

The Reliable Word

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"...and we possess as more reliable the prophetic word, to which you do well if you pay attention to it as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts..." (2 Peter 1:19 LEB)

The Undermined Authority of Scripture

Growing up in a Christian home and being raised by parents who believed without hesitation in the authority and veracity of the Scriptures, I cannot remember a time when I experienced any significant doubt regarding the Word of God. As a matter of fact, I recently realized that it was not until I was well into my late teens before I even understood that there were people who disputed the truthfulness and integrity of the Bible at all. Even then, I felt like those who did not share the same confidence in the Holy Scriptures were few and far between and certainly the great minority of society.

That rather naïve belief structure came tumbling down in 2004 when I attended (for one semester before transferring to a strong evangelical institution) a very liberal seminary. There, under the tutelage of a New Testament professor who proudly acknowledged her gay lifestyle, I learned that many who were even serving in the church disputed the authenticity and reliability of the Word of God. I found myself almost shocked by both the brazen and arrogant truth claims that were made which, if believed, threatened to undermine and dismantle the orthodoxy that I had embraced; an orthodoxy that relentlessly held to such core doctrines as the deity of Christ, virgin birth, bodily resurrection of Jesus, substitutionary death of Christ at Calvary, and the existence of both heaven and hell. I knew that the day had come when Christians would have to be adequately prepared to defend their faith and the inspiration of the Scriptures upon which that faith is grounded.

As the years have passed, the attack on the reliability of the Bible has intensified in exponential terms. Centers of higher learning almost universally posit the natural development of the Scriptures and deny any divine activity or superintendence in its emergence. More and more, those who claim to believe in the inspiration of Scripture and uphold its reliability, find themselves in the minority and their views are both scorned and disregarded.

That said, there is a strong and completely cogent case to be made for the divine authority of the Bible. It is a case too frequently kept silent, but one that stands the test of liberal theologians and unmasks the diabolical bias of our contemporary media, academia, and godless society. It is to this case we will now turn our attention.

The Witness of the Apostle Peter

The Apostle Peter enjoyed a very unique place in the life and ministry of Jesus. Not only was he called to follow Jesus like his fellow disciples, he also enjoyed the status of being a part of the inner circle of Jesus. He was invited to share the glory of the mountain where Jesus, Elijah, and Moses were transfigured, experienced the painful intimacy of the garden where Jesus sought the Father's will, was given the personal promise of the Savior's intercession, and experienced Christ's restorative power following his miserable personal failure.

Besides these unique aspects of Peter's relationship with Jesus, he also witnessed, with the other disciples, the incredible miracles and the profound and life-changing teaching of Christ. He saw blind eyes opened, bread and fish multiplied, demons exorcised, and the dead raised. He was a firsthand eyewitness to many of the amazing miracles of our Lord. Yet, it was not the eyewitness revelation that he most treasured, rather what he called the "completely reliable" prophetic message (2 Peter 1:19 NIV). The Lexham English Bible calls it the "more reliable" Word!¹ In other words, Peter was claiming that the prophetic word of the Scriptures was even more reliable than his OWN eyewitness account of the exploits of Christ.

It is that confidence in the Word of God that believers need to possess today. Is it possible to know the same conviction that Peter had that the words of Scripture are wholly reliable? Is there evidence that would support such a conviction or merit such confidence? I believe there is and in the next paragraphs we will explore those very questions. As we look deeper into this "more reliable Word," we will review four main aspects of Scripture: its TRANSMISSION, its FORMATION, its AUTHORITY, and its TRUSTWORTHINESS.

The Transmission of Scripture

Two critical texts inform our understanding regarding the transmission process of Scripture. One is penned by Peter and the other by the Apostle Paul. Peter's words are found in 2 Peter 1:20, 21.

