In a previous article, it was pointed out that, although the kind of Greek text which underlies our Authorized King James Version is rejected by modern textual critics, this rejection is wholly unconvincing. The acceptance of the newer critical editions of the New Testament does not, therefore, rest on factual data which can be objectively verified, but rather upon a prevailing consensus of critical thought. It will be the purpose of this discussion to show that contemporary critical texts are, in fact, the fruit of a rationalistic approach to New Testament textual criticism.

Quite recently Kenneth W. Clark, in an extremely interesting study, has pointed out that in our day the text of Westcott and Hort, produced in 1881, has become the contemporary “textus receptus.” No one who is acquainted with this field will deny that Dr. Clark’s credentials as a knowledgeable textual critic are impeccable and, moreover, in this matter at least his data is subject to verification.

To any who might object to the assertion that “the Westcott-Hort text has become our textus receptus,” Clark has this to say:

Perhaps someone will remonstrate that there have been many critical texts produced since 1881, which is true. Someone will adduce the Nestle series of twenty-five editions since the beginning of this century. With each new edition we are prone to hasten to the bookstore to obtain the latest text. Our problem lies here, that few scholars are aware that the latest Nestle is a close copy of the 1881 text, and that edition succeeds edition with little or no textual change. All the critical editions since 1881 are basically the same as Westcott-Hort. All are founded on the same Egyptian recension and generally reflect the same assumptions of transmission.

To buttress this contention, Clark goes on to discuss the results of a study by eight Duke University students in which a collation was made “of numerous critical texts against Westcott-Hort, in two sample passages (Mark 11 and John 12).” Following some detail, he concludes: “Since 1881 twenty-five editors have issued about seventy-five editions of the Greek New Testament. The collation of these many ‘critical’ texts consistently exposes the fact that each of them is basically a repetition of the Westcott-Hort text of which we may be permitted to declare with truth: ‘You now have the text which is accepted by all.’ Indeed, we have continued for eighty-five years to live in the era of Westcott-Hort, our textus receptus.”

“There is nothing new under the sun!” And the proliferation of critical editions since 1881 has only served to give us more of the same. This is Clark’s complaint. But if the text of Westcott and Hort is, to all intents and purposes, the text in use today it will be well worthwhile to examine some of the premises on which that text was produced. For if, in fact, the charge of rationalism is well founded in regard to that text, then mutatis mutandis it is substantiated in regard to all. In a word, if Westcott and Hort’s text was constructed on rationalistic foundations, all contemporary critical texts rest on the same foundations. For, “we have continued for eighty-five years to live in the era of Westcott-Hort.”

The charge of rationalism is easily substantiated for Westcott and Hort and may be demonstrated from
To begin with, Westcott and Hort are clearly unwilling to commit themselves to the inerrancy of the original Scriptures. Under their discussion of “primitive corruption,” i.e., places where all extant manuscripts may be in error, they state: “Little is gained by speculating as to the precise point at which such corruptions came in. They may be due to the original writer [italics mine], or to his amanuensis if he wrote from dictation, or they may be due to one of the earliest transcribers.”¹ In short, primitive errors may have existed in the inspired autographs. This concept is rationalistic to the core. It is not surprising, therefore, to read in another place a passage in which this rationalism finds even fuller expression. Hort writes:

The way has now been cleared for the final question: Is it or is it not reasonable to expect that in any number of cases the true reading has now perished? Have we a right to assume that the true reading always exists somewhere among existing documents? The question is often foreclosed on one or both of two grounds which in our judgment are quite irrelevant. First, some think it incredible that any true words of Scripture should have perished. In reply it is a sufficient argumentum ad hominem to point to the existence of various readings, forming part of various texts for long ages, and the frequent difficulty of deciding between them, even though we say nothing of difficulties of interpretation: on any view many important churches for long ages have had only an approximately pure New Testament, so that we have no right to treat it as antecedently incredible that only an approximately pure New Testament should be attainable now, or even in all future time. For ourselves we dare not introduce considerations which could not reasonably be applied to other ancient texts, supposing them to have documentary attestation of equal amount, variety, and antiquity [italics mine].²

This last assertion, which we have displayed in italics, is as sweeping an affirmation of a rationalistic premise as one can find anywhere in textual literature. To put it bluntly, the New Testament is to be treated in textual study like any other book. “No considerations which could not reasonably be applied to other ancient texts” are to be adduced. But to the believing mind the fallacy of this conception is transparent. The New Testament is not like any other ancient text! The New Testament is unique! It is breathed out by a living God. It is inerrant as it came from the pen of its inspired authors.

