

Sunday, February 17, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 77 Textual Variants and Corruption: Defining Our Terms

## **Introduction**

- In [Lesson 73](#) we began studying some basic issues related to transmission before laying out some principles for discerning, locating, and identifying the preserved text in history. Thus far, we have considered the following topics:
  - Materials Used in Transmission & Witness to the New Testament Text ([Lesson 73](#))
  - False Assumptions Concerning Transmission (Lessons [74](#) and [75](#))
- Last week in [Lesson 76](#) we considered Matthew 5:17-18; a passage that is often used by King James Only believers to support their belief in plenary preservation or the *exact* preservation of every word with no differences of any kind. In doing so, Lesson 76 served as a case study for what happens when one demands *verbatim identity* as the standard for preservation/transmission.
- Today in Lesson 77 we want to consider the fourth and final preliminary topic identified in Lesson 73—the issue of Textual Variants and Corruption. In order to accomplish this task, we will consider the following points:
  - Existence & Definition of Textual Variants
  - Causes of Variant Readings
  - Types of Variants
  - Textual Corruption: What Is It?

## **Existence & Definition of Textual Variants**

- As we have seen in recent weeks, acknowledging the existence of variant readings in the New Testament text need not overthrow one's belief in the Biblical promise of preservation and cause them to embrace the Reconstructionist approach of the modern textual critics. Rather, one should look back to the Bible that taught them to believe in preservation in first place and let it teach them how to think about the reality of variant readings.
- Any position on preservation/transmission that does not account for the reality of variant readings is inadequate and needs to be refined. I have sought to encapsulate my thinking on this matter via the following statement: I believe in “perfect” preservation and/or transmission if, by perfect, one means:

- The existence of a **pure text** (Psalm 12:6-7) that does not report information about God, His nature or character, His doctrine, His dispensational dealings with mankind, history, archeology, or science that is FALSE. In short, God’s promise to preserve His Word assures the existence of a text that has not been altered in its *character* or *doctrinal content* despite not being preserved in a state of *verbatim identicality*.
- Dr. Daniel B. Wallace, editor of *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, defines a textual variant as follows:
  - “A textual variant is any place among the MSS in which there is variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling differences. The most trivial changes count, and even when all the manuscripts except one say one thing, that lone MS’s reading counts as a textual variant.” (Wallace, 26)
- James R. White, author of *The King James Only Controversy*, states the following in part regarding textual variants:
  - “In other words, no two handwritten copies would be *absolutely identical* to each other.” (White, 38)
- In terms of the number of textual variants, Wallace writes:
  - “The best estimate is that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 textual variants among the manuscripts. Yet there are only between 140,000 words in the NT. That means that there is an average of between two and three variants for every word in the Greek NT. If this were the only piece of data, it would discourage anyone from attempting to recover the wording of the original.” (Wallace, 26)
- While I do not agree with Wallace’s reconstructionist approach, he is correct that to merely speak of the number of variants without also speaking about the number of MS witnesses is misleading.
  - “. . . the reason we have a lot of variants is that we have a lot of manuscripts. It is simple, really. No classical Greek or Latin text has nearly as many variants, because they do not have nearly as many manuscripts. With virtually every new manuscript discovery, new variants are found. . . To speak about the number of variants without speaking about the number of manuscripts is simply an appeal to sensationalism.” (Wallace, 27)
- Textual critics utilize a variety of different explanations to account for divergent readings in the New Testament text. In their textbook on textual criticism, *The Text of the New Testament*, Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman make a distinction between “unintentional” and “intentional” errors in the transmission of the text (see pages 250-271). Regarding “accidental” and “intentional” changes Ehrman states the following in his solo work *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*:

- “My interest in the present study, however, is not with accidental changes but with those that appear to have been made intentionally. It is not easy to draw a clean line between the two. Even a misspelled word may have been generated deliberately, for example, by a scribe who wrongly assumed that his predecessor had made an error. Nonetheless, there are some kinds of changes for which it is difficult to account apart from the deliberate activity of a transcriber.” (Ehrman, 32)
- Given the fact that assigning motive to textual variants is highly subjective, I believe we are better suited by just understanding the types of variants that scribes created when copying their texts.