¹ 2 Peter 1:19 (The Lexham English Bible)

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's words were written to Timothy and found in 2 Timothy 3:16.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

These two passages are the key texts for our understanding of the **inspiration** of Scripture. Paul's words to Timothy actually use the word *the-o'-pnyü-stos*, the Greek word translated "given by inspiration" or "God-breathed."² Divine inspiration of the words of Scripture is an internal claim of the Bible. Peter notes that there was indeed human participation in the creation of the biblical text, but the human participants were yielded to the Holy Spirit that directed them in their writing. The origin was not human, but rather, divine.

It is important, however, to realize that the claims to inspiration made by both Peter and Paul seem to refer to the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. The word used in both texts for Scripture is the Greek word *graphē*, a term used to denote the Old Testament.³ The two apostles make it very clear that the Old Testament text WAS divinely inspired. That, however, does little to ease the assault by many today regarding the New Testament texts that affirm and proclaim the Gospel message of salvation exclusively through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Can we be so sure that the New Testament text has the same divine authority?

It seems from words written by Peter that he does indeed include the words of the Apostle Paul in the body of inspired Scripture when he writes his second letter.

*Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the **other Scriptures**, (emphasis mine) to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15, 16).*

² Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers, 1986. 46.

³ Vine, W.E. *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. 4th ed. Vol. III. London: Oliphants, 1948. 329.

Here, Peter classifies the writings of Paul as themselves, "Scripture" (graphe) and therefore affirms the authenticity of their inspiration. This is very significant, especially since Paul wrote at least thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. With one verse, Peter insists on the inspiration of at least half of the New Testament.

Paul himself includes the Gospels in the body of inspired Scripture when he recalls the words of Jesus, quoted by Luke, reminding His followers that the laborer is worthy of His hire.

For Scripture says, (emphasis mine) "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18).

The Gospels which record the words and ministry of Jesus are validated by Paul as part of the corpus of the text we call "Scripture" (graphe).

Further adding to our insistence that the New Testament, like the Old Testament, was inspired and superintended by the Holy Spirit are the words of promise made by Jesus to His disciples, many who would author significant portions of Scripture. The promise of Jesus was that when the appropriate time came, He would remind them of what He had said, implying that they would have supernatural recall to pen the words and teachings of the Master.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).

The transmission of Holy Scripture, which seems to include both Old and New Testaments, does have a uniquely divine quality. The Scriptures were not delivered through human intellect nor through angelic instrumentality. The Scriptures were not mysteriously found in a clay jar like the Dead Sea Scrolls or in a farmer's field complete with a seer's stone like the Book of Mormon. The delivery instead came when men spoke and wrote as they were moved upon by the Holy Spirit of God. This is the doctrine of divine inspiration.

The Formation of Scripture

While the transmission of Scripture via the divine inspiration of human authors is a fascinating and intriguing subject, just how the Bible was formed and came into being is equally interesting, and at the same time, complex. To trace that development, it is important to understand the meaning of the word "canon." This word, which boasts a Latin origin, literally means "rule" or "standard" and became one of the most significant concepts of early church history. It drew attention to a "norm" or body of

texts that would ultimately be called the “biblical canon” or the accepted books of Scripture. By the 2nd century the phrase “revealed truth” or “rule of faith” was used and, by the 4th century that longer phrase was replaced with “ho kanon” — “The Canon.”⁴

Both the Old and New Testaments underwent a canonical process although the Old Testament formed with much less scrutiny and controversy than did the New Testament. The Old Testament tradition, formulated and transmitted by the Pharisees, categorized the Old Testament writing into three primary components: the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Prophets (both Major and Minor), and the Writings. This three-fold division is sometimes called the “Tanakh,” an acronym for that three-part construct. “Ta” stands for the “Torah” (the Law), “Na” stands for “Nebium” (the Prophets), and “Kh” stands for “Kethubim” (the Writings).⁵ Jesus seemed to affirm this three-fold approach to the Old Testament canon in some of His own words.

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44,45).

