

3 Good Reasons to Believe the Bible Has Not Been Corrupted

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The image on the front cover of this month's *R&R* is St. Catherine's Monastery where Codex Sinaiticus was discovered by Constantin von Tischendorf in 1844.]



Many are those who insist that the Bible has been corrupted over time, that we do not really know which verses belong in the Bible, and that translation errors are so plentiful that we do not have the original message. Yet these allegations have been confronted and refuted time and time again. Apart from the Old Testament (which has been fully verified), a myriad of books over the years have masterfully demonstrated the integrity of the New Testament text, including such volumes as J.W. McGarvey's *Evidences of Christianity*, Kurt and Barbara Aland's *The Text of the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce's *The Canon of Scripture*, Bruce Metzger's *The Text of the New Testament*, F.H.A. Scrivener's *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, Sir Frederic Kenyon's *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, Benjamin Warfield's *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, and many others. Those who cast aspersions upon the integrity of the biblical text manifest either abysmal, inexcusable ignorance of the long established facts of the matter or deliberate bias. If the reader desires the truth regarding the authenticity and integrity of the Bible, **the evidence is available**—if the individual is willing to spend the time and effort to weigh that evidence and arrive at the proper conclusion (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1). Do we have the message that the original authors penned? The fact is that the books of the New Testament are the most extensively verified books of ancient history. The facts completely undermine and discredit any attack on the integrity and transmission of the Bible.

REASON #1: THE NEW TESTAMENT GREEK TEXT HAS BEEN AUTHENTICATED

We know how the original New Testament books read because **we have three surviving classes of evidence by which to reconstruct the original New Testament**: Greek manuscripts, ancient versions, and patristic citations. The current number of Greek manuscript copies containing all or part of the New Testament now stands at 5,795. This amount of manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament is **far greater than that available for any ancient classical author**. The time between the writing of the original books of the New Testament and the earliest surviving copies is **relatively brief**. Although no two manuscript copies agree in every detail, the degree of accuracy achieved by most scribes was **remarkably high**. The vast majority of textual variants involve **minor** matters that do not alter any basic teaching of the New Testament. **No feature of Christian doctrine is at stake**. Suitable solutions to these differences are detectable. Even if they weren't, manuscript evidence is so prolific that **the original reading is one of the extant options**. Even those variants that some might deem "doctrinally significant" (e.g., Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11) pertain to matters that are treated elsewhere in the Bible where the question of genuineness/certainty is unquestioned. We can confidently affirm that we have 999/1000^{ths} of the original Greek New Testament intact. The remaining 1/1000th pertains to inconsequential details.

Additionally, a wealth of ancient versions provides further verification of the purity of the biblical text, including Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Old Slavonic, and others. Textual critics through history have steadfastly affirmed the value of these ancient versions in reconstructing the New Testament text. For example, Vaganay observed: "After the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the versions constitute the most valuable source for writing the history of this text" (1934, p. 28; cf. Vogels, 1923, p. 84—"The versions are very valuable for establishing the original text of the Bible."). Though noting the limitations, the Alands admitted: "[T]he importance of the versions is substantial" (1987, p. 182).

The same may be said for the wealth of textual materials available via the so-called "Church Fathers," i.e., early Christian writers who quoted, paraphrased, and otherwise alluded to passages from Scripture in their letters, commentaries, and correspondence. This latter source of information is so prolific that Metzger affirmed: "Indeed, 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" (1968, p. 86).

These contentions have been verified by the greatest textual critics and linguistic scholars of the past two centuries. Their conclusions have not become outdated, but remain as valid today as when first formulated. If the integrity of the text of the Bible was fully authenticated in their day, **it remains so today**. Consider the following statements by some of these world class authorities.

Scholarly Verification of the Purity of the New Testament Text

F.F. Bruce (1910-1990) was a biblical scholar who taught Greek at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Leeds, chaired the Department of Biblical History and Literature at the University of Sheffield, received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Aberdeen University, and served as the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester. He wrote over 40 books and served as Editor of *The Evangelical Quarterly* and *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*. Bruce declared: "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the N.T. **affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice**" (1975, pp. 19-20, emp. added). He also stated:

In view of the inevitable accumulation of such errors over so many centuries, it may be thought that the original texts of the New Testament documents have been corrupted beyond restoration. Some writers, indeed, insist on the likelihood of this to such a degree that one sometimes suspects they would be glad if it were so. **But they are mistaken.** There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament (1963, p. 178, emp. added).

