

# Textual Trysts

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## *The Textual Reliability of the New Testament*

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[[Textual Criticism of the NT: Basic Assertions and Problems](#)] [[Advice from Secular Textual Critics](#)] [[Agreement Among NT Critics](#)] [[Is Our Faith Affected By Variants?](#)] [[Was There a Conspiracy to Change the NT?](#)] [[Textual Reliability and Historical Reliability](#)] [[Case Study: Bart Ehrman](#)]

The reliability of the text of the NT (we cover the matter of the reliability of the OT [here](#)) is a necessary prerequisite for accepting the historicity of the NT - for of course, how can one be sure that the history is correct unless the text is correct? In this matter, the evidence is fairly clear, and there is plenty of it available - the oft-repeated statistic about 24,000+ NT copies or pieces is well-known. So, then, what are some of the key questions for this issue?

**Is NT criticism any different from textual criticism of secular texts?** In principle, not at all [See for example McGn.TCLI, 55-91]: And this shall give us some interesting moments! We shall at certain points herein note that statements made by some folks regarding the text of the NT would be laughed out of court in the circles of "secular" textual criticism.

**Using textual criticism, how much of the NT can we recover and designate as authentic?** The popular idea is that textual criticism has been able to recover the NT text with 99% accuracy. That's a total of three pages in your average Bible without study notes being in question. Textual critics Westcott and Hort asserted [Hunt.IntNT, 13] that the parts of the NT "still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part" of the NT - which would be less than a third of a page. Generally, however, it seems that very few scholars in this field are willing to be so bold! Most scholars in this field seem to settle for vague phrases, ranging from speaking of the "retreating mirage" of the original text to Comfort's assurance that "there are several manuscripts that are quite accurate copies of the original text." [Comf.TNT, 29] Scholars outside the field are more bold; France asserts that "among the textual variants in the gospels there are only two which throw doubt on more than a verse or two of the traditional text" - the [ending of Mark](#) and the [adultery story in John](#) [Franc.EvJ, 135-6], with the other variants bearing only on details of sentimental value. Beyond that, he proclaims (ibid., 137):

*The student of the history of Jesus is, from the point of view of textual criticism, on vastly safer ground than the student of the life of Julius Caesar or indeed of any other figure of ancient history.*

And Moreland adds [More.ScCy, 136]:

*Most historians accept the textual accuracy of other ancient works on far less adequate manuscript grounds than is available for the New Testament.*

The above leads us to compare the statements of certain NT text-critics with those of "secular" critics who work with far less evidence in terms of quality and/or quantity. Here are some words of wisdom we can apply:

"Nothing entitles us to assume stupid cutting, still less destructive cutting, except a blind reliance on the supposed axiom that Shakespeare never revised his work." [McGn.TCLI, 5] Let us likewise do better than presume that all changes to the text that we suppose were made by later interpolators with an agenda.

"There is now general agreement that the textual problems in Shakespeare are of such complexity that no text can be established that will commend the general assent that constitutes 'definitiveness.'" [ibid., 26] Note: This is the closest I have seen in any "secular" textual criticism book to the statements of despair and woe made by some NT text-critics to the effect, "We can NEVER know what was REALLY written!!!" (See below.) Most critics, however, are of a far more positive bent! For example, though an edition of *Richard III* "can advertise that they contain more than a thousand variants from the conventional text" [Bowe.TLC, 3], we do not see text critics wondering if that play actually was written entirely differently! "Hamlet will not be revealed as a woman, or as the villain; he will still be melancholy and at odds with the life about him." [ibid., 8] Textual variants are important to note, but we are not going to find that they significantly alter the storyline!

**How well do modern textual critics agree?** An encyclopedic treatment of this issue is presented by the team of Kurt and Barbara Aland, who provide statistics as to both the percentage of variant free verses among the seven major editions of the Greek NT, and the number of variants per page (excluding orthographic errors). It is helpful to look at these [Alan.TNT, 29-30]:

