

**The Text of the New Testament**  
**or**  
**How close are the books of our Bibles to the books as they were written?**  
**or**  
**Is what we have now what they wrote then?**

We are restricting our discussion to the New Testament documents.

### **Why it matters**

- This is a primary objection to biblical Christianity.
- Since we believe the Bible is the Word of God, it should matter to us if we have the correct words.

Our goal: Avoid both radical skepticism and overstatement.

### **Some Misleading Claims**

- The orthodox church deliberately corrupted the Scriptures to reflect their own theological views.
- There are more NT variants than there are words in the NT.

### **Definitions**

- **Autograph:** An original document, as it left its author's hands.
  - No originals
  - Inerrancy
- **Manuscript:** A copy of a document, written by hand.
  - Moveable type printing press ca. 1440
- **Textual criticism:** The study of the manuscripts of a writing whose autograph is lost, for the purpose of determining the original text.
- **Textual variant:** A place where one or more manuscripts differ in wording or spelling.

### **How variants enter into the textual tradition.**

- **By accident**
  - Errors of sight.
    - Confusion of letters.
    - Homoioteleuton.
    - Metathesis.
    - Errors owing to legibility.
  - Errors in writing.
  - Errors of hearing.
  - Errors of memory.
  - Errors of judgment (John 5:4).

- **On purpose**
  - Grammatical and linguistic changes.
  - Liturgical changes.
  - Elimination of discrepancies (“Isaiah the prophet” to “the prophets” in Mark 1:2; Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3).
  - Harmonization.
  - Conflation (two variants into one).
  - Attempts to correct a Ms error.
  - Doctrinal changes (addition of “fasting” in Mark 9:29).

### **A (possibly) troubling observation**

- **There are** approximately 138,000 words in the New Testament.
- **There are** approximately 400,000 known textual variants in our extant New Testament manuscripts.

### **Why this isn’t surprising (or very troubling)**

- **We have** 5,824 manuscripts of the New Testament.
  - This is only manuscripts written in Greek.
    - Doesn’t count other ancient languages.
    - Doesn’t count NT citations by the early church fathers
      - Over a million verses quoted
      - Can reconstruct entire NT several times over
- **Other ancient works**

### **Some interesting manuscripts**

- Early papyri
  - **P52**
    - Earliest
    - Size of a palm, from a codex
    - Preserves parts of John 18:31–33 on one side and parts of John 18:37–38.
    - First half of second century (100–150, 175 latest).
  - **P66**
    - Late second, early third century (ca. 200).
    - Nearly complete codex of the Gospel of John.
  - **P46**
    - AD 180–200
    - Hebrews, all of Paul’s letters, except 2 Thess, 1 and 2 Tim, and Phlm.
  - Between 10 and 12 papyrus manuscripts in all dating to the second century, which give us 43% of all the verses in the NT (before 200 AD).
  - Total number of early papyrus Mss is around 130, and growing.
- Major witnesses
  - **Codex Sinaiticus**

- Discovered, 19th century at Saint Catherine's Monastery
- Fourth century AD (330–360 AD)
- Entire New Testament, much of the OT, other works as well
- **Codex Vaticanus**
  - Complete NT, except 1 and 2 Tim, Tit, Phlm, and Rev
  - 300–325.

**Different kinds of textual variants:** Meaningful and viable.

- **Meaningful:** A variant that impacts the meaning of the text.
  - The vast majority of textual variants fail to meet this criteria.
  - Spelling
    - Mistakes.
    - Lack of agreed spelling
      - **Example from John 9:** Three different spellings of the same word in the span of eight verses (3s aor. act. ind. of ἀνοίγω).
      - Moveable *nu*.
  - **Word order**
    - Sometimes somewhat significant, but not usually.
  - Of all the known textual variants in all NT Greek Mss, only about one percent are meaningful (400,000 → 4,000)
- **Viable:** A variant that has some reasonable chance of reflecting the original wording.
  - Only in late Mss?
  - Only about half of the meaningful variants in the NT are viable.
- **The *real* number** that we need to grapple with is between 1,500 and 2,000 variants that are both meaningful *and* viable.
- A different way of looking at things.
  - There are roughly 5,800 Greek NT Mss.
  - The average length is about 450 pages = 2,610,000 pages of GNT Mss.
  - If we say there are about 2,000 variants that are both meaningful and viable, this means that there is one significant variant for every 1,305 pages of manuscripts.

The significant textual variants are easily found and widely known.

- The most important appear in the footnotes of any good English Bible.
- The standard Greek New Testaments used by scholars and Bible translators list all important details about all important variants.
- **Romans illustration.**

**No major (or even minor) doctrine** of the Christian faith is called into question because of a textual variant.

- “**The position I argue for in *Misquoting Jesus*** does not actually stand at odds with Prof. Metzger’s position that the essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup>
- **The difference** in meaning may not touch doctrine.
- **The difference** in meaning may teach something that is taught elsewhere.

### **Weighing textual variants**

- **External evidence**
  - Date
  - Geographical distribution
  - Text family
- **Internal evidence**
  - **The basic principle:** The reading from which the other readings most likely arose is probably original.
    - The harder reading.
    - The shorter reading (in cases of intentional changes).
    - The longer reading (in cases of unintentional changes).
  - **In parallel passages**, the reading which is less verbally identical to the parallel is generally preferable.
  - **A reading with words** and forms foreign to the author’s style is suspect.

### **The three most significant textual variants in the New Testament**

- **The story** of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11).
- **The longer ending** of Mark (Mark 16:9–20).
- **The *Comma Johanneum*** (1 John 5:7–8).

---

<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 252.