

DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

Variations in Ancient Texts

Lesson #8

When studying the doctrine of the Bible, it becomes obvious that we no longer have any of the original manuscripts written by the Biblical authors. It also becomes obvious that, among the ancient manuscripts that we do have, there are differences. This usually causes people to ask, “How can we say the Bible is without error if the ancient manuscripts that are translated into the Bible disagree?” This is a very common and important question which forces any serious student of the Bible to investigate just how differences in the ancient manuscripts apply to the authority and inerrancy of God’s Word. How did errors creep into copies of the original text? Are the errors and textual discrepancies large or small? How many are there and to what extent do they alter the meaning of the text? In this lesson we will examine some of the ways errors have crept into the various ancient manuscripts of the Bible. We will look at examples of these errors and seek to understand various ways the original inspired text might have been corrupted as uninspired men copied the manuscripts through the ages. In this lesson, we will examine the errors and discrepancies of the ancient Biblical text. Then, in our next lesson, we will learn how textual scholars sift through the variants in order to identify the original text. Neil Lightfoot has said:

It is a fact that the New Testament text has been transmitted to us through the hands of copyists. It is also a fact that, since these hands were human, they were susceptible to the slips and faults of all human hands. It is not true, therefore, that God has guided the many different scribes as they executed their tasks of copying the Sacred Scriptures. The Scriptures, although divine, have been handed down through the centuries by means of copies, just like any other book. A failure to recognize this would make it necessary for God to perform a miracle every time a scribe picked up a pen and ink. And this assumption is almost inconceivable!¹

I. KEY TERMS TO KNOW

- A. **Exemplar** is the text or manuscript that is being copied from. It is the source of information for the new manuscript.
- B. **Original** can refer to the “exemplar” as stated above, or the original inspired text, which is often referred to as the “original autograph.”
- C. **Earlier text or manuscript** is a phrase used to describe a manuscript that is older. It is usually assumed that the older the manuscript, since it is closer to the original, has less errors and is more accurate.
- D. **Copy** is any portion of or the whole Bible that has been copied from another manuscript or even an original.

¹ Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, pg. 67.

- E. **Copyist** is a person who makes copies of the Biblical text by hand. They are often referred to as “Scribes,” as that was the Jewish name for those who made copies of the Scriptures.
- F. **Translation** is any copy or translation of the Bible into another language. Any time any text is copied or written in a different language, it can be called a “translation.”
- G. **Lower Criticism** is the legitimate field of study that attempts to determine what the original inspired text is through scientific methods of studying ancient manuscripts.
- H. **Higher criticism** is a liberal field of study that seeks to destroy the claims of Biblical authority, accuracy, and inspiration. Higher critics are, for the most part, self-proclaimed Bible scholars, who are in reality unbelieving heretics.

II. HOW DID THE ERRORS CREEP INTO THE BIBLICAL TEXT?²

There are two ways errors have crept into the Biblical text over the centuries. First, there are *unintentional errors*, that is errors that were introduced unknowingly by a copyist. This would include common mistakes of spelling errors, transposing letters, or misreading the original. Secondly, there are intentional errors. Intentional errors are cases where the copyist made a conscious decision to change the text for some reason. He may think that his purposeful alteration of the text represents the original, but he may be mistaken. Hence, his intentions may be good, and he may be convinced he did the right thing, but in actuality, he may have introduced an error into the text. Hence his actions would be categorized under “intentional errors.” There were, of course, those who knowingly misrepresented the text and they, too, would be those who intentionally introduced a textual error.

A. Mistakes crept in because of bad eyesight

The Bible was copied for over 1300 years before reading glasses were invented. This means there was virtually no way a person could see clearly if they had less than perfect vision. Even if they had a slight astigmatism, it would be difficult for them to distinguish between certain letters which were similar in form. Unintentional mistakes would creep in during the copying process. As others read the text, some of the errors would immediately become obvious but others would change the meaning and go unrecognized. Textual critics can recognize some of these errors easily by comparing ancient manuscripts found in a certain geographical location from different time periods, and by comparing these with other ancient manuscripts from different times and places. The chart below indicates how some letters might be confused by scribes with vision problems.

²The below summary of various reasons for scribal errors was taken from Bruce Metzger’s excellent work, *The Text of the New Testament*, pgs. 186-206.