*Book---% of variant-free verses---# of variants per page*

- *Matthew* 59.9 / 6.8
- *Mark* 45.1 / 10.3
- *Luke* 57.2 / 6.9
- *John* 51.8 / 8.5
- *Acts* 67.3 / 4.2
- *Romans* 75.5 / 2.9
- *1 Corinthians* 75.7 / 3.5
- *2 Corinthians* 78.1 / 2.8
- *Galatians* 76.5 / 3.3
- *Ephesians* 76.1 / 2.9
- *Philippians* 70.2 / 2.5
- *Colossians* 72.6 / 3.4
- *1 Thess.* 68.5 / 4.1
- *2 Thess.* 72.3 / 3.1
- *1 Timothy* 81.4 / 2.9
- *2 Timothy* 79.5 / 2.8
- *Titus* 71.7 / 2.3
- *Philemon* 76.0 / 5.1
- *Hebrews* 77.2 / 2.9
- *James* 61.6 / 5.6
- *1 Peter* 66.6 / 5.7
- *2 Peter* 52.5 / 6.5
- *1 John* 72.4 / 2.8
- *2 John* 61.5 / 4.5
- *3 John* 73.3 / 3.2
- *Jude* 72.0 / 4.2
- *Revelation* 52.8 / 5.1

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*Total 62.9 equals 4999/7947 verses*

The agreement here is quite astonishing, considering that this is the combined result of seven different teams and/or persons over an extended period of time. That all 7 editions completely agree on close to two-thirds of the NT is a striking indication of how much confidence we may have in our present text. (Though not given, the next statistics would show agreements on 6 out of 7, 5 out of 7, etc. - and if the trend above is followed, we might well reach that 99% agreement before going too far down the ladder!)

**Is any matter of the Christian faith affected by any variant reading?** This is the most important issue for the average believer, and the good news is this: No doctrine of Christianity is in the least dependent on ANY textual variant.

A major study of this issue has been performed by Ehrman [Ehr.OxC], who locates several orthodox-oriented corruptions of the NT text that were designed to halt illicit interpretations of verses by heretics. We shall take a special look at his study at the end of this section.

**"Holding, you Christians are believing lies. Don't you know that the later church conspired to eliminate discrepancies and made purposeful changes to the text of the NT?"**

We will look at this matter more closely when dealing with Ehrman's work; for the moment, let it only be said that textual conspiracies such as are often suggested would be practically impossible - there is no way that the church could have eliminated ALL known readings of a given text!

Beyond that, what is the direct evidence and data for textual corruption? 95% of the errors found in the NT text are recognized as unintentional [Patz.MNT, 138]. This includes confusion of similar letters, repetition of words or sentences, and just plain bad copying. The remaining 5% of errors includes revised spelling and grammar, harmonization of similar passages, elimination of textual difficulties, and, indeed, theological or doctrinal changes. However, let it not be said that there was some systematic or even informal conspiracy to change the NT text.

Also working against any idea that some important text was lost or added is evidence that textual criticism was already in process as early as the second and third century! Origen complains of negligence and audacity by scribes; Jerome takes note of various scribal errors, and so on. [Metz.TNT, 152-4] These fellows, at least, were on guard against any variations! (To this we may also add that scribal science used in Alexandria on the NT in the early decades also ensured careful treatment of the text.)

In summary, here is a general admonition regarding charges of NT textual corruption: Until solid textual evidence is found for such changes, all that we are being offered with such objections is a "spaghetti against the wall" supposition. Rather than citing some particular textual difficulty, all we have the typical critic is some vague idea that somewhere, somehow, we must be missing SOMETHING that will cause problems for the Christian faith! Even Ehrman [Ehr.OxC, 46n], though he has only found a few dozen corruptions - which he was able to identify because original readings were still preserved! - cannot resist speculating that there are actually "hundreds" of undiscovered corruptions. This is rather like the wandering soothsayer who carries a sign saying "THE WORLD WILL END TOMORROW" - having faith that someday, he will be right! The evidence is far better that we DO have the "original text" -- it is simply mixed up with "unoriginal variants," and it is speculative to believe we have lost any real parts.

**"So what? This is pointless. Textual reliability and number of manuscripts does not mean that the Bible is reliable historically."**

Beware this straw man: It's been pulled at least twice that I know of! NO ONE is arguing that textual reliability = historical reliability. But as noted at the beginning, one cannot suggest that the history recorded by a text is accurate unless the text itself is accurately recorded!

Furthermore, there are reasons for citing the outrageous number of manuscripts of the NT available:

1. No one can properly complain that we don't have adequate source material for the NT. I.e., skeptics, no yelling about how we don't have enough textual evidence, as some of you amateurs out there like to do, I have noted.
2. No one can register the complaint above without making similar complaints about other ancient documents. Concerning the *Iliad*, often regarded as the "second-best" ancient text in these terms, the superiority of the NT is quite evident - according to Wood [Wood.STW,124], the bulk of our surviving manuscripts of the *Iliad* come from the 14th and 15th century, with our best and earliest manuscript dating to the 10th century. (So, let there be no complaints about having, say, Late Middle Age manuscripts in that 24,000 total.)

