

Chapter 6

Textual Criticism 101

What in the World is a *Dord*?

In the 1934 printing of the unabridged *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, the following entry stood curiously:

Dord (dôrd), *n.* *Physics & Chemistry*, density

To the embarrassment of the editors of dictionary, it was soon pointed out that there is no such word in the English language. Instead, the word appeared in their dictionary due to an unfortunate “scribal error.” The entry originated due to confusion over an *abbreviation* of the word “density.” It was supposed to read as follows:

D. or d., *Physics & Chemistry*, density

In compiling the new edition in 1934, the editor did not notice the periods and created a new word through fission (see page 114). Remarkably, the error escaped detection for more than a decade even though the volume was reprinted multiple times during that span.¹

This act of correction is analogous to the task before us: textual criticism. In the case of the Webster's “variant,” the error was easy to correct by comparing the entry to previous entries. Though just as easy in most places, the work of textual criticism is much more difficult in determining the original wording of the biblical manuscripts. Taking all that we have learned about the origins and transmission of the biblical text, we will learn how to do the work of the textual critic.

Why Bother?

The very phrase *textual criticism* conjures up an abstract academic exercise which leads many to remain unconvinced of the need to learn of this science. Pastors are ignore the subject for fear that church members will find it boring, overly technical, impractical, or that their faith (their own and the congregations') may be undermined in the process. Pastors fear the fallout of church members learning of the many variants that exist in the previously understood “golden tablets” of the New Testament manuscripts.

While it is true that textual criticism *can* be technical and *can* be communicated in such a way as to threaten people's faith (see Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*), it need not be the case. The average church member can grasp the material. Furthermore it is a far more dangerous and sinister thing to leave church members uneducated of the history of their Bible. Opponents of the faith know this information; so should the people of faith.

¹ Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 301.

A Test Case from London

I remember well one incident during my trip to London in 2006. One evening, while handing out New Testaments in Arabic, I entered into a conversation with a 20-something year old young man who told me he was training to be a sheik (an Islamic wise man or scholar). He grew up as an American Protestant but now was a Muslim citizen of England. As we spoke, he began to raise various objections to the Christian faith (he said he had 101 of them) and soon settled on the subject of the Trinity.

As we debated the topic, he asked me about the famous Trinitarian passage in 1 John 5:7-8. I could see what he was trying to do. He wanted to kill two birds with one stone: demolish my arguments for the Trinity and my confidence in the Scriptures at the same time. If I referred to the verse at all as a proof for this central doctrine of the faith, he would “pull the rug out from under my feet” with his knowledge of the textual variant. So, I simply said, “I do not need that verse to defend the doctrine of the Trinity and I would prefer not to use that verse because I do not believe it should be included in the Bible.”

I could see a visible change come over his face. He was shocked that a Christian knew such a thing. I spent two or three minutes explaining the textual criticism and history behind this passage. The conversation quickly came to a stop as he left to find others to harass.

We're All Textual Critics

So, textual criticism is anything but mere ivory tower academic activity. Church members practice textual criticism every Sunday in church, in reading scripture, in choosing Bibles for themselves and their children, and in witnessing to atheists, Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.² Questions about the Bible are asked weekly in churches all across America. Christians want to learn not just what is in Scripture, but its history and reliability as well. As more believers obey the command to carry the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world, these witnessing situations with often antagonistic individuals usually raise biblical issues.

As members of our church can vouch, you cannot witness to a Muslim for long without them bringing up their most common objection to the Christian faith. Muslims will inevitably object by saying, “Your Bible cannot be trusted because it is based on thousands of manuscripts in which not a single one of them agree with each other. There are more mistakes in the New Testament than there are words in the New Testament.” That objection can only be answered through an understanding of textual criticism.

