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**THIRTEEN  
ARGUMENTS  
FOR THE  
RELIABILITY  
OF THE NEW  
TESTAMENT**

**BENJAMIN  
C. F. SHAW**  
FOREWORD BY  
**GARY R.  
HABERMAS**



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# NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

**When it comes to ancient writers** such as Homer, Plato, or those of the New Testament, we only have copies of their writings and not the originals. As we might imagine, the original manuscripts (or autographs) have been subjected to destruction, decay, and loss. This can lead us to wonder how we can be confident regarding the words in the New Testament. Are they what the originals said? Do we have the right words?

Of course, having the right words does not automatically mean that the content of those words is accurate. As scholar Jacob Peterson points out, “A *reliable text* is not a guarantee of *reliable content*.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, once we are confident that we have a reliable text, then we can test the claims of that text to see whether they are reliable. This is why being confident that we have the right words is directly relevant to New Testament reliability.

## TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND ANCIENT WRITINGS

If we do not have the originals, how can we be confident that our copies accurately reflect what the originals said? We all know that everyone makes mistakes, and we would expect copyists to be no

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob W. Peterson, “Math Myths: How Many Manuscripts We Have and Why More Isn’t Always Better,” in *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 68, emphasis added.

different. Yet how can we know when and where these mistakes occurred without the originals?

An entire discipline known as textual criticism considers questions like these. The end result of these efforts is that when you pick up an English translation of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, the words you read “do not reproduce the text of any *one manuscript*; editors and textual critics try to establish the *most probable* Greek text by comparison of the different manuscripts.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, to recreate the original text as accurately as possible, textual critics will collect and examine the available copies we have. They will then identify and assess the differences between the copies to determine which reading is more likely to represent the original (and why).

Given this process, two components are particularly helpful. First, it is normally preferable to have a multitude of manuscripts to examine. Having several copies allows us to compare the various texts and identify any differences between them. Second, it is generally the case that manuscripts closer in time to the originals are more important. The shorter time gap means fewer generations of copying and thus a lower likelihood of textual differences. From here, textual critics can really get to work comparing the different manuscripts to best determine what the originals likely said. Therefore, two initial evidential considerations that are important for textual critics are the *amount* of copies and the *age* of the texts.<sup>3</sup>

**Homer and Plato.** With these components in mind, I can now introduce some textual data for Homer and Plato. These are two highly important and influential figures from the ancient world. To give an idea of their impact, biblical scholar N. T. Wright observes, “If Homer functioned as the Old Testament for the Hellenistic world . . . its New Testament was unquestionably Plato.”<sup>4</sup> These two thus provide a good sample for comparison.

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<sup>2</sup>T. H. Irwin, “The Platonic Corpus,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, 2nd ed., ed. Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 87, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup>For proper nuances and limitations of these considerations (and others), see Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes*.

<sup>4</sup>N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 47-48 (see also 32).

Homer (or the Homeric tradition) dates to around the eighth century BC, with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* being well-known works throughout history. Though multiple manuscript counts have been given, and counting the manuscripts is an incredibly difficult and tedious task, there appear to be somewhere *around* two thousand copies of these Homeric works.<sup>5</sup> The date of one of the earliest papyrus fragments of the *Iliad* is as early as the fourth century BC, roughly four hundred years after it is thought to have been written.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to Plato, who lived and wrote around the fourth century BC, his textual tradition has a stark difference. As with Homer, the counting of these manuscripts is difficult and nuanced. Nevertheless, one may be surprised to learn that we currently have fewer than 275 manuscripts of Plato, though recent publications indicate a number closer to 210.<sup>7</sup> This is a startlingly low number of manuscripts for such an influential philosopher.

