

EXCERPT

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Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism

Available November 5, 2019 | \$40, 400 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5257-4

A renewed interest in textual criticism has created an unfortunate proliferation of myths, mistakes, and misinformation about this technical area of biblical studies. Elijah Hixson and Peter Gurry, along with a team of New Testament textual critics, offer up-to-date, accurate information on the history and current state of the New Testament text that will serve apologists and offer a self-corrective to evangelical excesses.

Demythologizing Textual Criticism

Perhaps, like us, you've had this experience when driving to a new place. You set off, confident that your map or GPS has you headed in the right direction, and you begin thinking about other things. Soon, however, the roads are all the wrong names, and the signs do not seem right. Slowly, you begin to discover that you are lost. But where did you go wrong? Was it the last turn or the turn before that? Was it because you were on the phone, or are the directions wrong? If you're lucky, you manage to answer these questions, get back on the right track, and find your destination. This experience of thinking you know where you are going, only to realize you're lost, can be disorienting and frustrating. It can leave you wondering what else you may be wrong about. Are you sure you turned off the stove? Was the back door locked, or did you leave it cracked again? One doubt easily leads to another.

The problem of getting to the right place by the wrong route is what we address in this book. Not about driving, of course, but about the Bible and about defending its credibility. Unfortunately, some defenders think they know how to get us to the proper destination when in fact they've taken us through several wrong turns along the way. For those who discover that the route is wrong, the realization can be disorienting. Once-trusted guides can turn out not to be as reliable as once thought, and, in the case of defending the Bible, this can sadly lead to greater doubt in Scripture's reliability.

Christians believe and trust the Bible as God's special revelation. That belief is basic to the Christian faith. So, naturally, serious challenges to the trustworthiness of this book are significant and need a response. One challenge to the Bible that has risen to new prominence is the claim that we can't trust the New Testament because we do not even know what it says. This, we are told, is the case because the manuscripts—handwritten copies of the New Testament—are so corrupt from miscopying that we simply cannot know what the original text was. As Bart Ehrman, the scholar whose bestselling book *Misquoting Jesus* has done more than any other to bring this issue to the forefront, has said, "How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God if in fact we do not have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly?" For Ehrman, the answer is clear: it is not much help at all, a conclusion that contributed to his much-publicized loss of evangelical faith.

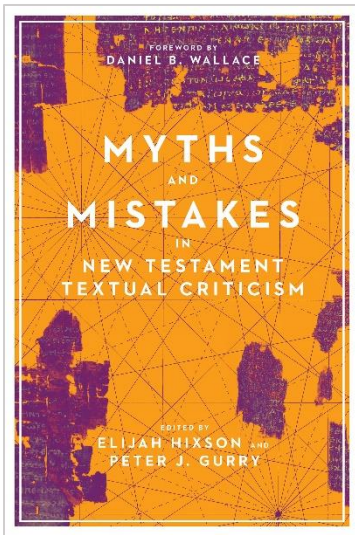
As Ehrman's public profile has risen, this part of his argument has gained greater traction, often without the benefit of his years of research in the subject area. Just before Christmas in 2014, for example, *Newsweek* published a long-form essay by Kurt Eichenwald titled "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin." Among a series of provocative claims, Eichenwald tells us, "No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we've all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times."

This notion that the New Testament has been miscopied to the point of near oblivion has reached beyond national news magazines to capture certain parts of the popular imagination. Sometimes it crops up in unexpected places, such as popular fiction. In the bestselling Jack Reacher series written by Lee Child, we find an unexpected presentation of the



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idea that the original wording of the New Testament is hopelessly lost. In one of his stories, Child presents us with an Anglican priest who meets the protagonist on his way to Yuma, Arizona. On the drive there, the priest offers this lesson on the book of Revelation:

Most of the original is lost, of course. It was written in ancient Hebrew or Aramaic, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Koine Greek, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Latin, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Elizabethan English and printed, with opportunities for error and confusion at every single stage. Now it reads like a bad acid trip. I suspect it always did.

