

The Transmission of the New Testament

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Date: 03 May 2026

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[0 : 00] So, last time we left off talking about the transmission of the New Testament! And I will skip over any kind of review this morning other than to remind you that! the copying of the New Testament was considerably different than that of the Old Testament.

Old Testament transmission, Old Testament copying was highly centralized. It was done mostly by professional scribes in specific locations under strict guidelines, but that really wasn't possible for the New Testament. For at least the first few centuries, the church was spread out, it faced persecution, so you had a lot of people, both professionals and amateurs, copying books of the New Testament very quickly. So, as you might expect, this produced much sloppier results. However, it produced many, many more manuscripts.

So, to begin, I want you to imagine that we have a large table spread out, and on that table, we have every existing manuscript of the New Testament. In Greek alone, we have something like 5,800 existing manuscripts, that is, to this day. And we're really going to focus on these Greek manuscripts because they are the most important. Since the New Testament was originally written in Greek, these are word-for-word, letter-for-letter copies. Now, we also have on our table thousands of translations, and many of them are very early translations, and those are also very helpful to us, but they're secondary because a word-for-word copy in the same language is going to be even more useful than a translation. So, we have thousands of Greek manuscripts on the table. We also have thousands of translations on this table, and we'll also add to that early Christian writings. We'll be adding the writings of men like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Augustine. Why? It's because they so frequently quote the New Testament in their writings, and that gives us even more insight because we can see perhaps what manuscripts they were reading at the time, what their copies of Scripture said. So, we have all of these manuscripts on the table. Now, what we want to do is organize them a little bit. So, maybe we'll make one long row of the Greek manuscripts in chronological order, in the order that they were written. Then, maybe, below them, we'll put all of the translations, also in chronological order, and then we'll add those extra biblical patristic sources in chronological order. So, now we have an opportunity to see how the text evolved over time. We can move up and down this table and see the first moment when, say, a mistake was made, or when maybe a novel reading was introduced into the text.

[3 : 20] Then, we can see what happened to that mistake as time progressed. Did it get corrected? Did it get copied over and over again? Did subsequent scribes recognize the mistake and correct it, or did they perpetuate it? But, we need to do at least one more thing to our table of manuscripts here.

Chronological order is good, but it only tells us part of the story. We also need to organize these manuscripts by what are called text types, or manuscript families. You see, the church was spread out over all of the Roman Empire. So, you had pockets of Christians here, and there, and elsewhere, and they're all copying the New Testament independently. Again, this is not happening in a centralized way.

So, if a change was made to the text somewhere, it might be helpful to know where it came from, and how widespread it actually was. I mean, was the text the same across the entire Roman Empire?

Is there a textual variant that is limited to one particular region? That kind of information could also be useful when we're trying to understand what the autographs, or the original writings, of the New Testament actually said. Now, when we talk about manuscript families, or text types, there are two in particular that are most important, and they are the Alexandrian text type, and the Byzantine text type. So, the Alexandrian manuscripts are older, as you see up here.

They are primarily associated with the dry, warmer climate of Egypt, and the reason these were preserved is because the climate was ideal for that. However, because they are much older, they are often less polished, and often less harmonized, and we'll talk about why that is in a moment. [5 : 26] As for the Byzantine manuscripts, they are much later manuscripts, and they are the majority of surviving manuscripts. As you would expect, we have much more of the later manuscripts than we have of the earlier manuscripts. But interestingly, the Byzantine family of manuscripts is much smoother in their readings, much more harmonized between parallel passages, and considerably longer than the Alexandrian manuscripts. And again, we'll talk about why that is. So, now we have our table, with all of our manuscripts laid out and neatly organized, and what do we learn from this?

Well, first of all, we learn that there are as many as half a million textual variants between all of these manuscripts of the New Testament. And I'm talking exclusively about the 5,800 Greek manuscripts. Half a million. Now, that might sound very troubling. How can we possibly believe in the reliability of Scripture with that many differences between the manuscripts?

