

# How Did We Get Our Bible and Has It Been Changed?

---

*Dr. Matthew S. Harmon*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

It is a privilege to be here with you today.<sup>2</sup> I am honored to be sharing the platform today with these other men who are speaking today, and look forward to listening to them present when I am done with my session.

Assaults on the Bible are nothing new, but there seems to be a new twist over the past decade. Two objections against the Bible have become more prominent. The first charge is that the various books in our Bible were chosen hundreds of years after they were written, and the choice was made by shady church leaders with ulterior motives. The second charge is that we cannot trust our Bibles because what we have is not really what the authors actually wrote.

In the brief time I have today I want to provide the beginnings of an answer to these two objections. For those of you who want to take notes, I want to encourage you that my entire set of notes that I am working off of here will be posted on the website for you to download for free. There is much more in my notes than I can share with you today, including extensive footnotes that will provide you with further resources to check out. So let's look at the first objection...

## How Did We Get Our Bible?

Because the Bible is so readily available to us, we can get the impression that it simply dropped from heaven, complete with a genuine leather binding, cross-references and maps. But when we remember that the Bible is made up of 66 different books, written over a 1,500 year period, by various human authors from diverse backgrounds, it is worth pausing to ask how we came to have these 66 books in our Bible.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Matthew S. Harmon is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Grace College and Theological Seminary. He blogs at <http://bibtheo.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> This material was originally presented at a conference entitled *No Doubt: True Answers to Eternal Questions* (<http://www.gotnodoubt.com/>), on August 15, 2009. This document contains additional material that was not presented in light of time constraints. Permission is granted to make copies for personal and church use (up to 25 copies) as long as there are no changes made to the material and proper attribution to the author is given. © 2009 Matthew S. Harmon

<sup>3</sup> Although it is now slightly dated, for a helpful discussion of the formation of both the Old and New Testament canons see David G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

Since we only have a limited amount of time today, I will only focus on how we came to get the 27 books that make up our New Testament. But I do want to note that by the time of Jesus there was a widespread agreement among the Jewish people on three major divisions of the Old Testament canon: the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Nowhere in the New Testament or the writings of the early church do we have any evidence that the Jews disagreed with Christians as to what books should be included in the Old Testament.

Now on to the New Testament. Those who are critical of the New Testament sometimes give the impression that the books included were decided by shadowy figures in back rooms with hidden agendas.<sup>4</sup> After all, they point out, it is not until the Easter letter of Athanasius in 367 A.D. that we have a list of the exact 27 books of the New Testament. That's over three hundred years after the time of Jesus and the apostles! Furthermore, the decision to issue such a list is sometimes portrayed as a power play to suppress alternative forms of Christianity. So how should we respond to this charge?

First, we should begin by recognizing the truth of what is being said. It is true that Athanasius' letter is the first document that contains the exact 27 New Testament books with no additions or omissions. But as we will see in a moment, that is a bit misleading. And it is also true that when Athanasius wrote this letter the church was dealing with some important doctrinal controversies. But these two facts are only a very small part of a much larger story.

Before telling that story I need to briefly describe two key aspects of first-century life. Unlike today Christians lived in a very oral culture where feats of memory were quite common.<sup>5</sup> It was not unusual for Jewish rabbis to have the entire Old Testament, along with interpretive traditions, memorized word for word. So this is how the earliest traditions about Jesus were passed on; as the apostles formed churches they preached and taught the stories of what Jesus did and said. These traditions were repeated and explained repeatedly to establish new believers in the faith. The apostles who had accompanied Jesus ensured that the traditions passed down were in fact accurate representations of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But as that first generation of apostles began to die, it became necessary to write these traditions down so they could be preserved and distributed. Each of the four gospel accounts in the New Testament are either written by or closely associated with an apostle to ensure the

---

<sup>4</sup> This is the impression one gets from reading Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities : The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 229-46 and Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus : The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (1st ed.; New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 29-43.