There you have it. A trippy book made worse by thousands of years of miscopying and mistranslation so that now we do not even know what the original was. As anyone with a basic introduction to the New Testament knows, the problems here are obvious and plentiful. For starters, the book of Revelation was not *translated* into Greek for the simple reason that it was *written* in Greek. The many translations we do have of it—both ancient and modern—are almost all taken directly from Greek. It is true that opportunities for error do come from copying anything of length by hand, but these have also been accompanied by opportunities for correction and clarification. In short, our traveling priest's view of the matter is about as wrong as could be. The point here is not to pick on fiction (the appropriate genre for such misinformation, after all) but to show that views like these are all too easily consumed and accepted by popular audiences who lack the expertise to see through them. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the view expressed by the priest in this Jack Reacher novel is held by more and more people today.

To be sure, most trained scholars ignore such popular nonsense and go about their work unfazed. Still, when these kinds of conspiratorial claims find their way to the *New York Times* bestseller list or the cover of *Newsweek* and *Wired* magazine, Christian scholars and apologists who care about Christianity's reputation take note. In their justified zeal to defend the Bible against such misinformation, they have naturally produced a growing number of books, articles, chapters, study Bibles, and blog posts in response. With such a proliferation of material, what justification could there be for yet another publication on the subject?

As it turns out, that very proliferation has caused an unintended problem, and it is the one this book particularly addresses. A survey of literature reveals a growing gap between good scholarship on the transmission of the New Testament and its appropriation in the literature aimed at nonspecialists. In some cases, the misinformation is actually more severe on the side of those who want to defend the Bible's reliability (perhaps because they write more often on it). Such treatments often repeat bad or outdated arguments from other authors. In many cases, the treatment ends up worse than the ailment: arguments meant to encourage confidence in the Bible make it look untrustworthy through ignorance, negligence, or worse. This is troubling for those of us who love the Bible and want to know whether it can be trusted.

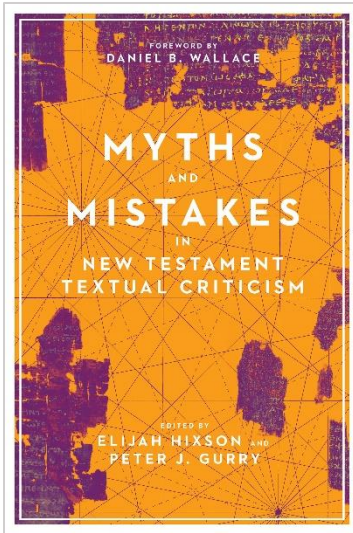
The contributors to the present volume are convinced that the Bible *should* be loved and that its text *can* be trusted. Like many of those we critique in what follows, we are convinced that the New Testament text provides a more than adequate foundation on which to build the Christian faith. In that, we quite agree with them against Christianity's



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media-savvy critics. But we often find their reasons inadequate. From our own research, we know that studying the Bible's textual history can be intimidating. For the New Testament, it requires a knowledge of Greek and other ancient languages. It demands experience in reading ancient manuscripts. It draws on elements from classics, church history, and biblical studies. If that were not enough, some of the most important research is published in languages other than English. Those who write for popular audiences should not be faulted if they lack expertise in all these areas, and we certainly do not fault them here. However, the fact remains that many who address the topic from an apologetic angle construct their arguments from information that is at best outdated and at worst patently wrong.

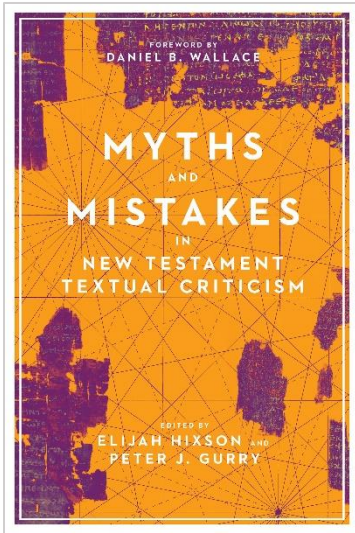
—Taken from the introduction



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L. W. Hurtado, emeritus professor of New Testament language, literature, and theology, University of Edinburgh

New Testament Textual Critics Offer a Way Forward

Andrew Blaski (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is assistant professor of theology and philosophy at Holy Apostles College & Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut. He has published essays and reviews in *Vigiliae Christianae*, *Studia Patristica*, *Origeniana Duodecima*, and the *Expository Times*.