Well, raw numbers can be very misleading. For now, let's take all of the manuscripts off the table, except for Greek copies of the book of Jude. And we'll use the book of Jude as a test case because it's the shortest book in the New Testament. In Greek, Jude has approximately 461 words. It's very short.

So, now our table has only 560 copies of Jude. And if we are acting as very careful, very astute textual critics, we will notice that there are 1,694 textual variances or differences between them. In raw numbers, that's a lot. Nearly 1,700 differences in only 461 words. Let's see, what's that? Four variants or so per word? Now, before you close up your Bibles and say, that's it, I'm done, I can't trust this book anymore, let's take a closer look at these variants. Bible scholars and textual critics are not merely going to count the number of differences and leave it at that. They're going to categorize these variants because not all differences are the same. Not all differences are even meaningful.

[8 : 14] In fact, the vast majority of variants have no meaning at all. They're irrelevant. And let me show you. So, the first category of textual variants can be classified as nonsense readings. These are essentially typos. If a scribe had been using a word processor, they'd get that little red squiggly line under the word that would indicate that what they wrote is not even a legitimate Greek word. And anyone later reading that manuscript would immediately recognize the mistake. There would be no question about it. You wouldn't need an accurate manuscript for comparison to know that that word should not be there or should not be written that way. The second category is singular readings. These are readings found in only one manuscript, no others. So, when we go to our table and we look at our 560 copies of Jude and we see a strange reading, but it's only found in one manuscript, well, that's a pretty big red flag.

That would indicate a very localized error. One scribe made one mistake. So, it's pretty safe to set that one aside and just assume it was a mistake made by one person. So, as we look at our Greek copies of Jude and we set aside all of the nonsense readings and all of the singular readings, how many textual variants do we have left? Well, that actually removes about 50% of them. So, now we're down to 785 differences. But let's keep looking because that's still quite a large number. The third category is spelling differences. We have to remember that ancient spelling was not standardized. So, you might have two or more scribes who spell the exact same word differently. The fourth category is minor grammatical differences. And these are so minor, in fact, that many of them can't even be translated into English. For example, you could have variations in the word order of a Greek sentence that to a Greek reader would not affect the meaning of the sentence at all. Or you might find an article before a proper name, which sounds very strange to us. So, rather than simply write the name Paul, they might write the Paul. Obviously, these differences do not affect the meaning of the text either, so we can safely discard them as well. So, where does that leave us?

If we count only the textual variants that actually have any impact on the semantic structure of a sentence, that leaves us with no more than 47 differences. We went from nearly 1700 down to 47, but even that number is misleading. Once the text gets translated into another language, say English, even most of those 47 remaining variants are actually meaningless. They don't change the meaning of the text at all. And you'll see that reflected in your own Bibles. If you're using the NIV, you'll notice the translator supplied precisely two footnotes in the book of Jude to indicate textual

variants that have any remote significance. The ESV has only one. And let me show you what that is.

So, according to the ESV, Jude verse 5 says, Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the footnote indicates that some manuscripts did not say Jesus, but said the Lord who saved a people out of the land of Egypt.

And I believe the NIV does the opposite. So, verse 5 in the NIV says the Lord, while the footnote indicates that it could be Jesus. So, which is it? Out of the nearly 1700 textual variants in our Greek copies of Jude, this is the only one that has any real significance. But we might ask, how much significance does it really have? When we study through the entirety of the Bible, is there any question as to whether Jesus is God? Is there any question about Jesus' active role throughout the New Testament? I mean, we're told that He was at work even at the beginning of creation. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. So, you see, even with this one meaningful variant in all of Jude, no Christian orthodoxy changes, no fundamental doctrine is altered in the very least. Did the Lord save His people out of Egypt? Of course He did. Did Jesus save His people out of

[13:44] Egypt? Again, yes, He did. Now, this is a good time to mention what we might call the golden rule of textual criticism. And again, by textual criticism, I'm referring to the process of comparing the manuscripts to better understand what the autographs likely said. And the golden rule is this, the reading that best explains the textual variance is likely the original. Or to put it another way, textual critics prefer the reading that best explains how the other readings came into existence. So, let's use Jude 5 as an example. Do you think that it's more likely that Jude originally wrote the Lord and a scribe later changed it to Jesus, or that Jude originally wrote Jesus and a scribe later changed it to the Lord? Let's just see a show of hands. Who who thinks Jude originally wrote the Lord? Who thinks he originally wrote Jesus?

