

3. LOST IN TRANSLATION: Scribal Tampering?!

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So far in this little series on **LOST IN TRANSLATION** we have observed how, in some critical verses, translators of our modern Bible versions have subtly introduced unwarranted ‘suggestions’ into the text of Scripture. **Translation has become the subtlest form of commentary.**

Examples of these ‘suggestions’ may come in the form of random capitalisations, unauthorised word definitions, subtle changes to word order, and the like. In this article I will introduce another unfortunate consideration. Scribal ‘emendation’ is a euphemism for what turns out to be scribal manipulation — changing the original NT autographs the apostles penned to suit their own theological preferences.

BART’S THESIS

Before he became an agnostic, and then a sceptic, **Bart Ehrman** was a scholar in the tradition of American evangelicalism. He adhered to the tenets of Protestant “orthodoxy”, which of course, include the conviction that the Scriptures — both Old and New Testaments — are “the very word of God”.

Ehrman’s seminal book, *THE ORTHODOX CORRUPTION OF SCRIPTURE: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* is a must read for anyone who wishes to investigate the volatile *milieu* out of which our NT was forged.

Ehrman’s central thesis is that, during the Second and Third ante-Nicene Centuries, debates over Christ’s identity, found their way into the manuscripts (MSS) of the NT via the scribes who felt they needed to ‘help’ their particular Christological factions win the day. Justified assistance came in the form of text- tampering.

Within the various Christian traditions vying for supremacy at this critical juncture, were such schools as the Adoptionists, Separationists, Monarchians, Gnostics, and Doceticists ... all still trying to come to terms with Jesus’ own question to his disciples: “**Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?**”

Before we draw our pistols at 20 paces and fire our ballistic lead at **Ehrman** we must understand that he is not saying our NT documents are totally corrupt and unreliable. In his *The Reliability of the New Testament*, p 11 he states that, although there are **hundreds of thousands** of textual differences within the many thousands of

our extant manuscripts, those variants that change the meaning pale in comparison. **Less than 1% of the differences are both meaningful and viable.**

This is exactly what I have written in my previous two articles on the subject of **LOST IN TRANSLATION**. The huge numbers of textual variants come mostly in the form of mis-spelling, omissions of a word here and there, a doubling up of the same line or omitting a line, and the like, which are immediately obvious and which alter nothing significantly. Therefore, we may read our NT with the assurance that we are holding an incredibly reliable record of what the authors first penned.

So, the burning question is: How significant are the **less than 1%** of variants ending up being **both meaningful and viable**?

The good news is that once a mistake, and yes, even a deliberate scribal alteration was introduced, it took some time to enter wider circulation. At that point of alteration there were already hundreds, if not thousands, of previous ‘unedited’ copies from all over the far-flung Roman empire already in circulation. So, a particular emendation can usually be traced to the very region and time it entered the ‘mainstream’. Thus, today’s textual criticism (“criticism” used in its best forensic sense) is able to quite accurately work back with confidence as to what the original autographs said.

There is no greater authority in the field of the science of textual criticism than **Sir Frederic Kenyon** who wrote at the end of his life after extensive discoveries and research, “... we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.” (¹) And the prince of NT scholars, **F. F. Bruce** wrote, “There is no body of ancient literature in the world that enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.” (²)

SCRIBAL EDITING MAINLY CONCERNS THE PERSON OF CHRIST

William Barclay observed the curious fact that, on almost every occasion in the New Testament on which Jesus seems to be called God there is a problem either of textual criticism or of translation. In almost every case we have to discuss which of two readings is to be accepted or which of two possible translations is to be accepted. (*JESUS AS THEY SAW HIM, New Testament Interpretations of Jesus*, p 21).

Before we look at one obvious instance where the scribes definitely have altered an apostle’s autograph, I will finish this section with **Ehrman’s** proposition that the less than 1% of altered texts has to do mainly with the person of Christ — and inversely

¹ Kenyon, F. G. *The Story of the Bible*, (1936), p144.

² Bruce, F.F. MA., *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible*. Pickering & Inglis, London. 1953. p170.

the doctrine of God ... with the telling fact that such variants were introduced during the Christological debates from the Second to the Fourth Centuries.

