

# CAN WE STILL BELIEVE THE BIBLE?

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An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions

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CRAIG L. BLOMBERG



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*To the faculty, administration, and trustees  
of Denver Seminary,  
who from 1986 to the present  
have created as congenial a research environment  
as a professor could hope for,  
upholding the inerrancy of Scripture  
without any of the watchdog mentality  
that plagues so many evangelical institutions*



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## PREFACE

I wrote this book sooner than I had planned. I typically have multiple writing projects to which I have committed—lined up like airplanes on a runway, waiting to take off. I arrange them chronologically, according to their due dates. When one is finished, I proceed to the next. Of course, there is inevitably some overlap in projects here and there, but I really dislike being late on anything.

Finishing this book at this time, however, has meant pushing some other things back that I thought I would be working on by now. Publishers have been gracious enough to allow me to extend some deadlines. Like the prophet Jeremiah, with fire in his bones preventing him from being silent (Jer. 20:9), I had to speak. The reliability of Scripture is the topic that first catapulted me into biblical scholarship; I would not be surprised if it turns out to be the last thing I am studying academically whenever the Lord decides I am writing my last work. It is the topic on which I am most often invited to speak, and the need is decidedly urgent. In the nonrefereed world of the internet, so much gibberish masquerades as truth, confusing or misleading web-surfers daily. In the refereed world of academic publishing, too frequently publishers are more interested in cents than in sensibility, so that they intentionally publish books with dramatically conflicting viewpoints on the same issue, knowing that each work will have a separate market and generate more income than either work would by itself. Unfortunately, Christian publishers are not exempt from this temptation.

Readers, therefore, need help in weaving their way through the maze of competing claims.

Few academic disciplines yield a greater diversity of perspectives than biblical studies. In some ways this is a backhanded compliment to the Christian Scriptures. If correctly understanding them and evaluating their claims were not of monumental importance for each person on the planet, there would be far fewer scholars either attacking and trying to debunk them or supporting and trying to defend them. There would also be fewer subdivisions within each of these two categories of scholarship, where writers debate the correct way to critique and dismiss the Bible or to interpret and apply it in our contemporary world.

This book does not pretend to have discovered some new breakthrough that will make the media swarm to examine its novel claims. It does represent perspectives that are widely held in mainstream evangelical circles, even though evangelicalism itself is fragmented into numerous subgroups, so we dare not claim more consensus than exists. This book does not follow the trend in certain circles of lobbying for the acceptance of more of the methods and conclusions of the critical establishment, represented by many in organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion. But it also refuses to try to turn back the clock and retreat to the mythical “good old days” by disregarding genuine advances in biblical studies and censuring those who accept them.

I wish to thank my research assistants over the past two academic years, Luke Hoselton and Emily Gill, for their superb work in helping me with this project. I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the people and organizations who over the years have invited me to speak on the topics addressed in this book at conferences, churches, campus outreach events, retreats, and the like. All these people have considerably improved my awareness of the questions our culture is most asking and the most common misconceptions they have about the answers to those questions—in terms of both what we do know and what we do not yet know. As I complete my twenty-eighth year of teaching at Denver Seminary, I am profoundly grateful for the numerous colleagues, staff, students, trustees, and other members of our constituency who have encouraged me in my work and enabled it to flourish. Years ago our late chancellor,



*Preface*

Dr. Vernon Grounds, penned the statement that is now inscribed in our student center named after him and his wife, Ann: “Here is no unanchored liberalism—freedom to think without commitment. Here is no encrusted dogmatism—commitment without freedom to think. Here is a vibrant evangelicalism—commitment with freedom to think within the limits laid down in Scripture.” Having discussed my perspectives on several of the issues treated in this book with Vernon over the years, I think that he would be pleased with this offering as in keeping with the spirit that he so deeply engraved on Denver Seminary during the fifty-nine years (1951–2010) he was a part of it. In any event, I dedicate this book to all of the wonderful people I have been associated with here at the seminary since my arrival in 1986.



# ABBREVIATIONS

## Bibliographic and General

AB	Anchor Bible
AD	<i>anno Domini</i> , in the year of the Lord
ad loc.	<i>ad locum</i> , at the place discussed
<i>Alex.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Alexander</i>
<i>Anab.</i>	Arrian, <i>Anabasis</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ASV	American Standard Version
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
B	Codex Vaticanus
BC	before Christ
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
CBMW	Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood
CBT	Committee on Bible Translation
CC	Continental Commentaries
CEB	Common English Bible
CEV	Contemporary English Version
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
chap./chaps.	chapter/s
CJB	Complete Jewish Bible
ConcC	Concordia Commentary

Abbreviations

CSG	Colorado Springs Guidelines
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
ed./eds.	editor/s, edited by, edition
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
esp.	especially
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	<i>et alia</i> , and others
ETS	Evangelical Theological Society
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
GNB	Good News Bible
<i>Gos. Thom.</i>	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>
GWN	God's Word to the Nations
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
<i>Ign. Trall.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Trallians</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JST	Joseph Smith Translation
KJV	King James Version
LBP	Living Bible Paraphrased
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint (Greek OT)
mg.	marginal note or footnote
MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew OT)
NAB	New American Bible
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NCCS	New Covenant Commentary Series
NEB	New English Bible
NET	New English Translation
<i>NHL</i>	<i>Nag Hammadi Library in English</i> . Edited by J. M. Robinson. 4th rev. ed. Leiden: Brill, 1996
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIRV	New International Readers' Version
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary

## Abbreviations

NIVI	New International Version, Inclusive-Language Edition
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
NTL	New Testament Library
NWT	New World Translation
OT	Old Testament
par./pars.	and parallel/s
pl.	plural
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
Q	<i>Quelle</i> , hypothetical source of Jesus's sayings shared by only Matthew and Luke
REB	Revised English Bible
repr.	reprinted
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UBC	Understanding the Bible Commentary
v./vv.	verse/s
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
y.	Jerusalem Talmud
ZCCS	Zondervan Classic Commentary Series
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalms
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Isa.	Isaiah

*Abbreviations*

Jer.	Jeremiah	Jon.	Jonah
Lam.	Lamentations	Mic.	Micah
Ezek.	Ezekiel	Nah.	Nahum
Dan.	Daniel	Hab.	Habakkuk
Hosea	Hosea	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Joel	Joel	Hag.	Haggai
Amos	Amos	Zech.	Zechariah
Obad.	Obadiah	Mal.	Malachi

**New Testament**

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

# INTRODUCTION

Questions about the Bible have flourished since its inception. People have always wrestled with the problem of evil and why there is so much suffering in the world. Bible readers have regularly assessed the adequacy of the Jewish and Christian responses to that question found in the Scriptures, which focus on God's desire for a freely offered love relationship with humanity that likewise allows the freedom to rebel against God, with all of the resulting consequences.<sup>1</sup> Other religions and ideologies regularly suggest discrete answers as well. Many religions have likewise debated the fate of those who never had a reasonable chance to respond to their message. Will God or the gods treat them in the same way as those who have rejected the message outright? The Bible only hints at answers to this question, yet Christians have made numerous suggestions that merit evaluation and are by no means limited to the notion that all such people are lost.<sup>2</sup> Closely related are issues of pluralism versus exclusivism. What is the destiny of those who consciously reject a given religion? Do they all fall into one homogeneous group, or are there subdivisions of some kinds? Again, Christian responses have often been far more nuanced than many people realize.<sup>3</sup>

In a different vein, any anthology of sacred literature written in diverse literary genres over many centuries, and to a wide variety of audiences for many different purposes, will inevitably exhibit apparent contradictions and theological diversity along with some measure of continuity and unity. With respect to the Bible, from at least the second century

onward Christians have been well aware of the similarities and differences among the four Gospels and have offered a variety of explanations for both minute apparent discrepancies and broad, varying emphases.<sup>4</sup> The same is true for the seeming dissonance *within* a wide variety of passages in both Testaments, either with each other or with information from outside of Scripture. Not a single supposed contradiction has gone without someone proposing a reasonably plausible resolution.<sup>5</sup>

A third important area of conversation involves biblical ethics. Many people with only superficial or secondhand familiarity with the Bible's contents wrongly believe, for example, that the Bible promotes slavery. It is true that some Christians in later centuries supported their defense of slavery from Scripture, but the Bible has been twisted and distorted to support countless bizarre beliefs throughout history. The most important matter is what it actually says, and there is not a single text anywhere in the Bible that commands slavery. God allowed it in Old Testament times, as it was universal among the people groups of the ancient Near East. He enacted legislation, however, to make it more humane than in any other ancient context, often more akin to what might better be called indentured servanthood. In Israel it was primarily an institution for enabling individuals to work themselves out of debt and return to free status. In the New Testament even more countercultural teaching appears, with numerous seeds that would eventually germinate into its abolition altogether—abolition that was disproportionately spearheaded by Christians.<sup>6</sup>

Many people, even many evangelical Christians, have never engaged in a detailed study of what the Bible permits women to do either. On this issue there *are* legitimate debates over the interpretation of key texts and over which passages were meant to be timeless in application and which were more situation-specific.<sup>7</sup> But it is a simple fact that women are described with approval in the Old Testament as judges, prophets, and queens and in the New Testament as deacons, as coworkers with Jesus and the Twelve, and as having and exercising the spiritual gifts of pastor, teacher, apostle, evangelist, and the like. Whether it is significant for today's world that they could not be priests in the Old Testament, were not chosen as Jesus's closest followers, and do not appear as presbyters or elders in the New Testament—all this is a matter of ongoing,



lively discussion and research. The vast majority of all interdenominational evangelical Christian institutions nevertheless recognize that diversity of opinion here is not a reason to keep anyone from becoming a believer and fellowshiping and working together with other believers across theological boundaries. The evangelical egalitarian position has become an established and credible part of the scholarly and ecclesiastical worlds alike, even if a handful of Protestant denominations have yet to recognize this.<sup>8</sup>

