

# Debunking Silly Statements About the Bible

## An Exercise in Biblical Transmission

FEBRUARY 8, 2016 | [GREG GILBERT](#)

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/debunking-silly-statements-about-the-bible>

One American tabloid [recently said this about the Bible](#):

No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we've all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.

First, it's not true we're dealing with "a translation of translations of translations," as if the original Greek first went into Chinese, which went into German, which went into Polish, and finally we got around to putting it into English. No, we're able to translate directly from the original Greek and Hebrew, so at worst we're dealing with a *translation*, full stop. But what should we say about that idea, the charge that all we have available to us are "hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies"?

Copycock. Er, I mean, poppycock. That's what we should say.

### Elephant in the Room

Let's think for a moment about the question of *transmission*—that is, can we be confident the original text of Scripture was transmitted accurately to us through the centuries? As we begin to consider that question, we should just right off the bat acknowledge the gigantic elephant in the room: We don't have the originals.

Whatever pieces of paper Luke, John, or Paul used to write Luke, John, or Romans have been lost to history, and it's unlikely we'll ever find a biblical manuscript about which we can say, "We are 100 percent certain this is the original piece of paper on which the author wrote."

But here's the thing. Is having The Original Piece of Paper really the only way we can have confidence that what we *do* have is in fact what was written? Are we forever doomed to saying we don't really have any idea what Homer or Plato wrote since we don't have the pieces of paper on which they wrote *The Odyssey* or *The Republic*? Certainly not, and to say so would be ridiculously pedantic. So what about the documents of the Bible? Are we left simply to give up and admit that all we have are a bunch of useless copies of copies of copies of copies, and that we'll never have confidence what we have is what the authors actually wrote?

Well, no. In fact, even though we don't have the Bible's Original Pieces of Paper, we can be highly confident we know what those original pieces of paper said. Now how can that be?

The key to answering that question lies in the fact that even though we don't have the originals, we do have thousands of *other* pieces of paper that contain original-language text from each book of the Bible—about 5,400 when it comes to the New Testament. These go back to the third, or second, or even (perhaps?) to the first century. Some of those pieces of paper contain whole copies of biblical books; others have been destroyed to varying degrees so all they contain now are just portions of books. Still others are literally just fragments of what were once much larger manuscripts.

What makes all these manuscripts and fragments interesting, or problematic depending on how you look at it, is that at certain places they *differ* from each other, even when they're supposed to be copies of the same portion of the Bible.

"No way," some respond. "There's *no way* we can know what the originals said." That conclusion, though, goes way too far. For one thing, the problems often cited as arising from all this—that the manuscripts we have are too far removed in time from the originals; that they're absolutely riddled with variations—aren't nearly so bad as some make them out to be. And for another thing, it turns out it's *precisely* the existence of those thousands of copies, from all over the Roman Empire and with all their variations, that allows us to reconstruct with a *huge degree of confidence* what the originals said.

Let me try to explain, one step at a time.

### **Mind the Gap!**

The charge is often made that the documents we have are so far removed in time from the originals that we might as well give up trying to figure out what the originals said. After all, the New Testament was written in the mid-to-late first century, and the earliest copies we have are from about the years 125 to 200. At best, then, there's a gap of some 45 to 75 years between the originals and our earliest copies.

That sounds fairly problematic to most of us, because for some reason we imagine 75 years is a lot of time—enough time in fact for copies of copies of copies to be made and subsequently lost so that we have no idea what the originals actually looked like. Actually, that's not a fair assumption at all, especially when you realize books in general were far more valuable to ancient people than they are to us today, so they probably kept better care of them than we do.

One fascinating example is what's called the "Codex Vaticanus," a copy of the New Testament originally made in the fourth century, but which was re-inked in the tenth century so it could continue to be used. Do you see what that means? Codex Vaticanus was still in use *600 years* after it was originally made! Therefore the claim that all we have are "copies of copies of copies of copies" of the originals is far overwrought. Indeed, it's well within the realm of possibility that we have in our museums today *copies of the originals*, full stop.

