



St. George's Fall Theological Forum

The Canon of Scripture: How did the Bible become the Bible?

Part 6 – Transmission, Translation, & Reliability of the NT

Translation and Transmission

- Quotes from a recent survey of college students in California
 - “The Bible has been translated so many times, how can it be reliable?”
 - “I wouldn’t trust a book that has been revised as much as this”
 - [The Bible is] filled with human error, and the English copy we have today is nothing like the originals.
- Is there validity to these view points, and if so, what are they based on. Are there reasonable arguments to make against such points? The answer is not only yes, but that often times such viewpoints are made out of ignorance or being taught half truths.
- The earliest forms of writing were on stone, mud, wood, and even bone.
 - Papyrus, a type of ancient paper made from the pulp of the reeds that grew in the Nile Delta, was a common and ancient medium for writing. Many documents of the NT are written on papyrus.
 - Parchment, or vellum, is the other commonly used medium on which ancient documents were written, including the NT.
 - Papyrus and parchment were usually used to make scrolls. Scrolls gave way to the codex
 - It is these types of documents on which the NT books were originally written, copied, and transmitted through history.
- Transmission refers to the copying of a text, usually as accurately as possible.
- Translation refers to taking a text in one language and writing it in another language.
- These terms often get misused or confused. A text can be transmitted in one language for hundreds of years, and then translated into dozens of languages.
 - The question that faces us is this: What do we know of the transmission of the texts of the NT, and was this transmission reliable and knowable?
 - That is, can we trace back with accuracy to early copies of the NT, and thus know that what we have today is legitimate.

Working with the Manuscripts (MS)

- While we don’t have the originals of the NT books, we have copies that date to within decades of the originals. Our earliest manuscripts today go back to the 2nd century, whereas the KJV used MS from the 11th century. So as time has gone on we’re actually getting closer to the originals, not further.
- False assumption of copying (transmission) process: that it was like the ‘telephone’ game.
 - What actually happened: the transmission of the text is not linear, but rather prolific; that is multiple copies made of one original text; there is a proliferation of multiple copies,
 - Early on during proliferation of the gospels it was possible for churches to compare their copies and even be able to go back and reference older copies. The more MS we have, the better shape we are in because we can more accurately trace back to what the oldest and first texts contained.
- Many of these MS would stay in use for a hundred years, or even more. In other words, it is entirely possible that the earliest copies that are extant (that we have) could have been copies of the original.
 - 80% to 85% of the MS we have today date to the 9th century, implying that only 15% of the MS we have to work with predate the 9th c. Although the oldest documents that have survived date to early in the second century, they are incomplete. The earliest most

- complete MS dates to the 4th c., the Codex Sinaiticus (discovered in 1859)¹. The next most important MS is the Codex Vaticanus, also dating to the 4th c. By the 9th century there were hundreds of complete MS of the NT.
- Today, there are over 20,000 NT MS (5500 in Greek, over 10,000 in Latin) available to study, and so 15% of that is still a large number (in the hundreds) of early texts to work with.

Dealing with Variations in the MS

- All copies will inherently have some form of variation from the original. Sometimes these variations were negligible, even over a long period of time, which the DSS Isaiah scroll shows.
- There are probably around 400,000 differences or variations, when comparing all the MS of the NT. That sounds at first like a hugely problematic number, and that we can't know with any reliability what the original NT said and should chuck it out.
 - But the reason we have so many differences is precisely because there are so many MS available! This is actually a good thing, because we can figure out where they come from, and this belies a genuine effort to transmit.
 - Often errors are clear scribal errors, when a scribe inserts a margin note into the middle of a verse. While this makes for a tough read, it doesn't mean that we can't identify these variations, and we certainly can trace back to find the text before these errors.
- The vast majority of the differences are spelling, the rest are movable nu's, particles, synonyms, and variations in use of definite articles, almost all of which don't affect the meaning of the text or its translatability at all.
- Of the ~400,000 differences among the thousands of MS, less than 1% of the textual differences are both meaningful and viable.
 - Meaningful in that the difference affects the meaning of the text in some way, and viable in that it possibly could go back to the original wording. This means that there are about 1000 places where this occurs in the entire NT.
 - Example: Mark 1:41, Jesus heals a leper, and most MS have that Jesus was filled with pity/compassion, but some early and significant MS have that he was moved with anger. This is a significant variance, one of the most in all the NT. It is possible that it is in fact the original wording, but if it is, does either one of these variants give us a different picture of Jesus that is worthy of concern? It actually doesn't. Elsewhere throughout the NT Jesus is portrayed as expressing genuine anger (e.g. John 2:13-16) as well as also expressing compassion. Furthermore, the variations affect no cardinal doctrine of Christianity: the trinity, the humanity/divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the atonement on the cross, the resurrection, his return in glory, and the ministry of the HS.
- Scholars like Bart Ehrman are making a career out of sensationalized half truths.

Comparing the NT to other Ancient Documents

- Compare the NT to other works that we have and use today from the ancient world. The best attested work from the ancient world that we have are the writings of Homer (Iliad and Odyssey).
 - The earliest MS for Homer come hundreds of years after his writing, and there are approx 2,200 MS, mostly fragmentary, and being 1/10 as many MS as the NT. The earliest NT MS come within decades of the original events.
 - Most ancient works that we have extant number in the 20's, many have only one or two, and date hundreds of years (sometimes thousands) after their original composition, like Plato's *Republic*. No other classical book from the ancient world even comes close to the MS attestation of the NT. Does anyone sit down and wonder if the copy of *Republic* they

¹ For the full story of its discovery, see Metzger, Bruce M., *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd Ed., pp. 42ff.

bought in B&N is even remotely accurate? Of course not. Yet the historical evidence and literary MS weight of the NT blows all other classical works out of the water.

Concluding remarks

- The Bible as we have it is not a single work, but rather a library of writings; the product of numerous authors spanning close to a thousand years of time.
 - This stands in stark contrast with the holy writings of other religions whose scriptures are more or less single works, that is, the product of a single author (regardless of later edits/revisions) and often from either a single ‘revelation’ or at least a series of revelations within that author’s life. Most notable are the Koran and the Book of Mormon.
 - Our Scriptures are not quite as ‘neat’, but let us not mistake ‘messy’ for unreliable, in the historical sense. If anything the great span and variety of our Bible’s books and the great internal consistency despite such a manifold nature, is quite a strong argument in favor of reliability.
- Just as the works and writings themselves came into being over a long period of time, so too did the process of canonizing them progress slowly over time.
 - Rather than a golden tablet descending from the sky, we ought to view the canon’s development as a tree, growing slowly from seed to sapling until one day we realize there is a tree in our yard.
 - The question of the authority of the canon is closely tied to the question of inspiration, that is the God-source-ness of the writings. We hold that although there were many human authors the Bible ultimately has God as its author. And just as the Word of God was Incarnate, that is to say both divine and human in all the earthy existence of human life, so to the Word of God written is both divine and human.