A quite different ethical topic involves the so-called attempted genocide in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, this very label misleads. The only offensive war ancient Israel ever fights is against the Canaanites when they enter the promised land; all the others are defensive (even if individual battles within larger wars are sometimes initiated by the Israelites), as they are attacked by Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and so on. Even then, archaeological research has increasingly shown that of the few cities Joshua describes the Israelites as actually attacking, several were probably little more than armed encampments, much like modern-day military bases, where the only civilians present are the family members of soldiers and a few basic service personnel. Moreover, all of them had heard of the Israelites and their God, as proved by Rahab's testimony and action in Joshua 2. This account illustrates how anyone could have peacefully chosen to serve Israel's God without repercussions. To make a sweeping generalization, the Canaanites also were among the most debased of human cultures ever, and God had waited patiently for over four hundred years until their behavior had reached its lowest point (Gen. 15:16; cf. Deut. 9:5).<sup>9</sup> Finally, the ancestors of the Canaanites had freely entered into treaties with Abraham and the other patriarchs, on which their descendants were now reneging (Gen. 21:27; 26:28). Unlike so often in today's overpopulated world, there was plenty of good land for all of the people, if the inhabitants of the country had been willing to allow Israel to settle there as well, and the laws of Moses repeatedly required the Israelites to treat the foreigners in the land with the same justice that they were to administer among themselves (Exod. 20:10; 22:21; 23:9–12; Lev. 16:29; 17:8–15; 19:33–34; etc.).

At the same time, there are a variety of Old Testament ethical issues that understandably trouble interpreters even after the most careful

historical-critical research is undertaken. These are not always identical to those mentioned by some of the most outspoken atheists of recent years, such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, or Sam Harris;<sup>10</sup> no one should read the works of these individuals without constantly checking the Bible itself, because many of their descriptions of events are significant distortions of the actual accounts.<sup>11</sup> In any event, given the amount of clarification that a study of comparative literature and culture has shed on these items even just in recent decades,<sup>12</sup> it is likely that scholars will continue to learn still more about ancient culture, thus enabling us to view ancient customs and languages in a more accurate historical light and removing even more of the objections. But for the Christian, it is also always important to stress that central to Jesus's ministry was the abolition of some of the potentially most offensive practices in ancient Israel. It seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that God has worked with humanity gradually over time, progressively revealing more and more of himself and his will as humans have been able to receive it, which also suggests that there are trajectories of moral enlightenment established on the pages of Scripture that we should continue to push even further today.<sup>13</sup>

*However, this book is about none of these topics.* All of them are worthy of continued study, but excellent resources abound for those who are interested. These topics have been addressed in detail many times in recent years, as well as throughout history. Frequently, the more aggressive atheists—as Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and like-minded individuals are often called—write as if the historical, theological, and ethical problems of Scripture that they believe merit the rejection of Christianity are somehow new discoveries of recent times and are problems that earlier generations and centuries of believers weren't aware of or just didn't understand.<sup>14</sup> This is utter nonsense. After careful study, one may decide that the best defenses of the faith prove inadequate, but let no one pretend that such defenses do not exist or have not existed throughout church history. Sadly, the most virulent anti-Christian voices of our day seem woefully ignorant of this body of literature.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, what one deems plausible depends much on whether one adopts a “hermeneutic of consent” or a “hermeneutic of suspicion” when approaching the biblical text.<sup>16</sup> Literary critics routinely explain

that the only way to truly understand another author's communicative processes, before ever beginning to assess and evaluate them, is to enter empathetically into the worldview presupposed in that communication.<sup>17</sup> As a culture we excel in doing this with science fiction, with romance novels, with political docudramas, and the like, but we seem to shelve all those skills when it comes to the Bible. In any case, one looks in vain for signs of such empathy in the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and their ideological kin, and even in much liberal biblical scholarship.

Also remaining unchanged over the centuries are some of the classic reasons *for* believing the Bible to be a trustworthy depository of Jewish and Christian history, divinely given theology and ethics, and a collection of masterpieces of religious literature. The astonishing amount of archaeological corroboration of the kinds of details in the Bible that can be tested grows steadily with each generation.<sup>18</sup> The theological unity of Scripture, even amid all of its diversity, enables readers of all sixty-six books to discern a coherent narrative plot, profound wisdom, and a metanarrative that explains human nature from its origins to its final destiny. No other anthology of literature in the history of the world even attempts to undertake all three of these tasks simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> The lives transformed for the better by the Bible's witness and the contributions to civilization that those people have made throughout history are disproportionately larger than in any other religion or ideology.<sup>20</sup> None of this is to deny some very horrible things that a few Christians (and a few others masquerading as Christians) have perpetrated over the years,<sup>21</sup> but the complaints from some of Christianity's harshest critics have often grossly exaggerated these actions and failed to acknowledge the worse and more widespread atrocities committed under the banners of other religions and especially atheism.<sup>22</sup>

Yet this book is about none of these topics either. *What this book does address is why I still believe the Bible as I write these words in 2013.* Because my reasons for belief are not idiosyncratic but generalizable, I have titled the book *Can We Still Believe the Bible?*

I came to faith in my sophomore year of high school, in the spring of 1971. In college, from 1973 to 1977, I majored in religion at a private liberal arts college that in many respects was running from its Christian heritage as fast as it could.<sup>23</sup> Between actively engaging anyone in

my public high school who would talk with me about Christian faith and delving into the whole gamut of a liberal arts curriculum in college, I think I encountered virtually every major historic challenge to traditional, orthodox Christianity during those seven years of schooling. Rarely were the classic or contemporary Christian responses to those challenges ever presented or acknowledged in my classrooms. Fortunately, my college had an excellent library, and in both my high school and college years, a good percentage of the Christian bookstores nearby were still stocked with serious academic works. Local pastors and parachurch leaders pointed me to still other texts that I needed to know about in order to gain a balanced education and to decide for myself where I fell on the spectrum of responses to the key issues of faith versus unbelief.<sup>24</sup>

Study at an evangelical Christian seminary in the United States for my masters in New Testament studies (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) and at a public university in the United Kingdom for my doctorate in that same field (University of Aberdeen) rounded out my formal education. Both institutions provided far more balance in presenting all sides to key issues, before the professors would indicate their own preferences, than my undergraduate education had done, which overly stressed the latest avant-garde approach to most of the subdisciplines of religious studies.

Our liberal American love affair with the newest and the novel seems to condemn each new generation to rehearse the same debates as in the past, making some of the same mistakes all over again, even if minor variations and changes of nomenclature intrude. One key branch of today's postmodernism is little more than the existentialism of the 1960s.<sup>25</sup> A generation ago, the Graf-Wellhausen theory of sources in the Pentateuch was well entrenched in Old Testament scholarship, parceling up the writings traditionally attributed to Moses in the fifteenth century BC and assigning them to anonymous tenth-through-fifth-century Jahwist (Yahwist), Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomistic writers (conventionally labeled J, E, P, D).<sup>26</sup> Today in some circles, the so-called Old Testament minimalists have replaced them. Sometimes stressing the literary unity of books more than their predecessors, these scholars nevertheless date the final form of various Old Testament books well into the Persian

and Hellenistic ages of the fifth through second centuries BC, largely apart from any substantial new discoveries that would actually make their theories plausible.<sup>27</sup> The study of the historical Jesus has now embarked on its third main phase (often called a “quest”), and some scholars are now calling for a fourth quest.<sup>28</sup> There are important differences among the various phases or quests, but the same debate remains: Can historical argumentation bolster faith? Does it hinder faith? Or is it altogether unrelated to faith?<sup>29</sup>

New methodologies in biblical studies come and go: the academy is extremely faddish. Liberationist exegesis has mutated into postcolonialism.<sup>30</sup> Form criticism and structuralism have seen their heyday, but a close analysis of texts as literary artifacts continues unabated with narrative and genre criticisms.<sup>31</sup> Rudolf Bultmann’s great mid-twentieth-century program of demythologizing the Bible—looking for the core theological truths that can still be believed in a scientific age, truths wrapped in the husks of the mythical miracles—had just about died out, only to be given new life by the Jesus Seminar in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>32</sup> Examples could be multiplied. What goes around comes around. Most of my reasons for believing the Bible thus remain unchanged from thirty and forty years ago.

There are some areas, nevertheless, where a curious phenomenon has occurred over the past generation. *I am thinking of areas of scholarship where new findings, or at least much more intense study of slightly older discoveries, have actually strengthened the case for the reliability or trustworthiness of the Scriptures, even while the most publicized opinions in each area have claimed that there are now reasons for greater skepticism!* Six in particular have captured my attention enough for me to devote some specialized study to them. They involve textual criticism, the canon of Scripture, the proliferation of English (and other) translations of the Bible, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the diversity of literary genres among books or sections of books that appear to many as historical narrative, and the manifestations and meanings of the miraculous. So I have subtitled this book *An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions*.

Sadly, there has also been a backlash in each of these six arenas. A handful of very conservative Christian leaders who have not understood

the issues adequately have reacted by unnecessarily rejecting the new developments. To the extent that they, too, have often received much more publicity than their small numbers would warrant, they have hindered genuine scholarship among evangelicals and needlessly scared unbelievers away from Christian faith. As my Christian eighth-grade public school history teacher, Dorothy Dunn, used to love to intone with considerable passion, after having lived through our country's battles against both Nazism and Communism: "The far left and the far right—avoid them both, like the plague!"<sup>33</sup> A brief overview of the six areas of study will set the stage for our more detailed examination of them in the chapters ahead.

