

Fort Bend Christian Academy – Honors Apologetics

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It Seems You're Having Problems with Your Transmission

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Introduction

Since the beginning of written language, humans have sought to record information and ideas for use by future generations. As time advanced it became clear that the first editions of certain texts would not survive, and various groups could not benefit from the text's contents unless copies were made. From this sprang the practice known now as textual transmission, which is the subject of much debate among members of the intelligentsia the world over.

The problem that has arisen is that over time the practice of critiquing ancient texts now requires scholars to separate the actual contents of a text from any claims to truth or transcendence that may be intrinsic to a certain text; they must regard any given ancient work as *just a text*, and nothing more. When a text as substantial as the biblical New Testament is given this sort of treatment and claims of inadequacy and corruption begin to become commonplace conflict is inevitable. This is the unfortunate reality that has come to pass as critics figuratively dismantle the Scriptures as if performing an autopsy in order to prove it could not possibly have value to the “modern person”.

The statement may be made that these same critics that assault the New Testament are inconsistent in that they do not critique other texts as heavily; they often focus so singularly on the New Testament that it is accepted as a given that other ancient texts were transmitted with far less, or even no error, though less knowledge of the methodology used to transmit them is available. The questions to be answered are these: if accuracy is the general trend during transmission, then why is it that the biblical New Testament comes under fire so often, and which methodology and history most logically erases the possibility that a text can become erroneous during transmission? In the following pages an examination of three texts that are generally held

as classics and as transmitted accurately will occur. The texts to be examined are Sun-tzu's *Art of War*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Zoroastrian holy book the *Avesta*. In examining these texts it is hoped that it can be demonstrated that attacks on the New Testament as corrupt are unfounded, and that the methodology used during its transmission is adequate or surpasses that of the other three texts in terms of disallowing error.

Methodology for Examination of Texts

In order to ensure that each text is given the same treatment a concrete methodology by which the examination of texts will occur is needed. The original basis for parts of this methodology came from Robert Jones Schafer's *A Guide to Historical Method*, in which he expounds upon a methodology for historians to evaluate sources that includes the following questions to be answered:

1. When was the source produced?
2. Where was it produced?
3. By whom was it produced?
4. From what pre-existing materials was it produced?
5. In what original form was it produced?
6. What is the evidential value of its contents?¹

This list has been narrowed down and rearranged to just four sections: significance, authorship, date produced, and transmission. The answer to where each text was produced is obvious for each of the chosen texts, so the category was therefore removed. The answers to the questions of pre-existing materials and original form would be found throughout the whole of the examination. The questions of authorship and production date are important for this examination because the implications of knowing the original author and date a text was produced are important; if seemingly simple questions such who composed a text and when they composed it can not be answered without much doubt, then it is questionable how much information is truly

¹ Robert Jones Schafer, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 1980 3d ed., ed. David Harry Bennett (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, ©1980), 168.

known about a given text. The significance section was added in order to answer what the value of a text's contents are as well as to give a defense as to why each text was chosen. The transmission section is devoted to tracing the history of a text to a certain degree, and to analyzing the methodology used for transmission if enough scholarly information is available.

Classical Texts from Other Cultures

The Art of War

Significance

Of all books on military philosophy and tactics none compare to the reputation of Sun-tzu's *Military Strategy*, commonly referred to as the *Art of War*. Widely held as the oldest² and greatest of ancient Chinese military writings the principles presented in the *Art of War* have shaped military philosophy for millennia, with all other works on military command and administration coming nowhere close to the elevated status given to the *Art of War*³. Though the *Seven Military Classics*⁴ of ancient China have all been translated for use in the Western world only the *Art of War* has received major exposure in the West. Many instances of its application and impact can be seen in Western history in the last two centuries since it was originally translated by a French missionary, which include effective utilization by Napoleon, reported study by higher ranking Nazi officials, wide application to business⁵, and frequent appearance on

² It is worth noting that the T'ai Kung, generally regarded as the author of the *Six Secret Teachings*, was active several hundred years before the *Art of War* was written. Nonetheless, the *Art of War* still has the reputation as the oldest and greatest.

³ Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 15-160.

⁴ What is known as the *Seven Military Classics* is a compilation that was arranged at some point during the Sung dynasty. The works included in the *Seven Military Classics* are: *Sun-Tzu's Art of War*, *Wu-Tzu, The Methods of the Ssu-ma, Questions and Replies Between T'ang T'ai-tsung and Li Wei-kung*, *Wei Liao-Tzu, Three Strategies of Huang Shih-kung*, and *T'ai Kung's Six Secret Teachings*.

⁵ Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 15-160.

the U.S. military's Commandant's Reading List. Even more plentiful are examples of its significance in Asia, as seen here:

In Taiwan... books applying the thoughts of the ancient strategists to life, business, sports, and the stock market have suddenly surged in popularity... Perhaps more astounding is the penchant of Japanese writers to apply principles and tactics from the *Seven Military Classics* to all the complexities of modern society; they use such tactics, for example, for successful human relations, romantic liaisons, and company infighting... Naturally, tactics from the classics also frequently appear in novels, movies, and on television, and their words are quoted in contemporary media throughout Asia. However, in every sphere, Sun-tzu's *Art of War* predominates, eclipsing all the other military writings combined.⁶

Based on its colossal impact in both hemispheres it should be obvious that the sheer significance of the *Art of War* made it an easy selection for this examination.