<sup>5</sup> For helpful discussions on oral tradition and memory, see the following: Timothy P. Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 83-94; David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart : Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 96-101; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 197-254; Whitney T. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel : First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 103-24; Allan R. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 192-94; Jocelyn P. Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind : Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1997), 81-137; Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28-32; William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 30-33; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Asnu; Lund: C.W.K Gleerup, 1961), 124-26.

reliability of what was written.<sup>6</sup> Over time these written gospel accounts were copied and distributed among various churches as Christians travelled throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup>

The second aspect of first-century life is the use of scrolls as the primary material for books.<sup>8</sup> In other words, books were written on scrolls made of papyrus. As such to collect the different biblical books required accumulating many scrolls of each individual books. You can imagine how difficult this would make managing all of the different scrolls of the Old Testament books, as well the writings of the apostles as you had opportunity.

All of that changed in the second century with the growing use of the codex.<sup>9</sup> The codex was similar to our modern day books in that sheets of papyrus were sewn together and given a cover. There were several advantages to the codex over scrolls. First, the codex could hold much more material than a scroll. At most a scroll could be about 30-35 feet long, which was enough space to hold the Gospel of Luke. The codex could hold as much material as you could manage to sew together, meaning that you could put all four of the gospels into one codex. Second, with a scroll you could only write on one side, whereas with a codex you could write on both sides of a page. Third, the codex allowed you to gather several documents together into one object rather than needing multiple scrolls.

So you can see how the transition from oral tradition to written documents, as well as the shift from the scroll to the codex were key factors in making the gathering of multiple documents into one place possible. Now let's take a look at how this process happened.

## First Century

The 27 books of the New Testament were written over a 50 year period from about 45–95 A.D. As these different documents were written, the churches that had them began to make copies so they could be distributed to other congregations. Paul mentions this very process in Colossians 4:16 when he writes:

And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful discussion of the apostolic roots of each Gospel account, see Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 95-120.

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful description of how the earliest churches acquired and maintained copies of the various apostolic writings, see *Ibid.*, 34-38.

<sup>8</sup> For a helpful description of writing materials in the first century, see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing : Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 47-58.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of how the codex may have shaped the development of the canon, see the following: Lee M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon : Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Updated & rev. 3rd ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 350-56; David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69-77; John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text : The Canon in Early Christianity* (1st American ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 88-91; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 108-12; J.K. Elliott, "Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon," *JSNT* 63 (1996): 105-23.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Bible® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Writing shortly before his death in 68 A.D., the Apostle Peter refers to a collection of Paul's letters that seems to be circulating among the churches:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,<sup>16</sup> as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Not only does Peter know of a collection of Paul's letters, but he refers to them as Scripture! So already by the late 60s A.D. Paul's letters are put on the same level as the Old Testament Scriptures. By the end of the first century, there were collections of Paul's letters circulating in a variety of places throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>11</sup>

There appears to have been a similar process with the Gospels.<sup>12</sup> It seems very likely that Mark was the first Gospel written, probably in the mid 50s. According to early church tradition, Mark based his account on the preaching and teaching of the Apostle Peter. Sometime probably in the early to mid 60s the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, and they both used Mark's Gospel as one of their key sources. This requires that the Gospel of Mark had begun to be copied and distributed within a short time after it was originally written. The Gospel of John was probably written some 20 years later in the mid 80s, but the fact that it focuses on different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry than the other three Gospels suggests that John writes to fill out the picture of Jesus. In other words, he knows of Matthew, Mark and Luke and wants to supplement their portrait of Jesus.

We see evidence for rapid distribution of these three Gospels in the titles for each of the four Gospels.<sup>13</sup> Each of them is "The Gospel according to ..." followed by the person who wrote it. The need to distinguish the four different accounts arose as these documents were copied and distributed to different churches. So at some point, probably in the late first century, these different accounts were designated as "The Gospel according to ..." The point of labeling them this way was not only to distinguish between the different accounts, but to emphasize that there is one gospel, but each author has presented it from a unique perspective.

So by the end of the first century, there are collections of Paul's letters circulating among a large number of churches in the ancient world. Many churches would have possessed copies of

---

<sup>11</sup> The spread of these collections is evidenced by the references to Paul's letters in writings that date from the end of the first (*1 Clement*) and beginning of the second century (*Didache*, the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp). See further, McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 265-70 and Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 210-23. The earliest manuscript (P<sup>46</sup>; mid to late second century) containing ten of Paul's letters (it lacks the Pastoral Epistles) is also evidence of a collection of Paul's letters circulating; see further, Philip Wesley Comfort and David P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts* (A corrected, enlarged ed.; Wheaton: Tyndale, 2001), 203-07.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful discussion of how this process may have happened, see Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1-146.

