

For today's Readers' Mailbag I deal with an interesting and important question about the changes that scribes made in their manuscripts.

QUESTION

In several of your books you mention that most modifications in the NT manuscripts happened in first 3 centuries. If I'm correct we have no manuscript from 1st century and only few from the 2nd. That means we can say almost nothing about changes during this time. This is however more than half of the "greatest modifications" historical period.

RESPONSE

This comment is more of a statement than a question, but the question is clearly implied: how do we know (or why do we think) that almost all of the changes in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament as found in later manuscripts were made early in the history of the tradition, in the first three centuries, if we don't have many manuscripts from that period to prove it? Great question. But with an answer that I think just about every textual scholar agrees with.

To begin with: when textual scholars say that virtually all the important textual changes were made by 300 CE or so, they are NOT talking about accidental changes made by scribal mistakes, such as misspelled words or accidentally deleted letters or words. Surely some words were simply misspelled, for example, by scribes of the 12th century that had not been misspelled by the 3rd century - fair enough. So we're talking about changes that matter for something.

And another point is that there are a couple but only a couple of well-known exceptions to this rule, well-known precisely because they are so exceptional. The famous "Johannine comma" - the two verses found in older translations of 1 John 5:7-8, where the Trinity is explicitly affirmed (in the only explicit statement of the entire New Testament) first came into the tradition after 300 CE. But this is a truly exceptional case.

Virtually all the other "significant" changes - that is, ones that affect the meaning of the text in one way or another - appear to have been made prior to 300. But how do we know that, if we don't have manuscripts from that period?

There are several points to note, the last of which is the most important.

First:

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