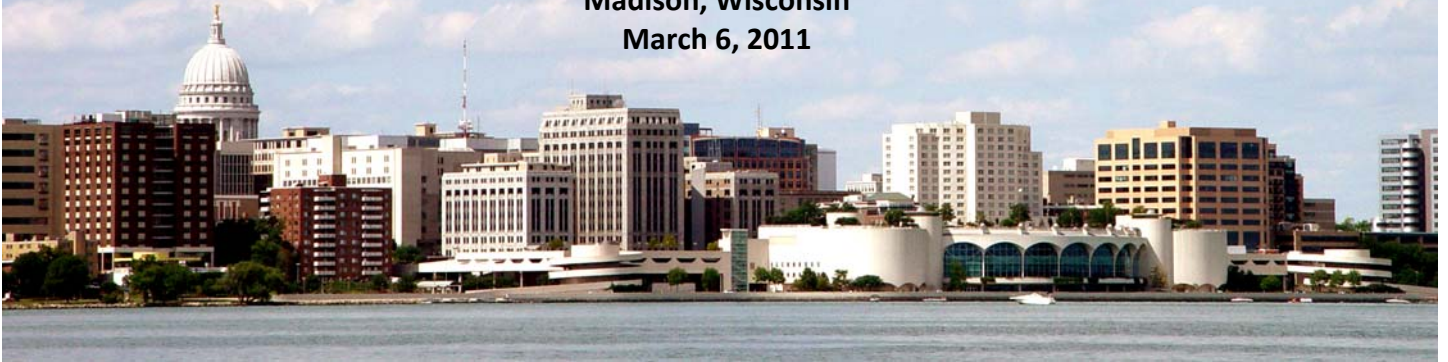


“Are the Manuscripts Reliable?”

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE #3

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For those of you who have been with us over the past two weeks, you know that we are in the middle of a series of lessons based on a number of questions that have come up over the past several months. Our members have been asking questions concerning how we got the Bible in its current form. So, two weeks ago we looked at the importance of the written word of God. We discovered that God wanted His word written down so that it could be passed along to large numbers of people. He wanted it passed along and shared not only at the time it was written, but He also wanted it to be a permanent record, He wanted something that could be reliably passed along to future generations. And so two weeks ago we ended with the passage from 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where Paul said that, ***“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”*** We learned that there is a tremendous value to the written word of God.

Then, last week, we studied the question: In the days before Microsoft Word, how did people write? And so we studied the making of ancient books. We focused on ancient writing materials: stone, pottery shards, clay, wood, metal, waxed tablets, papyrus, and vellum (which is animal skin). After last Sunday’s lesson, someone asked about the kind of ink that people wrote with back in Bible times. I just barely looked into this a little bit this past week, and I would say that the research was overwhelming. In fact, there were literally thousands of theories and recipes for ink that was used in ancient times. The possibilities ranged from dye that came from various clams, to dried bark boiled with wine, to charcoal mixed with all kinds of stuff, and the possibilities truly seem to be endless. We do know, however, that ink is mentioned four times in the Bible (once in Jeremiah, once by Paul, and twice by John), and the word literally means “black.” So, I’m sorry about that, but as far as I can tell, people in Bible times wrote with black stuff, and I think that I will just leave it at that.

This morning, though, I would like for us to move forward by looking together at the manuscript evidence that we have for the Bible in its current form. And so we focus in on the question: How do we know that the New Testament manuscripts are reliable? How do we know that we have today the exact words as they were written by Paul, Peter, John, and the other New Testament writers? And how do we know that the New Testament documents have been accurately copied and preserved through the years? As some people see it, one of the biggest problems is that we no longer have the original autographs. As you can probably guess, an autograph would be a letter or book in the actual handwriting of the original author. However, just try to imagine what would happen if we were to have the book of John in John’s handwriting. That piece of paper

would be worshiped! And yet you might remember from two weeks ago that I referenced a debate between an atheist here in Madison and a leading denominational minister in Connecticut. In that debate, the atheist made the argument in his opening comments that the books of the Bible were written and copied and translated by human beings, human beings make mistakes, and so therefore (according to this atheist, anyway), the Bible is full of mistakes. That was his opening argument. And so there is a great benefit to investigating the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts.

