

THE ACCURACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

The New Testament is more accurately copied than any other book from ancient history. Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton conducted a research project comparing the accuracy of the copies of the New Testament to other ancient works. He concluded that the Hindu *Mahabharata* “was copied with about 90 percent accuracy and Homer’s *Iliad* with 95 percent accuracy.”¹ This is a more than sufficient degree of accuracy to convey the essential teaching of the originals.

By contrast, scholars have estimated that the New Testament was copied with up to 99 percent, or even greater, accuracy. Nineteenth-century British manuscript experts Westcott and Hort estimated that only about one-sixteenth of the variants rise above “trivialities,” which would make copies 98.33 per cent accurate.² Ezra Abbot’s figures yield an estimate that the text is 99.75 percent pure.³ The great New Testament Greek scholar A.T. Robertson declared that “the real concern is with a ‘thousandth part of the entire text.’” That statement would translate to 99.9 percent accuracy on anything of real concern.⁴

What is more, even Bart Ehrman, the renowned New Testament scholar who argues against the reliability of the New Testament, admits that the manuscript variants do not affect the central message of the New Testament:

It would be a mistake . . . to assume that the only changes being made were by copyist with a personal stake in the wording of the text. In fact, *most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology.*⁵

Misleading Statistics

In view of the foregoing evidence, particularly that in the previous chapter, one can see how misleading statistics from critics such as Bart Ehrman really are. To speak of 200,000 to 400,000 errors in the Bible is completely misleading. First of all, most of

the differences are not errors, but simply variant readings. Second, these variants do not represent 200,000-plus places in the Bible. Rather, if one word is misspelled in 3,000 manuscripts, this is counted as 3,000 errors. By this same type of calculation, it has been shown that Ehrman has 1.6 million errors in the first edition of his own book. Mariano Grinbank discovered 16 errors in Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*.⁶ Since the first edition is reported to have sold 100,000 copies in its first three months, this would mean (the way Ehrman counts errors in the Bible manuscripts) that there are 1.6 million errors in Ehrman's book! Yet no reasonable person would argue that because of this we cannot trust the copies to convey Ehrman's original thoughts on the matter.

Actually, the more so-called errors (really, variants) there are, the more certain we are of the original. For example, if one received a message like this, one would have no problem collecting the money:

Y#U HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

Why? Because, even with the error, 100 percent of the message comes through. And if one received a message like this it would remove all doubt:

Y#U HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

YO# HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

And the more lines we have (with errors in a different spot), the more we would be sure of the message.

Ehrman also makes an issue over the so-called biases of the manuscript copiers. Yet, as it turns out, their bias does not affect the basic message of the Bible. Consider the following illustration:

1. YOU HAVE WON TEN MILLION DOLLARS

2. THOU **HAST WON** TEN MILLION DOLLARS

[Notice the King James bias here]

3. Y'ALL **HAVE WON** \$10,000,000

[Notice the Southern bias here]

Observe that of the 28 letters in line 2, only 5 of them [in bold] are the same in line 3. That is, about 19 percent of the letters are the same. Yet, despite the bias, the message is 100 percent identical! The lines are different in form but not in content. Likewise, even with the many differences in the New Testament variants, *100 percent of the message comes through*.

In the light of all the above evidence, it is fair to say that the New Testament is the most accurately copied book from the ancient world. For it survives in more copies, earlier copies, and more reliable copies than any other work from antiquity by comparison with other classic works from the ancient world, most of which survive on only 10 to 20 manuscripts. Compare the evidence in the following chart:

New Testament Manuscripts Compared to Other Ancient Sources					
Author	Ancient title	Date of original	Date of earliest manuscript	Time gap from original	Manuscript copies extant
Plato	<i>Dialogues</i>	4th century BC	AD 900	c. 1,250 years	20
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	9th century BC	400 BC	c. 500 years	643
Herodotus	<i>The Histories</i>	484 to 425 BC	AD 900	c. 1,350 years	8
Aristotle	Assorted works	4th century BC	AD 1100	c. 1,400 years	5
Thucydides	<i>History of the Peloponnesian Wars</i>	460 to 400 BC	AD 900	c. 1,300 years	8
Aristophanes	Assorted works	448 to 385 BC	AD 900	c. 1,300 years	10
Sophocles	Assorted works	496 to 406? BC	AD 1000	c. 1,400 years	193
Julius Caesar	<i>The Gallic Wars</i>	58 to 44 BC	AD 900	c. 950 years	10
Tacitus	<i>Annals of Imperial Rome</i>	AD 58 to 120	AD 1100	c. 1,000 years	20
Pliny the Younger	<i>History of Rome</i>	AD 62 to 113	AD 850	c. 750 years	7
Suetonius	<i>The Twelve Caesars</i>	AD 70 to 140?	AD 950	c. 900 years	8
Total manuscripts for ancient sources					932
Greek New Testament manuscripts		AD 45 to 100	AD 117 to 325	30 to 300 years	5,800-plus
Non-Greek New Testament manuscripts					19,200-plus
Total New Testament manuscripts					25,000-plus

Chart adapted from Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 408, by H. Wayne House and Joseph M. Holden, *Charts of Apologetics and Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2006), chart 43. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Conclusion

In the light of all the available evidence, we can agree with the great Greek manuscript expert Sir Frederic Kenyon, who declared,

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. [Thus] both the *authenticity* and the general *integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.⁷

In short, we can trust the Bible in our hands as an accurate copy of the original in all essentials. As the famous scholar Philip Schaff noted of the variant readings known in his day, only 50 were of real significance, and *there is no "article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching."*⁸