There seems to have been very little disagreement or even controversy regarding the Old Testament canon, except the debate over the Apocrypha books added by the Catholic Church. These books, seven in all, while adopted by Roman Catholicism were never accepted by the Jews, and earliest Christian evidence seems to be that they were never affirmed by Christianity either. All of them were written after Malachi and before the birth of Christ, between 400 BC and the Incarnation. Jerome did include them in the Latin Vulgate, but even Jerome noted that they were not to be considered canonical.⁶ While Catholics continue (since 1546) to view these books as canonical, they are rejected by almost all of Protestantism because of multiple historical errors and inconsistencies regarding the plan and workings of God.⁷

⁴ Tenney, Merrill C., and Walter M. Dunnnett. *New Testament Survey*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. ;, 1985. 401-412.

⁵ Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press ;, 1994. 57-59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

The New Testament canon, however, was developed at a different pace and with much more controversy. To trace its development is a little more challenging and the details are a bit more elusive. Most of the New Testament books were written between AD 40 and AD 100.⁸ Before AD 140 there seemed to be no move toward a strict or firm canonization process. It did seem, however, that the New Testament writers themselves were aware that what they were writing was really part of a larger body of inspired writing that was happening simultaneously with their own works. Peter, for example, noted the works of Paul in his own second epistle.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15, 16).

Paul, too, not only seems aware of the Gospel accounts but affirms their veracity when he writes concerning the true nature of the gospel that he preached.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...(1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Even though the general understanding of the first and early second century Christian community was that the Gospels, letters of Paul, and possibly Peter's epistles were works of canonical importance, there was no formalization to that process that even began until at least AD 140. Clement of Rome may have inadvertently started this process when in his writings he declared both 1 Corinthians and the letter to the Hebrews as "apostolic authority that is in good order."⁹ Ignatius of Antioch also wrote in AD 115 that "the apostles are known through their writings."¹⁰ Polycarp saw the tide turning toward the embracing of the New Testament text and stated that "the importance of the Old Testament has receded in favor of the increased esteem given to the writings of the apostles, particularly, Paul."¹¹

These written observances by some of the early leaders of the church community happened simultaneously with the rapid spread of copies of New Testament literature.

⁸ Cairns, Earle E. "The Church Closes Ranks." In *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 127-130. Revised ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954.

⁹ Lane, A. N. S., and A. N. S. Lane. *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. Completely Rev. and Expanded ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

The four Gospels traveled together as one book simply called "The Gospel," and the thirteen letters of Paul traveled together as one collection known as "The Apostle."¹² When Acts was inserted in between the two, a great continuity was formed between the message of Christ in the Gospels and the letters to the churches found in Paul's writings. Acts provided the material that explained and documented the growth and development of the early Church.

Until around AD 140, the Christian community seemed content without formalizing a New Testament canon. However, with the rise of heretical teaching, the need for a formalization process became important. Marcion was one of the first heretics to emerge that really challenged the quickly forming Christian orthodoxy. In AD 140, before the presbyters at Rome, he propagated his theology, a theology that rejected a God capable of wrath and declared the New Testament God superior to the God of the Old Testament. Consequently, he suggested that the New Testament canon should consist of only ten of Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke, both interestingly edited in significant ways, especially where God was seen bringing any form of judgment. The theology of Marcion was rejected in short order but did serve to awaken the early church to the need of formalizing what was orthodox and what writings would be considered authoritative.¹³

Gnosticism of the early second century also stirred the early church to action. Their inherent belief that there was "gnosis" (knowledge) that was superior to the inspired text called for a response from church leaders.¹⁴ Muratorius, in the late second century, posited his suggestion for a biblical canon (known as the Muratorian Fragment) and included all of the twenty-seven New Testament books with the exception of Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. Additionally, he included the *Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Apocalypse of Peter*.¹⁵ Origen set forth his own version of the biblical canon and excluded only James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.¹⁶ By the end of the second century, twenty-three of the twenty-seven New Testament books enjoyed almost universal acceptance. Only Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and Revelation stood outside the accepted canon. That would change in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Eusebius (260-340 AD) wrote a letter stating his affirmation of the twenty-three books and noted that the other four books should be accepted as well. He called for the

¹² *The Book of the Acts* Bruce, Frederick Fyvie Eerdmans, 1988, 84-89.