As we begin, I would like to introduce the closest we can get to the autographs (at this point, at least). Up here on the wall, we are looking at a portion of John's gospel account, written on papyrus and found in Egypt in 1934. It is referred to as the John Rylands Fragment (or P52, that is, Papyrus 52). This fragment is dated to very early in the 2nd Century. Some say it should be dated as early as 100 AD, but most would date it at around 117 AD. Think about that date. If this was really written in 117 AD (as many people think that it was), then that means that this is quite possibly a copy made from the original. In other words, as this copy was being made, the scribe was most likely looking at John's handwriting! Again, this is dated to within 30 years or so after the book of John was first written!



This morning I would like to divide our lesson into two basic parts. First of all, I would like to pass along some very basic facts that have helped me have greater faith in the New Testament documents. And then secondly, I would like for us to consider some examples of variations between the manuscripts.

First of all, though, as we think about the question of whether our copies of the Bible are reliable, I would like to pass along **SOME VERY BASIC FACTS THAT HAVE HELPED ME PERSONALLY HAVE GREATER FAITH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS.**

1. And first of all, it is significant that WE HAVE MORE THAN 5,500 HAND-WRITTEN COPIES OF VARIOUS PARTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE.

Some of these manuscripts are complete, and others are fragments (like the John Rylands fragment). Some of them are dated to within just a few decades of the originals, and others are dated to within a few centuries.

In contrast, other ancient documents are not nearly as well-supported by the manuscript evidence. *Caesar's Gallic War*, for example (written between 58-50 BC), only has 9 or 10 decent manuscripts, and the oldest we have was copied roughly 900 years after the original. Think about that: 900 years! But virtually NO ONE questions the accuracy of *Caesar's Gallic War*. In Latin class in high school, the class spent the last semester of the second year translating *Caesar's Gallic War*. We considered it to be an accurate rendition of what Caesar had actually written (even though it has only a tiny fraction of the manuscript evidence that the New Testament has (9-10 manuscripts with a 900 year gap vs. 5,500 manuscripts with a gap as narrow as only 30 years). So, the point here is that we have thousands of hand-written copies of the New Testament in the original language, and many of these can be dated to within just a few decades of the originals.

2. There is a second fact that has reinforced my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is: WE HAVE MANY ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT INTO OTHER LANGUAGES.

Almost immediately, New Testament books and letters were translated into other languages and were passed along to other congregations. Early translations were often in Latin (the official language of the Roman Empire), Aramaic (the Hebrew dialect spoken by Jesus and the apostles), and Syriac (a major literary language that was used throughout the Middle East). You might remember that one of the first challenges the early church had to overcome was the language barrier. In Acts 2, as Peter and the other apostles preached, the lesson was miraculously translated so that it could be understood by people from all over the world who had come together in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. As those people went home, they translated various letters and books into their own language. So, not only do we have those 5,500 manuscripts in Greek, but we also have thousands of early manuscripts in other languages.

3. There is a third fact that has strengthened my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is, WE HAVE THOUSANDS OF SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS THAT ARE FOUND IN ANCIENT NON-INSPIRED WRITINGS.

Today, for example, if you have seen one of my sermons (either here or on the Internet), then you know that I put any quotation from the Bible in bold italics. By the way, I used to put Scripture in bold green italics, but one Saturday night I went to print out the final draft, and the printer was out of green ink. So, I looked at my sermon, and it was everything but the Bible! It was a sermon with no Scripture whatsoever. But anyway, now I put all quotes from the Bible in bold italics. As of this morning, I have preached 1,105 sermons in my life. Those lessons take up roughly seven feet on a shelf in my office. If somehow all copies of the Bible everywhere in the world were suddenly destroyed (not a Bible left anywhere), you could reconstruct a rather large portion of God's word just based on the bold italics in those lessons. It would be hard work to put it all together in order, but it would be possible to reconstruct a rather large portion of the Bible just based on those quotations. As we were singing with the church in Spencer yesterday, it also hit me that we have a good chunk of Scripture in our songbooks. When we sing #883, Seek Ye First, we are really singing straight from the Bible. So again, if all of the Bibles in the world were somehow destroyed, we would have at least some of the Bible in our songbooks.