1 TIMOTHY 3: 16

I have chosen to illustrate scribal editing and translation challenges with what Ehrman calls a particularly intriguing textual problem from First Timothy 3: 16. Many scholars think the apostle Paul is quoting a very early creedal confession which outlines the core essentials of our religion ...

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:

God was manifested in the flesh,

Justified in the Spirit,

Seen by angels,

Preached among the Gentiles,

Believed on in the world,

Received up in glory (1 Timothy 3: 16 KJV, NKJV, Majority Standard Bible, Websters, World English Bible, Young's Literal Translation, etc).

Most versions however, have the first line saying, Who / He was manifested in the flesh. But there are a couple which go further and say, Christ / he appeared in human form/nature (Weymouth, Good News Translation, God's Word Translation, CEV, etc.)

A very few read "which" was manifested ... e.g. Douay-Rheims Bible, Aramaic Bible in Plain English, Catholic Public Domain Version, etc.)

So, what did the apostle actually say about there being *no controversy* about our great Christian confession? Did he write that God, Christ, Who / he or which, was manifested in the flesh? Can we ever know? Does it really make a difference? Should we just go with the overwhelming majority who make this verse designate Christ as God in the flesh?

THE MASCULINE RELATIVE PRONOUN

Without doubt, the majority of MSS begin the statement with a relative pronoun in the masculine **who** / **he** was manifested in the flesh. In the Greek this reads as **ὅς**.

So how did this relative pronoun morph into the far less attested, **θεός** to read it was God who was manifested in the flesh? Well, a common scribal practice was to abbreviate the Sacred Name (better, Title) for God. And a common abbreviation for 'God' was to write the capitals for the first and last letters of the word **θεός** — to get **ΘΣ** ... God was manifested in the flesh.

Even those who don't read the Greek will have noticed that the first letter of the relative pronoun (ὅς) starts with what looks like a capital 'O' (it's called an omicron). But, you may say, that's not the first letter in the word for God, θεός, which starts with the Greek letter which orthographically looks like an 'O' with a line running through the middle ... Θ ('Theta' pronounced as our 'th').

So, all a scribe had to do to alter the relative pronoun was place a small line through the 'O' and wallah! We get ΘΣ translated to "God" — whether by accident or by design. Simple! (The second letter Σ is the capitalised equivalent of our "S".)

We know this change was more than likely *deliberate* because it first occurred by the copyists at the very time and place (a crime scene always has a when and a where) when the Western Church was pushing hard to affirm the Deity of the 'incarnate' Christ. The "orthodox" mystery was that it was God Who became flesh.

Militating against the idea **Paul** wrote "God" here in **1 Timothy** is, as **Ehrman** says that, It should first be observed that four of the uncial witnesses who attest θεός do so only in corrections (Aleph, A C D). (Remember the earliest of our Greek texts called uncials were written in all capital letters.) This shows that θεός was the preferred reading of later scribes but also that it did not creep into the tradition unawares. (Underlining mine) (³)

Thus, the earliest and superior manuscripts support the reading of the relative pronoun "who/he" and **not** the noun "God". Textual critics are fairly certain that this scribal alteration happened in the Third Century. We know for sure that from the Fourth Century onwards this tampered text was increasingly adopted (showing that by now, the debate over Christ's person and nature was increasingly being dominated by the majority "orthodox" opinion through **Rome's** growing control over the Western Church). This is a matter of historic record.

However, we have not yet completely solved our dilemma. Is there really such a big difference in starting the creedal affirmation with a relative masculine pronoun ("who/he") or the masculine noun, "God"? Isn't the who / he God anyway? After all, the immediately preceding verses do use the noun "God" a couple of times. They speak of **the house of God** and **the living God**. Is it not therefore only natural we should understand the relative pronoun to apply to that God? Ahh. Great question.

³ Ibid. [The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture](#), p 78

THE NEUTER RELATIVE PRONOUN.

Let's keep an open mind. There's more evidence to consider, for there is a case that **Paul** originally used the neuter relative pronoun — i.e. **not** “who/he” but **“which”**.

