

New book offers needed correction to Christian apologists

Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism

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Biblical creationists are no strangers to bad arguments against Christianity. We are also well aware of bad defences of Christianity from compromised positions. But there are also times when we ourselves need correcting, and often it is individuals with specialized knowledge who point out bad or outdated arguments we shouldn't use.¹ It helps when these individuals combine their zeal for accuracy with a love for God's Word, because then we know they are trying to build something better, not to tear down and destroy what is already there. The contributors to *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Criticism* do a service to all Christian apologists by pointing out some crucial areas where our arguments about the New Testament (NT) manuscripts need to be revised. Their arguments are based on the best evidence currently available and serve as both a warning and an encouragement to the believer.

Autographs

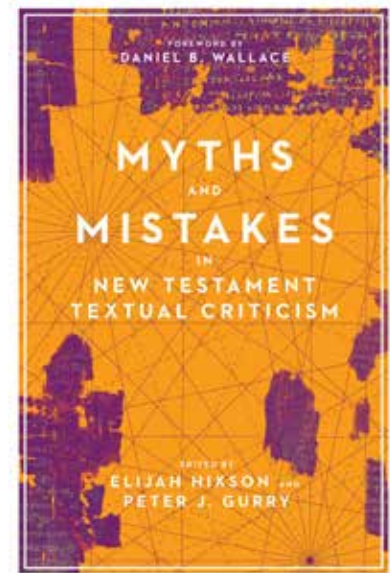
The Chicago Statement of Inerrancy² states that the 'autographs' of Scripture are inerrant, but what exactly is an autograph?³ To answer that, we have to understand what publication of a document in that era entailed. There would sometimes be multiple drafts or early

copies that would precede the 'final' product. This would then be released for circulation and further copying. Also, "it was often a community effort that involved some of the author's closest associates" (p. 35). Furthermore, it is also possible that the author produced multiple 'autographs' of the document to circulate.

Some apologists claim that the autographs could have survived for a very long time and thus stabilized the textual tradition. However, we know that most of the early NT documents were written on papyrus, which only survived well in hot, dry climates like Egypt, and survived poorly in places like Rome that were more humid. And written documents were also often destroyed in fires or deliberately ruined during times of persecution. Furthermore, it seems that it was the *message* of the biblical documents, and not the manuscripts themselves, that were seen as valuable, so early Christians did not necessarily take care to preserve older manuscripts when a good newer copy had been produced. Also, an original copy can only exist in one place. It cannot be easily compared to all the circulating copies of that document. Therefore, the authors state, "It is unlikely that the New Testament autographs still existed and influenced the text by the time of our earliest copies. Even if they did, this alone would not guarantee that the existing manuscripts are reliable" (p. 47). There are other good arguments for the reliability of the manuscripts that we have; this simply happens not to be one of them.

Manuscript numbers

One of the staple arguments for the reliability of the NT text is how many



copies of the New Testament documents were preserved—far more than for any other work of antiquity. While this is valid, many people have failed to keep up with the latest research, or inadvertently don't compare manuscript numbers fairly. While the overall argument can still be used, *Myth and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* gives some needed correction.

Many commentators, from evangelical apologists to Bart Ehrman, have claimed there are far fewer ancient manuscripts of non-biblical works than there actually are. This is because the numbers were once accurate but are now outdated. Just as more biblical manuscripts have been discovered, more manuscripts of other ancient works have also been uncovered.

Furthermore, it is difficult to count precisely how many biblical manuscripts we have. This is because some fragments that were originally catalogued as separate documents are part of the same manuscript so should be counted together. Others were catalogued once, lost, then rediscovered and catalogued again. Some manuscripts have been destroyed and thus can no longer be counted in the total.

Myths and Mistakes points out an inconsistency in how biblical manuscript numbers are compared with other

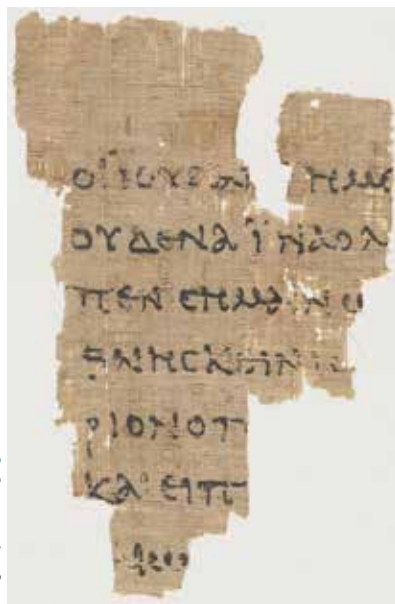


Figure 1. P52 is dated paleographically to AD 100–200

ancient works. Often, only the ‘good’ or ‘significant’ manuscripts of the non-biblical works are counted, but every scrap containing only a few words or clearly derivative biblical manuscript is counted toward the total of biblical manuscripts.