As those who have gone to London now know, textual criticism is no mere academic exercise. It is imminently practical. To be sure, you do not have to be a scholar to answer such objections. It is a mistake to think in extremes – that is, to think you can ignore

² All of the information in this section is adapted or copied from Alan Kurschner, “Reasons Why Textual Criticism is Essential for God's People,” <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?catid=19>, April 22, 2008 (accessed April 27, 2008).

textual criticism all together by convincing yourself it is not vital or you can become a scholar and be able to answer every question and objection. Instead, a basic knowledge of textual criticism will allow the Christian to answer most of the superficial objections to the history of the transmission of the Bible.

How will you respond to atheists and agnostics? These individuals read the most liberal of scholars and use textual arguments as a pretext to deny the Scriptures and live according to their own law. Bart Ehrman's book, *Misquoting Jesus*, took the topic of textual criticism to the *New York Times*' Best-Sellers List and has influenced numerous individuals that the Bible can not be trusted. How do you answer the acquaintance swayed by Ehrman's teaching? Similarly, liberal mainline Christians who have a low view of Scripture who will use textual objections against Evangelicals. These often nominal Christians believe that the Bible *contains* words about God, but is not actually God's Word.

Also, in our part of the country, evangelical Christians often have to deal with a King James Only advocate asserting that modern versions of the Bible are corrupt and therefore you are in danger of jeopardizing your spiritual walk with God or even your eternal salvation by using these versions (perversions?). How are we to respond to the common objection that the Greek manuscripts behind modern versions are not represented by the vast majority of Greek manuscripts and these same modern versions deny the deity of Christ and are embarrassed about the blood?

Finally, in teaching Sunday School or preparing sermons, students of the Scripture engage in textual criticism weekly. We must know what words belong in the text before we can determine what the text actually means. Though there are no major doctrines that are affected by decisions of textual criticism, there are significant variants that preachers need to be aware of in sermon preparation. It cannot be ignored if a preacher is reading a particular Bible version without a phrase or word in it, and three hundred persons in the pews are reading a different version with the phrase and word contained in it. When this happens, the listeners may be distracted by the preacher's "error" and thus think about it for most, if not all, of the remaining sermon.

More reasons could be cited, but if these do not convince someone of the importance, no more additional reasons will. The field of textual criticism should be embraced because it corroborates the Christian faith, gives the church a defense to many popular objections to the history and nature of the Bible, and it testifies to God's sovereignty in the preservation of his Word throughout history.

The Goal of Textual Criticism

The job of the textual critic is similar to that of a detective searching for clues. Readers of Sherlock Holmes are often amazed at his ability to deduce a number of truths about a subject from the almost imperceptible clues he would notice.³ The textual critic is a detective trying to decipher the "clues" left us by the many copyists through the years. It

³ Wegner, *The Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, 23.

is not unusual to discern much from even the smallest fragment. For instance, in looking at the small fragment known as P⁵², we can determine much about the original manuscript. By looking at the size of the handwriting and the words written on the front and back of the manuscript, we can determine how big the original page was. Furthermore, we can then determine the number of pages in the entire codex by virtue of discerning how many pages it would take to complete the entire book with that particular handwriting on that particular page.

Of course, those are only external matters. The textual critic is more concerned with the actual text. The goal of the textual critic is to determine the exact reading of a biblical text in order to know what God has revealed to us.⁴ It must be remembered that *only one reading* can be original, no matter how many manuscripts with all their variants exist. The biblical authors wrote used particular words to create particular sentences in particular paragraphs in particular letters and Gospels. The job of the textual critic is to determine that single correct reading.

Textual criticism is necessary because we have none of the original manuscripts penned by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul, James, and others. We have many copies and even copies of copies but no originals. Furthermore, none of these copies is completely like another (though they are similar in wide passages and even certain books). We need textual criticism.

Textual criticism is a science because specific rules govern the evaluation of the types of manuscripts and the variants contained therein. These rules have been developed over the centuries as great minds did the hard work of textual criticism. However, this science is also an art because those rules cannot be applied rigidly in every single situation. Textual criticism is far from simple mechanistic procedures.