<sup>13</sup> The standardization of these titles suggests an early recognition of their authoritative status; see Trobisch, *First Edition*, 38.

at least one if not more of the Gospels. These documents are recognized as authoritative Scripture for believers.

## Second Century

There are several key developments during the second century that helped bring the canon into sharper focus.

### Justin Martyr & His Student Tatian

Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) wrote extensive defenses of the Christian Faith in the first half of the second century.<sup>14</sup> Repeatedly in his writings he refers to the Gospels as “memoirs of the apostles” (*Apol.* I.33, 66; *Dial* 100-107, 133) and quotes from them as authoritative on the same level as Old Testament writings (*Apol.* I.67; *Dial* 100.1; 103.6, 8).<sup>15</sup> So by the middle of the second century Justin Martyr is defending Christianity against its critics on the basis of the four gospel accounts.

His student Tatian (ca. 120-180) went a step beyond this when in the mid-second century he compiled the Diatesseron, which was an attempt to combine all four Gospels into one integrated narrative.<sup>16</sup> He incorporated virtually all of the material from the four Gospels, as well as some remaining oral traditions of additional sayings of Jesus.

The point then is that by the middle of the second century there was widespread agreement in the church that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the only authoritative accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry and death. There is even evidence that they circulated together as a collection by the end of the second century, and subsequent apologists such as Irenaeus (ca. 130–200), Tertullian (ca. 155–222), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 130–200) and Origen (ca. 185–254) used these four Gospels as the basis of their work.

### Marcion

Marcion (ca. 85-160) was a charismatic teacher in Rome who gathered a sizable following during the middle of the second century. He believed that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as the Father of Jesus Christ; the former was cruel while the latter was merciful. According to Marcion the true message of Jesus was corrupted by all of the apostles except Paul. To support this belief he created a list of authoritative books: ten letters of Paul and a modified version of Luke’s Gospel. Marcion was eventually excommunicated from the church, but remained influential for some time.

---

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of how Justin Martyr fits into the development of the canon, see the following: McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 285-89; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 143-48

<sup>15</sup> These references are helpfully noted and discussed in Peter Head, "How the New Testament Came Together," in *Grove Biblical Series* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2009), 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Tatian, see Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 114-17.

One effect of this controversy was to force the church to more directly address the issue of which writings were to be recognized as authoritative.<sup>17</sup> As was often the case throughout church history, controversy was a spur to clarifying where the church stood on key issues.

## Muratorian Fragment

Sometime between 170-200 A.D., an unknown figure connected with the church in Rome compiled a list of writings considered authoritative for the church. This list has come to be known as the Muratorian Fragment, named after the Italian man who discovered it.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately the document is damaged, but the contents are quite informative. The manuscript begins in the middle of a sentence, but then goes on to list the following books as authoritative: Luke (listed as the third Gospel, strongly suggesting the original included Matthew and Mark), John, Acts, Paul's thirteen letters, Jude, two (perhaps all three) letters of John, and Revelation. The list also includes some other works marked as either authoritative or forgeries, but these are the books from our New Testament that the anonymous author identifies as authoritative.

So by the end of the second century we have a listing of 21/22 of the 27 books of the New Testament in a list that is designated as authoritative for the faith and practice of the church. That's almost 80% of our New Testament that is clearly recognized throughout the church by the end of the second century.<sup>19</sup>

## Third Century

During the third century we do not have as much information as we might like. But what we do have are several places where key church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, among others, refer to the various New Testament documents as authoritative for the faith and practice of the church.

But perhaps the most interesting evidence during this period is a document called Codex Claromontanus, which is a list of books regarded as authoritative in North Africa or Egypt near the end of the third century.<sup>20</sup> It lists all 27 of our New Testament books, but also indicates some disputed books such as *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Acts of Paul*. But the point to emphasize here is that towards the end of the third century there is growing agreement on the final shape of the New Testament documents.

