

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Understanding Variants

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1. Review of corrections in the New Testament manuscripts

Ancient New Testament scribes were as aware of differences between the manuscripts as we are today. In fact, as time went on they introduced a systematized means of assigning a scribe to double check for accuracy and rectify any discrepancies. With earlier manuscripts, corrections were made often centuries later.

The vast majority of manuscripts have some degree of correcting. The minuscules, being the most recent manuscripts, show very little correction with the sole exception of the heavily corrected 424. The uncials however often have many corrections. This is due to two major factors: (1) their age and (2) their tendency to not originally include readings from various later additions.

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the most corrected manuscripts, with an estimated 25,000 different corrections being made over the entire Bible. The New Testament was copied by three different scribes and two of them made their own corrections. There appears to be as many as nine or more scribes that made corrections over time to the text of Sinaiticus, mostly between the 5th and 7th centuries. The last corrector made very few changes in the 12th century.

The corrections to manuscripts are noted separately from the original so that we are able to know the progression of the alterations. The original reading is noted with a superscript asterisk and each subsequent correction is noted with a superscript number, beginning with 1. For example, Codex Vaticanus is known by the letter B and had three correctors. Therefore, the original reading would be referenced as B*, the first corrected reading would be referenced as B1, the second corrected reading would be referenced as B2, and the third corrected reading would be referenced as B3.

One would think manuscripts that were heavily corrected would be less helpful to the determination of the original text, but this is not the case. The corrections help us see what the options might be and more importantly, they point us to the changes that took place in the text as the centuries went by.

For example, one of the most poorly copied manuscripts is P66. P66 has most of the Gospel of John and dates from around 200 A.D., and some think as early as 150 A.D. It contains around 450 corrections. One might think that this very large number of corrections makes the manuscript less reliable.

However, the vast majority of the errors in P66 are either (1) nonsense readings or (2) singular readings (found only in this manuscript). The original scribe simply was well meaning but not very skilled and his errors are very easy to discern. This actually makes this manuscript far more helpful since we can easily correct for misspellings or textual readings that are not found in any other manuscript.

2. The number of variants in the New Testament manuscripts

One of the most misunderstood numbers given in the study of the New Testament text transmission is the number of errors, known as “textual variants.” These variant readings are found in every New Testament manuscript of substantial length due to the human factor in the copying process.

In order to discuss the number of errors, we need to understand the definition of a variant. A textual variant is simply any difference from a standard text (e.g., a printed text, a particular manuscript, etc.) that involves spelling, word order, omission, addition, substitution, or a total rewrite of the text. Capitalization and punctuation variants are not counted since the original text had all capital letters and no punctuation.

In other words, any place in the text where at least one manuscript has a difference. If one of more than 5,800 manuscripts has one spelling difference, then this counts as one of the variants.

Best estimates are that there are more than 400,000 variants that exist in the various New Testament manuscripts. This number is nearly three times as many variants as there are words in the New Testament.

The reason there are so many variants is because there are so many copies. If there were only one copy there would be no variants at all. In other words, the number of variants is simply the necessary by-product of having an amazing plethora of copies.

The remarkably high number of variants is best understood not only by looking at the sheer number of manuscripts but also by looking at the how the variants occurred.

3. The source of variants in the New Testament manuscripts

The errors that exist in the manuscripts are haphazard, not conspiratorial. There was no attempt or even ability to completely eradicate a reading from the ancient texts and we find that the mistakes follow a natural progression what would be expected and can be recognized much more easily.

The earliest New Testament text were typically copied by amateurs simply because of their love for the Scripture rather than as a job. The errors that they made were more of the accidental variety because they did not have access to a wider number of copies (due to persecution, limited distribution of the text, cost of materials). Later copies inserted intentional changes with the motive to improve the text and not omit any possible Scripture.

The end result of this is not that we have lost any part of the New Testament but rather we have picked up additional material that has been added to it.