At first instance, this may appear to be a forlorn task for the simple reason that there are fewer MSS which start the statement with the neuter relative pronoun **ὃ** (e.g. D* 061 d g vg, several ‘church fathers’.) **Ehrman** himself dismisses this variant on the grounds that this reflects a greater concern for the grammar of the passage than for its contents, since the creed clearly refers to Christ. (⁴)

Even though Christ is not mentioned in the immediate context, and although he gives lip service to concern for the grammar of the passage, as far as **Ehrman** is concerned, that's the end of his discussion! (**Ehrman** himself was a trinitarian and believer in Christ's Deity when he wrote his book.) He does not consider what he gives scant acknowledgement to — namely, that what is being elaborated is **the mystery of our religion**.

So, *could* **Paul** be saying that it's the mystery which was manifested in the flesh?

Usually, but not always, the relative pronoun refers back to its immediate antecedent. In this case, the immediate antecedent is **not** **God**, but **the mystery** (a neuter noun) **of godliness**. This is a very real possibility as we will now show.

GOD'S BLUEPRINT FROM BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN

The NT uses the word **mystery** to mean a secret once hidden in God's counsel but which is now openly available to everybody. So, what is the Divine secret, once hidden, but now made known, and which we confess? Is it Christ himself or, is it the Divine mission which Christ came to fulfil? Both? Or is this just splitting hairs?

The Bible teaches God has had a dream for mankind even before He created the world. God the Father purposed in Himself, that in the administration of the fulness of the times He might gather in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth (Eph. 1: 9-10). This was His good pleasure which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time (NRSV).

Peter's foundational sermon on the Day of Pentecost announced; “**This Jesus, being delivered up by the carefully planned intention and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by wicked hands, and have crucified ... (Acts 2: 23).**

⁴ Op Cit p 78

So, it's the predetermination of God's purpose which existed as His blueprint for all the ages which has now been historically fulfilled through the mediation of Jesus.

This idea is very Jewish. God told the prophet **Jeremiah**, “**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you ... and appointed you a prophet to the nations**” (Jer. 1: 5). When God told Jeremiah He knew him before his conception, the idea is that God pre-planned the ministry and the message for the prophet's arrival in Israel. Jeremiah's personal preexistence is not what's meant. It's the plan before the man!

Before **John the Baptist** was ever conceived, his life's calling, destiny, and mission, were marked out and prepared (**Lk. 1: 15ff**). The plan existed with God before John came to be. The word of promise was given before John came in the flesh! (Where else have we heard that idea???)

In the same Jewish way of thinking, Messiah Jesus was the man pre-ordained to accomplish God's plan of salvation, but this is a far cry from claiming that Christ himself personally existed before the world began. (⁵) (⁶)

Paul clearly states this is his meaning; **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... He predestined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will ... For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will according to His purpose which He determined beforehand in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time ... in him we have been predestined and appointed according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will ...** (Eph. 1: 3-14).

Later in the same letter, **Paul** elaborates how God made known to him and to the church **the mystery ... which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men ... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel**. He goes on to say that now God is presently announcing to the world what had previously only been a secret in His own heart, how **the manifold wisdom of God might be made known ... according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord ...** (Eph. 3:1-11).

Observe again and again that **it's the purpose, the promise, the plan, which was predetermined to be accomplished in Christ**. That's the mystery — not that Christ was God Who became flesh!

⁵ For my fuller treatment of the Jewish understanding of pre-existence see the first article on this website.

⁶ I am aware of **Colossians 2: 2 ...** but dealing with its textual variations is beyond the scope of this brief article.

Colossians 1 repeats the same message; it's the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints (vs. 25ff).

Commenting on these verses, no less a NT scholar than James D.G. Dunn writes: Here too it is the divine choice or election which was made 'before the foundation of the world' — the predetermination of Christ as redeemer and of those who would be redeemed in and through Christ. We may speak of an ideal pre-existence at this point, but of a real pre-existence of Christ or of believers once again there is no thought ... This is simply the vigorous language of those who have no doubt that what has come to pass in and through Christ was part of God's plan from the beginning, indeed the climax of his original purpose in creating the world. (7)

Dunn goes on to observe how clear this language about God's master plan, previously hidden and unknown to men including the Jews, is now an open secret; ... predetermination is the mystery that was hidden for ages, not Christ. Christ is the content of this mystery, as he is the content of the word of preaching (p 236 Underlining mine).

