Principles of Textual Criticism of the Old Testament
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This article is a sample chapter of the textbook *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: Principles and Practice*

Introduction

Why another textual criticism of the Old Testament? There are some very good textbooks available, most notably the third edition of Emanuel Tov's *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, which is recommended for a more in-depth study of the subject. In that textbook the non-specialist will find everything he or she needs for Old Testament textual criticism, and more. One reason for this textbook is to supply less—that is, this text aims to be a simpler and more accessible starting point for the non-specialist, particularly for the parish pastor. It aims for a more "popular" style than Tov. For heavy-duty study go to Tov's third edition or to other items in the bibliography.

Although seeking to supply something less than Tov's *Textual Criticism* in some respects, this volume also aims to provide something more than *TCOHB* in three respects. First, this text examines textual criticism from the perspective of a high view of the inspiration of Scripture. It takes the Bible's claims about the authorship and origins of the books of the Old Testament at face value. In many respects this perspective makes textual criticism even more complex than it is for those who hold critical views about the origin of the Old Testament, because it greatly extends the time-frame for the process of transmitting the text, and it assumes the existence of many more centuries of transmission of the text for which there is no extant manuscript evidence. Second, this work aims to provide more information about the Lutheran contribution to textual criticism, particularly that of Martin Luther. Finally, after the student has studied the general principles of textual criticism, the remaining chapters give the student an opportunity to practice them in a workbook which provides more detailed studies of specific textual problems.

Since this book tries to be both something more and something less than other textbooks, it has something of a platypus design. It joins together a number of parts that do not exactly seem to go together. The aim was to design an animal that seems to be a strange mixture of incongruous parts, but which fits nicely into the niche for which its creator designed it.

Since there are no two manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that are exactly alike, anyone who wants to produce the best possible edition of the Bible will have to correct the errors which have crept into the Hebrew manuscript which he is using as his base text. The form of the Hebrew text that the Masoretes worked so hard to transmit accurately had already accumulated errors of transmission before it came into their hands. Though we often refer to working with the Masoretic edition of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as "working with the original," this text is centuries removed from the original manuscripts, and copying errors had occurred long before the text reached the Masoretes. Texts copied by hand

accumulate errors. Even modern printed editions, after several proof-readings, are not free from new typographical errors. In most cases this process of attempting to correct Hebrew texts is not much different from the task of any proof-reader: fixing spelling mistakes, restoring missing words, removing words written twice, catching "typos" of various sorts, etc. By and large, removing such errors pertains only to the aesthetic and editorial quality of the text, not to its meaning. In some relatively rare cases, more is involved, and the meaning of the text has been affected. How to deal with these relatively rare cases is the subject of the work that follows.

Sample

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION TO
THE PRINCIPLES
AND GUIDELINES

Since many seminary students begin their study of textual criticism as a part of their New Testament studies, this textbook assumes that the reader is already familiar with the basic principles of textual criticism. In general, the principles learned in New Testament textual criticism for explaining the origin of variants can be applied to Old Testament textual criticism as well. The major difference between the two disciplines is that there is a much narrower range of manuscript evidence in the original languages available for Old Testament textual criticism than for New Testament textual criticism. The major differences which distinguish the type of manuscript evidence available for the two testaments are the following:

1. NT: Completed in about 50 years.
2. NT: More early manuscripts. Manuscript evidence is extant from less than 100 years after the original texts.
3. NT: Rapid multiplication of copies over a wide geographic area.
4. NT: Translations relatively unimportant for textual criticism.
5. NT: Textual problems are easily identified. There is objective manuscript evidence for the variants.

