

# THE TABLE BRIEFING: ENGAGING CHALLENGES TO THE RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

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“**C**OPYISTS MAKE MISTAKES. How can you claim to know what the New Testament says when there are hundreds of thousands of textual variants?” Many skeptics bring up challenges like this to undercut the idea that most English translations of the Bible reflect what the biblical authors wrote. Have we lost the message of the New Testament?

We talked with textual critic Daniel Wallace in an episode of *The Table* about how to approach the issue of manuscript differences in the transmission of the Scriptures. Wallace is Senior Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts.

This discussion highlights answers to four key questions that can encourage believers as they engage in everyday conversations about the reliability of the text: Why do New Testament manuscripts contain so many differences? Do variants suggest completely different, competing theologies? What essential doctrines are at stake? How does textual criticism relate to the reliability of the New Testament?

## WHY DO THE MANUSCRIPTS CONTAIN SO MANY DIFFERENCES?

Some skeptics say it is unlikely that English Bibles represent what the biblical authors wrote because existing manuscripts have many

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differences between them.<sup>1</sup> Textual critics, however, are involved in recognizing and recovering the original wording of the New Testament documents. Bock and Wallace discuss textual criticism:

*Wallace:* The word “criticism” simply means research, and “textual criticism” is the discipline that has as its primary goal to ascertain the wording of an original document that no longer exists or can no longer be found. We apply it to all ancient literature. We apply it to a lot of modern literature, including the Gettysburg Address. We have five copies in Lincoln’s handwriting, and they all have differences among them. With the New Testament, the originals disappeared within a century of writing. They were probably copied so much that they just wore out. All of the manuscripts have differences between them. We have to do textual criticism to try to ascertain the wording of the original.

*Bock:* So you’re looking at the variations in the wording and trying to make sense—based on the various sources that they’re coming from—which wording is likely to be more reflective of the original?

*Wallace:* Right. You defined it pretty well.

Many Christians are surprised to discover that differences exist among ancient New Testament manuscripts. Some may be uneasy with the vast number of confirmed variants. Why are there so many?

*Wallace:* If we only had one manuscript of the New Testament, we’d have no textual variance at all. Since every manuscript, by definition, is a handwritten document [copied] by frail, mistake-ridden human beings, there are going to be mistakes. Our two closest manuscripts from the first eight centuries have between six and ten differences per chapter. When you start thinking about that with all these manuscripts, there are going to be a lot of differences. It is correct to say we have hundreds of thousands of textual differences among the manuscripts.

I did an experiment a few years ago where I wrote out how many ways you can say “John loves Mary” in Greek. It took me about eight hours, and I came up with 384 ways to say “John loves Mary” in Greek. Then I decided, “I know there are about

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<sup>1</sup> These include differences in spelling, word order, omission, addition, substitution, or revision.

another one hundred fifty, but that’s enough to prove the point.”

Now here’s the way this relates to us. Bart Ehrman in *Misquoting Jesus* says there are so many variants that we could go on talking about them practically forever, and yet we wouldn’t get done with it. They’re not just in the hundreds, but in the thousands.<sup>2</sup>

He’s right. But [for] the vast majority of them, you can’t even translate the differences. There are different ways to spell John [and] Mary. You can put it in a different word order, [using the] same verb, and so on.

*Bock:* This is a way of saying don’t be fooled by the large number.

*Wallace:* Exactly.

*Bock:* There are a substantial number of variants that are what I would call transparent: You’ve reversed [two letters or] misspelled a word. Or there are differences in word order in which the same thing is being said. . . . What I’ve heard you say as a generalized rule of thumb is that a vast majority of the variants that we’re dealing with are of that type.

*Wallace:* Exactly. Most of them can’t be translated. The largest single group is spelling differences that affect nothing. I’d say over 99 percent, in fact well over 99 percent, of all of our textual variants are either not meaningful, that is, they don’t affect the meaning of the text, or not viable, that is, they don’t have any likelihood of going back to the original, or both.

At a classic Hendricks Center event called *Jesus in Prime Time*, Wallace described a range of variants in this 99 percent (of between 300,000 and 400,000 variants): The largest category of textual variants contains variations in spelling or nonsense readings that are easily detectable. This accounts for over 75% of all textual variants. The next largest category involves synonyms, word order, or articles with proper nouns. The differences in these top two categories do not make any meaningful difference to the message of the text. The third largest category of variants would suggest a difference in the meaning of the original text only if these readings existed earlier in the

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<sup>2</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 98.

manuscript tradition. Late changes that come hundreds of years after Jesus may be informative about the practices of later copyists, but they do not clarify the wording of the earliest documents.<sup>3</sup>

Many textual variants exist simply because many ancient manuscripts exist. The amount of the manuscript evidence is one thing that makes the New Testament stand out among other works of antiquity. Consider how it compares with other classical works from the Greco-Roman world:

*Wallace:* We have maybe half a dozen manuscripts for the average classical author, and let's say we had as many as fifteen manuscripts for the average classical Greek author that still exist. [If] you stack those up, they'd be about four feet high. If you stack up the New Testament manuscripts, the Greek ones as well as early translations—which all count as manuscripts—in Latin and Coptic and Syriac and Georgian and Gothic and Ethiopic and all that, it would be about a mile and a quarter high, four feet versus a mile and a quarter.