Also, when you consider the gap between the originals and first copies of other ancient works, you can see just how small this "gap" for the New Testament really is. For example, for Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, we have exactly eight surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which is 1,300 years removed from the original! For Julius Caesar's *Gallic War*, we have a total of nine or ten readable copies,

the earliest of which is 900 years older than the original. For Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*, it's two manuscripts, one dating from the 9th century and the other from the 11th. The original was written in the first century—800 and 1,000 years earlier. You can easily see the point here: No one screams "Mind the gap!" when it comes to other ancient literature.

On to the second charge, then, which is that the manuscripts we do have are so riddled with differences, or "variants," that it's hopeless to think we can ever have any confidence about what they said. One scholar has asserted there are, astonishingly, up to 400,000 variants in the New Testament! There are several things to say about this charge.

First, the manuscripts are *not* in fact riddled with variants, and that 400,000 number isn't nearly as scary as it seems, even if it's accurate. The scholar who used that number wasn't just looking at the 5,000 pre-printing-press, original-Greek manuscripts we have, but also at 10,000 *other* manuscripts in other languages, and then on top of that *another* 10,000 or so instances where people *quoted* the New Testament during the first 600 years of church history! Put it all together, and what you're really talking about is 400,000-ish variants across some 25,000 manuscripts and quotations covering 600 years. But at the far upper end, this comes out to . . . only about 16 variants per manuscript. To put it nicely, that's really not many.

Second, keep in mind that "400,000 variants" here doesn't mean 400,000 unique readings. What it means is that if *one* manuscript says, "I am innocent of this man's blood" and *ten* others say, "I am innocent of this righteous blood," then you get to count all *eleven* as "variants." Factor that in, and that scary 400,000 number becomes nearly meaningless.

Finally, it's not as if the variants in all those 25,000 manuscripts just show up everywhere; rather, they tend to cluster around the same few places in the text over and over again, which means the number of *actual places* in the New Testament really at issue is surprisingly small.

The point is that when you think about it beyond the soundbites, you don't get a picture here of a mountain of copies with so many variants that we can't make heads or tails of it. Not even close. On the contrary, you get a picture of a remarkably stable transmission history for the vast majority of the New Testament, and a few isolated places where some genuine doubt about the original text has given rise to a relatively large number of variations.

In short, the copy-monks did a remarkably good job.

### **Exercise in Biblical Transmission**

But there's one more critically important thing to discuss here: In the places of the New Testament where we *are* faced with variants, it is precisely the existence of those variants that allows us to piece together what the original document probably said. Let me show you what I mean.

The whole process is a lot like solving a logic puzzle. It rests on the fact that when there are variants, we can usually identify not only *that* a scribe introduced a variation, but also *why*. There are all kinds of reasons for why scribes introduced variants. Sometimes it was purely accidental. For example, 1 letters

that looked similar might be switched out for each other; one word might be substituted for another word that sounded the same when read; words might be skipped; words or letters might be doubled; even whole sections might be skipped when the same word was used a few lines apart. (Go ahead, read that sentence again . . . there be Easter eggs hidden there!)

At other times, the changes introduced were deliberate. So a scribe might decide that a word or name was misspelled and act to “correct” it; he might change something in one passage so it would agree with another passage, or even “fix” a word or two to clear up “problems” he perceived; or he might even add something to “clarify” what the reader should take from it.

Here’s where the fun starts, because once you can identify *why* a scribe made a certain change as he copied, you can get a good idea of what the original said before he changed it. Here’s a simple example: Imagine all you have is a fragment of a copy of a lost manuscript that reads, “Roses are read, violets are blue. . . .” It’s not hard to see what happened as the original was copied, is it? If we can give the original author the benefit of the doubt that he didn’t write the nonsense phrase “Roses are read,” then we can pretty confidently say the copying scribe simply misspelled the word “red,” and that the original said “Roses are red, violets are blue.”

Here’s a slightly more complicated example. Let’s say you have two fragments, both copies of a long-lost original. One of the copies (we’ll call it Fragment A) reads:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.

The other copy (Fragment B) reads:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives so that the nation of which we speak might live.

All right. Go ahead and give a minute or two to figuring out the variations that are at issue here. There are two of them. Then read on.