Authorship

Though commonly known by the title Sun-tzu the figure that is generally attributed with the writing of the *Art of War* is properly known as Sun Wu, a man portrayed in both the *Shih Chi* and *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yüeh* and reportedly active in the beginning of the sixth century BCE⁷.

Despite these portrayals, as time has progressed some scholars have come to doubt the role of Sun Wu, while others go as far as to doubt his very existence⁸. The basis of their

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

argument is a complete lack of evidence found in the *Tso Chuan*, the classical record of political occurrences during the Spring and Autumn period⁹. If Sun Wu had contributed as a military leader during the wars between Wu and Yüeh, then the belief is that the *Tso Chuan* should confirm his existence and role as they were portrayed in the *Shih Chi*. Another point where doubts are raised as to Sun Wu's role and existence is that not only is there not much historical data from what are thought to be the authentic texts of the time, but also that his life never became the subject of various anecdotal and illustrative, romanticized stories are frequently associated with famous figures in ancient China¹⁰.

This doubt first arose during the Sung dynasty¹¹, and support grew among scholars who embraced the mindset of Confucius in the following centuries¹². Though the absence of mention in the *Tso Chuan* may be a point of contention for some, the implications of it are not as radical as sometimes suggested. The first implication of Sun Wu's absence would be that at most he did not play a *significant* role, rather than playing no role or not existing¹³. Sun Wu could very well have served as a commander or strategist, but still he would not have received a mention in the *Tso Chuan* due to him being overshadowed by figures with far more credit attributed to them during the conflicts of the time. The lack of Sun Wu's mention is not necessarily a point of great conflict, as confirmed by the statement:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Sung Dynasty ruled China during the period from 960 to 1126 CE.

¹² Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 15-160.

¹³ Ibid.

Many theories have been vociferously advanced to explain Sun Wu's invisibility, chief among them that most of the credit that was rightly his was attributed to his mentor, Wu Tzu-hsü, because the latter was more prominent and his life, a living melodrama writ large, provided a natural focal point for tales of intrigue and portraits of achievement.¹⁴ It is also not uncommon that important, generally acknowledged figures during the Spring and Autumn period receive no mention in the *Tso Chuan*, yet no there is no conflict over their existence¹⁵. The issue of whether or not Sun Wu existed based on mention in the *Tso Chuan* can therefore be discounted because even without mentioning Sun Wu it does not fully prove that Sun Wu did not exist or did not play a role as a military official in some capacity.

Date Produced

Regarding the date that the actual text was first committed to writing there is still debate as certain questions regarding supposed anachronisms and inconsistencies are often raised, and the question of when a text was produced is ultimately tied to who the author was. Some of the questions raised by critics include discrepancies regarding the scale of war described by Sun-tzu, his description of how to manage sieges, forms of military organization, and emphasis on speed and mobility which appears out of place for his time¹⁶. The response to these questions that is given by Ralph D. Sawyer is that the evolutions of strategy and warfare arrive at different conclusions than these critics, and that the emphasis on speed and mobility displayed in the *Art*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of War can be seen arising in the later years of the Spring and Autumn period, which is when Sun-tzu reportedly penned the *Art of War*¹⁷.

The traditional view regarding the date of the *Art of War* is that the widespread copying and borrowing of passages from the *Art of War* that is seen in other military texts indicates that it must therefore be the earliest text, because the extent of the borrowing could only be possible if the *Art of War* were the earliest text¹⁸. The problem with this view is that it virtually negates the two millennia of military history previous to the *Art of War* and nearly attributes the whole creation of military strategy to Sun-tzu¹⁹. When an analysis of concepts and common passages is made, it works in favor of the position that the *Art of War* was not created *ex nihilo*, but was rather an advancement on the current military principles of the day²⁰.

Perhaps the most correct view that can be offered at this point in time is that the figure Sun Wu could very well have existed, and could have produced the *Art of War* at some point in the Spring and Autumn period.

Transmission

Now to the question of could the *Art of War* become erroneous and ‘corrupted’ due to the inadequacy of the procedures used by ancient Chinese scholars. Regarding the military classics it was a rare occurrence that that they were ever permitted to be held by private individuals, and it was usually the case that if a non-government or military official had the texts they were

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

involved in a conspiracy²¹. Almost all of the classical military texts were first transmitted through a secret, oral fashion for generations before eventually being recorded on bamboo slips²². After being recorded they were gathered by state officials, and stored in imperial libraries for use by only a highly exclusive, select few. The texts were valued so highly that they were exempted from the book burnings during the Ch'in dynasty, and access was only allowed to individuals such as a small number of high ranking officials, a few professors of the classics, and the emperor²³. However, even they (the highly ranked officials and professors) could be restricted from access at certain times, especially if they were related to the imperial family²⁴.