So [New Testament scholars] have a lot more manuscripts than [classical scholars] do. We have an embarrassment of riches, and they have a dearth of evidence. But besides that, [for] the average classical author, we're waiting five hundred to one thousand years before we even see one copy. For the New Testament manuscripts, we're waiting a mere two or three decades and then we get our first copy.

*Bock:* And then from there we get more and more copies all the time. That produces that stack.

*Wallace:* Right.

Focusing exclusively on the number of textual variants can be misleading. Having about 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament is not a problem because a plurality of texts can help us better assess which readings most closely represent the original.

Still, there are real questions about the authenticity of some of the words and sentences in the New Testament. They involve a fourth category of variant readings that do make a difference in what the text says. These kinds of differences may get us closer to the original New Testament text. For example, most scholars hold that the story of the woman caught in adultery was not originally a

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, "Jesus, Canon, and Theology," at *Jesus in Prime Time* (panel discussion, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas), October 29, 2007.

part of the Gospel of John. This narrative appears in different places in some manuscripts, including the margins or at the end of a page. But what kind of difference does this make? Do textual issues suggest completely different, competing theologies in the New Testament?

### DO VARIANTS SUGGEST COMPETING THEOLOGIES?

While text critical studies may demonstrate that a certain doctrine was not taught in a certain passage, the absence of a doctrinal affirmation does not indicate a denial of that doctrine. The same doctrine may be taught elsewhere in the New Testament. Bock and Wallace explain:

*Bock:* There are real issues of translation and meaning in the New Testament that text critics . . . wrestle with. The way that most people encounter these are the little side notes they get in their [English] translations that say, “Some manuscripts say . . .” What’s going on when that kind of a thing is happening?

*Wallace:* Translators are telling the reader . . . they’re not certain about what the original wording is, typically. [Or] they’re saying there has been a tradition that has been found . . . that we are rejecting, but there are some manuscripts that have this. Or it’s the late majority of manuscripts. But there [are] a lot of places . . . that do affect the meaning and are viable. That is, it could go back to the original. . . .

*Bock:* So here’s the issue if I can try and boil it down. . . . There are discussions about what particular texts mean and whether they are saying X or Y, but when you put it all together and you put it against what is regarded as orthodoxy, the issue becomes how many passages make that point as opposed to the idea of “We’ve got completely different theologies at work here.”

*Wallace:* That’s exactly right.

For example, consider the deity of Jesus. The King James Version renders a portion of 1 Timothy 3:16 as “great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” However, modern translations do not supply “God” for the relative  $\delta\varsigma$ , “who.” They say, “He was manifested in the flesh” (NIV), or, “He who was revealed in the flesh” (NASB). The difference is one letter in the Greek manuscript tradition. That is, a scribe likely saw a horizontal line through

the first letter, suggesting the theta of a *nomen sacrum*, an abbreviation of the divine name.<sup>4</sup> Without a line, the letter becomes the omicron of the relative pronoun. Rather than rejecting the deity of Christ, the earliest reading of 1 Timothy 3:16 simply does not explicitly teach the deity of Christ. As Wallace notes, “To say, ‘Who is revealed in the flesh,’ is not a denial of the deity of Christ, it’s just not an explicit affirmation of the deity of Christ. The deity of Christ is affirmed in many New Testament texts.”<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES ARE AT STAKE?

What doctrines are at stake when discussing variants that seem to challenge the reliability of the New Testament text? One major variant that comes up is the well-known narrative of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). Most scholars hold that this scene was not originally part of the Gospel of John. Bock and Wallace explain how to engage the issues surrounding this narrative, addressing questions of authorship and historicity:

*Bock:* [This account] shows up not just in the place where it’s landed in John . . . but it also shows up in other places, which tells you . . . it’s a floating piece of tradition.

*Wallace:* Exactly.

*Bock:* Some think if you read John carefully, it breaks up what’s going on in John by having it where it is. . . . But as a floating piece of tradition, it looks like something that may well be something Jesus did and said.

*Wallace:* It’s a floating tradition, which probably suggests John didn’t write it. That alone is not a reason for it, but there are three different places in John 7 where it occurs [in various manuscripts]. It occurs in some manuscripts between Luke and John as just an isolated pericope. Sometimes, it occurs after all the Gospels. In some manuscripts, it occurs after Luke 21:38.

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<sup>4</sup> *Nomina sacra*, “sacred names,” refers to the scribal practice of abbreviating common divine names and titles in copies of the New Testament. This shorthand appears in the Septuagint papyri and the Greek Christian Scripture papyri. See the fifteen kinds of *nomina sacra* appearing in the Greek papyri in Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Palaeography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 36.

<sup>5</sup> For example, John 1:1; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8.

*Bock:* That’s the one I’m familiar with.