Moreover, the logic of faith demands that documents so unique cannot have had a history wholly like that of secular writings. As they cannot have avoided the attack of supernatural principalities and powers of evil, so they cannot have lacked the superintending providence of the God who authored them. To say imperfect texts have been used in many places and at many times cannot set these facts aside. It is always true that man’s treatment of his most precious possessions, as well as his enjoyment of them, is likely to be marked by imperfection. But to move from the premise that men do not use a perfect text of God’s Word to the conclusion that they cannot have one is an egregious non sequitur. It is also an expression of unbelief in the kind of overruling divine providence which is inescapably implied in the very nature of the Word itself. “All flesh is as grass, and the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.” We may well concede that the finest literary effort of man preserved in any ancient text cannot only suffer irreparable corruption but can also perish forever. It is, after all, but the flower of grass. But this we may not concede for anything which we call the Word of the Lord in any portion or particular thereof. For here we have timeless and infinitely precious truth that lives and abides forever!

This author is, of course, well aware how uncongenial such an argument is to contemporary perspectives. Indeed, the sentiments of Westcott and Hort, to which we have been addressing ourselves, would undoubtedly be approved by the overwhelming majority of modern textual critics. The tragedy lies rather in the fact that conservative scholars and students of the text have so often failed to detect this rationalistic
frame of reference and thus have never stepped outside of it to examine the textual question from the vantage point of faith.

Worse yet are those who, while recognizing the unbelieving premises which permeate this field, have nevertheless managed to argue that despite themselves textual critics have led us along the right path. By such proponents of the contemporary views, it will be asserted that the charge of rationalism is an unjustified *ad hominem* argument which has no place in scholarly debate. Rather, they will affirm, we ought to examine the facts which critics of all persuasions adduce and decide the issues on their merits alone. We are not, of course, adverse to examining the facts and have actually tried to do this, within the limits of space allowed, in the article previously referred to. What emerges, however, from any appeal to the facts is the realization that in the final analysis our modern critical texts are validated by the judgment of textual critics themselves.

It would be naive in the extreme to suppose, when individual or collective judgment is made the final court of appeal, that the rationalism of those who exercise this judgment can have had nothing to do with the final result. To believe this would be to believe an illusion. Thus when the charge is made that textual criticism has been, or is, carried on within a rationalistic frame of reference such a charge cannot be taken lightly by a Bible-believing Christian.

Interestingly enough, one can find even among liberal textual critics a restlessness about the wide latitude accorded to individual judgment in modern textual study. Ernest Cadman Colwell is a case in point. Years ago Colwell established himself as unimpeachably rationalistic in his perspective. He wrote: “It is often assumed by the ignorant and uninformed—even on a university campus—that textual criticism of the New Testament is supported by a superstitious faith in the Bible as a book dictated in a miraculous fashion by God. That is not true. Textual criticism has never existed for those whose New Testament is one of miracle, mystery, and authority. A New Testament created under those auspices would have been handed down under them and would have no need of textual criticism.” Following this hopelessly distorted assertion, he adds: “In reality, textual criticism belongs to those who believe that God’s revelation in Jesus should be and must be subjected to the criticism of reason [italics mine].” No one who reads such statements as these will, we surmise, suppose that for Colwell rationalism is the *bête noire* of textual criticism!

Nevertheless, quite recently Colwell has expressed himself as being unhappy with the subjective nature of much contemporary textual study. For example, in an article entitled “External Evidence and New Testament Textual Criticism,” he has written a passage that merits rather extensive quotation. He says:

> The outstanding workers in textual criticism in the nineteenth century were deeply involved in the actual study of manuscripts. As one newly discovered witness after another was made available, these scholars eagerly reviewed the new witnesses. They either

published them, or collated them, or digested their data and summarized their significance. We who follow them in time have taken too much of this for granted. We rely on summaries in manuals, not on a rich knowledge of the stuff itself. We need to go again down their trails, to follow in their train. But before we start down those trails, we must take a new look at their motivation.

