In my previous post I pointed out that lots of people — friends and foes — misconstrue what I say in Misquoting Jesus. It’s a particular problem with people who want to attack my views, often without seeing what I actually say. Sometimes when someone tells me what they object to in my book I ask them if they’ve read it. “Well, no, but I heard about it.” Sigh....

Even scholars — including scholars I’m friends with — have said things about my views that are absolutely not true (e.g., a common one, that I became an agnostic once I realized how many differences there were among the manuscripts of the NT. Good grief. Where do they get such ideas from?? I knew about massive differences in the manuscripts when I was a *fundamentalist*!!)

Anyway, what do I talk about in the book, and why have people found it objectionable? Here are some reflections I had on the issues when I thought about them some years ago.

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One of the most interesting things in the rather loud and vociferous denunciations of my book Misquoting Jesus by conservative Christian scholars is that rarely (I can’t remember a single instance, in fact – maybe someone else knows of some; if so, let me know!) did they dispute any of the facts I marshal in the book. So far as I know, the facts are not in dispute.

There were several books written in response to my book, including one called Misquoting Truth; another called Misquotes in Misquoting Jesus; and another called Lost in Transmission. These books were all written to assure people (mainly believers) that the changes of the New Testament in the surviving copies are not overly significant.

Before getting to the point of significance, let me say something about the facts that I marshal:

- We have something like 5500 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, some of them tiny fragments; some of them entire, complete copies.
- The earliest of these manuscripts date, probably, from the first part of the second century (some decades after the originals). These, however, are only fragmentary scraps. We do not get anything like full pages of this that or the other NT writing until the early 3rd century, and we do not get full and complete manuscripts until the middle of the fourth century.
- Of all our manuscripts, 94% date from the ninth century or later – that is, from 800 – 1400 years after the originals were put in circulation.
- We don’t have any originals, or copies of the originals, or almost certainly copies of copies of the originals. Our copies are later generation copies.
- We don’t know how many differences (scribal alterations) there are in these thousands of manuscripts, but there are lots. Some scholars say 300,000, some say 400,000. Since I wrote the book a new scholarly article has appeared claiming that there are more likely about 500,000.
- On the positive front, the vast majority of these differences in our manuscripts are unimportant, insignificant, and matter for nothing more than to show that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than students can today.
- But some of the differences are important for the interpretation of a verse, a passage, or even an entire book.
- Scholars continue to debate hundreds of places of variation in the text. In some places these debates will probably never cease. There are some passages where we probably will never
know what the author’s own copy said.

So those are the facts, and no one on the planet who knows what they’re talking about would ever deny any of them. So if those are the facts, and that is what I talk about in *Misquoting Jesus*, what is there to object to?

My sense is that....

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[private\My sense is that most of my critics objected to my tone. What they wanted was for me to assure readers that they can trust what they read in their New Testaments. They think that by talking so much about what got changed by scribes I don’t stress enough that we have a very good idea what the authors originally wrote. And that none of the changes in our manuscripts have a major effect on any important Christian doctrine.

I have several things to say in response to that. The first is that I think sometimes my critics have not read my book very carefully. I do indeed say explicitly (as I said above among my facts) that the vast majority of changes scribes made are completely insignificant. Most of them have almost zero effect on the meaning of the text; a good many of them cannot even be represented in an English translation (that is, if you translate two of the different wordings, the translation in English would be exactly the same!). I completely agree with that and have never said otherwise.

But the fear is that by focusing on changes that do matter I convey the wrong idea by making people think there are hundreds of thousands of places that radically affect what the text means. To that I would say that if people do read me as saying that, they are not reading what I said, since I never said that and never have said that.

There are places where the changes matter, though, and matter a lot – even if there are not hundreds of thousands of such places. One standard argument against my view (I’ve never seen how this is an argument against my view, actually, but people make it as an argument) is that no textual variant has any bearing on any major Christian doctrine. The conclusion that is drawn is that therefore none of the variants matter much. To this I have several responses:

• First, it’s not true that none of the variants are closely related to theology. Most are not vital, but some are, including one that is the only verse in the Bible that explicitly affirms the doctrine of the Trinity; one that is used by Appalachian snake handlers to justify their practices of ... handling poisonous snakes; and one of direct relevance to the doctrines of forgiveness and redemption, where Jesus extends pardon to a woman caught committing adultery.

• Second, if one wants say that no matter which manuscript of the NT a person chooses, she or he will have the same theology, I would completely agree. But that’s not because there are not lots of differences in our manuscripts. It’s because people tend to hold their theological views by establishing them from an entire range of passages and perspectives (some of which don’t come from the Bible). If anyone changes one passage, there are other passages (or arguments) to which appeal can be made. My view is that hardly anyone ever
changes their beliefs because of a passage (or even because of a whole bunch of passages). Beliefs are very hard indeed to change.

- Third, I think it is very odd indeed to think that the only reason textual differences could matter is if they affect major doctrines of the Christian faith. Are doctrines the only things that matter? Look at it this way: suppose tomorrow morning we all woke up only to find that the Bibles everywhere in the world no longer contained the Gospel of Mark, the letter to the Colossians, and the epistle of 1 Peter? Which of Christianity’s most cherished doctrines would be changed as a result? Not a single one. Does that mean that the loss of these three books would not be significant? Of COURSE not. It would be HUGELY significant. But it wouldn’t affect doctrines. Something can be significant for reasons other than cherished doctrines. The variations in our manuscripts are significant for other reasons (e.g., they show us how this or that author is to be interpreted, to see what he is trying to say).

I should stress a point that people don’t hear me stress enough. Since we do not have extensive early manuscripts, we cannot know for certain that the wording of the NT books that we have corresponds completely with what the authors wrote. We just can’t know for sure. Do I myself think that basically we know pretty much what Mark, or Paul, or James wrote? Yes, I myself think it is reasonable to assume that we pretty much know. Do I know that we are certain in every case? No, in fact I don’t know. And either can anyone else. We proceed in our interpretations of these books on the assumption that we basically know, and I think it’s a reasonably good assumption. But if I have to say whether we know for sure, then I’d say absolutely, no, we do not and cannot. For that we would need more evidence than what is currently available.[/private]

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