



YOU CAN TRUST THE BIBLE

As one should never purchase a new car without doing some research as to cost, economy, value and size—to say nothing about power and style—in the same way we should do some research before choosing the version of the Bible upon which we will base our theology and Christian experience. But this reality raises many questions. Where does one start? How does one do the needed research? Perhaps we don't even know the questions to ask to find the answers we need.

Most of us realize that there are two main categories of Bibles that are widely available today. These are literal translations, including the *King James Bible*, *The New International Version* and the *New American Standard Bible*, and paraphrases such as *J.B. Phillips*, *New Living Bible* and *The Message*. We immediately note that the reading of some verses varies widely. Even if we compare two literal versions such as the KJV¹ and NASB, we see that some verses are identical, others quite differ-

ent. Why is this so? Which is correct?

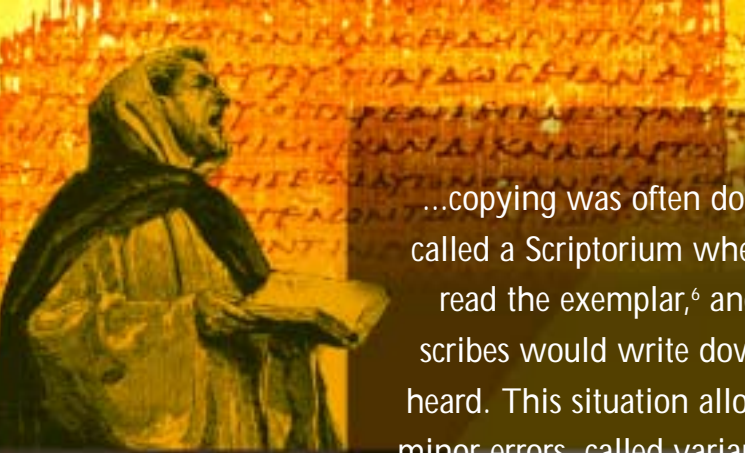
Before we can answer these questions, we need to examine how scholars derive modern versions from the original languages. In this article we will limit ourselves to a discussion of the formation of the New Testament. Both the literal versions and good paraphrases are based on the underlying Greek text of the New Testament. Often—not always—differences in reading in our English Bibles spring from variant readings in the Greek text. This fact leads us to what I consider to be a fascinating discovery of how today's New Testament came into being.

No one person sat down and wrote the Greek Bible. Rather the Gospels, Epistles and the Apocalypse were all written in single units, and later, as the church realized the treasure of these various writings, they gathered them together into what we call the canon of the New Testament.² The Gospels and Epistles of Paul

(including Hebrews³) were the first documents to be included in the Christian canon along with the Old Testament. Some years later Acts was added, and then the General Epistles and Revelation.

In some geographic areas of the early church there were several other writings that were, for a period of time, included in the Christian writings. *The Shepherd of Hermes*, for example, was one such document recommended as reading for Christians. However, as the church read and studied the early manuscripts, they came to realize that the books we now have⁴ in the canon of Scripture were inspired of God.

While it is true that the church councils voted on what would be included in the canon of the Bible, their vote did not make the included works inspired. Rather, the self-evident witness of the Holy Spirit in these writings is what prompted the church to recognize them as the Word of God, while it rejected other popular early documents. But this internal wit-



...copying was often done in what is called a Scriptorium where one person read the exemplar,⁶ and a group of scribes would write down what they heard. This situation allowed for many minor errors, called variants, to enter in.

ness of the Holy Spirit is only part of the saga of how our Bible came to be.

How Variants Came In

Faulty hearing variants: The early manuscripts of the New Testament documents were hand written on papyrus scrolls with quill and ink, and later, parchment and vellum⁵ were used. As the papyrus scrolls were rolled and unrolled during use, they would wear out and need to be copied. This copying was often done in what is called a *Scriptorium* where one person read the exemplar,⁶ and a group of scribes would write down what they heard. This situation allowed for many minor errors, called variants, to enter in.

Sometimes words (which we call homonyms) sounded alike but had different spellings and meanings, and scribes would accidentally write the wrong word. In Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, a number of vowels and diphthongs came to be pronounced alike, all of them sounding like the long “e” in “feet.”⁷ This similarity in pronunciation led to occasional confusion. For example, in English we have “read” and “reed” and “great” and “grate.” An illustration of the problem these homonyms create is found in some manuscripts in the presentation of 1 Corinthians 15:54. Some read, “Death is swallowed up in victory” (nekos); others read,

“Death is swallowed up in conflict” (nikos).