They moved in this direction in a strenuous effort to be ‘objective.’ We find it hard to tolerate this motive for two reasons. In the first place we have learned that no historian can achieve an objectivity that is complete. The epidemic debunking of historical objectivity has gone so far that we tend to increase our suspicion of the scholar if he introduces evidence which is external to his powers of manipulation. In a period in which ‘So you’re trying to be objective’ is a sneer, the thoughtful scholar needs to take a long look at the reason for his predecessor’s passion for objective evidence.
That passion was rooted in something more than theological predilection or the *Zeitgeist* that produced Historicism. It was rooted in a clearheaded awareness of the treacherous nature of internal evidence, and was an effort to escape from the distortion of judgment that so easily manipulates the criteria of internal evidence. This distortion can be detected in the work of scholars where their judgment was based solely on the internal evidence of readings.  

This is a truly classic passage, coming as it does from one of the most prestigious names in American textual criticism. And it is classic just because it states truths which are, and should long ago have been, self-evident. Indeed, conservative scholars who continue to base their text on so-called “internal” criteria would do well to ponder Colwell’s remarks long and thoughtfully.

More recently still, Colwell has renewed his attack on those who make internal evidence the polestar of their textual method. He writes again,

> The scholars who profess to follow ‘the Eclectic Method’ frequently so define the term as to restrict evidence to the Internal Evidence of Readings. By ‘eclectic’ they mean in fact free choice among readings. This choice in many cases is made solely on the basis of intrinsic probability. The editor chooses that reading which commends itself to him as fitting the context, whether in style, or idea, or contextual reference. Such an editor relegates the manuscript to the role of supplier of readings. The weight of the manuscript is ignored. Its place in the manuscript tradition is not considered.

Thus Kilpatrick argues that certain readings found only in one late Vulgate manuscript should be given the most serious consideration because they are good readings.

Colwell’s complaint is well taken. The literature of the field is replete with suggestions that this or that meagerly attested reading be treated as possessing a claim to originality. Nor, in the same literature, do critics hesitate to multiply the conjectural emendations by which they imagine the entire manuscript tradition ought to be corrected. Indeed, it might almost be said to have come to pass in modern textual criticism, as it did in the days of the Judges—“Every man did that which was right in his own eyes”! Obviously, in such a state of affairs, there are no real safeguards against rationalistic bias, whether that bias be conscious or unconscious.

What, then, is the solution which Colwell offers us? Ironically, a return to Westcott and Hort! “We need Hort Redivivus,” Colwell asserts, and he proceeds to applaud Hort’s insistence that “ALL TRUSTWORTHY RESTORATION OF CORRUPTED TEXTS IS FOUND ON STUDY OF THEIR HISTORY” and that “KNOWLEDGE OF DOCUMENTS SHOULD PRECEDE FINAL JUDGMENT UPON READINGS.” But alas! As every student of Hort’s “Introduction” knows full well—Colwell surely as well as any—Hort’s study of manuscript history and his investigation of documents is predicated above all on the internal evidence of readings! Thus Colwell is unwittingly leading us in a circle. To free ourselves from the tyranny of internal criteria we must return to Hort. But in returning to Hort, we shall only return to internal criteria.

It may be plausibly argued that the free eclecticism, about which Colwell complains, is the logical result of the methodology originally employed by Westcott and Hort themselves. If the textual history they professed to write has not as a whole commended itself to critics, the method they used to write it has! If their evaluation of the documents has not approved itself to all, the principles on which their evaluation was made have! And thus contemporary contextual scholars, freed from many of Hort’s conclusions, have pursued his basic techniques with glad abandon. But, like the proverbial dog chasing his own tail around the flagpole, we have not—according to Clark—traveled any real distance since 1881!

The contemporary problem is well summed up by Clark himself in another passage from the article...
previously quoted. Superbly stated, it reads as follows:

Psychologically it is now difficult to approach the textual problem with free and independent
mind. Where textual emendations are at issue we have literally moved in frequent circle, with
alternating favor between two choices. Eclectic experimentation and sporadic emendation
constitute the order of the day. Critical alteration in the frequent editions has been slight and
amounts only to intermittent patches. The main fabric is still that of Westcott-Hort. A recent
expression of Colwell’s, though relating to a different factor, is truly applicable here also: ‘Hort
has put...blinders on our eyes.’ However great the attainment in the Westcott-Hort text, the
further

progress we desiderate can be accomplished only when our psychological bonds are broken
[italics mine]. Herein lies today’s foremost problem with the critical text of the New Testament.