This highly restrictive policy among ancient dynasties does seem to support the position that error could not have easily entered the *Art of War*, however the standards for transmission established by later figures, namely Confucius, and the transmission practices of later dynasties do not favor the position that ancient texts can be completely free of error, 'corruption', or change. Something that must first be noted is the difference between how scholars regard transmission in both the modern West and China. Western scholars tend to view transmission pessimistically, as a process by which texts become "corrupted" or "contaminated". However this view is not necessarily shared in Chinese academic circles²⁵. Chinese textual critics expect texts to be altered in transmission, but it is the changes that are *unsanctioned* that are said to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Susan Cherniack, "Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54, no. 1 (jun., 1994): 6-27.

falsify and add error to a text²⁶. They are not unlike Western critics in that since even the Han dynasty they wish to regulate texts in such a way that they are returned to a more original state. When comparing the lists of textual errors used by textual critics in both Chinese and Western cultures, and the case seems to be that regardless of geographical location the same types of errors are made. The difference is that Chinese critics are more likely to attribute error to personal lapses in attention, simple ignorance, or reckless change based on conjecture²⁷. Another difference can be seen in that in China transmission is also held as the process by which texts become perfected²⁸. From the beginning of Chinese transmission the sanctions for changes were an implicit part of the task assigned to the transmitter²⁹.

This view of textual change regarded not necessarily in a negative light extends as far back in history as to even Confucius as evidenced here:

As the *K'ung-tzu chia-yü* explains: 'The texts and documents of the former kings were confused and disorganized... Confucius handed down their teachings to posterity by fashioning them into model forms.' Such a view provided constant encouragement for editorial activism aimed at organizing, reorganizing, and refashioning texts. Though the exact extent and nature of Confucius's involvement with different classics has been long debated, the traditional consensus is that Confucius took an active role in composing

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

them. He was not merely an editor or compiler, an abridger or expurgator. In the case of the *Chou I* and the *Ch'un-ch'iu*, he comes close to being what we would call an author.³⁰

What is found in the Chinese view of transmission since Confucius is a concept of collaborative authorship over time that is not found in Western transmission practices³¹. Though this may portray Confucius as all too eager to alter a text, in actuality he was careful to try to keep a text intact. When copying a text there were four things that he would never do: he never guessed, was never arbitrary, was never obstinate, and did not change a text based on subjective judgement alone³². The standards of whether to change a text established by Confucius support the position that classical and ancient texts such as the *Art of War* were transmitted accurately, and exemplify the mind of the Chinese transmitter in that change is not regarded as an inherently wrong occurrence during transmission.

Despite the practices that Confucius established in order to keep texts from being influenced to too great a degree during transmission, future dynasties did not as actively work to prevent a copier from reinterpreting a text through their own point of view. When the Sung dynasty had only just come to power the imperial administration had formed a close link between themselves and the authority of the Confucian classics³³. Printing as a practice to increase dissemination of texts had just begun as well, so the editions given to the public were largely imperial editions. Doubt eventually arose as to whether the imperial controlled press was

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

printing accurate versions, and from there transmission changed course completely³⁴.

Traditionally, canonized texts allow for the fewest opportunities for revision or innovation, but as printing came to replace transcription it was clear that with the new method of printing texts available there was now nearly limitless potential for revision and adjustment³⁵. It was abundantly clear that while the stone tablets used during transcriptions were marked by finality and authority the new printed materials were marked by volatility and a near complete lack of authority³⁶. The once strong standards used to prohibit texts from being influenced during transmission were now nearly gone, and almost all texts, including canonical texts, were open for interpretation at this time³⁷.

What occurred can be further summarized by the following:

What is remarkable about these criticisms is the importance attached herein to “author-based” authority in texts - that is, authority deriving from claims of original authorship made for various classics or their components - and the corresponding debasement of claims of textual authority derived from traditional transmission and embodied by the orthodox versions endorsed by the imperial government. The denial of the authorial origins of various details of the classics provides a sanction for textual revisions, and such revisions are carried out with the goal of restoring an authorial text. Textual authority has not been lost, but rather transferred from a tradition-based model to a model

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

in which individual readers may assert their own rights to determine authorial intent in the classics, independent of tradition.³⁸

In this way the practices of transmission retained the implicit trait of Chinese transmission that change is not negative at all times, but the standards were nearly erased as authority was questioned and nearly anyone could offer their own revision of the text.

Conclusion

Based on what is known of Chinese history and the evolution of warfare that took place the view that Sun-tzu (aka Sun Wu) produced the *Art of War* during the Spring and Autumn period still has enough evidence and backing among scholars to be taken as true. However, the questions of authorship and when the text was produced are not without their critics who would attribute the text to another figure such as Wu Tzu-hsü and place it at a later point in Chinese history. Pertaining to the question of whether the *Art of War* could have had error enter into it during transmission, the possibility is there given the Chinese view of transmission, and the loss of official authority that took place during the Sung. However, it appears that in spite of the conditions for transmission in China, a small close-knit group of disciples or family members were capable of maintaining the integrity of the text and transmitting it over the centuries, while slowly allowing it to be disseminated³⁹. What was found in a Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) tomb in 1972 were bamboo slips with the *Art of War* written on them in essentially the same form as the present day version⁴⁰. This indicates that though the Chinese position towards textual transmission does tend towards volatility it appears that they are still capable of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ralph D. Sawyer, trans., *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, History and Warfare (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 150-423.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

transmitting a text over millennia with little to no added ‘corruption’ or error during transmission, which is the case in the *Art of War*.

Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Significance

As two of the oldest extant texts that are still intact today, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have experienced a lengthy history of transmission over the centuries. The *Iliad* was originally composed as a 15,693 line epic poem to record the history and occurrences that the Greeks believed came to pass during the mythological Trojan War, and its ‘sequel’, the *Odyssey*, uses a similar form to the *Iliad*, but records the homeward of the Achaean hero Odysseus, who first appeared in the *Iliad*. Both have been the subject of study and analysis for millennia, and in recent decades translations and critical works on Homer have appeared in a higher number than ever before⁴¹. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have influenced literature and culture for centuries; they are both more than just simple works of literature that have been passed down through the generations, and as they are still some of the oldest works of literature that still undergo study they have been chosen for this examination.

Authorship

Traditionally attributed to a poet known in the last few centuries as Homer, the authorship of the two epics of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has been debated for various reasons, one in particular is that no trustworthy information about Homer’s life or activities exists today⁴². Since there are no records as to what his life entailed all that remains is the ancient Greek

⁴¹ Kostas Myrsiades “Introduction: Homer; Analysis and Influence”, in “Homer: Analysis and Influence,” special issue, *College Literature* 35, no. 4 (Fall, 2008): xi.

⁴² Homer, *The Iliad*, penguin classics ed., trans. Robert Fagles and Bernard MacGregor Walker Knox Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1991, 1990), 5-9.

tradition associated with him. Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian said to be the “Father of History”, reported that Homer lived at most four hundred years previous to his own life, which would place Homer somewhere in the ninth century BCE⁴³. The Homeric scholar Aristarchus of Alexandria placed Homer 140 years after the Trojan War, which in the ancient Greek view of history would have occurred sometime around 1200 BCE⁴⁴. Another point of disagreement was the location where Homer originally came from; some ancient scholars would say that he originated from the island of Chios, while others would say he was from Smyrna⁴⁵. It was unanimously believed that he was a blind singer, yet it was also assumed that Homer, while he could very well have sung during performance, composed his works through writing.

Though this traditional view is all that can be known of the person commonly known as Homer it has not gone unchallenged through the many centuries since its inception. The earliest skeptic, and probably the only one in the ancient world, who did not accept that Homer wrote the whole of the works attributed to him was Josephus. In response to the Greek writer Apion, who claimed that the Jews had no history to speak of, Josephus not only defended the historical accounts of the Old Testament, but launched a counterattack by emphasizing the point that written language did not exist until late in the Greeks’ history⁴⁶. With regards to Homer he said that even the Trojan heroes portrayed in Homer’s works were “ignorant of the present-day mode of writing”, and that Homer “did not leave his poems in writing”; Josephus was the first to argue

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

that the works attributed to Homer were first transmitted orally for several generations, then unified and put to writing at a much later date⁴⁷.

After Josephus, the issue of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*'s authorship did not resurface again until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when European scholars began to ask the very question who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In 1795, a German scholar by the name of F. A. Wolf produced *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, a discourse in which the question of Homeric illiteracy was again raised⁴⁸. The point Wolf was trying to make was that if Homer was illiterate, then he could not have produced poems as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; Homer would have been more likely to have produced shorter poems that resembled ballads, and could be passed down by memory. Again the conclusion he came to was that they must have been collected into their current form at a later time than when they were initially produced. In the 1600's, the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico took a different approach by arguing that it was not a singular person to produce the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but it was rather the whole of the Greek people that collectively co-authored them⁴⁹. This view contrasted starkly to that of the Age of Reason, but nonetheless the mentality at the time had a strong desire to "find works of untutored genius, songs and ballads, the expression of a people's communal imagination... In such an atmosphere of enthusiasm for folk poetry the discovery of a primitive Homer was more than welcome."⁵⁰. Based on criteria such as inconsistency of character, imbalance of structure, irrelevance of theme or incident, and clumsiness of transition scholars sought to divide up

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Homer's works to see who could discern the greatest number of separate authors⁵¹. This continued because those same criteria are so overly subjective that where one scholar would see inconsistency another would claim that the text contained no error.

At present it is asserted that the belief commonly held among scholars is the same belief found in seventeenth century Europe: there was no individual Homer, but it was multiple authors who collaboratively wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The foundation for this position is the belief that it is 'merely tradition' to claim Homer wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A possible anachronism regarding the usage of the Greek word that has come to be 'Homer' is also a point upon which disagreement occurs⁵². The effort now is to prove that Homer was a fictitious person instead of a poet who could potentially have existed and composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in shorter forms that were added to over time⁵³.

Date Produced

The *Iliad* is known to have appeared in written form on papyrus rolls by at least the fourth century BCE; scholars in Alexandria edited and wrote commentaries on the copies they received, however before they produced a standard edition there was much discrepancy between each of the copies⁵⁴. During the fourth and fifth centuries these papyrus versions of the *Iliad* could be found throughout the whole of Greece⁵⁵. Even as far back as the sixth century BCE copies of the *Iliad* existed, and reportedly official recitations occurred in Athens and other Greek

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² M. L. West, "The Invention of Homer", *The Classical Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1999): 366.

⁵³ This view that Homer existed and composed the poems in shorter forms is a historical view that has been held by scholars over the last couple of centuries.

⁵⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, Penguin Classics ed., trans. Robert Fagles and Bernard MacGregor Walker Knox Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1991, 1990), 5-9.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

poets were said to have referenced Homer in their own poems during this time⁵⁶. However, sources in the seventh century yield less information due to the fact that Greece's written language was still in its adolescence at this point in time. What we know is that poets from the seventh century had certain passages in their works that at least echoed Homer and implicate that they had some familiarity with his works⁵⁷. Combined with the above discussion of authorship it is likely that, regardless of *who* exactly composed them, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both appeared in some form during the eighth and ninth centuries BCE.