1. OT: Writing spread out over 1000 years.
2. OT: Relatively few early manuscripts. For some books there was 1000 years of transmission for which we have no extant manuscript evidence.
3. OT: Multiplication of copies was gradual and more locally confined.
4. OT: A greater role for non-Hebrew texts, particularly the Septuagint.
5. Alleged textual problems may really be problems of lexicography or grammar. Critics are often dealing with what they imagine to be textual problems.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF OLD TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Only a small percentage of textual variants change the meaning of a passage, and none raise doubts about any biblical doctrine. The great majority are simply spelling variants. If every possible variant was adopted, the Bible would read essentially the same as it does in the BHS text. Its message would not change. If the standard meter stick or yard stick at a national bureau of standards was lost, this would not have any great effect on the daily practice of measurement throughout the country since there are plenty of near-facsimiles throughout the country. In the same way, the fact that we do not have the autographs available to us does not substantially affect our daily use of Scripture as a measuring rod for faith and practice.[1] If a variant makes the presence of a doctrine uncertain in one passage, the doctrine remains in other passages.

However, there are a greater number of difficult texts in the Old Testament than there are in the New Testament. Although conservative Christians have sometimes downplayed the necessity for textual criticism, those who hold a high view of inspiration should want to determine the original wording of the inspired text as accurately as possible. Textual criticism which is practiced with a reverent spirit is a form of respect for the text, unlike the forms of literary criticism which approach the text with suspicion. Although the received text of the Old Testament (the Masoretic Hebrew Text) is a very good text, we cannot assume that it always preserves the correct reading. We should also weigh the testimony of other manuscripts and versions which are witnesses to the original text.

The most significant textual variants in the Hebrew text originated before the New Testament era. Most of the variants which have developed in the Hebrew text since that time are relatively insignificant copying variants within a standardized, traditional text rather than substantial deviations from the original.

The two most significant questions for Old Testament textual criticism are:

1) What is the nature of the Masoretic Text (hereafter MT)?

2) How much prominence should be given to the versions, especially the Septuagint (hereafter LXX)?

For centuries the Masoretic Text has been the standard text of Judaism. There is, however, no single manuscript of the Masoretic Text which is to be exalted above all others as the one true text. Generally, until recently, Old Testament textual scholars did not try to produce an eclectic Hebrew text which incorporates readings from many different manuscripts as the standard New Testament Greek texts, Nestle and the UBS, do. The major projects of Old Testament textual criticism in the past have had as their goal the production of a textual apparatus to accompany a Hebrew edition based on a single manuscript of the Masoretic Text, such as the Leningrad Codex. Commentators and translators, on the other hand, often do produce an eclectic text of their own creation.[2] In general, even in producing

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[1] Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity,* p. 88-89.

[2] The arguments against producing an eclectic text for use by faith communities is presented in *Textus XX* (2000), p. 193-211, "The Textual Basis of Modern Translations of the Hebrew Bible:

such an eclectic text, the Masoretic Text should be given greater weight than the versions, restraint should be exercised in departing from the Masoretic Text, and conjecture should be rare.

Nevertheless, in spite of a general "bias" toward the Masoretic Text, we should be on guard against either of two extremes in regard to the relationship of MT and LXX.

One extreme would be to treat the MT as always correct except in the rare passages in which it makes no sense. The LXX, in this view, would be used only where the MT is obviously wrong or unintelligible. Actually, an effort to clarify an obscure Hebrew text is the circumstance in which the LXX is least likely to provide a superior reading. When the MT has an extremely difficult reading and the LXX has a very simple substitute, it is quite possible, perhaps even likely, that the LXX translators faced the same perplexing reading in the Hebrew text that we do, and they had to take their best guess at a solution. If the LXX has any value at all as a textual resource, it has the same value everywhere. If the LXX is too unimportant to consult for ordinary variants, there is no reason to consult the LXX in those cases in which the MT is extremely difficult. All cases have to be examined on their own merits. For example, if the MT reads smoothly as it is, but the LXX has a longer reading than the MT, and the gap in the MT is easily explained by a jump of the scribe's eye from one occurrence of a word to another occurrence of the same word, there is reason to give serious consideration to the LXX reading even though there is no problem with the MT. It is unsound to believe that wherever the MT gives a possible reading, it gives the true reading, and that its only textual errors occur in those places in which it gives an impossible reading.

The other extreme would be to treat the MT and the LXX as possessing equal overall reliability, as if they were essentially equal witnesses to the original text. A translation (and what is more, a translation with some popularizing and emending tendencies, a translation which is really a collection of translations with different styles [3] and different degrees of competence) cannot be treated as the overall equal of a text in the original language which was transmitted with great care. When a scholar is assessing variants, however, each reading must be considered on its own merits, not with a bias to certain manuscripts or certain types of texts.

