

The Preservation Of The New Testament Text: A Common Sense Approach

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Opinions vary as to how God might have preserved the text of the New Testament. No originals remain, only copies, and these have many variations. Yet, it can be said that the New Testament text is substantially pure as demonstrated in the existing manuscripts. The minor differences that exist between manuscripts should be examined carefully, however, keeping in mind that the Scriptures came to man in an inerrant fashion. The original location of the autographs can provide a key to understanding their transmissional history. Manuscript choices are crucial and can help or hinder doctrinal understanding.

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“My Words Will By No Means Pass Away”¹

Jesus, as recorded in his Olivet Discourse, used a strong type of Greek double negative when he proclaimed “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” The word order in each of the synoptics is identical, though Mark and Luke use the future indicative, while Matthew expresses the thought with an aorist subjunctive (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). The concept is that God’s words, and hence His promises, will never fail to be performed.

The same thought is more fully expressed in Matthew 5:18. There Jesus said, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” The emphasis is not that a jot or tittle would never be overlooked when copying a biblical manuscript, but rather that not even the least aspect of God’s promises would ever fail to be fulfilled by the Almighty God who created and now sustains this magnificent universe. In fact, not only jots and tittles, but also entire words and even larger chunks of material have accidentally been omitted during the copying of individual manuscripts. The preservation of the New Testament text is not to be founded upon a glib quotation of these or other such verses.²

No Originals, Only Copies

Why Textual Criticism Is Needed

There is no doubt that God in His providence could have preserved the original New Testament writings if He had so chosen. Obviously, that was not His plan. Frederic Kenyon, of Magdalen College, Oxford, and late Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum, notes that because “the original autographs and all early copies of them have disappeared, we have to do as best we can with such later copies as have survived.”³ Greek scholar David Alan Black mentions two factors that necessitate New Testament textual criticism: (1) the originals are gone, and (2) there are differences in the copies that remain.⁴

How Mistakes Entered the Copies

Naturally, copyists in general did their best. However, some handwriting was poor, contractions could be mistaken, letters or words could be confused or even transposed, and letters or words, or groups of words and even whole lines of text could be omitted accidentally. Some tried to harmonize different texts, while others may have sought to abbreviate a text. Another scribe might seek to reconstruct what he felt was a faulty text, perhaps restoring the correct sense, but not the original words. Alexander Souter, longtime New Testament professor at Mansfield College, Oxford, succinctly said, “Every fresh copy introduces fresh possibilities of error.”⁵ Kenyon observed, “Owing to the frailties of the human hand and eye and brain, it is impossible to copy large quantities of matter without making mistakes. These mistakes will be repeated by the next scribe who copies this manuscript, with additions of his own, so that as time goes on the text will tend to vary further and further from the true original.”⁶

B. B. Warfield, professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological Seminary of Princeton from 1887 to 1921, seemingly painted just as bleak a picture. He noted that each manuscript copy “was made laboriously and erroneously from a previous one, perpetuating its errors, old and new, and introducing still newer ones of its own manufacture. A long line of ancestry gradually grows up behind each copy in such circumstances, and the race gradually but inevitably degenerates, until, after a thousand years or so, the number of fixed errors becomes considerable.”⁷ Many manuscripts, however, bear evidence of numerous corrections by later scribes and users of the manuscript.

Gordon Fee observes that “no two of the 5340-plus Greek MSS of the NT are exactly alike. In fact the closest relationships between any two MSS in existence—even among the majority—average from six to ten variants per chapter. It is obvious therefore that no MS has escaped corruption.”⁸ With approximately 6,000 Greek manuscripts⁹ of various parts of the New Testament, it has been estimated that there are about 200,000 variant readings when each variant is counted each time that it occurs.