¹³ Irvin, Dale T., and Scott W. Sunquist. *History of the World Christian Movement*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001. 81-84.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 82.

¹⁶ Lane, 23.

Church to make a decision.¹⁷ In AD 367, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, issued the 39th Festal Letter and in it he affirmed all twenty-seven. He stated regarding these books, “*These are the fountain of salvation that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take out from these.*”¹⁸

The recommendation of Athanasius was acted upon quickly. Church councils around the world readily accepted his call. The Greek Church immediately accepted his recommendation, the Latin Church adopted the canon in 382, and the African Church, at the Synod of Carthage (393 AD) and Hippo (397 AD) came to the same conclusion. By the end of the 4th century, the canon we now accept was fully adopted by the Church universal.¹⁹

The Authority of Scripture

While an understanding of both the transmission of Scripture (inspiration) and formation of Scripture (canonization) is crucial to developing a conviction regarding the supreme reliability of God’s Word, the last two components, authority and trustworthiness, are even more vital for the believer to integrate into their worldview. The authority issue has to do with the question, “How do we know the Bible is truly a revelation of God’s authority?” At least seven answers to that question should be considered.

First, archeological evidence has proven time and time again the veracity of historical and cultural references posited in Scripture. Many things that were once considered trouble spots for Christian apologists have since been found to be firmly upheld by archeological findings. The Christ-follower has no need to fear new or recent scientific discovery, rather they should take comfort in the fact that these only serve to affirm the solid ground upon which our conviction of biblical authority rests.²⁰

Second—eyewitness accounts. The New Testament was written by those who saw the events that they described, including the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Most of these authors were themselves martyred for their faith, including Peter who was crucified upside down. While one might understand the energy and passion for developing and following a concocted tale, it is unconscionable to believe that people, in the face of martyrdom, would choose to lose their life rather than acknowledge their fallacious fabrication.²¹

¹⁷ Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged*. New Updated ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006. 91.

¹⁸ Lane, 32.

¹⁹ Cairns, 128.

²⁰ <http://www.rae.org/pdf/veracity.pdf>

²¹ Jeffrey, Grant R., *The Signature of God*, Frontier Research Publications, Inc. (1996), p.254-257

Third, secular historians of the 1st and 2nd century corroborate many of the New Testament narratives. Josephus, a Jewish historian and Roman defector born in AD 37, wrote much about the formation of the early church in the 1st century. Time and time again his writings have been found to strengthen the truth claims of Scripture and verify its historical and sociological assumptions. Much of the work of Josephus chronicles the political and military pressure applied by the Romans to the Jews and provides strong evidential support to the record of the New Testament.²²

Fourth, the literary consistency of the Bible is nothing short of phenomenal. More than forty different authors wrote sixty-six books over a fifteen hundred year period, and yet, the message never contradicts and the truth never vacillates. The salvation-history and the redemptive plan of God from the world's foundation is seen in almost every book regardless of author, context, or historical setting.²³

Fifth, the fulfillment of prophecy stands as one of the most magnificent proofs of Scripture's integrity. Just the Messianic prophecies alone leave one shaking their head. More than 300 prophecies are found in the Old Testament regarding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the Nazareth-born carpenter's son fulfills them all. Statisticians have calculated the odds of just one man fulfilling just eight of those more than three hundred prophecies. The numbers are staggering. The probability of one individual fulfilling even eight of the Old Testament prophecies is 1×10^{28} or 1 in 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. That, in itself, should cause us to hold fast to our confidence in the authority of Scripture.²⁴

Sixth and seventh, are global influence and changed lives. The world has been changed by the person of Jesus Christ. All of history and indeed our very calendar centers around the historical Jesus, and the testimonies of changed lives serve as an ongoing reminder that the Word of God is indeed authoritative!

