

On February 1, I had a public debate in Chapel Hill with Daniel Wallace, a conservative evangelical Christian New Testament scholar who teaches at that bastion of conservative dispensationalist theology, Dallas Theological Seminary. I have known Dan for over thirty years, since we were both graduate students interested in similar areas of research: my field (at the time I too was an evangelical) was textual criticism, the study of the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and of what they can tell us about the “original” writings of the New Testament; his field was the grammar of the Greek New Testament.

The term “textual criticism” is a technical term. It does not refer to any study of “texts.” It is specifically the study of how to establish what an author wrote if we do not have his or her actual writings, but only later copies of them. In the case of the New Testament we have a highly ironic and problematic situation on our hands. We have thousands and thousands of later copies of the New Testament. But none of our copies are the originals or copies of the originals or copies of the copies of the originals.

The vast majority of our copies are from many hundreds of years after the originals. That in itself is not a problem, apart from a related circumstance. All of these surviving copies are different from other another, giving different wording for this verse and that verse, up and down the line, page after page over the entire New Testament. We don’t know how many differences there are among our surviving copies – by last count we had some 5560 copies in the original Greek language of the New Testament – but they appear to number in the hundreds of thousands. Most scholars think that there are some 300,000 or 400,000 differences among these copies.

The vast majority of these differences are completely unimportant, immaterial, insignificant, and don’t matter for a thing, other than to show that ancient Christian scribes could spell no better than most people can today. (And they didn’t have spell check! In fact, they didn’t even have dictionaries.) But some of the differences matter a lot, affecting how a verse, or a passage, or even an entire book is to be interpreted. When you change what the words of a text are, you obviously also change what the words of the text mean! And so it matters which words were originally written.

Over the thirty years since I first met Dan I have engaged in serious and rigorous research in textual criticism. It was the subject of my Master’s thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. And then of my PhD dissertation. I have published seven books on the subject and lots of articles in scholarly journals. It is the field that I devoted the first twenty years of my research career to. Over that time I moved away from being an evangelical Christian who believed not only that we could reconstruct the very words of the original authors of the New Testament, but who also believed those very words were inspired by God.

The public debate that I had with Dan – who has himself remained a committed evangelical Christian over all these years – was about the former question. It was not over whether the words of the New Testament were inspired by God. It was over whether we can know with relatively complete confidence what these words are.

It is not surprising that Dan thinks we can know what they are. It would make little sense to say the words were inspired if in fact we don’t have the words. What good would it have been for God to inspire words that are now lost? I on the other hand have come to realize that despite our best efforts, we will never be able to know what those words were in many instances. We simply don’t have the kinds of evidence that are needed to be confident that our reconstructed texts – based on copies that are all full of mistakes from hundreds of

years later - are exactly what the authors wrote.

In other blogs I will discuss various aspects of that question. Here I simply want to point out one issue that came up during our debate.

In the debate I pointed out that our earliest copy of the Gospel of Mark was P45 (called this because it is the 45th Papyrus [hence "P"] manuscript to be catalogued), which dates to around the year 200 CE - i.e., 140 years after Mark was first written. That's our earliest copy. Between the original of Mark and our earliest copy there were something like fourteen decades of copying, and recopying, and recopying of Mark. Year after year it was copied. And the copies were being changed at every point. And then later copies were copies of the earlier changed copies. Then those earlier changed copies were lost; as were the copies based on them; and the copies based on them. Until our earliest surviving copy, P45 - which itself is not a complete copy of Mark, but highly fragmentary. Our first complete copy of Mark dates to around the year 360 - nearly three hundred years (count them 300 years) after the "original" of Mark.

In his response to my discussion in the debate, Dan made a surprise announcement. We now have a first-century copy of Mark, he told the astonished audience (and the astonished Bart). When asked, he would not, or could not, tell us very much about this first-century copy of Mark. But it is obviously very important to know the details:

- *How extensive is this copy? Is it a complete copy of Mark? Or a fragment? If it is a fragment, how much text is found on it? Twelve chapters? Two verses? It obviously makes an enormous difference! But Dan would not say.*
- *How was it dated? Dan would not say.*
- *Who dated it? Dan would not say*
- *Has anyone corroborated the dating by rigorous testing. Dan would not say.*

All Dan would say is that the manuscript had been discovered; it had been dated by a renowned (but unnamed) palaeographer (i.e., expert in ancient handwriting: that's how ancient manuscripts are dated, by analyzing the handwriting) who "had no theological bias" (I was not sure why Dan made that point; what does theology have to do with the dates of ancient handwriting); and that it would be published by the respectable publishing house E. J. Brill "in about a year."

I have lots to say about this remarkable announcement, some of which I will say here in this public forum and some of which I will reserve for my membership site. For this forum, I should say, first of all, that it struck me at the time and still strikes me now as a rather strange debating point for Dan to have made, and it makes me wonder if it really was simply to "score a point" rather than to provide helpful information. In effect what he was saying was that contrary to my claim, there was in fact a copy of Mark from near the time of original, that he had evidence that would counteract my views. But, in effect what he is saying is: "I won't tell you anything about this evidence! Trust me on this one!"

I really don't think a public debate is the place to raise evidence that you are not willing to talk about, and that if you aren't willing to state what exactly the evidence is, then you shouldn't bring it up (I have evidence, but I won't tell you about it).

Moreover, I don't understand why there is so much secrecy about this "manuscript." Why NOT tell us where it was found, who found it, how extensive it is, who has examined it, what his grounds for dating it were, whether his views have been independently corroborated? Is it so more people will buy the book when it comes out? Is this secrecy driven by a profit

motive? If not, why the secrecy?

Dan has been repeatedly asked for more information, and he will not give it. I don't know if he owns the manuscript, if he has seen the manuscript, if it is his book that will contain information about the manuscript, or anything else. The one piece of information that I have been able to gather is that we are not talking about a large manuscript with lots of text on it (say, several chapters, let alone all of the Gospel of Mark). It appears to be a scrap of papyrus with parts of a few verses on it.

The other thing I will say about this entire business is that publishing such a scrap as a book rather than in an academic journal where claims can be evaluated and reassessed by real scholars in the field is a very poor way to promote scholarship.

But let's say that the dating is right, and that now we have a scrap of Mark from the first century. Let me be the first to say that I think that would be absolutely fantastic! It would be great! May many more appear!

Dan has gone on record as saying that this will be a discovery as significant as one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (see [more here](#)). He is wrong about that. In fact, if it is just a scrap, as it appears to be, then it probably will not change a single, solitary thing in the entire field of New Testament textual criticism.

I have extended this discussion by explaining why in the longer version on my membership section-[Join now or log in to read the complete content.](#)

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