The Task of Textual Criticism

Metzger writes that “to teach another how to become a textual critic is like teaching another how to become a poet.”⁵ Principles can be given and rules may be followed but the appropriate application of these principles and rules depends on the wisdom, insight, and knowledge of the textual critic. The process of New Testament textual criticism entails two fundamental tasks: (1) the study of the surviving manuscripts and (2) the evaluation of the evidence from those manuscripts.⁶

The majority of the evaluation is done in the area of the variants. Textual criticism assumes that it is impossible for all the copyists to have made the same mistake at the same time.⁷ To be sure, there are a staggering amount of variants in the Greek manuscripts we possess. However, to merely quote the number of variants is to give a one-sided statement that is typically uttered for the sake of scandalous sensationalism. It must also be noted that the great number of variants exist simply because of the great

⁴ Wegner, *The Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, 23.

⁵ Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 305.

⁶ Wegner, *The Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, 230.

⁷ Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 44.

number of manuscripts in possession. After all, if you have only *one* manuscript, you have *zero* variants. If you have two manuscripts, you may still have zero variants but it is likely you will have at least a few. In comparison with other ancient works, the scale of the New Testament is massive. The number of manuscripts raises two competing thoughts. First, with the increase in manuscripts, there is a similar increase in variants. However, at the same time, there is an increase in the ability to determine the original reading as more similarities emerge than differences.

Consider the following numbers:

- 5,745 manuscripts with an average size of 200 pages⁸
- 1.3 million pages of manuscripts
- 138,612 Greek words in the Greek New Testament compiled from these manuscripts
- 400,000 variants in these pages

A little math reveals the following, depending on your point of view and the impact you hope to make on your audience:

- On the skeptical side, you find an average of almost three variants for every one Greek word. Bart Ehrman loves to make this statement and says often that there are more variants than there are words in the New Testament. While technically true, he does not tell the entire story.
- Meanwhile, on the conservative side, you can say that you find an average of not quite 70 variants per manuscript or an average of about 3 variants per page. That statement does not sound so discouraging. In fact, when you consider the vast number of manuscripts and the long period of time that manuscripts have been copied, it is an amazing feat that the number of variants is not in the *millions*!

In comparison with all other ancient works, the New Testament scholars suffer from an embarrassment of riches (see page 60 of this document). Contrary to these other ancient works, there are many more biblical manuscripts currently known. Again, the more manuscripts you have, the more variants you will find.

However, even with all these manuscripts, there is no place in the New Testament where *conjectural emendation* is needed. To conjecture is to make a good guess; to make an emendation is to insert material into an unknown portion of the text in an attempt to imagine what the author actually wrote. So, to create a conjectural emendation is to make a good guess at a particular reading because you have no real evidence. An illustration is in order.

Suppose conjectural emendation is needed to complete Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.⁹ Pretend that we know of only two manuscripts that still exist of this important speech. In this hypothetical exercise, we notice that there are gaps in different places in

⁸ Obviously, some are small fragments and others are immense complete volumes.

⁹ Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 107-108.

either manuscript. Perhaps water has damaged one manuscript or an insect has eaten part of the other. The two manuscripts read:

MSS 1: Four score and seven _____ ago our _____ brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in _____dom and dedicated to the proposition that “all _____ are created equal.”

MSS 2: Four score and _____ ago, our _____s brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, _____ in lib _____ and dedicated to the proposition that “all _____ are created _____.”

We can fill in several gaps because the missing words do not appear in the same place in both manuscripts. Collating the two, we can be certain of the following reading:

Four score and seven _____ ago our _____s brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in {lib _____ / _____dom}, and dedicated to the proposition that “all _____ are created equal.”

Now, in this case, how do we fill in the remaining gaps?¹⁰ Do we have the right to put whatever we want in the gaps? Of course not. There are a finite number of options. We know the date of the address, so we can fill in the time reference – it cannot be days or months but must be years. The “lib_____” and the “_____dom” will produce many journal articles in support of “liberty” and “freedom” but either will work and neither destroys the intention of the author. Who brought forth this nation? Words like “fathers” and “forefathers” and “leaders” would be appropriate.

