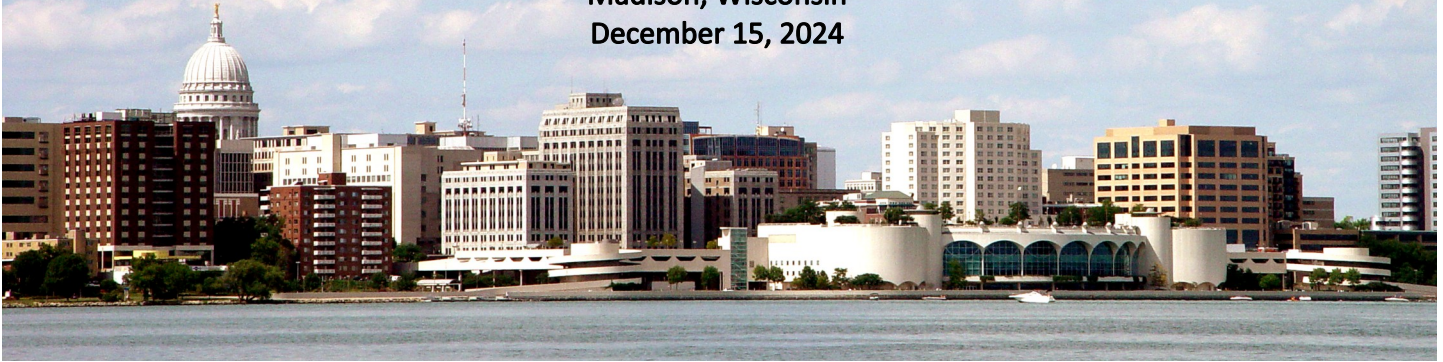


Are the Manuscripts Reliable?

How We Got the Bible: Part 4

Baxter T. Exum (#1764)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
December 15, 2024



It is an awesome blessing to be together with all of you as God's people this morning! If you are visiting with us today, we are happy to have you with us, and we'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card – either online or on a card from the pew in front of you. And we also invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns in that way.

We are here this morning to preach the love of God, the good news, that although we've sinned, God sent his Son Jesus to save us: He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up from the dead on the first day of the week. We respond to this good news by turning to God in faith, by turning away from sin, by publicly proclaiming our faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And, as usual, we do have several examples to share this week, starting with an update from somewhere in the Philippines. They say that on December 7, "Forty-eight precious souls were baptized into Christ after the gospel meeting under the bridge." I would share all 48 pictures, but they all look almost exactly the same, as those being baptized are completely under the water! But what I love about this picture is seeing the kids up there on the rocks. We are thankful for the good news being shared in the Philippines!

This next one also comes to us from the Philippines, but from another congregation. They say, "God be glorified! I'm glad to share, brethren, that after our Sunday worship study on 'How to Be Saved' at the Minanga Weste Church of Christ, two precious souls obeyed the Gospel of Christ (Matthew 16:18; 28:18; Mark 16:15-16) for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38) and were added to the Lord's Church (Acts 2:47). Brother Orlando Camero and Sister Athena Alviar no longer hesitated to obey the Lord's command. God be praised for these two new brother and sister in Christ! Please welcome them and include them in your fervent prayers that they may grow in faith and knowledge of the Lord. Thank you so much and may God bless us all." And I included these, because the preacher seems to be standing in a canoe or a small boat! I don't think I've see this before. But I'm also thankful that they shared some pictures of where they meet as a congregation. I know we've been praying for a larger place to meet lately. It can get crowded in here sometimes. But we are blessed with the facility we have right now, aren't we? What they have here is basically a roof, and some random lawn chairs, and not much else. And I don't know whether you can see it, but they have the bread on a napkin and some grape juice in a small bottle on the table up there. But again, we have been tremendously blessed with a very nice place to assemble here in Madison.

This next one comes from a friend and fellow gospel preacher, Brent Donoho, who preaches down near Louisville, Kentucky. Harlee Doemer says, “What a wonderful Baptism experience! I’m so grateful for my friends, family and my church!!!! My support system is amazing! I am truly blessed.”

These last few come to us from Ukraine – from Kiev, the capital city (on the left), and from Zaporizhzhia, a frontline city in southeast Ukraine (on the right). Concerning Kiev (on the left), they simply say that, “The angels in heaven are rejoicing. Today God joined the saved to the church: Anya, Ala, Yaroslav, Dima.”

Concerning the pics on the right, they say that, “The Book of Acts continues to happen across Ukraine! Despite the missiles, the power outages, the cold...the Kingdom of God is thriving...serving...evangelizing...and baptizing. Seven more souls have been saved in the last few hours...3 of them in the front-line city of Zaporizhzhia.” And they close by saying, “Not today devil.” Amen to that! As always, we share these pictures by way of encouragement and as our invitation to you to consider obeying the good news yourself. If we can help, if you’d like to study together, please let us know. Pull me aside after worship, or give me a call or send a text to 608-224-0274.