A Substantially Pure Text

Inerrancy Applies to the Original Autographs

Those who hold to the doctrine of the Bible’s inerrancy, such as this writer does, are careful to point out that inerrancy applies only to the original manuscripts, not to the many copies that have come down to us. Charles C. Ryrie, now retired from teaching at Dallas Theological Seminary, notes that “Both inspiration and inerrancy are predicated only on the originals.”¹⁰ Baptist theologian Millard Erickson says, “what is being affirmed by the concept that only the originals are inerrant is that inspiration did not extend to copyists and translators. While divine providence was doubtless operative, there was not the same type of action of the Holy Spirit as was involved in the original writing of the text.”¹¹

Over the years, I have attended and even chaired many ordination councils. A young ministerial candidate will affirm his belief in the inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture. Then the seasoned pastors and theologians will ask whether we still have those original manuscripts today. When the expected answer is given, a tougher question follows. “Then how can you claim to hold the Word of God in your hands today? Is your English Bible inerrant?” One who is prepared will correctly reply, that although neither inspiration nor inerrancy apply to translations, to the extent that any translation is

correctly rendered from proper manuscripts it is indeed the Word of God. Baptist theologians Demarest and Lewis, of Denver Seminary, write, “The doctrine of inspiration has to do with the Bible’s origin, not with its transmission. ... Given the original nature of the inscripturated revelation, however, its transmission to our day also has great importance.”¹² Our salvation and eternal destiny hinge on us getting the message in its true form. But with all the mistakes noted above that have crept into the text, one might wonder if that is possible.

The New Testament Text Has Been Preserved Very Well

In what way then can it be said that the text of the New Testament has been well preserved? Warfield cites Richard Bentley to the effect that even the worst possible manuscript of the New Testament “is competently exact.”¹³ That statement is true, not just in comparison with the much poorer in quality and far fewer in number copies of the Greek texts of Homer and the classical playwrights, but also on its own merits.¹⁴

Warfield also notes that Ezra Abbot, frequently reported that 95% of the New Testament’s variant readings have almost no support, and that in 95% of the rest, either reading “would cause no appreciable difference in the sense of the passages where they occur.”¹⁵ Those figures would indicate that in only one quarter of one percent would the variant readings present an appreciable difference in meaning.

Everett F. Harrison, longtime and respected New Testament professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, boldly stated that “The vast bulk of the Word of God is not affected by variations of text at all.”¹⁶ R. Laird Harris, now retired, claimed that “close study of the evidence of ancient texts supports the view that the present editions are remarkably accurate copies of the words God spoke to man.”¹⁷ Fundamentalist evangelist, John R. Rice, added that “The differences in the translations [or manuscripts] are so minor, so insignificant, that we can be sure not a single doctrine, not a single statement of fact, not a single command or exhortation, has been missed in our translations.”¹⁸

Emery Bancroft was for many years the dean of Baptist Bible Seminary in Johnson City, New York. He perhaps overstated the case when he boldly claimed that, “As to the New Testament, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand, we have the very word of the original.”¹⁹ Demarest and Lewis conclude, “Thus the text of the originals can be established beyond reasonable doubt in the bulk of the material.”²⁰ I take this to mean that in the overwhelming majority of the places where variants or different readings occur, we have a very good idea of what the original text was.

Some Textual Problems Affect Meaning

It has been argued that most textual variants do not greatly affect the sense of Scripture. In 2 Peter 2:4, whether fallen angels are kept in pits (σῖροις; *sirois*) or chains (σῖραις; *sirais*), does not greatly differ. I believe chains is the better reading, however, and it agrees with Jude 6’s “chains” for the angels who did not keep their first estate. There are, however, numerous textual variants that *do* materially affect the sense of the passage. David Alan Black calls John 3:13’s “who is in heaven,” “a significant variant because it has an important bearing on Christology.”²¹ Black weighs in heavily in favor of this reading, though it is summarily passed over by minority critics. Black also argues persuasively for the inclusion of “in Ephesus” for Ephesians 1:1, ²² though most minority

critics do not. The last twelve verses of Mark (16:9–20), are a textual critical battleground, as is the narrative of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). I personally hold that both of these longer passages are original, but when asked about the questioned readings in Acts 8:37, 9:6 and 1 John 5:7–8, I do not believe the evidence supports them. Even though textual problems persist, the Scriptures are still substantially pure.

