Here is a second guest-written post dealing with manuscripts. We are unusually lucky over the past two days! This one is by Brice Jones, another ancient manuscript person who happens to be on the blog. Brice runs his own blog devoted to issues related to papyrology (roughly: the study of ancient papyri manuscripts). His very useful blogsite is: http://www.bricecjones.com/blog

Brice here is responding to some rather extravagant claims made by Craig Evans (my friend and erstwhile debate opponent) about whether we know what the original manuscripts of the NT said, based on a book recently published by George Houston (who is also - though neither Craig nor Brice knew this - also a friend and erstwhile colleague: he was a longtime member of the Classics department at UNC and is a very bright fellow, even if his work sometimes gets misused by others). In any event, Brice summarizes Craig’s just-published article and shows some of the reasons it is problematic:

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Craig A. Evans on the New Testament Autographs: A Response

6/29/2015

The latest issue of the Bulletin of Biblical Research (25.1) features an article by NT scholar Craig A. Evans that has been the subject of much discussion on social media over the last few weeks. Evans’ article, titled “How Long Were Late Antique Books in Use? Possible Implications for New Testament Textual Criticism,” has three main arguments. The first argument, which relies on George Houston’s work on ancient libraries, is that some literary manuscripts were in use over a long period of time, sometimes for 100 years or more. The second argument, which hinges on the first, is that the autographs of the New Testament probably also remained in use (i.e., being copied, read, and circulated) for 100 years or more. The third and final argument is that, since the autographs and first copies probably continued to be copied throughout the second and on into third centuries, the New Testament text was stable and therefore did not undergo any major changes.

There are many problems with Evans’ article, but here I would like to respond to a few of the more serious ones. It should be stated at the outset that the New Testament autographs—i.e., manuscripts containing the original or authorial text—are lost to us today. Just like any other ancient text, we do not possess the manuscripts that the original authors of the New Testament wrote and we do not know what their texts looked like immediately as they left their hands (or mouths, if produced via dictation). Our earliest manuscript evidence of the New Testament is a handful of fragments, most containing only a few verses, dating from the second and third centuries. The majority of our earliest evidence for the text of the New Testament stems from the fourth and fifth centuries and is represented by major codices like Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Alexandrinus, and Codex Bezae. The text of the New Testament as it existed in the first and second centuries has been a point of debate for many years, primarily because we have no first century evidence, and only minimal evidence for the second century. But what must be remembered is that the autographs are lost to us today and we do not know what those texts looked like exactly.
The most controversial claim in Evans’ article is that the autographs circulated and continued to be copied throughout the second century, and even on into the third century in some cases. **There is not a shred of evidence for this claim.** As mentioned above, Evans bases this claim on the work of Houston. So what does Houston say? According to Houston, who gathered only a small amount of data for ancient libraries, some literary manuscripts can be shown to have had “a useful life of between one hundred and two hundred years” (251). It is apparent that some literary manuscripts were indeed kept in use for this period of time before being discarded. (It should be noted that there are some problems with respect to how Houston’s “concentrations” are established, especially in regard to the dating of papyri and the potential contamination of a collection; see 248.) But that was certainly not the normal practice. Houston himself even admits that “a considerable majority of volumes in our concentrations were not that old when they were discarded or (in the case of the Villa of the Papyri) destroyed” (250). Manuscripts were frequently retired, discarded, or destroyed for various reasons (see examples and further discussion in AnneMarie Luijendijk’s work on “Sacred Scriptures as Trash”). Multigenerational use of literary texts was an exception to the rule and so extrapolating Houston’s data to permit longevity of the New Testament autographs is highly problematic.

In the end, **we have no idea how long the New Testament autographs were in use.** If they were treated like other literary manuscripts of the time, they were probably discarded within a generation or so. But even if they **were** “kept alive” for a century or more, as Evans wants us to think, they were still being copied. Thus, Evans’ argument that the autographs were “in a position to influence the form of the Greek text” in the late second and early to mid-third centuries is sheer guesswork. How could we possibly know this when we do not even possess the autographs?! Evans ultimately attempts to use this scenario of preservation and use to argue for “the textual stability of the writings that make up the Greek NT” (35). In other words, he sees his imagined autographs as filling up the gaps in our early evidence. The idea that these imagined autographs afforded textual stability or control of the early New Testament texts is completely dubious. If this were the case, then how in the world does one explain the textual diversity in the earliest manuscript tradition?

New Testament scholar [Michael Kruger](https://www.thereligionf急性乱.md) read Evans’ article and concluded that “this makes the gap between our copies and the autographs shrink down to a rather negligible size.” In reality, however, **not a single thing has changed.** Evans has not discovered new evidence: he has invented it. There are no new links between the autographs and the earliest manuscript copies despite what Evans wants us to think. The gaps have not shrunk down to a rather negligible size, as Kruger claims. The autographs of the New Testament are lost, and we have no idea what happened to them. Thus, Evans’ arguments about the longevity of the autographs and their influence on the manuscript tradition are built wholly on multiple, untenable assumptions.

Like Evans, many scholars continue to overemphasize the “early” in order to argue for textual stability, but this method is flawed. It is wrong to assume that “earlier” manuscripts always contain better readings and that late manuscripts always contain bad readings. Indeed, readings in later witnesses have been found to have early support. As J.K. Elliott has rightly warned, “to emphasize their [i.e., the papyri] early dates is deceptive. The age of a manuscript is of no significance when assessing textual variation, unless we know how many stages there were between the autograph and that copy and also what changes were made at each of the intervening stages. No one has such information” (223).
Evans attempts to strengthen his claim that the early text of the New Testament was stable by turning to the “Gnostic manuscripts.” According to Evans, the “Gnostic” writings were less numerous and less sacred than the New Testament texts, were read and studied in private, and were not taken as seriously as New Testament texts (“the NT writings were taken more seriously by their readers and copyists, with the Gnostic writings—probably read and studied in private—seen more or less as ‘interpretations’ of the dominical and apostolic traditions” [36]). These points, he suggests, “seem to show significant instability in the Gnostic manuscripts—in marked contrast to the NT manuscripts, whose text is considerably more stable” (36). We can probably all agree on the first point (i.e., the Nag Hammadi texts were less numerous than New Testament texts). But how in the world can we know that the Nag Hammadi texts were considered less sacred? And the assumption that readers took the text of the New Testament more “seriously” than the Nag Hammadi texts is absurd. In short, Evans appeals to a canonical-bias approach here: he undercuts the non-canonical texts by showing that they were unstable, unpopular, read in secret, and so on, in order to argue for the superiority and textual stability of the canonical texts.

All in all, I—and a whole slew of other scholars—am baffled as to how this article, full of faulty assumptions and claims, came to see the light of day. Its publication in the Bulletin of Biblical Research demonstrates that this journal’s editorial and peer-review standards seriously need to be reevaluated.

What is An Orthodox Corruption of Scripture?  
Questions on the Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library