Transmission

As to the process by which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were transmitted through generations not much information is available today. What is known is portions of the history by which the text was preserved for certain periods of time.

The first whole written texts were almost undoubtedly the papyrus roll versions that were found throughout Greece during the fifth and sixth centuries BCE, however they would contain the twenty-four chapter divisions which were likely added at a later date⁵⁸. Afterwards there are a few possibilities for who could have preserved the text depending on if there was a singular author who composed it. The first possibility is preservation within the family of the author, however this is unlikely because it does not answer how it was that the text was diffused throughout Greece⁵⁹. Another possibility is that the text was preserved and diffused by a community of rhapsodes, of which there was one specifically, the Homeridai, who took Homer

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ M. L. West, *Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad* (München: K.G. Saur, 2001), 3-6.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

as their patron and even went as far as to claim descent from him while they recited his works throughout Greece⁶⁰. The two final possibilities are preservation by a patron, or dedication to a temple. If a patron had commissioned Homer (or whatever poet) to compose the epics, then they would have possession of it, but would need to engage rhapsodes to have the epics recited for performance. Regarding the temple dedication, some instances of this did occur in ancient Greece, but it is purely theoretical that it happened with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*⁶¹. Of all these the most likely proposition is the case of the rhapsodes à la the Homeridai.

What could also be the case is that though Homer could have been illiterate he could have composed the story in some form, and performed it from memory; the case with oral tradition is that what was composed in its first iteration can be recomposed each time it is performed, and this recomposition-in-performance is the essence of transmission in oral tradition⁶².

After reception by the Alexandrian scholars and the production of their standard edition there are not many works tracing the transmission of Homer's works through the centuries. It is possible that they were afterwards acquired by the Muslim scholars who preserved the philosophical works of ancient Greece.

Conclusion

From the above examination the only question that can be answered with an adequate degree of certainty is the question of when was the text produced, to which the answer is some time in the eighth or ninth centuries BCE.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Andrew Faulkner, ed., *The Homeric Hymns: Interpretative Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 281.

The question of authorship is still open to much debate among scholars, and the responses to that question could be indicative of whether error could be introduced into the text over time. If the case were that there was an original composer known as Homer that created the text in a shorter form than its current one, then the embellishments and extensions could alter the meaning of the text so greatly that it would not resemble what the author intended very much in the end. The other possibility among scholarship that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were collectively authored obviously would cause the texts to contain inconsistencies because no two of the authors would be capable of creating a cohesive work if they did not know what the other authors had introduced to the narrative. Again with the case that they (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) were originally composed by a single author, were performed orally, and changed with each performance inconsistencies could be found as the listeners who later transcribed the work of the illiterate performers would differ between each other.

The difference between these epic poems and other texts is that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are works of literature that had a standard edition produced at one point in time. A canonized text is available today, but whether or not the contents are true or not makes no difference to the reader. Even though inconsistency could have entered into the texts at many points during their history, any error introduced does not have an impact on modern people because the texts can not be applied to the lives of modern people, and make no exclusive claims to truth or make statements on morality and ethics that an individual has to reckon with whilst studying them.

Zoroastrian *Avesta*

Significance

Reportedly having an official beginning around the tenth or ninth centuries BCE, Zoroastrianism is older than both Christianity and Islam, though it has had far fewer practitioners during the whole of its history⁶³. Zoroastrianism could possibly be the oldest creedal religion that still continues to this day with a few adherent existing in several middle eastern countries⁶⁴. It should not be surprising that all of the the scattered remnant of Zoroaster's disciples still accept, along with additional writings in the later Pahlavi or Middle Persian languages, the *Avesta* as their holy scriptures.

Shortly after its inception the Achaemenid Empire, the first Persian Empire and the same Persian Empire mentioned in the Old Testament, came to power and Zoroastrianism found many devotees among the Achaemenid people. Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid empire, was a dedicated follower of the teachings of Zoroaster who is mentioned in the Old Testament on numerous occasions and even is called God's 'anointed'⁶⁵, his 'shepherd'⁶⁶, and the 'righteous' one⁶⁷. All Achaemenid rulers mentioned in the Old Testament were practitioners of Zoroastrianism; even the magi who traveled from the East to bring Jesus gifts shortly after his birth were alike to the Achaemenid emperors in that they were followers of Zoroaster⁶⁸.

⁶³ "The World Factbook: Field Listing: Religions," accessed May 2, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Isa. 45:1-3

⁶⁶ Isa. 44: 28

⁶⁷ Isa. 41: 2

⁶⁸ A.V.W. Jackson, "Avesta, the Bible of Zoroaster." *The Biblical World* 1, no. 6 (jun., 1893): 422-24.

It may be said that the scriptures of no other culture exhibit a fuller grasp on spiritual concepts shared with Christianity as the *Avesta* does. Contained in its pages are descriptions of the principles of right and wrong, the importance of both physical and spiritual purity, a “more ethical conception of duty” compared to other cultures at the time, belief in the resurrection of the body after death, the future coming of a Savior, and the belief that after death both judgement and retribution await⁶⁹. Since Zoroastrianism predates Christianity, has many references to its believers in the Old Testament (along with one important instance in the New Testament), has many shared doctrines with Christianity, and can be considered the state religion for one of the empires that conquered Israel in ancient times, its holy text has been selected for use in this examination.