### **Bart's Batter-Up: On *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture***

And now to the case presented by Bart Ehrman, which I feel warrants special attention. The basis of Ehrman's case - and it is a very good one - is that certain verses of the NT were altered in the second and third century, albeit with good intentions, to deflect heretics from foisting an unorthodox interpretation upon them. It is this sort of finding that leads some Skeptics (and even some Mormon critics) to claim that the NT cannot be classed with secular works in terms of textual reliability, because there was clearly so much textual infighting that would not occur over a secular work.

Generally there is little to find at fault with Ehrman's work. Many of his claims of intentional change are good; some require rather strained explanations or else plumb the depths of paranoia (as opposed to a much simpler idea that a change was the result of an accident). However, various critics have taken his material and run with it as though it renders the whole of the NT suspect; Ehrman himself draws far more cautious conclusions, and does not here make any argument for any theological view as correct, after the manner of Elaine Pagels in [\*The Gnostic Gospels\*](#) (though we will see if he does so in a newer book now out, *Lost Christianities*). Indeed, in an email to a reader of ours who requested clarification, Ehrman (who gave permission to use this quote) said:

*I do not think that the "corruption" of Scripture means that scribes changed everything in the text, or even most things. The original texts certainly spoke at great length about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The issues involved in the corruption of the text usually entail nuances of interpretation. These are important nuances; but most of the New Testament can be reconstructed by scholars with reasonable certainty -- as much certainty as we can reconstruct \*any\* book of the ancient world.*

Thus one should be cautious of those who abuse Ehrman's conclusions. But let's begin with a summation of what *Orthodox Corruption* presents.

Ehrman identifies four heretical stances that incited the orthodox corruptions: adoptionism, separationism, docetism, and patripassianism. Adoptionism, Ehrman acknowledges, has the oldest pedigree of the set (and I would add, is the only one of the set that has anything like a fighting chance), so we will look at that one more closely.

To put it succinctly, adoptionism holds that Jesus was not born as the Son of God, nor was He pre-existent, but He was "adopted" as God's Son at some later point - generally identified as being at His baptism. In other words, God just picked Jesus out; anyone could have done the job the same.

Ehrman gives several examples of how orthodox belief led to "corruption" of the NT in order to "obviate the possibilities of misconstrual" [Ehr.OxC, 58; for other examples, see Alan.NTTC, 133ff]. We will consider one in particular related to adoptionism, at Luke 2:33 -

*Luke 2:33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.*

Now this verse as it stands in my CD-ROM NIV has been restored to what was originally written by Luke, according to the textual critics. However, the orthodox corrupters changed the verse to read, "Joseph and his mother marvelled..." Why? Because the adoptionists were taking the original version to mean that Joseph was Jesus' physical father!

Here are my observations on this matter of orthodox corruptions, and on Ehrman's case for them:

1. **As demonstrated by the above, heretics were often not particularly bright.** It may be politically incorrect to say so, but I find it laughable that the adoptionists interpreted the above verse (and others) as meaning that Joseph was Jesus' physical father, when Luke so clearly states that the conception was the work of God (1:34-5), and Matthew elsewhere affirms the virgin birth. The tagging of Joseph as Jesus' "father" here is hardly in the genre of a doctrinal specification; moreover, it is not as though we would expect Mary to say, especially in the hearing of others, "I and this man, who for convenience we call your father, though he was not, biologically...!" Certainly Joseph was a "father" to Jesus in that important way of rearing the child, which more than earned him the sub-title; and if nothing else, the convenience of use would suggest that this is what Joseph would be called, even with full awareness of Jesus' divine origins. Beyond that, adoptionism is totally refuted by this verse in the OT:

*Is. 42:8 I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*

- which, along with other verses in the OT, makes it quite clear that God would not have just picked any old Tom, Richard or Harry at random to be Messiah or to declare himself Wisdom incarnate. Thus these "corruptions" while corruptions of text should only be considered a problem if they are corruptions of *truth*. Clearly, this one is not, and we thus have a lesson in the need to read *text* in light of *context*.