Textual criticism has come of age in the last generation. Due partly to discoveries of new manuscripts, partly to scholars' completing the translation of copies of Old Testament books discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s and 50s, and partly to the tireless efforts of centers for textual research in Germany and the United States in compiling and collating facsimiles of the thousands of biblical manuscripts still in existence from antiquity, we are now in a better position than ever to reconstruct with confidence the most likely wording of the original writings of the biblical authors.<sup>34</sup> The vast majority of textual critics of all theological or ideological stripes recognize this, but somehow a few dissenters have captured the attention of the popular media and the blogosphere: far too many people think that the situation is just the opposite, that the proliferation of manuscripts has made us less certain than ever about what the biblical authors first wrote. This is simply false, but we need to go into more detail to demonstrate it. At the other end of the spectrum, a tenacious and vocal, even if tiny, minority of Christians continues to maintain, against virtually all the evidence, that God actually *preserved* every biblical book perfectly in some ancient manuscripts somewhere. Usually this belief is joined to the one alleging that the King James Version of 1611 is by far the closest English approximation to that inerrantly preserved text. This too is completely misguided.

A second issue involves the biblical canon, the collection of books that the Christian church deems authoritative and inspired. Some discussion continues concerning the Old Testament Apocrypha, that is,

the books that Roman Catholics treat as canonical but Protestants do not. But here about the only widespread trend noticeable over the past generation has been a move in at least some Catholic circles to treat these books as “deuterocanonical”—authoritative, yes, but not as centrally important as the sixty-six books that all branches of Christianity have historically agreed on as Scripture. What *has* become a virtual cottage industry of new study are the post–New Testament apocryphal works, especially the so-called gnostic gospels. From time to time, even calls for reconsidering the New Testament canon have been sounded.<sup>35</sup> The popular press and the average layperson, including the unchurched, have probably heard more about the noncanonical *Gospel of Thomas* than the canonical Gospel of Mark, and much of what they have heard has been at least misleading if not downright inaccurate. The real state of affairs is that every noncanonical document from ancient Christianity known to us has been given far more scrutiny than ever in the history of the church during the last generation, and the reasons for *not* treating them on a par with the New Testament documents are clearer than ever.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, especially among grassroots evangelicals, the notion that the canon of Scripture is not only uniquely adequate to address spiritual matters but also sufficient for addressing numerous other topics of human inquiry has led to some bizarre approaches to the Bible, which need to be avoided.

A third phenomenon is the rampant proliferation of English translations of Scripture. Other modern languages have also seen a flurry of new versions, but nowhere nearly so prolifically as in English. Many of these are justifiable once one understands the translation theory utilized and the target audience in mind. Yet some seem to replicate previous efforts unnecessarily. A few try to establish themselves by touting their merits at the expense of the alternatives, thus giving the public the impression that we really aren’t sure how to translate significant parts of the Bible at all. And if we can’t even be sure what it *means* in our own language, how can we ever hope to have it function as a reliable and adequate authority for Christian living more generally? But in fact, our understanding of the nature of language, recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to translating from one language to another, and the sophistication of the discipline of linguistics more

generally have never been greater. Significant strides have been taken in just the last generation.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, huge misunderstandings remain about the strengths and weaknesses of so-called literal translations. Indeed, the term *literal* itself is used in a variety of inconsistent and sometimes incompatible ways. Add in some of the unfounded claims that have been made about the dangers of using inclusive language when referring to humanity, and it appears to many that the various Bible translations are much less reliable than they actually are.

Fourth, we consider the question of the “inerrancy” of the Bible. The term itself has not always been used throughout church history, but the concept that dominated Christianity until modern times was that, of all the writings in human history, the biblical books are uniquely accurate and reliable, historically and theologically. The late eighteenth century’s Scientific Enlightenment, as it is often called, spawned for the first time a substantially liberal branch of Christianity, which continued to grow until about a generation ago. But it is only in the last generation that expressions such as “I swear on the Bible . . .” or “It’s the gospel truth” have largely fallen out of use, because they do not carry the force they once did. Ironically, as liberal Protestants and Catholics have steadily decreased in number both at home and abroad over the last half century and as conservative or “evangelical” Christians have exploded in number, now for the first time in history significant numbers of those evangelicals have begun to question belief in inerrancy, at least as it has usually been framed.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, historians today have an unprecedented understanding of what would or would not have been considered reliable history in the biblical cultures,<sup>39</sup> so that inerrantists have the ability to define and nuance their understanding of the doctrine better than ever before. Sadly, some extremely conservative Christians continue to insist on following their modern understandings of what should or should not constitute errors in the Bible and censure fellow inerrantists whose views are less anachronistic.

Closely related to this discussion is a fifth area of research: biblical genres. With unprecedented access to most ancient documents relevant for understanding biblical history and literature, with a large percentage of them available in English (and often German, French, and/or Spanish as well), and with the ease of consulting them in a digital world,



we are aware more than ever before of the diversity of literary forms contained within biblical documents and the array of literary genres that entire biblical books comprise.<sup>40</sup> Most important, simply because a work appears in narrative form does not automatically make it historical or biographical in genre. History and biography themselves appear in many different forms, and fiction can appear identical to history in form. Other contextual and extratextual indicators must be consulted as well, including comparisons with noncanonical literature of similar form, in order to determine the kinds of narrative we are reading. Occasionally, what has seemed to many throughout the centuries to reflect straightforward history can now be seen to represent a different genre. In most cases, what has usually been viewed as historical is rightly understood as such, but the way in which the ancients wrote history is clearer now than ever before. Once again the result is that we know much better what we should be meaning when we say we “believe the Bible,” and therefore such belief is more defensible than ever. Yet once again, unfortunately, a handful of ultraconservatives criticize all such scholarship, thinking they are doing a service to the gospel instead of the disservice they actually render.

Finally, there is the question of the miraculous. Thanks to twenty-first-century communication technology, we have unprecedented numbers of carefully documented accounts (sometimes recorded in audio or video) of physical healings, exorcisms, and even more dramatic supernatural (or at least paranormal) events, often in quick response to public and explicitly Christian prayer, for which science and medicine have no explanation.<sup>41</sup> A variety of classic objections to the concept of miracles, which have been put forward over the centuries, have been successfully rebutted.<sup>42</sup> More important, no convincing explanations have emerged for the innumerable miraculous events attested just in the last generation alone. The biblical miracles dovetail remarkably with these recent miracles in nature and purpose. Also, the biblical miracles prove far less random or fanciful than those in other literature from the ancient world. In most instances, the way the biblical accounts differ from the classic Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern myths proves particularly striking, despite the occasional superficial similarity. Where such parallels with the Old Testament are closer, the biblical authors

are usually rebutting pagan claims and showing how God and not some other deity is in charge of some part of the world. Where the parallelism between the New Testament and the surrounding world proves to be close, the pagan accounts almost always turn out to be post–New Testament, too late to have influenced the Bible’s composition.<sup>43</sup> Once again, however, we would scarcely suspect this if we relied solely on some recent works that have received widespread attention. And a small rearguard of hyperconservative believers, usually reacting to certain excesses in the charismatic movement, attribute all or virtually all contemporary “miracles” to human manufacture or diabolical counterfeit, when they should instead be rejoicing at the powerful workings of God’s Spirit for good in our world.

I have read and heard numerous accounts of people who are “de-converting” from Christianity, to use the fashionable and euphemistic term for reneging on one’s faith commitments or baptismal pledges.<sup>44</sup> There is almost a definable literary genre of autobiographical writings explaining why a person who once believed no longer does.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, most people who once believed *and still do*, or believe even more strongly than in the past, never think to publicize their faith journeys. Perhaps they assume few would be interested. Perhaps they are right; if so, it is a shame. But I suspect that biblical scholars who, like me, have found their faith fortified by the evidence the longer they have studied it may have an increasing obligation in our pluralistic world to give an account of the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15).<sup>46</sup>

The six areas of scholarship that this book presents explain why I still believe the Bible *in the twenty-first century*, and why I believe that *we can still* believe the Bible. These topics may not produce the most important reasons for belief. But they do debunk widespread misconceptions about what belief entails, and they present exciting recent developments in scholarly arenas that are not nearly as well known or understood as they should be. Let us begin, then, with what for many readers may be the most opaque of the six fields of study to be investigated here, textual criticism.

## AREN'T THE COPIES OF THE BIBLE HOPELESSLY CORRUPT?

Some scholars estimate that there are four hundred thousand textual variants among the ancient New Testament manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> From this observation alone, certain skeptics conclude that it is ridiculous to imagine ever reconstructing the original text of Scripture, much less being able to affirm its trustworthiness. How should Christians reply? What do Christian scholars do with this statistic? If we really can have no confidence that we know what the original authors of the Bible wrote, then it is pointless to ask about their *accuracy* in what they wrote. What we have might not correspond at all to the original documents. In this case, all we could look at would be hopelessly corrupt copies!

It is depressing to see how many people, believers and unbelievers alike, discover a statistic like this number of variants and ask no further questions. The skeptics sit back with smug satisfaction, while believers are aghast and wonder if they should give up their faith. Is the level of education and analytic thinking in our world today genuinely this low? Anyone learning about four hundred thousand variants should

immediately want to ask a variety of questions: Is this statistic accurate? If so, what *kinds* of variations appear among the manuscripts? Are they minor or major? Do they affect the meanings of texts and, if so, to what degree? Across how many manuscripts are these four hundred thousand variants spread? Do they fall into identifiable patterns? If so, what is the significance of those patterns? How did these variations come into existence? And all of this is just about the New Testament. What is the state of Old Testament textual criticism (or analysis)?

### Misleading the Masses

The number four hundred thousand comes from a remarkable book published by Bart Ehrman in 2005: *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. Ehrman is professor of New Testament at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and has become a prolific writer and popular speaker and teacher. He once embraced evangelical Christian faith but now describes himself as an agnostic. The general tenor of most of his publications and talks makes it clear that he wants to help disabuse people of whatever Christian faith they have as often as he can. Some of his former students have told me that he has said as much in class.

