

An Interview with Daniel B. Wallace on the New Testament Manuscripts

By Justin Taylor [link to article](#)

^[1]As Craig Blomberg has written, “Dan Wallace has clearly become evangelical Christianity’s premier active textual critic today.” In addition to teaching New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, he serves as executive director of the cutting-edge [Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts](#) ^[2] (CSNTM). He recently made quite a stir when he announced that next year an academic publication will reveal the discovery of a first-century fragment from the Gospel of Mark. (See, for example, this [interview](#) ^[3] with Hugh Hewitt.)

He was kind enough to answer some questions about the discipline of textual criticism, the number of manuscripts, the earliest manuscripts (including the soon-to-be famous fragment), why the process of copying is nothing like the “telephone game,” and other questions.

What is “textual criticism?”

Textual criticism is the discipline that attempts to determine the original wording of any documents whose original no longer exists. There are other, secondary goals of textual criticism as well, but this is how it has been classically defined.

This discipline is needed for the New Testament, too, because the originals no longer exist and because there are several differences per chapter even between the two closest early manuscripts. All New Testament manuscripts differ from each other to some degree since all are handwritten manuscripts.

How many NT manuscripts do we know of?

As far as Greek manuscripts, over 5800 have been catalogued. The New Testament was translated early on into several other languages as well, such as Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, etc. The total number of these versional witnesses has not been counted yet, but it certainly numbers in the tens of thousands.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that most of our manuscripts come from the second millennium AD, and most of our manuscripts do not include the whole New Testament. A fragment of just a verse or two still counts as a manuscript. And yet, the *average* size for a NT manuscript is more than 450 pages.

At the other end of the data pool are the quotations of the NT by church fathers. To date, more than one million quotations of the NT by the church fathers have been tabulated. These fathers come from as early as the late first century all the way to the middle ages.

What’s the earliest manuscript we have?

^[4]Up through the end of 2011, the following would be the answer: [A papyrus fragment](#) ^[5] that had been sitting in unprocessed ancient documents at the John Rylands Library of Manchester University, England, is most likely the earliest NT document known today. Known as P52 or Papyrus 52, this scrap of papyrus has John 18:31-33 on one side and John 18:37-38 on the other.

It was discovered in 1934 by C. H. Roberts. He sent photographs of it to the three leading papyrologists in Europe and got their assessment of the date—each said that it was no later than AD 150 and as early as AD 100. A fourth papyrologist thought it could be from the 90s. Since the discovery of



this manuscript, as many as eleven NT papyri from the second century have been discovered. On February 1, 2012, I made the announcement in a debate with Dr. Bart Ehrman at UNC Chapel Hill, that as many as six more second-century papyri had recently been discovered. All of them are fragmentary, having only one leaf or part of a leaf. One of them rivals the date of P52, a fragment from Luke’s Gospel. But the most significant find was a fragment from Mark’s Gospel, which a leading paleographer has dated to the first century! What makes this so astounding is that no manuscripts of Mark even from the second century has surfaced. But here we may have a document written while some of the first-generation Christians were still alive and before the NT was even completed. All seven of these manuscripts will be published by E. J. Brill sometime in 2013 in a multi-author book. Until then, we should all be patient and have a “wait and see” attitude. When the book comes out it will be fully vetted by textual scholars.

How does the number of NT manuscripts compare to other extant historical documents?

NT scholars face an embarrassment of riches compared to the data the classical Greek and Latin scholars have to contend with. The average classical author’s literary remains number no more than twenty copies. We have more than 1,000 times the manuscript data for the NT than we do for the average Greco-Roman author. Not only this, but the extant manuscripts of the average classical author are no earlier than 500 years after the time he wrote. For the NT, we are waiting mere decades for surviving copies. The very best classical author in terms of extant copies is Homer: manuscripts of Homer number less than 2,400, compared to the NT manuscripts that are approximately ten times that amount.

Histories	Oldest Manuscripts	Number Surviving
Livy 59 B.C.-A.D. 17	4th century	27
Tacitus A.D. 56-120	9th century	3
Suetonius A.D. 69-140	9th century	200+
Thucydides 460-400 B.C.	1st century A.D.	20
Herodotus 484-425 B.C.	1st century A.D.	75
New Testament	c. 100-150	c. 5,700 (counting only Greek manuscripts) (plus more than 10,000 in Latin, more than a million quotations from the church fathers, etc.)

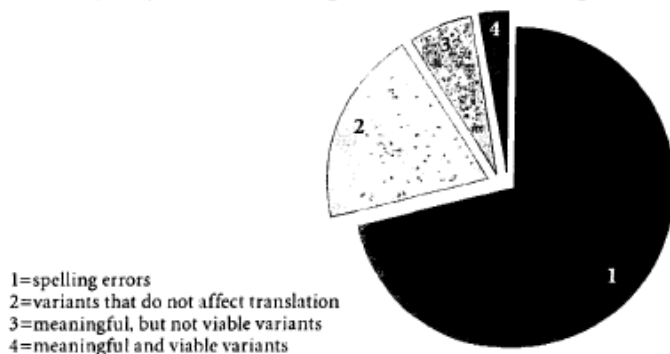
[6]

What are the different kinds of variants, and how do they affect the meaning of the texts?

The variants can be categorized into four kinds:

- Spelling and nonsense readings
- Changes that can’t be translated; synonyms
- Meaningful variants that are not viable
- Meaningful *and* viable variants

Quality of Variants Among New Testament Manuscripts



[7]

Let me briefly explain each of these.