Faulty seeing variants: Sometimes, because of the way the Greek letters were printed on the original manuscript, or exemplar, the scribe copying from the exemplar misread them. Those who read my handwriting can certainly understand this problem! Because of misreading the Greek he was copying, one scribe miscopied Romans 12:11. It actually reads, “not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord,” but mistaking the writing on the exemplar, he wrote “...serving the time” instead of ‘serving the Lord.’”

Memorization variants: In Colossians 1:14 most modern translations read, “In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” However, one scribe, probably having memorized a lot of Scripture, remembering Ephesians 1:7 expanded the verse in Colossians to, “In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins” (KJV). While the statement is true, it is true based upon Ephesians 1:7 and not Colossians 1:14.

Scribal addition variants: Sometimes scribes would add historical and/or geographical details. For example, the reading of John 5:4 is a case in point. The KJV reads, “For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” This verse, however, is not included in the earlier manuscripts.

Therefore, verse four is left out in all modern translations.

Another similar variant is that of adding scribal notes to the text. One monk working on a text might make a note below the text or above the text to explain the meaning or add clarification. Another later scribe would understand the notation to be a correction to the text and insert the scribal note into the text, believing it was a correction to a previous omission.

There are also variants which occur from omissions and additions because of similar sounding ends or beginnings of verses. The scribe would look back at the text and either duplicate or omit parts of sentences thinking he had (or had not) already copied those portions.

Conflation variants: In Acts 20:28 there are two early readings: “church of God” and “church of the Lord.” In some later manuscripts at this point these two have been combined to read, “the church of the Lord and God.”

Doctrinal variants: Marcion, (second century) took out all the references to the Jewish background of Jesus in his copy of Luke and also omitted the other gospel accounts. Purposeful changing of the Bible is perhaps the most despicable thing a person can do as others who read do not always know that changes have been made to God’s word. Purposeful changing the doctrines of the Bible is tantamount to deception and must be opposed vigorously.

One interesting variant in the *Codex Bezae* is the addition of the following account in Luke 6 between verses 4 and 6 (what we know as verse 5 is inserted after verse 10 in this codex): “On the same day, seeing one working on the Sabbath day, he [Jesus] said to him. ‘Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.’” Although this sentence, which is found in no other manuscript, cannot be regarded as part of the original text of Luke, it may well embody a first-century tradition, or it may be one of the “many

other things which Jesus did" which are not written in the gospels.⁸ *Codex Bezae* also has a number of other unique readings.

These are but a few of the ways that hundreds of variant readings come into the text of the Greek New Testament.⁹ At this point, some of our readers may begin to wonder if, with all the variant readings, the Bible can be trusted as the Word of God. Keep reading, and you will find that not only can it be trusted, but we think that in nearly every case, the original wording has been restored!

How the correct reading is being restored. In the Reformation period, as the Bible was being translated into German and other languages, the translators had but comparatively few Greek manuscripts from which to work. Often their Bibles relied on the Latin Vulgate. Later in the nineteenth century, as more MSS were discovered and the discipline of textual criticism was developed, scholars set upon the task of attempting to determine the "correct" reading of the Greek New Testament.

Scholars developed certain guidelines which have helped them restore, as far as possible, the correct working of the text. The following are not hard and fast rules, as each text in question must be judged independently by many different criteria; however, they serve as illustrations.

The earlier manuscript witness is to be preferred. The earliest witness is more likely to be correct as there would be fewer copies behind it and thus less chance for scribal variants. As mentioned before, John 5:4 is missing in the early manuscripts of John.

The more difficult reading is to be preferred. When copying a manuscript, scribes had a tendency to try to make clear that which to them was unclear. Most of us today would do the same. However, what they thought was helpful, often corrupted the text. Therefore, New Testament scholars think the more difficult reading is to be preferred.

The shorter reading is to be preferred. New Testament scholars have found that most variants were added words rather than subtracted words. Therefore, the shorter reading is often, but not always, to be preferred.

