

There are many thousands of ancient manuscripts of our New Testament. While all of these agree in over 85% of their content, there are thousands of variations between them... most of no consequence whatsoever and some representing noticeably different readings. Why so many variations? Human error, human interpretation and human intent.

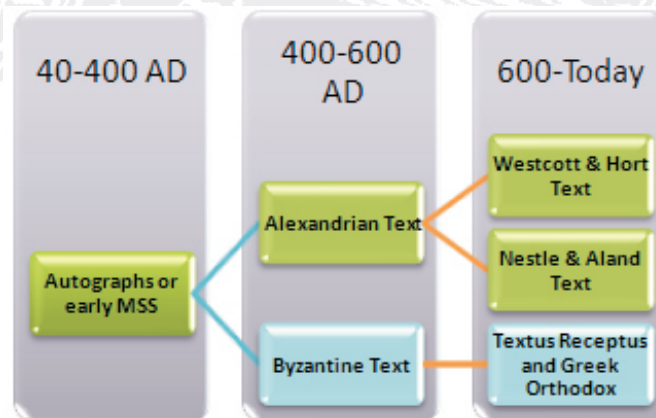
The copying process. Some copies were made one at a time by very dedicated scribes. Others were replicated by having one scribe read passages to a room full of scribes each making a transcript. As you recall, the time involved in copying can be overwhelming and the attention required relentless. Many unintentional errors can be made in the course of copying. We will examine the most common of these in our class. Other errors are introduced when scribes attempted to 'improve' on imperfect or contradictory originals... creating yet new variants.

Text families. Through time, certain variations gained popularity often due to sponsorship by secular or religious leaders, sometimes due to geography or culture. These popular variants are called text families. Most ancient NT manuscripts fall into one of three such families: The Alexandrian, the Byzantine or the Western.

Alexandrian Texts. As far more of the earliest manuscripts and writings of the church fathers reflect this family, it is argued to be closest to the original text or autographs. Typical characteristics include: 1) shorter phrases, more abrupt endings in passages, 2) more variations between synoptic accounts than in other families and 3) more 'difficult' readings... that require careful study to resolve potential conflicts with other accounts etc. Manuscripts include Beatty and Bodmer papyri, Codex Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus.

Byzantine Texts. Sometime beyond 400 AD this text family became substantially prevalent. Literally thousands of manuscripts reflect the Byzantine character which includes: 1) more elegant flowing greek, 2) few variations between synoptic accounts, 3) few 'difficult' readings. It appears this family may be the result of compilation editing using many earlier sources.

The Western Text. From as early as 300 AD we find NT texts replete with paraphrases. Words or phrases appear to have been dropped, changed or replaced with portions of extra-biblical writings to improve impact or eliminate contradiction. Codex Bezae is the only surviving substantial work of this family before the 6th century.



Stemma of NT Greek Text

Textual Criticism

The study of a literary work that aims to establish the original text. (Meriam-Webster)

The technique of restoring texts as nearly as possible to their original form. (Britannica)

Stemma and Stemmatcs

A diagram depicting relationships between versions of a literary work. Categorizing documents based on similar deviations.

Eclecticism

Reconstructing text by consulting a multitude of witness readings.

Copy-Text Editing

Correcting obvious-to-editor errors leveraging few sources

Resources

Earlham College Textual Criticism Overview

<http://www.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/>

Byzantine Text Overview

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_text-type

Alexandrian Text Type

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandrian_text-type

There are many additional references available at sites

Types of Textual Errors

Permutation - There are letters having forms very similar to one another. Occasionally when copying the wrong letter is transcribed changing the meaning of a passage.

Haplography - When a line (or more) is omitted because it's ending is similar to to the ending of a line before it in the text being copied.

Dittography - When a line is copied a second time by accident.

Faulty Hearing - When a wrong word is recorded because a letter or combination of letters sounds similar to another letter or letters.

Substitution of Synonyms - When copying while reading sometimes the scribe would recall the meaning but not the exact words used.

Variations in Sequence - In a list of events or actions the ordering may be different between manuscripts.

Transposition of Letters - Once in a while two letters are transposed significantly changing the meaning conveyed.

Assimilation of Wording - Scribes were so familiar with scripture that sometimes wording of parallel passages was mistakenly inserted.

Spelling and Grammar Changes - Sometimes it would appear that scribes (particularly those in later times) sought to improve the grammar and or spelling of the original authors.

Harmonistic Alterations - When a scribe sought to correct differences between differing accounts of an event or saying.

Corrections - When a scribe altered wording to correct what they felt was a mistake or mis-spoken quotation, etc.

Conflations - Occasionally a scribe using more than one source would combine variant readings to preserve both in the new work.

Doctrinal Alterations - Sometimes wording of a manuscript would be altered to conform or support a belief of the scribe.

Textual Criticism

With all these types of errors how can we have confidence that God's word has reached us? This is where the practices and techniques of textual criticism come into play.

Throughout history devout men have worked to preserve God's text and weed out human mistakes in its transmission. While the specific techniques vary between practitioners, they have similar roots and as a result there are no doctrinal differences between significant modern translations. Keep in mind also that manuscripts of the Alexandrian and Byzantine text families differ in only 15 percent of their content, and only 5 percent of those differences introduce even noticeable change in emphasis or meaning.

Here are a few factors that weigh into discernment of originality:

1. the age of a manuscript, the older the better in general
2. a reading peculiar to a single document is suspect
3. number and geographic dispersion of supporting manuscripts
4. conformity with style of other writings of same author
5. different renderings of parallel passages is preferred

These are but a few of the tenets of textual criticism. We should take great confidence that our New Testament is not only the most widely copied and quoted work of ancient text, but also that all these texts harmoniously represent the message contained.

