



3. Is today's text of the Bible free from error?

The question. Can you believe that the Bible (the completion of the 66 books as recognized in the councils of Hippo in AD 393 and Carthage in AD 397) is God's inspired, inerrant, infallible Word and also doubt the authenticity of a few verses in today's text? Yes ... and you should do both. Can someone believe that today's text of the Bible is a 100% replication of the original manuscripts? Yes, someone could. However, in spite of admirable motives to do so, that demonstrates a lack of knowledge about today's text of the Bible. There is a difference between those people who are trying to denigrate the authenticity of the Bible and the textual scholars who are pursuing a text that is free from any corruptions after being copied and recopied over many years. The two groups are very different. Moreover, it is unmerited to equate the two ... and disparaging to the second group to do so.

A warning. The author of this article is committed to Biblical inerrancy. The books referenced in the preparation of this article are from sources committed to the inerrancy of the Bible. Much has been written by such people about the resolution of minor textual difficulties in the Bible ... available in many reference books and academic texts. However, a considerable number of believers, also committed to inerrancy, are not familiar with the subject. Those who are unfamiliar with it may find this article disconcerting at first. However, they should have increased confidence in inerrancy after a second reading ... knowing more about the process that has brought our current text of the Bible fundamentally into alignment with the Word of God as originally penned.

Is the text of our Bible accurate? A good word-for-word (formal equivalence) translation, based on the most accurate reconstructed texts of the Bible, can be trusted in spite of a small number of remaining textual difficulties. The Bible in its autographs (original manuscripts) comprise the full, word-for-word, truthful, inspired, inerrant Word of God, which is the supreme and final authority in doctrine and life (Isaiah 40:8, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, 2 Peter 1:20-21). It is God-breathed, factual, free from error, pure, uncorrupted, eternal, and powerful. The Bible stands out from all other books as the preeminent book. It is not simply *about* God ... but is *from* God. Is the Bible 100% free from error? Yes, in the original manuscripts that we no longer have. Is our reconstruction of the original manuscripts into today's Bible text finished? Not completely ... all minor textual difficulties have not yet been resolved.

Textual critics. There has been a multi-century effort by scholars to produce a text of the Bible that is as close as possible to the original manuscripts. Those scholars are referred to as *textual critics*. They are not *critical* of the Bible in a negative sense. They are not opponents attacking its inerrancy. Textual critics endeavor to produce the most accurate reconstructed text of the Bible as they collect, collate, and *critique* (i.e., evaluate the merits, value, and authenticity of) the many old manuscripts, translations, quotations, and variant renderings. Today there are committed Christians who mistakenly believe that our current Bible translations are but one-step away from the original writings. That is simply not the reality of how they were produced. The multi-century effort by textual critics has produced a collection of reconstructed texts of the Bible upon which our translations are based.

The manuscripts. The text of today's Bible is derived from more sources than any other body of writings from antiquity. From earliest dates, it was meticulously copied and recopied with minimal textual corruption ... and widely distributed and translated. The historic textual evidence for today's New Testament is based on an immense number of copied manuscripts (in whole or fragment) ... more than 5,000 Greek, 8,000 Latin, and 1,000 other. These are not the original manuscripts (referred to as autographs) ... but are copies and translations. There are also about 2,000 New Testament passages quoted in early church lectionaries (church service books). In addition, there are more than 36,000 quotations from the Bible found in the works of early church writers. The New Testament was meticulously copied, recopied, and translated. However, the original manuscripts were neither photocopied nor digitally reproduced and archived. They were hand-copied ... most often on perishable mediums. No original manuscript of the New Testament has been discovered. However, the massive quantity of ancient texts has allowed the reconstruction of a very accurate text of the original. Textual corruption has been essentially eliminated through a continuing effort using every credible discovery of manuscripts, linguistics, and technology to do so.

The Gospels. There are approximately 3,780 verses in the Gospels (although there was no delineation by verse numbers in the early Gospels). Approximately 40 verses of today's text of the New Testament stand out as having some degree of doubtful authenticity ... as recognized by textual critics. That means that essentially 99% of today's text is considered an accurate reconstruction of the text of the original manuscripts. Many of these forty verses are noted in side-column comments or footnotes accompanying the text of up-to-date translations of the Bible. Of these forty verses, fewer than 11 have any significant doctrinal consequence. We can be confident that our Gospels are more than 99.7% pure. Less than 3/10th of 1% of the texts of the Gospels involve these textual difficulties. The forty verses (representing only 18 passages) of varying degrees of questionable authenticity are categorized below. Neither inconsequential minor variants (inclusions, exclusions, and alternate renderings) in credible source manuscripts nor those already resolved in good newer translations are mentioned here.

1. Doctrinally inconsequential because they are represented in other passages:

Matthew 18:11 ... *"For the Son of man has come to save that which is lost."* Most old manuscripts do not include this verse. Luke 19:10 has essentially the same content.

Mark 9:44 ... *"Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."* This verse is not in the best old manuscripts. However, its content is in Mark 9:48.

Mark 9:46 ... *"Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."* This verse is not in the best old manuscripts. Its content is in Mark 9:48.

Mark 11:26 ... *"But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."* This verse was apparently added in later manuscripts. Its content is represented in Matthew 6:15 & 18:35.

