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Variants: Villainous or Validating?

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Perhaps no area in the discussion surrounding contemporary, vernacular versions and the KJV evokes a more immediate and heart-wrenching response than the matter of textual variants. For example, consider the comments of Dr. Bruce Cummons who finds a comparison between multiple manuscripts (without considering the far more numerous textual variants) to be only a confusing and fruitless "rabbit chase."

From what I read in the average book or review of manuscript research and background, I will be very frank with you, I wouldn't be sure whether I had the Word of God or not. Most of them will take you for a 'rabbit chase' through a dozen, two dozen, or three dozen ancient manuscripts and then when they get through they leave you in great doubt as to whether we have anything close to the original words of God in print today.¹

¹Bruce D. Cummons, *The Foundation and Authority of the Word of God* (Massillon, OH: Massillon Baptist Temple, n.d.), 11-12.

Or consider the comments of Dr. Gordon H. Clark who equates variants which text critics classify as significant with "theological error."

The attempt to destroy Christian faith by an appeal to the difficulties of textual criticism has been based on considerable exaggeration. Someone has calculated that there is textual variant for one word in seven, but only one in a thousand makes any difference in the sense. Still, since the New Testament contains about 200,000 words, it would mean 200 theological errors in the book as a whole. This is too many for comfort.²

Both novice and experienced Bible student alike can be overwhelmed by the sheer number of textual variants which exist between the various ancient Bible manuscripts that we possess. The thought of any variation between Biblical manuscripts can be disconcerting. But the realization of the existence of thousands of variations between manuscripts, for some is intolerable and even appears as being anti-Scriptural. This reaction no doubt is due in part to our technologically-oriented culture which cherishes precision. Another contributing factor is a perspective on the doctrine of inspiration which seeks to apply verbal-plenary flawlessness beyond the original autographa to manuscript copies, to copies of copies, and even to translations which are used in daily life and worship.

Before panicking in the face of the large number of variants and before making claims that God's people are somehow being deprived of the words of God, it would be profitable to better understand the issue and the effect of variants on the discussion of textual criticism. The aim of this article is to work through a basic model of text-critical work in order to better understand the nature and the effect of variants on determining the text of God's Word.

²Gordon H. Clark, *Logical Criticisms of Textual Criticism* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 13.

An Exercise

For the sake of illustration only, let us suppose that five early English translations of the Bible are ancient manuscripts. Let us suppose that we live in the distant future and it is our purpose to reconstruct an English language text (i.e., practice textual criticism) from these five manuscripts³ which archaeologists have delivered to us. The five manuscripts include *The Coverdale Bible* (1535), *The Great Bible* (1539), *The Geneva Bible* (1560), *The Bishops' Bible* (1568), *The Authorized Version* (1611, KJV). The verse that we are attempting to reconstruct is Psalm 23:2.

Organizing the Material.

In preparing to reconstruct a single text of verse 2 from the five available manuscripts the verse under consideration must first be isolated and variations compared with each other. The following chart contains verse two as it appears in each of the manuscripts with which we are dealing.

³The five versions being used in the exercise have played prominent roles in the development of the English Bible as we know it today. The texts of these versions are taken from *The Hexaplar Psalter Being the Book of Psalms in Six English Versions*, edited by William A. Wright (Cambridge: University Press, 1911).

Translation	Verse 2
<i>Coverdale</i>	He fedeth me in a grene pasture, ad ledeth me to a fresh water.
<i>Great Bible</i>	He shall fede me in a grene pasture, & leade me forth besyde the waters of comforte.
<i>Geneva</i>	He maketh me to rest in grene pasture, & leadeth me by the stil waters.
<i>Bishops'</i>	he wyll cause me to repose my selfe in pasture full of grasse, and he wyll leade me vnto calme waters.
<i>Authorized</i>	He maketh me to lie downe in greene pastures: he leadeth mee beside the still waters.

Identifying the Variants

Before we can reconstruct a single English text from the five manuscripts it is necessary to determine the location and nature of textual variants that exist between our five manuscripts. Consequently, it is necessary to first understand what a variant is. Simply put a textual variant is found wherever two or more manuscripts differ from each other.⁴ Therefore, variants result from very insignificant differences between manuscripts. For example, a variant results from "a different form or spelling of the same word . . . Jehoram (1 Kings 22:50), Joram (2 Kings 8:21) . . . Priscilla (Acts 18:2), Prisca (Rom. 16:3)."⁵

⁴F.B. Huey, Jr., and Bruce Corley, *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical and Theological Studies* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983), 196; variants "refer to differences in the wording of a biblical passage that are discovered by comparing different-manuscripts of the passage."

⁵Huey and Corley, *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical and Theological Studies*, 196.