Finally, the last statement that “all _____ are created equal” might require “people” or “men.” The word “men” is the best choice considering Lincoln’s literary tendencies and the lack of political correctness during the days of Lincoln. To support the positions taken, scholars would need to find other speeches by Lincoln along with his personal letters and other accounts of and by him. Scholars would also need to examine the manners and customs of American writers and citizens in the mid-1800s.

It is important to remember that the situation for textual critics of the New Testament is nowhere as bleak as this single simple example!¹¹

Finding the Evidence

In dealing with the variants, we must first determine where errors appear in the various manuscripts. This would be an impossible job for most individuals. Thanks to some who have gone before us, we already know these errors. The editors of the modern Greek New

¹⁰ Technically, these “gaps” are called *lacunae* (plural) or *lacuna* (singular). A manuscript is *lacunose* if there are numerous gaps that have no physical evidence for those gaps. Modern editions will typically indicate the lacunae with ellipses (. . .).

¹¹ Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 109.

Testaments (UBS⁴ and Nestlé-Aland²⁷) have already examined all the manuscripts and recorded all the variants. Much of this work is done at the Institute for New Testament Research in Münster, Germany.¹² This amazing place houses a reproduction of every single Greek manuscript ever discovered. We will examine the Greek texts in the UBS and Nestlé-Aland more closely in a few pages when we do some critical examinations of a few particular passages.

Examining the Evidence

Textual criticism is not merely a science, rigid and constant in its workings. It is fluid and variable. It is a mistake to use the single issue of “manuscript age” as the determining factor, just as it is a mistake to take the single issue of “majority readings” as the determining factor. There are numerous items to consider, all of which fall into the two types of evidence that a text critic must examine: (1) external evidence and (2) internal evidence. Criticism must always begin from the external evidence and move towards the internal evidence. Internal evidence can never be the sole basis for a critical decision.¹³

External Evidence

External evidence comes from outside the text and comes primarily from three sources: (1) the Greek manuscripts, (2) ancient translations of the New Testament, and (3) citations from the early Church Fathers. Text critics examine the manuscripts to discern the writing materials (papyri, parchment, vellum, or paper) and handwriting styles (uncial or minuscule and other aspect of handwriting (paleography)). This examination of the biblical manuscripts is primary.

On a supplementary and corroborative level, text critics also examine the thousands of New Testaments in Latin, Ethiopic, Coptic, Syriac, Gothic, Armenian and Arabic (among others). Text critics also examine the many patristic citations found in lectionaries and other writings. The writings of these church leaders are most important because they allow us to fix with certainty the date of certain readings because we know when these men lived and died.

External evidence must take into consideration the following:¹⁴

1. **The date and character of the manuscript itself** – the preferred reading is *typically* found in the earliest manuscripts (though not always). In the earlier manuscripts, less time has elapsed between the original and the copies. At the same time, it is important to see that a particular manuscript is a good witness in agreement with its text-form because the route to the original wording is through the text types and not a direct line back to the original. However, there is no single manuscript or even groups of manuscripts that can be followed in every instance, though certain combinations of manuscripts are considered extremely reliable. Each passage must be considered on a case-by-case basis.

¹² Visit the Institute online at <http://www.uni-muenster.de/INTF/>.

¹³ Aland and Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 280.

¹⁴ Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 84-89.

2. **The genealogical solidarity between texts** – Most of the manuscripts were written in the same locales as others that match up well with one another. In other words, most manuscripts find their roots in a local ancestor that influenced all the “offspring.” When all or almost all of the manuscripts in a particular text family agree in a particular passage, one can conclude that the local ancestor contained that reading. Furthermore, if there is agreement across “family lines,” there is increased reason to regard that reading as original.¹⁵
3. **The geographical distribution of the witness** – The variant that is found in geographically widespread locations in the first few centuries of copying is more likely to be original than one that is found in only one location. If a third-century manuscript in Egypt, a third-century manuscript in Rome, and a third-century church father in Gaul all agreed on the wording in a particular verse, chances are very high that they are all reproducing a *much* earlier and *very* accurate source. There is no chance of collusion in such a widespread area – especially in the third century (no email!).