Still, the Scriptures Are Substantially Pure

John Skilton, whose tenure at Westminster Theological Seminary was fifty-eight years before his death in 1998, edited and contributed to a very helpful series of books for New Testament students. In his description of the nature of the text that has come down to us, notice the confluence of three words—providence, preservation, and purity. Skilton says, “We must acknowledge that the singular care and providence of God have been at work in the preservation of the Scripture in a state of substantial and essential purity.”²³ He reasons, again, that “The sovereign God who rules all things has preserved His Word, as we would have expected, in a state of purity. He has, of course, made use of men and circumstances in working out his purpose, but He is the ultimate and controlling cause of this providential preservation.”²⁴

No doubt, one of the greatest biblical scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Robert Dick Wilson of Princeton. Wilson defined the concept of substantial purity when he stated that the manuscripts were “changed only in respect to those accidental matters which necessarily accompany the transmission of all texts where originals have not been preserved. . . . Such changes may be called *minor* in that they do not seriously affect the doctrines of the documents nor the general impression and evident veracity of their statements as to geography, chronology, and other historical matters.”²⁵

Many confessions of faith also incorporate statements about biblical manuscripts. One of the most historic, the Westminster Confession, adopted in 1646, states that the Old and New Testaments “being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”²⁶

The First Copies of the New Testament Text Only Certain Places Held the Inerrant Text

There is one factor that must have dominated the earliest copying process for New Testament manuscripts. Each autograph was in the possession of a particular church or individual. Practically all of these originals of the New Testament text were located in Asia Minor and Greece. Italy and Palestine held the rest.²⁷ It was *only* in these churches that year after year, copy after copy could be made from the *original* manuscripts. These documents were the fountain source—they were, after all, the original inerrant text. They stood in the midst of the area that gives the greatest evidence of needing and using the Word of God during the early centuries of the Christian era and even later. No doubt these originals must have been copied time and again so as to proliferate that text decade after decade, although each new manuscript would add a certain share of common scribal mistakes. Outside areas did not have the luxury of obtaining a copy from a church which could certify that the exemplar was from the hand of the apostolic author.

A Text Closest to the Inerrant Autographs Would Be More Abundant in These Areas

That being the case, the first century must have produced a wealth of copies from Rome, through Greece, Asia Minor and into Palestine. These copies must have been as relatively close to the autographic text as was possible. Of course, each manuscript would carry with it some unique blunders of the scribe's eyes, hand, and mind. Is this not, seemingly, the most natural historical scenario for the abundance of similar kinds of manuscripts that exist today? It is common sense that more early copies were made in those areas than elsewhere because that is where Christianity was most entrenched. If those copies held a numerical superiority during the first centuries, it is common sense to suppose that they would remain dominant in even later stages of the copying process, especially since Christianity continued to flourish for centuries in these areas. In addition, those were the *only* places where the autographs were available for copying. It makes sense that the text from those regions would be closest to the autographs—though all texts, as noted earlier, have differences and no copies have escaped corruption.

What Role Does Inerrancy Play in Making Textual Decisions?

Should the doctrine of the inerrancy of the autographs have a role in recovering the original text of the New Testament? The answer should be affirmative,²⁸ yet, it is rare to hear it enunciated. Young evangelical exegetes do not want to seem out of step with the assured results of modern textual criticism which accept questionable postulates that enthrone a minority text with errors in it. Instead, they craft ingenious explanations as to how the supposedly mistaken words occurred.

The Case of Matthew's Asa and Amon, Versus Asaph and Amos

A case in point is Matthew 1:7 and 10, the genealogy of Christ. The issue is simple. Did Jesus descend from King Asa and King Amon, or from Asaph (the psalmist?) and Amos (the prophet?)? Metzger, et al., declare that Matthew penned "the erroneous spelling" in both verses.²⁹ Alfred Plummer, of University College, Durham and Trinity College, Oxford, wrote, "That there are errors in both lists of names is neither unlikely nor very important. Errors respecting matters of far greater moment can be shown to exist in the Bible, and there is nothing that need perplex us if errors are found here."³⁰

