

Tough Topics: How Do We Get “the Text” of Our English Bibles? Part One

It is taken for granted—the text of the Bible. While we have so many good English translations of the Holy Scriptures, there are differences in the translations. What’s behind these differences? For example, consider our place of study in Mark 11:25-27 in the ESV:

²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

²⁷ And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him,

Now consider the King James version:

*²⁵ And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ **But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.***

²⁷ And they come again to Jerusalem: and as he was walking in the temple, there come to him the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders,

What is the difference? THE KING JAMES HAS AN ADDITIONAL VERSE. The big question we want to answer is **how did this difference possibly arise**, and **what can we say about the difference**? And does it matter?

Our Basic Presupposition: The Holy Scriptures are the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God. The goal of this study is not to prove this! Instead, the reliability and authority of Scripture is our starting point. The goal of the study is to answer the basic question of *how God (working through human means) established the text of the Bible.*

I. Introduction—Key Terms and Concepts

- **A Text**—a written production. **Marks on the page.**
- **The Autographs**—the *original text* of the books of the Bible. *No original autographs are extant.*
- **Textual Criticism**—the science of assessing the biblical manuscripts in order to establish *the text that is closest to the original autograph.*
- **Manuscripts/Manuscript Evidence**—the hand-written copies of the biblical text. There are thousands upon thousands of manuscripts of many forms. Collectively, this is know as *the manuscript evidence.*

Because we do not have the originals (e.g. Mark’s “copy” of his Gospel), text criticism *seeks to reconstruct the closest reproduction of Mark’s autograph.* This is done by looking at the evidence in hand.

Major Point: in 99% of the manuscript evidence, **there is total agreement between the manuscripts.**

II. A Little History of the Manuscript of the Bible (That Is Needed)

While this topic may cause some consternation, a proper understanding of the text of the Bible actually gives one *great confidence* in the Scriptures.

But before the history, we have to come to terms with the fact that for most of human history, **it was nearly impossible to reproduce an exact copy of a document as large as a letter or book of the Bible.** Before the invention of the printing press in 1454/55,

copies were made in handwritten form and no two copies were alike. In fact, no printed version of the Bible was available until right before the Reformation. But there are tons and tons of manuscripts (hand-written copies) of the Bible. Thousands. It is from this wealth of evidence that we can reconstruct a faithful text of God's written Word.

As Christianity arose in the 1st century, the technological achievement/advancement of *the codex* was invented. This was preferred to a scroll. There were advantages to a codex (or book). One could bind more material together. Books were mobile. One could cross-reference passages more quickly. Christians began copying the original documents, and soon began binding the books/letters into codexes. See 2 Timothy 4:9-13:

*Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, **also the books, and above all the parchments.***

But a lot of what we have as evidence is not complete books (or bibles), but *parts* of books and letters. The original documents of the NT were written in Greek, the language of the day. We have Greek manuscript evidence dating as early as 125AD, and hundreds from the second century. We have even more in the 3rd and 4th. Over time, copies of copies were made. Things became formalized and standardized. Over the centuries, the chief evidence of the Greek Bible were thousands of Greek manuscripts available to the Church (usually stored in monasteries). The characteristics of these types of manuscripts (seen in the Middle Ages) were that they were written in *Greek lower case letters* on a material called vellum or on parchment (made of animal skins) and they were produced (largely) *in the 9th century or later*. These are known as "minuscules". This was the chief manuscript evidence that was the basis for the first printed version of the Greek New Testament(s) in the 16th century. It was necessary to produce a Greek Bible because for 1200 years the Bible was the Latin translation (the Vulgate). During the Renaissance, the Greek text was "rediscovered", however, and was what Luther used for his German Bible, Tyndale for his English, the basis for the Geneva Bible (the bible of the pilgrims and Shakespeare) and then of course, the King James Bible, translated in 1611.

But in the 1800s things began to change...dramatically. A number of Greek manuscripts written in all *capital letters*, also on vellum, but *produced centuries earlier*, were discovered and then published in the late 19th century. **This included whole New Testaments from the 3rd and 4th centuries.** The most important were *Vaticanus B*, *Sinaiticus (Aleph)*, *Alexandrinus A*, and *Codex Bezae or D* (5th century). What was found were that these codices (plural for codex) exhibited **slightly different textual readings than the later and more numerous manuscripts**. Scholars began to reassess Greek editions of the Bible (and the English translations that came from them) and produce different critical versions.