Along the same lines, but less harshly, I would fault Ehrman for a degree of theological naivete in his presentation. He notes, for example, the Gnostic interpretation of Luke's given age of Jesus as being about 30: The Gnostics took this to mean that the divine realm consisted of 30 aeons! In reply to the complaint by Irenaeus that the literal interpretation was clearly and plainly the correct one, Ehrman replies that it was "clear and plain to Irenaeus, not the Gnostics"! [ibid., 21] I would suggest that it was only unclear to the Gnostics because they were so mind-numbingly out of touch with reality! One would like to see Ehrman defend the Branch Davidians or Jim Jones with such obtuse reasoning. The "aeons" idea would never have emerged in Jewish Palestine; here is an example of how text is informed by context. In another place, Ehrman asserts that the Gnostics could make a "plausible" case for claims of apostolicity: According to Clement of Alexandria, Valentinus was a disciple of Theudas, who was "allegedly" a disciple of Paul; and Basilides studied under Glaukia, a "supposed disciple" of Peter! [ibid., 22] I find VERY LITTLE plausibility for apostolicity here, inasmuch as a) the discipleship links are alleged, not definitive - by Ehrman's own admission! - and, b) after three generations, a goodly degree of change is possible - and there is quite a change from Paul to Valentinus and Peter to Basilides! (See [here](#).) Finally, I can add the most important contextual information: The Jewish ["Wisdom theology"](#) background against which the NT was written makes adoptionism little more than a laughable anachronism! Jesus identified himself with the pre-existent Wisdom known from earlier Jewish literature, and NT writers further on work under the same premise.

2. **None of these corruptions affect any doctrine.** The doctrines in question are affirmed elsewhere, in places NOT subject to textual variation.
3. **As noted above, these corruptions were determined through readings of preserved texts.** Ehrman goes back to older texts to determine the original readings - and as we have seen, my NIV has gotten back to the original text. Thus, again, there should be no crying out about some

widespread conspiracy to alter the NT - which would be practically impossible anyway! Beyond this critics who "overuse" Ehrman fail to note certain cautions he makes, and his specific caution against thinking that such a conspiracy existed. On the changes against adoptionism, for example, Ehrman notes that they occur "sporadically throughout the tradition, not at all with the kind of consistency for which one might have hoped (?!)....The scribes of our surviving manuscripts more commonly preserved theological variations than created them, and none of these scribes appears to have made a concerted effort to adopt such readings with rigorous consistency. Almost certainly there was no effort to create an anti-adoptionistic recension of the New Testament. Indeed, the Christians of the proto-orthodox camp did not, on one level, need to change the texts; they believed that the texts, in whatever form they came, already attested their christological views." [98] Changes made the text more "serviceable" [99] but it is not as though (say) adoptionists and the orthodox came with equally valid interpretations. Furthermore, some have falsely taken evidence of change in the 2nd and 3rd centuries as a "guilt by association" validation of unattested changes in the 1st. Ehrman himself makes no such statement directly here; nor does he suggest them, other than in the form of questions such as, "Do the preliterary creedal and hymnic fragments cited by the New Testament authors preserve an adoptionistic Christology?" [276]

A second caution that critics miss is that Ehrman quite explicitly states that "there is scarce need to posit any kind of ulterior motive for this kind of scribal activity." [279] Ehrman does not posit scribes thinking that they can convert opponents with such changes; Ehrman even states that we can be "fairly certain...that variant texts favoring one point of view were rather easily dismissed as aberrations." [279] Ehrman finds no evidence "to suggest that proto-orthodox scribes acted out of sheer malice or utter disregard for the constraints of the text -- that is, that they strove to make the text say precisely what they knew it did not." Ehrman sees these changes as acts of interpretation (if I may say, after the form of a modern commentary), not part of some vast conspiracy to hide the truth. Critics (especially Mormons) who use Ehrman to this end are going far beyond what Ehrman intended.

We will add a final caution of our own. The orthodox corruptions Ehrman identifies happened within the context of specific controversies in the second and third century. The critic who tries to drag the idea of corruptions back into the *first* century based on "guilt by association" has a burden to identify opponents against whom the text was "corrupted"; they should also provide actual evidence of corruption, as Ehrman did, for even Ehrman began with hard textual evidence for corruption, and only then could he accord validity to possible changes of the same ideological slant, for which there is no hard textual evidence. This burden they will not satisfy except by imagination, for there are no hard texts left from this period, and they can do more than invent fictitious opponents (after the manner of Burton Mack) for whom there is no hard evidence.

### Kerry's Carry-All

I now close this article with consideration of material on textual criticism by Mormon apologist Kerry Shirts. Shirts has recently updated his material and has made some improvements and additions to what was originally a reply he made to Greg Koukl of *Stand to Reason*.

