

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Conclusion

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1. Review of the class

We have looked at the types of ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, from the earliest papyri to the large number of minuscules. We have examined how they are discovered, how they are dated, and how they are evaluated. We saw how the vast volume of manuscript evidence sets the New Testament apart from any writing of the Greco-Roman world, increasing our confidence in the Scripture. We have also seen the unique challenges of studying these texts, and specifically we have studied the rise of the variant readings.

As we looked into the approach to dealing with the variant readings, we saw the incidents of both intentional and accidental changes to the text. We learned the relationship that manuscripts have in the study of the text-types. We saw how variant readings are evaluated, through the use of external and internal evidence and we saw the part that history has played in delivering the printed Greek editions to us.

The practice of this study of the textual variants in order to arrive at the reading of the original text is known as textual criticism. We looked into several of the verses that require textual criticism be done due to significant variant readings. Most notably we looked into the two large sections that are affected by scribal additions, John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.

Today's class will conclude this series on the New Testament manuscripts by seeing how those who misrepresent the textual evidence attack the Scripture. We will also look at two final verses that are textually doubtful.

2. Defending the faith

Defending the Scripture is an essential part of preaching the gospel because the reason we know about the words and works of Jesus Christ is through the New Testament. The Word of God is under attack in many ways and the variant readings of the ancient manuscripts is one of those ways where we must defend the faith.

One of the most high profile critics of the faith in recent years has been Bart Ehrman, a University of North Carolina professor and author. One of the primary ways that Ehrman has attacked the Christian faith is on the basis of the textual evidence in the New Testament manuscripts. He has authored several best selling books, including *Misquoting Jesus, the Story of Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* in 2005. This book sold over 100,000 copies within the first three months of its publication and discusses the subject of textual criticism in a manner that calls the Bible into question.

Since this publication, he has engaged in many debates on the subject of the reliability of the New Testament copies. Having a familiarity with objections that people like Ehrman present will not only help us to develop our own confidence in the Scripture but we can also develop an ability to address the criticisms that people like Ehrman offer.

3. The use of textually questionable passages

Ehrman makes a lot out of verses that are printed in most English Bibles but which are not found in the oldest manuscripts. He concludes the paperback copy of his best-selling *Misquoting Jesus* with “*The Top Ten Verses That Were Not Originally in the New Testament.*” Most of these verses that he lists we have dealt with in a prior class.

Two of the ten verses that he lists are Mark 16:17 and Mark 16:8, which we examined in our last class regarding the longer ending of Mark. Two other verses are John 8:7 and John 8:11 which we looked at before in the class on the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53-8:11. Another verse is the Comma Johanneum, 1 John 5:7, which we addressed in the class on the Greek Editions. Each of these verses was clearly a later addition to the text and our modern English translations inform us of this.

Three other verses he lists are from Luke’s Gospel: Luke 22:20, 24:12 and 24:51. If we assume they were actually absent from Luke’s original masterpiece, it would simply be three examples of the assimilation of text from one Bible passage to another, which was covered in our class on the textual variants and how they occurred.

However, Ehrman’s basis for opposing the authenticity of these three verses from Luke lies in the Greek text with essentially only one manuscript, Codex Bezae (c. 400). There is some small evidence of omission in the some of the versions, particularly a few of the Old Latin versions, but the weight of the evidence is so strongly in favor of including these texts that the UBS apparatus considers them all to be almost certainly in the original text. This leaves only two of the ten verses worthy of additional examination and has not yet been addressed in our series on the ancient New Testament manuscripts.

a. John 5:3b-5:4

The external evidence against John 5:3b through 5:4 being original is very strong. Both papyri from around 100 years after John wrote his Gospel (P66 and P75) omit this verse. The oldest uncials do not have this verse either (Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, the original text of Codex Ephraimi Rescriptus, Codex Bezae, Codex Washingtonianus, Codex Borgianus). These all date from the fifth century or earlier.

Fifth century Codex Alexandrinus includes John 5:4 but excludes 5:3b. Beyond this, the earliest Greek manuscript to include this passage dates from the eighth century and some of those asterisk this text as being questionable.

John 5:3b-5:4 is no doubt a later addition to the text, which explains why the UBS apparatus provides it with a grade level of certainty of “A” and why nearly all modern English translations note its questionable nature in some fashion.

b. Luke 22:43-44

Many of the earliest manuscripts omit the story of Jesus praying in Luke 22:43-44. The early manuscripts which do not include it are: P69, P75, Codex Sinaiticus (corrected), Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Petropolitanus Purpureus, Codex Nitriensis, Codex Borgianus, and Codex Washingtonianus, all from the sixth century or earlier.