*Wallace:* That group of manuscripts . . . probably picks the right spot for it. There was an article written by Dallas Theological Seminary graduate Kyle Hughes that argued Luke had access to a form of this story, not exactly the shape that it ended up in.<sup>6</sup> It looks like [Luke’s] kind of material, his wording, vocabulary, syntax . . . but it’s not the full story.

It was a conflation between East and West—two different areas that came up with the story in its current form that we have in our New Testaments. They occur in different forms where Luke had a more vanilla kind of a story: This woman was caught in some sin. You don’t have the Pharisees peeling out from the oldest to the youngest. Luke probably didn’t include it because it wasn’t all that significant or interesting.

The story of the woman caught in adultery is my favorite passage that’s not in the Bible, and the basic theme it teaches is that Jesus forgives sin. Is this the only passage we have that teaches it? Well, if it is, then we’re all in trouble. There are a whole lot more passages that do that.

*Bock:* This illustrates some things pretty powerfully. . . . An awareness of variants lets us know what the possibilities are. Sometimes when you hear this conversation, the idea is, “Well, we have maybe 95 percent of our Bible,” or 98 percent, whatever percentage you want to put on it.

The way I like to put it is to say that the problem is not that we have less of the Bible than we ought to have. The problem is we have too much. We’re trying to work our way back to what was the original, and the variants are the pileups that give us the “too much.”

*Wallace:* What’s fascinating about the New Testament is that over time, like a snowball that rolls down a hill, it’s going to pick up alien elements. [But] it doesn’t pick up that much. In the fourteen hundred years of copying the New Testament, it grows by about two percent. Any economist would say that’s not a good investment. Two percent over fourteen hundred years? You’re not going to make a lot of money that way.

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<sup>6</sup> Kyle R. Hughes, “The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the Pericope Adulterae,” *Novum Testamentum* 55, no. 3 (2013): 232–51.

*Bock:* So your point is that you've got the core plus a little bit on top.

*Wallace:* Right.

*Bock:* [Most English Bibles] print the alternatives in the margin. . . . It isn't like you're unaware of what the choices may be. . . . The content of what's been added actually shows up elsewhere in the New Testament. So whether you have it [in a given place] or don't, in one sense—again in the big picture—doesn't make much difference.

Whether future printings continue to include the story of a woman caught in adultery in the main Scripture text or relegate it to a footnote, questions surrounding the text do not change the fact that Jesus was remembered as claiming to forgive sin. Bock notes: "What is impacted is whether or not a particular passage teaches a particular point. But in the big scheme of things, there is no fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith that is impacted by this one percent [of New Testament textual variants]."

This is not only a conservative, evangelical position. Even an agnostic scholar like Ehrman agrees, "Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament."<sup>7</sup>

#### TEXTUAL CRITICISM, HISTORY, AND THE RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

While the story of a woman caught in adultery appears to have the earmarks of historicity, one must make a distinction between historicity and canonicity. A report can be historical without being written by a biblical author. "Does this report represent an event in the life of the historical Jesus?" is a different question from "Was this report composed by John, Luke, or another biblical author?"

*Bock:* Sometimes when people engage in a conversation about textual criticism and they think they've defended the reliability of the wording of the text, they equate that with defending the reliability of the New Testament. But there's actually a whole other layer of conversation that comes after that.

*Wallace:* That's a historical question, not a textual question.

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<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 252.



*Bock:* Exactly right. . . . We are confident about the wording that we have. . . . But the next question becomes, “What about the contents of what that is saying?” There are all kinds of [surrounding] discussions and issues . . . that complete the discussion about the reliability of the New Testament.

*Wallace:* They go in tandem. That’s correct.

The ability to get back to the original wording of a New Testament book means that what we have now is very close to what an ancient author wrote—the text is reliable in that sense. The truthfulness of a particular assertion and our ability or willingness to understand it correctly are different matters. They are related issues, but they are not the same. Christians should not confuse textual and historical questions or solely focus on one to the exclusion of the other.

## CONCLUSION

God has preserved the New Testament text in amazing ways. Consider the history of transmission, the labors of copyists through the centuries, and even Wallace’s present work digitizing extant manuscripts through the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts. Wallace shares a personal observation about the faithfulness of the scribes:

What has profoundly impacted me in looking at hundreds of thousands of pages of manuscripts is the dedication these scribes had to copying the Word of God. There’s what’s called a *colophon*. It’s a personal note that a scribe often puts at the end of a manuscript. There’s one . . . I had the opportunity to see when I was in Athens a couple of years ago. The scribe wrote, “The hand that wrote this is rotting in the grave, but the words that are written will last until the fullness of times.” And it was dated AD 1079. I [was] looking at this manuscript that’s a thousand years old, and I said, “Yeah, I’m sure he’s rotting, and yeah, this thing is still here.”

In the end, Christians can be confident that most English translations of the Bible are fair representations of what the biblical authors wrote. A vast number of textual variants exist only because a vast number of ancient, hand-copied manuscripts exist. No textual

variant anywhere calls any essential Christian doctrine into question or indicates completely different, competing theologies among the New Testament authors. We have not lost the message of the text. God has preserved his Word, and the text's wording is trustworthy.

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