INTERTESTAMENTAL
THE ACCURACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
New Testament Survey – Lesson 2 Part 1 Supplement

For the last five hundred years, scholars have worked to reproduce, letter by letter, the New Testament writings as they were written in their autographed originals. Through this time period, Bruce Manning Metzger (1914-2007) and Kurt Aland were two of the most preeminent and accomplished scholars. Together they worked on producing the Greek New Testament text that is used by most every scholar and modern New Testament translation. Metzger published a number of important works, including a trilogy on the integrity of the New Testament. Each volume is a staple in the library of most every New Testament scholar who deals with textual criticism. One volume centers on the New Testament text, including how it was transmitted, the errors that crept in and the work to restore it.[1] The second in the trilogy explores the various early manuscripts of the New Testament, exploring their origins and relationships to the original writings and to each other.[2] The third volume discusses the process behind the assembling of the New Testament as a coherent whole ('the "canon").[3] These are not popular books written to generate sales and postings on the New York Times bestseller list (a la the Ehrman books discussed in the earlier lesson handout). They are first rate scholarly works that most scholars readily accede give an accurate and solid discussions of the facts.

In the principal handout on this lesson, we discussed the fact that among the 5,500 or so Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available today, there are several hundred thousand areas where the scribes have made mistakes in copying. Scholars, of course, are able to resolve almost all of those with little or no dispute over what the original manuscript would have said. Many of the divergent readings are simple spelling errors, accidently dropped phrases, repeated phrases, or something similar. One of the most famous of the divergent reading is Codex 109, residing today in the British Museum. Some careless scribe made this manuscript of the four gospels around 1326 AD. His error reminds me of a math test I took in third grade. My teacher had written the test in two columns,

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[1] Metzger, Bruce, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, (Oxford 1992)

[2] Metzger, Bruce, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations*, (Oxford 1977).

[3] Metzger, Bruce, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, (Oxford 1987).

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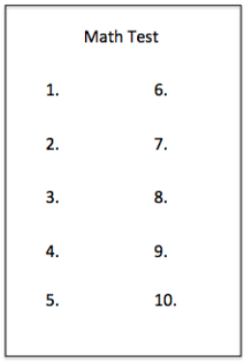
numbering the problems down the page. In my mind and carelessness, I thought the problems were numbered across. So on my answer sheet, I got problem one right, but I put the answer for problem six as the answer to problem two. I put the answer to two as the answer the three, seven for four and three for five, etc. I worked every problem right and failed the test!



This is very similar to what we have in Codex 109. The genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38 was in two columns in the source document used by the scribe. He did not realize that and made his copy as if it was in one column. This means in Codex 109, almost everyone is listed as the son of the wrong father, including God himself listed as the son of Phares!

Of course, these errors in copying are easy to spot and easy to fix. At the end of the day, Metzger puts the state of knowledge about the original texts into proper perspective:

> It should be mentioned that, though there are thousands of divergencies in wording among the manuscripts of the Bible (more in the New Testament than in the Old), the overwhelming majority of such variant readings involve inconsequential details, such as alternative spellings, order of words, and interchange of synonyms… In any event, no doctrine of the Christian faith depends solely upon a passage that is textually uncertain.[4]

The other main person who stands out from all others for the last 100 years for his diligent work in assembling the best Greek version with analysis of variant readings was German scholar Kurt Aland (1915-1994). For decades Aland produced the most accurate analysis of differences in the various significant manuscripts. Like Metzger, his work is important to scholars today. Along with his wife Barbara, a scholar in her own right, Aland warned readers against overreacting to the simple numbers of variant readings:

> Textual critics themselves, and New Testament specialists even more so, not to mention laypersons, tend to be fascinated by differences and to forget how many of them may be due to chance or to normal scribal tendencies, and how rarely significant variants

[4] Metzger, Bruce, The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content (Abingdon Press 2003), at 327.

> occur—yielding to the common danger of failing to see the forest for the trees.[5]

This does not make for sensational headlines or tabloid-esque book titles like Ehrman's popular works, but they represent the solid truth of the best of scholasticism. They are the facts!

The few passages that give scholars serious pause were set out in the lesson handout from last week. In addition to that information that we are covering today, we supplement last week's handout with some additional manuscript data.