The title of the book is highly misleading. The book is not about anyone misquoting Jesus but about the nature of the similarities and differences among the New Testament manuscripts. When scribes accidentally or intentionally changed an element of the text they were copying, they were not misquoting anyone; they were miscopying a text. But a title like *Miscopying New Testament Texts* would not have sold nearly as many books. Astonishingly, *Misquoting Jesus* made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list for several months after it was released. Yet most of its content discloses nothing that biblical scholars of all theological or ideological stripes have not known for decades. What made it so enormously successful? The answer lies primarily in its packaging and marketing, and in the fact that once its contents started to become known, people who were not scholars realized that here was a dimension of study of the world's most influential book about which

they knew nothing or next to nothing. Sadly, this seemed to be just about as true for most believers as for most unbelievers.<sup>2</sup>

In readable language, Ehrman's book presents the basics of the textual criticism of the New Testament—the number and nature of the manuscripts, the process of copying, and the kinds of mistakes that were introduced—but he focuses on the most interesting parts of the discipline. He looks at two twelve-verse segments that are printed in standard translations of the New Testament but have been determined most likely not to have been written by the authors of the books in which the passages are embedded: the so-called longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) and the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). Ehrman discusses much shorter but still fascinating variants, such as whether Mark 1:41 originally read that Jesus “showed compassion” or “was angry” when he encountered a man afflicted with leprosy. He explores whether Hebrews 2:9 originally insisted that Christ tasted death for everyone “by the grace of God” or “apart from God.” Ehrman points out instances in which scribal changes were likely motivated by theology. Throughout the New Testament, the most common such change involves adding titles for Jesus. Ehrman's doctoral dissertation, published under the provocative title *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, lays out the evidence in detail.<sup>3</sup> Passages that originally said merely “Jesus” were sometimes altered to read “the Lord Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” or even “the Lord Jesus Christ.” The changes reinforced orthodox belief about the identity of Jesus but in so doing changed the wording of the originals.

Nothing in all of this is new. Readers of almost any English-language translation of the Bible except for the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) can look at the footnotes, or marginal notes, of their Bibles and see mention of a broad cross-section of the most important and interesting of these variants. Unfortunately, many readers don't consult these notes often enough. Of course, more and more people are reading the Bible in electronic form, and many electronic versions of the Bible don't even include such notes.

A key problem with Ehrman's book, however, is with what he does *not* include. It is easy for the uninformed reader to come away from his treatments of the largest or most interesting variants and start to wonder

how often there might be other passages that we still don't know about, with similarly large or significant variants that would change the nature of Christianity. What Ehrman doesn't make clear is that the number and nature of manuscripts we have make it extraordinarily unlikely that we shall ever again find variants that are not already known. As Daniel Wallace, professor of New Testament and Greek at Dallas Seminary and founder of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, likes to put it, while there are places where we are uncertain of what the original text read, the original reading is almost certainly one of the options recorded in the existing manuscripts somewhere.<sup>4</sup>

With this background, we are ready to analyze the issue of four hundred thousand variants. Here is Ehrman's statement:

Scholars differ significantly in their estimates—some say there are 200,000 variants known, some say 300,000, some say 400,000 or more! We do not know for sure because, despite impressive developments in computer technology, no one has yet been able to count them all. Perhaps, as I indicated earlier, it is best simply to leave the matter in comparative terms. There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

How easy it would be to conclude from this that there is no word anywhere in the New Testament that we can say with certainty was what the original author wrote! But that is not even remotely the real nature of things.

Less than a page before the paragraph just quoted, Ehrman himself notes that 5,700 manuscripts of portions of the Greek New Testament exist from the centuries before the printing press was invented. In the paragraph immediately preceding the quote, he acknowledges that we have about ten thousand manuscripts of the Latin translation of the New Testament along with manuscripts in other ancient languages such as Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic, along with all of the quotations of Scripture passages in the church fathers (or patristic writers), especially from the second through sixth centuries of church history.<sup>6</sup> Although Ehrman doesn't total all the numbers, Wallace does, and the result is that those 400,000 variants, if there are that many, are

spread across more than 25,000 manuscripts in Greek or other ancient languages.<sup>7</sup>

Suddenly the picture begins to look quite different. This is an average of only 16 variants per manuscript, and only 8 if the estimate of 200,000 variants is the more accurate one. Nor are the variants spread evenly across a given text; instead, they tend to cluster in places where some kind of ambiguity has stimulated them. Paul Wegner estimates that only 6 percent of the New Testament and 10 percent of the Old Testament contain the vast majority of these clusters.<sup>8</sup> Of course many of the manuscripts are not of the entire New Testament, but of select collections of books, individual books, and, as one gets back to the very earliest fragmentary scraps of texts available, small portions of books. And a statistical average does not enable us to recognize which manuscripts were very carefully copied and which ones had numerous errors creep in. So we need to supplement these statistics with other ones.

## **The Truth about Textual Variants**

### *The New Testament*

The United Bible Societies' fourth edition of the Greek New Testament contains 1,438 of the most significant textual variants in its footnotes and presents the most important manuscript evidence for each existing reading of the disputed text.<sup>9</sup> Using the letters A through D, the committee that produced the edition also ranks its level of confidence in its decision to adopt a particular reading. A companion volume, edited by Bruce Metzger, called *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, explains the committee's rationale for their choices and their levels of confidence, with all the variants arranged canonically.<sup>10</sup> The twenty-eighth edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament includes about seven times as many variants as the UBS fourth edition but then drastically limits the number of manuscripts listed in support of each reading.<sup>11</sup> In Nestle-Aland, however, seldom do the extra variants not found in the UBS seem at all significant. Many of them involve the inclusion or omission of an article or conjunction, the inversion of a

couple of words, variant spellings of words, or other minor differences that leave meaning virtually unaffected.

Even beginning Greek students with just a few hours of classroom instruction in textual criticism can begin to understand the process of reasoning used by the committees that produced these critical editions of the Greek New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Decisions are based on both external and internal evidence. External evidence refers to the number and nature of the manuscripts that support each variant reading—their age, location of origin, overall quality, and similarities to other reputable manuscripts. Internal evidence is the evaluation of the kinds of changes a scribe was most likely to make, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as well as what the original author would most likely have written. Confusing syntax, unusual vocabulary, theological oddities, and overly brief comments are all likely to be smoothed out, explained, replaced, or altered in ways that improve intelligibility. Accidental mistakes include misspellings of words; duplicating or omitting a letter, word, or line of text; dividing words that were originally run together without spacing; or placing punctuation in different places—in short, all the mistakes that even typists today make when typing up someone else’s writing instead of merely scanning, copying, or cutting and pasting the original text electronically.

When one then peruses the more than 1,400 textual footnotes included in the UBS Greek New Testament, one learns that the *only* disputed passages involving more than two verses in length are the two Ehrman mentions, Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11. Almost all modern English translations alert readers to the issues with these two texts. The *ESV Study Bible* (English Standard Version), for example, places in brackets and capital letters a statement between Mark 16:8 and verses 9–20 that reads, “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9–20.” The text is then surrounded by double brackets: [[ and ]]. In the study notes at the bottom of the page, the reader learns not only that “some ancient manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel” do not contain these verses but also that the verses are missing from “numerous early Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian manuscripts. Early church fathers (e.g., Origen and Clement of Alexandria) did not appear to know of these verses. Eusebius and Jerome state that this section is missing in most manuscripts available at their time.”<sup>13</sup> Quite frankly, we should be delighted



to learn this, because what came to be labeled as verse 18 promises that believers “will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them.” There is a tragic history of very fundamentalist Christian snake-handling churches in Appalachia throughout the twentieth century that treated this verse as if it were inspired Scripture, and yet they had numerous fatalities. Even today in one state, West Virginia, snake-handling remains legal and occurs in a few small, usually rural congregations.

Where then did these verses come from?<sup>14</sup> If Mark ended his Gospel at verse 8, then he concluded his narrative without Jesus appearing to anyone. A young man dressed in a white robe merely instructs the women who have found the tomb empty to tell his disciples that he is going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him. Verse 8 ends the undisputed portion of Mark 16: the women leave the tomb, saying nothing to anyone, because they are afraid. Scribes undoubtedly thought that Mark could not have intended to end his Gospel that way, without an actual resurrection appearance, and so they composed a more “proper” ending. The odd verse about snakes was probably created on the basis of Paul’s experience recorded in Acts 28:3–6, where he was not harmed by a viper’s bite while on the island of Malta, and an overly literal interpretation of Jesus’s promise to his disciples that they will tread on snakes and scorpions without ill effect (Luke 10:19). But there are far more textual variants within these twelve verses than within any comparable span of text elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel. And the style of writing in the Greek significantly differs from the rest of Mark’s Gospel.<sup>15</sup> A footnote in the *ESV Study Bible* also tells us that

a few manuscripts insert additional material after verse 14; one Latin manuscript adds after verse 8 the following: *But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.* Other manuscripts include this same wording after verse 8, then continue with verses 9–20.<sup>16</sup>

All this makes it overwhelmingly likely that Mark did not originally contain these verses.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars debate whether the original ending of Mark was lost or whether he intended to end with what we call verse 8. The open end of a scroll was the most vulnerable part of a manuscript for damage; perhaps Mark literally got “ripped off”! More likely, he intended to end with the fear and failure of the women. His Gospel is the one that most emphasizes the fear and failure of all of Jesus’s followers, male and female alike. If early church tradition is correct that Mark wrote to Roman believers experiencing increasing persecution, then this makes good sense since he could have wanted to highlight that Jesus’s first followers were no stellar heroes of faith. If God could use them, despite their gaffes, he could use Roman Christians a generation later as well, despite their insecurities and weaknesses. Mark is not concealing information from his audience that they don’t already know. They could scarcely have become believers without having heard about Christ’s resurrection appearances. But he is catching them up short by stopping where he does, in order to make a point that should, even in a slightly backhanded way, greatly encourage them.<sup>18</sup>