Let’s start with the first variation, the omitted phrase about meeting on a great battlefield of the war. Is there any good reason to think a copyist would *add* all those words to an original that didn’t include them? Not really; at least I can’t think of any. So if not, is there anything that might explain why he would *omit* them? Yes. See how the word “war” shows up twice in Fragment B? In fact, those two occurrences kind of bracket the words that were omitted in Fragment A. If that word “war” was there twice in the original as well (especially if both were, say, at the end or beginning of a line), then that would provide a natural and easy place for the copyist’s eye to “skip” accidentally from one to the other, and would explain why he would’ve inadvertently omitted the words between them. Given that, we can pretty confidently say the longer reading, in Fragment B, is more likely to reflect the original.

And what about the second variation? Is there any good reason why a copyist would amend an original that said “so that the nation of which we speak might live” to “so that that nation might live”? Probably not. After all, the phrase “that that nation” is just awkward. Therefore, it’s more likely a copyist would act to “correct” the doubled “that that” to something less grating to the ear and eye. For that reason, we should probably conclude that the *harder*, less grammatical reading in Fragment A reflects the original.

Given all this, we can come to good conclusions that Fragment B probably reflects the original on the first variation (because of the probability the copyist’s eye skipped from “war” to “war”), and that Fragment A reflects the original on the second variation (because a copyist wouldn’t “correct” the original to say “that that.”) Therefore, we should reconstruct the original like this:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, **testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war.** We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives ***that*** ***that*** nation might live.

Do you see? Just by reasoning through *why* copyists might make certain changes, we’re able to arrive at a confident conclusion about what the original document actually said, *even though our final version is not entirely reflected in either of the fragments we actually have*. Neat, huh?

That’s exactly the kind of work scholars have done for centuries on the fragments and manuscripts of the New Testament available to us. The puzzles they face, of course, are far more complicated than these simple examples, but you get the idea. By comparing the ancient copies we have, and thinking carefully about why certain changes or errors might have been made by copyists, scholars reach highly confident conclusions about what the original documents said. It’s not a matter of guesswork or magic, much less of assumption or simply “making things up,” but rather of careful deductive reasoning.

### **Patently and Utterly False**

Before we conclude, we should make another point or two. First, it’s worth pointing out that the vast majority of the textual variants with which we’re faced are utterly uninteresting and non-dramatic. They have to do with plural versus singular pronouns, inverted word order, subjunctive versus indicative mood, aorist versus perfect tense, and on and on and on. The vast majority don’t include anything that affects how we ultimately understand the meaning of the Bible.

Second, Christian scholars have been exceedingly careful to document—in actual books you can buy, if you’re willing to shell out the money—the most significant variants *along with* an analysis of each one like the kind we’ve done here. Of course you’re free to disagree with any one of the conclusions those scholars reach; Christians have fun arguing about this kind of thing all the time. But the point is that, again, there’s no conspiracy to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes. Where there are variants to be reckoned with, Christians are wide open about that fact, precisely because we believe those variants—and the reasons behind why they exist in the first place—can help us determine to a decisively high degree of probability what the original New Testament documents really said.

Do you see the point? The charge that we cannot know what the originals said is patently and utterly false. The gap between the originals and our first copies of them is—in the grand scheme of things—not that long at all. And far from *diminishing* our ability to identify what the originals said, the vast number of existing copies actually allows us to deductively reason out, to a high degree of historical confidence, what John, Luke, Paul, and the other writers actually wrote.

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**Editors' note:** This is an adapted excerpt from Greg Gilbert's book [Why Trust the Bible?](#) (Crossway, 2015) [[review](#)]. It originally appeared at [9Marks](#).

**Greg Gilbert** is the senior pastor of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of [What Is the Gospel?](#) (Crossway, 2010), [Assured: Discover Grace, Let Go of Guilt, and Rest in Your Salvation](#) (Baker, 2019), and the commentary in the [ESV Story of Redemption Bible](#) (Crossway, 2018). He is the co-author of [What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission](#) (Crossway, 2011). You can [follow him on Twitter](#).