

Accurately Defending the Textual Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts

Kenneth J. Coughlan

February 27, 2019

Chapter 9 of Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler's, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* forms the culmination of Part Three of the text, defending the textual reliability of the New Testament manuscripts. After walking through the process by which the New Testament texts were transmitted (Chapter 7) and identification of the earliest and best manuscripts (Chapter 8), Holden and Geisler give a brief overview of the process of textual criticism, including how scholars sort through variants to find the most probable original text and how the proximity in time of our earliest copies of New Testament manuscripts to their originals compares to other documents of antiquity.¹ All three chapters can be viewed as a progression through steps in building a cumulative case, and thus much of Chapter 9 builds upon and depends on some of the evidence presented in the previous two.

While the overall conclusion of Chapter 9 (i.e., "The New Testament is more accurately copied than any other book from ancient history"²) is solid, some of the details presented could benefit from more precision. Also, when speaking on this topic elsewhere in his works, Geisler has at times presented information that even other conservative Christian scholars do not believe is accurate.

One example comes from this chapter's first quote of Bart Ehrman in which the authors claim that even Ehrman "admits that the manuscript variants do not affect the central message of the New Testament."³ A careful examination of the quote, however, along with a survey of other literature, shows that this may come across as somewhat misleading. In the quote provided,

¹ Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 97-130.

² Ibid, 127.

³ Ibid.

Ehrman states that “most” of the variants do not affect our theological or ideological conclusions.⁴ This is not the same, however, as conceding that none of them do (which seems to be the implication the authors put forth).⁵ In fact, Ehrman has contended that at least some variants may significantly affect the way we read many New Testament books. He has been soundly refuted in this conclusion, but the important point here is that he has made it, and thus has not truly given as broad of a “concession” as the authors suggest.

To give one example, Ehrman has argued that scholars are wrong to claim “that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case.”⁶ Daniel B. Wallace wrote a response to many of Ehrman’s similar allegations from *Misquoting Jesus*.⁷ According to Wallace, in one case Ehrman addressed a difference of opinion as to whether the proper reading of Hebrews 2:8-9 is “by God’s grace he would experience death on behalf of everyone” or “apart from God he would experience death on behalf of everyone,” claiming that this one small change could affect the way we read the entire book.⁸ Wallace observed that Ehrman’s favoring of the latter reading is far from certain. Furthermore, even if true it would not

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ It is possible that Holden and Geisler were attempting to speak more broadly and claiming that Ehrman agrees that the theological “big picture” of the New Testament is not in dispute, while still disputing some lesser theological issues. If this is the case, it does not appear to be supported by the quote they provided in which Ehrman simply discusses “theology” and “ideology” and not overarching theological themes versus lesser theological claims.

⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 208.

⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, “The gospel according to Bart: a review article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 49 no. 2 (2006): 327-49.

⁸ Ibid, 337-40.

change the theological message of Hebrews.⁹ Thus, even though Ehrman is incorrect in his conclusion, he has at least made the claim that certain variants can profoundly affect out theological interpretation of New Testament texts. This could be seen as at odds with the claim made by Holden and Geisler.

Shortly after giving this quote from Ehrman, the authors go on to say that “[t]o speak of 200,000 to 400,000 errors in the Bible is completely misleading.”¹⁰ This harkens back to their discussion of “variants” in Chapter 7 where they defined “variants” as “deviations ... from the original or accepted text in the manuscripts themselves.”¹¹ While they are correct that this figure is misleading when used by Ehrman and other critics, where Geisler has explained his reasoning in more detail in other works he may have overstated his case. For example, in *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences*, Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks allege that a “variant is counted any time one copy is different from any other copy and it is counted again in every copy where it appears. So when a single word is spelled differently in 3,000 copies, that is counted as 3,000 variants.”¹² However, Wallace disagrees. He has stated that this way of calculating variants is “entirely false.”¹³ He says, “If that is how we are to count textual variants, then there would be *tens of millions* of variants among the NT MSS. A variant is any place where there is deviation among the MSS. Each *deviation* counts as *one* variant, regardless of how many MSS

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 127.

¹¹ Ibid, 106.

¹² Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 160.

¹³ Daniel B. Wallace, “Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 52 no. 1 (2009): 98.

attest to it.”¹⁴ Wallace is highly critical of many apologists, not only Geisler, for allowing this faulty definition of a variant to find its way into their works.¹⁵ The fundamental claim still holds true that the overwhelming majority of these variants are things like spelling errors or other meaningless differences, and none significantly impact any Christian theological doctrine. However, as apologists we must be careful that we are conveying accurate information and not merely repeating something that we have heard previously without assuring its validity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, 98 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁶ Another instance in which Holden and Geisler commit this error occurs in Chapter 8 when they state “one could reconstruct the entire New Testament based solely on the more than 36,200 Scripture quotations of the Fathers – with the exception of a few dozen verses!” Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 124. The authors do not provide any citation for this claim, although it is one often seen in apologetic circles. While this conclusion is sometimes attributed to Sir David Dalrymple, J. Warner Wallace recently reviewed Dalrymple’s works and was unable to locate any passage in which he made this assertion. Furthermore, Wallace appears to concede that the claim is likely overstated and the New Testament cannot truly be reconstructed to such a high degree (although the Early Church Fathers certainly do provide an extremely high degree of support for the authenticity of the New Testament Scriptures). J. Warner Wallace, "Can We Construct the Entire New Testament from the Writings of the Church Fathers?," June 12, 2016, <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/can-we-construct-the-entire-new-testament-from-the-writings-of-the-church-fathers/>.