Examples of letters in English and Greek that might be confused in copying							
Original	Error	Original	Error	Original	Error	Original	Error
IV	N	LI	U	Θ	O	ΓI	Π
NV	M	VV	W	ΛΛ	M	Δ	Λ
TV	N	L	I	AA	M	Τ	Γ
Q	O	D	P	ΛI	N	Ω	O

B. Mistakes crept in by confusing similar lines

Sometimes a scribe would be copying a text for hours and would come upon a section of the Bible that contained two lines that had similar endings called “homoeoteleuton.” His eye might read the first line correctly, copy it correctly, then he might mistakenly read the last part of the second line (since the beginning is similar, and add the end of the second line to the beginning of the first line. It is easy to understand how this might happen in between looking, dipping your pen in ink and writing. This mistake is called “parablepsis,” and is illustrated below.

Examples of lines that might be confused in copying	
As you read this you need to remember that humans err. As you read this you need to read the right line.	Similar beginnings
The first line might be read and copied, “ <i>As you read this you need to</i> ”, then after writing, the copyist might dip his pen in the ink, and mistakenly look at the second line and write, “ <i>read the right line</i> ” skipping the ending of the first line. The copyist would move to the next verse	
It is common for humans to error and make mistakes. Even professional copyists error and make mistakes.	Similar Endings
The second line might be skipped because the endings of both are identical and the copiest might write the first part of the first line “ <i>It is common for humans to</i> ” and then he might dip his pen, look at the original, and this time read the end of the second line, instead of the first and write “ <i>error and make mistakes.</i> ” Then he would move on to the next line, missing the beginning of the second.	

C. Mistakes crept in because of hearing incorrectly

Sometimes groups of scribes would copy down what they heard from a person who slowly read the original. The reader or cantor would speak out the word, then a group of copyists would write it down. While listening, the copyist might hear something different than what was spoken and might mistakenly write down a synonym or word that was similar but spelled slightly different. For instance “a” and “e” sometimes make similar sounds. Also, diphthongs (double vowels) like “ai” might be mistaken for “i” or “ou” for “u” or “oo” for “o.” In the Greek language several diphthongs sound identical or similar to other single long vowels. The

scribes would then hear incorrectly and substitute the wrong letters in place of what the original had. These errors, or textual variants as they are called, would be easily identified as spelling errors, or in some cases, would create a new word that had a different meaning.

What was read and what might be heard and written			
Read	Heard and written	Read	Heard and written
There	Their or They're	speak	peak
wait	weight	skill	still
red	read	die	dry

D. Mistakes crept in because of errors in judgement

Other mistakes crept into the text because scribes were careless and possibly tired or bored. You can imagine how tedious the work of copying the Bible by hand was and after hours and days of this the content might be ignored as the scribe would press like a machine to complete the manuscript. Two famous examples, which come from the New Testament, illustrate this. In one case, a certain Greek manuscript of **II Cor. 8:4** says, **“begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints,”** has a note in the margin describing a certain deviation in the text, *“it is found thus in many of the copies.”* Later, the next scribe actually wrote the marginal note in the text as if Paul was instructing the Corinthians, **“begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, it is found thus in many of the copies.”** The addition does not even remotely fit the context of **II Cor. 8:4** and is a clear case of a lapse in judgment. Bruce Metzger sights possibly the most famous scribal error of all times:

What is perhaps the most atrocious of all scribal blunders is contained in the fourteenth-century codex 109. This manuscript of the Four Gospels, now in the British Museum, was transcribed from a copy which must have had Luke’s genealogy of Jesus (iii.23-38) in two columns of twenty-eight lines to the column. Instead of transcribing the text by following the columns in succession, the scribe of 109 copied the genealogy by following the lines across the two columns. As a result, not only is almost everyone made the son of the wrong father, but, because the names apparently did not fill the last column of the exemplar [original], the name of God now stands within the list instead of at its close (it should end, of course, ‘. . . Adam, the son of God’). In this manuscript God is actually said to have been the son of Aram, and the source of the whole race is not God but Phares!³

³Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pgs. 194-195.