Because it is hard to count manuscripts precisely and the numbers are always shifting as new research is conducted, we should use non-specific numbers and consult recent scholarship for the best possible information.

How early are the manuscripts?

Several years ago biblical scholar Daniel Wallace mentioned a first-century manuscript of Mark that had yet to be revealed to the public in a debate with Bart Ehrman.⁴ However, when it was finally published, the truth was far less spectacular—it was not a particularly early copy.

We believe that the New Testament was completed before the end of the first century, and early copies provide both a *terminus ad quem* for its composition and evidence for the specific wording of the original text. But most manuscripts can only be dated

by paleography—analysis of the handwriting. This can only give us a range within a century or so. This means, for instance, the John manuscript P52 (figure 1) was written somewhere between AD 100–200, not necessarily AD 125, as is often claimed. It is still an early manuscript fragment, but we cannot be that specific.

Even if some of the manuscripts are not as early as previously claimed, the real evidence for the trustworthiness of the text is how little the text has changed over time. We can see this by comparing a new recreation of the Bible using text-critical techniques (the *Editio Critico Maior*) to the later Byzantine manuscripts. The text of Acts and the general epistles agree 94% of the time, and the Gospels agree at least 86% of the time (p. 116). In fact, “the core tradition remains remarkably stable over time, in that the difference between the two texts usually thought to be most polarized is actually fairly small” (p. 116).

Were the early copyists professional, amateur, or something else?

It is often claimed that the early copyists of the New Testament were amateurs, and this resulted in more errors than would have been expected otherwise. Some apologists have claimed the opposite—that the early copyists were highly literate and made few mistakes or intentional changes. In reality, the manuscripts of the New Testament reflect “a wide range or scribal skills and abilities among the early manuscripts, but a majority appear to be competent transcribers” (p. 151).

Additionally, manuscripts were corrected, sometimes by the original copyist and often by later hands. The corrections “show that scribes strove to improve and revise their work” (p. 170).

Most variants are not significant

There are no two identical hand-copied manuscripts of any biblical text.

However, while there are more variants than words in the New Testament, the vast majority of those have to do with spelling or word order. Only a small number of variants are both *viable* (i.e. they could be the original reading) and *meaningful* (they make a difference to the reading of the text). While there are small places where we cannot be 100% certain of the original reading, these instances do not affect doctrine.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book was a comprehensive overview of the manuscript tradition for Philemon which highlights the number of variants that exist that are not discussed in most exegetical analyses because they are certainly not original. However, “textual variations that aren’t original can still help us to understand how the text was understood in some settings” (p. 190).

How much did early Christians change the Scriptures? And how much of the Bible did their quotations preserve?

A common skeptical argument claims that theologically motivated church authorities changed the Scriptures to remove beliefs they deemed heretical. We know that, at least in some cases, there are theologically motivated edits to particular manuscripts. These can be identified by looking at an entire manuscript as a whole. The advantage to having so many manuscripts is that these theologically motivated edits never replaced the original readings.

Some apologists make the claim that even if we had no New Testament manuscripts we could reconstruct the entire New Testament (minus 11 verses) from patristic sources. However, this is false. Even if it were true, it would be circular because you would still need the New Testament to be able to distinguish a genuine quote from an allusion or paraphrase. And you would not be able to order the quotations within a specific book or even necessarily know which quotations belong in which book. So, on the one hand, yes, the New Testament

is extensively quoted in early Christian writings. But, on the other hand, this does not mean we could recreate it. However, the early commentaries give us an excellent additional source of validation for the New Testament text. We know what it says because we have so many copies, so many early copies, so many early quotations, and so many early translations into other languages.

Becoming comfortable with some degree of uncertainty

We like to make statements with as much certainty as possible. After all, we are dealing with a book that is inerrant—we are *certain* that it is true. However, there is a difference between the amount of certainty we can claim for the doctrines of Christianity and the certainty we can claim for particular arguments in the defence of Scripture. No one should lose their faith because we need to claim a wider date range for P52, or because we have slightly more manuscripts of Homer's *Iliad* and slightly fewer NT manuscripts than was previously claimed.

Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Criticism provides an important service in correcting some overly simplistic, outdated, and flawed arguments. It also provides improved arguments for the reliability of the New Testament manuscript tradition. It assumes some knowledge of technical terms but is written in an engaging style that should be accessible for the interested layperson. Thus, this book is highly recommended for the student of Scripture.

References

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