Textual Criticism and Textual Variations

**Intro:** The manuscripts we have are not without errors. It is certain that when men copy from either an original or other copies, an occasional mistake might be made. The presence of these errors in the text necessitates efforts to identify them, a process which is called textual criticism. This has developed into a highly advanced science, and the product of such efforts is an accurate recreation of the original autographs.

**Textual Criticism**

* *Higher Criticism* – authorship, date of composition, historical value, canonicity (Note: Much of the modern version of Higher Criticism is tainted by modernist theology, which denies the inspiration of the text, casts doubts as to authorship wherever possible, and ascribes commonality to plagiarism rather than inspiration. Remember, such analysis is often colored by the prejudices and personal beliefs of the critics.
  + Ex: Matthew and Luke used Mark, and another document called “Q” to write their gospels. Why? Matthew and Luke have some common material not found in Mark. So, they took from Mark, and then added from another source.
  + Ex: Jesus Seminar – A group founded in 1985. “The Seminar uses votes with colored beads to decide their collective view of the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth” (Wikipedia). Note: a bias is obvious, as references to Jesus as acting and speaking in a loving way were voted as genuine, but actions or words connoting judgment were voted spurious.
* *Lower Criticism* – Concerned only with the form of words – the text – of a document. The textual critic seeks through comparison and study of all available manuscripts to recover the exact words of the original composition.
  + The only way a translation can be dependable is if the original Greek text is free from copying mistakes, or deliberate changes made by scribes.
  + If the Greek text is faulty, all translations from the text will likewise be faulty.

**Mistakes of Copyists**

* *Unintentional errors.* Mistakes of the hand, eye or ear. Happen frequently. Usually very easy to pick out. Possibly mistaking one word for another, or a misspelling, or leaving a word out, or adding a word that doesn’t belong. Maybe transcribing a word twice, or copying the same line twice. When many manuscripts are examined, such mistakes can be easily identified.
* *Marginal notes.* Sometimes explanatory notes, written in a margin, might later be copied directly into the text. It has very rarely occurred, and again, the multiple manuscripts make it fairly easy to keep us on the right course.
* *Intentional errors.* Not by a “dishonest” scribe, but someone who thinks he has found an error, and seeks to correct it. Maybe an attempt to make the gospels agree more completely with one another. Rare, and more difficult to determine, but not affecting in any significant way the final text.
  + Ex: Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:35. (Oldest manuscripts agree the word in Matthew 11;19 should be “works” instead of “children.” Maybe a change made by an early copyist to make the two references agree?

**Rules of Textual Criticism** (General guidelines, not hard and fast)

* The most difficult reading is usually preferred. Other than obvious copying mistakes, which make for nonsensical passages, the natural tendency of a scribe to try to “smooth over” a difficult passage makes it probable that the more difficult reading is the correct one.
* The quality of the witness is more important than the quantity of witnesses. “Textual authorities must be weighted rather than counted” (Lightfoot). If thousands of manuscripts of late date stand opposed to early uncial manuscripts, their witness is to be rejected.
* In example of Matthew 11:19, most later manuscripts (those used by KJV translators) read “children.” However, both the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts read “works.”
* In parallel texts, different readings are preferred. (Gospels). The minute differences in words show the individual accounts from the gospel writers. If slightly different versions exist, as do exact duplications, it is probable that a scribe made a change to “harmonize” the two.

“What an unexperienced person might consider a maze of bewildering data on the text, a trained specialist will regard as a wealth of material in which has been preserved the original reading – and in this belief and by means of exact principles he sets to work.” (Lightfoot, 51).

**Significance of Textual Variations**

* Over 200,000 “errors” in the manuscripts. This large number obtained by counting all the variations in all of the 4500 manuscripts. (If one word is misspelled in 4,000 different manuscripts, it means 4,000 errors. In reality, only one error, copied 4,000 times).
* **Note:** The more manuscripts (more evidence) the greater number of errors! Therefore, a greater possibility of checking and identifying the errors!
* **Types of Variations:**
  + **Trivial variations**, of no consequence to the text. Changes no meaning. Different spellings, addition or subtraction of a “for”, “and”, “the.”
  + **Substantial variations** which have bearing on the text. (Most obvious example is Mark 16:9-20). In this case, almost every witness attests to it, including the Alexandrian manuscript, except for Vatican and Sinaitic (the best). Additionally, Irenaeus (early Christian writer) quotes from the text in the second century, and attributes it to Mark. (Note: the main events of Mark 16 are recorded elsewhere, so the truthfulness of the passage is not in dispute). One other example is Acts 8:37. Lightfoot states that evidence for the passage is weak. But, cf. Romans 10:9-10, Matthew 16:16).

“The variant readings in the manuscripts are not of such a nature that threaten to overthrow our faith. Except for a few rare instances we have an unquestioned text, and even then one principle of faith or command of the Lord is not involved.”

Conclusion:

Most all of the variations (errors) in the copies are easily revealed due to the large number of witnesses. Substantial variations are rare, and there is no example of any such variation that would in any way change a single Bible doctrine, or command of God. The realization of just how dependable our Greek and Hebrew texts are is comforting and strengthens our faith!