I'd be interested to hear your reasons, but initially, I think most people would think that scribes had more incentive to change the Lord into Jesus than the other way around.

I mean, it bolsters the case for Christianity when you can see that Jesus was clearly active in the salvation of God's people from Egypt. Then again, imagine you're reading Jude for the first time. You have read the story of the Exodus many times before, and never once did you read the name Jesus.

But all of a sudden, here you get this letter from Jude, and it's not the Lord rescuing his people, it's Jesus. Now, that can feel a little jarring. In fact, I remember experiencing this firsthand when I went from reading the King James Version to the English Standard Version for the very first time. I remember thinking, what's going on here? Why is Jesus' name here? Well, it's by no means definitive. I don't know that we have a clear answer, but very early manuscripts and some of the most reliable manuscripts, not to mention many other ancient sources, have Jesus here in Jude 5. But that's a very difficult reading, isn't it? And by difficult, I mean, a Christian may know it's theologically accurate to say Jesus saved his people out of Egypt, but seeing his name in the text just feels a little out of place. So we can easily imagine how a scribe might have thought this was a mistake, or might have thought it was an intentional edit by an earlier scribe, and decided to smooth it out, or to fix it. And that's what we typically see throughout the New Testament transmission. Scribes don't intentionally make passages harder to read. The natural tendency is for them to take hard passages, make them smoother, make them easier to read. So when scholars are examining a textual variant, they ask themselves a series of questions. Which reading most likely gave rise to the others?

[17:23] Which reading would scribes most naturally want to change? Or which reading best fits the manuscript evidence? And now you may be thinking, well, this doesn't sound promising. Are you saying that scribes were intentionally changing the words of the Bible? Well, in some cases, yes, but not for the reasons you think. So there are basically two types of scribal mistakes. There are accidental mistakes, and there are intentional changes. Now the accidental mistakes are exactly what you think they'd be.

They are misspellings, repeated words, skipped words, skipped lines, confused letters, reversed letters, accidental omissions. Now keep in mind that early manuscripts almost always had all capital letters and no spaces between the words. So it was very easy when a scribe's eyes were going back and forth between the source manuscript and the copy to miss things or to miscopy

something. For example, a very common mistake was when phrases or sentences had similar endings. So let's say the original manuscript said, we went to the market and bought bread, and we went to the market and bought fish.

Well, the scribe might copy, we went to the market, and when his eyes look back at the original, instead of his eyes landing on that first instance of the phrase, we went to the market, it lands on the second instance. And then he copies and bought fish. He missed the part of the line that says, and bought bread. But I think we can readily understand how accidental mistakes were made.

So let's talk about the intentional changes. Now, intentional changes were almost never made out of malice. Even scribes who intentionally changed the text, they did so with reverence. They usually believed they were helping the reader or actually protecting the text in some way. Now, this doesn't justify anyone making changes to the Word of God, but it helps us understand why these changes were made.

It also helps us understand why the New Testament did not get shorter over time. It actually got longer. And this often surprises people. But when we compare those earlier Alexandrian manuscripts to the later Byzantine manuscripts, we find that the Byzantine manuscripts are considerably longer.

[20 : 20] Actually, let's go down that rabbit hole for a moment. I'll come back to how the Bible got longer in just a minute. But let me pause here to stress that the New Testament did, in fact, get longer over time.

As scribes copied it over and over again throughout the centuries, additions were made. More additions were made than things that got missed. And this is relevant for at least two reasons. We have all of them laid out in chronological order and categorized by text types. So, naturally, on one side, we are going to see those earlier Alexandrian manuscripts, which are far fewer, a bit messier.