Internal Evidence

Internal evidence is collected from the text itself. Textual critics will examine a certain biblical author’s vocabulary, customary syntax and grammar, along with the context surrounding the variant in the book or letter. For example, if the author of John’s Gospel always uses the name “Jesus” instead of “Jesus Christ” or “Lord Jesus Christ,” we know that manuscripts that routinely use the longer titles have been changed.

Internal evidence makes much use of the various ways variants appeared in the manuscripts (see the previous chapter). We do this every day, as David Parker illustrates:

Everybody who reads the newspaper is expert in textual criticism, in coping with those distinctive errors of omission and displaced lines, and jumbling of lettrset. This sophisticated process of recognizing nonsense and picking up the sense is so natural to us the classical scholars of ancient Alexandria or the Benedictines of that we perform it without thinking, unaware of our kinship with St. Maur. Textual criticism is not an arcane science. It belongs to all human communication.¹⁶

Some of the errors in the above paragraph may take longer than others to figure out, but we can all establish what the original paragraph said. We can do this without comparing the statement to other occurrences. We can determine the original reading by examining the wording and eliminating known errors. This is working with internal evidence.

Evaluating the Evidence

Once all the work has been done with the external and internal evidence, the text critic will begin the evaluation stage. The aim of the evaluating process is to determine which

¹⁵ Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 35.

¹⁶ David Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*, in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 90. Parker is reminiscent of Bart Ehrman in his approach to the Bible.

reading from among all the variants has the best evidence for being the original reading. There are several principles that have been developed to aid in the process of evaluating the evidence to determine the original reading. While internal evidence is very helpful, it is fairly subjective and rests on the critic's presuppositions. The best method is to use external evidence first to determine the strength of the reading and then use internal evidence to support and confirm the position suggested by the external evidence or when the external evidence is not clear.¹⁷

Manuscripts must be weighed, not merely counted

The creators of the Majority Text merely recorded all available readings of each individual verse and declared that the reading that appeared most frequently was the original reading. This is preposterous at first glance. We obviously have fewer manuscripts from the immediate centuries after the completion of the New Testament and a vast majority of our surviving manuscripts were created after the twelfth century. The evidence is skewed from the beginning – the end result is known before the work has even begun! It would seem common sense to recognize that an earlier manuscript should be evaluated on a higher level than one copied 1500 years later.

To determine the proper weight to be given to a particular manuscript, we must primarily consider the date – the earlier the reading, the less opportunity for transmissional corruption by well-meaning scribes. This is not always a hard and fast rule because an early text may be corrupt and a much later text may be a good copy of a very good early manuscript. For example, manuscript 1739 from the 10th century is a very good text that matches up extremely closely to \mathfrak{P}^{46} from around A.D. 200.

Determine the Reading Most Likely to Give Rise to Other Readings

Many textual critics consider this to be the most important principle: the variant most likely to be original is the one that best accounts for the origin of all competing variants in terms of external and internal evidence.¹⁸ In other words, in comparing two or more variant readings, the textual critic tries to determine the logical reason for why a certain reading seems more likely to have been the reason for the other readings to have appeared. For example, in recording the name of Jesus, is it more likely that the original author wrote “Jesus” and later copyists expanded the name to reverence the Lord or did the original author write the “Lord Jesus Christ” and later copyists removed one or more of the designations? Obviously, the former makes more sense. The case is not always so simple.

The More Difficult Reading is Generally Preferable

This principle sounds contradictory but it is usually the correct way to go. If a reading appears to be the more difficult one but on further examination it may actually be what the author is attempting to say, it should be preferred.¹⁹ Why? Scribes had a near universal tendency to simplify readings. For example, in Matthew 5:22, several very

¹⁷ Wegner, *The Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, 248.

¹⁸ Michael Holmes, “Textual Criticism,” in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 112.