I noted previously that Shirts lifted quotes from their contexts out of the books of textual-criticism scholars. For example, he quoted Metzger as saying that "The whole of Matthew's Gospel as far as xxv, 6 is lost, as well as leaves which originally contained John 6:50-58, 52, and 2 Cor. 4:13-xii, 6". This is all he quotes, leaving the reader with the impression that these materials are not attested in any ancient manuscripts at all, when in fact Metzger is only referring to *one particular* codex of the NT. Although I think Shirts is earnest, and though he no longer uses this quote, I must sadly report that in the updated version similar misapprehensive uses of quotes have occurred. Having now corresponded with Shirts a bit, I no longer think this to be malfeasance, merely carelessness.

In addition, Shirts *still* apparently believes that evangelicals assert that the Bible has been perfectly preserved to this day (obviously, they do not). Though he no longer rings up the large number of "variants" and makes hash of it, he does still use quotes that report variations, without any critical evaluation in terms of showing that these variants are obstacles to determining the original state of the text.

Let us now take a look at Shirts' latest update. Due to availability of material I will not be evaluating ALL of what he reports, just enough to give the reader an idea what's up.

Shirts' item is titled, "The Bible, Unfortunately, Has Not Been Perfectly Preserved Through the Centuries." This raised alarms for me at once, since I know of no intelligent Christian (I bar here the KJV Only crowd!) who believes that the Bible HAS been preserved perfectly through the centuries; indeed, I have [argued that such would be an impossibility](#) in the first place. In personal correspondence I advised Shirts to take a closer look at what is actually believed by most Christians in this regard. I specifically referred him to the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy. In the interim I looked this up and would point the reader to the following statement, Article X:

*We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies **only to the autographic text of Scripture**, which in the providence of God **can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy**. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.*

*We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.*

If anything this statement assumes that the text of the Bible has NOT been perfectly preserved through the centuries. We hope that Shirts will look more deeply into this matter; as it stands, it is clear that Shirts is taking an extreme view of normative, or else has not properly understood the Evangelical view. The latter, unfortunately, seems to be indicated by this statement that he attributes as a belief of "Critics though especially Fundamentalist Christians":

*1. The vast overall majority of the "errors" the Mormons have "found" the Bible to have are either not really there or make no difference to the tune of 99.995% of them being totally invalidated claims.*

Shirts offers no documentation or direct quote or source cite here, but it sounds like a badly mangled version of Norman Geisler's observation that the text of the *New Testament only* via the *process of textual criticism* has made us able to be assured of what the original text said to a certainty of, actually, 99.5%. Where or when this mangling occurred, whether with Shirts or a source, I obviously cannot say, but it is certainly mangled one way or the other. Shirts' second item is more on target:

*2. Even of those that the Mormons would claim to be valid, the vast overall majority of those were due to understandable and real human error and not to intentional deception of any kind. (I would add, I agree there was, in many cases, not deliberate deception, but the issue is were there deliberate changes. I think there is enough to show that there were, and some of these changes were certainly for theological reasons).*

Actually this would apply to ALL claimed problems, not just those the Mormons would claim to be valid, but the essence is correct: The vast majority of such errors were not deliberate changes. Those that were, were indeed made for theological reasons, but as I have pointed out above, none of these changed any doctrine of Christianity, and none offer any support for Mormon purposes other than perhaps Deut. 32:8-9, which we discuss [here](#).

3. *The Biblical record is thousands upon thousands of records dating back (some of them) to almost 4000 BC that everyone is trying to find holes in like the Mormons are in order to discount the Bible.*

Egad! 4000 BC? I do not know where Shirts gets that date. The oldest OT text I know of is from maybe 400 BC; the oldest NT text, from 125 AD (the Rylands papyrus, a small scrap of John). The "thousands upon thousands" refers to the 24,000 NT texts (not OT) we have from the second century onward into the sixth or seventh. A textual critic's gold mine.

4. *The Bible has been "purged" and burned so many times throughout history that it ain't even funny that the Mormons can not ever publicly publish the original characters of the supposed "Golden Plates".*

I do not know who makes this claim or what the significance of it is. To be honest, it makes no sense!

5. *And last but not least, every deliberate error that exists in the Bible is still openly there for the open examination, consideration, and decision of the reader."*

This is true. Critics like Ehrman have been able to detect such things precisely *because* original readings have been preserved, or at least there have been ways to detect redaction that are fairly reliable. (See above.)