And on the other side, we have those later Byzantine manuscripts. Again, we have a lot more Byzantine manuscripts because they're later manuscripts. Their materials were not as brittle. There's been less time for them to be lost or destroyed. And I'll also say that they're far more uniform with one another. There are still textual variants, but compared to those earlier Alexandrian manuscripts, they're considerably more consistent between them. And this is because they were created after persecution had ceased and the copying process could move into a more professional setting. So, that's what we would expect to see.

[21 : 44] So, as we're looking at the table, we can see that the New Testament got longer, especially as we move from the Alexandrian manuscripts to the Byzantine manuscripts. And this is also true across translations as well. But we're going to set those aside for now and continue focusing on those Greek manuscripts.

Okay, so clearly the New Testament got longer. How is this relevant? Well, first of all, it indicates that we cannot let the majority rule when we're examining textual variants. Why? It's because the majority of manuscripts that may agree with one another come later in the timeline. Well, our question is not what do the majority of manuscripts say. Our question is what did the autographs say? What did the apostles originally write? What did God originally inspire men to write? And as we're looking at the table, the majority of manuscripts may not be much help to us in answering these questions.

For all we know, as standardized and relatively consistent as those Byzantine manuscripts became, they may have preserved errors that were made sometime prior. You see what I mean?

Second, this also helps us understand much of the debate over modern versions of the Bible versus the King James Version. So critics of modern versions will often point out that our Bibles are missing words or phrases or even entire verses. And of course, what they're doing is they're comparing the modern Bible with the King James. Well, the King James Version has more words in it than modern versions do. And their claim is that scholars and translators and publishers along the way have intentionally removed words from the New Testament for one reason or another. But the truth is actually the opposite of that. While the King James Version is an older translation than, say, the NIV or the ESV, it is a translation of exclusively much later Byzantine manuscripts.

And for them, that was out of necessity. That's what they had. That's what they had available to them. So those were the only manuscripts they had available. So they're working exclusively from much later, longer manuscripts. And most modern versions of the Bible are actually translated from both Byzantine and those earlier Alexandrian manuscripts. There was far more evidence to be used

in those translations. So in modern scholars and translators, they look at the table and they see clearly that additions were made to the text over the centuries. Well, what should they do?

[24 : 55] It's just as wrong to add to Scripture as it is to take away from Scripture. So in an effort to get as close to the original wording of the autographs as possible from this much wider pool of manuscript evidence, our modern Bibles do not include those later additions to the text that were, out of necessity, included in the King James Version. In short, there's no satanic conspiracy to remove verses from the Bible or anything like that. That's not what's happening. Well, with that, let's climb out of the rabbit hole and get back to why scribes made intentional changes to the New Testament.

The first reason is simply piety. For example, scribes often expanded titles for Jesus, where earlier manuscripts might say Jesus, later manuscripts might say Lord Jesus or Lord Jesus Christ.

Another example would be some of Paul's greetings. Consider Colossians 1-2. In the ASV, it says, grace to you and peace from God our Father. But the King James says, grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The earliest manuscripts do not contain the phrase, and the Lord Jesus Christ, while the later manuscripts do in fact. So, either a scribe borrowed from one of Paul's other greetings in one of his other letters intentionally, or perhaps mistakenly, just having it memorized and naturally writing it, or out of a sense of piety, he added that phrase to the text.

The second reason for intentional changes is harmonization. And, as you might expect, this is very common in the Gospels. Since you have multiple Gospels telling the same stories, the temptation of scribes was to harmonize them. And that's not to say there wasn't already harmony between them, but sometimes scribes wanted to make that harmony even clearer.

[27 : 14] And this is especially true in Mark's Gospel. If a scribe was already familiar with, say, Matthew, reading Mark can feel like there's a lot of details missing.

So, they would take some of those details from Matthew and insert them into the parallel stories in Mark. If I could get the next slide, Ollie. So, here's an example.

This one is found in Mark chapter 9. This is a slightly different example, but Jesus is speaking. And he says in verses 47 and 48, If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

So, notice that last part, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. In the earliest manuscripts, verse 48 is the only time Jesus makes that statement within this passage.

[28 : 24] However, later manuscripts have him using that exact same phrase right after verse 43 and right after verse 45. Why?