The date of the earliest substantive manuscript for this famous philosopher is equally startling. According to T. H. Irwin, “The oldest

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<sup>5</sup>Finding even this general figure is admittedly extremely difficult. See Martin L. West, *Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad* (München: K. G. Saur, 2001), 86-129. West provides a catalogue of papyri for the *Iliad*, which consists of 1,569 entries. Some of those listed in the catalogue are bracketed. West states, “For my own edition I have been able to make use of 1543.” West then goes on to provide 142 additional items related to “Homeric glossaries, commentaries, and scholia minora” (130). This list is on 130-36, while a list of witnesses appears on 136-38. Prothro notes several discoveries that have been published since West’s 2001 publication. See James B. Prothro, “Myths About Classical Literature: Responsibly Comparing the New Testament to Ancient Works,” in Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes*, 76n16. Clay Jones offers a count of over 1,750 in “The Bibliographical Test Updated,” *Christian Research Journal* 35, no. 3 (2012): 33. Craig Blomberg lists under 2,500 copies of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined but provides no documentation for his estimate. See Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs*, B&H Studies in Christian Apologetics (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 644. The Leuven Database of Ancient Books indicated over 2,300 attestations for Homer as of November 2022, but the database ends at AD 800, and not all are manuscripts (some entries are quotes, some are on pottery, etc.).

<sup>6</sup>West does not include this mention with the catalogue of papyri but rather in the w-series (w38), which are various papyri or inscriptions in which the *Iliad* is quoted. (Derveni papyrus; see *Studies in the Text*, 137).

<sup>7</sup>More recent publications suggest a number closer to 210. See Jones, “Bibliographical Test Updated”; Robert S. Brumbaugh, “Plato Manuscripts: Toward a Completed Inventory,” *Manuscripta* 34, no. 2 (1990): 114-21. An earlier publication by Nigel Wilson appeared to list 263 manuscripts in “A List of Plato Manuscripts,” *Scriptorium* 16, no. 2 (1962): 386-95.



sources for the text of Plato are written in the second and third centuries AD. Unfortunately, these contain only fragments of text. Our main sources for the text are fifty-one Byzantine manuscripts, copied from the ninth century AD onward.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the manuscripts we use to reconstruct Plato's writings are *considerably later* than when he actually wrote. As one classicist puts it, these copies are "closer in time to us than to him."<sup>9</sup>

The above gives us an initial idea of the textual traditions for two major ancient figures. There are significantly more manuscripts of Homer than there are of Plato. The period between the original writing and our earliest fragmentary manuscripts is several centuries for both authors. While textual critics rely on far more than simply counting the number of manuscripts and assessing how close they are to the originals, the *amount* and *age* are nevertheless significant. Moreover, these two, especially Homer, have better textual evidence compared to other ancient writings.<sup>10</sup>

**New Testament writings.** Regarding the New Testament, two research groups have substantially contributed to our knowledge and preservation of New Testament manuscripts. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research was founded in 1959 and maintains the official database of documented New Testament manuscripts. Its database can be visited online and is referred to as the Kurzgefaßte Liste, or much more simply Liste.<sup>11</sup> The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts is the other important group and utilizes the latest in photographic technology.<sup>12</sup> The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts provides high-resolution photographs of several

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<sup>8</sup>Irwin, "Platonic Corpus," 71.

<sup>9</sup>Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 1. See also Irwin, "Platonic Corpus," 70.

<sup>10</sup>For those interested in the dating of additional ancient sources, see Jones, "Bibliographical Test Updated"; Prothro, "Myths About Classical Literature."

<sup>11</sup>The abbreviation is INTF because it comes from the German name Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung. The website is also in German: <https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/liste>.

<sup>12</sup>Their site allows users to view their photographs: [www.csntm.org/](http://www.csntm.org/). The Institute for New Testament Textual Research site also has images.

important manuscripts, thus preserving them in case of potential destruction, theft, or loss. If one is interested in studying and/or viewing the New Testament manuscripts, the Institute for New Testament Textual Research and the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts will be essential resources.

When it comes to the number of New Testament manuscripts, there are over five thousand copies.<sup>13</sup> This is a remarkable wealth of material for textual critics and far greater than that of Homer and Plato combined. Bart Ehrman, a leading New Testament textual critic and atheist/agnostic, summarizes the New Testament textual situation, writing,

We have more manuscripts for the New Testament than for any other book from the ancient world—many, many more manuscripts than we have for the writings of Homer, Plato, Cicero, or any other important author . . . along with manuscripts in many other ancient languages (e.g., Latin, Syriac, and Coptic). That is good news indeed—the more manuscripts you have, the more likely it is that you can figure out what the authors originally said.<sup>14</sup>

Undoubtedly, the vast number of Greek manuscripts helps textual critics as they seek to confidently establish the original text. The New Testament is therefore in an excellent evidential position with such vast numbers of manuscripts.