The Trustworthiness of Scripture

One of the greatest assaults leveled at the Bible has to do with its trustworthiness. Liberal and agenda-driven secularist, longing to remove the moral authority of the Scriptures from society, try repeatedly to discredit the integrity of the Word of God. Often, arguments such as textual discrepancies and variants are the target of those attacks. Vast revisionist conspiracies are posited and the uninformed believer, in many cases the young, become disillusioned with the thought of placing their trust in a book that lacks authenticity or integrity. Repeatedly, the charge is made by those hoping to discount the authority and integrity of the New Testament that the text has been

²² Josephus, *The Works of Josephus* (trans. W. Whiston; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) 537-8.

²³ <http://evidencetobelieve.net/reliability-of-the-bible/>

²⁴ McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*. San Bernardino, Calif.: [Campus Crusade for Christ International], 1972.

corrupted and what has been handed down to us has no resemblance to that which was originally penned. Understanding and sorting out this issue is integral to one's confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture. This is a complex issue and to do it justice we must first explain some important terms and concepts as well as acknowledge some universally held facts.

First, we must understand the difference between an autograph and a manuscript. An autograph is the original writing of any letter or book by a particular author. It is that which was penned by the author's hand. A manuscript, on the other hand, is a copy of that autograph or a copy of a copy, or a copy of a copy of a copy, etc. When it comes to the biblical text, it is true that we have NO original manuscripts of any New Testament book but only copies (manuscripts).²⁵ To argue otherwise or to adopt a "King James only" mentality is a foolish attempt to preserve tradition rather than to pursue truth. As we will see, the sincere Christ-follower has no reason to fear the outcome of searching for truth.

Second, it is important to address the issue of "variants." Before that, however, it is good to refresh ourselves on the process of manuscript transmission. Only one autograph (the original author's work) ever existed and none of those have been found. The original autographs were copied by scribes, possibly one, two, or five or more at a time. This was a painstaking process as all the work was done by hand and often by candlelight. Letter by letter, word by word, copies were made and disseminated to Christ-followers and the churches. Copies of copies were made, and copies of copies of copies were also made and all by the same laborious scribal process. When ancient manuscripts are compared by textual critics, inevitably they find "variants" among those manuscripts. Variants are discrepancies between one manuscript and another and include everything from a different word, order of words, different spellings, or deleted letters.²⁶

In respect to variants, it is estimated that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 variants within the multiple manuscripts of the New Testament and there are only about 140,000 words in the entire Greek New Testament.²⁷ This could be breathtakingly discouraging to some if they did not fully understand the entirety of the issue. The reason for the great number of variants is the vast number of manuscripts that have been recovered. There are more than 5600 Greek manuscripts today, and more than 2.6 million pages of New Testament manuscripts in Greek. These, however, are not the only manuscripts that go into the count of variants when studied by textual critics. Early on, the New Testament was translated into several languages. There are more than 10,000 Latin

²⁵ Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, 1st paperback ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 253.

²⁶ Wallace, Daniel B. *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 26.

²⁷ Ibid.

manuscripts and more than 5,000 manuscripts in Coptic, Syriac, Georgian, Gothic, Ethiopic, and Armenian. All told, there are more than 20,000 manuscripts of the New Testament in various languages including the Greek, and the variants emerge from this vast body of evidence.²⁸ Even beyond these manuscripts there are more than a million New Testament quotations from early church fathers that, according to New Testament scholar and textual critic Bruce Metzger, would be sufficient to reconstruct the entire New Testament.²⁹

A third important concept to understand is the date of the manuscripts that have been retrieved. It is almost universally accepted that most, if not all of the New Testament was written within the 1st century AD. At least twelve of the recovered manuscripts were from the 2nd century, sixty-four from the 3rd century, and forty-eight from the 4th century. That means that a total of 124 manuscripts of the New Testament are within 300 years of their composition.³⁰ When compared to the average classic Greek or Latin author, the facts are compelling. As a matter of fact, there are no copies within 300 years of the original composition of any of these classics: *The Jewish War* (Josephus), *Caesar's Gallic Wars*, Homer's *Iliad*, or any of the writings of either Plato or Aristotle.³¹ Rather, the closest manuscripts of either Plato's or Aristotle's writings are more than 1,000 years from the original composition. While 643 ancient manuscripts of Homer's *Iliad* exist (earliest 500 years from original composition), there are only 49 ancient manuscripts of Aristotle's writings and only seven of Plato's.³² Despite these almost shocking facts, none of us have ever heard a literature professor doubt the veracity or integrity of any of these classics. "The New Testament is by far the best attested work of Greek or Latin literature from the ancient world."³³