The situation with the story of the woman caught in adultery is quite different. Whereas there are a number of good, generally reliable, relatively early manuscripts that contain the last twelve verses of Mark, almost none of the oldest, most complete, and most reliable manuscripts contain John 7:53–8:11. A few that do include these verses place them elsewhere, such as after John 7:36, at the end of John’s Gospel, in the narrative stream of Luke’s Gospel (after 21:38), or at the end of Luke’s Gospel! Again, there are more textual variants than normal for this length of passage. Obviously it is a story looking for a final form and for a home. On the other hand, there is nothing theologically objectionable here like handling snakes or drinking their venom. Even fairly liberal scholars often think that the account of the woman caught in adultery reflects an authentic episode from the life of Jesus, not least because no other known teacher in his world would likely have been so gracious in this kind of situation. But the account almost certainly was not written by the author of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>19</sup> To quote the *ESV Study Bible* again, “It should not be considered as part of Scripture and should not be used as the basis for building any point of doctrine unless confirmed in Scripture.”<sup>20</sup> Preachers, Sunday School teachers, and Bible

study leaders who fail to heed this advice risk setting their people up for confusion when books like Ehrman's appear and people have no idea how to respond. Christian leaders need to teach the basics of textual criticism in a responsible way to their congregations.<sup>21</sup>

Why is this discipline no threat to Christian faith? It is because there are no other places in all 25,000+ manuscripts where any other passages like these two appear. Had there originally been more, it is impossible that all record of them could have been expunged from the textual tradition, given how independently from each other many of these documents were copied. The same is true of shorter variants. There are about two dozen in the entire New Testament that involve one to two verses. All the rest affect less than a verse, usually just a few words. Interested readers can flip through the footnotes of their modern English-language translations, locate them, and decide for themselves how crucial they are. All told, a typical English translation of the New Testament will include around 200–300 variants in its footnotes, averaging roughly one per chapter of the various books.<sup>22</sup> The following is a cross-section of illustrations to help the reader get a feel for their nature.

In Matthew 5:22a, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) accurately reflects what was almost certainly the original text of Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court." Of all the major translations, only the KJV and NKJV add "without a cause" after "angry," because the translators commissioned by James I of England to produce the KJV in 1611 had access to only about twenty-five manuscripts, most of them much later and noticeably less reliable than the best manuscripts that have been rediscovered in the centuries since.<sup>23</sup> In this passage, some ancient scribes were clearly trying to make Jesus's teaching a little more manageable. The "harder reading" is usually the earlier reading (unless it becomes nonsensical), and Jesus's seeming condemnation of all anger against one's spiritual siblings is certainly the harder reading of the two.<sup>24</sup>

In the KJV and NKJV, Matthew 6:13 contains the famous doxology at the end of the Lord's prayer: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever ["forever" NKJV]. Amen." All other major translations exclude these words because they are overwhelmingly absent

from the earliest and most reliable manuscripts. Well-meaning scribes probably thought the prayer deserved a better ending, and the words may have been composed on the basis of 1 Chronicles 29:11–13.<sup>25</sup> There is absolutely nothing wrong with praying these words, unless a person has decided never to speak a word in prayer that is not a direct quotation of Holy Scripture! They just don't appear to have been in Matthew's original text, so they should not be treated as uniquely inspired.

Ehrman's selection of Mark 1:41 is a good example. Most modern translations follow the KJV here, reporting that Jesus, seeing the leper, was "moved with compassion" (or an equivalent expression). Codex Bezae, an important fifth-century Greek manuscript of what is called the Western text-type, like various old Italic manuscripts, reads instead that Jesus was "indignant." The external evidence in support of the "indignant" reading is not at all strong enough to tip the scales in its favor, but the internal evidence overwhelmingly supports it. What scribe would ever change Jesus's compassion to indignation? Yet it would be easy for scribes to think that Mark was claiming Jesus was upset with the leper, rather than with his disease or its effects in making him a social outcast, and therefore want to change the text to "moved with compassion."<sup>26</sup> As a result, the updated (2011) edition of the New International Version (NIV), along with the Common English Bible (CEB), has used "indignant" and put "moved with compassion" into a footnote as an alternate option, while the Revised English Bible (REB) reads simply "moved to anger."

On the other hand, against Ehrman, Hebrews 2:9 really does have too little external evidence for his suggestion to be the original reading. The manuscripts containing "apart from God" are few, late, in languages other than Greek, or in secondhand quotations. The Greek for "by the grace of God" in the capital letters of the earliest manuscripts, without spaces between the words, is XAPITIOEOY, while "without God" is ΧΩΡΙΣΘΕΟΥ. Because Jesus sensed the rupture of his communion with the Father on the cross, when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), a scribe could easily have misread the text of Hebrews he was copying and yet realized that "without God, he [Jesus] tasted death for everyone" made perfect sense and so didn't catch his mistake.<sup>27</sup>

A famous two-verse variant appears in Luke 22:43–44. In the middle of Jesus’s agony in the garden of Gethsemane, we read that “an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” The NIV offers the following footnote at this point: “Many early manuscripts do not have verses 43 and 44.” Many others do. The external evidence is quite split: about half of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts contain these sentences, and about half don’t. The vast majority of all the late manuscripts contain them, but their evidence doesn’t weigh that heavily in a decision. There is nothing terribly “hard” about this reading, especially when we realize that Luke is employing a simile: Jesus’s sweat is *like* drops of blood. The text does not say he actually sweats blood. So it seems more likely that some overly pious scribe wanted to add a supernatural dimension to the story, with the role of the angel as strengthening Christ, than that someone omitted these verses despite finding them in the manuscript he was copying.<sup>28</sup>

By now, readers discovering textual criticism for the first time may well be asking, “If various passages are not likely original, why do translations at times continue to print them?” The answer is that some people take serious offense at anything being left out of a given Bible translation that previous translations have typically included, and Bible translators and publishers want to avoid unnecessary hostility against them!<sup>29</sup> The Revised Standard Version (RSV) was one modern translation that often relegated such doubtful verses entirely to its footnotes, but the majority of versions adopt the approach of the NIV: retain the text but alert the readers with a footnote about the extent of the textual uncertainty.

If both the external and internal evidence for a certain variant is weak enough, however, most translations *will* relegate the doubtful words to a marginal reading. The more famous or theologically significant a text is, though, the more they will exercise caution. For example, the NIV, the New English Translation (NET), the New American Bible (NAB), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), and the CEB all place Acts 8:37 entirely in a footnote. This verse provides a direct answer to the Ethiopian eunuch’s question about what stands in the way of his being

baptized. Philip answers that if he believes with all his heart, he may be baptized, and the eunuch replies that he believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The manuscripts that lack this interchange are truly impressive in both quality and number. There is every reason to believe that a scribe added this clarification, because without it the story never explicitly indicates that the eunuch has come to believe.<sup>30</sup> The primary reason that not all translations consign verse 37 to a footnote is because it is such a well-known, significant, and powerful confession of faith. People who overly exalt the KJV regularly criticize modern translations for a variety of (usually unjustified) reasons, and translators are reluctant to give them even more fuel for their attacks.

The examples we have given thus far, like others Ehrman considers, are among the handful of most dramatic and interesting variants. Even among the variants chosen for inclusion in the textual notes of English translations, the typical ones are much smaller and much less significant. In Romans 5:1, for example, there is very strong external evidence for the Greek verb “have” (EXOMEN) appearing in the first-person plural subjunctive mood, which would yield a translation such as “Therefore, having been justified by faith, *let us have* peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” English translations, in tandem with critical editions of the Greek New Testament, nevertheless almost unanimously adopt the later, widely attested reading EXOMEN, a simple indicative-mood verb meaning “*We have* [peace with God . . .].” In this instance, the internal evidence proves decisive. The entire paragraph that spans Romans 5:1–11 is about the results of justification. It is filled with theological statements, not commands or exhortations. One can understand how easily the omega (Ω) could have been inserted instead of the omicron (Ο), given how similar the two look. Moreover, verse 2 contains a verb (KAYXΩMEΘA) that, until accent marks were added centuries later, could have been read as either indicative or subjunctive. In other words, it could have meant either “we boast” or “let us boast.” A scribe understanding this word as a subjunctive might well have wanted to change the verb in 5:1 to a subjunctive, too, so that the two words would match in function.<sup>31</sup>

A good way to get a feel for how ordinary and uninteresting are the vast majority of textual variants is to choose a single section of text in

one of the biblical books and note all the variants that the UBS Greek New Testament has chosen as worthy of inclusion, remembering that by definition these will be the most significant and “exciting.” John 3:16, for example, is one of the best known and loved Bible verses of all. Are there significant textual variants in it or in its context? The UBS presents only three textual issues for all of John 3:1–30. In verse 13, there is some uncertainty as to whether the original read simply, “and no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man,” or whether after “Son of Man” should be added either “the one in heaven” or “the one from heaven.” In verse 15 (“in order that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life”), some manuscripts substitute a synonymous expression for “in him,” a few say “on him,” and a number add language from verse 16, yielding “in order that everyone who believes in him might *not perish but* have eternal life.” In verse 25, finally, the debate about cleansing that erupted between John’s disciples and “a Jew” is in some manuscripts between John’s disciples and “Jews,” plural. Because of the uncertainty, a few late manuscripts simply omit any reference to the disciples’ conversation partner. The first of these three variants finds its way into the NIV footnotes; the other two are neither certain enough nor sufficiently significant to merit any mention.<sup>32</sup>

What about the additional variants that Nestle-Aland’s text presents? Now we can identify one that affects John 3:16 itself. Some manuscripts explicitly add the Greek pronoun for “his,” probably to make absolutely clear that this is the way the article used with “only” is to be understood (“his only Son” not just “the only Son”). But the idea is already clearly present in the sentence. Backing up to verse 12, there are a few texts that change the Greek tense of the second use of the verb “believe” to emphasize *ongoing* belief and thus match the tense of the first use of that verb in the verse. In verse 8, a few manuscripts repeat “of water and” before “the Spirit” to make the language match verse 5. Nothing else nearby is any more interesting; several items are even less so. What these very minor and poorly attested variants demonstrate most commonly is a desire to smooth out the text or to harmonize the language of one passage with that of another relevant passage on the same topic, often in the nearby context.