In a similar way, we have thousands of very early manuscripts of sermons, letters, and books that all quote various parts of the Bible. In fact, all but just a few verses of the New Testament could be reconstructed based on these inspired quotations alone. And so we have a guy in 150 AD, for example, who writes a sermon and says, "As Paul says...", and then he goes on to quote directly from the apostle Paul. Again, all but just a few verses from the New Testament can be reconstructed like this.

4. There is a fourth basic fact that has strengthened my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is: WE KNOW FROM HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY THAT ANCIENT SCRIBES WERE FANATICALLY PRECISE IN THEIR WORK.

We know that the Scribes would check their work by counting the number of letters and words per line, per page, per book, the middle letter in each line, page, book, and so on. We know this because sometimes they would put these notations in the margins. And so maybe a lead scribe would be at the front of the room calling out a line of text so that a room full of others could copy it, and after each line, he would say, "Okay, there were five words on line 12, there were 27 letters, and the middle letter is A." Each scribe would then go back and check his work. They were extremely accurate.

And please remember: There were many times in the New Testament when Jesus disagreed with the Scribes concerning their doctrine. There were times when the Lord condemned the Scribes right along with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but not once did Jesus ever criticize the accuracy of their copies of the Scriptures. In fact, over time the Scribes came to be known as experts on the Law. After all, if your job was to copy the Bible word-by-word all year long for a lifetime (if that was your occupation), you would probably very quickly become an expert on what is in there! But the point is: The Scribes were fanatics when it came to making accurate copies of God's word.

Well, I know some people may doubt that, and until fairly recently there were no Jewish manuscripts dating before around 1000 AD. So, there were obviously some concerns as to whether the modern copies, of copies, of copies, of copies, are really accurate. In other words, there was no way to "test" the accuracy of the scribes over a long stretch of time.

That was true...until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940's. Basically, around 1946 a young Arab boy was trying to get one of his goats down off of a cliff near the Dead Sea. So, as any boy might do, he threw a rock at it. Well, he missed the goat, the rock flew into a cave, and the young man heard a crashing sound. He climbed up the cliff and found some old jars containing some ancient scrolls. Word got out, and archaeologists started discovering many, many scrolls in clay jars—scrolls that dated from around the time of the First Century. They found parts of every Old Testament book except for the book of Esther, along with many manuscripts (old songs, commentaries, and so on). Concerning our study today, the important thing is that when they compared the copies, of copies, of copies, of copies to the scrolls from 2,000 years ago, they discovered that our copies were almost identical to those scrolls that were 2,000 years closer to the originals.

In my lifetime, I have seen various parts of the scrolls twice—once at the Maltz Jewish Museum just outside of Cleveland, Ohio, and again just a year or so ago at the Milwaukee Public Museum. They would not let me have one of the scrolls to bring here to show you, but I was able to get a copy of a section of the Isaiah scroll, and I will pass that around for you to look at. But the point is: The Dead Sea scrolls helped to confirm (to prove) that the scribes were incredibly accurate. The Dead Sea Scrolls serve as a kind of test concerning the reliability of the copies that we have today, and our copies have passed the test.

So, these are some basic facts that have helped to strengthen my own faith in the reliability of the manuscripts. However, even though this is true (thousands of manuscripts, thousands of ancient translations, thousands of quotations in un-inspired documents, and scribes who were fanatically accurate), when we study all of these documents side-by-side, we do see some differences between some of these ancient manuscripts. After all, with more than 5,500 handwritten copies, we would certainly expect at least some variation. So, how do we handle this? **HOW DO WE EXPLAIN THOSE VARIATIONS?** Do we have God's word or don't we? Before we close our lesson this morning, **I WOULD LIKE TO JUST BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE AND CATEGORIZE THE VARIATIONS.**