So then, where do these arguments come from? Shirts says that they are "limited more or less to the strictly literalist Fundamentalist Christians I have encountered on the Internet" and acknowledges that "[m]any Christians have little to do with such a naive and overly literalist understanding of the Bible." He's right -- as I have noted tongue in cheek to Mormon contacts, we both have our weirdos to bear. But we do rather wish Shirts would get more of a handle on what is taught by educated Christians rather than the sort he seems to have attracted. 🙄

In what follows Shirts offers quotes from several scholars as to the "real deal" when it comes to the text. As noted, we would actually agree with these scholars as a whole; indeed I have quoted several of them in my articles as a measure against Skeptics! Also, I am again only dealing with some of what Shirts quotes as many of these sources are not immediately available to me.

*Bruce M. Metzger, "The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration" notes that "a group of correctors working at Caesarea entered a large number of alterations into the text of both Old and New Testaments." (p. 46). Codex Bezae's special characteristic is the free addition as well as the occasional omission of words, sentences, and even incidents. (p. 50). As he reviews various traditions of manuscripts discussing their relative strengths and weaknesses, Metzger finally notes that "All known witnesses of the New Testament are to a greater or less extent mixed texts, and even the earliest manuscripts are not free from egregious errors..." (p. 246) Metzger also points out that there have been doctrinal changes in the Bible due to preconceived notions of what the scriptures ought to say, in order to conform to previous held beliefs in an early age of Christianity. (p. 201ff)*

I "caught" Shirts before not giving Metzger full due, and unfortunately, he does it here again. The quote about the correctors at Caesarea notes that the variant readings were designated by signifying marks and that the scribes were attempting to correct the text based on the work of an earlier martyr named Pamphilus. In other words, this was a genuine, early attempt to conduct textual criticism. On Codex Bezae, Metzger clearly notes that this codex is highly idiosyncratic and very unusual. Differences include additions of agrapha (independent floating words of Jesus that in many cases may be authentic) and rearrangement of verse order. At any rate, Metzger's words only disintegrate any view that the text has been perfectly preserved -- which is again a statement no informed Christian would accept. Shirts goes on to criticize me

for not grasping that this is the belief of "many Christians in the general public" -- to which I can only say, he has been hanging out in some very odd public places. 🤪

I will comment otherwise only on Shirts' use of Emanuel Tov's *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. Here again I must sadly pinpoint Shirts for carelessness with the material. He states, "The Samaritans added their own theological biases to the scriptures (p. 19)." They did, but they did so in what was clearly their own "version" which was entirely separate from the mainstream OT text! The way Shirts has it described, it leaves the impression that the Samaritans were able to get their biases into the mainstream text we are reading today!

Shirts then says, "words were added that change the meaning of biblical passages (pp. 57, 63, 65, 60)." Tov explains several of these and as Shirts has described it, leaves the impression of a mountain when there is really a molehill. One example Tov gives is of changing the word "hemorrhoids" to "tumors"! I'm sure a great deal of doctrinal significance accompanied that change, at least at the Church of Preparation H Reformed!

Shirts offers more examples, but as a whole, he does not help the Mormon case at all, nor does he in any way affect the position of more than a few coconuts. I commend his greater depth in research, but it remains that Mormonism is finding no solace for uniquely Mormon doctrines in the field of textual criticism.

### Islamic Unawareness

By request we now also have a look at an item titled *Textual Reliability / Accuracy Of The New Testament* listed to "M S M Saifullah, Usman Sheikh, `Abdullah David & `Abdurrahman Robert Squires". This article contains little that is not debunked by material we have above, but there are a few points we'd like to address even so.

The first point for consideration is that the authors tackle the common claim that we are able to restore the text of the NT to an accuracy of 99.5%. I have noted this as a popular argument; the authors complain that they do not find such a statement in the works of Metzger, who is often cited, but the offer of Westcott and Hort (*Westcott and Hort asserted [Hunt.IntNT, 13] that the parts of the NT "still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part"*) offers much the same quantity estimate. (They charge Geisler with inventing the claim for Metzger, which I seriously doubt; though I indeed cannot find the referenced citation in Metzger's older book, I would suspect a mis-citation by Geisler as opposed to pure invention.) At the same time, the authors do little or nothing to invalidate the 99.5% estimate, and indeed, are oblivious to their own abuse of statistics in addressing it.

