

I have been talking about different kinds of changes made in our surviving New Testament manuscripts, some of them accidental slips of the pen (that's probably the vast majority of our textual variants) and others of them intentional alterations. One of the points that I've been trying to stress is that at the end of the day it is, technically speaking, impossible to know what a scribe's "intentions" were (or if he had any, other than the intention of copying a text). None of the scribes is around to be interviewed, and so - as with a lot of history - there is a good bit of scholarly guess-work that has to be done.

This guess work is not simply shooting in the dark, however. And it is dead easy for a highly trained expert to tell the difference between informed guesswork and just plain guesswork. But at the end of the day we are always talking about historical probabilities, not historical certainties, when it comes to figuring out why a scribe decided to change a text.

And in some places it is very hard indeed to tell whether a change was made intentionally or not.

Let me give a prime example, again drawn from the Gospel of Mark. This one occurs right off the bat. In fact, it is in verse 1.

There is a significant variant in the opening line of Mark's Gospel. It may not seem significant at first, but in fact the more you study Mark's Gospel, the more significant you realize it is. The way Mark is said to begin in most manuscripts is this (these are the opening words):

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"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But in several manuscripts, the final words are missing, so that Jesus is not called "the Son of God" in the opening line.

Now for casual readers of the Gospel, that would make almost zero difference. That's because the question is NOT whether Mark ever portrays Jesus as the Son of God in his Gospel. Quite apart from this verse, he very much does portray him that way. When Jesus is baptized, the voice from heaven declares "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (1:11). At his transfiguration, the voice comes again from heaven and says "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" (9:7). At the crucifixion, the Roman soldier standing at the cross who has seen Jesus die declares, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (15:39). So whatever 1:1 said originally, Mark does portray Jesus as the Son of God. Then why does it matter if he began his Gospel by saying so?

It is hard to explain why it might matter without talking about the textual variant itself. So holding in abeyance the question of why it might matter, let's think about the textual problem. Were the words "son of God" originally in 1:1 or not?

This is where life becomes very interesting for textual critics, because it is possible to explain the textual change on the grounds that it was an accident as well as on grounds that it was intentional, and it is very difficult to decide which one is right.

I won't go into all the ins and outs here. In my book Orthodox Corruption of Scripture I spend four whole pages of detailed argument condensing the issues. You don't need that. Let me explain the two options, one in this post and one in the next.

Accident. If the change was made by accident, then probably the text originally said “Son of God” and a scribe accidentally left the words out. Scribes leave words out all the time. And in this case, the four English words “the son of God” are actually just two words in the Greek: UIOU THEOU. But what makes this instance particularly interesting are a set of related phenomena.

First, these words are among those technical terms that scholars call the “nomina sacra.” The nomina sacra were a group of words, about fifteen of them, that were commonly abbreviated by scribes copying them. They are called nomina sacra (literally meaning “sacred names”) because most of these words were ones typically used of or related to God or Christ or the Spirit. Thus, among the names were God, Christ, Lord, Spirit, Son, Father and so on.

The way these words were typically abbreviated was by giving only their first letter and their last letter, and drawing a line over the top. It is often thought that this was a more reverential way to write the words.

Scribes were not entirely consistent in their renderings of the nomina sacra. Sometimes they would forget to abbreviate them, sometimes they would abbreviate them, and in no instance did their decision affect what the text said or what it meant. It made not the slightest bit of difference.

And so, the phrase “the Son of God” in this opening verse of mark would not have been made up of eight letters YIOY ΘEOY (in English UIOU THEOU) but of four letters YY ΘY (with a line drawn over the top). And there are two other issues that make this yet more interesting. Remember, as I pointed out a few posts ago, ancient manuscripts were written in scriptio continua - that is, they did not separate the words from one another. So the four words in English would have been found as YYΘY in Greek. And second, notice that the two words *before* these words are also nomina Sacra “Jesus Christ.” Those too would have been abbreviated, so instead of IHΣOY XPIΣTOY they would have been written as IHYXY.

The two lines of the Gospel then (“The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Just as is written in ...” then would have appeared like this (I have underlined the words “Son of God”):

APXHTOYEYAGΓEΛIOYIHYXYYYΘYKΑΘΩΣΓΕΓΡΑΠΤΑΙ

You can see how easy it would have been for a scribe simply to miss those four letters. And that’s especially the case because the fourth of those letters is the SAME letter as the letter before the four (both are upsilons). A scribe could very easily have written down the epsilon from the word “Christ,” returned his eye to the page, picked up the epsilon at the end of the word “God” and that that *that* was the epsilon he had just copied, and continued on from there (they both would have had a line drawn over the top, so they would have looked just the same).

If that’s what happened, the scribe would have accidentally dropped the words “Son of God.” And that would explain why the words are found in most manuscripts, but not in others. But is there a better explanation? I’ll explore that question in the next post.



[Mark 1:1 as an Intentional Alteration of the Text](#)
[An Intentional Change in Mark 15:34](#)