- 1. First of all, the largest number of variations between the manuscripts (by far) can be categorized as DIFFERENCES IN SPELLING WHICH IN NO WAY AFFECT THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.**

This category accounts for fully one half of the variations! So, if one proper name is misspelled and copied a hundred times, that counts as a hundred "variations." For example, one of the common spellings of "John" is with two "n's," but the correct reading only has one "n." So, as a copy was being made by a scribe nearly 2,000 years ago, if he accidentally spelled it out as "J-o-h-n-n," that would count as a mistake. And yet as we

compare those manuscripts, we can look at that, and we can say, “Aha! I see what he did there!” and it makes no real difference—we can very easily determine the correct reading. It is still the word of God.

2. Secondly, as we look at the thousands of ancient manuscripts, we can also find a number of DIFFERENCES IN WORD ORDER WHICH IN NO WAY AFFECT THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.

For example, one manuscript might refer to “the Lord Jesus Christ” while another manuscript might refer to “Christ Jesus the Lord.” And there again, who really cares? By comparing those manuscripts, we can probably determine which one is the correct reading (the way Paul originally wrote it), and we can probably determine that a scribe flip-flopped it somewhere along the line, but ultimately it makes no real difference concerning the question of whether we really have God’s word.

3. A third category is related and concerns WORDS THAT ARE ACCIDENTALLY INSERTED OR OMITTED.

For example, we might read in one manuscript about “God your Father” as opposed to “God the Father” or simply “the Father.” And again, we can go back and compare the 5,500 manuscripts, we can compare the thousands of ancient translations, we can compare the thousands of quotes in un-inspired documents, and we can pretty safely figure out what happened in order to determine the correct reading.

4. The third group of variations would fall in a category we could refer to as WORD SWAPS, WHERE ONE WORD IS ACCIDENTALLY SWAPPED FOR ANOTHER.

In some cases, the words sound the same. In other cases, there are words that look very similar. For example, perhaps you could look with me at 1 Thessalonians 2:7 (p. 1847). In that passage, Paul says, **“But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.”** Does your Bible have a footnote on the word **“gentle”**? There was no footnote in the NIV and the KJV that I use in my office, but there was a footnote in my copy of the ESV and the NASB. There is a footnote in our pew Bibles. Down there at the bottom of the page, the note on **“gentle”** says, “Three early manuscripts read babes.” Well, we look into that a little bit, and we find that the difference between the Greek word for “babes” and the Greek word for “gentle” is one letter. “Babes” has an “n” in front of it, and “gentle” does not. So, somewhere along the line, a scribe was making a copy of 1 Thessalonians and accidentally put an “n” where there should not have been an “n.” That “n” was then copied in at least two other manuscripts. And we can understand why: Both words make sense in the context. But the bottom line is that Paul was **“gentle.”** He was not really a “babe.” So this is one example of a word swap, where one word that looks similar or sounds similar to another is accidentally put into the text of the Bible. But again, we can compare the thousands of manuscripts, and we can figure it out.

5. There are other times when it appears that a scribe has made an INTENTIONAL CHANGE.

And by the time we get down to this point, we are only talking about a small handful of verses, a tiny percentage of the New Testament, and even here we are not talking about malicious changes. One example of this is found in Acts 2:47 (p. 1703). In the NASB, we have Luke’s description of the early Christians, as they were **“...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”** Well, if you are using the KJV or the NKJV, you will notice that the verse says that the Lord was adding people “to the church.” Well, it is accurate to say that the Lord was adding people to the church, because that is what the Lord was doing; however, the word “church” is not actually in the verse! In reality, the word “church” was added by a scribe somewhere along the line in later years in order

to help the verse make sense. My own copy of the KJV has no footnote on this issue, but my copy of the NKJV at least explains that the word “church” is only found in the more modern manuscripts. Sometimes, therefore, those who copied the Scriptures would very occasionally add something here and there to help a passage make sense, sometimes they would put a note in the margin, and sometime that note of explanation would make its way into the text itself, but as I said before, those circumstances are few and far between.

6. Now, even further down the spectrum toward those variations that are truly rare, we come to some MORE SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTIES.