Or take another beloved chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13 on love. Again the UBS offers three textual footnotes. The first is quite interesting and has affected various translations. In verse 3 most have followed the KJV: “and though I give my body *to be burned* and have not love, it profits me nothing.” But instead of *KAYΘHΣOMAI* from “to burn,” key manuscripts read *KAYXHΣOMAI*, which is only one letter different. This then means “and though I give my body *to boast*.” That this is so less vivid a reading than “to be burned” suggests that a scribe probably changed it to the more dramatic reading rather than vice versa.<sup>33</sup> Thus the 2011 NIV, NAB, NET, NRSV, and New Living Translation (NLT) all use “boast.” The CEB follows this latter approach, too, with its rendering, “hand over my own body to feel good about what I’ve done.”

The other two variants in 1 Corinthians 13 are much less interesting. Some manuscripts do not repeat the subject “love” with the verb “boast” in verse 4. They use the word for love only twice in the verse: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” (NIV). Some repeat “love” a third time before “does not envy” (ESV), a few instead insert it a third time before “does not boast” (NASB), and some include it in both places (KJV). Finally, one important early manuscript uses a positive phrasing at the beginning of verse 5, so that love behaves in a seemly way, rather than the double negative (“love does not behave in an unseemly way”) that all the rest of the manuscript tradition contains.

Turning to Nestle-Aland’s additional variants, we find an issue over the tense of an infinitive (“to remove”) in verse 2. Should it be aorist (simple action) or present (ongoing action)? In verse 5, one early copyist accidentally wrote, “[love] does not honor others,” rather than “does not dishonor” (the difference in Greek is only a two-letter prefix). In verse 10, a few manuscripts add “then” between “but when completeness comes” and “what is in part disappears.” In verse 11, many manuscripts add “but” between “I reasoned like a child” and “when I became a man.” Verse 12 finds manuscripts divided among “as through a mirror,” “through a mirror as,” and “through a mirror and.” Finally, a few copies of verse 13 invert the order of “faith, hope, and love” and “these three things” in the Greek word order. Have Paul’s magnificent



teachings on love and spiritual gifts in this chapter been altered by any of these changes? Not one whit!<sup>34</sup>

Ehrman has one final claim, however, worthy of comment here. He argues that before Constantine became the first Christian emperor in the early fourth century and legalized Christianity, copies of New Testament books were not made nearly as officially and therefore not nearly as carefully. He postulates that if we had enough evidence, we would discover that the farther back in time one went toward the first century, when the books were first penned, the more diversity among the manuscripts one would find.<sup>35</sup> But this is sheer hypothesis unsubstantiated by any actual data. There is a slightly greater amount of variation among pre-Constantinian manuscripts than afterward, but there is no evidence that the farther one moves back in time from the early fourth century, the more the manuscripts diverge.<sup>36</sup> Nor is it the case that the manuscripts appear so few and far between that we have a “black hole” in our knowledge of the state of the text during this period. A full 102 copies of individual New Testament books or portions of them have been recovered from the second and third centuries.<sup>37</sup> And every single one of them is written with the very careful handwriting of an experienced scribe, not with the more careless scrawls of less literate individuals whom Ehrman postulates would have introduced many more errors in these earliest centuries.<sup>38</sup>

By now the point should be clear. The vast majority of textual variants are wholly uninteresting except to specialists. When one hears numbers like 400,000 variants (if that number is even accurate), one must remember that they are spread across 25,000 manuscripts. A large percentage of these variants cluster around the same verses or passages. Less than 3 percent of them are significant enough to be presented in one of the two standard critical editions of the Greek New Testament. Only about a tenth of 1 percent are interesting enough to make their way into footnotes in most English translations. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that *no orthodox doctrine or ethical practice of Christianity depends solely on any disputed wording*. There are always undisputed passages one can consult that teach the same truths.<sup>39</sup> Tellingly, in the appendix to the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman himself concedes that “essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual

variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”<sup>40</sup> It is too bad that this admission appears in an appendix and comes only after repeated criticism!

### *The Old Testament*

But what about the Old Testament? Ironically, the text of the Old Testament is not as secure as that of the New, yet skeptics hardly ever talk about it. Maybe this is because it’s a quite technical area of study and harder to understand; maybe it’s because one has to master several more foreign languages to gain true expertise in the field. Or perhaps it’s because they know most Christians (sadly) don’t care that much about the Old Testament.

Before the earliest discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, English translations were based almost exclusively on the Masoretic Text (MT), named after the Masoretes. They were the Jewish scribes who meticulously copied the Hebrew Bible (especially during the sixth through eleventh centuries AD) and, among other things, added the Hebrew vowel points to the consonantal texts they inherited. More than three thousand manuscripts, transcribed extremely carefully from these exemplars, survive from the 1100s through 1440.<sup>41</sup> The oldest existing copy of the MT can be dated to the ninth century AD. A very complete and well-preserved Hebrew Old Testament is Codex Leningradensis (named after Leningrad, or St. Petersburg, Russia, where it has long been housed). This copy dates to 1008.<sup>42</sup>

Although the existing copies of the Hebrew Masoretic Text were copied more than a thousand years after the eras in which the Old Testament documents were first written, scholars have long had access to ancient manuscripts of the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, produced in roughly 200 BC. The Septuagint is often referred to by the abbreviation LXX (the roman numeral for 70) after the legend that seventy (or seventy-two) scholars, all working in isolation from each other, created identical translations. Some of the manuscripts of the Septuagint are part of the same codices as the ancient Greek New Testaments, showing that they were preserved in Christian circles (and they are not word-for-word identical to each other!). After

the birth of Christianity, some distinctively Jewish editions of the Septuagint rendered certain key words and passages slightly differently, often in woodenly literal fashion, to make it harder for Christians to appeal to them as messianic prophecies fulfilled by Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

The differences between the ancient Septuagintal manuscripts and the Masoretic texts can occasionally prove dramatic. The book of Jeremiah, for example, is one-sixth shorter in the LXX than in the MT. Significant differences appear in smaller stretches of Joshua, Ezekiel, 1 Samuel, and Proverbs, while numerous other Old Testament books have interesting minor variations between the Greek and the Hebrew. Some sections within certain books are placed in differing orders, and the manuscripts containing multiple books of the Bible sometimes preserve the biblical books in different canonical sequence.<sup>44</sup> Scholars had long wondered whether all of these differences could be accounted for via loose translation of the Hebrew into Greek or by corruption, whether accidental or intentional, of the Hebrew text. Or could it be that in at least some instances, the LXX *was* a literal translation, but of a different Hebrew original? This last theory proved especially attractive, because the New Testament often quotes a Septuagintal form of an Old Testament passage, even when the LXX is not a very literal translation of the Hebrew (MT).<sup>45</sup>

With the discovery after World War II of portions of every Old Testament book except Esther in the caves near the shores of the Dead Sea, possibly representing the library of a separatist Jewish sect known as the Essenes at a monastic-like site called Qumran, scholars no longer needed to speculate. Overall, the most striking result of comparing these approximately 200 biblical manuscripts, ranging from roughly 250 BC to AD 50, was how similar they were to the Masoretic texts of a millennium or more later. The most stunning example of this was the discovery of an entire scroll of Isaiah with only a handful of extremely minor differences in content (as opposed to orthography or grammar) from the MT copies dating a millennium and a quarter later.<sup>46</sup>

Some copies of biblical texts in this collection, however, disclosed a variety of interesting differences from the MT. Occasionally, the texts of these far more ancient Hebrew manuscripts matched how the distinctive renderings of the LXX would read if translated back into Hebrew.

An excellent example of this appears in Deuteronomy 32:43b. The MT reads, “Rejoice, you nations, with his people, for [God] will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.” The LXX, however, adds at the end of the verse, “and let all the angels worship him.” This is precisely the portion of the verse that Hebrews 1:6 quotes, in the context of the letter’s argument that Christ is superior to the angels. Hebrew copies of Deuteronomy from the Dead Sea also contain these extra words.<sup>47</sup> A similar phenomenon recurs in numerous Old Testament texts. So now it is clear that at least some of the differences between the LXX and the MT are because the LXX translators were closely rendering a Hebrew text that differs from that of the MT rather than because the LXX translators were playing fast and loose with their sources.<sup>48</sup>

On other occasions the Hebrew scrolls from Qumran contain passages that were previously unknown from either the MT or the LXX. Probably the most striking example occurs between the end of 1 Samuel 10 and the beginning of chapter 11. The NIV, for example, follows the MT by ending the chapter, after Saul has been made king, with a reference to “some scoundrels” who “despised him and brought him no gifts.” Next the narrator adds, “but Saul kept silent” (1 Sam. 10:27). Chapter 11:1 then shifts to a new setting: “Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead.” Apparently realizing they could not resist him, the residents of Jabesh Gilead asked for a peace treaty and promised to become Nahash’s slaves. But what led them to give in so readily? This was not characteristic behavior for ancient Israelites. In the copy of 1 Samuel recovered from Qumran, the sentence “but Saul kept silent” is missing. The following appears instead:

Now Nahash king of the Ammonites oppressed the Gadites and Reubenites severely. He gouged out all their right eyes and struck terror and dread in Israel. Not a man remained among the Israelites beyond the Jordan whose right eye was not gouged out by Nahash king of the Ammonites, except that seven thousand men fled from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh Gilead. About a month later. . . .” (NIV mg.)