Compare with early versions. Versions are translations of the Bible into other languages. Some of the Greek Christian writings were translated into other languages such as Syriac, Latin and Coptic quite early in the history of the church. By comparing these versions, scholars are sometimes able to determine what the Greek text was from which these versions were copied.

Compare early patristic quotations. The early church fathers, in writing their commentaries and defense of Christianity, often quoted verses from the Bible they were using. There are tens of thousands of such quotes. In fact, "so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament."¹⁰ These writings are now being computerized, as are the manuscript fragments of the New Testament, and will make the discipline of textual criticism even more accurate.

Compare manuscript "families." As the Christian church spread throughout the world there was a natural tendency for "families" of manuscripts to be created. In each major geographical area, manuscripts tended to be similar to each other in that they had similar source manuscripts. By comparing the different manuscript families, scholars are aided in their goal of finding the correct wording.

An article such as this on the transmission of the Greek New Testa-

ment would not be complete without recounting the fascinating story of one of the most important manuscript discoveries.

Tishendorf's Amazing Discovery

"In 1844, when he was not yet thirty years of age, Tishendorf, a *Privatdozent* in the University of Leipzig, began an extensive journey through the Near East in search of Biblical manuscripts. While visiting the monastery of St. Catharine at Mount Sinai, he chanced to see two leaves of parchment in a waste-basket full of papers destined to light the oven of the monastery. On examination these proved to be part of a copy of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, written in an early Greek uncial script. He retrieved from the basket no fewer than forty-three such leaves, and the monk casually remarked that two basket loads of similarly discarded leaves had already been burned up.... He warned the monks that



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Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century Greek manuscript found by Constantine Tischendorf in the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai in 1844 and 1859.

struct what is believed to be the correct reading in most instances! Today there are several NT Greek Bibles. These are very much alike¹² and very trustworthy. As more ancient manuscripts are found that may influence a word or two, the Greek New Testaments are revised. One of the most popular Greek New Testaments is *Nestle*. It is now in its twenty-seventh edition. It is a wonderful source of scholarship; it has a detailed and systematic footnote system which shows the manuscript support for the Greek text used in a given passage. The footnote also gives the source and wording of the important variant readings. Most scholars believe that today's Greek New Testament is the most well-documented and accurate ancient writing available anywhere in the world. Yes, we can trust it!



second century, the *Epistle of Barnabas*... and a large portion of the *Shepherd of Hermes*, hitherto known only by title.

The next morning Tischendorf tried to buy the manuscript, but without success. Then he asked to be allowed to take it to Cairo to study; but the monk in charge of the altar plate objected, and so he had to leave without it.

Later, Tischendorf importuned the abbot of the monastery of St. Catharine, who happened to be in Cairo, and Tischendorf was allowed eight leaves at a time to copy.

Some years later, the purchase of the manuscript was arranged for approximately \$500,000 and today resides in the British Museum."¹¹

If you have not guessed by now, the manuscript that Tischendorf discovered is known as the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the oldest complete New Testament, and it also contains the other books mentioned above.

The number of known New Testament manuscripts (some are only fragments) is about 5,000. The earliest known manuscript of the New Testament is a small fragment from the Gospel of John that has been dated early second century.

Scholars now believe that only a very small proportion of Christians could have owned, or even seen, a copy of the complete canon of the New Testament before the invention of printing.

Today's Greek New Testament

The facts show that even though there are many variant readings in the New Testament documents, scholars have been able to recon-

struct what is believed to be the correct reading in most instances! Today there are several NT Greek Bibles. These are very much alike¹² and very trustworthy. As more ancient manuscripts are found that may influence a word or two, the Greek New Testaments are revised. One of the most popular Greek New Testaments is *Nestle*. It is now in its twenty-seventh edition. It is a wonderful source of scholarship; it has a detailed and systematic footnote system which shows the manuscript support for the Greek text used in a given passage. The footnote also gives the source and wording of the important variant readings. Most scholars believe that today's Greek New Testament is the most well-documented and accurate ancient writing available anywhere in the world. Yes, we can trust it!

Now that we have some idea of the many hundreds of thousands of painstaking hours of careful research and work that has gone into the formation of the Greek New Testament, we turn our attention to translating the Greek text into English.