4. The types of variants in the New Testament manuscripts

Variants occur in the New Testament text for two basic reasons: (1) accidental changes and (2) intentional changes. Many scribes made errors, which when working with a text of all capital letters with no spacing is completely understandable. Some scribes however decided to improve the text in a variety of ways.

a. The spelling of the text

Spelling is the most common New Testament manuscript variant. There was no standardized spelling or dictionaries. There are many times that the same word is spelled differently in the same Greek text. The Greek language (like all languages) gradually changed over time. Many of these spelling errors were accidental, being our equivalent of “typos.” However, many of these errors were intentional, coming from a desire for correctness or readability.

b. The grammar of the text

Just as with spelling, grammar gradually changed over time and scribes would seek to improve the text by making slight adjustments in style.

c. The omission of text

The loss of letters in a text occurred when a scribe skipped ahead one or more letters, leaving out the letters in between. The technical term for this type of error is haplography.

There were two typical ways that this accidental loss of text occurred:

The first way that loss occurred was when two words, phrases or lines ended with the same sequence of letters. Loss of text occurred when a scribe copied the first sequences and then skipped to the second sequence without copying what was in between. The technical name for this error is “homoioteleuton” (“same ending”).

A second and somewhat less common related error was when two words, phrases or lines began with the same sequence of letters. It also resulted in a loss of text when the scribe’s eye skipped to the similar sequence later. The technical name for this error is “hamoioarcton” (“same beginning”).

d. The addition of text

One way that text became added unintentionally is when a scribe repeated a letter or sequence of letters that should have been written only once. The technical term for this type of error is “dittography.”

There are two places where twelve entire verses have been added (John 7:53-8:11; Mark 16:8-20). These two places are intentional additions since there is no way scribes in different locations would have been able to reproduce the same addition over such a large amount of text. One of the ways that we can be confident that these are additions to some texts rather than omissions from some text is the implausibility of any scribe would intentionally omit this text. Indeed, it would take a widespread silent conspiracy of scribes to pull this off.

One text that is a great case study for either the accidental addition of a letter or the accidental omission of a letter is 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

- *“But we were **gentle** among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children”* (ESV, also NASB and KJV).
- *“Instead, we were like **young children** among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children”* (NIV, also NET and CEV).

The reason for the different translations is due to a textual difference in the Greek texts:

ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗΜΕΝΗΠΙΟΙ (“we became gentle”) or ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗΜΕΝΝΗΠΙΟΙ (“we became young children”).

This variant depends upon whether the Greek letter **N** was added later or omitted later. A scribe may have accidentally left the letter out or accidentally repeated the letter. The evaluation of the original reading is done through “textual criticism,” which will be covered in later classes.

e. The substitution of text

Substitution of text is replacing one letter, word or groups of letters or words with something similar. Words had similar sounding letters. This error could occur not just when writing down what another person dictated to the scribe but even as the scribe read the text aloud to himself.

Words also had similar lettering. Some letters look like other letters and in the days before corrective lenses and with unique handwriting, rather than printed text, errors were more easily made.

Examples of similar capital Greek letters are:

Α Δ Λ	Α Δ Λ
Ε Θ Ο Σ	Ε Θ Ο Σ
Ι Κ	Ι Σ Κ
Γ Τ	Γ Τ
Η Π Τ Τ	Η Η Π Τ Τ
Μ Λ	Μ Λ

Words were sometime substituted when either a scribe was familiar with the wording from a similar passage, or when they read one word and wrote a similar but different word. One example of substitution of text is in John 4:1, which has the text divided between “Jesus Knew” (ESV, NIV, CEV) vs. “The Lord Knew” (NASB, KJV, RSV).

f. The transposition of text

The transposition of text is when the order of letters or words are switched. The most common is the change of word order. For example, Jesus Christ vs. Christ Jesus is very common.

