

Sunday, February 24, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 78 Textual Variants and Corruption: Defining Our Terms, Part 2

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 77 we began a consideration of the fourth and final preliminary topic identified in Lesson 73 – the issue of Textual Variants and Corruption. In order to accomplish this task, we looked at the following three points:
 - *Existence & Definition of Textual Variants*
 - “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)
 - There are more variants in the MSS (400,000 to 500,000) than there are words in the New Testament (140,000).
 - There are a lot of variants because there are a lot of MSS.
 - Text critics like to talk about “accidental” and “intentional” changes to the text. 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*
 - 1) Faulty Eyesight, 2) Homoeoteleuton (caused by similar ending lines), 3) Impaired Hearing, 4) Impaired Memory, 5) Harmonization, and 6) Conflation.
 - These are plausible general causes of variant readings. Any attempt to explain a particular variant with a specific cause from the above list is speculative. No one knows for sure the exact cause that gave rise to a particular variant reading.
 - Therefore, I am skeptical of how text critics use harmonization and conflation to argue against the majority witness of the Byzantine text-type. Moreover, of all the causes listed for variant readings, harmonization and conflation imply the highest degree of intentionality by scribes copying the text.

- *Types of Variants*

- According to Dr. Daniel B. Wallace, variants can be broken down into the following four categories: 1) spelling differences and nonsense errors, 2) minor differences that do not affect translation or that involve synonyms, 3) differences that affect the meaning of the text but are not viable, and 4) differences that both affect the meaning of the text and are viable (Wallace, 40)
- Less than one percent of textual variants belong to the fourth category mentioned above, according to leading textual critics. Yet, this one percent includes “. . . hundreds of passages whose interpretation depends, to some degree, on which reading is followed. . .” (Wallace, 43)
- Evangelical text critics such as James R. White and Daniel B. Wallace confidently inform their readers 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.” (White, 40)
- Former Evangelical Bart D. Ehrman disagrees, “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.” (Ehrman, 207)
- Time did not permit us an opportunity to talk about our fourth point last week which was *Textual Corruption: What Is It?* Our main objective today in Lesson 78 is to discuss this important point. If time permits, we will also look more deeply into the question of ; do any of the variant readings impact any essential doctrine of the Christian faith as Wallace and White has asserted.

Textual Corruption: What Is It?

- Recall from our study in [Lesson 54](#) that we considered the “simultaneous nature of preservation and corruption” i.e., the notion that both processes were occurring at the same time as the text was being transmitted.
- When discussing the topics of preservation and transmission, one must clearly identify what they mean by words such as “perfect,” “pure,” “error,” and “corruption.” Most of the time commentators on both sides of the textual and/or translation debate use the assumption of *verbatim identity* of wording when discussing these matters (see the quote from James R. White above). Consider the following statements made by Dr. William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary as a case in point:
 - “How pure have the original words of the biblical writings been preserved? It is an indisputable fact, proven by the manuscripts and versional evidence, that God has not

perfectly (that is, without error) preserved the Scriptures throughout their long history of transmission. There is no single manuscript, printed text, or version that can be shown to be error free. This is patently obvious to anyone who is at all familiar with the transmission history of the Scriptures. First, we should note that no two Greek manuscripts of the New Testament agree exactly; these thousands of manuscripts all differ from one another to some degree. No one has ever suggested, even within the KJV/TR camp, that a particular one of these manuscripts is a perfect copy of the autographs—that it is error free. This conclusively demonstrates that God has permitted errors to enter the transmission process, which is the inevitable result of providential preservation.” (Combs, 49-50)

- Mark well that for Dr. Combs an “error” constitutes a textual variant of any kind. In this way he is assuming *verbatim identity* as the standard for preservation/transmission.
- Dr. Bart D. Ehrman author of *The Orthodox Corruption of Scriptures* agrees with Dr. Combs regarding how textual criticism has traditionally defined words like “errors” and/or “corruptions” when discussing the transmission of the text.
 - “The term “corruption” derives from the traditional text-critical discourse, in which the “original” text (i.e., as it was actually penned by an author) is the dominant concern, with changes of that text—whether accidental or intentional—representing contaminations of that original.” (Ehrman, 33)
- According to Dr. Ehrman, most scholars view any change to the text, regardless of the sort or motivation, as a “corruption.” That being said, it is imperative to understand that Dr. Ehrman’s definition of a textual “corruption” far outstrips the common text-critical usage of the word outlined above.
 - “All of us interpret our texts and ascribe meaning to them and, in that sense, we “rewrite” them (i.e., we explain them to ourselves “in our own words”). The scribes, somewhat more literally, actually did rewrite them. And not infrequently it was precisely their understanding of these texts that led them to rewrite them—not only in their own minds, which all of us do, but actually on the page. When we rewrite a text in our minds so as to construe its meaning, we interpret the text; when a scribe rewrites a text on the page (i.e., modifies its words to help fix its meaning) he physically alters the text. On the one hand, then, this scribal activity is very much like what all of us do every time we read a text; on the other hand, by taking this business of rewriting a text to its logical end, scribes have done something very different from what we do. From the standpoint of posterity, they have actually transformed the text, so that the text henceforth read is quite literally a different text. Only from this historical perspective can one apply the standard text-critical nomenclature to this scribal activity and call it the corruption of a text.