Several minuscules omit the text as well: 158, 512, 542, 552, 579, 777, 826, 1071, and 1128. There are also Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, along with a couple of Syrian and Old Latin versions that omit this text.

However, many manuscripts include this passage: Codex Sinaiticus (original and recorrected), Codex Bezae, Codex Laudianus, Codex Seidelianus I, Codex Seidelianus II, Cyprius, Regius, Codex Campianus, Codex Guelferbytanus B, Codex Sinopensis, and Codex Sangallensis, Codex Nanianus, Codex Monacensis, Codex Tischendorfianus III, and Codex Athous Lavrensis.

The vast majority of the minuscules contain Luke 22:43-44. Also, the Latin, Syrian, Armenian and Ethiopian versions contain this passage as well.

Furthermore, Codex Sangallensis, Codex Petropolitanus, Codex Vaticanus 354 and several minuscules (354, 045, 166, 481, 655, 661, 669, 776, 829, and 892) asterisk this text to indicate its questionable nature. In addition, the Family 13 group of minuscules place this text after Matthew 26:39.

Certainly there is ample evidence to seriously question the authenticity of Luke 22:43-44. The many ancient manuscripts that omit it, along with many translations that omit it, and the texts that mark it as questionable all point to the text not being original. Since this account is referenced by both Irenaeus and Justin Martyr there is good reason to believe this is a very old account, dating to the second century.

The question of internal evidence comes down to two opposing hypothesis. With regard to it being in the original text, some consider those seeking to defend the deity of Christ against Arianism may have removed it. Others consider those seeking to defend the humanity of Christ against Docetism may have added it. While this speculation could go either way, it remains more likely for scribes to add text than to remove it.

4. Methods used to mislead people

Bart Ehrman is skilled at rhetoric and does a remarkable job of making the complex and little known subject of textual criticism understandable to the public. He freely speaks of growing up in a “fundamentalist” brand of Christianity, attending Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, prior to studying at Princeton. This background that he has rejected appears to have contributed to his enthusiasm for this subject matter and his willingness to present his case with a bias against the reliability of the Bible.

Ehrman uses several approaches to deliver his arguments to make them persuasive to the reader. Following is an examination of these tactics and an analysis of the problems with what Ehrman does.

a. Preying on the ignorance of the readers

Most people are unaware of the textual variants. However, as we have seen, this information is not hidden from readers of modern translations since they often include footnotes or other markings when a textual reading is in question. But those who have not looked into that matter of the textual variants are vulnerable to the rhetoric of those who seek to sow seeds of doubt regarding the reliability of the Bible.

People who are unaware of the manuscript data may be surprised and confused, particularly if they have never been exposed to a more thorough study of the Bible in their local church. In this way, Ehrman leverages the failure of churches to fully teach the word of God to sow seeds of doubt into the minds of believers. While “the first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17), this assumes Christians are willing and able to address the issues that Ehrman raises.

Without studying for ourselves, we are vulnerable. Ungodly teachers use their status and knowledge to intimidate and confuse. We have a responsibility to “no longer be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14).

b. Obfuscation of the textual data

By lumping texts that are not found in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts (John 8, Mark 16) with texts that are found in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts (Luke 22, 24), Ehrman makes the problem of the variants to be more significant than it really is. By simplifying his subject for the common audience, he fails to provide sufficient information so the reader can make their own conclusion, therefore leading the reader to Ehrman’s perspective and only adding to their confusion.

To consider passages like Luke 22:20; 24:12 and 24:51 to not be in the Bible based upon the textual evidence we have is moving away from serious examination of the textual evidence to simply attacking the Word of God. Since Ehrman is certainly aware of the manuscript evidence supporting these three verses, it is hard not to conclude that he included these for the purpose of supporting an agenda of creating doubt in the mind of the reader.

c. Exaggerating the significance variant readings

Ehrman has a strong tendency to overstate the significance of the variant readings. It is not only passages that have no real textual controversy that he puts forth; he also overstates the issue of the number of variants. He knows that less than one percent of all textual variants have the slightest significance on the text, being both viable and meaningful. Nevertheless he speaks as if textual errors litter the Bible.

Not only are the verses for which we have a high degree of certainty called into question, the doctrinal significance of such passages is also far overblown. For example, including 1 John 5:7 in his list of misquoted verses is disingenuous since modern translations do not include the King James reading. But even worse is to say that variant affects doctrine inasmuch as the case for the Trinity does not rest upon 1 John 5:7. He often speaks of variants affecting doctrine when that doctrine comes from other verses and not the variant he speaks to.

d. The self-defeating argument

Ehrman’s own argument that the copies of the copies of the copies have been lost and we cannot know the original text works against himself when he claims that Jesus has been misquoted. If it is impossible to know with confidence the original text due to the alleged multiple generations of copies with scribal errors, how is it then possible to declare that Jesus has been misquoted? In order to consider someone to be misquoted there must be a requirement to know what was originally said.

e. The enlightened ones

How do people such as Bart Ehrman get such a platform to attack the Word of God? Certainly because there is an appetite among the multitude to listen to what undermines the authority of God's Word but why do some people get a hearing more than others?