Greek is a precise language. It has five cases, three voices, four moods and six tenses. Some of the preciseness of Greek is difficult, even impossible, to translate into English. While both the *New International Version* and the *New American Standard Bible* are good literal translations, my favorite is the *Updated New American Standard Bible Reference Edition*. This translation, while it may have some rough readings, seeks to be accurate with the Greek grammar. Often when there is a significant variant reading in the Greek manuscripts, it will have a footnote with an alternate reading.

At times the Greek can be translated in more than one way even if there is no variant reading in the manuscript evidence. The NASB will often give a secondary translation in the margin or footnote. For example in the last part of Romans

such things were too valuable to be used to stoke their fires....

In 1859 his travels took him back once more to Mount Sinai, this time under the patronage of the Czar of Russia, Alexander II. The day before he was scheduled to leave he presented to the steward of the monastery a copy of the edition of the Septuagint which he had recently published in Leipzig. Thereupon the steward remarked that he too had a copy of the Septuagint, and produced from a closet in his cell a manuscript wrapped in a red cloth. There before the astonished scholar's eyes lay the treasure which he had been longing to see. Concealing his feelings, Tischendorf casually asked permission to look at it further that evening. Permission was granted, and upon retiring to his room Tischendorf stayed up all night in the joy of studying the manuscript—for, as he declared in his diary... 'it really seemed a sacrilege to sleep.' He soon found that the document contained much more than he had even hoped; for not only was most of the Old Testament there, but also the New Testament was intact and in excellent condition, with the addition of two early Christian works of the

4:17 we read, "...calls into being that which does not exist." Another way this can be translated, (which I like best) is, "calls things which do not exist as existing." In context, this verse refers both to the "multitude of nations" that did not exist when God changed Abram's name to Abraham and also to our righteousness that does not exist when God changes our name from "sinner man/woman" to "saint" at the point when we believe!

Here is an illustration from the NASB. The verses from John 7:53 to 8:11 have brackets around them. In the margin we read, "Later MSS (manuscripts) add the story of the adulterous woman numbering it as John 7:53-8:11." This section of Scripture is not found in the earliest MSS. However, it is of interest to note that the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which does not have the story of the adulterous woman, nevertheless has a blank section that the scribe left open. When counting the letters needed to write this section in, it is just the right size. Therefore, it seems clear that the scribe who copied the *Codex Sinaiticus* knew of this story and left room for it. The point I am making, however, is that the NASB often informs the reader regarding the Greek behind the English translation so the reader can participate in the final decision.

In Romans 1:17b, the NASB text reads, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." In the margin we have this alternate reading, not from a variant in the Greek text, but another way the Greek can be translated into English: "But he who is righteous by faith shall live." You will also note that when the NASB contains quotations from the Old Testament, it shows these in capital letters to call attention to this fact. Note the "*man*" in italics shows that this is an added word which can be assumed but is not in the Greek text.

The King James Version

What about the King James Version? The old KJV is a good literal

translation; however, it has several weaknesses.

First, it was translated from a Greek manuscript made by Erasmus who depended heavily on the Latin Vulgate. Some parts of his self-made Greek text have readings which have never been found in any known NT Greek manuscript—but are still perpetuated today in printings of the so-called "*Textus Receptus of the Greek New Testament*."¹³

Second, there have been many MSS discovered since the KJV was translated which correct some of the KJV faulty variant readings. Many of these will be found in the footnotes of the New KJV.

Third, many of the English words have changed meanings since 1611. Language is dynamic

Greek is a precise language. It has five cases, three voices, four moods and six tenses. Some of the preciseness of Greek is difficult, even impossible, to translate into English.

and not static. For example, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 in the KJV reads, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." The NASB reads, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." Four hundred years ago, "prevent" meant "to come before, to precede." We can see how from that definition we have derived the meaning of "taking action in advance to keep something from happening." While the evolution of the word makes sense, the meaning of the KJV is no longer clear to modern readers.

Fourth, while the "thee's" and "thou's" are accurate and precise, most people find these outdated and odd. For these reasons, I sug-

gest that those who are serious Bible students carefully consider the Updated New American Standard Reference Bible. I think you will be happy.