---

<sup>17</sup> For the role that the Marcionite controversy influenced the development of the canon, see *Ibid.*, 90-99.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of the Muratorian Fragment, see the following: *Ibid.*, 191-201

<sup>19</sup> We should note here the intriguing argument of David Trobisch. He contends that a wide range of evidence indicates that sometime in the second century the apostolic writings were collected into codex form and copied with the title "New Testament"; see Trobisch, *First Edition*, 8-44.

<sup>20</sup> See Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 134-37.

## Fourth Century

The fourth century is the period of consolidation.<sup>21</sup> We will focus on just two of the key developments.

First is the work of the church historian Eusebius. His book *Ecclesiastical History* is one of the most important documents in history of the church, because in it Eusebius records sections from earlier writers on a number of key subjects. He probably finished the book around 325 A.D., and in it he includes a list of authoritative writings.<sup>22</sup> He divides the list into three categories: accepted, disputed, rejected. In the accepted category we find the four gospels, Acts, Paul's letters (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation for a total of 22. In the disputed category we have James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John and Jude. By disputed Eusebius simply means that there are some who have raised questions about these books. But when you combine the accepted and the disputed, you arrive at our 27 New Testament books. He then lists several documents that are rejected. But the point to make here is that we again have widespread agreement on the shape of the New Testament.

Now at last we come to the Easter letter of Athanasius, a bishop of Alexandria. In 367 A.D. he wrote to a large number of churches indicating which writings should be considered authoritative. He lists only the 27 books of the New Testament, while acknowledging that there are books beneficial for reading but not divine Scripture.

## Summary

So let me try to sum up. What we have seen is that although the first list we have that has all and only the 27 books of the New Testament is Athanasius' letter in 367 A.D. However, that is only part of the story. The truth is that by the middle to the end of the second century there was widespread agreement on almost 80% of the New Testament documents. But beyond that we see ample evidence of the church fathers quoting from these various documents as authoritative for faith and practice. The basic shape of the New Testament canon was in place by the end of the second century and was widely agreed upon among a vast range of churches throughout both the East and the West.

---

<sup>21</sup> It is sometimes claimed by conspiracy theorists that the Emperor Constantine played a heavy role in shaping which books were included as authoritative as part of his program to eliminate political and religious rivals (popularized in *The Da Vinci Code*); for a concise response and helpful response see Randall Price, *Searching for the Original Bible* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2007), 154-57.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of Eusebius' list, see the following: Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 201-07

## Criteria Used for Recognizing Authoritative Documents

Before moving on I want to note briefly how the church came to recognize these various documents as authoritative Scripture. In other words, what sort of criteria did they use?<sup>23</sup> There were three primary ones.

1. **Conformity to the Rule of Faith.** Remember that in the first generation after Jesus the message of his life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection was passed on orally. Over time the basic shape of that gospel message came to be referred to as the “rule of faith.” It was this understanding of the message of Jesus and its implications that became the standard by which any document was measured. So even if documents like the Gospel of Thomas or Gospel of Judas were written from the first century, the fact that their contents were out of step with the Rule of Faith made it clear they were authoritative for the faith and practice of the church.
2. **Apostolicity.** For a document to be considered authoritative it had to either be written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with one. Of the 27 New Testament documents, only four were not written by an apostle: Mark, Luke, Acts and Hebrews. Both Mark and Luke were closely associated with Paul and Peter. As for Hebrews, while some originally thought it was written by Paul, it is unclear who wrote it.
3. **Widespread acceptance and usage by churches everywhere.** A document could not reach authoritative status if it was only recognized in one region. Only those documents that were widely distributed and recognized in a wide variety of regions within the churches scattered throughout the world were recognized as authoritative.

What these criteria show us is that the church did not create the New Testament canon, but rather acknowledged the documents that God had inspired as authoritative for the faith and practice of Christians. In fact, it is more accurate to say that the gospel message, or the Rule of Faith as the early church sometimes called it, is what gave birth to the inspired documents that comprise our New Testament. Through the agency of this gospel message God by his Holy Spirit brings the church into existence.

