

400,000 Textual Variants in the New Testament Alone?

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One of the oft-cited statistics from Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* involves the observation that there are other 400,000 textual variants among the ancient New Testament manuscripts. Taken without any additional context, it is little wonder why some unsuspecting readers think there must be hardly any way to know if our Bibles even remotely correspond to what the original writers first penned.

It's time to look at the context—and some additional statistics. There are also over 5700 ancient Greek manuscripts, including lectionaries, from the centuries prior to the invention of the printing press, with anywhere from a few verses to entire New Testament contained in them. Add the manuscripts of ancient languages into which the Greek New Testament was translated, and that number swells to over 20,000. Now we have only on average 20 distinctive variants per manuscript, though obviously that number will be far greater or far lower, even on average, depending on the amount of the New Testament contained in the manuscript.

The vast majority of these variants involve variant spellings of words that do not affect meaning whatsoever (and the largest percentage of spelling variants involve words with a movable nu at their end—i.e., they can be spelled with or without the Greek letter for the n sound). Huge numbers of variants also involve the accidental omission of a letter or duplication of a letter or omission of a word or inversion of word order of two or three words or improvement of syntax, style, grammar or diction, where it is easy to determine what the original reading was.

The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 4th edition, one of the two standard scholarly reconstructions of the most probable original wording for each of the New Testament documents, thus prints only about 1200 variants in its footnotes, where there is even a small amount of significant doubt about the original reading and/or that makes even a small amount of significant difference in meaning.

English Bible translations usually choose only 200-300 of these to put in their footnotes or marginal notes as involving a significant enough question of meaning to be of interest to the average reader. These involve less than 1% of all the words in the Greek New Testament

Of these few hundred, only two affect more than just a couple of verses, the so-called longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) and the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11). Only a couple dozen affect as much as one or two verses; all the remaining ones involve less than a single verse and usually only a few words.

No orthodox Christian doctrine depends solely on any disputed text or texts. And because of the huge volume of textual variants it is highly unlikely that the

original reading is not represented somewhere in the existing manuscripts even where variants do appear.

No other document known to humanity from any culture in the centuries before Gutenberg comes even remotely close to having had this many of hand-copied manuscripts preserved of it. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the next closest is Homer's *Iliad* with less than 700 manuscripts. For Roman histories like Pliny's *Natural History* we have twenty good manuscripts and for Caesar's *Gallic War*, a meager ten. For the vast majority of ancient documents we have copies in the single digits; for most of the Gnostic texts we have exactly one copy, though occasionally a few more. Plus the time lag between the originals and the oldest copies is usually centuries, not just decades, as with the New Testament.

But what of the Qur'an? First of all, this is a document entirely authored by a single person, Muhammad. Second, upon Muhammad's death, variant copies that were known were collected and all but one, that was deemed to be authoritative were destroyed. From that time on, copies could be made only under carefully guarded and authorized conditions, carefully checked and rechecked. To this day, orthodox Muslims believe you must be able to read the Qur'an in Arabic (whether or not you even understand the language) to be truly reading God's word. Christianity, on the other hand, has always valued spreading the Bible as far and as widely as possible, putting in the vernacular of every person worldwide as often as possible, for the sake of comprehension and facilitating discipleship, and thus by encouraging copying and translating without nearly such a stringent process as for the Qur'an. Given those freedoms, it is astonishing how accurately the Bible has been preserved and no argument against its divine origins or for the Qur'an's divine origins that the Bible was not copied quite as carefully. Origins and transmission are separate issues.

So 400,000 textual variants—really? Really! And despite that the New Testament is by far the best preserved *collection* of books, prior to printing, anywhere in the history of the world.

<http://www.denverseminary.edu/craig-blombergs-blog-new-testament-musings/400000-textual-variants-in-the-new-testament-alone/>