An example of a scribal mistake that might occur is illustrated below:

A text with a marginal note creeps into the text when the next copyist makes a copy of the text	
Original text (exemplar)	Marginal notes or scribal comments
For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. Rom. 8:15-17	The Holy Spirit Christ Jesus, who was crucified for our sins
New copy	Marginal notes moved into text
For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The <i>Holy Spirit</i> Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ <i>Jesus, who was crucified for our sins</i> , if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. Rom. 8:15-17	The copyist might wonder if the marginal notes were originally part of the text but accidentally left out. Not wanting to leave out any of God's Word and figuring that the addition of the notes do not corrupt what the Bible teaches, he might include them accidentally, yet on purpose.

E. Mistakes may have crept in on purpose by well intentioned scribes

Some scribes, in all good faith, may have purposely altered a text thinking they were fixing it. They may have had a group of manuscripts they were copying from. The oldest manuscript they were using may have had an erroneous reading and then in some newer manuscripts copyists may have caught the error and removed it. But later, a scribe, who did not know the reason for the error and did not know that it should have been removed, might assume that it had accidentally had been left out and then reintroduced the mistake back into the text. We know that scribes did this because, in one instance, a scribe from the thirteenth century wrote in the margin a rebuke to whatever scribe altered the text before him. The marginal note reads, "Fool and knave, can't you leave the old reading alone and not alter it!" This tells us that different scribes had different opinions of what was the original reading. One scribe may have had better manuscripts deleting an actual error but another well intentioned scribe, who didn't have access to the same earlier manuscripts, may have put it back into the text thinking it belonged. Notice the example below.

Example of how mistakes were purposefully added in	
Earlier manuscript with error	Scribal thoughts
<p>For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The <i>Holy</i> Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ <i>Jesus, who was crucified for our sins</i>, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. Rom. 8:15-17</p>	<p>The scribe has a large number of very old early manuscripts, none of which contain the word "Holy" or "Jesus, who was crucified for our sins." He is confident that these were added by mistake, probably marginal notes that were accidentally included into the text. So, he fixes the text to conform to the majority of very early and more reliable manuscripts.</p>
Copy with error removed	
<p>For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. Rom. 8:15-17</p>	<p>This copy reflects accurately the original.</p>
Copy with error reintroduced	
<p>For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The <i>Holy</i> Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ <i>Jesus, who was crucified for our sins</i>, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. Rom. 8:15-17</p>	<p>Another scribe comes along, he does not have very many ancient manuscripts but the oldest one he does have includes the words "Holy" and "Jesus, who was crucified for our sins." He reasons to himself that some half wit, sleepy scribe left out the words "<i>holy</i>" and "<i>Jesus, who was crucified for our sins.</i>" So, he adds them intentionally, but incorrectly, back into the text.</p>

F. Mistakes crept in when scribes made spelling and grammar adjustments

As time went on, certain rules of grammar, spelling, and syntax changed and various passages were seen by some scribes as having such poor grammar that they assumed a mistake must have been made. They then would "fix" the text and adjust the syntax to comply with what they thought was the correct grammar and syntax. Yet, their well intentioned adjustment might have been a corruption of the original, which in its day used acceptable grammar and syntax or which used poor grammar and syntax but yet was still inspired. In some instances, lower criticism has discovered several attempts to try and fix a single case of awkward grammar or spelling. An example is given below of what might happen.

An example of wrongly adjusting grammar and syntax	
Example of what the original might read	Scribal thought
<p>“The judgement is this, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.” Jn. 3:19</p>	<p>Scribe notes that the normal reading should be, “This is the judgement.” He also notes that the word “judgement” has an “e” and that it should be spelled without an “e” so he removes the “e” from the word “judgment.” The scribe has changed the sentence structure and the spelling of a word, because he truly believes the text has been corrupted, but it has not.</p>
Incorrectly modified text	
<p>“This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.” Jn. 3:19</p>	<p>Scribe changes the text to read more smoothly according to what he believes is proper grammar and syntax. Yet, he has corrupted the text unwittingly.</p>

G. Mistakes crept in when scribes accidently harmonized the Scriptures

Scribes often had large portions of the Scripture memorized. Errors were made when a scribe was very familiar with all of the gospels and while copying a specific gospel would accidently add something from another gospel that he had memorized. Lower criticism, for example, has found this in the Lord’s prayer where one copyist added some of the words from Matthew’s version of the Lord’s prayer (Mt. 6:9-13) to Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer (Lk. 2:2-4). Another example is when a scribe added words from Paul’s testimony in Acts 9:5-6 to Paul’s testimony in Acts 26:14-15.