Fourth, it is important to have at least a cursory understanding of the process of textual criticism, that system of study that seeks to determine, with the greatest probability, the original text. All of the manuscripts (in the case of the New Testament, over 20,000) are considered and the ones closest to the original composition date are weighted the heaviest to arrive at the most probable rendering. The vast number of manuscripts that come from such diverse places and eras makes the integrity of the New Testament text far more certain than any classical literature from the ancient world.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the variants. First, just one letter difference in a word constitutes a variant. If that letter appears different in hundreds of the manuscripts, hundreds or even thousands of the 300,000-400,000 variants would be

²⁸ Ibid, 27-28.

²⁹ Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D., *The Text of the New Testament: It's transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 126.

³⁰ Wallace, 29.

³¹ Ibid.

³² <https://carm.org/manuscript-evidence>

³³ Wallace, 30.

made up of just one scribal error of one letter, copied many times.³⁴ Variants include spelling differences, nonsense errors, use of synonyms, and transposition of words. The largest category of variants, by far, are spelling. John, for instance, is spelled three different ways and accounts for more than a thousand variants.³⁵ Nonsense errors occurred when either the scribe was fatigued or did not know Greek very well. This kind of error makes up the second largest category of textual variants. One such example is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, a text that is divided among the manuscripts as either "*we were gentle among you*" or "*we were little children among you*" but one lone manuscript has translated "*we were horses among you.*" The Greek word for horses is similar to the other two.³⁶

The second most common variant is the use of synonyms that do not change the meaning of the text at all.³⁷ Another common variant is when the Greek uses an article in front of a proper name ("The Mary" or "The Joseph") and a scribe drops the article. These are never seen in an English version because the article is always dropped in English.³⁸ The final variant that is frequently seen is the transposition of words. The simple three word sentence "Jesus loves John" can be expressed in sixteen different ways in the Greek which uses a variety of suffixes and prefixes and even infixes for emphasis.³⁹ Again, almost all of the variants reflect one of these non consequential issues and do absolutely nothing to the meaning or integrity of the biblical text.

An important fact is that less than 1% of the hundreds of thousands of textual variants change the meaning of the text at all. One of most significant textual variants is the number of the Beast in Revelation 13:18. While most modern translations record that number as 666, the oldest manuscripts found record it as 616. In addition, the ending of Mark 16 and the story of the adulteress woman in John's eighth chapter are among the most significant textual variants. Dr. Metzger says that "there is absolutely nothing in the variants of the New Testament that challenges any essential Christian belief (e.g. the bodily resurrection of Jesus, His deity, or the Trinity).⁴⁰ He somewhat humorously notes that no church, seminary, or denomination has a doctrinal statement on the number of the beast. Even under the most critical scrutiny, textual variants reveal ONLY inconsequential issues.

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When one considers the discussion of this article, great confidence can be found in our certainty of the message of the Scripture. The Bible, when compared to other ancient

³⁴ Ibid, 40.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 41.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 55.

texts, is exponentially more trustworthy and its integrity is far more dependable. As a matter of fact, when all the ancient manuscripts from centuries removed from each other and discovered in countries and cultures thousands of miles apart are considered, the New Testament is found to have more than a 99% scribal accuracy rate, a phenomenal reality not known with any other ancient literature transmission. We can trust the truth of the Bible without hesitation as God's inspired Word, breathed originally by the Holy Spirit, who then superintended the process of its transmission. Experience is marvelous and encounters with Christ are irreplaceable. We must never forsake the pursuit of either. But, with Peter we testify, "*We have a more reliable word.*"