

I have started discussing “intentional” changes of the text of the New Testament – that is alterations found in manuscripts of the New Testament that appear to have been made by scribes who *wanted* to change the text, presumably in order to make it say (more closely) what they wanted it to say. Let me illustrate my discussion by dealing with three of the most interesting textual variants in the Gospel of Mark, one of which is an easy problem to solve, one that is a bit more difficult, and one that has generated a lot of discussion over the years and no firm consensus. This will take a couple of posts.

In a still later post I will talk about the criteria and arguments that scholars typically use in order to resolve these questions. I will be alluding to those criteria and arguments here in my explanations of why one form of the text appears to be what the author originally wrote, and the other form of the text appears to be the scribal change. (It will help me to explain the criteria if first you see them in action.) (Note, in each of these three instances I will be discussing only two forms of the text, one of which is presumably the “original”; in other textual units there are three or more forms of the text, which makes things even *more* interesting!)

The one textual problem that is fairly easily resolved occurs almost right off the bat. Mark begins by indicating that his book will be “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” and then he launches into a Scriptural quotation (leading up to his introduction of John the Baptist):

“Just as was written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I am sending my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, a voice crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’... And so on.

There several textual variants in this short passage. Here I’ll point to just one. In a lot of manuscripts, instead of saying that the Scripture quotation (“Behold I am sending,” etc.) comes from the writing of the prophet Isaiah, the quotation is said to be found “in the prophets.” So which is it? Did Mark say the quotation is from Isaiah or from the prophets? He almost certainly said one or the other, but scribes changed it. Which way did they change it, and why?

There are two reasons for being relatively certain about which text is the original and which is the altered. The first may have occurred to you, if you have your entire Bibles memorized, as I’m sure so many of you do. The lines “Behold I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way” are not found ...

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[privateThe lines “Behold I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way” are not found in the writings of Isaiah. These words appear to be a kind of loose quotation of Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 (the *second* part of the quotation, starting with “A voice crying in the wilderness” *does* come from Isaiah 40:3).

Now your first instinct might be to say that this would suggest that originally Mark wrote that the words came from “the prophets,” rather than from “Isaiah,” since in fact the words *don’t* come from Isaiah but from several books of the OT quoted together, so “in the prophets” would be correct and, technically speaking “in Isaiah” would be incorrect.

But your instinct is not shared by textual critics. In fact, it is precisely because “in the

prophet Isaiah” is (technically) wrong, or could be seen as wrong, that critics are sure that it is what Mark originally wrote.

And why is that? It is because you have to ask yourself the question: which form of the text is the one that scribes might have found to be problematic and decided, therefore, to change? Is it one that makes perfectly good sense and is correct? Or is it one that doesn't make good sense and seems to be incorrect? Suppose you were a scribe. Which of the two would you be more likely to want to change. Obviously the one that seems incorrect.

So text critics think that is the one that Mark originally wrote and the “improved” text is what scribes created. And their opinion is supported by one other compelling piece of evidence. It is *that* reading - the one that is harder to explain away and seems to be incorrect - that is found in all of our earliest and best manuscripts. It was only later, after the original reading had been in circulation, that a scribe (one whose change became widely accepted) altered it, so that instead of saying that a quotation that combines words from Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah is taken from “Isaiah the prophet” it now says, unproblematically, that it is a quotation that comes from “the prophets.”

You will find this changed text (the one that is almost certainly not original) in the King James Version. You will find the other one in most of the modern translations.

Now you will have noticed that I have said that this original form of the text is “technically” speaking a mistake. Some interpreters would argue that it's not really a mistake. In their view the author, Mark, is simply indicating the most prominent of the three books as the source for a quotation that he has taken from parts of all of them. The textual critic - when she or he is working strictly as a textual critic - is not concerned about that question of whether the text is *really* a mistake or not.

The textual critic in a matter such as this is interested in two things and two things only:

1. What is the oldest form of the text that we can establish? In this case, it is almost certainly “in Isaiah the prophet.”
2. Why, when, and how was the text changed? In this case: it was changed because the original text could be perceived as a problem/mistake/error; it was changed by at least the year 400 or so, since that is the approximate date of the manuscripts that start having it; and it was changed by altering the words to say “in the prophets.”

Once the textual critic has established what the text actually *said* then interpreters can approach the text and explain what it *means* (in this case, explain why it is or is not an actual mistake). But they can't do that until they know what words to interpret. That's why textual criticism is such a foundational discipline within the field of New Testament studies. You can't really do much of anything else without it.[/private



[An Intentional Change in Mark 15:34](#)
[Intentional Changes of the Text](#)