
The Doctrine of Inerrancy and The Manuscript Variants

extracted from an appendix of
an unpublished, 1998 work - by
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first published in PDF format
at - www.Biblical-data.org

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APPENDIX NUMBER THREE:

The Doctrine of "Inerrancy" and the Manuscript Variants

To many scholars and Bible believers, there seems to exist a real tension between the notion that God's written Word is Holy, perfect, error-free *and* the fact that thousands of manuscript variants exist. Traditionally this incongruity has been downplayed by some theologians who state that:

Only about 400 of the 100,000 or 150,000 variations materially affect the sense. Of these, again, not more than about fifty are really important for some reason or other; and even of these fifty not one affects an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teachings.

[*Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version*, 4th ed., 1911. Philip Schaff. p. 177]

Many more such sentiments can be seen in evangelical works, such as that by Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 1972; pages 43 *ff.* The estimated number of 150,000 variants is by today's estimate, perhaps conservative. Most of these 150,000 variants are simple phonetic or spelling errors. In this present work on First Corinthians I disclose amongst its 437 verses about 2200 variants (not including simple phonetic or spelling errors). This occurs in just the 97 or so witnesses which I use, [refer to my end note following this essay]. There are about 560 *more* Greek manuscripts which contain all or a portion of I Corinthians! I would be fain to estimate a total of about 3,000 true variants in the Greek text of First Corinthians, incorporating all of its known Greek manuscripts. In my understanding of basic Biblical doctrines, I find in this great epistle alone, about 60 - 70 variants affecting any sort of a major doctrine, in fact only about a dozen or so may even be considered as really MAJOR. Consequently we do have some meaningful textual variations, and we should be able as Christians to answer for them. Hence the impetus for this appendix.

First I suggest we define "inerrancy" and its relation to "infallibility". The clearest definition which I have found is that which the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* declares:

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science.

[JETS - Volume 21, No. 4, December 1978. Article XII (in part), page 291]

Inerrancy, means without error. Infallible, means reliable, trustworthy and not misleading, a safe and sure guide. The Chicago statement also has an expositional essay attached which declares that "...the truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of irregularities of grammar or spelling..." [op. cit. above - JETS, page 295]. Then on page 296, of the same journal, they state that:

God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission.

They then continue by declaring that we today have many good translations which are dependable, so that the "true Word of God is within their [the readers'] reach." I support most of the Chicago Statement, but I also realize that it glosses over the manuscript variations which do impact major doctrines, and their naïve acceptance of many modern translations as "excellent" is an overt deception, without excuse.

Such was the common view of inerrancy in the mid-twentieth century. Today in the early twenty-first century we see a movement to the other extreme! Numerous scholars suggest that we cannot ever discern the original text, that it will always remain elusive! Note these quotes:

[The NT] is open, and successive generations write on its pages.

[*The Living Text of the Gospels*, David C. Parker, 1997, page 92]

...the people of God have to make up their own minds. There is no authoritative text to provide a short-cut.

[*Ibid.*, Parker, page 212]

At last NT textual criticism has lost its innocence and has learned to tolerate ambiguity—one of the sure signs of maturity.

[JBL, 123/1, (2004), page 9: *The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: "Not Without Honor Except in Their Hometown"?* Eldon J. Epp]

These postulations appear to be the results of frustration, the apparent conclusions which rational scholars succumb to. It is quite probable that these men and women are not able to use the one God-given *key* which enables believers to unravel the many variants and to see the correct and true reading. Without this type of faith, most scholars are thwarted in their attempts to rationally determine the original text via purely humanistic or scientific means.

Even an associate of mine—Dr. Reuben Swanson—feels that we cannot ever discern the original text [per correspondence]. The apparent frustration seems to be contagious.

However, if I may, I have a reply to such scholarly ejaculations:

God has allowed variants to exist in His preserved mass of manuscript witnesses. These variants serve two great functions:

(1) They serve as "road-signs" illuminating the path through the chaos of numerous manuscripts and versional survivors. They link and expose truths and errors, these revelations as truth or error, are the fruits of much protracted study, experience, and a trust in the Author.

(2) They serve as a protective shell or seal blocking out relevant humanistic or pagan extrapolations. They lure the enemy (Satan) into supposing that their presence will confuse and stop true prolonged confidence in the original semantics. Consequently a clear perception requires a mature, faithful exegete who utilizes the one key to their inner crystalline interlaced form—the indwelling Holy Spirit within the bosom of a hopefully obedient saint—this is the *necessary* key, the Holy Spirit. Without reliance upon this inner assistance, critics and exegetes are left to chance or the bleakness of human rationalism.

