I’ve been discussing the kinds of evidence that textual critics appeal to in order to make a decision concerning what an author originally wrote, when there are two or more different forms of the text—that is, where a verse or passage is worded in different ways in different manuscripts. And I have been using the passage found (only) in (some manuscripts of) Luke of Jesus’ bloody sweat as an example. In my previous post I discussed one kind of “internal” evidence. Remember: external evidence deals with figuring out which manuscripts have which reading: how many manuscripts (this criterion, as it turns out, is not so important), age of the manuscripts, geographical distribution of the manuscripts, and (something I didn’t discuss) quality of the manuscripts. And recall that internal evidence is of two kinds, the first of which is “intrinsic probabilities,” which seeks to establish which form of the text is more likely to have been written by the author himself.

The second kind of internal evidence is a kind of flip side of the coin, and it’s called “transcriptional probabilities.” Here the question is not which reading is more inherently likely to go back to the author; instead it is which reading is more inherently likely to have been created by a scribe or scribes.

The deal is this: a lot of times when there are variant readings for a verse, one of the readings is really hard to understand, or grammatically incorrect, or contains a historical error, or presents a theological view that later came to be seen as dubious, whereas the other reading is easy to understand, grammatically correct, has no historical problems, and presents a perfectly acceptable theological view. Now, this criterion may seem backwards, but it’s one of the best in the business: it is the *more difficult* reading that is more likely original than the less difficult one. The one that is hard to figure out or that has grammatical, historical, or theological problems is more likely to be the one the author originally wrote. And why is that? Because scribes who were changing the text were more likely to make it better—if they were consciously changing it—rather than worse; they were more likely to try to *correct* problems than *create* them.

This criterion has been around for over 250 years, and it has proven right time and time again: the earliest manuscripts (discovered since the rule was first formulated) tend to have the more difficult readings, which get smoothed out over time by sharp-minded copyists.

This criterion involves “transcriptional probabilities” because....

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