Robert Gundry, a graduate of L.A. Baptist College and Seminary, who then studied under non-inerrantist F. F. Bruce, was asked to submit his resignation from the Evangelical Theological Society in 1983 for holding views inconsistent with the society's inerrantist doctrinal basis, "unless he acknowledges that he has erred in his detraction from the historical trustworthiness of the gospel of Matthew in his recent commentary."³¹ The 2600 members of the society must subscribe in writing annually that, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." Gundry's 1982 commentary on Matthew said that "Matthew may have chosen or coined the spelling 'Amos' for a secondary allusion to the prophet Amos, just as he spelled Asa's name like that of Asaph to introduce a prophetic note."³²

D. A. Carson, who wrote a lengthy review castigating Gundry for his commentary views,³³ said of Gundry's Asaph and Amos explanations, "This is too cryptic to be believable."³⁴ Yet, Carson's own ingenious solution is hardly better. Noting that *one*

LXX manuscript of 1 Chronicles 3:10 has 'Asab, rather than 'Asa, he speculates, "In short Matthew could well be following a MS with *Asaph* even though *Asa* is quite clearly the person meant."³⁵ What is unbelievable is that Carson would countenance the idea that Matthew himself blundered, *possibly* following a faulty manuscript, but either way writing the wrong name in the autograph. Daniel Wallace, a Dallas Theological Seminary professor, in an exchange with this writer after he delivered a paper criticizing the majority text theory, offered the speculation that Asaph and Amos must be alternate spellings of Asa and Amon.³⁶ This is a novel, but unsupported explanation. Several modern translations have also given way to the Asaph and Amos thinking, namely the ASV, NASB, RSV, and NRSV.

By subscribing to the critical minority text, Carson and Wallace, are required to come up with plausible explanations as to the reason Matthew wrote Asaph and Amos, rather than Asa and Amon. Should not the Scripture's own teaching on inerrancy be regarded at all, especially when the manuscript evidence so broadly, overwhelmingly, and continuously supports the reading of Asa and Amon? Can one's theological *a priori* that the minority text must be right cause an intellectual blackout regarding the doctrine of the inerrancy of the autographs?

The Doctrine of Inerrancy Should Make a Difference

In general, textual critics do their work apart from theological considerations. They examine manuscripts, note variant readings, then test and apply some basic canons of evidence, both internal and external, both intrinsic and transcriptional. But should a Bible believer see things differently than unbelieving critics do? This has been the assertion of Edward F. Hills, a learned textual critic who studied under Machen, Van Til, and R. B. Kuiper.³⁷ Extremely perceptive, I thought, were these words of John Skilton, who taught New Testament Greek at Westminster Theological Seminary for longer than most younger scholars have been living (58 years), until his death in 1998. "For men who accept the Bible as the Word of God, inerrant in the original manuscripts, it should be out of the question to engage in the textual criticism of the Scriptures in a 'neutral' fashion—as if the Bible were not what it claims to be."³⁸ He goes on to say, "This is a point which Cornelius Van Til has been stressing in his apologetics and which Edward F. Hills has been appropriately making in his writings on textual criticism. All along the line it is necessary to insist, as Hills does, that 'Christian believing Bible study should and does differ from neutral, unbelieving Bible study.'³⁹ Skilton concludes that Hills "is quite correct when he reminds us that" ignoring God's "divine inspiration and providential preservation of the New Testament ... is bound to lead to erroneous conclusions."⁴⁰

Close to twenty years ago, I issued a plea that our belief in inerrancy must have a bearing on our practices in textual criticism. It bears repeating today.

If we accept the inerrancy of the Scriptures and yet countenance a textual criticism that voids inerrancy, something is amiss—and I would suggest that it is not the Word of God that needs reconsideration but rather our principles of textual criticism. For too long, lower criticism has been guided by those who cared little about the inerrancy of the autographs. The time has come for a change. We must re-examine and divorce ourselves from a biased, narrow and settled view of the field. Unless we do, it will not be long before some in our own ranks will be singing the tune against inerrancy.⁴¹

In conclusion, God has providentially preserved the New Testament text through the copying of thousands of manuscripts. Though copying errors abound, the basic sense of the text remains, and in the greatest majority of the cases we have no doubts as to what the actual words are. It speaks to us with a substantial purity. However, when two or more competing readings impinge on the doctrine of inerrancy, why should we not consider that the apostolic author may have written what we would expect if he were truly writing under God's supernatural guidance (2 Pet 1:21)?

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