Alas! faith, that old ingredient, coupled with a mature saint who trusts and recognizes the indwelling Holy Spirit, can produce meaningful results. Results which should and do inspire confidence that we, have in the mass of surviving manuscripts, the full and complete Word from God. I further posit, that no one manuscript or text-type is to be seen as perfect, or error-free. No, I suggest that we need to utilize and examine numerous manuscripts in order to filter out the intentional variations and the variations which result

from transcriptional error. That is why I use about 16 percent of the surviving Greek manuscripts of the Pauline corpus in this work, I do not rely upon one or two manuscripts, or a single text-type.

By allowing His Word to disperse itself into a mass of surviving testimonies, God has effectually protected the Word; leaving it only accessible to believing saints. Accessible especially to saints who are gifted to do the work of textual criticism. Hence, to me, a genuine Christian textual critic is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit existing in our present dispensation. The earlier temporary gifts (prophecy, tongues, special knowledge, interpretation of tongues [i.e. languages]) existed because back then (pre A.D. 98) they did not have the complete Bible. Today we have the complete Bible, but now we require a number of gifted saints to perceive its integrity amongst the manuscripts, and to share and publish their research for the benefit of other hungry believers.

This is not to suggest that for hundreds of years past believers were denied a full and correct Bible; the KJV is a very good translation (in English) and presents a fine text for many general purposes, especially for the purposes of past generations. The same is true of the German Bible translation by Martin Luther. One can even peer back to the medieval ages when they often utilized the Byzantine text-type, which seems to be more accurate than the competing texts in Rome and in Egypt. In our present dispensation, it is possible that we are living in an era when the "last days" is nearly upon us, thus we require precise information about the text. We also live in an era when old pagan beliefs are resurfacing such as gnosticism, drug induced philosophies, a growing trust in all sorts of magic, an increase of bloody ritual sacrifices, a belief in numerous gods and goddesses, a Greek style of religious humanism and a resurgence of the old Sodom and Gomorrah immoralities/homosexualism. Rising up against all of these old and new deceptions is a clearer perception of God's Holy and complete written Word.

The Bible itself paints a troubled picture of the latter days of this age, note these passages: [each is a citation from the KJV]

1 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. 2 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, 4 Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; 5 Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. 6 For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, 7 Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. [II Timothy 3:1-7]

6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: 7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. 9 For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.
[Colossians 2:6-9]

1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; 2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; 3 Forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.
[1 Timothy 4:1-3]

The above selections amply disclose that the last days of this dispensation will be filled with all sorts of increased deceptions and pagan religious activities. Consequently a clearer and highly ratified Biblical record is surfacing to meet the challenge, to lead and comfort those who seek to know the truth.

When confronted with variants in the ancient witnesses, the genuine textual critic will need to have met the following criteria to make proper decisions:

- [1] Properly trained in all the aspects of the original language(s).
- [2] Able to perform palæographical evaluations of each manuscript.
- [3] Able to pray and wait upon the Lord (and the indwelling Holy Spirit).
- [4] To have been called and equipped by God for this type of service.
- [5] To have years of experience of trusting God, to recognize His subtle guidance and that inner "still small voice".
- [6] To be making an effort to live a proper life, living in sin corrupts, so the sin needs to be stopped and confession and prayer instituted. Otherwise fellowship with God is severed and the work is crippled.

- [7] The critic should be mature, (yes, I know I am repeating myself) having experienced a range of challenges in this dark and evil world. New "converts" need aging. Babes are never drafted into an army and textual critics should be highly trained soldiers, ready for spiritual battle and experienced in spiritual warfare. Able to see the enemy's camouflage.
- [8] Able to effectively communicate [speak, write] in his/her native language. He/she needs a quiet place to study, and is able to focus or concentrate. Various resources are also required—good copies of the manuscripts, along with tested and reliable information sources.

The above presents a partial list, even as such it seems intimidating to this writer, as I know that I struggle with sin, and I need to often re-establish fellowship with the One Who chose me.

One may have noticed in the quote of Philip Schaff's work (*Companion to the Greek New Testament...*) he wisely mentioned that concerning a doubtful passage [that is a passage in which the variant seems unresolvable] the basic truth is elsewhere in the Bible sustained. I find this is usually so, so it helps if the critic is also conversant with the full text of the Bible. But what is to be done when several apparent orthodox critics cannot agree, each preferring a different reading? I assume that each seems to be a trained saint. Many scoffers would declare that when a critic relies upon faith to establish the text, that any and all whims result, and that no two exegetes fully agree.