I am therefore consciously employing irony in my denotation of the orthodox corruptions of Scripture. On the one hand, I am using the term in its technical text-critical sense of “alterations of a text;” at the same time, I am using it to refer to the effect of rereading or rewriting of text in the history of their transmission, claiming not that scribes misunderstood their texts and perverted them (as if corruption were necessarily pejorative), but that in their transmissions of the text they engaged in much the same process of interpretation and interaction that we all engage in, rereading and therefore rewriting our texts at every turn.” (Ehrman, 35-36)

- Mark well, that there are two components to “orthodox corruption” according to Ehrman’s analysis: 1) an alteration of the text that transforms and 2) rewrites of the doctrinal content of the text. Put another way, it is not just that the text has been altered, it is the way it has been altered that causes a problem, according to Ehrman.
- While Ehrman sees orthodox believers as making these textual alterations for doctrinal reasons i.e., to strengthen Christological views, his explanation could also apply in reverse as an explication for how and why heretics altered the text. Is it not just as likely that heretical scribes could have altered the text in key places to weaken the doctrine of Christ? I believe the latter rather than the former. The scriptures warn against those who would seek to intentionally alter the biblical text for nefarious purposes.
- The following Pauline texts established that a culture of corruption with respect to the scriptures existed during the first century while the New Testament was being written. This culture of corruption includes the following minimum components:
 - Corrupting the word of God (II Corinthians 2:17)
 - Forging the word of God (II Thessalonians 2:2)
 - Handling the word of God deceitfully (II Corinthians 4:2)
 - Any means strategy (II Corinthians 11:1-4)
- Please note that all these components of corruption imply intentionality on the part of the corruptor. Once again, those holding to unsound doctrine would have ample motivation for tampering with the text so as to hide the heretical nature of their teaching.
 - “There are many reasons why men would desire to change God’s words. In many cases, the changes are affected as a result of a desire to adhere to some false teaching. Since the scriptures condemn their heresies, some go so far as to change the scriptures in order that the heresies can go undiscovered.” (Taylor, 52)

- The scriptures anticipate this situation by issuing three strategically placed warnings against tampering with the word of God.
 - Deuteronomy 4:1-2
 - Proverbs 30:5-6
 - Revelation 22:18-19
- I believe that substantive alterations would not have been made by Bible believing people who were seeking to faithfully copy and transmit God's word. The believing viewpoint is that, while the faithful were not kept wholly from variance in the copying of the scriptures, they would not have sought to intentionally alter the substantive doctrinal content of the text and thereby corrupt God's word. To behave in such a manner would have been a violation of the precepts of the very text they were endeavoring to transmit.
- Kent Brandenburg editor of *Thou Shalt Keep Them: A Biblical Theology of the Perfect Preservation of Scripture* states the following in his essay titled "First Century Textual Attack:"
 - "Pure manuscripts and readings were embraced while others were rejected [This was one of the functions of the New Testament prophet in the early church.]. This behavior stemmed from authoritative warnings concerning tampering with Scripture. The Bible establishes clearly that there were corruptions of first century manuscripts by means of purposeful textual attack. . ." (Brandenburg in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 132)
- When one Biblically amends their position on preservation (See Lessons 42, 43, 74, 75, and 76) and thereby realizes that preservation did not occur with *verbatim identity*, it brings the entire discussion on the extent of preservation and transmission into focus. On this amended view, an "error" or "corruption" would constitute a variant that substantively alters the doctrinal content of the Biblical text. Variants that constitute a different way of saying the same thing or do not substantively alter the doctrine of the Bible (which would be the vast majority according to the leading scholars in the field) are not "errors" because they are substantively equivalent.

Works Cited

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