

The Reliability of the Bible (3)

It is an undeniable fact that the original writings of the New Testament are no longer in existence. There is no answer as to why God chose not to preserve the original texts. Almost immediately upon receipt—copies were made of the letters of the apostles and distributed to Christians. Galatians was written to *the churches of Galatia* (Gal. 1:2) and Paul personally requested his letters to be distributed to brethren in other places. (Col. 4:16) So...is the Bible a copy of a copy of a copy? Some use this as an argument to state that the Bible is unreliable and full of errors.

In the making of books, problems have long persisted. Neil Lightfoot has written that more than 300 errors were found in the first edition of the King James Bible. Most of these errors were corrected in 1613 with the release of the second edition. Even in the twentieth century—those who sought to publish the Revised Standard version were subject to misprints.

All ancient books were produced by hand. It is certain that errors were made and some errors were mixed in with the pure text. Manuscripts have been subject to two kinds of errors:

Unintentional errors. Mistaking one word for another; confusing words of similar sound (as in English we often interchange “affect” and “effect.”) and misunderstanding passages due to improper division of words are just a few unintentional errors. Remember, the uncial style of writing was to crowd the letters together in such a way as to leave the words without spaces between them. We also find errors of omission and addition in the manuscripts. Sometimes this was done for no apparent reason. Many of these errors are of little consequence.

Intentional errors. There are

History of The Greek Text

There are approximately 5,300 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament in existence today. These range from fragments written on papyrus, that contain a small fragment of a book, to complete copies of the New Testament. These copies range in dates from the beginning of the second century (or perhaps even earlier depending on dating methods) to the 15th century. No two of these manuscripts that contain any significant portion of the NT have exactly the same wording. Again, this is due to errors that occurred during the process of copying the text by hand.

Manuscripts fall into groups that are known as text-types or families. These groupings arose because a certain original, or few originals, were the basis for copies of the texts. Readings in those originals were passed on to the copies made from them. These families tend to fall into certain geographical patterns. Identification of text-types is not an exact science. Generally there are four text-types that are recognized:

The Alexandrian text-type is so named because it is generally associated with the Church at Alexandria. Most of the papyri manuscripts, and the uncial manuscripts are representatives of the Alexandrian text-type.

The Western text-type is so named because it was the text-type prevalent in the Roman Catholic Church. It is found in Greek manuscripts and in the Latin translations used by the Western church.

The Byzantine text-type is so named because of its association with the Byzantine empire. This text type is also referred to as the Majority Text because the majority of the surviving manuscripts are of this type.

The Caesarean text-type is associated with the Church at Caesarea. There is considerable debate about whether this should be treated as a separate text-type.

Which Greek Text Best Represents the

some “variant readings” that have been purposely added by scribes. Lightfoot says, *We are not to think that these insertions were made by some dishonest scribe who simply wanted to tamper with the text. Almost always the intention of the scribe is good and he only wants to “correct” what appears to be an error in the text.* (p. 30)

Since the New Testament has been transmitted to us through the hands of copyists there is no doubt there are a few errors here and there. *To fail to recognize this would make it necessary for God to perform a miracle every time a scribe picked up a pen and ink.* (Lightfoot, p. 34)

What is “Textual Criticism?”

Since there are errors in the manuscripts a science has evolved known as “textual criticism.” A textual critic compares and studies all available evidence to recover the exact words of the author’s original composition. In short textual critics “weed out the chaff of bad readings from the genuine Greek text.” Some basic rules of textual criticism are:

The older reading is to be preferred. (This rule assumes that the closer the manuscript is to the autograph the more likely it is to be correct.)

The more difficult reading is to be preferred over the easier reading. (This is based on the tendency to simplify difficult words or phrases in the process of copying.)

The shorter reading is to be preferred over the longer reading. (Copyists tended to add additional material to make the text easier to understand.)

The reading that explains all the variants is most likely the original one.

The reading with the widest

Original Reading?

With some, this is a tremendous area of debate. The Greek text underlying the KJV is based on a 16th century version of the Greek text known as the Textus Receptus or Received Text. This text is a representative of the Byzantine text-type, although many scholars consider it a poor representation. From its publication in 1516 until the end of the 19th century the Textus Receptus remained as the “standard” Greek text of the New Testament.

In 1881 two British scholars, Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort published an edition of the Greek New Testament based heavily upon the readings found in the Alexandrian Text-type Manuscripts. They believed the older manuscripts are more likely to reflect the original reading. Since 1881 approximately 100 Papyri manuscripts dating from the first to the fourth century have been discovered. These discoveries have been used to further refine the text of the New Testament. Today the “standard” New Testament texts are the Nestle-Aland 27th edition (NA²⁷) and the United Bible Societies 4th edition (UBS⁴). These versions are sometimes referred to together as the “Critical Text” or CT.

(Next week: Arguments of those who believe the KJV to be the ONLY correct text refuted....)

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Editor’s note: Much of the above information is compiled from a variety of sources. Call or write me if you would like a copy of the [references I have used](#)

geographical support is to be preferred over one that predominates only within a single region or single manuscript.

The reading that most closely conforms to the style, diction, or viewpoint of the author in the rest of the book is to be preferred.

A reading that displays no doctrinal bias on the part of the copyist is to be preferred over one that betrays a partisan bias.