

~Is the New Testament text reliable?~

by Greg Koukl

The phrase, "*The Bible's been translated and recopied so many times...*" introduces one of the most frequent canards tossed at Christians quoting the Bible. Can we know for certain that the New Testament has been handed down accurately? Yes, we can.

In the spring of 1989 syndicated talk show host *Larry King* interviewed *Shirley MacLaine* on the New Age. When a Christian caller contested her view with an appeal to the New Testament, MacLaine brushed him off with the objection that the Bible has been changed and translated so many times over the last 2000 years that it's impossible to have any confidence in its accuracy. King was quick to endorse her "facts." "Everyone knows that," he grunted.[1]

This appeal to common knowledge is enough to satisfy the ordinary, man-on-the-street critic of the New Testament. An appeal to the game "telephone" to demonstrate how reasonable this objection is. Whisper a message to one person and transfer it from person to person, ear to ear, in a circle. Then compare the message's final form with the original. The radical transformation of the original phrase in so short a period of time is always good for a few laughs. This comparison is enough to convince the casual skeptic that the New Testament documents are equally unreliable.

The argument against the reliability of the New Testament texts can be stated very simply. How can we know that the documents we have in our possession accurately reflect originals destroyed almost two millennia ago? Communication is never perfect; people make mistakes. Errors are compounded with each successive generation, just like the message in the telephone game. By the time 2000 years pass, it's anyone's guess what the original said.

It's easy to state the problem, and some may think merely raising the objection makes the argument itself compelling. Yet offering evidence on its behalf is a bit more difficult.

Usually the complaint is raised by people who have little understanding of the real issues. In cases like this, an appeal to common knowledge is more often than not an appeal to common ignorance. Like many questions about Christianity, this objection is voiced by people who haven't been given reliable information.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

The question of authenticity is not really a religious concern at all; it's an academic one. It can be answered in an academic way totally unrelated to spiritual convictions by a simple appeal to facts, an apologetic technique I call "*Just the Facts, Ma'am.*"

The objection at first glance is compelling. When we try to conceptualize how to reconstruct an original after 2000 years of copying, translating, and copying some more, the task appears impossible. The skepticism, though, is based on two misconceptions about the transmission of ancient documents like the New Testament.

The first assumption is that the transmission is more or less linear, as in the telephone example--one person communicating to a second who communicates with a third, etc. In a linear paradigm people are left with one message and many generations between it and the original. Second, the telephone game example depends on oral transmission which is more easily distorted and misconstrued than something written.

Neither assumption applies to the written text of the New Testament. First, the transmission was not linear but geometric--e.g., one letter birthed five copies which became 25 which became 200 and so on. Secondly, the transmission in question was done in writing, and written manuscripts can be tested in a way that oral communications cannot be.

Reconstructing Aunt Sally's Letter

Let me illustrate how such a test can be made. It will help you to see how scholars can confidently reconstruct the text from existing manuscript copies even though the copies themselves have differences and are much older than the autograph (i.e., the original).

Pretend your Aunt Sally has a dream in which she learns the recipe for an elixir that would continuously maintain her youth. When she wakes up, she scribbles the directions on a scrap of paper, then runs into the kitchen to make up her first glass. In a few days her appearance is transformed. Sally is a picture of radiant youth because of her daily dose of what comes to be known as "Aunt Sally's Secret Sauce."

Sally is so excited she sends hand-written instructions to her three bridge partners (Aunt Sally is still in the technological dark ages--no photocopier) giving detailed instructions on how to make the sauce. They, in turn, make copies which each sends to ten of her own friends.

All is going well until one day Aunt Sally's pet schnauzer eats the original copy of the recipe. Sally is beside herself. In a panic she contacts her three friends who have mysteriously suffered similar mishaps. Their copies are gone, too, so the alarm goes out to their friends in attempt to recover the original wording.

They finally round up all the surviving hand-written copies, twenty-six in all. When they spread them out on the kitchen table, they immediately notice some differences. Twenty-three of the copies are exactly the same. One has a misspelled word, though, one has two phrases inverted ("mix then chop" instead of "chop then mix") and one includes an ingredient that none of the others has on its list.