From the textual diversity found in the Septuagint and in the Dead Sea manuscripts it is apparent that there were significant variant readings in different manuscripts of the biblical texts before the beginning of the Christian era. However, within the main line of Judaism an

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The Argument against Eclecticism" by Emanuel Tov. In brief, his arguments against eclecticism are: 1) Eclecticism is subjective and perhaps presumptuous in its aims. 2) Eclecticism will produce different Bibles within the same faith community. 3) The ability of critics to accurately determine the original reading is doubtful. 4) Eclecticism has no support in tradition. 5) It is questionable to mix the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew traditions. The counter argument in favor of an eclectic text is presented in *Textus XXIII* (2007), p. 33-50, "Massoretic or Mixed?: On Choosing a Textual Basis for a Translation of the Hebrew Bible," by Bertil Albrecktson. In brief, the argument is: laypeople deserve the results of the best textual scholarship.

[3] In the LXX, books usually rated more free in translation style include Job, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel, and Esther. More literal renderings are found in Judges B (i.e., Vaticanus), Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

early, unpointed form of what became the Masoretic Text received nearly universal recognition as the standard text of the Hebrew Bible by the 1st century AD or even sooner. Some scholars have associated the adoption of this standard text with the famous rabbi Hillel.

Over the years scholars have offered different explanations both for the diversity of text types which existed at the beginning of the Christian era and for the emergence of the Masoretic Text as the standard Hebrew text.

The "local traditions theory" emphasized the development of different textual traditions in Egypt, Palestine, and Babylon. According to this theory the Egyptian tradition is preserved in the LXX. The Palestinian tradition is preserved in the Samaritan Pentateuch and perhaps in the quotations from the Pentateuch and Samuel in Chronicles, and the Babylonian tradition is preserved in the Masoretic Text. Some scholars, such as William Albright, believed that these "local texts" were recensions.[4] Other scholars, such as Frank Cross, believed that the so-called "local texts" were the result of natural scribal variants, not recensions resulting from deliberate textual criticism.

However, the presence of manuscripts that have similarities to all three textual traditions among the Hebrew texts found near Qumran casts doubt on this theory of regional, local origins for the different textual "families." Even if the claim that these three families of "local texts" developed in different geographic areas were true, it is clear that these "families" did not remain restricted to their original areas of development since all three text types occur among the Dead Sea manuscripts. It should also be noted that evidence for co-existence of diverse textual families comes primarily from the Dead Sea area and Egypt. We have little evidence for the same degree of textual diversity in the official texts of "mainline" Judaism in the Temple and in the synagogues of Judea. It may be claimed that lack of evidence for such diversity is simply an accident due to climatic differences which prevented the survival of collections of 1st century manuscripts from Jerusalem similar to the collections of texts from Qumran and Egypt, but there is evidence, which we will examine below, which indicates that the degree of textual diversity was considerably less among the standard texts used in 1st century synagogues in Judea. For example, the Dead Sea biblical manuscripts from sites other than Qumran are consistently proto-masoretic.

Furthermore, alleged evidence for these distinct textual families is limited to certain books of the Old Testament. For some books no such evidence exists. It therefore appears that there is no uniform theory of textual development which can be applied to the whole Hebrew Bible, and that there is still much uncertainty about the nature and history of these three "families" of textual tradition.

More recently, leading scholars, such as Emanuel Tov, have rejected the "three family theory" as an oversimplification. The different types of texts found in the Qumran caves cannot be neatly divided into three families. Although there are some relationships apparent between groups of texts, in some respects it is more accurate to simply speak of "a variety of texts" rather than "text families." There are some Hebrew manuscripts among the Dead Sea

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[4] A recension is a text created by an editor on the basis of a comparison of different manuscripts. The Nestle and UBS Greek texts are modern examples of such recensions or eclectic texts.

finds which show some striking points of agreement with the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint against the Masoretic Text, but these manuscripts also agree on other points with the Masoretic Text against the Samaritan and Septuagint texts, so they cannot be neatly slotted into one family or another. The evidence from the Dead Sea manuscripts indicates the existence of textual diversity which was too complex to permit the classification of manuscripts into a few families. The manuscripts relate to one another in an intricate web of agreements, disagreements, and unique readings. The different groups of manuscripts are like bands of the spectrum, which blend into one another. Various individual manuscripts lie closer to or farther from the midpoint of one particular band. The differences between the various text types do not appear to be created by deliberate recensional activity but by the processes of scribal transmission.