Example of how scribes might add words from well known parallel texts	
Original text from Matthew	Original Text from Luke
<p>“Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. ‘Give us this day our daily bread. ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ‘And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]’ Mt. 6:9-13</p>	<p>“When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. ‘Give us each day our daily bread. ‘And forgive us our sins For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.’” Lk. 2:2-4</p>

<p>Example of how scribes might add words from well known parallel texts</p>
<p>New Copy of Luke might read like this with words of Matthew accidentally inserted (indicated by italics)</p>
<p>“When you pray, say: ‘<i>Our Father who is in heaven</i>, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. ‘Give us each day our daily bread. ‘And forgive us our sins For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation, <i>but deliver us from evil.</i>” Lk. 2:2-4</p>

H. Mistakes crept in when scribes rounded off or lengthened sentences ending with common phrases

1. Sometimes mistakes would be introduced into the text when scribes would round off a sentence or phrase. Maybe a sentence ends “**the Lord Jesus Christ**” yet the scribe writes, “**The Lord,**” or “**Jesus,**” or “**Jesus Christ,**” and leaves off a word.
2. Sometimes a sentence might be accidentally lengthened. For example, certain phrases are repeated frequently in the Bible, but sometimes those phrases appear in shortened form. The scribe, being familiar with the longer reading, would accidentally add the extra words onto the shorter reading. In **Mt. 9:13** Jesus said, “**For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.**” Some scribes found this sentence crying out for a “more complete ending” and added at the end of it, “**to repentance.**” Other scribes and copyists had a hard time writing down “**Chief Priests**” without adding the two additional words, “**and Scribes**” or writing “**Scribes**” without adding “**Pharisees.**” Some scribes could not resist the temptation of adding “Lord” or “Christ” to texts that only mentioned “**Jesus**”. They automatically, without thinking about it, wrote: “**Lord Jesus**” or “**Lord Jesus Christ.**”

I. Mistakes crept in when scribes tried to clear up historical or geographical difficulties

Scholars, who work in the field of lower criticism, have discovered a case where a scribe tried to adjust **Mark 1:2**, which quotes parts of two texts found in **Mal. 3:1** and **Isa. 40:3**. In order to avoid confusion, instead of following the original reading, “*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,*” the scribe changed it to “*As it is written in the prophets,*” thus allowing for both the Isaiah and Malachi readings. A few scribes have attempted to harmonize Mark’s gospel with John’s gospel by changing **John 19:14**, “*Sixth hour,*” to Mark’s reading in **Mk. 15:25** to “*third hour.*” Origen, an early church father and expert of the ancient texts, changed a geographical location in **John 1:28** which most of the earlier and reliable manuscripts have as “**Bethany**” to “**Bethabara.**” The King James Version still retains the Bethabara reading preferred by Origen. Other scribes, seeing a

chronological difficulty in **Mk. 8:31** where the text reads, “*and be killed and after three days rise again,*” have changed the phrase to the more common expression in the gospels, “*and be killed and rise again on the third day.*” **Hebrews 9:4** mentions the golden altar of incense as being “**in**” the Holy of Holies and so some scribes, in an attempt to harmonize this with **Ex. 30:1-6**, have moved the golden altar back out of the Holy of Holies by rewording the text to “**outside of the Holy of Holies.**” Examples like these reveal that the scribes believed in the inerrancy of Scripture and knew that if the text had an error in it, it must have been introduced by a copyist, so they took it upon themselves to change the text to what they believed followed what must have been the reading of the original.

J. Mistakes crept in when scribes put down all the variants in a text

What would you do if you were a copyist and you had three ancient manuscripts that all read a little differently? What if each reading made sense and none of them distorted sound doctrine and all of them seemed to fit the context? What would you do? Well some scribes made a composite version, including all three variants, not wanting to leave out the inspired text. This is called a “*conflation of readings*” and is common in the ancient manuscripts that the King James Version was derived from. For instance in **Mk. 8:11** some manuscripts have, “**do not anxious before hand,**” and others have “**do not practice before hand.**” Some scribes then combined the two and wrote, “**do not practice being anxious before hand.**” Another example occurs in **Acts 20:28** where Paul writes concerning the “**church of God.**” Other manuscripts have “**church of the Lord.**” So some scribes wrote, “**church of the Lord and God.**” While errors like this often do not change the meaning or corrupt sound doctrine, they do misrepresent the original text.