¹⁹ Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, 247.

early manuscripts tell us that “everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.” Other manuscripts read “everyone who is angry with his brother *without cause* shall be guilty before the court.” The external evidence favors the first reading (dates, text families, etc.). It is also easy to understand why later copyists would attempt to soften Jesus’ original words with the qualifier “without cause.” At the same time, it is unlikely that a later scribe would purposely make Jesus’ statement more difficult by deleting those same words.

Another example reveals the depths some scribes would go. In John 4, Jesus meets with the woman at the well. After a brief conversation, He tells her to “Go, call your husband, and come here” (4:16). The woman responds, “I don’t have a husband” (4:17). To this, Jesus says, “Correctly you have said, ‘A husband I don’t have.’”

It is at this point that some scribes felt uncomfortable. Jesus quoted the woman but it appears that He didn’t quote her accurately. So, to correct this “problem,” some scribes made a correction. However, they did not correct Jesus’ words but the woman’s! Jesus didn’t misquote the woman – she didn’t get it right in the first place! Only a few manuscripts record this attempt to create a smoother reading.

The Shorter Reading is Generally Preferable

This principle follows closely with the above principle in saying that scribes generally tended to add things instead of remove them. The tendency was to increase understanding by making the text simpler through explanation.

Determine Which Reading is More Appropriate in its Context

This final principle hinges strongly on internal evidence. In other words, this principle takes into account the author’s use of grammar, vocabulary, theology, and intentions to help determine the most plausible original reading. The classic example of this principle in action is the ending of Mark’s Gospel. There are several minor differences that seem to indicate the final twelve verses were not written by Mark. For example, Mary Magdalene is described in verse nine even though she is mentioned earlier in verse 1. Obviously, this criterion must be used with great caution.

Four Schools of Thought

Not all scholars consider the above principles equally valid. In concentrating on different principles more than others, four approaches to textual criticism have emerged with their accompanying scholars (through which they are most well known within the field of study). Though not all approaches are listed, some important approaches are:

Proponents of Radical Eclecticism

The word “eclectic” means “selecting what appears to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles” or “composed of elements drawn from various sources.”²⁰ In other words, to engage in textual criticism utilizing a wide variety of tools (manuscripts) is to emerge with an eclectic text.

²⁰ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eclectic>.

Radical eclecticism is an approach that prefers a text based solely on internal evidence. Proponents argue that the history of New Testament manuscripts is untraceable and it is therefore a mistake to try to determine readings based on text families and textual relationships. In other words, the reading of *any* manuscript may be original since no single manuscript or text family is “best.”²¹ This view is held by a minority of British scholars, most famously George D. Kilpatrick and J. Keith Elliot.

Proponents of Reasoned Eclecticism

Reasoned eclecticism holds that the text of the New Testament is based on both internal and external evidence but without a preference for any particular manuscript or text family.²² This view is held by such scholars as Bruce Metzger, Kurt Aland, Michael Holmes, Eldon Epp, and Daniel Wallace.

Proponents of the Textus Receptus

Adherents of the Textus Receptus believe that God supernaturally preserved the text of the New Testament through the manuscript we now call the Textus Receptus. This is a rare position held by King James Onlyists.

Proponents of the Majority Text

Adherents of the Majority Text hold that the Byzantine text type most closely approximates the original text of the New Testament. The Byzantine text type contains the majority of all New Testament manuscripts. However, there are significant differences between the Byzantine text type and the Majority text – they are not the same thing. There are also differences between these two and the Textus Receptus, although all three rely heavily on the Byzantine text type. Proponents of the Majority Text ignore the principle that biblical manuscripts must be weighed and not simply counted. The Majority Text emerges from a strict counting of agreements among the known biblical manuscripts. The most well-known proponents of the Majority Text are Zane Hodges, Arthur Farstad, and Maurice Robinson.

Why Did God Do It This Way?

Textual criticism is a scary place for most Christians. We love the Bible and proudly stand on the doctrines of its inerrancy and infallibility and authority. Most also believe in a certain doctrine of preservation. Almost all conservative Christians understand these positions and hold to them unswervingly. At the same time, these beliefs produce in many a rather strange understanding of how the Bible has been handed down to us over time. Issues of transmission and textual variants are confusing and troubling. Yet, it should not cause such internal debate. I believe that God, working through human beings, has preserved His Holy Word for us through these variant-ridden manuscripts. How can that be? The answer is revealed in a look at the major competing “holy book” in the world today – the Qur’an.