### **Causes of Variant Readings**

- In his book *In Defense of the Textus Receptus*, Dr. Jim Taylor does an excellent job of summarizing the factors that gave rise to variant readings.
  - *Faulty Eyesight*—“Some errors were caused by faulty eyesight. If a scribe had bad eyesight, he might mistake certain letters that looked similar.” (Taylor, 91) Metzger and Ehrman add that scribes sometimes “found it difficult to distinguish between Greek letters that resemble one another, particularly when the previous copyist had not written with care.” (Metzger & Ehrman, 251)
  - *Homoeoteleuton*—“Sometimes two lines of text would end in the same way and the scribe would unintentionally omit a line while copying from one manuscript to the other.” (Taylor, 92) This error was facilitated by “a similar ending of lines.” (Metzger & Ehrman, 253)
  - *Impaired Hearing*—“It was common practice in medieval European monasteries to have a “scriptorium” where one scribe read a passage and several other scribes would write what the first scribe read. Sometimes the reader was not as clear in speaking as he should have been. And sometimes the listener did not hear as well as he used to!” (Taylor, 92)
  - *Impaired Memory*—“. . . sometimes the scribe thought he knew what a passage was supposed to say and so wrote from memory without adequately checking the source manuscript. If the scribe’s memory was not exactly accurate, he could very easily write something that was different. He might write a synonym or maybe inadvertently change the sequence of words.” (Taylor, 92)
  - *Harmonization*—“This is where a scribe would assimilate portions from one passage into another in order to harmonize the two passages.” (Taylor, 93) “Since monks usually knew by heart extensive portions of the Scriptures the temptation to harmonize discordant parallels or quotations would be strong in proportion to the degree of the copyist’s familiarity with other parts of the Bible.” (Metzger & Ehrman, 262)

- *Conflation*—“Sometimes a scribe would be faced with having to choose between two existing readings. But what if he chose wrongly? Then the true reading would be lost! So rather than doing this, some scribes would use both readings and thereby preserve both variants.” (Taylor, 94) “What would a conscientious scribe do if the same passage was given differently in two or more manuscripts that were available? Rather than make a choice between them and copy only one of the two variant readings (with the attendant possibility of omitting the genuine reading), many scribes incorporated both readings in the new copy that they were transcribing. This produced what is called a conflation of readings and is characteristic of the later, Byzantine type of text.” (Metzger & Ehrman, 265)
- The charge of conflation against the Byzantine text-type is an arbitrary one that Westcott and Hort used to neutralize the majority Greek witness so they could advance their argument for the supremacy of the Alexandrian text-type. Recall from [Lesson 73](#) that James R. White made the same point in *The King James Only Controversy* regarding the Byzantine text-type when he called it a “fuller” text than the Alexandrian. Dr. Jim Taylor notes this in his comments on conflation:
  - “I almost hesitate to even bring up the subject of conflation because this is one of the main charges that Critical Text Supporters make concerning the Textus Receptus. Time and again we read books and magazine articles that point to the “conflation” of the Byzantine family, but could one not just as easily say that the Alexandrian family is incomplete? Could we not look at the shorter readings of the Alexandrian manuscripts and make the claim that it is riddled with omissions?” (Taylor, 94)

### **Types of Variants**

- When discussing the issue of textual variants or errors of transcription, a question that always surfaces is some version of “How many differences affect the meaning of the text?” Or put a different way, “how many of the variants impact the substantive doctrinal content of the text?” According to Dr. Wallace, these variants can be broken down into the following four categories:
  - spelling differences and nonsense errors
  - minor differences that do not affect translation or that involve synonyms
  - differences that affect the meaning of the text but are not viable
  - differences that both affect the meaning of the text and are viable (Wallace, 40)
- Regarding spelling differences and nonsense errors Wallace states:
  - “Of the hundreds of thousands of textual variants in the NT MSS, the great majority are spelling differences that have no bearing on the meaning of the text. . .Several of the

spelling differences are nonsense readings. These occur when a scribe is fatigued, inattentive, or perhaps does not know Greek very well.” (Wallace,