Further on the authors show a dismal understanding of textual-critical procedure. They make much of that (so they say) "some 80% to 90%" of texts are of the "Byzantine" variety and that there are "characterised by smoothing, conflation, harmonisation and outright fabrication." Not that the authors establish or offer any quantitative estimate of how much of a problem any of this "smoothing," etc. is; much less do they offer any examples of readings which allegedly ought to send Christians scurrying for their holes. Furthermore, no one argues that *mere* number of manuscripts is in some sense the be-all and end-all for NT textual criticism; indeed it ought to occur to the authors that the only reason that they *can* identify "smoothing" and so on in the Byzantine text is because of the quality of other available texts. Numerical superiority is used for no other purpose than to show that we have a far greater "data pool" for the NT than any other comparable document, and that this in turn *elevates our level of assurance* at being able to get back to the original text, as it helps us trace the history and nature of transmission and thus assure us of getting closer to what an original said. The authors cannot even get apologetic arguments straight; or else they believe that King James Onlyists represent the best scholarship on the matter that we have to offer.

They may be credited with at least acknowledging that Metzger (via Strobel) does not follow this line of argument.

That said, the authors fuss much over the use of "about 18% or as little as 10% of total available manuscripts. Of course, even 10% of the available manuscripts (est. 24,000 total, or 2,400) is far above the number available for the runner up, Homer's *Iliad* (about 650 copies) so all this would do at best is make a decisive race less embarrassing. The authors also flub with the data thusly:

*Furthermore, we should add that no matter how many manuscripts the evangelicals and the apologists claim to have for their scripture, it is of little or no use as long as the manuscript tradition of the New Testament is non-uniform down to a sentence. No two manuscripts of the New Testament anywhere in existence are alike. Perhaps it is simplest to express the figure in comparative terms: there are more differences among the manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.*

This claim is quite frankly idiotic. It equivocates with the word "differences" as though all "differences" are qualitatively the same. The claim concerning "non-uniformity" is also patently ridiculous, on similar grounds; it is not as though the differences among texts are so wild that there is no way to determine what was actually said. Surely the authors are not so foolish as to suppose that if 4999 manuscripts read, "Blessed are the meek" while 1 says "Blessed are the geeks," that we will be throwing our hands into the air unsure of which reading is correct.

Metzger is also abused as one who "cautioned against the wrong impression given by the numerical superiority of the Greek New Testament manuscripts" in saying:

*Lest, however, the wrong impression be conveyed from the statistics given above regarding the total number of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, it should be pointed out that most of the papyri are relatively fragmentary and that only about fifty manuscripts (of which the Codex Sinaiticus is the only Uncial manuscript) contain the entire New Testament.[16]*

But Metzger's "caution" contains nothing against the numerical superiority of the NT texts -- fragments are just as much of value as full texts; "fragments" simply means a text not complete -- which could be anything from the cocktail-napkin sized bit of John to a codex missing 3/4 of the text to a single book. Once again, the authors use single words and phrases in a slippery way to create a false impression of loss of quality due to affect of quantity.

The authors extensively quote Ehrman's panic-polemic (see above for an evaluation of Ehrman); they also erect the strawman (last seen from Skeptics here) that textual reliability has nothing to do with historical reliability. The excuse Ehrman offers (echoed by Wells), that we have more NT copies than the *Iliad* because there was more interest in copying the NT than the *Iliad*, is interesting but beside the point, and does not change that the data is present and available for use. Wells' sputtering lament that "if there had been a Tacitus club in every European town for 1,000 or more years with as much influence as the local Christian clergy, sections of the *Annals* would not have been lost" is true but beside the point, and his implication that lack of interest caused hostile works (which he supposed would support his views) to be lost is the sort of "scholarship" we expect from *The Da Vinci Code*. Sour grapes will not change the fact that the NT is superior in terms of its available data pool, and that this in turn -- even if we disregarded the bulk of them, as the authors do -- gives us greater assurance of reconstructing the NT text than for any other document in antiquity.

The authors go on to deal in some issues with respect to patristic citations. We will bypass most of this as beyond our interest; while they may point out real issues in use of these citations, they naturally fail to demonstrate that any actual problem exists for any particular NT text. Their note of things like, "we no more have the original manuscript of Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian or Jerome" reflects not sober

scholarship but inept paranoia; as if secular textual critics confronted by the same problems with the Annals worry that Tacitus actually authored a manual for repairing sandals.