Authorship

Though meant to reflect the teachings of Zoroaster, the authorship of the *Avesta* is not as easily discernible as with the scriptures of other religions.

The *Avesta* began its life in the form of oral performances, though the performers were unlike those who performed the works of Homer in that the Avestan performers were not rhapsodes or bards making performances to entertain an audience. Since the *Avesta* was initially composed as a work of verbal display rather than as a text the principles of traditional Western philology do not necessarily apply⁷⁰. While a written text can generally be attributed to some

⁶⁹ A.V.W. Jackson, “Avesta, the Bible of Zoroaster.” *The Biblical World* 1, no. 6 (jun., 1893): 422-24.

⁷⁰ The reader may think that what is said of the *Avesta*’s authorship that occurs hereafter negates the discussion of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*’s authorship because what is said here is that seeking a traditional author for a work that came from oral tradition is not possible. What differentiates the two is that the *Avesta* is likely to have been transmitted by oral tradition for more than a millennia before it was put into writing, whereas the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could have appeared in written form within a century of their composition. Additionally, though it may not be the belief of the majority of scholars at this point in time the two works of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were attributed to a single author for all but the past two hundred years (excluding the dissent of Josephus). These two reasons make it possible to seek an original composer for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but not for the *Avesta*.

first figure or “original author”, the same can not be said of purely oral traditions, such as the *Avesta*, because the extant texts that remain to this day can not be used as an adequate indicator for authorship⁷¹.

Since the surviving texts can not explain the origins of the Avestan passages what remains is the understanding of its specific oral tradition that is known today. Due to the nature of oral performance in general the individuals who performed the *Avesta* practiced the same form of re-composition during performance found in the works attributed to Homer. With each performance the content could be manipulated to fit the conditions in which the performance was occurring, as seen here:

From what we know about the old Indo-Iranian literature in particular and from the study of oral literature in general, the composers were steeped in an ancient oral tradition of themes and forms. These they reproduced, updated linguistically, and modified before or during performances according to the expectations of their times and places...⁷²

Two kinds of performances were used during the *Avesta*’s composition: performances to demonstrate ritual practices, and performances for teaching and learning purposes⁷³. The performance of rituals would experience little innovation on the content due to the necessity that the rituals must be performed properly; however, hymns of praise and the teaching/learning lessons would provide ample opportunity for a composer to alter the contents as they saw fit

⁷¹ Prods Oktor Skjærvø, ed., “Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Texts,” in *Iranica*, ed. Alberto Cantera, vol. 20, *The Transmission of the Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 4-12.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

because they would have had a desire to create “new” works of brilliance that were composed of old materials⁷⁴.

As the *Avesta* was dependent on oral tradition by multiple composers for well over a thousand years before being written down it is therefore futile to attempt to attribute the whole of the *Avesta* to a single author.

Date Produced

Though no singular individual can be pointed to as the author of the *Avesta*, information regarding when the content was completed orally, then subsequently compiled in written form is known. While it has been estimated that the Zoroastrian reform could have occurred before 2900 BCE modern scholars usually place the *Avesta* at a comparatively more recent date⁷⁵. What had to first occur before the *Avesta* could transition from oral tradition to written text was a process of “crystallization”, whereby the earlier practice of recomposition-during-performance was made obsolete by decisions to quote the *Avesta* in a specific, invariable fashion⁷⁶. When it is considered that the *Avesta* is divided into two subsections: the Old Avestan and Young Avestan texts, then this process of crystallization would consequently have to occur at different times for both the Old and Young texts. The Old Avestan texts likely experienced crystallization by 1000 BCE, while the crystallization of the Young Avestan texts could have occurred by the beginning of the Achaemenid Empire⁷⁷. Despite references in works of the Classical era, Pahlavi sources,

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ de Harlez, “The Age of the Avesta”, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 17, no. 3 (Jul., 1885): 339.

⁷⁶ Prods Oktor Skjærvø, ed., “Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Texts,” in *Iranica*, ed. Alberto Cantera, vol. 20, *The Transmission of the Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 4-12.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

and works of Muslim authors it is considered baseless to think that the *Avesta* appeared in completely written form by the time of the Achaemenid Empire⁷⁸. It is commonly suggested that the completed Avestan corpus appeared during the reign of the Sassanian Empire (224 CE to 651 CE), however many scholars now argue that the completed *Avesta* came into being during later periods⁷⁹. With the basis of a variety of arguments different scholars suggest that the full *Avesta* in the form it is known in today was completed towards the end of the ninth century CE.

It is obvious that tracing the progression of the *Avesta* through history is difficult due to both the multitude of differing opinions as to the dates and the oral tradition which it came from before being put to writing. The best possible conclusion that can be arrived at is that the oral *Avesta* existed since well before the first millennium BCE, portions of it could have been put to writing before or during the rule of the Achaemenid Empire, and the whole of the text in more or less than the same form as today was present probably by the ninth century CE.