As with Homer and Plato, I am using general figures and estimates regarding the New Testament. This is even more important here because the sheer volume of manuscripts makes giving a definitive figure difficult. New manuscript discoveries, the risk of accidental double counting, loss, incorrect additions to the Liste, and material bias are all factors that require constant updates to these counts.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while

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<sup>13</sup>While various figures have been given (see below), Jacob Peterson conducted a recent count in “Math Myths.” He points out that 5,300 (see pp. 62, 66, 68-69) is possible, but he also suggests 5,100 as another likely possibility (see pp. 68-69).

<sup>14</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 23.

<sup>15</sup>Peterson, “Math Myths,” 51-58. Peterson notes that the Liste is constantly updating and evaluating its figures to reflect these issues and that one should avoid simply counting

figures can vary and/or change over the years, the conclusion remains that there is a plethora of New Testament manuscripts, over five thousand, and more than any other ancient author in terms of volume.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, this figure reflects only Greek manuscripts and does not include those in other languages (Latin, etc.) or references from the early church.

*When* were these manuscripts written? The earliest copies are fragments from around AD 100–200.<sup>17</sup> The most famous example is from the John Rylands collection and is a small fragment of the Gospel of John, which is commonly referred to as P52. P52 is considered the earliest manuscript of the New Testament in our possession, with various dates given. Ehrman dates this manuscript to around AD 125, but others think a broader time frame for the dating of P52 is more appropriate and date it within the second century more generally.<sup>18</sup> As I will discuss later, this Gospel is often believed to have been written around the mid-90s. This means that there is a particularly short time from the original to our earliest copy, especially compared to Homer and Plato.

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all the entries. The INTF also notes the difficulties of counting the total number of manuscripts on their site.

<sup>16</sup>As noted above, Peterson thinks 5,100 and 5,300 are reasonable figures. Peterson's discussion is especially helpful here as he notes that the "typical approximation for how many Greek New Testament manuscripts we have is a bit north of 5,500" ("Math Myths," 52). Peterson provides a sampling of over a half dozen publications over the past twenty years or so. The figures range from around 5,000 to over 5,800 (52n9). Ehrman, too, has provided different general figures over the years. In 2005 he gave a general figure of "over 5,000 copies" in Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 260. This is found in editions of *Misquoting Jesus* that contain a "Plus" section at the end of certain editions. In 2004 he gave a figure of 5,400. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 480. The most recent number is about 5,700. See Ehrman, *New Testament* (2019), 23.

<sup>17</sup>Some from the Liste are P52, P77, P90, P98, P103, P104, P129, and P137.

<sup>18</sup>Ehrman, *New Testament* (2019), 23. Recent evaluations have sought to provide a wider range (AD 100–200) for P52's date, as adopted here. See Elijah Hixson, "Dating Myths, Part One: How We Determine the Ages of Manuscripts," in Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes*, 101-7. For a more technical work see Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 1 (January 2005): 23-48.



There are more complete manuscripts starting around the third century. The Chester Beatty Papyri is an example of a substantive collection of manuscripts from this period. It is one of the earliest that contains a significant portion of the Gospels, Pauline epistles, and more. Ehrman points out that, for the Gospel of John, the “first reasonably complete copy . . . is from around 200 C.E.” He notes that while this is just over a century or so from when John wrote, it is “still pretty old—older than most manuscripts for most other authors from the ancient world, by a wide margin.”<sup>19</sup>

### ASSESSING THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Now that we have an idea of the *amount* and *age* of the New Testament manuscripts, we can look at how scholars assess them to best determine what the original said. Analyzing the various differences between copies is part of this process, and not all differences are created equal.<sup>20</sup> I will briefly introduce three types of differences that textual critics encounter. Many differences, indeed the overwhelming majority, are easily explained as unintentional errors and/or spelling mistakes. Other differences affect how a text is interpreted but are not well evidenced textually. Last, the smallest group is the one that is more difficult to reconcile.