Bruce further insisted:

Something more ought to be said, and said with emphasis. We have been discussing various textual types, and reviewing their comparative claims to be regarded as best representatives of the original New Testament. **But there are not wide divergencies between these types, of a kind that could make any difference to the Church's responsibility to be a witness and guardian of Holy Writ...** If the variant readings are so numerous, it is because the witnesses are so numerous. But all the witnesses, and all the types which they represent, **agree on every article of Christian belief and practice** (1963, p. 189, emp. added).

Bruce Metzger (1914-2007) was also a scholar of Greek, the New Testament, and New Testament Textual Criticism, serving as professor at Princeton Theological Seminary for 46 years. Described by prominent biblical scholar Raymond Brown as "probably the greatest textual specialist that America has produced" (as quoted in Ehrman and Holmes, 1995, p. xi), Metzger was a recognized authority on the Greek text of the New Testament. He served on the board of the American Bible Society, was the driving force of the United Bible Societies' series of Greek Texts, and served as Chairperson of the NRSV Bible Committee. He is widely considered one of the most influential New Testament scholars of the 20th century. Concerning ancient versions, Metzger stated:

...even if we had no Greek manuscripts today, by piecing together the information from these translations from a relatively early date, we could actually reproduce the contents of the New Testament. In addition to that, even if we lost all the Greek manuscripts and the early translations, we could still reproduce the contents of the New Testament from the multiplicity of quotations in commentaries, sermons, letters, and so forth of the early church fathers (as quoted in Strobel, 1998, p. 59).

Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) was a British bishop, biblical scholar and theologian, serving as Bishop of Durham and holding the Regius Professorship of Divinity at Cambridge. His colleague, **Fenton John Anthony Hort** (1828-1892), was an Irish theologian who served as a Professor at Cambridge. Together, they pioneered the widely recognized Greek text *The New Testament in the Original Greek* in 1881. They are still considered to be renowned textual critics. They forthrightly asserted:

With regard to the great bulk of the words of the New Testament...there is no variation or other ground of doubt.... [T]he amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation, and **can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text.** Since there is reason to suspect that an exaggerated impression prevails as to the extent of possible textual corruption in the New Testament...**we desire to make it clearly understood beforehand how much of the New Testament stands in no need of a textual critic's labours** (1882, pp. 2-3, emp. added).

These peerless scholars also insisted: "[I]n the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests **the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone** among ancient prose writing" (p. 278, emp. added). They add: "The books of the New Testament as preserved in extant documents assuredly speak to us in every important respect in language identical with that in which they spoke to those for whom they were originally written" (p. 284).

Benjamin Warfield (1851-1921) was a Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary from 1887 to 1921. He is considered to be the last of the great Princeton theologians. In his *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, Warfield insightfully observed:

[S]uch has been the providence of God in preserving for His Church in each and every age **a competently exact text of the Scriptures**, that not only is the New Testament unrivalled among ancient writings in **the purity of its text** as actually transmitted and kept in use, but also in the abundance of testimony which has come down to us for castigating its **comparatively infrequent blemishes**.... The

great mass of the New Testament, in other words, has been transmitted to us with **no, or next to no, variation** (1886, pp. 12-13,14, emp. added).

Richard Bentley (1662-1742) was an English classical scholar, critic, and theologian who served as Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and was the first Englishman to be ranked with the great heroes of classical learning. He was well-known for his literary and textual criticism, even called the "Founder of Historical Philology," and credited with the creation of the English school of Hellenism. Here are his comments on the integrity of the New Testament text:

[T]he real text of the sacred writers does not now (since the originals have been so long lost) lie in any single manuscript or edition, but is dispersed in them all. **'Tis competently exact indeed even in the worst manuscript now extant; nor is one article of faith or moral precept either perverted or lost in them** (1725, pp. 68-69, emp. added).