Transmission

As the *Avesta* has existed in some form for upwards of three thousand years the subsequent history and transmission of the text require an examination of their own in order to explain what has occurred to the contents during its lengthy lifespan. Throughout history various sources have claimed that the *Avesta* was itself colossal in both size and dissemination; the Roman author Pliny the Elder stated in his *Natural History* that the *Avesta* consisted of approximately two million verses, and later semitic authors claimed that the *Avesta* had been

⁷⁸ Prods Oktor Skjærvø, ed., “Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Texts,” in *Iranica*, ed. Alberto Cantera, vol. 20, *The Transmission of the Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 4-12.

⁷⁹ Antonio Panaino, ed., “The Age of the Avestan Canon and the Origins of the Ritual Written Texts,” in *Iranica*, ed. Alberto Cantera, vol. 20, *The Transmission of the Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 79.

translated into between seven and twelve languages⁸⁰. Despite this what remains today are only six ‘chapters’ (known as Nasks) that no single manuscript contains in full, and all the Nasks together compose a whole *Avesta* only approximately one tenth the length of the Bible. Obviously from the time it was composed much has occurred that has caused the *Avesta* to undergo drastic changes to its content.

As Zoroastrianism flourished and grew during the time of the Achaemenid Empire, so did the end of Achaemenid reign cause much destruction to ensue for Zoroastrianism as a whole. In 330 BCE Alexander the Great’s conquest of Persia was complete, and predictably more chaos came to pass following his usurpation of the Achaemenids. By permitting the incineration of a library in Persepolis Alexander destroyed what was most likely one of the only Avestan copies that could have contained the reported two million verses⁸¹. As a result of this and more similar incidents, Alexander the Great caused massive amounts of the Avestan scriptures to be forgotten, or to fall into disuse. Destroying the sacred books of Zoroastrianism was a near fatal blow to the whole religion, but through the ruin it persisted weakly for five hundred years until the Sassanian Empire gave new life to Zoroastrianism.

Though the invasion of Alexander the Great and the fall of the Achaemenids caused heavy damage to Zoroastrianism, the ascent of the Sassanian Empire in the second century CE helped to mend five hundred year old wounds. The Sassanian rulers were influential in restoring the *Avesta* to some of its former grandeur by giving commands for the gathering and collection of all ancient copies of Avestan texts that could be found⁸². The gathered texts were codified,

⁸⁰ A.V.W. Jackson, “Avesta, the Bible of Zoroaster”, *The Biblical World* 1, no. 6 (jun., 1893): 422-24.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

and the Sassanian church and state “became one” with Zoroastrianism as their uniting factor⁸³. During their codification of the *Avesta* the Sassanians constructed a detailed outline of the Nasks that described the content of each Nask; it is from this outline that modern scholars have been able to judge that the original *Avesta* had been an encyclopedia of sorts containing information regarding religion, art, science, and professions among other things⁸⁴. Despite this it is still said that even during the time of the Sassanian council no more than a quarter of the former *Avesta* could have been restored⁸⁵. After experiencing renewal under the Sassanian rulers Zoroastrianism continued for several more centuries in good condition, however another catastrophic blow was still yet to come as a new prophet arose to replace Zoroaster.

During the seventh century CE Islam was on the rise in the area of ancient Persia, and predictably it caused conflict with any religion that it encountered as it spread. The new followers of Muhammed were committed to either gaining converts at the point of a sword, or harshly forcing all dissenters into exile⁸⁶. Most of the old followers of Zoroaster adopted Islam as they were more willing to avoid persecution, however a few faithful adherents found refuge in India among the more peaceable Hindus. Thus did Zoroastrianism (and consequently the *Avesta*) again fall into a state of disrepair as few practitioners remained, and the text was largely forgotten due to the forced conversion of most of the Zoroastrian adherents.

Conclusion

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Demonstrated above it would appear that the *Avesta* does not particularly favor an accurate transmission in the traditional sense. From its beginning as a shifting amalgam of spoken performances no adequate answer can be given to the question of authorship. Different scholars suggest estimations for dates when the oral teachings were put into writing, however these remain to be only estimations and have a certain possibility of error to them as estimations. As mentioned earlier, when analyzing texts from oral tradition an author and the specific time when the text was produced are not pursued in the usual sense, however when asking the question of ‘do modern texts resemble ancient texts?’ the answer would have to be ‘no’ for the *Avesta*. Equally the history of the *Avesta* does not remove the possibility of error in transmission in that in two instances it was nearly lost due to either destruction or disuse. The codification and compilation that occurred between these two instances also leaves doubt about the accuracy in transmission as the editing that occurred could have changed the contents of the text in certain ways. The conclusion that can be reached from all this is that the *Avesta* definitely experienced much change to its content over time, however it does not come under attack by theological liberals because Zoroastrianism is not a confrontational religion, no claims of divine inspiration are made for the *Avesta*, and the change to the *Avesta*’s content is widely known and not a topic of debate.

The New Testament

Introduction

Now that all of the ancient texts have been examined a similar examination may occur regarding the biblical New Testament. The following examination differs from those above in that the significance of the New Testament is obvious and is therefore not worth mentioning

here. The authorship of many of the New Testament books is not questioned, while some debate occurs regarding other books. Due to the New Testament having known authors immediately sets it apart from the other texts examined; therefore, the authorship of the New Testament is not a topic for examination here. As for the date of production, it is known that the books of the New Testament were written in first century Israel, which again distinguishes the New Testament from the other texts. The majority of this final section is devoted to comparing the New Testament to all of the other texts in terms of erasing possible error.