**Category one.** As one might assume, and as Ehrman makes explicit, “the single most common mistake in our manuscripts is misspelled words.”<sup>21</sup> If we make typographical mistakes copying today with computers, spellcheck, and keyboards, how much more likely were ancient scribes to have made similar mistakes?

Another reason for unintentional differences is the difficult task of copying ancient texts. One example of such challenges is that ancient Greek had no spacing, punctuation, or distinctions between capital and

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<sup>19</sup>Ehrman, *New Testament* (2019), 23; see also 29.

<sup>20</sup>For a helpful introduction to this see Daniel B. Wallace, “Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted?,” in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 152–60. See also Peter J. Gurry, “Myths About Variants: Why Most Variants Are Insignificant and Why Some Can’t Be Ignored,” in Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes*, 191–210.

<sup>21</sup>Ehrman, *New Testament* (2004), 481.

lowercase letters.<sup>22</sup> One need not imagine how this added difficulty to copying a text.

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Understandably, this could lead to all sorts of inconsequential (accidental) copyist mistakes.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Ehrman points out that the majority of differences are “completely and utterly unimportant and insignificant and don’t matter at all.”<sup>24</sup> Textual typos are the typical trouble.

**Category two.** The second category of differences is a little more complex than the first. These differences are meaningful to the text, but the evidence for the difference is not strong (not viable). In other words, if there is a significant difference to the text but it is only found in a single and/or late text, then it is *unlikely to be a viable (or probable) reading*.

Dan Wallace, another leading textual critic, uses the following example. Luke 6:22 says, “Blessed are you when the people hate you, and when they exclude you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man.” Yet, as Wallace points out, Codex 2882 omits the ending: “on account of the Son of Man.” This is a meaningful difference because, according to Codex 2882, the meaning of the Luke 6:22 is that one is blessed anytime one is persecuted, *irrespective* of whether it is for Jesus’ sake! However, this omission occurs in only one manuscript, from a later period (ca. AD 900–1100).<sup>25</sup> Thus, while

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<sup>22</sup>“Lastnightatdinnerisawabundanceonthetable” Ehrman uses this example before noting relevant types of accidental errors (*New Testament* [2019], 26).

<sup>23</sup>While it is true that it is more difficult for us today to read this than it would have been for ancient people, it does not follow that therefore that they were so accustomed to it that it was not an issue for them. With our capitalization and punctuation today, people still make mistakes when copying texts even though we are accustomed to these features.

<sup>24</sup>Ehrman, *New Testament* (2019), 23.

<sup>25</sup>Wallace, “Has the New Testament Text,” 155. For another example, this time in Lk 1:34, see J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 97–101, 105.

textual critics can discuss how and why this omission occurred, ultimately it is not a viable reading and has readily been identified as such.

**Category three.** The last and most significant differences are also the rarest. These ones are both meaningful and textually viable. In short, these are the situations in which two meaningfully different readings have competitive or decent textual evidence. Mark 16:9-20 (events after the resurrection) and John 7:53-8:11 (the woman caught in adultery) are the two most well-known examples. Aside from these two, all other textual variants of this kind involve two verses or less.

While we find elements of the Mark and John passages in other texts of the New Testament, no Christian doctrine is ultimately *determined* by either of these two examples (or others in this category).<sup>26</sup> If these texts were not in the originals, as is widely held, nothing about the core of Christianity changes. The central doctrines of Christianity are not affected, and the Gospel still stands. Wallace highlights this point when writing, “No fundamental truth is lost by them [the Mark and John passages]. To be sure, the textual decision will affect how one views these Gospels, but it does not affect any cardinal doctrine.”<sup>27</sup>

These two and other textual issues have been known to textual critics for a long time. In fact, if you are looking for a collection of these sorts of potentially meaningful and viable differences, find the closest Bible. Most Bibles will bracket these texts and include a brief footnote clarifying the manuscript data.<sup>28</sup>

**Bottom line regarding the textual evidence.** What is the bottom line regarding these differences? Arguably, two of the most well-known New Testament textual critics are Bart Ehrman (a skeptic) and Dan Wallace (a Christian). While they have quite different worldviews, their answers are strikingly similar.