MANUSCRIPTS

The uninitiated might ask, "If the early church believed in the inspiration and importance of the New Testament writings, why didn't they keep and treasure the originals?" Ironically, it was the fact that the church *did* treasure the Scriptures that they are no longer with us. In the lifetime of the early church historian Eusebius (c.262-339), who wrote most of his works after becoming a bishop in 313, his eyewitness accounts set out the horrid persecutions under the Roman Emperor Diocletion. In late 302 or early 303, Diocletion issued an edict,

> ordering the churches to be razed to their foundations, and the Scriptures to be put out of existence by fire.[6]

Reading early church history records many other times of persecution and martyrdom that would have, by all accounts, also resulted in the destruction of Scriptures supporting or endorsing the faith. The amazing thing are the many manuscripts that survived! That is because the writings were not simple musings or instructions from old dead people. They were understood to be treasured words of inspiration. They were words that came as a fulfillment to the prophesies of Jesus recorded in John 14-16, that the Holy Spirit would remind the apostles of important events, would explain the significance and meaning of Jesus' teachings, and would give them the words to testify as they should.

A confounding reason for the paucity of early manuscripts is the effect of climate on papyrus writings. Many early texts were written on papyrus, the fibrous material made from pressing the stems of the papyrus plant (from which also we

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[5] Aland, Kurt and Aland, Barbara, *The Text of the New Testament*, (Eerdmans 1987), at 28.

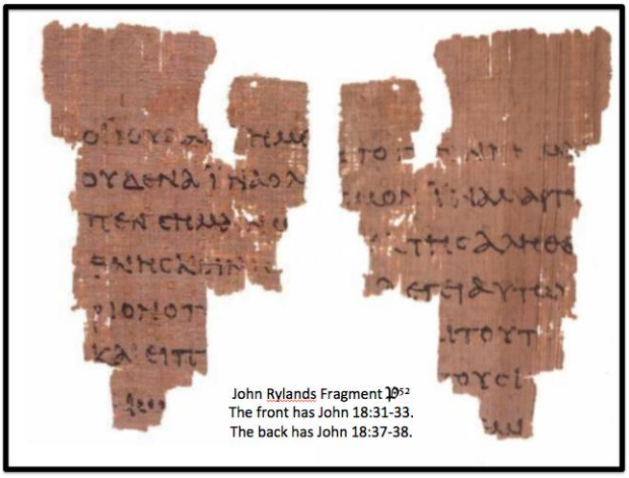
[6] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk 8, Ch. 2, as translated by Deferrari, Roy, *The Fathers of the Church*, (Catholic University of America Press 1953), Vol. 29, at 167.

derive the term "paper"). The papyrus, like other plants, decayed readily in humid and wet conditions. With very few exceptions, the papyrus fragments recovered from the first 300 years of the church all come from the hot and arid lands of Egypt.[7]

Just because we no longer have the original manuscripts, and even though so many early manuscripts were destroyed and burned, we are not without good solid early witnesses to what the original documents said. Our witnesses come from three main sources: (1) surviving fragments and manuscripts of New Testament writings, (2) quotes of the New Testament found in the writings of the early church fathers, and (3) early translations of the Greek New Testament into other languages.

SURVIVING FRAGMENTS

Likely the oldest fragment known at this time is a small papyrus fragment of John's gospel, called the John Rylands Fragment (for the museum/library that was holding the fragment). The fragment was first published for the world in 1935, and is often known in scholarly circles by its papyrus designation, **p**^{52}.



Although some have questioned the dating, a preponderance of scholars have dated the script to the first half of the second century, some further narrowing it down to 118-135AD.[8]

In early 2012, New Testament scholar Dan Wallace announced a recent discovery of a first century fragment of the Gospel of Mark was set for publication in 2013. At this point, no details are known, and a number of scholars have adopted a "wait and see" attitude. Regardless of what the facts ultimately bear out, it is worth remembering that there are likely a number of early manuscripts to be found!

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[7] Aland, Kurt and Aland, Barbara, *The Text of the New Testament*, (Eerdmans 1987), at 59.

[8] Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 38ff. See the challenges to this dating summarized in the challenge by Nongbri, Brent, "The Use and Abuse of p^{52}: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel", *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Jan. 2005), at 23-48.

Even without finding more manuscripts, there are about 50 fragments extant from the early days of church persecution, and substantially more once Christianity became the state religion of Rome under the Emperor Constantine (272-337). In addition to writing the early church history referenced previously, Eusebius authored a biography on the life of Constantine. In the biography, Eusebius reproduced a letter from the Emperor to Eusebius where the Emperor ordered fifty complete copies of Scripture:

> Order fifty volumes with ornamental leather bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use, to be copied by skilled calligraphists well trained in the art, copies that is of the Divine Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in church.[9]

This order came in the fourth century, which is the time period of production of several of our best and most important Biblical manuscripts.