## Is What We Have What the Authors Wrote?

So now that we have explored how we came to have the 27 books in our New Testament, we need to answer a second question: is what we have in the New Testament what the original authors wrote? In other words, can we trust that we have the actual words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul and the other New Testament authors? According to prominent critic Bart Ehrman, the answer is a resounding NO! Listen to what he says in his book *Misquoting Jesus*:

---

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the criteria used, see the following: McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 401-21; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 736-37; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 251-54; Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon : Its Making and Meaning* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship New Testament Series; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 67-72.

It is one thing to say that the originals were inspired, but the reality is we don't have the originals—so saying they were inspired doesn't help me much, unless I can reconstruct the originals... Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals, or copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the original, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have are copies made later—much later. In most instances, they are copies made many *centuries* later. And these copies differ from one another, in many thousands of places... these copies differ from one another in so many places that we don't even know how many differences there are. Possibly it is easiest to put it in comparative terms: there are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.<sup>24</sup>

That's a pretty grim assessment. What's challenging about Ehrman and his approach is that he is a master of presenting only part of the picture and not the whole picture. Because in looking at the available evidence, I am convinced that we can be confident that we can reconstruct the very words of the New Testament authors.

## Getting the Facts Straight

First, let's put some facts out on the table. According to our best estimates, there are nearly 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament,<sup>25</sup> ranging in size from a few verses to complete copies of the Old and New Testaments. The earliest of these manuscripts are from the beginning of the second century, less than 100 years after the New Testament documents were written. If you add in additional copies of the New Testament in Syria, Latin, Coptic and Aramaic, the total jumps to over 24,000 manuscripts. And on top of that, if all of our manuscripts of the New Testament disappeared tomorrow, we could still reconstruct almost the entire New Testament from the writings of the early church fathers.<sup>26</sup> The New Testament is the best attested collection of writings from the ancient world. Hands down. It's not even close.

To give you some sense of how this compares to other writings from the ancient world, let's look at the runner-up—Homer's *Iliad*.<sup>27</sup> There are about 2,500 manuscripts in existence today. The earliest of these is from 400 B.C., which sounds great until you realize that Homer wrote the *Iliad* around 900 B.C., a gap of 500 years!<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> For the most up to date information, consult the following websites: The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (<http://www.csntm.org/>) and The Institute for New Testament Textual Research (<http://www.uni-muenster.de/INTF/>).

<sup>26</sup> This point is made in Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 126. For an exploration of the extent to which the earliest church fathers quoted the New Testament writings, see Barton, *Holy Writings*, 14-24. For a listing of places where each New Testament book is quoted or referred to in the earliest church fathers, see McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 384-400.

<sup>27</sup> For a helpful chart comparing the New Testament to other ancient documents, see <http://www.carm.org/questions/about-bible/manuscript-evidence-superior-new-testament-reliability>.

<sup>28</sup> This information was gleaned from Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus : Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 49-51 and <http://www.carm.org/questions/about-bible/manuscript-evidence-superior-new-testament-reliability>.

So if we are going to discredit the reliability of the New Testament, to be consistent we also have to discredit the reliability of any document written before the invention of the printing press in 1440.

But what about all of those differences (called variants by scholars) between the copies? The way Ehrman presents it, our New Testament manuscripts are riddled with errors. In one of his books, he estimates the number to be somewhere around 400,000.<sup>29</sup> That is roughly three differences for every single word in the New Testament! But that number is wildly misleading, since the very reason we have so many variants is because we have so many manuscripts! And the overwhelming majority of these variants are mistakes in spelling, differences in word order or the use of synonyms that have absolutely no effect on meaning whatsoever. In fact, according to Daniel Wallace, less than 1% of textual variants are both meaningful, by which he means “that the variant changes the meaning of the text *to some degree*.”<sup>30</sup>

In one fell swoop we have moved from 400,000 down into the hundreds. That still may seem like a lot, but let me give you an example that will show the kind of “meaningful” variant we are talking about.<sup>31</sup> In Romans 5:1, our English translations read something like “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” But some manuscripts instead read “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The difference in Greek is one single letter; either a short or a long “o.” So which is it? Do we already have peace with God or should we strive to experience the peace of God? Quite frankly, both are true. So regardless of which way we read the evidence, there is certainly no overturning of central Christian doctrine.