This charge on the surface, seems serious. When we examine the translations of many different Bibles, we note various disagreements. Yet suppose that each was crafted by a group or committee of believers, what then, has God misled both? Certainly most claim that God has blessed their effort; yet their results often do not agree, and may even be incompatible! Note this passage as quoted from three translations reputed to be made by believers and of an evangelical stance:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not arrive until the rebellion comes and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.
[Net Bible, II Thessalonians 2:3]

Let no man deceive you by any means: for *that day shall not come*, except there come a [sic, the] falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;
[KJV]

Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,
[NASB, first edition]

There is much more to this verse than meets the eye. However, I shall confine myself to observing the words—"rebellion", "falling away first", and "apostasy". Each is a rendering of the Greek word ἀποστασία (and πρῶτον, "first"), interestingly the Net Bible omits "first" which is in all texts and known manuscripts which have this passage. The KJV renders an article "the" as an "a", which is an error. Our Greek term is translated in three different ways! One translation is somewhat ambiguous—"apostasy" as it is a transliteration—yet this Greek word had *two* meanings. The popular meaning was "rebellion", and this notion of "standing-apart" exists in the earliest forms of this word, back to the Mycenaean period (1450 BC.). Etymologically both "rebellion" and "apostasy" seem to be on firm ground. The term is only used here in the NT. In hundreds of other non-Biblical occurrences, it carries this semantic denotation of rebellion. Yet, there is seen several ancient writings which carry the meaning of "falling-away", a physical separation, not a separation via a rebellious stance.

In one of the occurrences a similar term used, is derived from ἀποστασις which word is an earlier form of ἀποστασία. The sample is from Clement of Alexandria's work titled: *Stromata*, and the passage is labelled, 4.22.141.1.2 on the TLG disk E. The Greek text appears as:

καὶ περὶ θανάτου ἐξακουεῖν. ἑκάτερος γὰρ δηλοῖ τὴν ἀποστασὶν τῆς ψυχῆς

Clement mentions the "separation of the soul (ψυχῆς)" at death, which is likened to sleep. Though in the above, "division" may also be a good rendering of ἀποστασιν. More precise, is the term used in the apocryphal text titled: *The Assumption of the Virgin*, as transcribed by Tischendorf in *Apocryphes Apocryphae: Mosis, Esdrae, Pauli, Iohannis: Item Mariae Dormitio*. Lipsiae, 1866, page 105:

ἠγνοεῖ γὰρ ὁ χιλιάρχος τὴν τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῆς μητρὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἀποστασίαν τὴν εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ

For the commander was not aware of the departure [ἀποστασίαν] of the apostles and the mother of the Lord to [or, into] Jerusalem."

Here the noun clearly shows a separation, a departure—as opposed to the common meaning of "revolt", or "rebellion". One should also note that in the work by the Alexandrian philosopher, Olympiodorus (circa A.D. 560), titled: *In Aristotelis Metora Commentaria*, 003 320.2 [per the TLG indexing] we also find a clear usage meaning - departure, or removal.

τη ξηροτητι την αιτιαν της αποστασιας του υγρου παρατιθεται και ταυτη διδωσι την πηξιν

the cause of the dryness (is) the separation (or, removal) of the moisture as it is set before, and this gives the freezing (or, coagulation)

The term does occur with the meaning of "departure"—(Clement wrote circa A.D. 200, and the Assumption text probably originated in Egypt no earlier than "the close of the fourth century" [HDOB-extra volume, page 435a])—we cannot dismiss this meaning if the context, or some other reason, supports it. I might add that forms of the word are also used for "divorce" in numerous writings. The rendering of the KJV as "falling away" has definite historical support. An older form of αποστασια (αποστασις), was used as early as 450 B.C. for "departure", [in Euripides, per *Greek English Lexicon*, ninth ed., Liddell, Scott, Jones et al.. pages 218f.].

The final decisive clue as to the meaning of our apparent ambiguous term αποστασια, will come from the context of the Thessalonian correspondences themselves. Paul clearly states that the "day of the Lord" ["Lord", is the better reading here, as the "day of Christ" is reserved for the later Philippians epistle] would not come until after two events FIRST occur. The two named "events" are the exposure of the "man of lawlessness" and our "apostasy" or "departure". Now Paul had been trying to comfort the Thessalonians as they had been lied to, they were told that their dead were lost, or that the day of the Lord has already come or is about to come. Note verse two of II Thessalonians chapter two:

That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of the Lord is at hand.

[modified KJV text - "Lord" for the KJV "Christ" substituted]

One of Paul's proofs, which should convince them that the day had not yet then occurred was that the "departure" had not occurred. If it had occurred, they would not be on earth! Paul has in mind the rapture, the

removal of the heavenly Body of Christ before the coming "time of Jacob's trouble". As for a "rebellion" this has always been occurring, as evidenced by the oft reoccurring prophets of doom who base their expectations on the many periods of revolt and rebellion seen in the world and even amongst believers.