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<sup>26</sup>Craig Blomberg points out various reasons to hold to the account in John being historical even if John did not write it. See Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 628.

<sup>27</sup>Wallace, “Has the New Testament Text,” 160.

<sup>28</sup>Blomberg provides a helpful commentary on various biblical footnotes, including from his own NIV 1984 Bible as well as those in the more technical Greek edition (*Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 630-44). See also Gurry, “Myths About Variants,” 206.

Ehrman, known for questioning the New Testament's reliability, concludes that "the essential Christian beliefs *are not affected* by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament."<sup>29</sup> This is remarkable because although Ehrman need not be charitable here, he nevertheless recognizes that the essentials of Christianity are unaffected. Moreover, Ehrman's overall assessment of the New Testament text is also positive. He writes, "Textual scholars have enjoyed reasonable success at establishing, to the best of their abilities, the original text of the New Testament. Indeed, barring extraordinary discoveries or phenomenal alterations in method, it is virtually inconceivable that the character of our Greek New Testaments will ever change significantly."<sup>30</sup> In short, "Scholars are convinced that we can reconstruct the original words of the New Testament with reasonable (although probably not 100 percent) accuracy."<sup>31</sup>

Regarding various differences between texts, Wallace writes, "No viable variant affects any cardinal truth of the New Testament."<sup>32</sup> He adds that he is not aware of any "confessional statements at seminaries, Christian colleges, or major denominations that were retooled in the slightest because of the excision of any of the meaningful and viable variants." Ultimately, for Wallace, "the text is certain in all essentials, and even in most particulars we can be relatively sure what the autographs said. Further, in the passages in which the text is in doubt, no cardinal doctrine is at stake."<sup>33</sup>

These two writers with vastly different backgrounds come to surprisingly similar conclusions. Indeed, one likely could not tell by reading these quotations who is a Christian and who is not. This is a testament to the strength of the New Testament textual evidence.

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<sup>29</sup>Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 252, emphasis added, found in the "Plus" section.

<sup>30</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, "The Text as Window: New Testament Manuscripts and the Social History of Early Christianity," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Boston: Brill, 2014), 825.

<sup>31</sup>Ehrman, *New Testament* (2004), 481. Though technically nothing in history is 100 percent certain.

<sup>32</sup>Komosoewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 114.

<sup>33</sup>Wallace, "Has the New Testament Text," 160, 163.

## CONCLUSION

Like being overdressed for a party, the New Testament enjoys a textual tradition that stands out in a crowd and provides an “embarrassment of riches” for scholars.<sup>34</sup> There are an incredible number of NT manuscripts for scholars to evaluate. As textual critics have analyzed the thousands of New Testament copies, we can continue to be confident that “no Christian doctrine or practice—major or minor—is *determined* by a textually difficult passage.”<sup>35</sup> The result, then, is that when it comes to the New Testament, we can be confident that we have the right words, a necessity for establishing reliability.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS: TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

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- Textual critics are scholars who look at different manuscript copies of an ancient writing such as Plato or the Gospel of Matthew. Since we do not have the originals (autographs), textual critics compare different copies of these works in order to make sure what we are reading today is likely what the original authors wrote.
- The New Testament is the best textually attested work in the ancient world. There are over five thousand manuscript copies of the New Testament in the Greek language alone, with some of them coming within a century or two of the writings.
- Given the plethora of copies, we would expect differences in the manuscripts of the New Testament (especially since they were all handwritten). The overwhelming majority are accidental mistakes (e.g., spelling). Textual critics, including the skeptical ones, acknowledge that core or essentials of Christianity are *not* affected by any textual difference.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Anderson, Amy S., and Wendy Widder. *Textual Criticism of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018.

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<sup>34</sup>Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 75-82.

<sup>35</sup>Gurry, “Myths About Variants,” 208, emphasis original.

Hixson, Elijah, and Peter J. Gurry, eds. *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019.

Meade, John D., and Peter J. Gurry. *Scribes and Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022.



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