Marvin Vincent (1834-1922) graduated from Columbia University and became professor of New Testament Exegesis and Criticism at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in the late 19th century. He is best known for his Greek analysis of the words of the New Testament in his *Word Studies in the New Testament*. Regarding the integrity of the text, he observed:

The vast number of variations furnishes no cause for alarm to the devout reader of the New Testament. It is the natural result of the great number of documentary sources. A very small proportion of the variations materially affects the sense, a much smaller proportion is really important, and **no variation affects an article of faith or a moral precept** (1899, p. 7, emp. added).

Sir Frederic George Kenyon (1863-1952) was a widely respected, eminent British paleographer and biblical and classical scholar who occupied a series of posts at the British Museum. He served as President of the British Academy from 1917 to 1921 and President of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem. He made a lifelong study of the Bible as an historical text. In his masterful *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, Kenyon affirmed:

One word of warning...must be emphasized in conclusion. **No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.** Constant references to mistakes and divergencies of reading...might give rise to the doubt whether the substance, as well as the language, of the Bible is not open to question. **It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain.** Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church is so large, that it is practically certain that **the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities.** This can be said of no other ancient book in the world (1895, pp. 10-11, emp. added).

In his monumental *The Bible and Archaeology*, Kenyon further stated:

The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that **the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written** has now been removed. **Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established** (1940, pp. 288-289, emp. added).

Indeed, "the Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear of hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, faithfully handed down from generation to generation throughout the centuries" (1895, pp. 10-11).

Samuel Davidson (1806-1898) was an Irish biblical scholar who served as Professor of Biblical Criticism at Royal College of Belfast and Professor of Biblical Criticism in the Lancashire Independent College at Manchester. He authored many books on the text of the Bible. Referring to the work of textual criticism, Davidson concluded:

The effect of it has been to **establish the genuineness of the New Testament text** in all important particulars. No new doctrines have been elicited by its aid; nor have any historical facts been summoned by it from their obscurity. **All the doctrines and duties of Christianity remain unaffected....** [I]n the records of inspiration there is no material corruption.... [D]uring the lapse of many centuries **the text of Scripture has been preserved** with great care.... Empowered by the fruits of criticism, we may well say that **the Scriptures continue essentially the same as when they proceeded from the writers themselves** (1853, 2:147, emp. added).

Frederick H.A. Scrivener (1813-1891) was a prominent and important New Testament textual critic of the 19th century. Having graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, he taught classics at several schools in southern England. His expertise in textual criticism is self-evident in that he served as a member of the English New Testament Revision Committee (Revised Version), edited the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis and several editions of the Greek New Testament, collated the Codex Sinaiticus with the *Textus Receptus*, and was the first to

distinguish the *Textus Receptus* from the Byzantine text. In his *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, Scrivener admitted:

[O]ne great truth is admitted on all hands—the almost complete freedom of Holy Scripture from the bare suspicion of wilful [*sic*] corruption; the absolute identity of the testimony of every known copy in respect to doctrine, and spirit, and the main drift of every argument and every narrative through the entire volume of Inspiration.... **Thus hath God's Providence kept from harm the treasure of His written word**, so far as is needful for the quiet assurance of His church and people (1861, pp. 6-7, emp. added).

J.W. McGarvey (1829-1911) was a minister, author, educator, and biblical scholar. He taught 46 years in the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, serving as President from 1895 to 1911. He summarized the point: "All the authority and value possessed by these books when they were first written belong to them still" (1974, p. 17).

Elias Boudinot (1740-1821) was a prominent Founding Father of America. He served in the Continental Congress (1778-1779, 1781-1784), as its President in 1782-1783, and was the founding president of the American Bible Society. In his refutation of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, Boudinot explained: "[T]he facts upon which the Christian religion is founded, have a stronger proof, than any facts at such a distance of time; and that the books which convey them down to us, **may be proved to be uncorrupted and authentic**, with greater strength than any other writings of equal antiquity" (1801, p. 239, emp. added). This Founding Father's view of the purity of the text of the New Testament was the view of the vast majority of the Founders.