AGAIN, THESE CHANGES WERE MINOR IN NATURE. But they were important in the development of a better and better Greek text.

Then things changed again in the early 20th century. In the Nile Delta in Egypt, **the Greek papyri** were discovered. These were manuscripts written with the same capital letters as the 4th century codices but written on pages the papyrus, thick paper made from a plant abundant in that region. However, they were *even earlier than the major manuscripts discovered in the 19th century*. These papyri dated back to the **2nd and 3rd centuries**. And some of these earlier manuscripts actually differed somewhat from the uncials of the 4th century and *tended to agree with the later minuscules!*

This complex history is necessary in order to explain **why there is variation in the different English translations we have in use among us**. Various translations (and translation traditions) made use of different manuscripts depending on when they were done and what manuscripts were available. **BUT WHAT IS NOTEABLE, THAT BY AND LARGE, THE MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE IS IN AGREEMENT IN THE VAST MAJORITY OF PLACES.**

III. The Analogy of “The Letter”

So, what is to be done with all of this “evidence”? How do we assess the different manuscripts and their various eras, all which show slightly different texts? We answer that below. But perhaps an even more foundational concern may have arisen in your mind: *how can we trust what we have is congruent with the original autographs?* IOW, can we trust our Bibles? Absolutely.

To help us better consider this concern though, we use *the analogy of the letter*.

IV. The Question: What Gave Rise to the Reading?

Standing behind all of this is a process of evaluating manuscripts, categorizing them, and preserving them (so, textual criticism). This process has *several methods and approaches*.

But when one has competing readings/variant readings of “the text”, a basic question is used to assess which reading is best—*what likely gave rise to the reading/omission/insertion?* This can be a tricky(!), but let us use our example from Mark 11. What are some possibilities? Why would one “version” have verse 26 and others not?

- A basic question is to ask, “What is a scribe likely to do?”
- Another question to ask is, “Is it more likely that a scribe added a verse or took it out?”
- Yet another question, “What human error is likely to have occurred?”

If one were to look at the manuscript evidence we have (the data), we see that the vast majority of “preferred” manuscripts omit it (otherwise put, *don’t have it*). These are B (4th) Aleph (4th) L (8th) Delta (9th) Psi (11th) 565 (9th). However, a few insert it. These are 579 (8th) C (5th) 33 (10th). The other witness is the so-called “majority text”. This is a later collection of witnesses, the basis of which were used as the foundation of the first printed Greek texts of the 16th century. The Majority Text (known also as the *Textus Receptus*) is the basis for the translation of the King James Bible.

As you can see, this gets complicated! But this is **why textual criticism is necessary** and also **why it is important that Christians have a basic knowledge of its necessity**.

Without settling the debate, one of the following scenarios could explain the omission or insertion:

One possibility is that a scribe made a mistake such as *unintentionally copying* a line that looked similar to the one above it?

Or even another possibility was that a scribe inserted a line in imitation of Matthew 6:15 (*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, **but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.***)

Another great example of considering this type of “problem” is the difference between the versions of the Lord’s Prayer seen in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.

Matthew 6:9-13

Pray then like this:

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our
debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil*

Luke 11:2-4

*And he said to them, “When you pray,
say:*

*“Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily
bread,
and forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone
who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into
temptation.”*

We again may ask the question: what gave rise to the different reading? What is a reasonable explanation?

Is it a problem to have two different “versions” of the Lord’s Prayer? Why or why not?

V. Final Conclusions and Comments

When we consider the differences we see in our translations, we can be assured that these differences don’t pose a threat to the validity and authority of the Bible. Instead, we can see how God used human processes to hand down His holy Word, as God often uses human means to deliver His gifts. We can be assured that the variations are founded on a wealth of evidence (and not a lack of it!) and that the differences largely are inconsequential to matters of doctrine and faith. In other words, we need not be troubled! God has preserved His written Word through the ages and given us an abundance of ways to receive His Gospel and account of the deeds of the Christ.

Quote from Martin Franzmann.