In my previous post I started talking about the different kinds of manuscripts of the New Testament we have, as a prelude to my discussion of my book The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture. I now want to say something further about these manuscripts and how they can help us reconstruct what the authors of the NT originally wrote (and why they pose problems for us to that end).

Below is what I say about the matter in my textbook on the New Testament, in the new sixth edition that has just appeared.

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When trying to reconstruct what the authors of the New Testament actually wrote, based on the surviving copies, we have both good news and bad news.

The good news: We have more manuscripts for the New Testament than for any other book from the ancient world—many, many more manuscripts than we have for the writings of Homer, Plato, Cicero, or any other important author. We have something like 5,700 manuscripts of the New Testament—from small fragments of tiny parts of a single book to complete copies of the entire New Testament - in the Greek language in which they were originally written, along with manuscripts in many other ancient languages (for example, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic). That is good news indeed—the more manuscripts you have, the more likely it is that you can figure out what the authors originally said.

Still, there is some bad news: as I have already intimated, despite the large number of manuscripts we have, there are hardly any that are extremely early. Most of our manuscripts are from the Middle Ages, many centuries—over a thousand years!— after the originals. What is worst, all these surviving manuscripts disagree with one another, often in minor ways, and sometimes even in major ways. Apart from the smallest fragments, no two of our manuscripts are exactly alike. How many differences are there in our surviving New Testament manuscripts? Thousands of differences; tens of thousands of differences; hundreds of thousands of differences. It is probably easiest to put the matter in comparative terms: there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

But there is more good news. The vast majority of these hundreds of thousands of differences are completely and utterly unimportant and insignificant and don’t matter at all. By far the most common differences simply show us that scribes in the ancient world could spell no better than most people can today (and the scribes didn’t have spell-check!). If we really want to know what the apostle Paul had to say about the importance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, does it matter to us how he spelled the word “resurrection”? Probably not. Moreover, lots of other kinds of differences in our manuscripts—as we will see—are easy to explain and don’t affect the meaning of the writings in the least.

But there is also some more bad news. There are lots of differences that do matter a lot. They may not completely reverse the teachings of the New Testament: when the Bible says that “God is love,” we don’t have manuscripts that claim the opposite, that “God is hate”! But, as we will see, they do affect how we interpret important passages of the books of the New Testament, and sometimes they affect significant teachings of the biblical authors.

There is, however, some further good news. Some of the manuscripts of the New Testament appear to be highly accurate copies, and a few of them are very ancient. The oldest surviving manuscript that we have is called P⁵²—named this because it was the fifty-second
A *papyrus* manuscript to be discovered and catalogued in modern times. It is just a tiny scrap found in a trash heap in Egypt. It originally came from a full manuscript of the Gospel of John, but all that is left is this little piece, the size of a credit card, with writing on the front and back that has a few verses from John 18, where Jesus is put on trial before Pontius Pilate prior to his crucifixion. Even though this little scrap does not have much writing on it, it is very valuable: scholars have typically dated it to around 125 C.E. or so—just thirty to thirty-five years after John was originally written. It could well be a copy of a copy of a copy. Too bad the rest of the manuscript didn’t survive!

Our first reasonably complete copy of the Gospel of John is from around 200 C.E. That is still a long time after John was written (well over a century). But it is still pretty old—older than most manuscripts for most other authors from the ancient world, by a wide margin. Our first complete manuscripts of the New Testament start appearing about 150 years after that, in the mid-fourth century C.E. (three hundred years or so after the originals). And so with the New Testament we are in the good situation of having *some* manuscripts—even if highly fragmentary—from within a century or two of the books’ originally having been written.

Still, you may have already have figured out more of the bad news. Having a few scraps from within a hundred years of when the New Testament was written does not give us what we’d really like to have: complete manuscripts from near the time the authors published their books. If our first reasonably complete copies of the New Testament do not appear until two or three centuries after the books were first put in circulation, that’s two or three hundred *years* of scribes copying and recopying, making mistakes, multiplying mistakes, changing the text in ways big and small before we have complete copies. We can’t compare these, our oldest surviving copies, with yet older ones to see where their mistakes are. There aren’t any older ones.

And the problems get worse. In later times, when we have an abundance of manuscripts, the copyists of the New Testament were trained scribes—usually monks in monasteries who copied manuscripts as a sacred duty. These monks of the Middle Ages did their level best—most, but not all, of the time—to copy their texts accurately. They sometimes got tired and inattentive and made mistakes; and they sometimes changed the text because they thought it was supposed to be changed. Still, for the most part they did a good job. But that was only much later in Christian history. In the earliest centuries, the vast majority of copyists of the New Testament books were not trained scribes. We know this because we can examine their copies and evaluate the quality of their handwriting, and we can assess how accurately they did their work. The striking and disappointing fact is that our earliest manuscripts of the New Testament have far more mistakes and differences in them than our later ones. The earlier we go in the history of copying these texts, the less skilled and attentive the scribes appear to have been.

Another way to put this: if you take two New Testament manuscripts from around the year 1000 and compare them to one another, they are often very much alike in every verse. But if you do the same thing with the fragmentary copies made around the year 200, you find lots and lots of differences—differences both from the manuscripts of the year 1000 and, more disconcertingly, differences from one another. This tells us that the earliest scribes were not as skilled or assiduous as the later ones. And that’s a problem, because *all* of our surviving manuscripts were copied from earlier manuscripts, and the earliest copies of all were filled with mistakes. If our earliest known copyists made tons of mistakes, how many mistakes were made by their predecessors, who produced the copies that *they* copied? We have no way of knowing.
That doesn’t mean, however, that we should give up all hope of ever discovering what the New Testament authors wrote. It simply means that there are some places, possibly a lot of places, where we will never know for sure.