When at last the authors get down to discussing more serious statistics, the result is predictably useless. While citing several authors (like Westcott and Hort) who note the minimal nature and impact of textual variation, the authors nitpick about misquotes and misreadings by some writer unknown to us; they babble on about how one of their own debated some "missionary"; but when it comes to actually disputing the accuracy of the text as arrived at by textual criticism, we find that they offer much more flash than bang. It is said:

*Taking the Greek text that is used to construct the NIV version of the Bible (UBS GNT-3corr) as a baseline, the number of doubtful verses according to the biblical textual critics are 1,318. (out of 7947 verses)*

And yet, as they try to dispute the earlier estimates of Westcott and Hort, the result is that of an elephant straining to give birth to a mouse. Moir and Earle are quoted as saying that modern textual critics have arrived at 95% certainty for what the original text said; and of the 5% remaining, no variant impacts Christian doctrine. The authors absurdly misread this as saying that "all Greek manuscripts are in essential agreement on at least 95% of the New Testament text," which is not being said at all. What is being said is that available data has allowed *certain or sufficiently certain reconstructions* for 95% of the text. The authors cannot seem to distinguish between the data in the pool and the conclusions drawn from that data.

Indeed their incompetence does not end there. They refer to the statistical table of the Alands (see above) concerning "variant-free verses" and act like what is left of verses with variants offers some sort of mysterious uncertainty about what the text actually said! In the end, however, the elephant continues to strain and they are only able to punch that 95% down to a mere (!) 83.5%, with still no effort to show that any of the remaining 16.5% relates to anything we ought to care about. In other words, even if their "16.5%" is right, it doesn't make a heck of a lot of difference if that 16.5% is filled with things like, did Paul say "I wish you well in the future" versus "I hope you had a good time at summer camp." Or, if it means stuff like the comma of 1 John, which we don't need because the doctrine it (supposedly) espouses is verified by a non-disputed text. Let us put it this way: Even if the authors have correctly arrived at their numbers, they have done little more than make it so that our mouths will not be quite so wide when they yawn. Until they deal with actual, *specific* problems in the textual history, their comments are merely flag-waving distractions; and they do not do so even in an update responding to this paragraph, in which they quote Metzger and Ehrman referring to "1,440 sets of variant readings, chosen especially for their exegetical significance..." and reference to 284 more -- but still, not *one example* of a specific we ought to care about. What they need to do, but *never* will do, is take one of those 1724 variant readings, describe it, and explain why it destroys some fundamental Christian doctrine.

The next section tries to blunt the force of the "interval between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant [manuscript] evidence" but the authors fail to consider these claims in context. The distance here is rightly called "negligible" because it is so named *within the context of other ancient documents* for whom the distance between composition date and mss. evidence is greater or much greater, and of which we do not have scholars pressing the panic button claiming that we cannot know what was originally written. The argument is *comparative*: If we reject the NT on textual grounds, so out the window must go the works of classical history, for their evidence is of less quality and quantity than the NT evidence. The authors blather on for paragraphs oblivious to the comparative nature of the argument; even if only 6% of NT mss. date before the 9th century, this is *still* superior to the evidence for other documents whose textual integrity is taken for granted and/or is not of concern.

In terms of actual problems, the authors fail to pinpoint anything specific and instead resort to citing the criticisms of opponents like Celsus who claimed that Christians were befouling the text with changes (in that case, may we also accept uncritically early criticisms of Muhammed? -- let us recall that for Muslims as well as Christians, Celsus was a *pagan*, an infidel, and the authors had best think twice before getting into bed with Celsus and taking his side). They are also compelled to appeal to the completely unrelated

issue of the production of pseudonymous documents; but the evidence even there shows rather that forgery was not tolerated (see [here](#)). They then produce generalized quote from Gamble, et al (with footnotes to Ehrman; see above) about the possibility of textual changes but not surprisingly, refuse to deal in any specifics. Indeed the same sort of vague, unsubstantiated charges could just as readily have been made about the Quranic text, based on differences of opinion within Islam; but to argue from that perspective, without an argument for specific changes, would be fallacious and paranoid -- hence, we do not make such arguments, and nor should displaced Islamic apologists where the NT is concerned. (Indeed, one might refer to a discussion [here](#) as an example of how discussions of textual integrity of the Quran are little different than those surrounding the textual integrity of the NT -- should we just flop this page out on the table, or [one like this](#), and expect the authors to panic?)

The authors close with comments on the 7Q5 and Magdalen fragments, which we (and mainstream scholarship) do not dispute and never have. In the final analysis, the authors' critique of arguments for NT textual integrity are 3 parts red herring, 1 part poor comprehension, and 6 parts dodgeball.

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