So my choice as to the meaning (and even concerning several variants within this verse, "Lord" for the KJV "Christ, *et al*) is based upon my understanding of the two epistles—I and II Thessalonians. [In the wider contexts, one might need to recall the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, and texts from Daniel's prophecy!]. Certainly someone is going to be "snatched" and to rise and meet the resurrected Lord *in the air*! The first epistle to the Thessalonians teaches this, which is a classic text describing the actual "snatching" or rapture. The event occurs in the air, so it is not the second coming of Christ to establish His earthly rule, it is a coming to remove the believers; it is to be a comforting message. If it were a message of a coming tribulation (oh the horrors) this would not produce any comfort, hence in my mind the ἀπαζω/ rapture, describes this "departure".

My choice is also shaped by my resultant theology, which theology was forged from years of Bible study. Another text critic, and one who would also be a believer in the validity of the Bible and via his or hers own salvation through the death, burial and resurrection of the Christ; might declare that the term means "rebellion", as perhaps he/she cannot accept a pretribulation rapture. There are quite a few folks (believers, saints) who follow the standard Reformed theology, and who would reject my interpretation and variant choice.

Only one choice is correct, this is not an ambiguous passage. Despite the pleasure that a David Parker or Eldon Epp might receive by entertaining confusion here, the text has one meaning, it is not confusing. There are passages in Scripture which do and should have several meanings: for example numerous prophecies have a near (in a chronological sense) fulfillment, and a later fulfillment. Certain "types" also can carry multi-semantic meanings, and these are usually perceivable especially to those who have a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the entire Bible. Some texts can have a true ambiguous meaning because of intended grammar, such as the syntax of the word "joyously" below:

11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.
[Colossians 1:11,12- NASB]

The word "joyously" be can read as in the above translation, or it can be rendered (via Greek syntax) as such:

...for the attainment of all steadfastness and patience with joy. 12 Giving thanks to the Father...

In both cases the text has an altered meaning, and both are grammatically correct. It is my understanding that BOTH renderings are valid. This is because I suspect that this particular type of ambiguity is intentional, a design via the Author.

As concerns our text in II Thessalonians, I arrive at a conclusion which has no ambiguity, as there is no intended ambiguity herein. Just because two or more *interpretations* can exist, does not mean that the text of God's Word is ambiguous. In our sample text from II Thessalonians, several meanings *seem* possible, but only one is right. It is also possible that when two (or more) interpretations collide that the resolution may not stem from which of the variant readings is correct, but rather which exegete is currently living a proper life in the presence of God! Further, one of the exegetes may be blinded by religious bias, or may not even recognize the transcendency of the Holy Writ. In such cases we students must evaluate the exegetes themselves in order to clear the conflict, confusion or fog.

Differing opinions and the presence of variants should encourage open discussion, and a hammering-out of the facts. This discussion is good and healthy, it helps believers to think about God's written Word. Hopefully to come to their own independent conclusions, not dependent upon the popular religious creeds or thousands of competing religious organizations. [*à la* Harnack!].

One needs to recall that this is God's Word, it is not to be handled as if it were the mere creation of some humans, it is Holy and distinctive, filled with transcendent concepts! I know of no humans who will ever, while on earth, fully comprehend the totality of this wonderful Book. It is an endless mine, into which the hard working miner can probe forever for gems of truth and beauty. It is the only source of real truth on earth; and to this editor, it is a great unending source of joy and awe.

In its original form, God's Word existed as error-free (inerrant). That original text required many copying events to preserve the text. In God's wisdom He allowed variants to occur in the copies. These are not truly hindrances to believers who seek their way through the Word. To the non-elect, to pagans, and even to immature beginners they can be forks in the path

which lead the unwary astray. Variants, it seems to me, serve as God's security devices. Devices which require a unique key to bypass or open, that key is the indwelling Holy Spirit within the bosom of a sincere student. So, study, pray and exercise your God-given faith.

Pagans and other types of critics may sense frustration when encountering tough theological/linguistic decisions, but their frustrations should not force believers to accept their liberal indifferences or their contrived and superficial solutions. I thank God for the variants! May they cause you to study and to become immersed within the text of God's Word.

END NOTE: In my estimation of total variants in the Greek text of I Corinthians, I am basing the estimates upon what I have published, for example: chapter one of I Corinthians has 31 verses, and I count 156 valid Greek variants in the 31 verses. This does not include simple phonetic errors, moveable -nu or itacisms et al. Nor does the count include any of the versional evidence. In verses 18 and 19 (for example) I would and do count 11 real variants, not the full 22 displayed. Nor do I count each witness, I count the actual Greek variants, not the number of manuscripts reading or not reading such-and-such a variant.

Thus, we note about 2200 variants in all of I Corinthians via my estimation based upon chapter one, and based upon 15% of the known manuscripts. This works out to about 5 variants per verse. I suspect that when all 650 Pauline MSS are examined that we would be close to 3,000 true variants, or about 6.8 per verse. IF this estimate holds true for all of the Greek New Testament, we would then see a grand total of about 54,000 valid Greek variants in the entire Greek New Testament (using the KJV total verse number of 7,959).