Then the text continues as in the MT of 1 Samuel 11:1.

The NIV prints this text in a footnote, being appropriately cautious not to jump to the conclusion that it was in the original text of Samuel. The ESV does not even put it in a textual footnote, though the Study Bible edition does mention it in its notes. But the NRSV introduces it as an unnumbered separate paragraph between 10:27 and 11:1, printing it in exactly the same font as the rest of the main text of 1 Samuel. The footnote in the NRSV reads, “Q Ms [Qumran manuscript] Compare Josephus, *Antiquities* VI.v.1 (68–71): MT lacks *Now Nahash . . . entered Jabesh-gilead.*” In his twenty-volume work *The Antiquities of the Jews*, first-century Jewish historian Josephus claims that Nahash had defeated other Israelite armies beyond the Jordan and gouged out their troops’ right eyes, which suggests that he was probably aware of texts of Samuel that contained this account.

Perhaps the majority of modern translations are right in concluding that this was a later scribal addition to explain how quickly the Jabesh-gileadites were ready to surrender. But the rationale recounts a bizarre episode, it does not seem to have any overtly theological motivation, and a much simpler explanation could have accounted for the reaction in Jabesh-gilead if someone were just making up a reason. At the very least, this additional paragraph may represent the true historical state of affairs, even if it was not part of 1 Samuel originally. Given the age of the Dead Sea scroll in which it appears, though, it just might have been what the oldest text of 1 Samuel contained.<sup>49</sup>

An example of a similar phenomenon that is easier to resolve appears in Genesis 4:8. This time it is not a Dead Sea scroll that potentially solves a mystery but the combined witness of the three most ancient or important translations of the Hebrew Bible—the LXX, the Latin Vulgate, and the Syriac—along with one Hebrew witness, the version of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) used by the ancient Samaritans. In the MT, something is clearly missing, because the verse reads, “Now Cain said to his brother Abel. While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.” All these other textual traditions, however, agree that what Cain said was “Let’s go out to the field.” The KJV obviously did not know what to do with this gap, so they tried a translation that would not make it so obvious that something was missing: “And Cain talked with his brother Abel.” But

that is not nearly as natural a translation of the Hebrew.<sup>50</sup> More-recent English versions have at times done something similar to that of the KJV (e.g., NASB, ESV), but most have filled the gap as the NIV does by adding, “Let’s go out to the field,” or something very similar (e.g., the Holman Christian Standard Bible [HCSB], NAB, NET, NJB, NLT, CEB, and NRSV).

Occasionally, the MT has a gap that other ancient versions filled in, but in a variety of different ways, suggesting that no one really knew any longer what the original text should be. Thus 1 Samuel 13:1 has long puzzled scholars. The most natural translation of the Hebrew of the MT is “Saul was one year old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel two years.” This obviously cannot be correct. The KJV dealt with this problem by translating, “Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel . . . ,” but this is not easily derivable from the Hebrew. The ESV, NAB, NJB, and NRSV assume that something has dropped out of the text but don’t supply anything other than ellipses, reading, “Saul was . . . years old when he began to reign, and he reigned . . . and two years over Israel.” Josephus says in one place that Saul reigned for twenty years (*Ant.* 10.143) and in another that he reigned for forty years (6.378). Most manuscripts of the Septuagint omit the verse, but a few late ones have Saul beginning to reign at age thirty. Acts 13:21 ascribes to Paul the conviction that Saul reigned for forty years. Combining these last two observations, the HCSB, NIV, updated NASB, NET, NLT, and CEB all opt for “Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years,” or words to that effect, assuming that forty is a round number for forty-two. But no Hebrew text has yet been discovered containing these clarifications.<sup>51</sup>

These examples barely scratch the surface of the topic but already point out a key principle that differentiates Old and New Testament textual criticism. Most scholarly reconstructions of the New Testament text are eclectic: they do not begin with one existing version of the New Testament in Greek but take into account all of the evidence before deciding on a reading in any given context. Old Testament textual criticism, however, almost always begins with the MT and then turns to other versions, whether from the Dead Sea Scrolls or other ancient translations, only if there are problems with the MT.<sup>52</sup> Of course,

different scholars and varying Bible translation committees will have different thresholds beyond which the MT is too difficult for them to believe that it was original.<sup>53</sup>

### **Did Originals Originally Exist?**

Because of the extent of the differences among the ancient versions of some Old Testament books, textual critics have at times suggested that we should not talk about one original text—the autograph—but merely the oldest text of a given book. Moreover, both Old and New Testament studies have often postulated stages of composition of various biblical documents, leading some scholars to wonder if we can even identify a final form of a text that was viewed as the author's finished product or as the finished product of one or more editors. If we cannot always isolate a final form, then the distinction between the composition of a book and its transmission becomes blurred.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, almost all of the theories of composition, however probable, remain entirely speculative in the sense that no manuscripts have ever been found of the supposed sources that a biblical writer used—whether it is Q (sayings of Jesus common to Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, which may have formed a pre-Synoptic written source);<sup>55</sup> or a version of Job without the opening and closing chapters that place Job's plight and discourses in the context of an unseen heavenly contest;<sup>56</sup> or a copy of 2 Corinthians 1–9 without chapters 10–13 (which was possibly a later Pauline letter combined on the same scroll with an earlier one);<sup>57</sup> or numerous other similar proposals for various biblical books. Even if such documents were discovered, that would not by itself mean they functioned as anything more than sources for the later, finished works that were greatly valued. That we are not always sure which version of a biblical book was viewed as the final, authoritative version does not mean that no such version ever existed. The ancient discussions of such topics always affirm or presuppose that people believed such versions *did* exist (cf., e.g., the debates between the Samaritans and Jews over which was the original and therefore authoritative Pentateuch).<sup>58</sup> So it remains most probable that each biblical

book circulated at a given time as a finished, authoritative document and only later began to be copied and/or translated.<sup>59</sup>

This supposition is strengthened by the study of the use of documents kept in libraries in the ancient Mediterranean world. Craig Evans has recently called attention to the important study by George Houston<sup>60</sup> of “libraries, collections and archives from late antiquity,” showing that “manuscripts were in use anywhere from 150 to 500 years before being discarded.” Evans continues, “The fourth-century Codex Vaticanus (B) was re-inked in the tenth century, which shows that it was still being read and studied some 600 years after it was produced.”<sup>61</sup> Most laypeople and scholars alike have usually assumed that a heavily used manuscript would wear out after a decade or two so that there might be dozens of copies (of copies of copies . . .) having to be produced over just a few centuries (exactly the model Ehrman depends on for his theories). *In fact, the original copy of a biblical book would most likely have been used to make countless new copies over a period of several centuries, leading to still more favorable conditions for careful preservation of its contents.* This is precisely what we see at Qumran, with scrolls of Old Testament books being preserved for 200–300 years. So when Bart Ehrman writes “We don’t even have . . . copies of the copies of the copies of the originals,”<sup>62</sup> he is almost certainly wrong. Second- and third-century New Testament manuscripts may well be copies of the very autographs, or at least copies of those copies.

A more modest revision of textual critics’ goals may, however, be in order. Particularly in Old Testament studies, given the potential gap of centuries between the presumed originals and the oldest copies in existence, even from Qumran, it might occasionally be more appropriate to speak of the “earliest attainable” form of a given document rather than the original.<sup>63</sup> Ironically perhaps, it is more conservative scholars, who tend to date biblical books earlier than many in the guild, who then need to reckon with an even greater interval between composition and extant manuscripts. But it is still important to recall that we have no actual evidence to suggest that the Hebrew text of a biblical book was ever treated without great care by the majority of copyists in *any* era of its transmission. Even when the Dead Sea copies of books deviated noticeably from the MT, they rarely introduced a new reading



unknown to us from all the versions and not readily explainable via an accidental error in copying or an intentional change in diverging from an earlier manuscript.<sup>64</sup> One may fantasize about all kinds of wild changes being introduced between the first, complete written form of a given book and the oldest copy we actually have, but it will be just that—fantasy—unless some truly remarkable new discoveries change the state of the discipline.

## Comparative Data

How does the wealth of textual evidence for the biblical books measure up with comparable evidence for other works of antiquity? The answer is that they do so astonishingly well. In the ancient Mediterranean world, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were by far the next most treasured documents outside of the Christian Bible, and they were put into writing eight hundred years before the New Testament, yet we have fewer than 2,500 manuscripts of those works put together.<sup>65</sup> Few other works exist in copies numbering even to triple digits; the collected works of the early second-century Roman historians, for example, number a little more than 200. Historians today are typically elated when we have a double-digit number of copies of an ancient work, as with 75 copies of the works of the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BC), 20 copies of the histories of his contemporary Thucydides, and 27 of the works of the Roman historian Livy (first century BC to first century AD). And the oldest surviving manuscript for any of these authors dates from at least four centuries after the time it was first written, sometimes as many as nine centuries after, versus a gap of only one century, or less, for most of the NT books.<sup>66</sup>

When one turns to the gnostic and apocryphal New Testament texts, about which much has been made in the popular media in recent years, most documents exist in the one and only copy that has been discovered in modern times. Occasionally we have discovered two copies, and in several instances there are radical differences between the two. In other cases, Greek fragments of apparently the same texts have been known for a longer period of time. By far the most famous and important of

these texts is the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, known from one complete fourth-century manuscript and fragments of three second-century Greek texts.<sup>67</sup> The contrast in the amount of textual evidence for the canonical Christian works could scarcely be greater.

