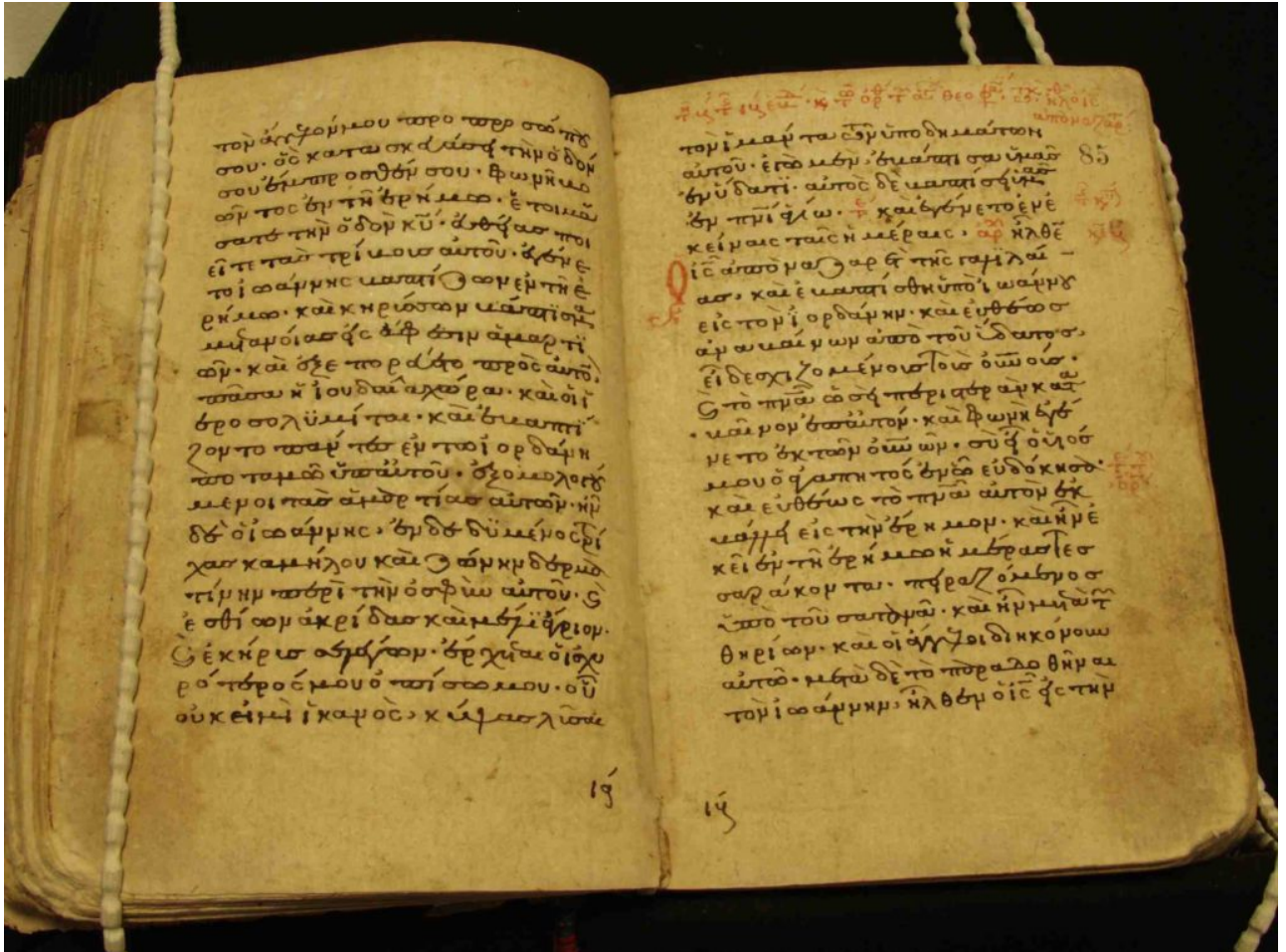


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Textual Criticism collates and compares the many ancient extant Bible manuscripts for the various Biblical texts to determine the original reading for each scripture?