Transposition is relatively common in the Greek text because the placement of words is not nearly as rigid as English and typically makes no difference in the meaning. This is particularly true when the scribe is copying more than just one letter at a time. Codex Bezae (400 A.D.) has many of these types of errors due to the nature of the scribal copy.

g. The conflation of text

Sometimes a scribe had access to more than one manuscript and was aware of a variant reading. Instead of choosing one reading or the other, both were inserted. This practice is known as conflation, and it occurs more often with the New Testament than with other works.

One example of this is found in Luke 24:53. Most early texts note that the disciples were “blessing God,” while early Latin translations and Codex Bezae read “praising God.” Later manuscripts joined this variant together to read “blessing and praising God.”

h. The assimilation of text

The assimilation of text is a form of adding text with intent. As a scribe works with the biblical text the degree of familiarity can lead to one part of the New Testament being introduced into another part when there is a mistaken concern that something has been left out.

There also would be times when words were written in the margin of a manuscript by an earlier scribe. We sometimes find these notations making their way into a text.

i. The harmonization of text

Frequently, text became added because it existed in a related Bible passage. There is a definite trend in the timeline of the manuscript data where text would be added so that the wording would match another passage.

This occurred mostly in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). This also happened when quotes from the Old Testament were adjusted to better reflect what the scribe thought should be in the text.

j. The rewriting of text

There are times when the text is so different in a manuscript that it cannot fit into one of these types variants. The copy was done so loosely that the text became more of a rewrite. Codex Bezae does this more than any other manuscript.

5. The nature of variants in the New Testament manuscripts

While there are a very large number of New Testament variants, this does not at all erode our confidence in the reliability of the text we have for two basic reasons: (1) not all these variants are meaningful (affecting the text to some degree) and (2) not all of these variants are viable (a possibility of actually representing the original text).

Therefore, we can look at the nature of the variants in four different classifications:

a. Not meaningful and not viable

These are variants that do not affect the meaning of the text and do not have a likelihood of being actually in the original text. Most of the variants are of this type. The primary reason there are so many variants is because of the great number of spelling differences that exist in the text before the days of dictionaries.

b. Not meaningful but viable

Generally speaking, old manuscripts have a greater likelihood of having a high degree of variants simply because the nature of scribal work became more professional as time went on. Therefore there are a lot of variants just within the older and best manuscripts. For example, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus have 3,036 differences just in the Gospels alone.

However, few of these early differences, though potentially viable, are really meaningful at all. In contrast to English for example, in Greek you can move the word order without affecting the meaning at all. When you add up the entire number of variants that simply have no bearing on the meaning of the text, well over three quarters of all the existing variants are not meaningful.

c. Meaningful but not viable

Words mean things and if you change the words are you very likely to affect the meaning. Therefore there are quite a large number of variants than do somehow affect what the text says.

One example of meaningful but not viable reading is in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where every manuscript has either “gentle” or “little children” except for one late manuscript that has “horses.” This would affect the meaning but it has no chance of having been in the original text.

Close to a quarter of the variants have some affect on the text but are found either so rarely or so late in the evolution of the text that they can be discarded as worthy of examination.

d. Meaningful and viable

By far the smallest classification of variants are those both meaningful and viable, accounting for less than 1% of all variants. These readings that have a chance of being original and have some affect on the reading, regardless of how small require extensive study to correctly evaluated which reading is most likely original. This the crux of the work of textual criticism.

One example of meaningful and viable is Revelation 13:18. Nearly all manuscripts show the number of the beast as 666 but Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (450 A.D.) showed the number as 616. In 2005, a papyri fragment originally found in Egypt around 1900 was determined to be part of Revelation and was dated at c. 250 A.D. and designated P115. This manuscript also showed the number of the beast as 616. Irenaeus writing less than one hundred years after Revelation was penned stated that 616 existed in at least one text of Revelation that he was aware of but that he considered it to be a scribal error.

Beginning next week we will introduce the field of study known as “textual criticism” which will study how to evaluated the meaningful and viable textual variants in the pursuit of arriving at what the original New Testament text was.

6. Application

“Accept the fact of the historical record.”