With all the kindness one can muster, these eminent, well-studied, competent, peerless scholars, whose expertise in the field of Textual Criticism is unsurpassed, are far more qualified and accurate in their assessment of the credibility, integrity, and authenticity of the biblical text than any alleged scholar or skeptic living today. Truthfully, God knew that the original autographs would not survive, and that His Word would have to be transmitted through the centuries via copies. **The transmission process is sufficiently flexible for God's Word to be conveyed adequately by uninspired, imperfect copyists.** Indeed, the original text of the New Testament has been thoroughly and sufficiently authenticated.

REASON #2: THE TRANSLATION PROCESS WORKS

God knew that the vast majority of the human race could not learn Greek or Hebrew. He knew that His Word would have to be read **in translation** in the language of the common people. The translation process is sufficiently flexible for God's Word to be conveyed adequately by uninspired, imperfect translators. While some English translations may well seek to advance a theological agenda, generally speaking, most translations do not differ on the **essentials**. Most English versions convey these essentials: (1) what one must do to be saved and (2) what one must do to stay saved. As imperfect as translations might be, most still convey this basic information. This fact is verified by Jesus and the apostles' own use of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text *en vogue* in first-century Palestine. Some think this translation was achieved by 72 Jewish scholars who were invited to Alexandria, Egypt roughly two and a half centuries before Christ. Though considered by scholars as an imperfect translation of the Hebrew, most of the direct quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint. Hence, the Bible gives implicit divine endorsement to the use of imperfect, manmade translations, further implying that God's Word has been adequately transmitted down through the centuries via translation.

A host of books have been published over the years that discuss principles of Bible translation (e.g., Nida, 1964; Beekman and Callow, 1974; Ryken, 2009; Grant, 1961; et al.). All human languages share in common a variety of linguistic features that may be suitably utilized to transmit God's meanings. The United Nations stands as an indisputable testimony to the fact that meaning can be conveyed from one language to another. Indeed, messages all over the world are effectively translated into different languages every day. Likewise, the meanings of the words, grammar, and syntax of the biblical (parent) languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek have been amply transferred to English Bible translations. Even when English translations differ with each other on any given passage, further study will enable the Bible student to ascertain the meaning(s) intended. As with the transmission of the Greek text, the translation process provides the individual with the possibilities when more than one meaning is possible. When all is said and done, one may confidently say that God's message has been suitably transferred from the original biblical languages into English.

REASON #3: THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH TRANSLATION DEMONSTRATES PRESERVATION

All languages are in a constant state of flux. Thus new translations are inevitable and necessary. But though the Greek text has been verified, and though we know that translation can be done accurately, how do we know that today we have God's Word available since the translating has been done by many different people over several centuries? Answer: Because the history of English translation has been traced and verified. We know that the Hebrew and Greek texts were translated into Latin early on, and eventually began to be transferred to English in the 14th century. The hall of fame of great Bible translators in the English-speaking world **verifies the**

accomplishment of this transference of God's Word to the present: John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, John Rogers (the Matthew's Bible), Richard Taverner, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, Matthew Parker (the Bishop's Bible), the King James Bible (1611), the English Revised Version (ERV—1888) and its American counterpart, the American Standard Version (ASV—1901), and the host of English translations that have appeared in the 20th and now 21st centuries (cf. Lewis, 1991). We know the Bible has not been corrupted because we have the English translations generated through the centuries that enable us to examine and verify the text of the Bible. Coincidentally, even if we did not know English translation history, we can take the authenticated Greek text and make a completely new translation in English.

CONCLUSION

The evidence is available and it is decisive. Currently circulating copies of the Bible do not differ substantially from the original. Those who reject the Bible's divine authority must do so for reasons other than their ability to know what God intended to communicate to the human race.

All human beings can know the truth and be saved. All can know that God exists and that the Bible is His Word. All can know that Christianity is the only true religion and that all must obey the Gospel of Christ in order to be forgiven of sin and saved. All can know that we must live the Christian life, worshipping God correctly, and living faithfully to God in daily behavior.

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