This morning, we are returning to our study concerning HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE. We started several weeks ago by taking a look at the written word of God. God communicated to us in writing because it is precise, authoritative, permanent, and it can be translated and shared far and wide, spanning many generations, without being changed or corrupted. Then we looked at the writing of ancient books, and that explains why we are still surrounded by papyrus this morning. In ancient times, people wrote on stone, pottery shards, clay tablets, wood, metal, wax tablets, papyrus, and vellum (or animal skin). Then, last week, we started asking whether the manuscripts we have today are reliable. Since we no longer have the original autographs, how do we know that the copies of copies of copies are accurate representations of the originals. And last week, I shared four very basic facts that have strengthened my faith in the manuscript evidence: 1.) We have somewhere around 6,000 copies of manuscripts in the original language, with some of those dating to within just a few decades of the originals, 2.) We have thousands of ancient translations dating back to the early years, 3.) We have thousands of quotations from God’s word included in non-inspired letters, and commentaries, and even in songs, and 4.) The scribes were fanatically accurate; in fact, we learned that the Dead Sea Scrolls basically serve as an audit of scribal accuracy from ancient times. Our copies are amazingly accurate. Next week we’ll take a look at the canon of scripture: How do we know that the books we have are really Scripture? And how do we know that we have all that we need to have? And the week after that we hope to look at what’s involved in translating God’s word into a language that we can understand.

Today, though, I want us to go back to the question concerning the reliability of the manuscripts. Yes, the manuscripts are reliable, but what do we do when these thousands of manuscripts differ from one another? Up until the invention of the printing press in the mid-1400’s, all of those early copies were made by hand, and as with anything made by hand, we do expect some variations. So, how do we deal with that? Do we have God’s word, or don’t we? For the rest of our time together this morning, I’d like to just briefly summarize and categorize the variations. I’ve arranged these in order of concern (in my mind) – starting “not really a big deal” and ending with “oh no, this is not good.” And as we work our way through these variants, I am confident that it’ll strengthen our faith in the reliability of the New Testament documents.

I. First of all, the largest number of variations between the manuscripts (by far) can be categorized as DIFFERENCES IN SPELLING THAT IN NO WAY AFFECT THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.

This category accounts for fully one half of the variations. So, if one proper name is misspelled and copied a hundred times, that counts as a hundred “variations.” For example, one of the common spellings of “John” is

with two “n’s,” but the correct reading only has one “n.” Today, I don’t know of any Johns who spell their name with two n’s, but today we might think of a name like Vicky. Sometimes it’s spelled with a “y” on the end, and sometimes it’s spelled with an “i.” In ancient times, John was like that. So, as a copy was being made by a scribe nearly 2,000 years ago, if he accidentally spelled it out as “J-O-H-N-N,” that counts as one of our “variants.” That’s one of our “mistakes.” And yet, as we compare the manuscripts, as we have them all laid out side by side, we can look at that, we see a hundred that are spelled with one “n,” and one that’s spelled with two “n’s,” and we can figure out what happened there. It’s obvious that a scribe made a mistake. Ultimately, though, it doesn’t really make a difference, does it? By comparing the manuscripts, we can very easily determine the correct meaning. Problem solved! And again, this kind of “typo” accounts for roughly half of the variations between the manuscripts.

II. Secondly, as we look at the thousands of ancient manuscripts, we can also find a number of DIFFERENCES IN WORD ORDER WHICH IN NO WAY AFFECT THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.

For example, one manuscript may refer to *“the Lord Jesus Christ,”* while another copy of the same passage may refer to *“Christ Jesus the Lord.”* And once again, by comparing the manuscripts, we can almost certainly figure out which one is the correct reading (the way Paul originally wrote it), and we can probably conclude that a scribe accidentally flip-flopped it somewhere along the line. But ultimately, it really makes no real difference. Practically speaking, it doesn’t really matter.

III. A third category is related to this one and concerns WORDS THAT ARE ACCIDENTALLY INSERTED, OMITTED, OR SWAPPED.

For example, we might read in one manuscript a reference to *“God your Father”* as opposed to *“God the Father”* or simply *“the Father.”* And again we can go back and compare the 6,000 manuscripts, we can compare the thousands of ancient translations, we can compare the thousands of quotations in uninspired documents, and we can pretty safely figure out what happened in order to determine the correct reading.