Here is the critical question: Do you think Aunt Sally can accurately reconstruct her original recipe? Of course she could. The misspelled words can easily be corrected, the single inverted phrase can be repaired, and the extra ingredient can be ignored.

Even with more numerous or more diverse variations, the original can still be reconstructed with a high level of confidence given the right textual evidence. The misspellings would be obvious errors, the inversions would stand out and easily be restored, and the conclusion drawn that it's more plausible that one word or sentence be accidentally added to a single copy than omitted from many.

This, in simplified form, is how the science of textual criticism works. Textual critics are academics who reconstruct a missing original from existing manuscripts that are generations removed from the autograph. According to New Testament scholar **F.F. Bruce**, *"Its object [is] to determine as exactly as possible,*

from the available evidence, the original words of the documents in question."[2]

The science of textual criticism is used to test all documents of antiquity--not just religious texts--including historical and literary writings. It's not a theological enterprise based on haphazard hopes and guesses; it's a linguistic exercise that follows a set of established rules. Textual criticism allows an alert critic to determine the extent of possible corruption of any work.

How Many and How Old?

The ability of any scholar to do effective textual criticism depends on two factors. First, how many existing copies are there to examine and compare? Are there two copies, ten, a hundred? The more copies there are, the easier it is to make meaningful comparisons. Second, how close in time are the oldest existing documents to the original?

If the numbers are few and the time gap is wide, the original is harder to reconstruct with confidence. However, if there are many copies and the oldest existing copies are reasonably close in time to the original, the textual critic can be more confident he's pinpointed the exact wording of the autograph.

To get an idea of the significance of the New Testament manuscript evidence, note for a moment the record for non-biblical texts. These are secular texts from antiquity that have been reconstructed with a high degree of certainty based on the available textual evidence.

The important First Century document **The Jewish War**, by Jewish aristocrat and historian **Josephus**, survives in only nine complete manuscripts dating from the 5th Century--four centuries after they were written.[3] **Tacitus' Annals of Imperial Rome** is one of the chief historical sources for the Roman world of New Testament times, yet, surprisingly, it survives in partial form in only two manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages.[4] **Thucydides' History** survives in eight copies. There are 10 copies of **Caesar's Gallic Wars**, eight copies of **Herodotus' History**, and seven copies of **Plato**, all dated over a millennium from the original. **Homer's Iliad** has the most impressive manuscript evidence for any secular work with 647 existing copies.[5]

Bruce's comments put the discussion in perspective: *"No classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over 1300 years later than the originals."*[6]

For most documents of antiquity only a handful of manuscripts exist, some facing a time gap of 800-2000 years or more. Yet scholars are confident of reconstructing the originals with some significant degree of accuracy. In fact, virtually all of our knowledge of ancient history depends on documents like these.

The Biblical Manuscript Evidence

By comparison with secular texts, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is stunning. The most recent count (1980) shows 5,366 separate Greek manuscripts represented by early fragments, uncial codices (manuscripts in capital Greek letters bound together in book form), and minuscules (small Greek letters in cursive style)! [7]

Among the nearly 3,000 minuscule fragments are 34 complete New Testaments dating from the 9th to the 15th Centuries.[8]

Uncial manuscripts provide virtually complete codices (multiple books of the New Testament bound together into one volume) back to the 4th Century, though some are a bit younger. *Codex Sinaiticus*, purchased by the British government from the Soviet government at Christmas, 1933, for £100,000,[9] is dated c. 340.[10] The nearly complete *Codex Vaticanus* is the oldest uncial, dated c. 325-350.[11] *Codex Alexandrinus* contains the whole Old Testament and a nearly complete New Testament and dates from the late 4th Century to the early 5th Century.