When I wrote the first draft of this chapter in September of 2012, the internet was flush with speculation about a supposedly fourth-century scrap of Coptic text, released and translated by Harvard professor Karen King. King's article made it clear that she thought the text had no bearing on our knowledge about the Jesus of history,<sup>68</sup> but that was not what news reports latched on to. What they hyped was a fragmentary line of text that apparently read, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife . . .'" If the text were not a forgery, if it were genuinely from the fourth century, and if King had given us the best possible translation, we would still need to note that fragmentary fourth-century Coptic texts from the Middle East with unorthodox teaching about Jesus and the disciples are precisely what the large corpus of gnostic texts represents. These documents tell us next to nothing about the historical Jesus, only about the distortions made of him by one heterodox sect that came to full bloom only in the second century after Christ.<sup>69</sup> Within a short time, however, other scholars, especially Durham New Testament professor Francis Watson, gave reasonably conclusive evidence to suggest that the fragment was a forged, modern pastiche of snippets of the *Gospel of Thomas* and that the word King translated as "wife" should be rendered as "woman," detached as it originally was from "my."<sup>70</sup> Yet only a handful of news stories, not nearly as well publicized, disabused the public of the misleading views originally put before them.<sup>71</sup>

When people are willing to jump on discoveries like the *Gospel of Judas* (in 2006)<sup>72</sup> or the fiction of *The Da Vinci Code* (in 2003)<sup>73</sup> and to believe them, while remaining skeptical about whether we have any adequate copies of the Old and New Testaments, then it is clear that they are simply believing whatever they wish were true and have abandoned all vestiges of genuine scholarship or rational inquiry. If we cannot say with confidence that we have the ability to reconstruct a biblical text that is overwhelmingly likely to be very, very close to the original texts of the books of Scripture, then to be consistent we should discard *all* ancient writings on any topic as being far more suspect and plead

total agnosticism concerning the original contents of any documents produced before the breakthrough of Gutenberg's printing press in about 1440!

## **Avoiding the Opposite Extreme**

By far the greatest errors in discussions about the nature of the textual evidence for the autographs of the biblical books come from those who fail to appreciate how much of the original texts we can reconstruct with such a high degree of probability. But it is also crucial to help people understand that we do not claim to have a perfectly flawless copy of any book of the Bible anywhere in existence. Chapter 4 (below) discusses in more detail the Christian doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Suffice it for now to say that the standard, orthodox theology of the church has never been to claim inerrant *transmission* of God's Word, merely inerrant *originals*.

Some people, however, remain unnecessarily uncomfortable with a scenario in which God did not preserve his Word as perfectly as he first inspired it. The most extreme example of this discomfort is found in the "King James Version Only" movement. Each time the movement seems to be on the verge of death, someone or something revives it, and another generation must face the misguided claims of those who insist that the KJV is based on the most carefully preserved and most reliable of all the ancient manuscripts.<sup>74</sup> Less drastic but still misleading are the anthologies of perspectives that present the rare scholarly defender of the textual criticism on which this view relies as if the scholar actually represents a significant segment of the academic guild.<sup>75</sup>

Several major flaws afflict the arguments of the KJV-only defenders and the scholars co-opted to appear as if they support them. Their most central argument is that the Byzantine text-type of New Testament manuscripts, which the KJV translators followed and which reflects about 80 percent of all the existing texts, must be accurate because that sizable a majority of texts couldn't be wrong. But textual criticism is not a democracy. One does not count manuscripts; one weighs them. The reason so many texts of the Byzantine tradition have been preserved is

largely because Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul) was the center of the Eastern Orthodox world for centuries, exactly where one would expect the greatest number of manuscripts to be preserved.<sup>76</sup>

The KJV supporters also claim that the manuscripts that follow in the textual tradition of the Textus Receptus, or “Received Text,” flawlessly preserved the New Testament originals. They demonstrably did not. Neither the KJV translators, nor Luther before them, nor Erasmus before him ever used only one New Testament manuscript exclusively, and no two manuscripts of the few dozen used in preparing these English, German, and Greek editions, respectively, ever agreed in every exact detail. Intriguingly, a better case could be made for a remarkably carefully preserved textual tradition with the MT for *the Old Testament*, but KJV-only people actually talk less about that portion of Scripture. Still, even within the manuscripts of the MT, there remain a host of very minor variants.

The KJV-only supporters often allege that all modern translations are “liberal” because they have “removed” passages that support the Trinity, the deity of Christ, or some other cardinal doctrine. The most famous example appears in 1 John 5:7–8. The NIV reads, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” A footnote indicates that “Late manuscripts of the Vulgate [add after “testify”] . . . *in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth: . . .* (not found in any Greek manuscript before the fourteenth century).” There is a fascinating story behind how the fifteenth-century Catholic reformer, Erasmus, was talked into including the Greek for these italicized words in his edition of the New Testament by a manipulative priest when he had previously found them only in Latin texts, which in turn led to the KJV’s including them decades later, but that need not detain us here.<sup>77</sup> The important point to make is that modern translations are not *removing* the words; they are translating from the thousands of Greek texts *before* the fourteenth century, none of which *contains* the words. In this way, compared to the KJV, they are restoring the original text. It is true that *one* traditional proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity is now not available for believers; but there remain plenty of others!<sup>78</sup>

The real issue is a very different kind of theological one. Many people simply can't live with even a very slight uncertainty about the exact reading of the original text of a document they treat as inspired, authoritative, and infallible Scripture. So, however implausible their arguments have to be, they insist on defending the notion that God has inerrantly preserved his Word.<sup>79</sup> But think of just what kind of miracle this would need to be for it really to have occurred. Not only would God have superintended the process of a select group of biblical authors penning their documents so that their words reflected precisely what God wanted to have written; God would also have needed to intervene in the lives of all the tens of thousands of copyists over the centuries to ensure that not one of them ever introduced a single change to the texts they were reproducing. Moreover, if no translation other than the KJV is really adequate, what does that say about the sizable majority of all Christians in the history of the church who have never had access to the KJV? Which exactly is the one mysterious Greek manuscript that was somehow kept free from error, since the KJV relied on numerous texts, none of which was absolutely identical to any other? What about all the Christians before and after the KJV was published who have never been able to read a word of English or Greek? Did God not want any of these people to have an equally reliable copy or translation of his word?

A comparison with traditional Muslim beliefs about the Qur'an is instructive at this juncture. In Islam, reading the Qur'an in a translation from the original Arabic is never considered a very satisfactory substitute for learning enough Arabic to be able to recite the original text itself. Never mind whether you can understand it; so long as you can at least memorize and pronounce the words, Allah will be pleased.<sup>80</sup> After variant readings in copies of the Qur'an were discovered at the time of Muhammad's death, and all copies but one were destroyed, Muslim scribes and religious leaders have gone out of their way to carefully safeguard the process of copying their holy book to an extent that Christianity has never undertaken.<sup>81</sup> Most Muslims think this makes the Qur'an superior to the Bible. But I much prefer the Christian commitment to putting God's Word into the hands of as many people in the world in as many of their indigenous languages as possible (even if at times the processes of copying and translation have not been undertaken with as

much care as we would wish), in order to facilitate the greatest possible identification with and *understanding* of Scripture. Merely venerating the words of a text in a language one cannot understand, because they are supposedly identical to those given by God in an ancient culture, can hardly by itself make one religion or its holy book superior to another.

In essence, this is what the King James Only movement does. In that sense, it is more Islamic than Christian in methodology! Never mind if one cannot understand the Elizabethan English of the KJV. Never mind if the quest for a pristine original that was translated perfectly literally is a chimera. Never mind the amazingly ethnocentric arrogance behind idolizing one given language into which the Bible has been translated. The KJV-only people want certainty, not 99 percent probability or higher. So they create myths by which they deceive themselves into thinking they have attained the certainty that in fact does not and cannot exist.

Why should anyone expect more certainty in religion than in any other area of life, given that we are finite and fallen human beings? What we should want is confidence based on the greatest probabilities.<sup>82</sup> Every day in countless ways we trust our lives and well-being to beliefs and actions that have proven track records and are extremely likely to work successfully but are not 100 percent guaranteed. The chair that has always held us up can suddenly collapse under us, the gas station that has never run out of gasoline before may suddenly run dry, or the house we thought we would retire in may burn down due to an out-of-control forest fire. But if we failed to act until we could prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that every chair would hold us up, every gas station we stopped at would have fuel, and every home we considered living in was utterly fireproof, we would never sit down, our cars' gas tanks would all be empty, and we would live out-of-doors in tents!

## Conclusion

For every practical purpose for which Christians use the Bible, the modern editions of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament, like all the standard modern-language translations in use around the world today, can more than adequately function as remarkably close

approximations of God's inerrant autographs and can guide us theologically and ethically in every walk of life. The Scriptures have not been inerrantly preserved; to claim otherwise flies in the face of all the evidence and unnecessarily discredits Christianity among those who know better. More important, however, we have massive amounts of support for our convictions that the sixty-six books of the canonical Scriptures accepted by all branches of Christianity have been extraordinarily well preserved. Of course, knowing what the biblical writers most probably first penned does not make a word of their testimony true. But it means that we can move on to the question of their trustworthiness in ways that we couldn't if we weren't even sure what they first wrote.

First, however, we must ask, "Why these sixty-six books?" How can we know that the documents of the Protestant Bible are uniquely inspired and worthy of canonization? Do they all merit inclusion? Should more be added, like the Old Testament Apocrypha of the Roman Catholic canon? Why not include some of the writings of the early church fathers or of the gnostics? Or why not stop with the Hebrew Scriptures, as Jews do? What about the claims of the Muslims or Mormons to have additional scriptures from a much later period of time, often viewed as even more important for the faithful? And do all sixty-six books truly deserve a place in the canon? It is to these questions that we must now turn.