We have a similar situation that happens when words either sound the same or look very similar. And for an example of this, I want to invite you to look with me at 1 Thessalonians 2:7 (p. 1847). I could put it on the wall up here, but that would defeat the purpose of using this passage as an example, because it’s important to see how the translation you normally use handles a situation like this. In the NASB (in our pew Bibles), Paul says, *“But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.”* Does your Bible have a footnote on the word *“gentle”*? There was no footnote in the NIV and the KJV that I use in my office, but there was a footnote in my copy of the ESV and the NASB. There is a footnote in our pew Bibles. Down there at the bottom of the page, the note on *“gentle”* says, “Three early manuscripts read BABES.” Well, we look into that a little bit, and we find that the difference between the Greek word for “babes” and the Greek word for “gentle” is one letter. Basically (in Greek), the word “babes” has an “n” in front of it, and the word for “gentle” does not. So, somewhere along the line, a scribe was making a copy of 1 Thessalonians and accidentally put an “n” where there should not have been an “n.” That “n” was then copied in several other manuscripts going forward. And we can understand why: Both words make sense in the context. But the bottom line is that Paul was “gentle.” He was not really a “babe.” But we can reconstruct what happened there, and we can figure it out. So, this is one example of a word swap, where one word that looks similar or sounds similar to another is accidentally put into the text of the Bible. But again, we can compare thousands of manuscripts, and we can figure it out. So here’s a practical application of this: I want a translation that tells me about this somehow. If there’s a variant that’s found between some of the major manuscripts, I really want to know about it.

IV. There is a fourth category of issues we may face with the manuscript evidence, and that is: **THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT SEEMS THAT SCRIBES HAVE PERHAPS MADE INTENTIONAL CHANGES.**

And by the time we get down to this category, we are only talking about a small handful of verses, a tiny fraction of the New Testament. And even here we are not talking about malicious changes, but we are usually dealing with a clarification, or maybe a commentary or explanation from the margin that made its way into the text. One example of this is found in Acts 2:47 (p. 1703). I would encourage you to look this up in your own copy of the Bible, to see how your Bible handles this. In the NASB, we have Luke's description of the early Christians, as they were *"...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."* Well, if you are using the KJV or the NKJV, you will notice that the verse says that the Lord was adding people "to the church." Well, it is accurate to say that the Lord was adding people to the church, because that is what the Lord was doing; however, the word "church" is not actually in that verse! In reality, the word "church" was added by a scribe somewhere along the line in later years in order to help the verse make sense. What's concerning is that my copy of the KJV has no footnote on this issue, but thankfully, my copy of the NKJV at least explains that the word "church" is only found in the more modern manuscripts. Sometimes, therefore, those who copied the scriptures would very occasionally add something here and there to help a passage make sense – sometimes they would put a note in the margin, and sometimes that note of explanation would make its way into the text itself. Is this a big deal? In the big picture, not really; however, we are talking about the word of God here. If a word has been added to help something make sense, I would like to know about it. And the other danger here is when a preacher uses this verse as a proof text of some kind or maybe bases an entire lesson on this one verse and the idea that God adds people to the church, when the word "church" isn't even there.

Another example of this comes in John 5:1-9 (p. 1661). In the NASB, the passage says,

¹ After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. ³ In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; ⁴ for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] ⁵ A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" ⁷ The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." ⁹ Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk.

Did you notice the issue here? In the NASB, at least, you see some brackets, and then there is a footnote that says, "Early manuscripts do not contain the remainder of verse 3, nor verse 4." Now, some translations just leave it out and don't say anything about it, and some translations put it in without any explanation, but in my opinion, I would rather see it and then have some kind of note about the issue. To me, that seems to be the best way to handle a variant like this. But I think we can see what happened here. Somewhere along the line, a scribe copies this text where the guy talks about not having anybody to put him into the water when it gets stirred up, and the scribe, knowing the tradition, says to himself, "This doesn't make sense!" So here's this manuscript headed for some far off place, he knows that the readers won't know about the stirring of the water, so the scribe adds an explanation, to help it make sense. And that explanation (perhaps in a footnote at first) eventually makes its way into the text. Thankfully, though, with 6,000 manuscripts spread over a

thousand years, we can arrange these in the order they were written, and we can figure this out. Ultimately, though, does this affect my salvation? Does my salvation hinge on the question of whether verses 3-4 were written by John or added later? Not really; however, if there is an issue with the manuscript evidence for a passage, if there are significant variations between the manuscripts, I would like to know about it. And so, I want a translation that uses brackets and a footnote (or something similar). Don't leave it in without telling me, and don't leave it out without telling me. Either way, I want to know about it. But as I said before, the issues we're talking about this morning (thankfully) are few and far between.

V. As we come to the end of our study today, we come to the last category, where we have some MORE SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTIES.

