

I've been looking for a scrappy question to tangle with, and today I received one!

QUESTION:

You make the case that we do not have the original New Testament manuscripts. In fact, we do not have any complete manuscripts of books that eventually became part of the New Testament until the 3rd century, correct? The response often given by fundamentalist Christians is this: So, you don't believe that Socrates died by drinking hemlock? You don't believe that Julius Caesar was Emperor? You don't believe that Plato wrote Plato's Republic? The manuscripts for Jesus are superior in quality to the manuscripts for other historical figures.

This is sort of a sneak way of convincing people that if they don't accept Jesus (his historicity or divinity?) than you don't believe anything about ancient history. I am guessing that you aren't a scholar of ancient Greece. But in a debate with a fundamentalist Christian, it's often tempting to pretend to be one simply to swat away these silly arguments.

What do you think is the best argument in response to this?

RESPONSE:

Fundamentalists are amazing creatures. I have to admit, deep down I admire their focus and simplicity (I don't often tell anyone this!). They have one particular point of view, it is simple and direct, and they are going to stick to it no matter what. It's refreshing, in its way.

The downside is that doing so leads to all sorts of crazy arguments, illogical assertions, non-sequiturs, and nonsense.

This particular argument is that if we don't know for certain what the authors of the New Testament wrote, then that must mean we don't know anything about the *things* they wrote *about*. And that must mean that those things aren't actually true. And if you take that logic, then we don't know if *anything* is true. Maybe Jesus was a Buddhist monk! Maybe Julius Caesar wrote the book of Revelation! Maybe the Bible was given to us by Martians! Hey, why not!

In simple terms this is known as an argument ad absurdum. An argument ad absurdum takes an argument, plays it out to a conclusion (which is always something ridiculous, and is, in fact, almost never the conclusion that would sensibly be drawn), points to the absurdity, and concludes that the flaw is in the argument itself, since no one could accept that conclusion. And so, for example, If there was a newspaper article about Apollo 11 that had factual mistakes in it, that must mean we can't trust the article, and that must mean we never landed on the moon, and that must mean that the whole thing is a hoax, and that must mean that we can't land on the moon, and that must mean that maybe the moon really might be made of green cheese. Is *that* what you want to think? Huh? Huh? (Implication: this article must be 100% correct).

Specifically, with respect to the fundamentalist argument ad absurdum about the

manuscripts of the New Testament – why doesn't anyone simply look at our surviving copies and ask whether they all agree or not (none of them do, in many many details) and then ask whether it is possible to get experts together to concur at every place of the Greek New Testament what the original texts said (in fact it is *not* possible)? If that can't be done, why not simply conclude that there are places where we don't know what the NT originally said?

The vast majority of those places will be very small, picayune little details that no one even cares about. I've always (always!) said this (even if people, on either side, never seem to hear me say it). On the other hand, there are some places that matter for how one can interpret a verse, or a passage, or an entire book; and some of them are deeply relevant for understanding what this, that, or the other author really thought about one important issue or another. These claims should be *entirely* non-controversial. They are simply true.

But fundamentalists who think that every single word of the Bible has to be the one God directed the authors to write, and if it's not then we can have no guidance for how to live or what to believe, and then we can believe just about anything, and therefore we can just as well become inveterate hedonists or raging tyrants (or both) and.... And so the argument goes.

So let me say as plainly as I can: the problems with the Bible are indeed the problems we have with every literary text from the ancient world. These problems don't make the Bible stand out as a sore thumb. Every text copied by hand has the same problem. Yes, it is a problem for Plato's account of the death of Socrates.

How then can we know if Socrates drank the hemlock? We don't know it because we believe Plato's *Phaedo* (where the account can be found) was inspired by God and inerrant in its every word. We have to examine all our sources of information, evaluate their merits, critically weight their claims, compare them to one another and other contemporary documents, determine if they are generally reliable, ascertain the possible biases of the author that may have affected his reporting, and ... and and and – we have to do the work of historians. One alternative to doing history is having faith. You could simply believe that the *Phaedo* is the inspired word of God so everything it says is necessarily accurate.

But here is the final point, in some ways the most important one. Fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals often argue that since we have so *many* manuscripts of the New Testament – far more than for any other book from the ancient world (to no one's surprise, since the copyists in the Middle Ages who preserved our ancient literature for us were, after all, Christian monks! Of *course* they'll copy their cherished scriptures more than other books) – that since we have so many manuscripts then we can trust that we have the New Testament in the original form and therefore we can trust what it says.

It is that final “therefore” that should make you screw up your eyes and ask, Huh??? (The first “therefore” is a non-sequitur as well, but I won't get into that here.) (BTW, when reading a logical argument you should always ask what the “therefore” is there for.) Why would having thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament mean you can trust what it says?

It actually makes zero sense. That's easiest shown with an illustration. Do we have any doubt at *all* about what Adolph Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*? There are millions of copies in print. One of them is a first edition signed by Adolph Hitler! There is no doubt about what Hitler wrote in the book. Does that mean we can trust what it says?

Trusting the *content* of a content of a book has no relation to its manuscript tradition. The manuscript tradition could be *terrible* (we have only one massively fragmentary copy of Cicero's de Republica, e.g.); but what the author said in the book might be completely true. On the other hand, the manuscript tradition could be *excellent* (e.g., for the Communist Manifesto), but what the author(s) said in the book might be completely wrong. You judge the contents of a book differently from its manuscript tradition. No relation.

Textual critics are experts who try to establish what an author originally wrote. For the New Testament, there is an abundance of evidence. For the first fifteen years or so of my scholarly career, I was obsessed with it and devoted my life to it. We do our best to know what the author's words were. My guess is that most of the time we're right. But it's only a guess - there is no way to know, given the state of our evidence.

That is not a problem for most people, any more than it's a problem that we may not know in some passages the original words of Plato's Phaedo. But it *is* a problem for fundamentalists, who insist that we must and do know the very words God inspired. I'm sorry, but even though it's a focused and simple view, it just doesn't pass muster in the face of masses and masses of evidence. The evidence can be ignored or ... a person can stop being a fundamentalist!



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