confused with stemmata. They are just graphs visualizing the relationships between witnesses and their potential ancestors ranked by percentages of agreement.
4. The global stemma is based (or rather, will be based) on the optimal sub-stemmata of all witnesses. An optimal sub-stemma comprises only the ancestors that are necessary to account for the individual text form of a witness. Such ancestors are no longer potential but *stemmatic* ancestors.
5. The global stemma is (or rather, will be) a hypothesis about the relative chronology of the development of the text as preserved in the manuscripts. All we know about the history of the manuscripts can be incorporated in the CBGM procedures of constructing the local stemmata of variants and the optimal sub-stemmata of witnesses.
6. The relative chronology of the development of text as shown by the global stemma can and will be put into relation with known historical data like the dates of the manuscripts carrying the textual witnesses, the dates of authors citing from the respective writings, and the dates of translations.
7. The CBGM is not the tool to use for dating manuscripts or texts.

¹³ *Introductory Presentation*, 482.