And yet again, even with these larger difficulties, the words in question do not really rise to the level of faith-shattering inconsistencies. With most of these, when we treat them like the others, when we contrast and compare between the thousands of manuscripts, we can almost certainly figure out what happened, and any information in the verses in question is almost always repeated in some other passage. And even here, we are talking about a tiny fraction of the entire New Testament – some have suggested less than 1/1000th of the entire text, only 1/10th of 1%. To put this in perspective, if we were to put everything in this last category together in one spot, all of those issues combined would take up less than a page, and none of them affect any core teaching of the New Testament. I would put John 7:53-8:11 in this category. That's the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery. The NASB has that passage in brackets with a footnote that says, "Later manuscripts add the story of the adulterous woman, numbering it as John 7:53-8:11." Much has been written on that. If I remember correctly, some of the early manuscripts leave it out, but some of those that leave it out will include it at the end of John. In other words, this thing with the woman caught in adultery actually happened, but we're not really sure where to put it. We could talk for hours about that one...

...but probably the most significant textual issue we have in this category would be the ending of the book of Mark. I'm putting it on the wall up here, but I want to encourage you to look this up in your own copy of the Bible, mainly to take a look at how they handle it. In our pew Bibles, this is found on page 1592. We won't get too deep into this, but let's just notice what happens after Mark 16:8. In my copy of the bible, at least, verse 9 starts with a bracket, and there is a footnote that says, "Later manuscripts add verses 9-20." In other words, verses 9-20 are not found in the oldest manuscripts that we have. However, does it make sense that Mark ends his gospel account with verse 8? ***"They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*** Is that how Mark ended his gospel account? I don't think so. But to me, verse 9 doesn't really fit perfectly either. For one, the story almost starts over by going back to the resurrection again. And then the author almost reintroduces Mary Magdalene, as if we don't know who she is, when she's just mentioned up in verse 1. So, something is going on here. The passage is found in some very old manuscripts, but not others, and some that leave it out seem to leave a space for it. It's almost as if the scribes knew something should be there, but they didn't have it at the time.

I don't know if you remember this, but about a month ago, when I introduced our Isaiah scroll, I noted that the outside edge was getting a little funky, and that was a day after I made it. I've carried it back and forth from home to here a few times now, and the edge is getting a little worse. I don't think it's too far fetched to imagine that somewhere along the line the last few verses of Mark got worn away completely on one of those early copies. On the other hand, I believe there is one Christian writer from the Second Century who quotes from verses 9-20 and claims that it comes from Mark. I don't know. I do know that much has been written on this, and I would be glad to share some additional resources if you are interested in learning more about it on your own.

But this is what comforts me: Out of everything in verses 9-20, nearly everything is included and covered in at least one of the other gospel accounts – the Lord’s appearance to Mary Magdalene is covered in John, meeting the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is covered in Luke, the Great Commission is covered in Matthew, and so on. In fact, the one thing that can only be found here that is not found elsewhere in the Bible is the promise (in verse 18) that the disciples would not be harmed if they were to drink any kind of deadly poison. So, unless you are sitting down getting ready to drink a bottle of poison to prove that you are a messenger from God, I would just take comfort that everything else in these verses is repeated somewhere else in the New Testament. But again, this kind of uncertainty involves only about 1/10th of 1% of the text of the New Testament, and no critical teaching hangs exclusively on something found in one of these passages.

Conclusion:

So, this morning we’ve done an overview of some of the variations between the manuscripts. Can we trust the manuscripts? Yes! And my opinion is: We can trust them even more because we have so many, and the large number we have is actually a good thing. Yes, we do have some differences between them, but with some careful study we can know that what we have is the word of God.

As we close, I’d like to recommend several books that have helped my understanding of these issues through the years.

- One of the best resources has been *Scribes, Scrolls, and Scripture*, by J. Harold Greenlee. This was recommended to me by the Greek professor at Freed-Hardeman University many years ago. It’s out of print now, but I’m sure it’s still available on Ebay (that’s where I got mine). The subtitle is, “A Student’s Guide to New Testament Textual Criticism.” And he covers these issues in a way that normal people like us can understand.
- I would also suggest *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by F.F. Bruce
- I would suggest *You Can Trust Your Bible* by Neale Pryor.
- And I would also suggest *How We Got the Bible*, by Neil R. Lightfoot.

These last two men, brothers Lightfoot and Pryor, are both members of the Lord’s church. I’ll leave these four books on the table up here, if you’d like to learn more.

Next week, if the Lord wills, let’s take a look at the question that actually led to this series of lessons: How do we know that the books we have are scripture? And how do we know that we have everything we are supposed to have? How do we know we aren’t missing any books? I hope you can join us next week for that.

Let’s close our study today by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We are thankful this morning for your written word. We are thankful that you have communicated to us, and we are thankful for those who have dedicated their lives to copying and translating and printing your word so that we can have it available to us today, in our own language. We are thankful for the promise that your word will always be with us.

We come to you this morning in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com