

Are There Mistakes In Some Bible Manuscripts?

by Randy Blackaby

People who are skeptical of the Bible often allege that our English translations are full of mistakes and that even the early manuscripts on which we base our translations are riddled with mistakes. The Jehovah Witnesses, claiming errors in more common translations, developed their own New World Translation to support their doctrine. The Mormons also allege Bible errors and use their additional books to supposedly rectify the matter.

Before tackling some technical aspects, it is worth keeping in mind God's providence as it relates to the preservation of the Divine message. It's amazing how our New Testament has been preserved for 21 centuries, translated into hundreds of languages and dialects, and remains the most-published book in the world.

Are There Mistakes?

In comparing the thousands of manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts, you can find misspellings, omitted words, or wrong words in some of the texts. Remember, especially when manuscripts had to be hand-transcribed, it was easy for a scribe to make a copying mistake.

But this isn't the problem some make it out to be. We can compare several different manuscripts and usually can weed out the obvious copyist mistakes. Most of them are so minor that they do no damage to the meaning of the text.

There is an entire field of study, called **textual criticism**, which involves the work of many people comparing manuscripts and determining the most reliable texts and translations. It is far too involved for this short article, but a number of books can be recommended for those who would like to further explore this subject.

Again, critics allege that there are as many as 200,000 errors in our New Testament text. And, depending on how you calculate, that can be true. But, here's the problem with getting excited about that number. The way that huge number is calculated, if we were to find one misspelled name in 4,000 manuscripts or pieces of manuscripts, it would count as 4,000 errors. On the other hand, we might look at it as one very insignificant error. Whether you spell the evangelist's name Apollo or Apollonios changes no doctrine or issue of faith. Whether the place is called Bethany beyond the Jordan or Bethabara beyond the Jordan is insignificant. Is the name of the pool mentioned in John 5:2 Bethzatha, Bethesda, or Bethsaida? To be forthright, we must admit there also are some significant variations, which present some issues for further study. Some words in Greek are close in spelling but vastly different in meaning. Mistakenly changing one letter can cause a vast difference in meaning. Consider the English words **bomb** and **tomb**. If we change only the first letter, a complete difference in meaning occurs. But, these more significant variants are few in number, and none involve passages that affect our salvation.

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