Modern textual criticism is psychologically “addicted” to Westcott and Hort. Westcott and Hort, in turn, were
rationalists in their approach to the textual problem in the New Testament and employed techniques within
which rationalism and every other kind of bias are free to operate. The result of it all is a methodological
quagmire where objective controls on the conclusions of critics are nearly nonexistent. It goes without
saying that no Bible-believing Christian who is willing to extend the implications of his faith to textual matters
can have the slightest grounds for confidence in contemporary critical texts.

1
Zane C. Hodges, “The Greek Text of the King James Version,” Bibliotheca Sacra, CXXV (October-
December, 1968), 334–45.

2

3
Ibid., p. 158.

4
Ibid., pp. 158-59.

5
Ibid., p. 159.

6
Ibid., p. 160.

7
By the term “rationalism” we intend a meaning like that given in Funk and Wagnalls New Standard
Dictionary of the English Language (1965): “Specif. in theology: (1) the doctrine of the school which rejects
the authority of supernatural revelation and appeals to human reason as sufficient for the answer to all
mooted questions in morals and religion, so far as such answer is possible for man. (2) A modified form of
the foregoing, which, while not altogether rejecting revelation, demands that its alleged truths and
injunctions shall submit themselves to reason for testing and approbation.” In particular, meaning (2) above
is usually the one intended in this article.

8
No scholar needs to be told this. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile quoting a couple of pertinent passages. The perfect circle in which Westcott and Hort moved in gaining a “knowledge of documents” is clearly spelled out by them as follows: “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 judgments 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 [italics mine]; 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” [italics mine] (Westcott and Hort, p. 32). Again, in addressing themselves to the problems of a genealogical history of the manuscripts, they write: “If we find, for instance, in any group of documents a succession of readings exhibiting an exceptional purity of text, that is, readings which the fullest consideration of Internal Evidence pronounces to be right in opposition to formidable arrays of Documentary Evidence [italics mine], the cause must be that, as far at least as these readings are concerned, some one exceptionally pure MS was the common ancestor of all the members of the group; and that accordingly a recurrence of this consent marks a recurrence of joint derivation from that particular origin, and accordingly a strong presumption that exceptional purity is to be looked for here again” (Ibid., p. 60-61). It is needless to multiply further
Of course, for Colwell, “Hort Redivivus” is not a mere resuscitation of his theories and techniques uncorrected by contemporary insights. (Cf. Colwell, *Studies in Methodology*, pp. 155-71, but especially pp. 158-59.) Nevertheless, when it has all been said, we have the distinct impression that we have seen a ghost!

Clark, p. 160.
Textual criticism is relevant to every Christian, precisely because many of the textual differences in Greek can be translated into another language. Thus the differences between the New Testament of the King James Version, for example, and that of the New American Standard Version are not just differences in the English; there are also differences in the Greek text behind the English—the in fact, over 5,000 differences! In Which Bible? he declares: Naturalistic New Testament critics seem to last to have reached the end of the trail. Although they accuse other textual critics of rationalism, their argument for preservation via the majority has only a rational basis, not a biblical one. New Testament Criticism has rightly been called the Cinderella of New Testament studies, because it has been somewhat isolated from the rest of New Testament studies. For example, in utilizing social science methodologies to read and interpret a text, textual critical aspects do not normally play a part. If the task of New Testament textual criticism is seen narrowly as the quest to reconstruct the standard original text then the answer is a resounding YES. In that sense textual criticism is dead indeed. But if the task of textual criticism is defined in broader terms as the study of the history of the text (Delobel 2003:3), and if a concerted effort is made to establish some dialogue between a re-imagined textual criticism and other. Dr. Wallace defines New Testament Textual Criticism and discusses topics like identifying textual variants, categorizing manuscripts, and interpreting the available evidence. The Basics of New Testament Textual Criticism—Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts. Books. 4.3 • 86 Ratings. Textual Criticism remains today as one of the most overlooked disciplines in Biblical studies. In this collection, Dr. Daniel B. Wallace of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM) teaches people from the lay to the scholarly level about the basic principles and practices of New