Comparison to Other Texts

Nearly two thousand years in age, the information contained in the New Testament has affected the world on an incredible scale. All of the other texts examined pale in comparison to the New Testament in terms of influence and significance, however the question now is ‘based on the above examinations is the New Testament unduly targeted?’ All of them, the New Testament included, are alike in that up until the the practice of printing became commonplace⁸⁷ the texts were copied by hand. The apparent inherency of error in handwritten copying is attributed by Gleason Archer when he wrote:

Even the earliest and best manuscripts that we possess are not totally free of transmissional errors. Numbers are occasionally miscopied, the spelling of proper names is occasionally garbled, and there are examples of the same types of scribal error that appear in other ancient documents as well.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ This is not necessarily the same date for all of the examined texts because printing was present in China for a few centuries before the printing press was invented in Europe.

⁸⁸ Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1982), 27.

There are a number of ways in which scribes could err when copying biblical texts, for example: (1) by omitting letters, words, or lines, (2) by transposing letters or whole words, (3) by dividing words in the wrong places⁸⁹, (4) by writing an incorrect word due to mishearing when the text was being read by one person and transcribed by another, (5) by relying on what the scribe believed they remembered the text to say rather than what the text said, (6) by incorrectly reading words in the original and replacing them with other words in the copy, and (7) due to poor penmanship texts could also appear falsely copied⁹⁰. Of this short list of possible errors only the third may apply only to biblical texts; the rest may still be applied to all ancient texts. Despite the possibility of these errors it can be considered improbable because today approximately 5,600 of the original Greek copies still exist, and each of these copies has been examined and found to have an internal consistency of about 99.5%⁹¹.

As mentioned previously the authorship of several of the books of the New Testament is known today. Compared to the other ancient texts examined this immediately distinguishes the New Testament. The *Art of War*'s authorship, though generally attributed to Sun-tzu/Sun Wu, has also been attributed to his master Wu Tzu-hsü, and other scholars have doubted that Sun-tzu existed at all. The authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has also been questioned because there is no evidence to substantiate a judgement as to who Homer was and describe him if he existed. It has been suggested by many scholars that the authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was not due to a single person, but rather multiple authors adding to the text and changing the contents of the text during performance. When discussing the *Avesta* it is no longer a question of

⁸⁹ Words in early manuscripts were not divided by spaces.

⁹⁰ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and expanded. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, ©1986), 469-75.

⁹¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, pbk. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988, 1976), 307.

whether this recomposition-during-performance occurred; it is known that before the content was codified and crystallized the individuals who performed the *Avesta* orally tended to innovate and add to the performance of the *Avesta*.

Information regarding the date of production for the New Testament is also known with a higher degree of certainty than all of the other texts. Scholars for the most part accept that the *Art of War* was produced during the Spring and Autumn Period, however there are others who would disagree based on what they see as anachronisms; this would make the dating of the *Art of War* the second most certain of the three ancient texts outside the New Testament. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are known to have been produced in written form by at least the sixth century BCE, however beyond that not enough is known to judge a specific date for when they were initially composed. The *Avesta* has less certainty than all of the other texts examined above due to its extremely long history of oral tradition coupled with the principle of recomposition found in its oral tradition. The *Avesta*, the *Art of War*, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* all require estimations to for the date when they were produced, however the dates of original composition for the New Testament books is fairly known for certain.

Two questions may be asked regarding the above examinations:

1. If the *Art of War* encountered an era where textual innovation and reinterpretation were encouraged, yet it did not change very much, then what does this indicate for the transmission of other texts?
2. If the *Avesta* can be nearly destroyed twice in its history, and experience heavy editing and compilation during the time between those two periods, then why is its textual transmission not the topic of debate compared to the New Testament?

Sung China was indeed a period during which texts were regularly reinterpreted to fit the mindset of a particular reader, however the *Art of War* deviates very little between current copies and ancient texts found in Han tombs. The case may be that due to the reverence that citizens had for the text it was not open to much interpretation, or it could be that due to the care of the disciples and family that copied the text after the original author died not many errors were allowed to slip into the text. Regardless of how exactly this occurred the *Art of War* is proof that a written text can experience little to no corruption even in a culture where reinterpretation and ‘corruption’ are the norm.

Both after the invasion of Alexander the Great and the rise of Islam Zoroastrian was nearly destroyed. Its holy scriptures had large portions lost to destruction or forgotten, but despite this its transmission does not come under assault by theological liberals. This is most likely due to the *Avesta* having these qualities being known about it, and the change that occurred during performance is not the topic of discussion. From this it can be asked that if the *Avesta* encountered such heavy change to its content, but still does not come under fire for corruption, then why is it that the New Testament, which had no such destructive or content changing events in its history, come under such heavy assault?

Conclusion

What has come to pass in modern scholastic circles is that the New Testament books (and biblical texts in general) are regarded as corrupted and as festering remains of former texts that are ‘dead’ and have no relevance to ‘modern man’. Upon examining other ancient texts such as Sun-tzu’s military classic the *Art of War*, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Zoroastrian *Avesta* it can be seen that the New Testament has a better case for transmissional accuracy than most to

all of other ancient texts. The New Testament is assaulted on the basis of textual transmission, however in actuality the New Testament has a better history of transmissional accuracy than any of the examined texts.

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