One of the most important and manuscripts from this time period is called the "Codex Sinaiticus." "Codex" is the word for old books that wereassembled from handwritten pages. Sinaiticus refers to where the pages to this codex were found. The Codex Sinaiticus was discovered in St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai by Dr. Constantine von Tischendorf around 1844. Several Old Testament pages are missing, but the New Testament is complete. Because this manuscript is beautiful and is typically dated to about 350AD, some scholars suspect it might be one of the fifty copies ordered by Constantine.[10] Principally using this manuscript, Tischendorf produced the best Greek text of his day, far eclipsing the earlier works of Erasmus, Estienne and others discussed in the earlier handout.. In addition to its invaluable help in aiding restoration of the autographs, reading the manuscript is illustrative of how many ancient codexes were made. It was prepared in a scriptorium, what we might call an ancient print shop. Scriptoriums employed lectors or readers who would slowly read aloud a text. Employed scribes were experts at writing as the lector read. Ten scribes writing simultaneously could make ten copies as one lector read, in effect cutting the time of copy reproduction 90% from one person simply copying a manuscript before him.[11] Any such

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[9] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book 4, Ch. 36, translated by Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart (Oxford 1999), at 166-167.

[10] Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 7.

[11] An interesting side note, scribes were typically paid by the line of what they wrote. The Codex Sinaiticus would have generally made a scribe somewhere around 30,000 denari (although by 350 AD, the denarius was no longer minted). See, Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 15. It is hard to put a value on that into today's monetary terms. At the time of Jesus, a denarius represented a day's wages for an unskilled worker or common soldier. Inflation set in, and a

method is always subject to errors as one mishears a word, or as one misunderstands a word ("great" or "grate"?). Therefore, after the scribes finished their writing, the scriptorium employed a corrector whose job was to proof the text and make necessary corrections. With modern science, we are generally able to discern both the allegedly erroneous underlying text as well as the corrected text. It appears that several correctors were involved in Sinaiticus at its first stage. 200-300 years later, another group of correctors made additional changes to Sinaiticus, indicating a different standard than the one used by the reader at the original scriptorium.

A second early and important codex is called Codex Vaticanus, after its location in the Vatican. This is the codex we pictured in the primary lesson with its marginal scribal note chiding an earlier copyist's attempts to change a word for accuracy.

This brings up another important subject in the reconstruction of original manuscripts. The ancient world had multiple centers of learning and Christian thought. Not surprisingly, different centers developed their own texts that they used and propagated through copies. Scholars generally divide early texts into groups or categories that seem to have similar places of origin in their variances. Constantly evolving, as more and more manuscripts are identified, these categories allow scholars to make certain assessments about manuscripts, that then help to identify where those manuscripts have common changes from what is likely the original text.

The scholars approach these many manuscripts a bit like my grandmother approached a jigsaw puzzle, just one with 5,500 pieces! The scholars try to group the pieces. Grandmother would separate out the end pieces. She would then take a bunch of paper plates and organize the pieces into groups based on commonality. Then within each plate, she would discern shades of differences in the pieces in an effort to put them together so that one piece fit into another. Scholars take the many manuscripts and fragments and separate them out into groups. Certain defining pieces we might consider "end pieces." They then take remaining pieces, and by looking at their likely dates of origin and the tendencies of the pieces to have certain details added, or certain phrasings or spellings, they put these into groups. The largest identifiable groups are classifications of "text-types." These divisions seem to draw basic lines of demarcation from which different subtext-types, tribes, and families of documents descended. The text-types are typically associated with regions, like a group from Alexandria, Egypt called the "Alexandrian" text-type or a group from Syria and the East called, variously, the

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denarius was not worth as much into the third century, the last century of production. Still, we can safely assume that the costs of a codex like Sinaiticus was quite large!

"Byzantine," "Syrian," or "Koine" text-type.[12] Scholars also have a "Western Text-type" and what one New Testament scholar began calling a "Neutral" text-type. (There is serious scholastic dispute over whether there is properly a "Neutral" group.[13]) These lines are not always clear, and a number of manuscripts fragments seem to predate (and anticipate) these groups.

This step in assessing and classifying manuscripts goes a long way in helping reconstruct original text forms from those in the thousands of copies. It is an arduous process, but one that for a hundred years has occupied the research of many fine scholars. These scholars regularly publish their conclusions making the results open for critique and examination by other scholars. It is one major reason after countless adjustments, most scholars stand in agreement on the major reconstruction of original documents. The manuscript evidence is not the only source scholars turn to in restoring the New Testament texts. They also readily use quotations found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

APOSTOLIC FATHERS

After the death of the apostles, the leaders in the church for the next few hundred years are termed today the "apostolic fathers." These are fathers of the church that received authority as successors to the apostles. These men wrote many works that are still available to us today. Their writings frequently quote Scripture, offering an important aide to the scholars working on restoring the New Testament text. The fathers are readily dated and this gives the scholars insight into the times when certain errors crept into the manuscripts. We also are generally able to determine where location of the father. That assists in helping determine when a variant reading or manuscript text-type arose in one region or another.