The manuscripts from sites near the Dead Sea other than Qumran are similar enough to our Masoretic Text to be called "proto-masoretic". They are closer to our Masoretic Text than any Hebrew manuscripts are to either the Septuagint or the Samaritan Pentateuch. The greater role of such proto-masoretic texts among the biblical manuscripts found near the Dead Sea supports the greater status of this conservative type of Hebrew text in turn-of-the-millennium Judaism. This tendency toward uniformity is strongest among the texts found at sites other than Qumran, which provides the main evidence for diversity.[5]

All scholars agree that there was a diversity of readings in existence before the New Testament era, and that there was a standardization of the Hebrew text between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD which resulted in the emergence of the Masoretic Text as the *textus receptus* of the Old Testament. However, they disagree about how this occurred. Some scholars claim that the MT is the result of a recension which was made for the express purpose of eliminating textual diversity. However, it is more probable that the MT emerged as the *textus receptus*, not because it was a harmonizing recension or a conflation of existing textual traditions, but because it had been recognized as an embodiment of the superior textual tradition, and it was therefore chosen as the standard to be followed by mainline Judaism for formal public use. As a result of the esteem in which the proto-masoretic text was held, it crowded out the divergent branches of Hebrew textual tradition. Although some Hebrew manuscripts related to these divergent branches survived in the caves by the shore of the Dead Sea, these divergent traditions were preserved mainly in the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, and versions derived from it.

This Process   **Not This**

According to this theory the Masoretic Text is descended from conservative manuscripts associated with the temple in Jerusalem.[6] The other textual traditions (SP, LXX, DSS)

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[5] We will consider the peculiar style and characteristics of a group of the texts produced at Qumran at a later point of the discussion. See p. 58t.

[6] See further discussion that begins on p. 69t.

reflect popularizing texts[7] which were used for personal study at Qumran, in northern Israel, and in Egypt, but which may have circulated widely in Judea as well. The Masoretic Text was clearly the winning text among the competitors in circulation at the start of the Christian era, though it must be conceded that the winning text is not necessarily the best text. That claim must be demonstrated from an evaluation of the respective readings on a case by case basis.

According to this theory of the origins of the MT, there was an original text of each book from which the diverse copies descended. This contrasts with the theory that biblical literature circulated for a long time as oral compositions in ever-changing forms which eventually produced a diversity of written forms, some better, some worse, from which one was eventually chosen. The Masoretic Text, however, did not originate from a redaction or a conflation of "a multiplicity of pristine texts," each with equal canonical authority.[8]

The relationship of the textual traditions underlying the non-masoretic versions such as the Septuagint, the Qumran texts, and the Samaritan Pentateuch may look something like this. LXX, Q, and SP may all originate from popularizing texts, which have many similarities.
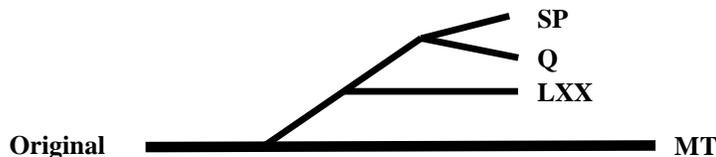
GUIDELINES FOR TEXTUAL CRITICISM OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

To practice sound textual criticism of the Bible a scholar basically needs two things: common sense and hard work. Tov begins his magnum opus with an observation from A.E. Housman, a noted textual critic of classical texts:

A man who possesses common sense and the use of reason must not expect to learn from treatises or lectures on textual criticism anything that he could not, with leisure and industry, find out for himself. What the lectures and treatises can do for him is to

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[7] Texts for which the standards and quality control were less rigorous.

