

The Transmission Record of the New Testament

By Allen Dvorak

The original documents of the New Testament books were preserved by God through natural means. As in the case of all other ancient documents, the method of preservation from one generation to another was through copying. Scribes made copies of the original documents which apparently perished over time. Additional copies were made of the first copies so that the inspired words of the original documents (known as “autograph copies”) were transmitted through the ages to modern man.

The individuals who made copies of the Scriptures were not inspired as were the authors of the New Testament books. As a result, these scribes made some errors in their copies. Although some may argue for divine guidance of scribes (and thus the inerrant quality of their work), it is an irrefutable fact that there are variants among the manuscripts, i.e., differences in the copied text. To properly evaluate the significance of these variants, it would be helpful to know what kinds of errors were made by the scribes who did the copying.

The original documents had no spaces between letters or words, probably due to the cost of the “paper” used for copies. Consequently, some errors involve the wrong division of words. Sometimes a scribe would mistake one line for another, resulting in the omission of letters, words or even phrases. Other errors caused by losing one’s place in the text include dittography, the repetition of the same letter or word, and transposition, the reversal of position of two letters or words. Occasionally, scribes made notes in the margins of their copies, notes which were sometimes incorporated into the text of a subsequent copy. It should be obvious to the reader that most of these errors would be easily identified by the comparison of multiple copies.

Unfortunately, it is also the case that scribes sometimes intentionally made changes in the text being copied. Such alterations usually involved small grammatical changes, attempts to “harmonize” one passage with another and the supposed “correction” of historical or factual “errors.”

To say that God preserved the original documents by natural means, however, does not exclude His superintendence. The divine answer to the problem of human error in copying was to make sure that we have many copies of the New Testament documents to compare with one another. The multiplication of copies inevitably increases the total number of scribal errors, but also provides the means for identifying those errors. Although the figure is inexact and dynamic (it changes as new manuscripts are discovered), the number of textual variants has been estimated at 200,000, occurring in about 10,000 places in the text of the New Testament. The reason for the difference in these numbers is that one place in the biblical text may account for multiple variants as manuscripts differ in that one place. Although the number of variants may seem high, most of these variants are very trivial, spelling, style, etc., as already noted. It has been stated by those familiar with the manuscript variants that no biblical doctrine depends upon a debatable text.

Lest anyone think that the transmission of the New Testament text was haphazard and ineffective, it should be noted once again that all ancient documents were transmitted the same way and the record of the New Testament is far superior to any other ancient document.

The task of the textual critic is to compare all of the available manuscripts containing a particular text for the purpose of determining the original text. Several factors are important in determining how effectively an ancient document was transmitted. First, the “gap” in time between the date of the autograph copy and the earliest existing copy is crucial. The larger the gap, the less certain the textual critic is that he has an accurate text in the earliest extant copy. Second, the total number of copies is important since these copies will be compared to one another. The larger the number of existing copies, the greater the certainty that scribal errors can be identified and the original text then

verified. Finally, the condition of the extant copies must be considered. How readable are they? Are they complete copies of the original text? Due to the perishable nature of early writing materials, some copies are fragmentary.

To illustrate the excellent transmission of the New Testament documents, the transmission record of other famous ancient documents should be compared. Julius Caesar, for example, wrote his “Gallic War” sometime around 50-58 B.C. The original text is preserved in less than a dozen copies and the earliest one is 900 years removed from the autograph copy! All the copies made of Caesar’s work for the first 900 years have perished or are undiscovered. How many changes were made to the text by scribes (in the ways already detailed in this article) during that 900-year period? Since those copies are not available for study and comparison, we will perhaps never know.

The Roman historian Livy wrote 142 books around the time of the birth of Christ, of which only 35 survive in 20 manuscripts. The early manuscript is 300 years removed from the autograph copies and even that manuscript contains only fragments of four books. The ancient work was so poorly preserved that we don’t have any text for most of the books written and very few manuscripts for those actually preserved.

Tacitus was another Roman historian whose *Histories* and *Annals* were completed around the end of the first century. Of the 14 books of his *Histories*, only 4 1/2 survive. There were 16 books in his *Annals* and only 10 of them survived. Textual critics have only two manuscripts of these works with gaps of 800 and 1000 years from the autograph copy! That is an incredibly poor transmission record, yet scholars rely heavily on the writing of Tacitus for details concerning the history of the Roman empire during that time.

The *History of Thucydides* is an ancient document written about 450 B.C. Only eight manuscripts survive and the earliest of those is 1,300 years removed from the autograph copy. That’s a long time for copies to be made and errors to multiply in those copies and yet we have not extant copies from that period.

The *History of Herodotus* was written about the same time as that of Thucydides and has a very similar transmission record, yet few historians seem to doubt that we have an accurate text of this Greek historian’s work. I have seen Herodotus referenced by many historians.

Homer’s *Iliad*, considered sacred by the ancient Greeks, has one of the best transmission records of any ancient document with 643 manuscripts available. Yet the earliest manuscript is 500 years removed from the autograph copy.

In contrast, there were 5,366 manuscripts of New Testament documents listed in 1986. We have the entire New Testament within 250 years and most of the New Testament within 150 years. Future articles will describe the nature and quality of some of these manuscripts.