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It is popularly believed today that the Bible has been copied and re-copied so many times over the centuries that its text is unreliable, and no one can be sure of what was in the originals. Is there any truth to this?

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like that of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24,25 NIV). In this text, the thought is conveyed that “the Word of the Lord endures forever”, which implies that the scriptures would be faithfully preserved over time. If we believe that, **“in the beginning God created the heavens and earth” (Genesis 1:1)**, and also empowered men to write the 66 books of the Bible over a period of about 1,500 years, then he would surely have the power to accurately preserve his word forever. But what are the facts in more detail?

Problem? - “We Do Have the Originals” - Are They Necessary?

Not surprisingly, there are copyists’ errors (called textual or scribal errors) in ancient Biblical manuscripts. The original copies of the books were lost long ago.

It is true, we don’t have the originals, and sometimes we hear this objection as to the validity

of the Biblical text. Why don't we have the originals? They were written on perishable materials, and handmade copies were meticulously and accurately made and distributed.

If we had the originals and no copies, suppose one or more of the originals was lost, destroyed, stolen, or deviously, but cleverly altered? Then what?

If we had the originals written by Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, etc., they may likely would have become idols, or objects of worship, the way **“the bronze serpent . . . Nehushtan”** was (**2 Kings 18:4 LSB**).

The New Testament books were written in various places and quickly copied and distributed all over the Roman Empire, long before there was any controlling body with the power to gather up these copies and have them deliberately altered. The very rapid copying and distribution also made it impossible for any authority to gather up and alter all the copies to make them say the same thing. By the time such powerful authority in or over Christianity emerged in the 4th century, extremely valuable manuscripts that are extant today, were long since buried in the sands of Egypt or tucked away in obscure places in Palestine and the Roman Empire.

So not having the originals solves these potential problems, rendering having the originals unnecessary, but it does mean that we have textual variants among the thousands of ancient Biblical manuscripts.

What About the Many Thousands of Textual Variants?

Any book copied by hand thousands of times over a period of a thousand plus years is likely to contain errors. The term textual variant derives from this fact. Thus, our sources for the Biblical materials are limited to handwritten copies (of copies) of the originals. We do also have access to copies of ancient translations of the Bible into other languages, as well as citations of the Bible by early rabbis and church fathers. Thus Hebrew and Greek manuscripts

of the Bible, together with early translations and citations of Scripture, witness to the correct reading of a particular text.

How did scribal errors arise? Poor memory, impaired judgment, mishearing and errors of sight or misunderstanding often caused the best-intentioned scribes to omit, substitute or repeat letters or entire words. Sometimes scribes made matters worse when they deliberately altered the text in an attempt to rectify something they perceived as a problem (deliberate alterations are probably very rare, however). In time, the result was a series of accidental corruptions or intended “improvements” that departed from the original text.

Is this a problem? No. Why not?

In fact, scribal errors are actually one of the many proofs that the Bible is not a work of fiction, nor is it the a result of collusion among conspirators to make it seem to be the word of God , when it actually is of human origin. Once variants appeared among the many copies of the Bible, they didn’t just go away. They were copied and recopied many times. But it also means that we still have the original readings of the New Testament texts.

How can we sure of this? How do we know what the original reading was?

What is Textual Criticism?

Textual criticism is the attempt to restore the Biblical authors’ original words by comparing and contrasting the various copies and translations of the Bible. Here “criticism” does not mean “finding fault with”, but “evaluating” the existing copies of the text. Significantly, while textual errors do exist among the ancient Biblical witnesses, they do not destroy the Bible’s credibility or message. Just as an alert reader can understand a book or newspaper article that has typographical errors in it, so too God’s Word is able to speak for itself in spite of the minor corruptions that have arisen through scribal transmission. The vast majority of the Biblical text is certain, and where variations do occur among existing copies, the original

wording can usually be determined with a good degree of certainty by a thorough acquaintance with the available manuscripts. Most modern translations use footnotes to let readers know where the text is difficult or where scribal errors may exist.