Yes, certainly, Christ is the personal agent whom God commissioned to achieve His determination to reconcile the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5: 19). Jesus Christ is the one who had from the beginning of the world been predetermined in God's promise and plan to bring His master plan for our redemption to fulfilment.

The apostle Peter confirms this thought also in his first epistle where he states, Christ was indeed predestined (πρόγνωσις/prognōsis ... also translated as 'foreordained' or 'foreknown') before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these last times (I Pet. 1: 20).

Now, just in case we are tempted to run off with the idea that this means Christ Jesus himself pre-existed his appearance in the world, bear in mind that in this same chapter Peter says we Christians are also chosen according to the predestination (πρόγνωσις/prognōsis is the same word in both cases) of God the Father ... (1 Pet. 1: 2).

It's God's eternal purpose which was determined from the beginning, not that we or even Christ himself literally pre-existed our historical appearances! Repeat: There is no thought of a personal preexistence of either Christ or of us believers, for **both parties** were foreordained before the foundation of the world ... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

⁷ CHRISTOLOGY IN THE MAKING: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation, Second Edition, SCM Press, 1980, p 235 (Underlining mine).

Again, we note the same line of thinking in **Titus 1: 2f**; There we **have the knowledge of the truth which is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, Who never lies, promised before the ages began — but in due time He revealed His word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour ...**

A careful comparison of **Titus 1: 2f** with **1 Timothy 3: 16** shows complete correspondence. There is the mention of propositional truth as the content of our confession of faith and hope. There is the agreement that God's mystery — as promised before the ages began — has now been revealed for all the world to know. It's the promise, it's the plan, it's the eternal purpose, **which** has now come to fruition in the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

We noted earlier that **Bart Ehrman** admits the neuter relative pronoun **"which"** **reflects a greater concern for the grammar of the passage**. An admission that **"which"** is good Greek for it agrees with the immediate antecedent ... **the mystery of [our] religion!**

CONCLUSION

Applying all these passages to **First Timothy 3: 16f** we reasonably understand that Paul is stating that there is **no controversy concerning the great confession of the mystery of our religion, which was manifested** for all of heaven and earth to witness. It's the Divine purpose for the world which existed from the beginning — not Christ Jesus himself who also existed only in God's promised future! God's predetermined plan of salvation has at last been seen and fulfilled in the embodied Messiah ... i.e. **in the flesh**, as a true human being fulfilling God's intended purpose from before time began.

Yes, we gladly acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the one through whom God has faithfully secured our great salvation in readiness for the coming Kingdom of our God. There is no salvation in anybody else!

The wisdom of God's everlasting purpose and mystery once hidden, has now been revealed to the world through the ministry, message and deeds (supremely seen in the crucifixion, burial, resurrection and glorification) of Jesus Christ. In him all the fullness of God's wise and gracious plan was **manifested in the flesh**.

History and tradition tell us that the "orthodox" party centred in **Rome** eventually won the Christological debate. Naturally, their texts survived — winners always get to write their version of the story! This is why your modern Bible version in all

likelihood says the mystery of our religion is that God was manifested in the flesh, or He was manifested in the flesh, rather than, which was manifested in the flesh.

We may be sure however, there is no statement here that God was manifested in the flesh. We consign that to scribal error, whether by accident or by design.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for His carefully planned intention and foreknowledge, all promised before the world began, and which He has now fulfilled by reconciling the world to Himself through our Saviour Jesus! What grace! What wisdom! What faithfulness! What love! What a mighty salvation. God's plan became the man "enfleshed" in Messiah Jesus!

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness
which was manifested in the flesh,

Vindicated in spirit,

Seen by angels,

Preached among the Gentiles,

Believed on in the world,

Received up in glory

Amen.