And yet again, even with these larger difficulties, the words in question do not really change the meaning of the passage, and the issue is often cleared up in a parallel account or in some other related passage. And even here, we are only talking about less than 1/1000th of the text of the New Testament (only 1/10th of 1%). To put it in perspective: If all of these passages were put together, they would take up less than a page, and none of them affect the core teaching of the New Testament.

For one example of what I’m talking about, let us please look together at John 5:1-9 (p. 1661). In the NASB, this is what the passage says,

¹ After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. ³ In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; ⁴ for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] ⁵ A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" ⁷ The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." ⁹ Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day.

Did you notice the problem here? In the NASB, at least, you see some brackets, and then there is a footnote that says, “Early manuscripts do not contain the remainder of verse 3, nor verse 4.” Now, some translations just leave it out and don’t say anything about it, and some translations put it in with no explanation, but in my opinion, I would rather see it and then have some kind of note about the problem. To me, that seems to be a rather fair and honest way to handle it. I think we see what happened: Somewhere along the line, a scribe said to himself, “That doesn’t make sense!” The scribe knew about the belief concerning the angel, and so he added the explanation to help the readers understand. Ultimately, that scribe created a difficulty, but in the end, who really cares? This explanation does not really affect our salvation.

We could say something slightly similar about the controversy over the last few verses of the book of Mark (p. 1592). We won’t get too deep into this, but just notice what happens after Mark 16:8. In my copy of the Bible, at least, verse 9 starts with a bracket, and there is a footnote that says, “Later manuscripts add verses 9-20.” In other words, as the note explains, verses 9-20 are not found in the oldest manuscripts that we have. However, does it make sense that Mark ends his gospel account with verse 8? ***“They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*** Is that how Mark ended his book? I don’t think so. But to me, verse 9 does not fit perfectly

either. For one, the story almost starts over by going back to the resurrection again. And then also, the author reintroduces Mary Magdalene (as if we don't know who she is), when she was just mentioned back up in verse 1. However, my understanding is that verses 9-20 are found in some of the old manuscripts. Not only that, but in some of those manuscripts that leave it out, the scribes have left a space...as if the scribes knew that something should be there, but they didn't have it at the time. Remember: Last week we talked about how sometimes the end of a scroll would get worn off. Some have suggested, then, that the end of Mark might have just deteriorated. But then on the other side, there is one Christian writer from the Second Century who quotes from verses 9-20 and claims that Mark wrote it. So, needless to say, there is some intense discussion concerning the last few verses of the book of Mark. A lot has been written about this, and I would be glad to share some additional information if you are interested in looking into it a little bit further.

But think about this: Out of all of the lessons in verses 9-20, nearly everything is included and covered in at least one of the other gospel accounts—the Lord's appearance to Mary Magdalene (in the book of John), meeting the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (in the book of Luke), the Great Commission (in the book of Matthew). In fact, the one thing that can only be found here that is not found elsewhere in the Bible is the promise (in verse 18) that the disciples would not be harmed if they were to drink any kind of deadly poison. So, unless you are sitting down getting ready to drink a large bottle of poison to prove that you are a messenger from God, everything in these verses is repeated somewhere else in the New Testament.

But again, this kind of uncertainty involves only a 10th of one percent of the New Testament text, and none of the variations that we have discussed this morning involve a core teaching of the New Testament.

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could consider, but the basic idea (as we have learned over the past two weeks) is that God has communicated to us through His written word, and through the providence of God, we have abundant evidence to prove that His word has been reliably copied and preserved down through the years. If the Lord wills, I would like for us to continue next Sunday morning by looking together at the question of how we know which books should be in the Bible and I would also like for us to at least briefly consider what to look for when choosing a translation of the Bible into the English language.

I would simply close this morning with the passage that Silas read for us earlier from Matthew 24:35, where Jesus said, ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."*** What an amazing promise!

The Bible teaches that we will be judged by the words of Christ. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice, and we accept the offer of salvation by obeying the good news about His son. We accept the Bible as the word of God, we turn away from sin, we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and then we resolve to do the best we can to live like Jesus. If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com