²¹ Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 37.

²² Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*, 37.

The Textual Transmission of the Qur'an

The Bible was written over a period of about 1,500 years by over forty men from different eras, different cultures, and different languages in different styles. The Qur'an, on the other hand, is said to have come into existence over a very short period of time – probably less than three decades.²³ Muslims believe that Muhammad memorized the words given to him by divine revelation and others later memorized those same words as he recited them. At some time, the words were written down in the Arabic language. The Qur'an is still written in Arabic and translations into other languages are not authoritative and considered “commentary” at best.

Belief in the perfection of the Qur'an precludes, by definition, interest in the study of the earliest copies of the book. It is considered impious to entertain even the possibility that the earliest manuscripts differ in any way from the modern version (a belief that many Christians ignorantly cling to regarding the Bible). In Muslim orthodoxy, the Qur'an as it exists today is exactly as it came into existence in the decades after Muhammad's reception of revelation.²⁴

The Islamic Equivalent of Tischendorf's Discovery

In 1972, workers in Yemen were restoring a mosque in Sana'a and stumbled across a large collection of Qur'anic manuscripts in the structure's roof. These manuscripts were stuffed into sacks and probably would have stayed there had their value not been realized by Qadhi Isma'il al-Akwa', the President of the Yemeni Antiquities Authority.²⁵ As there were no scholars capable of working on the documents in Yemen, the official called in scholars from Germany (non-Muslims!).

Almost ten years after the initial discovery, German scholar Gerd-R. Puin, a specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Qur'anic paleography based at Saarland University in Saarbrücken, Germany, was allowed to study the manuscripts in 1981. Over time, about 35,000 microfilm images were made. However, it was not until 1997 (27 years later!) that these images were allowed to leave the country so others could study the manuscripts. This low-key approach is taken for two reasons: to keep quiet the fact that Germans are working on these ancient Qur'ans and to keep quiet that *any work at all* is being done on these ancient Qur'ans.²⁶

²³ James White, “Examining Muslim Apologetics: The Bible versus the Qur'an,” *Christian Research Journal* 25:03, 32-41.

²⁴ Today's Qur'an can be traced to Uthman, the third Caliph (A.D. 644-656), who produced the “official” version of the Qur'an. Of course, the very fact that Uthman had to undertake such a revision should indicate to the open-minded investigator that a need existed for the work, which immediately causes one to wonder why one should accept the final decision of Uthman. Such a revision closes the door to any meaningful claim to be able to trace the text beyond the work of Uthman to Muhammad himself (White, “Examining Muslim Apologetics,” 41fn5.).

²⁵ Toby Lester, “What is the Koran?” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999. Found online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199901/koran> (accessed April 30, 2008).

²⁶ “To date just two scholars have been granted extensive access to the Yemeni fragments: Puin and his colleague H.-C. Graf von Bothmer, an Islamic-art historian also based at Saarland University. Puin and Von Bothmer have published only a few tantalizingly brief articles in scholarly publications on what they have discovered in the Yemeni fragments. They have been reluctant to publish partly because until recently

These studies indicate that these manuscripts are some of the earliest known Qur'anic materials. Furthermore, the documents provide incontrovertible proof of variation from today's Qur'an in both the reading of the text and the order of the text.

Compare this laxity in scholarship to the great finds of biblical manuscripts through the years. In particular, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls attracted worldwide attention and scholars from around the world were doing anything they could to get a glimpse of the manuscripts and to study them for any length of time. There is not even a hint of excitement in the Islamic community or academy. Christians wish to see more and more light shed on our ancient documents. Muslims take the information learned and twist it to defame the Scriptures. Hypocritically, these same Muslims resist any inquiry into the history of their holy book.