How Does Textual Criticism Work?

A simple modern day hypothetical example can help to understand the nature of Textual Criticism. Suppose a school teacher taught 200 students each day, and required all of them one day to copy an essay of about 300 words using pen and paper. When they were collected, collated, and comparatively analyzed, there likely would be a few variations. Suppose 198 wrote a word identically and 2 of the copies of this word were different. A grader who analyzed this without even having the original would know that the 198 had the word correct, while 2 were mistaken.

How does Textual Criticism work regarding the Bible? The Old Testament (OT) has about 1700 ancient manuscripts of the original Hebrew-Aramaic Scripture text, and the New Testament (NT) has about 5,800 ancient manuscripts in the original Koine' Greek text. Both the OT and the NT have thousands of ancient manuscripts in other languages. The vast majority of these ancient manuscripts are fragmentary, or partial, with only a few being complete or fairly complete.

All extant manuscripts are graded as to their value by Biblical language and textual expert scholars. Greater weight is generally given to the older manuscripts, the older, the greater the value. Likewise, with the languages, greater weight is usually given to the original languages, rather than to the translated languages. The extant manuscripts are collated, and compared, revealing variants. These expert scholars then decide on the composition of Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Master Texts, and also alternates, and explanatory footnotes.

The presence of scribal errors is not a reason to consider the Bible untrustworthy, because refined Hebrew-Aramaic, and Koine' Greek Master Texts use a compilation and collation of

thousands of ancient manuscripts to derive a Biblical text that faithfully represents the originals.

The two most prominent New Testament Refined Master Texts, the Nestle-Aland (N-A) 28th edition, and the United Bible Societies (UBS) 5th edition, have had independent teams of scholars working on them for many years now. By the time of about the N-A 26th edition and the UBS 3rd edition, the two texts were identical except for footnotes. No other work from the ancient world has a text with such a high degree of integrity.

New Testament Greek scholars consider the current Master Text to be 99.5% pure. The other 0.5% questionable text is of inconsequential matters, primarily spelling and syntax differences.

How Bible Translators Use the Results of Textual Criticism

Bible Translators make use of these Master Texts in translating the scriptures into modern languages, such as English, Spanish, French, Japanese, Chinese, etc.

An example of a textual problem is found in the last sentence of **Isaiah 51:19**. The New American Standard Bible translates the question “*How shall I comfort you?*” while the NIV words it “*Who can console you?*” (emphasis added for both translations). These different renderings reflect a difference of opinion over which manuscripts preserve the best reading. The NIV follows a reading that is found in a Hebrew manuscript from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This translation is also supported by the Greek (Septuagint), Latin (Vulgate) and Syriac (Peshitta) translations of the Old Testament. On the other hand, the standard edition of the Hebrew Old Testament (the Masoretic Text) reads “How can I comfort you?” and was followed by the NASB translators.

The above example of **Isaiah 51:19** also makes the point that virtually all scribal questions involve minor points in the text. We have good reason to be confident that the translations

now available faithfully, albeit never perfectly, reflect what the prophets and other Biblical authors originally wrote. The presence of scribal errors is not a reason to consider the Bible untrustworthy, because refined Hebrew-Aramaic, and Koine' Greek Master Texts use a compilation and collation of thousands of ancient manuscripts to derive a Biblical text that faithfully represents the originals.

Conclusion

“Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished” (Matthew 5:18 HCSB). Jesus says here that even the smallest details from God’s word will be preserved.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35 NIV). Jesus uses hyperbole’ to show that God will not allow his word, especially the scriptures, to fade, or “pass away”. This would include preventing any significant changes.

God said he would preserve his word, and he has!

One source for this article: New International Version Archaeological Study Bible