[8] This is not to say that the creators of the original text did not use written sources or that their books originated in a one-step process without any editions. We have the best evidence of how authors of biblical books worked in the example provided by Jeremiah.

save him time and trouble by presenting to him immediately considerations which would in any case occur to him sooner or later.[9]

If critics believed and practiced Housman's axiom, we could end this work right here since it is true that common sense, sober judgment, and hard work are the main traits needed to practice textual criticism wisely and well. The reason, however, that we cannot stop here is that common sense unfortunately is not very common, and it has too often been absent or in short supply in the practice of textual criticism. For that reason we must begin with a brief summary of common sense as it applies to Old Testament textual criticism.

1) There are no really good rules or canons for Old Testament textual criticism which are applicable to all cases. Common sense, aided by experience, and good judgment in evaluating all the factors involved in each variant produce better results than rigid application of rules.
2) Collect all the manuscript evidence. For in-depth work this means going beyond the apparatus of BHS to critical editions of the versions or even to original manuscripts.
3) Beware of prejudging. Do not sift the manuscript evidence, seeking support for the reading which you favor on a subjective basis.
4) Unless there are good, objective reasons to the contrary, the MT should be given general precedence over the versions. However, this bias should not be carried too far since even the best manuscripts are wrong sometimes.
5) The evidence of the versions is most weighty when two or more independent sources agree against the MT, for example, if a Dead Sea Hebrew text, the Septuagint, and the Samaritan Pentateuch agree against the MT. Daughter versions of the LXX are not independent evidence.
6) It is possible that a minority reading from a less reliable source could occasionally be correct.
7) Older manuscripts are not necessarily better. Many of the Qumran texts are rather carelessly copied.
8) The need to recognize that each book has its own peculiar textual characteristics and problems is greater in the Old Testament than in the New Testament.
9) Remember that different portions of the LXX vary greatly in the quality and style of translation.
10) Remember that the versions themselves are in need of textual criticism in order to establish their original reading.
11) Readings in the versions which differ from the MT may be due to paraphrasing by the translator, rather than to a difference of the underlying Hebrew text.
12) When a version has an easy rendering of difficult or possibly corrupt expressions in the MT, this may be due to a guess on the translator's part rather than to possession of a better Hebrew text.
13) Conjectural emendations should be a last resort and must be based on an analysis of the line of thought of the passages and on a plausible cause to explain the miscopying. Difficulty of the text is not adequate grounds for emendation.

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[9] See A. E. Housman, "The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism," *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, August 1921, Vol XVIII. Available online. See further Housmanisms in the appendix to this chapter.

14) The one sound rule: Consider each case on its own merits.
- Apply the principles listed above.
- Discard obvious scribal errors.
- Be suspicious of any reading that appears to be an artificial correction, stylistic improvement, modernization, or reconciliation with another text.
- Look for wording and phrases which would be likely to produce errors, omissions, or glosses.
- Choose the reading which best accounts for all the others.

Appendix to Chapter 1:

Trenchant Observations on the Art and Science of Textual Criticism

The following observations on the art of textual criticism from outside the field of biblical textual criticism provide food for thought for would-be textual critics, whether in the classical or biblical branch of the discipline. They are the observations of A. E. Housman, poet, practitioner of classical textual criticism, curmudgeon. Reading them will have the wholesome effect of instilling would-be textual critics with a sense of caution and humility as they approach the subject, or it will have the wholesome effect of deterring all but the most determined and confident would-be critics from ever taking up the practice. *Caveat lector*.

In beginning to speak about the application of thought to textual criticism, I do not intend to define the term thought, because I hope that the sense which I attach to the word will emerge from what I say. But it is necessary at the outset to define textual criticism….

Textual criticism is a science, and, since it comprises recension and emendation, it is also an art. It is the science of discovering error in texts and the art of removing it ….