It's hard to say, but it seems as though a scribe felt that phrase should be repeated for perhaps rhetorical emphasis. It has a cadence to it to hear that repetition.

And by the way, this is an example of a so-called missing verse from the Bible. Now, when verse numbers were added to the Bible, which did not happen until the 16th century, their versions of Mark reflected the longer text, much like the KJV would.

So, once it was realized that these are actually additions to the text, those phrases were taken out, along with the corresponding verse numbers 44 and 46.

So, if you look at your NIV or your ESV, you will notice verses 44 and 46 are missing. That's what these are. So, while it may seem that verses are missing, they are actually additions to the text over the years.

[29 : 40] And you'll notice that whether you're reading from the King James Version or a modern version, nothing substantial has changed.

Either way, God has preserved His inspired words and their meaning. Now, what I'd like to do is walk you through a few of the more notable examples of textual variance in the New Testament.

So, we'll look at our table of manuscripts and we'll apply the rules of textual criticism to determine what the autographs likely said despite the differences between the manuscripts.

But before we do that, what are the rules here? What are the rules for textual criticism? Well, I've already shared the golden rule, which is to prefer the reading that best explains the others or best explains how the variance arose in the first place.

Now, the question is, how is this done? And that's where the other rules come into play. So, the first thing a textual critic will examine is what's called the external evidence.

[30 : 51] So, this is a matter of examining the manuscripts themselves, all laid out on the table. How old is the manuscript? What region does it come from?

What text type does it represent? Is the reading geographically widespread or more localized? Is it found in Greek manuscripts? Is it supported by earlier translations?

Is it quoted by early church fathers? What is the general reliability of the manuscript? So, it's just looking at this whole table of evidence. That's the external evidence. You see, it's the external evidence that gives scholars a physical paper trail whenever the text has changed or there are differences between the manuscripts.

Now, the second thing a textual critic will look at is the internal evidence. This is where they examine the writing itself. What was the author most likely to write?

What was a scribe most likely to change? Does the reading fit the author's vocabulary? Does it fit his grammar? Does it fit his style? Would a scribe be tempted to add to this?

[32 : 04] Would a scribe be tempted to omit this? Would a scribe be tempted to smooth out the grammar in this verse? You see, the internal evidence helps to understand how the variants may have arose.

Next, generally speaking, textual critics will prefer the more difficult reading. Now, that may sound very counterintuitive, but scribes, again, were not prone to making a passage harder to read.

They were far more prone to make a passage easier to read. They smoothed out the awkward grammar. They clarified hard statements. They harmonized what they saw as discrepancies.

Now, a harder reading doesn't always mean it was original. It's not automatic, but more often than not, it proves to be. Along those lines, textual critics usually prefer the shorter reading.

Why? Well, yes, scribes sometimes did omit words or phrases, but as I've said, generally speaking, the New Testament actually got longer over time, not shorter.

[33 : 15] And this is because scribes would add clarifications, or they'd add explanatory notes that later got copied into the text, or they'd expand the titles of Jesus, or they'd harmonize phrases, or they'd take liturgical formulas being used in the church and inserted into the text, sometimes not even intentionally, perhaps, or other familiar sayings that were not originally there.

So a scholar has to ask himself whether the shorter reading arose accidentally, or whether the longer reading arose because of one of these various kinds of additions were made. Next, textual critics often prefer the less harmonized reading.

And this is especially true in the Gospels. If one Gospel has a shorter or rougher form in a particular passage, and another manuscript appears to have smoothed it out and make it match a parallel Gospel, well, more often than not, we find that the less harmonized reading is actually original.

And lastly, textual critics generally prefer the reading with Jewish or Hebrew influence. Obviously, much of the New Testament church was made up of Gentiles who were speaking and they were writing in Greek, but the authors of the New Testament were Jewish.

So what would happen often is that a later scribe would adjust some of the idioms and phrases and sentence structures to better reflect their cultural understanding and their more polished Greek.

