

The Text of the New Testament: Are the Textual Traditions of Other Ancient Works Relevant? A Blast From the Past

Funny how some topics keep recurring in my head. Here is a post from exactly five years ago, on a topic I still get asked about a lot. The really interesting bit of it starts about four paragraphs down. Turns out, I still think the same things today!

I have had three debates with Dan Wallace on the question of whether or not we can know for certain, or with relative reliability, whether we have the “original” text of the New Testament. At the end of the day, my answer is usually “we don’t know.” For practical reasons, New Testament scholars proceed as if we do actually know what Mark wrote, or Paul, or the author of 1 Peter. And if I had to guess, my guess would be that in most cases we can probably get close to what the author wrote. But the dim reality is that we really don’t have any way to know for sure. Our copies are all so far removed from the time when the authors wrote, that even though we have so many (tons!) of manuscripts of the New Testament, we do not have many (ounces!) that are very close to the time of the originals, and it is impossible to say whether the texts were altered a bit, or a lot, between the time the originals were penned and our first manuscripts appear.

My guess, as I said, is that they probably were not altered lots and lots and lots, but there really is no way to know. This doesn't matter for most of us. We simply create a little fiction in our minds that we are reading the actual words of Mark, or Paul, or 1 Peter, and get on with the business of interpretation. It's a harmless fiction, and very useful for all sorts of reasons that I may discuss in another post.

For this post I want to discuss briefly Dan's typical counter-argument. It is that we have SO many more manuscripts of the New Testament than for any other ancient author, that we are FAR better situated to know what these early Christian authors wrote than for any other work from antiquity. His point is that we don't sit around agonizing over whether the words we read in the dialogues of Plato are actually what Plato wrote; the same for the plays of Euripides, the histories of Livy or Tacitus, the epics of Homer, and so on. If we have no problem accepting that we have something like the "originals" of these writings, why not for the New Testament?

Dan goes on and gives the statistics. For some classical authors we have only one manuscript; or a dozen; or if we're lucky a hundred. In some VERY luck instances, such as Homer, we have hundreds of manuscripts (though never a thousand) And for the New Testament? We have over 5560 manuscripts – just in the original Greek. Way, way, way, way more than for any other classical author! And so, as Dan puts it, for the New Testament we have "an embarrassment of riches." Since we don't doubt what these other authors wrote, why are we creating special problems for the New Testament authors and claiming that we can't know what they wrote?

Let me make just three points about this claim.

First, it is not true that scholars are confident that they know exactly what Plato, Euripides, or Homer wrote, based on the surviving manuscripts. In fact, as any trained classicist

will tell you, there are and long have been enormous arguments about all these writings. Most people don't know about these arguments for the simple reason that they are not trained classicists. Figuring out what Homer wrote – assuming there was a Homer (there are huge debates about that; as my brother, a classicist, sometimes says: “The Iliad was not written by Homer, but by someone else named Homer”) – has been a source of scholarly inquiry and debate for over 2000 years!

Second, and more important: just because we are WORSE off for other authors than for those of the New Testament does not in itself mean that we can trust that we know what the NT authors wrote. I am a lot stronger than my five-year old granddaughter. But I still am not able to bench-press a half-ton truck. Yes, but you are MANY TIMES stronger than her! It doesn't matter. I'm nowhere near strong enough. We have far more manuscripts of the New Testament than for any other ancient writing. But that doesn't mean that we can therefore know what the originals said. We don't have nearly enough of the right kinds of manuscripts. Leading to my third point.

Third, even though we have lots and lots of manuscripts, the vast majority of them are comparatively late in date and not the kinds of manuscripts we would need to know with confidence that we have a very, very close approximation of the “original” text. 94% of our surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament date from after the ninth Christian century. That is 800 years (years!) after the so-called originals. What good do these late manuscripts do us? They do us a lot of good if we want to know what text of Mark, Paul, or 1 Peter was being read 800 years after the originals were produced. But they are of much less value for knowing what the authors themselves wrote, eight centuries earlier.

As I will explain in my next post, the kinds of manuscripts we would really need to be able to say with some assurance that we know what the “originals” said – very early and very extensive manuscripts – simply don't exist.

So it is absolutely true that the New Testament is far better attested than other ancient writings – pagan, Jewish, and Christian. But it is also true that this mere fact in itself cannot provide us with assurance that we know what the authors originally wrote.

My next two posts on this topic will be in the members site, under Bart Revisits the Debates. Please join!