Mark 15:28 ... *"And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with transgressors.'"* This verse was apparently added in later manuscripts. However, this event was predicted in Isaiah 53:12 and by Jesus in Luke 22:37. Its fulfillment is recorded in the Gospels.

Luke 17:36 ... *"Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left."* The verse is not included in many manuscripts ... while some do include it. Its content is in Matthew 24:40.

Luke 23:17 ... *"Now he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner."* Many manuscripts do not include this verse. Its concept is in Matthew 27:15, Mark 15:6, and John 18:39.

Luke 24:12 ... *"But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened."* Some older manuscripts omit this verse. Much of the content of this verse is in John 20:3-10.

Luke 24:40 ... *"And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet."* Some manuscripts include this verse. However, its content is in John 20:20.

2. Doctrinally inconsequential:

Matthew 6:13 ... *"For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen,"* is not found in early manuscripts. This is a point of disparity between the Catholic and Protestant rendition of the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew 16:2-3 ... *"But He replied to them, 'When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?'"* These verses are omitted in very early manuscripts.

Matthew 23:14 ... *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation."* This verse is not in the early manuscripts.

Mark 7:16 ... *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."* While not in earlier manuscripts, later ones add this verse.

Mark 16:8b or 16:21 ... *"And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."* A few later manuscripts add this section after verse 8 or after verse 20. However, it is already not included in the main text of many of today's versions of the Bible.

John 7:53 - 8:11 ... *"Everyone went to his home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?' They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.'"* The events recorded in this passage are considered by many as authentic tradition. However, these verses are not found in most old manuscripts of John.

3. Of moderate doctrinal consequence:

Matthew 17:21 ... *"But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."* This verse is not in many manuscripts. It is generally found in newer rather than old ones. Its condition of prayer is in Mark 9:29. However, in that verse in Mark, the inclusion of fasting is not in all manuscripts.

John 5:3-4 ... *"Waiting for the moving of the waters; 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."* Although not in some manuscripts, many authorities include this sentence.

4. Of significant doctrinal consequence:

Mark 16:9-20 ... *"Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons. She went and reported to those who had been with Him, while they were mourning and weeping. When they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they refused to believe it. After that, He appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking along on their way to the country. They went away and reported it to the others, but they did not believe them either. Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and*

hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.' So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed." This passage is not found in some of the oldest manuscripts. These verses in Mark are of questionable authenticity based on external textual evidence. However, there are also significant concerns from within the text. Some of its content is uncommon, inconsistent, and problematic when compared to other teachings of Jesus, the Gospels, or the remainder of the New Testament. Mark 16:9-20 may be a later conclusion added to this Gospel. This passage mentions signs accompanying believers ... such a statement is not found elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or the Gospels. This passage mentions them speaking in tongues ... not found elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or the Gospels. The use of the word *creation* to represent *humanity* rather than the *act of God's creating* is not found elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or the Gospels. The word *confirmed* in "*confirmed the word by the signs that followed*" is not found elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or the Gospels. The immunity of believers to snakebite is not taught elsewhere by Jesus or in the New Testament ... although treading on serpents is mentioned once (Luke 10:19) and Paul survived a snake's bite on Malta (Acts 28:3-5). A believer's immunity to the effects of ingested poison is not mentioned elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or in the New Testament ... nor is there an example of it. These two immunities have not proven true in the history of the church ... except possibly on rarest occasions. These unique teachings support the dubious authenticity of this passage. The most consequential teaching of this section is in verse 16, which to some indicates the requirement of water baptism for salvation. This is not taught elsewhere by Jesus or in the Gospels ... nor apparently did Jesus baptize anyone with water. If water baptism were required for salvation, it is virtually incomprehensible that Jesus would neither have baptized nor mentioned it in only one verse (one that He, as omniscient God, would have known would be recorded in a passage of questionable authenticity). Moreover, if water baptism were a requirement for one to be saved, why would Jesus not have commissioned Paul to water baptize (1 Corinthians 1:17)?

In conclusion. It is an admirable commitment to the purity of God's Word that precipitates one's conclusion that the reconstructed text, which forms the basis for our translations of the Bible, is 100% free of minor textual difficulties. However, such a conclusion is inaccurate. We have an essentially accurate reconstruction of the text of the original manuscripts of the New Testament ... more than 99.7% pure. The long process of the textual refinement of it to match the original manuscripts has not come to its ultimate destination. The Bible, as presented in its original manuscripts, is the complete and uncorrupted Word of God. It is eternal, eternally accurate, and relevant. It has not become outdated or irrelevant. Nor is it evolving, growing, or improving. The refinement effort that has endeavored for many years to bring our current text into total alignment with the original manuscripts, although not finished, has given a most trustworthy text of the Bible to us as the authority for doctrine and life. We can trust the Bible. Jesus prayed, "*Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.*" John 17:17. We can trust God's Word. His Word is truth.

This Good Questions answer, copyright 2004 by Acts One Eight, Inc., may be copied unchanged for free distribution ... but only with this copyright statement attached. Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible. Please visit www.ActsOneEight.org to access more information, Bible eLessons, daily devotionals, and Bible training courses on our multiple sites. Please send any questions or comments to contact@GoodQuestions.org.

