Comments on the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method

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I would like to thank the panel participants for their presentations today about the CBGM. As an outsider to Muenster and Birmingham, I have to admit that the CBGM looks like a mysterious black box whose inner workings seem inscrutable. Textual criticism already has the reputation of being esoteric, and there is a reasonable concern that the CBGM could create a priesthood within a priesthood, where only those behind the curtain are privy to its mysteries. Fortunately, Muenster has been working to help lift the veil on the CBGM. This panel is a case in point, and they have been generously helpful to others, for example, to my Australian Catholic University colleague, Toan Do, for his paper on 1 John 2:2 in this section on Sunday. Hopefully, these and future presentations will make the CBGM less obscure, not only to textual critics around the world but also to the New Testament field at large.

For this response, I would like to take the perspective of an exegetically-inclined textual critic who is interested in such questions as "What do the texts of a New Testament work tell us, not only about the 'original' author but also about those who transmitted the text?" For those who do not know, my doctoral work, under the supervision of Bart Ehrman and with the help of Mike Holmes, concerned the text of Galatians and its history. I was interested in how the text developed and to what extent theological concerns shaped the text over time. If textual variants are a window into early Christian history in a period within which we are desperate for evidence, can the CBGM help to answer such questions?

It appears to me that, despite the term "genealogical" in the name, the CBGM is not really intended to answer such questions about the history of the text. Rather, its focus is to more rigorously reconstruct what they now call the "initial text." I think this goal is clear from the CBGM's fundamental decision to work from the relationships between states of text instead of between manuscripts and consequently to reconstruct only one hypothetical text, the initial text. No other hypothetical text is reconstructed according to this method.

This decision has a number of effects:

First, text flow diagrams can have the text of a younger manuscript be the potential ancestor of the text of an older manuscript. For example, in Klaus Wachtel's diagram, the thirteenth century 5 manuscript has a text that is a potential ancestor of the ninth century 044 manuscript. In my own work on the Galatians, I discovered something similar. In particular, I reconstructed the ancestral text of the Byzantine text-type, which I call the "Byzantine prototype," which, as it turns out, hardly differs from that of Robinson-Pierpont or Hodges and Farstad. Now, most Byzantine manuscripts, especially the early uncials, differed from this prototypical text in about twelve to twenty places, but there happened to be one Byzantine manuscript, 1854, that differed from the prototype in only a handful of places. However, this manuscript is centuries

younger than the latest possible date of the Byzantine prototype. As I understand the CBGM, the method will not reconstruct a hypothetical Byzantine ancestor but will choose 1854 as the potential ancestor of a great number of Byzantine manuscripts. But 1854 cannot be the actual ancestor. It is too young for that. It just happens to embody a text that looks like the Byzantine prototype for the most part. My qualification here is crucial because we know that all manuscripts contain errors, and 1854's errors in no way represent ancestral readings. As a result, though the CBGM may be able to find a manuscript whose text most closely approximates a potential ancestor, that text is not really the ancestral text. It differs from it in some unknown but hopefully limited ways. To a certain extent, the CBGM addresses this by also looking at second potential ancestors, and this may also help deal with contamination. Yet, the textual critic interested in the history of the text still has a lot of work to do. As Klaus's paper states, "The structure of the tradition cannot be equated with the history of manuscript production." No global stemma has yet been formally published for the CBGM, and the text flow diagrams do not answer such questions brought to bear on the history of the text.

This leads to a second effect. In the case of the Byzantine text, we are rather fortunate in that the number of surviving Byzantine manuscripts means that, by sheer coincidence, one of them could happen to have a text that can stand in for a potential ancestor's text. This is much less the case for the earliest centuries of the text; we have so few specimens with substantial portions. Here, the CBGM's choice to not reconstruct any ancestral text below the initial text means that it would have to find an early extant exemplar that could be a potential ancestor, but the early manuscripts are too divergent. This has the effect of flattening the top part of the textual flow diagram, as evident in the figure, leading to a rather large set of texts that are identified as having only the initial text as their first (or second?) potential ancestor. This flattening results in a loss of structure of the early textual history and therefore puts a premium on the use of internal evidence to get the initial text right. And the CBGM offers a notion of "coherence" that promises to be helpful in assessing the internal evidence. Annette Hüffmeier's paper shows how coherence in its "pre-genealogical" form works, and Tommy Wasserman shows how to apply the notion on part of the text where the CBGM is not yet available, especially in the form of the Tommy's proposed canon of coherence: "A reading with imperfect genealogical coherency among its attesting witnesses is more likely the creation of scribes, since it seems to have arisen several times in the tradition by coincidence."

As for Dirk Jongkind's paper, I am glad he is subjecting the CBGM to scrutiny. It needs it, especially if it is to gain the confidence of textual critics outside of Muenster and Birmingham. I would say, however, that his thought experiment does not go far enough. He stops with a text flow diagram and observes that it does not represent the history of the text. I think that is right, but possibly irrelevant. The CBGM is not really intended to give a history of the text (in terms of the history of manuscript production) but to identify a set of texts that carry the readings of the initial text. In Dirk's last example, he asserts that it is wrong for the CBGM to identify manuscripts 3 and R as the closest potential ancestors to the initial text, but I should note that the reading of the initial text is always present in either 3 or R. If these readings can be found by internal evidence, then the CBGM will have done its job. Dirk's thought experiment needs to be extended or recrafted to find scenarios where it would adversely affect the reconstruction of the initial text. After all, the CBGM is about the initial text. Those interested in the history of the text will have to look elsewhere.