[34 : 58] So what was to the later scribes a more difficult reading proves to actually be the original. So with these rules in mind, I have a list of six textual variants for us to consider.

We'll only go through one of them today and we'll finish up the rest next week as I pray we bring this series to a close. And next week, I also hope to look at the different translation methods, especially into English.

So if we could go to the next slide. Thank you. I realize all of this is very small, but let's start here with John chapter 5. John chapter 5, verse 4.

Reading from the ESV, it says, starting at verse 2, Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.

In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for 38 years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be healed?

[36 : 13] The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. And while I am going, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Get up, take up your bed, and walk.

And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now this story raises some questions. Namely, what were all of these disabled people doing gathered at the pool of Bethesda?

Evidently, they were anxious to get into the water when the water was stirred, but we're not really told what that means. Who was stirring the water? And why did they want to get into it when it was stirred?

Well, this man seems to indicate that it would somehow heal him. How? We don't know. It's a very strange story. Well, if you happen to grow up reading the King James Version as I did, you're probably thinking, I know who stirred the water.

It was an angel. And that's because the King James Version has an additional verse that says, For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool and troubled the water.

[37 : 28] Whosoever then, first, after the troubling of the water, stepped in, was made whole of whatever disease he had. Okay, so we have a textual variant here.

So here's what we do. We walk over to our table with all of our manuscripts laid out and we see what's going on here. Well, the earliest manuscripts do not contain that verse.

We don't see it in any of the manuscripts from the 2nd or 3rd centuries. We have complete codices, remember the book format, of the entire Bible from the 4th century and it's still not there.

Then once we get to the 5th and 6th centuries, something strange starts to happen. Some of the manuscripts add only the phrase, Waiting for the moving of the water.

But then other manuscripts have the entirety of verse 4 as I read it from the King James. Then once we get down the line to those later Byzantine manuscripts, verse 4 is there in pretty much every copy.

[38 : 39] However, even some of those copies have verse 4 marked with an asterisk or some sort of marking to indicate it's questionable. Well, we can probably guess what happened.

But let's look at some of the early translations as well. In Latin manuscripts, we see the same thing. At first, it's absent, then it starts to develop with only portions of it included, then in later copies the entire verse is there.

We see the same thing in Syriac translations and we see the same thing in Coptic translations. So what do you think happened? Well, the evidence would suggest that John himself did not write verse 4.

But someone along the way, perhaps multiple people, had questions about this story and maybe they did a little research and maybe they discovered that there was a long-standing myth in Jerusalem that if a disabled person got into the water immediately after an angel stirred the water, they would be healed.

So maybe this scribe decided to make his own study Bible, if you will, and make a little note in the margin to explain what was happening in this story. But then you have another scribe.

[39 : 59] He gets a hold of that scribe's copy and he's going to make a copy for himself and he sees, uh-oh, there's a note in the margin. And maybe he thinks this guy must have forgotten a verse and had to write it into the margin.

So what does he do? He copies it right into the text because the last thing any scribe wants to do is remove anything from the Word of God. Now that's pure speculation on my part, but we do know that that exact same thing happened in other places in the Bible.

Regardless, the evidence shows us that verse 4 is not original to John. It may be true in the minds of the people who were waiting there by the pool of Bethesda that an angel would come and stir the waters, but John likely did not write it.

Now does it really change anything? No. And that is what is so astonishing about God's preservation of the Bible.

Scholars estimate that of the half a million textual variants in the New Testament manuscripts, only 1% of them change the text in any meaningful way.

[41 : 19] And of that 1%, none of them, not one of them, has any bearing whatsoever on Christian orthodoxy or the fundamental doctrines of the church.

So with or without John 5, 4, Christianity remains exactly the same. So while God allowed scribes to make many human mistakes, he did not allow their mistakes to alter or affect one significant doctrine in the least.

And we'll stop right there. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your faithful care over your word through many centuries, through many hands, and through much human weakness.

You have preserved the scriptures so that we might know you truly. We praise you that your truth has not been lost, your promises have not failed, your gospel remains as clear as ever.

So give us humility as we study our Bibles and confidence to believe what we read. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen.