

Scribal Interpolation and the Christian New Testament

Modern textual critics have identified sections of the Christian New Testament as additional material that were written centuries after the gospels were originally written. Most of this textual variation took place within the first three centuries of the early Christian era. In modern translations of the Christian New Testament, these interpolations have resulted in certain verses, words, and phrases being left out or marked as not in the original text. Textual criticism deals with the identification and removal of transcription errors and alterations in the manuscripts that were made by ancient scribes.

Christian New Testament manuscripts have been preserved in Greek, Latin, Syrian, Slavic, Ethiopian, and Armenian.

The New Testament is now known, in whole or in part, in nearly five thousand Greek manuscripts alone. Every one of these handwritten copies differ from the other one. It has been estimated that these manuscripts and quotations differ among themselves between 150,000 and 250,000 times. ...The actual figure is, perhaps, much higher. A study of 150 Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke has revealed more than 30,000 different readings. It is safe to say that there is not one sentence in the New Testament in which the manuscript' tradition is wholly uniform. – M.M. Parvis¹

Some of the most familiar verses of the New Testament were not originally part of the text, but were added by later scribes. These scribal additions are often found in late medieval manuscripts of the New Testament, but not in the manuscripts of the earlier centuries. – Bart Ehrman²

Four of the most commonly cited examples of scribal interpolation are Mark 16:9-20, Luke 22:43-44, John 7:53-8:11, and I John 5:7-8.

Mark 16:9-20: Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country.

And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by

no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.

According to most scholars, Mark 16:8 is the original ending of this gospel and the longer ending was written later by someone other than Mark.

Textual critics have identified two distinct endings to the gospel of Mark. The longer ending is contained in modern translations and the shorter ending appears in Greek and Ethiopian manuscripts.

The Council of Trent however, declared the longer ending as canonical at the Council of Trent.

Catholics are not bound to hold that the verses were written by St. Mark. But they are canonical Scripture, for the Council of Trent (Sess. IV), in defining that all the parts of the Sacred Book are to be received as sacred and canonical, had especially in view the disputed parts of the Gospels, of which this conclusion of Mark is one (cf. Theiner, "Acts gen. Conc. Trid.", I, 71 sq.). Hence, whoever wrote the verses, they are inspired, and must be received as such by every Catholic. – Catholic Encyclopedia³

Luke 22:43-44: Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

The authenticity of the passage has been disputed by scholars since the second half of the 19th century. These passages were not included in the earlier manuscripts nor were they mentioned by Clement or Origen.

[Luke 22:43-44] contravenes Luke's larger picture of a mighty Christ who strides confidently to his fate. All that later scribes were likely to notice, however, was that such a portrayal seemed to give aid and comfort to Docetic exegesis, where Jesus had nothing to fear, since he would suffer no pain in any case. Hence the interpolation of the bloody sweat: a Jesus is produced who has not only anxiety but sweat and blood, too. – Robert M. Price⁴

John 7:53-8:11: And everyone went to his own house. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act." Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him.

But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?"

She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

During the 16th century Catholic and Protestant scholars sought out the most correct Greek text of the Christian New Testament rather than relying on the Latin Vulgate. It was noticed by these scholars that these particular verses were missing in many of the early manuscripts.

Although this story is in line with many other stories in the gospels, most scholars argue that it was not part of the original text of John's gospel.

The Council of Trent though declared that the Latin Vulgate was authentic and authoritative. Since the Latin Vulgate included these verses, they were considered canonical.

As for the manuscripts, we know on the authority of St. Jerome that the incident "was contained in many Greek and Latin codices" (Contra Pelagium, II, xvii), a testimony supported today by the Codex Beza of Canterbury (D) and many others. The authenticity of the passage is also favoured [sic] by the Vulgate...It is thus possible, even from the purely critical standpoint, to adduce strong evidence in favour [sic] of the canonicity and inspired character of [these verses], which by decision of the Council of Trent, forms a part of the Holy Bible. – Catholic Encyclopedia⁵

I John 5:7-8: For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.

These two verses do not appear in any version of the text prior to the ninth century but do appear in the King James Bible. These verses appeared in some texts of the Latin Vulgate and was subsequently translated into Greek and added to the later Greek manuscripts.

The Christian New Testament is not consistent across the various manuscripts. Scribal interpolations have become accepted as canonical in these four cases as well as other parts of the text.

¹Biblioteca Pleyades. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.

[http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/biblianazar/esp_biblianazar_65.htm]

²Bart Ehrman *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.

³Joseph MacRory "Gospel of Saint Mark." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09674b.htm>]

⁴Robert M. Price. *Review of The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*.

[http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/reviews/ehrman_ortho_corrupt.htm]

⁵Leopold Fonck. "Gospel of St. John." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08438a.htm>]

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