

Can we trust that we have a New Testament text that is consistent with the original?

This was the subject of a debate in the Autumn of 2011. Arguing for the negative was Bart Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the author of many popular and academic books about the subject [even four best sellers!], including *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. Arguing for the positive was Daniel Wallace, professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, Director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, and the author of several popular and academic books about the subject, including the recently published *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* and *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* [with J. Ed Komoszewski and M. James Sawyer]. There is a book that highlights their respective views, *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace in Dialogue*, and the debate itself is available online at www.csntm.org.

The Argument for Doubt about the Accuracy of the Text

Ehrman pointed out that the oldest useful copy of most books in the New Testament is from the third century, which makes them copies of copies of copies, et cetera, down through several generations of transcription. And 94% of the manuscripts we have are from after the ninth century, long after the events they relate. His contention is that there are many compounded mistakes possible even by the time of the third century copy. His main point is that, because we do not have the earliest manuscripts in hand, we cannot know for certain if there are errors in the earliest texts we do have.

He supported his skepticism by noting there are innumerable variants in the manuscripts we do have, more overall than there are words [every deviation is a variant, so there could be many variants of the same word]. Ehrman admits that most variants are insignificant [such as spelling mistakes], but contends this still shows the likelihood of errors in each copy. He also contends that mistakes were more likely in early copies, because in the Middle Ages there was a greater educated and literate class of scribes to make copies, while there were no monks or professional literary scribes in the third century and earlier. He believes the earliest manuscripts we do have indicate a less trained hand in the copyists than later manuscripts. He also notes that scribes made some intentional changes, editorially motivated sometimes, sometimes to try to fix what they thought were earlier mistakes.

As examples of egregious errors, he points out that the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8.1-11 and the long ending of Mark [16.9-20] do not appear in the earliest and best manuscripts, but do in others; also, that there were two versions of Acts at one point, with one 12.5% longer than the other.

The Argument for Confidence about the Accuracy of the Text

Wallace admits we cannot have absolute certainty about the text we have without having the original text itself. However, he is critical of radical skepticism that ignores much of the evidence we have for confidence in the text. Rather than be absolute on either end of the spectrum, he favors a sober look at the evidence and weighing of the possibilities.

He pointed out that any single change in any single manuscript is counted as a variant, even if thousands of other manuscripts agree and even if the change in the one manuscript is insignificant, such as obvious spelling mistakes. He admits there are three- or four-hundred thousand variants in the manuscripts, but that is because we have so many manuscripts: over 5600 in Greek, about 10,000 in Latin, between 5,000 and 10,000 in other languages, and over a million quotations in the writings of the church fathers.

Regarding the quotations, Wallace noted that Metzger and Ehrman wrote that the patristic evidence alone could reconstruct almost the entire New Testament.

Wallace also admits that most of the manuscripts are later than one could wish, but still there are twelve from the second century, sixty-four from the third, forty-eight from the fourth, which totals 124 within 300 years of the events, and there are 500 manuscripts within the first 900 years. While most are fragmentary manuscripts, the whole New Testament is collectively represented many times. We have zero manuscripts for the average classical author within 300 years of their original writing, and not more than twenty manuscripts of all classical authors put together within that time. The early manuscript evidence we have for the New Testament obviously is incredibly rich compared to that of any other ancient writing, and that is why there are so many variants, but it also is why we can easily determine which option is more likely correct when a variant appears.

The tendency of scribes was to add to the text, as they tried to make it more understandable, tried to incorporate two variants into the text, or mistakenly copied margin notes into the text. Yet, the 90% of manuscripts that come from a time more than 900 years after the biblical writings add only 2% to the text, showing that there were few mistakes of this kind with each generation of transcription. Also, for the New Testament, there is no need to fill gaps of missing material, unlike for almost every other ancient Greco-Roman text, and the world trusts the accuracy of the transmission of those other texts.

Wallace pointed out that 99% of the variants in the New Testament manuscripts are insignificant: spelling mistakes, changes in word order which did not change the meaning of the sentence, obvious mistakes which can be ignored, et cetera. Of the 1% that are meaningful and viable, none challenge any major Christian doctrines, to which even Ehrman has agreed in his books. This suggests the consistency in copies, which have agreed with orthodox theology throughout church history.

Wallace believes that with the manuscripts we have, we can piece together what the original text said. Most English translations, for example, rely on an effort to do just that called the Nestle-Aland text. This text, now known as NA27, also lists the major variants, so if the text of NA27 is not correct it seems likely one of the listed variants is. Textual criticism helps us trace variants through generations of manuscripts and to recognize the likely errors and thus determine the most likely original text.

Wallace points out that most likely the original manuscripts had been consulted for many years and copied directly many times, launching several copy strains from the original. For example, the manuscripts P75 and B agree very closely, but are not related to each other except that they shared an earlier second century source. This is consistent with what Paul wrote that he expected to happen with his letters, with the relationship we see between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and what is attested by the early church witnesses. Most likely, the original manuscripts were copied carefully by people who valued an accurate copy for their own church. We can see from early Alexandrian manuscripts that their copyists consistently produced high quality manuscripts, with only recognizable incidental errors. Though there were no professional literary scribes in the earliest years, there were professional documentary scribes – something like accountants today – who were meticulous in their copying.

In summary, while Ehrman is correct that we cannot absolutely know what occurred in the copying of the original manuscripts during the earliest years prior to our manuscript evidence, Wallace believes that all the evidence we do have shows a great likelihood that we can discern the original text from the manuscripts we have.