It is not a sacred mystery. It is purely a matter of reason and of common sense. We exercise textual criticism whenever we notice and correct a misprint. A man who possesses common sense and the use of reason must not expect to learn from treatises or lectures on textual criticism anything that he could not, with leisure and industry, find out for himself. What the lectures and treatises can do for him is to save him time and trouble by presenting to him immediately considerations which would in any case occur to him sooner or later. And whatever he reads about textual criticism in books, or hears at lectures, he should test by reason and common sense, and reject everything which conflicts with either as mere hocus-pocus.

Secondly, textual criticism is not a branch of mathematics, nor indeed an exact science at all. It deals with a matter not rigid and constant, like lines and numbers, but fluid and variable; namely the frailties and aberrations of the human mind, and of its insubordinate servants, the human fingers. It therefore is not susceptible of hard-and-fast rules. It would be much easier if it were; and that is why people try to pretend that it is, or at least behave as if they thought so. Of course you can have hard-and-fast rules if you like, but then you will have false rules, and they will lead you wrong; because their simplicity will render them inapplicable to problems which are not simple, but complicated by the play of personality. A textual critic engaged upon his business is not at all like Newton investigating the motions of the planets: he is much more like a dog hunting for fleas. If a dog hunted for fleas on mathematical principles, basing his researches on statistics of area and population, he would never catch a flea except by accident. They require to

be treated as individuals; and every problem which presents itself to the textual critic must be regarded as possibly unique.

Textual criticism therefore is neither mystery nor mathematics: it cannot be learnt either like the catechism or like the multiplication table. This science and this art require more in the learner than a simply receptive mind; and indeed the truth is that they cannot be taught at all: *criticus nascitur, non fit*. If a dog is to hunt for fleas successfully, he must be quick and he must be sensitive. It is no good for a rhinoceros to hunt for fleas: he does not know where they are, and could not catch them if he did. …

But the application of thought to textual criticism is an action which ought to be within the power of anyone who can apply thought to anything. It is not, like the talent for textual criticism, a gift of nature, but it is a habit; and, like other habits, it can be formed. And, when formed, although it cannot fill the place of an absent talent, it can modify and minimize the ill effects of the talent's absence. Because a man is not a born critic, he need not therefore act like a born fool; but when he engages in textual criticism he often does. …

Not only is a natural aptitude for the study rare, but so also is a genuine interest in it. Most people, and many scholars among them, find it rather dry and rather dull. Now if a subject bores us, we are apt to avoid the trouble of thinking about it; but if we do that, we had better go further and avoid also the trouble of writing about it. …The less one says about a subject which one does not understand, the less one will say about it which is foolish. …

Those who follow the physical sciences enjoy the great advantage that they can constantly bring their opinions to the test of fact, and verify or falsify their theories by experiment. When a chemist has mixed sulphur and saltpetre and charcoal in certain proportions and wishes to ascertain if the mixture is explosive, he need only apply a match. When a doctor has compounded a new drug and desires to find out what diseases, if any, it is good for, he has only to give it to his patients all round and notice which die and which recover. Our conclusions regarding the truth or falsehood of a manuscript reading can never be confirmed or corrected by an equally decisive test; for the only equally decisive test would be the production of the author's autograph.

Come now to the sphere of emendation. There is one foolish sort of conjecture which seems to be commoner in the British Isles than anywhere else, though it is also practiced abroad, and of late years especially at Munich. The practice is, if you have persuaded yourself that a text is corrupt, to alter a letter or two and see what happens. If what happens is anything which the warmest good-will can mistake for sense and grammar, you call it an emendation.

Not to be a textual critic is no reproach to anyone, unless he pretends to be what he is not. To be a textual critic requires aptitude for thinking and willingness to think; and though it also requires other things, those things are supplements and cannot be substitutes. Knowledge is good, method is good, but one thing beyond all others is necessary, and that is to have a head, not a pumpkin, on your shoulders and brains, not pudding, in your head.[10]

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[10] A. E. Housman, "The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism," *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, August 1921, Vol XVIII, p. 67-84. Interesting, witty, and somewhat acerbic observations on textual criticism by a renowned classical scholar, poet, and curmudgeon. Available online.

Fortunately, the present author had the good fortune and good sense not to have read Housman's thoughts on the subject until after this volume was nearly complete.