K. Mistakes crept in because of theological bias

As the Scriptures were being copied through the centuries by different men who were fighting different theological battles, their biases often crept into the text. Copyists would accuse each other of slightly altering the text to fit their theological hobby horse. Errors crept in as copyists “undid” what they believed the copyist before them erroneously inserted or deleted to theologically “adjust” the text. One example of this is found in a certain manuscript of **Luke 1:3** where Luke writes, “**It seemed good to me . . . to write an orderly account.**” A scribe, no doubt wanting to preserve the doctrine of inspiration, changed the text to read, “**It seemed good to me and to the Holy Spirit . . . to write an orderly account.**” Another example is found in a manuscript of **Mt. 24:36**, where Jesus says of His second coming, “**But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.**” The scribe couldn’t reconcile Jesus’ “not knowing” with His divinity so he omitted the words, “**nor the Son**” to solve what he believed was a theological error propagated by a previous scribe who may have denied the deity of Christ.

L. **Mistakes crept in as well intentioned scribes added what they believed were factual details**

One mysterious instance of an altered reading appears in **Luke 6:4** and **Mt. 20:28** where Jesus is speaking to Peter. A later 13th century manuscript added words indicted in bold italics:

Jesus spoke to him saying, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from aliens?' And when he said, "From aliens", Jesus said to him, 'Then are the sons free? ***Simon said, 'Yes.' Jesus says to him, 'Then you also must give, as being an alien to them.*** But, not to give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook. . ."

What is interesting about this addition is that none of the earlier manuscripts have it. But an ancient commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron, an early parallel version of the Bible from the second or third century, written by a man named Ephraem, had this reading and Ephraem commented on it! The scribe must have had access to Ephraem's commentary and upon discovering the longer reading in the Diatessaron, written 1000 years earlier, he reintroduced it to the text thinking that the early commentator must have been using a more reliable text.

In other instances, scribes supplied the supposed personal names of people left unmentioned. For instance, several Old Latin manuscripts give different names for the criminals who were crucified with Jesus. Another copyist could not handle Mark's obscure reference to those who came to the tomb after the resurrection, so he altered the original reading. The original read, "**Then they drew near to the tomb**" but the scribe wrote, "**then they *the women* drew near to the tomb.**" He knew what the other gospels taught and he was convinced that someone before him must have left out the reference to "the women."

One of the more humorous additions of factual detail is found in the first verse of the book of Revelation. The original reads, "**The revelation of John.**" Later manuscripts add to it, "**The revelation of the theologian John.**" Still others add, "**The revelation of the theologian John the apostle [and/or] evangelist.**" But the most extensive and factual addition comes from a manuscript found at Mount Athos in 1775 called "Hoskier's 236." It reads, "***The Revelation of the all-glorious Evangelist, bosom friend [of Jesus], virgin, beloved to Christ, John the theologian, son of Salmon and Zebedee, but adopted son of Mary the Mother of God, and Son of Thunder.***" The only title left out, probably by accident, is "Apostle."

III. SUMMARY

The many examples above show us how well intentioned men introduced errors into the ancient text of the Bible. These examples should remind us of the truth of the proverb, “to err is human.” Yet one should not become discouraged thinking that the scribes, who copied the Bible, were a bunch of hackneyed, tired, and frivolous drones who could care less about preserving the integrity of the original autographs. There are many more instances that could be sighted of painstaking exactness, as scribes labored to preserve the original text even though they encountered some “peculiarity.” As described in an earlier lesson (The Preservation and Drama of Ancient Biblical Texts, #4), the Bible has over ten times the manuscript evidence of any other ancient writing.

Although we have tens of thousands of manuscripts, partial manuscripts and fragments, the variants in ancient Biblical manuscripts are minimal. Most variants can be easily and confidently corrected. Most of the changes are minuscule and none of them have any bearing on any major doctrine. But how do scholars determine what the original text is? What methods are used to sift through the ancient text? How reliable is the text of the Bible? How can we believe in “inerrancy” knowing the ancient text of the Bible has been corrupted? In the next two lessons, we will examine the field of *Textual Criticism* and the doctrine of *Biblical Inerrancy* and answer those important questions.