



How did we get the Bible?

Before we move on to English translations, we need to discuss the question that some raise about errors in the Bible. Does the Bible contain any errors?

We believe the autographs (original copies) of the Bible books do not contain errors since they are inspired by God. This does not mean that variations have not arisen in any of the copies.

In a very famous example of printing error, a 1631 copy of the King James Bible was published leaving out the “not” in Exodus 20:14 so that the verse read, “*Thou shalt commit adultery.*” No one would say that error means that God or the original writers made a mistake. It is easily recognised as what it is: the mistake of a publisher.

Likewise, most errors in the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts are similar to the example above. The job of manually copying the Bible by human hands inevitably led to some minor variations.

Most of the mistakes were unintentional and happened because a scribe: a) missed or copied a letter twice; b) skipped a line or copied a line twice; c) made an error in punctuation; d) transposed letters; e) divided a word in the wrong place; f) misunderstood and miscopied a word in the text as it was read to him; g) had poor penmanship; or h) made errors because of poor lighting conditions or poor eyesight.

1. Have you ever mistakenly passed along inaccurate information because you heard, wrote down, or remembered incorrectly? Give an example of how this could happen.

Along with the unintentional errors of dedicated scribes there are also a small number of intentional errors. Usually these were made when a scribe tried to correct what he believed were errors in the text he was copying. In some cases he may have been very familiar with one of the Gospels and when copying another Gospel he tried to harmonise slightly different readings.

To determine exactly what was in the original autograph the science of **textual criticism** has developed. The textual critic carefully studies and compares the wealth of manuscript evidence in order to recover the exact words of the original.

In his book *How We Got the Bible*, Neil R. Lightfoot lists three basic rules of textual criticism. First, when there are variations in the manuscripts the more difficult reading is usually preferred. This is because a scribe may have tried to smooth out any rough readings or passages he was unable to understand.

Second, when there are variations in manuscripts the quality of witnesses is more important than the quantity. A very old uncial is typically to be preferred over a number of much later manuscripts.

Third, in parallel Gospel texts variations are usually preferred. This is because each writer, while under inspiration, still wrote with his own style. A scribe may have tried to change the slightly different wording in one Gospel to make it exactly consistent with another Gospel.

2. Determine the original sentence from the copies below which illustrate textual errors and the science of textual criticism.

- a. Christians believe in the power of prayer.**
- b. Christian's believe in the power of prayer.**
- c. Christians believe in the power of prayer.**
- d. Christians believe in the power or prayer prayer.**

Lightfoot discusses what he calls trivial and substantial variations. These variations may be large in number because once a variation comes into being it may have been copied hundreds of times. Remember that we have over 5,000 manuscripts. If an error in spelling was copied 4,000 times some would say that the manuscripts contain 4,000 errors. While this is technically correct it is misleading.

Most of the variations are trivial including misspellings, changes in punctuation, changed tenses of words, or grammar. Some of these can hardly be called errors. Consider about how much English spellings have changed over the past few hundred years. If a scribe recorded a word with its new spelling is this really an error?

There are a few more substantial variations. Codex Bezae from the fifth century records Luke 6:5 with a very different reading from any other manuscript or version. In this case we can easily discount the Codex Bazaе since it stands alone in with a variant reading.

Another example is found in John 7:53-8:11. This text is found only in the Codex Bezae of all the early manuscripts and is found in almost no early versions. Many later manuscripts from the eight century onwards list these verses, but often put in notes of doubt about them. Most modern translations either omit this text or tell the reader about the manuscript evidence. (Manuscript is often abbreviated as mss.)

Mark 16:9-20 is perhaps the most difficult of the substantial variations. This passage is not found in the Vatican or Sinaitic Manuscripts which are the overall best manuscripts that we have; however it is found in the Alexandrian Manuscript, the Ephraem Manuscript, other early uncials, many old versions, and is mentioned by Irenaeus in the second century. It is quite likely this passage should be included in our Bibles. The ending of Mark may simply have been broken off of one of the earliest copies so that it was not available to later scribes. (For a more detailed explanation see <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/2780>.)

3. What footnote (if any) does your Bible give at John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20?

Because so many manuscripts have been discovered and carefully examined, it is a certainty that our Bibles today reflect the words of the original author. Most variations are trivial and the very few substantial ones do not in any way alter any item of faith.