The most fascinating evidence comes from the fragments (as opposed to the codices). The *Chester Beatty Papyri* contains most of the New Testament and is dated mid-3rd Century.[12] The *Bodmer Papyri II* collection, whose discovery was announced in 1956, includes the first fourteen chapters of the Gospel of John and much of the last seven chapters. It dates from A.D. 200 or earlier.[13]

The most amazing find of all, however, is a small portion of John 18:31-33, discovered in Egypt known as the *John Rylands Papyri*. Barely three inches square, it represents the earliest known copy of any part of the New Testament. The papyri is dated on paleographical grounds at around A.D. 117-138 (though it may even be earlier),[14] showing that the Gospel of John was circulated as far away as Egypt within 30 years of its composition.

Keep in mind that most of the papyri are fragmentary. Only about 50 manuscripts contain the entire New Testament, though most of the other manuscripts contain the four Gospels. Even so, the manuscript textual evidence is exceedingly rich, especially when compared to other works of antiquity.

Ancient Versions and Patristic Quotations

Two other cross-checks on the accuracy of the manuscripts remain: ancient versions and citations by the early church 'Fathers' known as "patristic quotations."

Early in the history of the Church, Greek documents, including the Scriptures, were translated into Latin. By the 3rd and 4th Centuries, the New Testament was translated into *Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, etc.* These texts helped missionaries reach new cultures in their own language as the Gospel spread and the Church grew.[15] Translations of the Greek manuscripts (called "versions") help modern-day textual critics answer questions about the underlying Greek manuscripts.

In addition, there are ancient extra-biblical sources--characteristically catechisms, lectionaries, and quotes from the church fathers--that record the Scriptures. *Paul Barnett* says that the "*Scriptures...gave rise to an immense output of early Christian literature which quoted them at length and, in effect, preserved them.*"[16] Metzger notes the amazing fact that "*if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, [the patristic quotations] would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.*"[17]

The Verdict

What can we conclude from this evidence? New Testament specialist *Daniel Wallace* notes that although there are about 300,000 individual variations of the text of the New Testament, this number is very misleading. Most of the differences are completely inconsequential--spelling errors, inverted phrases and the like. A side by side comparison between the two main text families (*the Majority Text and the modern critical text*) shows agreement a full 98% of the time.[18]

Of the remaining differences, virtually all yield to vigorous textual criticism. This means that our New

Testament is 99.5% textually pure. In the entire text of 20,000 lines, only 40 lines are in doubt (about 400 words), and none affects any significant doctrine.[19]

Greek scholar **D.A. Carson** sums up this way: *"The purity of text is of such a substantial nature that nothing we believe to be true, and nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants."*[20]

This issue is no longer contested by non-Christian scholars, and for good reason. Simply put, if we reject the authenticity of the New Testament on textual grounds, we'd have to reject every ancient work of antiquity and declare null and void every piece of historical information from written sources prior to the beginning of the second millennium A.D.

Has the New Testament been altered? Critical, academic analysis says it has not.

[1]Larry King with Shirley MacLaine, spring 1989.

[2]Bruce, F. F., *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 19.

[3]Barnett, Paul, *Is the New Testament History?* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1986), 45.

[4]Geisler, Norman L., Nix, William E., *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 405. Note: Bruce records two existing copies of this document (p. 16) but Barnett claims there's only one (p. 45) and that single copy exists in partial form. To be conservative, I've cited Geisler & Nix's statistics.

[5]Metzger, Bruce M., *The Text of the New Testament* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34. This number consists of 457 papyri, 2 uncials and 188 minuscule manuscripts.

[6]Bruce, 16-17.

[7]Geisler & Nix, 402.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Metzger, 45.

[10]Geisler & Nix, 392.

[11]Ibid., 391.

[12]Ibid., 389-390.

[13]Metzger, 39-40.

[14]Geisler & Nix, 388.

[15]Barnett, 44.

[16]Ibid., p. 46-47.

[17]Metzger, 86.

[18]Wallace, Daniel, "The Majority Text and the Original Text: Are They Identical?," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June, 1991, 157-8.

[19]Geisler and Nix, 475.

[20]Carson, D.A., *The King James Version Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 56