It is a fact that Christian scholars welcome the discovery of new manuscripts and hope for the discovery of even more. On the other hand, Muslims quietly hope that any new discoveries of ancient Qur'anic texts are not noticed. The Christian's claim that God has preserved His Word and Christians can trust their Bibles is a statement that can be substantiated in facts. The same views espoused by the Muslim is a statement of faith that cannot be vindicated by any study of the facts.

There are variations in the texts of the New Testament and any Christian interested in honesty will admit this. At the same time, the knowing Christian will not be stymied by this. The introductions of variants into the textual stream only increase our confidence in the original wording of the Bible. Variants prove that there has never been a time in the history of the world when any one person, one group, or one church had the ability to go throughout the world and collect all the manuscripts of the Bible and make wholesale purposeful alterations in the text. If that were the case, we would have absolutely no way of knowing what the original text said!

For instance, suppose a religious leader in the Middle East did not believe that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. Let's further suppose that he had possession of a copy of John's Gospel with all the Christological propositions in the first chapter. This leader could very easily create a new copy of John's Gospel and alter anything he wanted in the opening fourteen verses. This new version might be extremely influential in his area. However, what about all the other copies that already existed in lands as far away as Rome? Would the Middle Eastern scribe's corruption amount to much? Of course not.

they were more concerned with sorting and classifying the fragments than with systematically examining them, and partly because they felt that the Yemeni authorities, if they realized the possible implications of the discovery, might refuse them further access. Von Bothmer, however, in 1997 finished taking more than 35,000 microfilm pictures of the fragments, and has recently brought the pictures back to Germany. This means that soon Von Bothmer, Puin, and other scholars will finally have a chance to scrutinize the texts and to publish their findings freely—a prospect that thrills Puin. 'So many Muslims have this belief that everything between the two covers of the Koran is just God's unaltered word,' he says. 'They like to quote the textual work that shows that the Bible has a history and did not fall straight out of the sky, but until now the Koran has been out of this discussion. The only way to break through this wall is to prove that the Koran has a history too. The Sana'a fragments will help us to do this.'" (Lester, "What is the Koran?").

Looking at his copies from our perspective today, it would be obvious what had happened. The insertion of entire doctrines, such as the “later invention” of the deity of Christ, is simply impossible to conceive for any student of history. Furthermore, the deletion of entire doctrines, such as the alteration of words in John 14-16 where Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit but Muslims insist He was referring to the later coming of Muhammad, are equally impossible.²⁷ To put it simply, the Bible’s reach expanded so far so quickly as to make wholesale changes impossibility. However, this type of change occurred in wholesale fashion in the Muslim textual tradition. As such, we have no real way of knowing exactly what Muhammad actually believed.

Why I Believe We Have the Original Words of the Bible

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, once a variant reading entered into the text stream, it remained there – forever. Scribes were amazingly conservative in their copying, refusing to delete anything. Even when a scribe might make a mistake that is obvious, the later scribes copying from his faulty work would be hesitant to remove completely the errant reading. We call this tendency to continue to include variants the “tenacity of the text.”

The understanding of textual tenacity is vitally important. While we do have to engage in the study of textual variants, it also means that *the original readings of the original documents remain in our manuscript tradition*.²⁸ The original reading is there! We can say with confidence that we have the original writings of the apostles. We can openly embrace the relatively small number of variants (most of which are completely insignificant) because those same variants help to reveal the true wording of the text.

²⁷ Also consider these facts: We have fragments of John’s Gospel from the second century with complete manuscripts of the Gospel that predate Muhammad by 400 years. Why would a scribe from that time period alter John’s text to remove a reference to a person he knew nothing about – either positive or negative knowledge? Furthermore, no variant readings indicate any alteration of the text whatsoever in manuscripts before or after Muhammad’s time. Third, there is absolutely no textual evidence that supports this wild claim that *paraclete* was originally written as *periklytos*, or “the highly exalted one.” (White, “Examining Muslim Apologetics,” 40).

²⁸ White, “Examining Muslim Apologetics,” 40.