One drawback to the fathers' usage for this endeavor is the need to determine whether a father was meaning to quote or to approximate a particular Scripture. Additionally, sometimes the fathers were apparently quoting passages from memory, rather than by copying a text before them. We also have manuscripts where the father would reference a part of a Scripture and a later secretary would come back later and fill in the whole Scripture.

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[12] This is the text-type of the manuscripts used by Erasmus in his Greek editions (called the "*Textus Receptus*") in the 16th century. A bit unfortunate, as time has taught scholars that the Byzantine text has a number of large deficiencies. See Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 4.

[13] See, Aland at 14.

Even with these shortcomings, the apostolic fathers' writings play an important role as early witnesses. For example, the prodigious writer Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, quoted Scripture often. Considering that he died around 202, less than 150 years after Paul, his witness is invaluable. Justin Martyr, another writer who quoted Scripture often was martyr around 165, almost 40 years earlier thank Irenaeus. A Syrian named Tatian wrote a most important work around 170. Tatian worked "through" the "four" gospels, combining them into one flowing text. The Greek for "through four" is δια τεσσαρων or *dia tessaron*, and his work is accordingly called the "Diatessaron." This work will get cited in a later lesson for its testimony to the fact that the church recognized the four gospels of the canon very early, certainly before Tatian's gospel harmony. One of our older fragments of Tatian's Diatessaron is a copy made before 256-257.

It is because of these and so many other works of the fathers that Metzger was able to affirm,

> So extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.[14]

FOREIGN VERSIONS

The early church was a missionary church. Jesus had charged his apostles to go into all the world preaching the news of the kingdom of God. (A good historical question is "Why else would the apostles have done so? Why didn't Christianity stay a Jewish sect in Judah, not unlike the group at Qumran?" Because of the charge of the master!) Unlike all other faiths before them, and in spite of the sacrifices and personal dangers, history records the apostles doing exactly that, going into the world proclaiming the resurrected Jesus.

After the apostles, the church continued in the Master's charge and missionary efforts grew. Just as in modern times, missionary efforts need readily available and understandable Scriptures to help establish people in the word of God. IT is not surprising, therefore, that we have a number of very early translations of the Greek New Testament into important languages of different people groups.

Scholars recognize that by the second century, there were New Testament translations into other tongues. Early translations included texts into different Syriac versions, old Latin versions, and Coptic versions. By the mid-300's the

[14] Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 86.

missionary to the German Goths, Ulfilas, created the Gothic alphabet so he could translate the Scriptures into Gothic. Shortly thereafter, Christian missionaries devised an Armenian alphabet and translated the Scriptures into Armenian. There were many other versions from these periods, and while these assist scholars, there are inherent limitations with them.

The people involved in translating these texts did not always have the best command of Greek. Their works were far from perfect, not only because of personal limitation, but also because of the limitations of their languages. Greek has a definite article (the word "the"), while Latin does not. Greek has different tenses that express past events, sometimes emphasizing the historicity of the events while other times emphasizing the ongoing consequences of the events. These features are not always readily reproduced in other languages, forcing the translator to take liberties or to produce a translation that is not as simple as one word for one word.

CONCLUSION

As we consider the vast resources available to scholars, it is no wonder that there are so few areas where there are serious questions as to what the original texts looked like. While people may sensationalize the idea of errors, and while some make great money off their bestselling books written to strike fear in the heart of the believer, there is really great security that we are using Scriptures that accurately reflect the writings of the originals. There is no document from antiquity that even closely compares to the Biblical writings for security in reproducing the integrity of the originals!

With this supplement in hand, we can now return to the earlier lesson and look at the handful of areas where some scholars still discuss what the original text resembled, holding the same points for home as the last lesson.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.…*" (2 Tim. 1:12-13).

   Paul does not say, I know "what" I have believed. Nor does he say, "I know what I have read." He tells Timothy about his knowledge of Jesus.

Paul regularly laid his life on the line, finally dying a martyr's death, out of his conviction over who Christ was, what Christ had done, and what Christ held in the future for Paul. We have Scriptures that fairly and accurately show Jesus as Christ, Savior of the world. We never need doubt because of an ongoing debate over a handful of verses in the text.

2. "*And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*" (Mark 16:8).

   This is the abrupt ending to Mark. We do not know how he truly ended his gospel, and may never know unless we find some more ancient and authoritative copy. But the ending of Mark, as abrupt as it is, is not the end of the story for anyone. The resurrected Jesus marks the beginning of the story for the believer, who is delivered from fear to faith! In the resurrection, life has meaning and the future holds promise.

3. "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*" (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

   As Paul drew his last letter to Timothy to a close, he admonished Timothy to continue in living in the knowledge he had gained from Holy Scripture. These writings, even with variant readings (which were present in Old Testament texts at the time of Paul), were still, in God's care, "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." That is no less true today. Amen!