Text Variations in the Bible
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I received the following question from a young brother at FC: “I noticed that there are some scriptures that aren’t found in our oldest manuscripts. I am confused. Does this suggest that they are placed in the Bible after the fact? Things like the end of Mark 16 or 1John 5:7, or the woman caught in adultery… it is a bit curious.”

The task of copying manuscripts was generally done by scribes and monk copyists who were trained in the arts of writing, proofreading, and bookmaking. However, an important issue with manuscripts is preservation. The earliest New Testament manuscripts were written on papyrus, made from a reed that grew in the Egyptian Nile Delta. This tradition continued into the 8th century. Papyrus becomes brittle and deteriorates with age. With few exceptions, New Testament papyri manuscripts are not complete; many consist only of fragmented pages. Beginning in the 4th century, parchment or vellum began to be a common medium for New Testament manuscripts. It wasn’t until the 12th century that paper made from cotton or plant fibers began to gain popularity in Biblical manuscripts. Because the earliest manuscripts are fragmented, they will necessarily be incomplete. Some contemporary textual critics make the assumption that because the earliest manuscripts do not contain certain passages, later manuscripts with those texts are edited or enhanced by the copyists. Occam’s Razor (the Principle of Least Hypothesis) simplifies this by acknowledging the fragmented condition of the oldest manuscripts as the reason the oldest manuscripts do not contain all of the text.

None of the original copies of the New Testament books exist today, and the copies of existing manuscripts vary a small amount from one another. The textual critic seeks to determine from the divergent copies which texts should be regarded as conforming the closest to the original intent. In textual criticism, eclecticism is the practice of examining a wide number of texts and selecting the one that seems most consistent with the rest of the text. The result of the process is a text with readings drawn from many sources. Experienced critics rely on both external and internal evidence with the oldest manuscripts favored above newer ones. Modern translations (NKJV, et al) note these variations. But it is not a logical necessity to assume that these variations constitute additions to the original, but rather that the fragmented condition of the oldest documents make it necessary for contemporary critics to depend on later manuscripts for the complete text.

What most beginner critics overlook is the vast quantity of manuscripts available for authentication. There are 23,000 manuscripts, codices, papyri, and fragments of documents (with more being found every year) of the Biblical documents, some of which date back to the 2nd century AD. That is 1000 times more than any other writing from the same period. In examining all of these documents and fragments, scholars have determined that there is less than one half of one percent of variation among them all, and that these variations do not impact any significant doctrine. Only the most determined skeptics believe that we cannot trust the present scriptures as genuine and complete. A person has to really want to disbelieve the Bible to dismiss all of the evidence for its authenticity and accuracy.