Spelling and nonsense readings are the vast majority, accounting for at least 75% of all variants. The most common variant is what's called a movable nu—that's an 'n' at the end of one word before another word that starts with a vowel. We see the same principle in English with the indefinite article: 'a book,' 'an apple.' These spelling differences are easy for scholars to detect. They really affect nothing. The second largest group, *changes that can't be translated and synonyms*, also do not affect the meaning of the text. Frequently, the word order in the Greek text is changed from manuscript to manuscript. Yet the word order in Greek is very flexible. For the most part, the only difference is one of emphasis, not meaning.

The third group is *meaningful variants that are not viable*. By 'viable' I mean a variant that can make a good case for reflecting the wording of the original text. This, the third largest group, even though it involves meaningful variants, has no credibility. For example, in Luke 6:22, the ESV reads, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!" But one manuscript from the 10th/11th century (codex 2882) lacks the words "on account of the Son of Man." That's a very meaningful variant since it seems to say that a person is blessed when he is persecuted, regardless of his allegiance to Christ. Yet it is only in one manuscript, and a relatively late one at that. It has no chance of reflecting the wording of the original text, since all the other manuscripts are against it, including quite a few that are much, much earlier. The smallest category by far is the last category: *meaningful and viable variants*. These comprise less than 1% of all textual variants. Yet, even here, no cardinal belief is at stake. These variants do affect what a particular passage teaches, and thus what the Bible says in that place, but they do not jeopardize essential beliefs.

Isn't the process of copying a copy of a copy somewhat akin to the old "telephone game"?

Hardly. In the telephone game the goal is to garble an original utterance so that by the end of the line it doesn't resemble the original at all. There's only one line of transmission, it is oral rather than written, and the oral critic (the person who is trying to figure out what the original utterance was) only has the last person in line to interrogate.

When it comes to the text of the NT, there are multiple lines of transmission, and the original documents were almost surely copied several times (which would best explain why they wore out by the end of the second century).

Further, the textual critic doesn't rely on just the last person in the transmissional line, but can interrogate many scribes over the centuries, way back to the second century.

And even when the early manuscript testimony is sparse, we have the early church fathers' testimony as to what the original text said.

Finally, the process is not intended to be a parlor game but is intended to duplicate the original text faithfully—and this process doesn't rely on people hearing a whole utterance whispered only once, but seeing the text and copying it.

The telephone game is a far cry from the process of copying manuscripts of the NT.

One of Ehrman's theses is that orthodox scribes tampered with the text in hundreds of places, resulting in alterations of the essential affirmations of the NT. How do you respond?

Ehrman is quite right that orthodox scribes altered the text in hundreds of places. In fact, it's probably in the thousands. Chief among them are changes to the Gospels to harmonize them in wording with each other.

But to suggest that these alterations change essential affirmations of the NT is going far beyond the evidence. The variants that he produces do not do what he seems to claim. Ever since the 1700s, with Johann Albrecht Bengel who studied the meaningful and viable textual variants, scholars have embraced what is called ‘the orthodoxy of the variants.’ For more than two centuries, most biblical scholars have declared that no essential affirmation has been affected by the variants. Even Ehrman has conceded this point in the three debates I have had with him. (For those interested, they can order the DVD of our second debate, held at the campus of Southern Methodist University. It’s available [here](#) ^[8].)

For those who want to explore further, could you give us a reading list of some of the chapters/papers you have written on textual criticism, from the most basic on up?

First, I would recommend my chapter, “The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts,” in [Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible’s Origin, Reliability, and Meaning](#) ^[9] (published by Crossway). It’s a brief introduction, very user-friendly, to the issues involved. The rest of the book has excellent chapters on various aspects of biblical interpretation, reliability, and canon.

Next, I would recommend [Reinventing Jesus](#) ^[10], a book I co-authored with Ed Komoszewski and Jim Sawyer. This book wrestles with a number of issues—such as the historical reliability of the Gospels, the reliability of the manuscripts as witnesses to the original text, whether the ancient Church got the canon right (the 27 NT books), and whether they were right about the divinity of Christ. It’s a solid primer on many of the hot topics about the New Testament today.

Finally, a book that came out last October called [Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament](#) ^[11], which I edited and contributed to, takes head-on Bart Ehrman’s [Orthodox Corruption of Scripture](#) ^[12]. My essay is essentially the transcript of my debate with him at the Fourth Annual Greer-Heard Forum, held at New Orleans Baptist Seminary in April 2008. (For a more truncated version of my lecture, along with Ehrman’s lecture, see [The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace in Dialogue](#) ^[13].) The rest of the chapters were written by my students and deal with various aspects of Ehrman’s hypothesis.

URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/files/2012/03/DWallace.jpg>

[2] Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts: <http://csntm.org/>

[3] interview: <http://www.hughhewitt.com/transcripts.aspx?id=2ae35594-18e1-4776-bd4a-ca8f77c4deb6>

[4] Image: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/files/2012/03/P52.jpg>

[5] A papyrus

fragment: <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/searchresources/guidetospecialcollections/stjohnfragment/>

[6] Image: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/files/2012/03/DBW.jpg>

[7] Image: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/files/2012/03/variants.png>

[8] here: <http://www.csntm.org/News/Archive/2011/11/5/DebateDVDsonSale>

[9] *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible’s Origin, Reliability, and Meaning*: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1433529998/thegospcoal-20>

[10] *Reinventing Jesus*: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/082542982X/thegospcoal-20>

[11] *Revisiting the Corruption of the New*

Testament: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/082543338X/thegospcoal-20>

[12] *Orthodox Corruption of*

Scripture: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0199739781/thegospcoal-20>

[13] *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace in Dialogue*: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0800697731/thegospcoal-20>