- Bart Ehrman concurs with Daniel Wallace that most textual variants have no substantive impact upon the doctrinal content of the text.
  - “. . . most of the changes found in our Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology. Far and away the most changes are the result of mistakes, pure and simple—slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another. Scribes could be incompetent: it is important to recall that most of the copyists in the early centuries were not trained to do this kind of work but were simply literate members of their congregations who were (more or less) able and willing.” (Ehrman, 55)
- Wallace explains that, after “spelling differences”, the next largest category of variants is those that “involve synonyms or do not affect translation.” Wallace maintains, “they are wordings other than mere spelling changes, but they do not alter the way the text is translated or, at least, understood.” (Wallace, 41) An example of this type of variant might be the transposition of Greek words.
- Wallace’s third category of variants deals with differences that are meaningful but not viable.
  - “The third and largest category involves wording that is meaningful but not viable. These are variants found in a single MS or group of MSS that, by themselves, have little likelihood of reflecting the wording of the autographic text. In I Thessalonians 2:9, one late medieval MS speaks of “the gospel of Christ” instead of “the gospel of God,” while almost all the other MSS have the latter. Here “the gospel of Christ” is a meaningful variant, but it is not viable because there is little chance that one medieval scribe somehow retained the wording of the original text while all other scribes for centuries before him missed it.” (Wallace, 42)
- According to Wallace, the smallest category of variants comprises those that are both meaningful and viable. Regarding this category Wallace states:
  - “Less than 1 percent of all textual variants belong to this group, but even saying this may be misleading. By “meaningful” we mean that the variant changes the meaning of the text to some degree. It is not terribly significant, but if the reading impacts our understanding of the passage, then it is meaningful. . . Although the quantity of textual variants among the NT MSS numbers in the hundreds of thousands, those that change the meaning pale in comparison. Less than 1 percent of the differences are both meaningful and viable. There are still hundreds of texts that are in dispute. I do not want to give the impression that textual criticism is merely a mop-up job nowadays, that all but a handful of problems have been resolved. That is not the case. There are hundreds of passages whose interpretation depends, to some degree, on which reading is followed, but the

nature of the remaining problems and their interpretive significance are probably far less monumental than many readers of *Misquoting Jesus* come to believe.” (Wallace, 42-43)

- It is commonly repeated by Critical Text and Modern Version advocates that none of these textual variants are meaningful and viable variants thereby impacting any point of doctrine.
  - “The simple fact of the matter is that **no textual variants** in either the Old or New Testaments in any way, shape, or form materially disrupt or destroy any essential doctrine of the Christian faith. That is a fact that any semi-impartial review will substantiate.” (White, 40)
- Regarding the notion that textual variants impact no cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith, Dr. Bart Ehrman states the following in the conclusion to *Misquoting Jesus*:
  - “To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, or of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us. It would be wrong, however, to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our texts have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case. In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves a textual problem: Was Jesus an angry man [Mark 1:41]? Was he completely distraught in the face of death [Heb. 2:9]? Did he tell his disciples that they could drink poison without being harmed [Mark 16:9-20]? Did he let an adulteress off the hook with nothing but a mild warning [John 7:53-8:11]? Is the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the New Testament [I John 5:7-8]? Is Jesus actually called the “unique God” there [John 1:18]? Does the New Testament indicate that even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come [Matt. 24:36]? The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us.” (Ehrman, 207-208)
- While I do not agree with Ehrman’s textual conclusions regarding the New Testament text, his main point stands. The variant readings found in MS witness to the New Testament do matter and they do impact doctrine depending on which variants a textual critic decides are authentic. Critical Text proponents James R. White and Daniel B. Wallace are unwilling to acknowledge what is plainly obvious. We will consider this more fully next week when we look at historical case studies of how textual variants have impacted peoples understanding of doctrine.

### Works Cited

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