The answer lies not only in ability but also in reputation. How does our society promote philosophical ideas? Through our educational system and the granting of degrees. It is assumed that the more advanced your degree is, the more of an expert you are.

This advancement of the professional class of the knowing is similar to the challenge the early church faced with Gnosticism, where special people gained special knowledge that was not available to the common man. They are the enlightened ones who have knowledge and they should be consulted because they know. This can be intimidating for the average Christian.

Theologically conservative Christian leaders can promote this same fallacy by promoting degrees, credentialing, and positions of authority as evidence for truth. While religious advancement in society can be seen even with Paul, a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6), this is no replacement for the truth of God. We cannot sub-contract out our discernment to anyone but must examine the truth of God for ourselves.

5. Why the ancient manuscripts are reliable

If no existing copy is perfect, how can we be assured that we have the original text delivered to us? If we cannot be sure that we have the original text available to us, doesn't that make the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture irrelevant?

Tertullian, writing in the early 200s, gave us an indication of how reliable the text of the Scripture was not long after the passing of the apostles:

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over to the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally (On the prescription of Heretics 36.1).

At a minimum, we see the value that he placed upon the "authentic writings" (which in Latin normally meant the original). It is quite likely that Tertullian was speaking about several of the original books of the New Testament still available. Nevertheless, these writings were highly valued by the church and were not likely cast aside by the early church.

The idea that our existing copies are the product of "copies of copies of copies of copies, year after year" is speculation. While it is likely that many copies are from countless generations of other copies, that is not necessarily the case. Remember minuscule 1739, found in Greece in 1879 and containing the book of Acts and the epistles? Based upon the appearance of many notes in the margin, it is apparent that this text was copied from a 600 year-old manuscript. If this copy can bring a fourth century manuscript into a first generation tenth century copy, the earlier texts can certainly bypass decades or even centuries.

In fact, given the quality of writing material used for the earliest existing codices, produced at such great expense, it would seem that these texts were copies of the best texts than were available in the fourth century.

Furthermore, we have two copies of the Gospel of John (P66, P75) dating to roughly 100 years after the original was penned. Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace note the correspondence between the oldest uncial (Codex Vaticanus) and P75:

Two of the oldest manuscripts that we have, Papyrus 75 (or P75) and Codex Vaticanus (or B), have an exceptionally strong agreement. And they are among the most accurate manuscripts that exist today. P75 is about 125 years older than B, yet it is not an ancestor of B. Instead, B was copied from an earlier ancestor of P75. The combination of these two manuscripts in a particular reading must surely go back to the very beginning of the second century.

From these two manuscripts alone we can see how unlikely it is that there are many generations of manuscripts heaping error upon error upon our text. However, we have thousands of Greek manuscripts and even more texts of ancient translations. We have so much evidence for the variant readings that it becomes very possible to make a credible evaluation regarding the text.

To suppose that the issue of scribal errors has rendered our Greek text hopelessly uncertain requires one of two possibilities: (1) either all of the early copyists made the same accidental error that resulted in the original text being lost or (2) we have a successful conspiracy of intentionally changing the text for some purpose.

The only way you have either of these possibilities requires believing that because something is theoretically possible, it is therefore the likely outcome. As textual scholar Gordon Fee has noted, “Unfortunately, Ehrman too often turns mere possibility into probability, and probability into certainty, where other equally viable reasons for corruption exist.” We must presuppose the unlikely scenario of either very few copies being made of the original text that were all creating the same variant or an unfathomable ability for the scribes to control the later variant copies. The possibility reduces to impossible.

The far better explanation is for the natural process to work itself out, which is that many copies produced differing variants and by looking at the sum total of evidence we are able to reconstruct the original based upon the large number of copies. When we allow for the routine accidental scribal errors and the observable tendency for scribes to add to the text, we become much more able to correctly evaluate the textual evidence.

This is all based upon a strictly naturalist analysis. But we know that the Lord actively works in this world to bring about the end that He desires. It is a theological certainty that if God spoke to man, He is able to ensure that communication is not lost. This is not to presume upon God *how* He must do the task of preserving His Word, but we must recognize that our human analysis of the textual data must also allow for the work of God in the midst of it. It is a form of Deism to view that God revealed Himself in the Word but did nothing apart from natural events so that we know His revelation today. The Lord preserved His text for us.

6. Application

“Advocate a defense of the Scripture in light of those who oppose it.”