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Jeremiah Coogan is a PhD candidate in New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Notre Dame. His work focuses on intersections between Gospel reading, material texts, and literary theory. His dissertation considers how the Eusebian apparatus reconfigures the Gospels as a fourfold unity. His work has been published in a number of venues, including the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* and the *Journal of Late Antiquity*.

Edgar Battad Ebojo (PhD, University of Birmingham) is a global translation adviser (GTA) of the United Bible Societies (UBS) assigned in the Asia-Pacific region. He is also one of the translation consultants for the Philippine Bible Society, where he served for many years as its translations department manager until his present appointment with the UBS. He first served PBS as a Bible translator.

Peter J. Gurry (PhD, University of Cambridge) is assistant professor of New Testament and codirector of the Text & Canon Institute at Phoenix Seminary. He is the author of *A New Approach to Textual Criticism* (SBL; with Tommy Wasserman) and *A Critical Examination of the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method in New Testament Textual Criticism* (Brill).

Elijah Hixson (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is a junior research associate in New Testament text and language at Tyndale House, Cambridge, where he is working with Dirk Jongkind to produce a textual commentary on the Greek New Testament. He is the author of *Scribal Habits in Sixth-Century Greek Purple Codices* (Brill) and numerous articles on textual criticism in publications such as the *Journal of Theological Studies*, *Novum Testamentum*, and *New Testament Studies*.

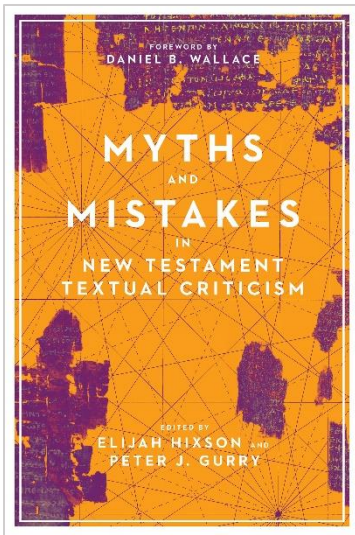
Gregory R. Lanier (PhD, University of Cambridge) is associate professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando). His publications include *Septuaginta: A Reader's Edition* (Hendrickson; edited with William A. Ross), *How We Got the Bible: Old and New Testament Canon and Text* (Christian Focus), and *Old Testament Conceptual Metaphors and the Christology of Luke's Gospel* (T&T Clark) as well as various articles on textual criticism, Christology, and the Septuagint in academic journals. He also serves as associate pastor of River Oaks Presbyterian Church.



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Peter Malik (PhD, University of Cambridge) is a research associate at Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal/Bethel, where he works on the *Editio Critica Maior* of Revelation. He is the author of *P. Beatty III (P⁴⁷): The Codex, Its Scribe, and Its Text* (Brill) and is presently engaged on a new edition of the Greek biblical texts of Codex Climaci Rescriptus, a Sinaitic palimpsest.

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Timothy N. Mitchell is a PhD student at the University of Birmingham (UK). His research focuses on the writing and book culture of early Christianity and the textual transmission of the Gospel of Mark in the Π group of manuscripts. He has published articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.

Jacob W. Peterson is a PhD candidate in New Testament language, literature, and theology at the University of Edinburgh and a research fellow at the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM). His research and writing focus on manuscripts of the Pauline Epistles, and his doctoral thesis is on the Pauline text of GA 1739.

James B. Prothro (PhD, University of Cambridge) is assistant professor of theology at Ave Maria University and studied classics at Washington University in St. Louis. He is a subeditor at *The Religious Studies Review* and the author of *Both Judge and Justifier: Biblical Legal Language and the Act of Justifying in Paul* (Mohr Siebeck).

S. Matthew Solomon (PhD, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) has done extensive collation and research in the text of Philemon. He has presented his research at numerous Society of Biblical Literature meetings, and his academic interests range across New Testament textual criticism, papyrology, early Christianity, and interpretive methods.

Daniel B. Wallace (PhD, Dallas Theological Seminary) is the executive director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM) and senior research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is a past president of the Evangelical Theological Society, a consultant for several Bible translations, and the author of numerous journal articles and books, including *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*.



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