Without the question the most sensational claim that Ehrman makes is that “orthodox scribes” intentionally changed the text as they were copying it to respond to heretical teachings the church was facing.<sup>32</sup> I only have time to look at one example that Ehrman gives.<sup>33</sup> When Joseph and Mary present the baby Jesus in the temple, a man named Simeon pronounces a blessing on the child. According to Luke 2:33 “his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.” Ehrman makes a huge deal out of the fact that several manuscripts read “Joseph” instead of “his father.” In other words, some scribes were uncomfortable with the possibility that someone might read Luke 2:33 and conclude Jesus was actually the physical son of Joseph; as a result they substituted “Joseph” for “his father.”

Wow. Suddenly my whole faith in the Bible is gone. Seriously? This is the kind of change that completely changes how we should think about Christianity? Anyone who has read Luke up to this point knows full well that Jesus was not born as a result of Joseph sleeping with Mary. But this is the kind of change that Ehrman trumpets as evidence of devious changes that require us rethinking everything we thought we ever knew about Jesus and the early church.

---

<sup>29</sup> This number is found in Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 89; for response to this misleading number, see Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 52-60 and Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 43-50.

<sup>30</sup> Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> The example is taken from *Ibid.*, 57-58; see also Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 39-77.

<sup>32</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 151-75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

## Summary

The bottom line is that the books of the New Testament are the most reliably copied and handed down documents in the history of the world. With a high degree of confidence we can reconstruct the very words of the authors over 99% of the time, and in the remaining one percent we can always determine what it is likely author wrote. Listen to this summary from world-class textual critic Daniel Wallace:

Our fundamental argument is that although the original New Testament text has not been recovered in all its particulars, it has been recovered in all its essentials. That is, the core doctrinal statements of the New Testament are not in jeopardy because of any textual variations. This has been the view of the majority of textual critics for the past three hundred years<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

We've run out of time this afternoon, and there is so much that I would have loved to touch on if I had more time. And it is likely that there are things I didn't address that you might like to raise in the Q&A time. But in closing I want to leave you with two bottom-line conclusions to walk away with today.

First, the Bible that we hold in our hands contains the books that God intends for us to recognize as authoritative for faith and practice. You have no need to fear that some vast conspiracy has managed to prevent us from having documents that are inspired by God for the benefit of his people the church. The reason books like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas are not included in the Bible is because there was widespread recognition in the church from a very early period that documents such as these did not conform to the rule of faith, were not apostolic in origin and were not widely accepted by Christians throughout the world.

Second, you can be confident that what we read in the New Testament is exactly what God inspired the human authors to write. They are the most carefully transmitted and preserved documents from the ancient world. Even in those rare places where we cannot be 100% sure what the original text said, we are always able to determine what it is likely to have said. And there are no places where a central doctrine or belief of the Christian faith is at stake.

So when you open your Bible to read about the good news of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for us, you can rest your eternal destiny on what you read there. And at the end of the day that is what really matters. Let's pray...

---

<sup>34</sup> Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 72.

## Recommended Resources

While there are a number of resources available on this issue, here are the ones I would recommend for further reading. Simply listing them does not mean I agree with everything in them (especially the last one), but it does give an idea of where to go next. I have listed them from easiest to most difficult in terms of reading level and depth of subject

**Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007).**

This is the easiest to read treatment of these issues at a basic level.

**Peter Head, *How the New Testament Came Together* (Grove Biblical Series; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2009)**

This is available as a PDF download from the website of Grove Books located in the UK ([http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/cart.php?target=product&product\\_id=17321&category\\_id=282](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/cart.php?target=product&product_id=17321&category_id=282)) for a small price. Head traces the development of the NT canon with care while remaining readable. Its length (30 pages) makes this a helpful resource.

**Darrel L. Bock & Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007)**

Bock and Wallace are also easy to read, and go into more depth at points than Jones. This book also addresses other issues that are worth reading about.

**Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)**

This book remains the definitive treatment of the issue on a scholarly level while reaching conservative conclusions. Unfortunately it is now 20 years old and new developments that have taken place in this area are not incorporated.

**Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007)**

This book contains perhaps the most exhaustive treatment of the canon of the Old and New Testaments. I do not agree with all of his conclusions, but this is a valuable resource to consult and read discriminately.