Paraphrases

Paraphrases, on the other hand, operate under a different set of rules. Rather than translating the Greek word for word, as good literal Bibles seek to do, paraphrases intend to discover the *meaning* of the text and may use different words to express that meaning to make it relevant in today's language and culture. These are very good for devotional reading and to give one a new and fresh look at Scripture. However, paraphrases should not be trusted for serious doctrinal study. It is easy for the paraphraser to give his/her idea of what he/she thinks the text means rather than that it says. *The New Living Bible*, *J.B. Phillips N.T.* and *The Message* are examples of paraphrases that seek to be true to the intent of the Greek and are good for devotional reading.

There are some translations and paraphrases, however, that are untrustworthy, and people should be warned about them and avoid them. *The New World Translation of the Greek Scriptures* is an example of what is supposed to be a literal translation. This Bible was prepared by the Jehovah's Witnesses and is strongly biased and poorly translated in areas where a typical literal Bible would show Witness teaching to be in error. It compromises the deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit and man's condition in death.

One of the worst paraphrases I am aware of is the *Clear Word*. While it purports to be true to ancient texts, it purposely reads into the text "facts," ideas and words which simply are not in the Greek. It also changes the *meaning* of the Greek in dozens, if not hundreds, of places and deletes dozens of words in other places. It is not a safe guide to the Christian life. Why the Adventist church has not pulled this "Bible" from their bookstores and openly con-

demned this paraphrase when it is so obviously filled with denominational bias is a mystery to me.

While some Adventist scholars have written against it, pointing out its obvious shortcomings, the last time I was in an Adventist Book Center, it was still being displayed and sold. While it is technically not officially an Adventist Bible,

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nevertheless it was written by the religion chair of an Adventist university, printed in an Adventist press, advertised in Adventist periodicals and sold in Adventist book centers. It remains, in my opinion, one of the strongest evidences of the cultic nature of Adventism.¹⁴

So what is the bottom line? The most trustworthy Bibles are those not written by an individual but by a committee of scholars. For serious theological study when seeking answers to doctrine, one should use a modern literal version. *The New International Version* and the *New American Standard Bible* are good examples.

Even though many variants have crept into the Bible, thanks to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the providence of God and the meticulous work of thousands of scholars, our modern Bibles are indeed trustworthy. Yes, they are the living and active Word of God! Choose at least one good literal translation for serious doctrinal study and also get a good but trustworthy paraphrase. Study these, and God's Spirit will meet you there!

What About Inerrancy?

Today one of the tenets of the Evangelical Christian faith is that the original manuscripts of the Bible were inerrant.¹⁵ However,

we do not have any of the original manuscripts, so this is a statement of faith and not fact. This tenet, however, causes the Bible student to consider the word of God as authoritative and not something to be disregarded, taken lightly or tampered with.

Yes, when rightly translated and interpreted, the Bible is, indeed, the living and active word of God, authoritative, inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.¹⁶

Let us thank God for the Bible, study it and open our hearts to its central message: Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior¹⁷ and the salvation he brings by grace alone through faith alone! "He who believes has eternal life."¹⁸ □

¹ Either the old King James Version or the New King James Version.

² It is beyond the scope of this article to fully describe the formation of the Christian canon.

³ While there are many scholars who do not consider Hebrews to be authored by Paul, the early manuscripts included this book as part of the Pauline Epistles.

⁴ It is recognized that the Catholic church included the apocryphal books in the canon while the Protestant church generally rejects them.

⁵ Leather prepared for writing.

⁶ The manuscript being copied.

⁷ The Greek pronunciation taught in most New Testament Greek classes today is not the same as Koine Greek was pronounced at the time the manuscripts were copied. See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament, Third Edition*, p. 191).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50. See also John 21:15.

⁹ Some say that there are as many as 3,000 variants.

¹⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament, Third Edition*, p. 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42-45.

¹² It should be noted that there are also differences. Sometimes the textual "weight" may be nearly equal with two or more variants. One Greek NT may put one in the text with the variant in the footnote. Another may put another variant of equal weight in the text with the first variation in the footnote.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁴ For documentation on the perversion of the Clear Word go to: <http://www.ratzlaf.com/corrupt.htm>.

¹⁵ This tenet has been variously interpreted. For an excellent discussion of the infallibility of the Scriptures see *Scripture and Truth*, by D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1002. See also Appendix 68 in *Bible Answers to Sabbath Questions* by Verle Streifling, now available as an e-book from LAM Publications, LLC.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16.

¹⁷ John 5:39.

¹⁸ John 6:47.

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