A closer examination of Psalm 23:2 in the five manuscripts under consideration reveals that variants fall into a number of different categories. For example, the manuscripts exhibit the following categories of variants:

Category of Variant	Coverdale	Great Bible	Geneva	Bishops'	AV
Spelling (fedeth or fede)	He fedeth me	He shall fede me	He maketh me to rest	he wyll cause me to repose my selfe	He maketh me to lie downe
Lexical (feed or rest or repose or lie down)					
Verbal tense (present or future)					
Add/Delete (my selfe)					
Spelling (grene or greene)	in a grene pasture,	in a grene pasture,	in grene pasture,	in pasture full of grasse,	in greene pastures:
Singular/Plural (pasture or pastures)					
Lexical (green or full of grass)					
Punctuation (comma or colon)					
Spelling (ad or and)	ad	&	&	and	
Word v. Symbol (and or &)					
Add/Delete (the AV has no conj.)					

Category of Variant	Coverdale	Great Bible	Geneva	Bishops'	AV
Spelling (ledeth or leadeth)	ledeth me	leade me forth	leadeth me	he wyll leade me	he leadeth mee
Spelling (me or mee)					
Add/Delete ("forth" occurs in only one manuscript)					
Verbal tense (Present or future)					
Word choice - preposition (to, besyde/beside, by, unto)	to a	besyde the	by the	vnto	beside the
Spelling (besyde or beside)					
Definiteness (a or the)					
Singular/Plural (water or waters)	fresh water	waters of com- forte	stil waters	calme waters.	still waters.
Spelling (stil or still)					
Lexical (fresh, comforte, stil[], or calme)					

Determining the Number of Variants.

Identifying the variants that exist between manuscripts is a relatively uncomplicated matter, although attention to detail is vital. However, determining the number of variants is a far more complicated matter. Before calculating the number of variants that were discovered in our comparison of the five manuscripts, we must determine which "variants" will be counted and how we will calculate

the total number. For example, in calculating the number of variants we have discovered: (1) Do we count *categories* of variants? If so then we have a total of 10 variants (Spelling, Lexical, Verbal tense, Add/Delete, Verbal mood, Singular/Plural, Punctuation, Word vs. Symbol, Word choice: preposition, and Definiteness). Or (2) do we count the *occurrences of each category* of variant? If so, then we have 23 variants (Spelling - 7 times, Lexical - 4 times, Verbal tense - 2 times, Add/Delete - 3 times, Verbal mood - 1 time, Singular/Plural - 2 times, Punctuation - 1 time, Word v. Symbol - one time, Word choice: preposition - 1 time, and Definiteness - 1 time).

Or (3) do we count individual *manuscripts per each individual variant*? Actually, since variants are differences between manuscripts, this is the way to calculate variants. However, there is a difference of opinion on how this is actually accomplished. According to one method, a subjective or objective choice is made to determine a "model" or "preferred" manuscript. Variants are then calculated in relationship to the designated manuscript. Using this method the variants may be classified as "variants from," "additions to," or "deletions from" the chosen manuscript. A second method views all manuscripts equally and counts variants between them without giving preference to one manuscript. This is the standard method used in doing text critical work. Immanuel Tov points out that,

the details of which texts are composed (letters, words) are 'readings,' and, accordingly, all readings which differ from a text presented or accepted as central are usually called 'variant readings' or 'variants.' It should, however, be remembered that some scholars use the term *variants* in the same neutral way as the term *readings* is used in this book and in most text-critical discussions.⁶

⁶Immanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 18; see also 233-34.

The first method is given to pejorative usage. For instance, defenders of certain manuscripts or text bases choose their preferred manuscript(s) as the model to which others are compared and then speak as if other manuscripts have added to or subtracted from "God's Word." Thus the term "variant" is in actuality a misnomer, since they would view other manuscript variations as "corruptions" of the model text.⁷

How one decides to calculate variants on this level can greatly affect the number of variants that result from any count. For example, in calculating the number of variants involved under the category of "Word vs. Symbol" a number of differing totals may be generated. The total number of variants could be: (1) *two* variants—texts with the word (i.e., *Coverdale* and *Bishops*) and text with the symbol (i.e., *Great Bible* and *Geneva*). Or (2) the total might be *three* variants—texts with the word, texts with the symbol, and texts with neither (*Authorized*). Or (3) the total may be *five*—since five different manuscripts contain variant forms in this category. If one chooses to use the "model" manuscript method of comparison the numbers of variants may be significantly reduced. For example, if *The Great Bible* is chosen as the model manuscript to which others are compared, then *The Geneva Bible* would not be included in any count since it does not vary from the chosen model in this particular variant (Word vs. Symbol). It is feasible that with ten categories of variants occurring twenty-three times in five manuscripts that one could come up with a total of 115 variants in this one verse (23 occurrences multiplied by 5 manuscripts = 115).⁸

⁷Immanuel Tov points out (*Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 233-34) this is not always the case; "in the critical (diplomatic or eclectic) edition of any text . . . all the readings quoted in the critical apparatus differing from the text printed in the edition are considered variants. . . . the distinction between the main reading and a variant therefore is not evaluative . . . Variants in the apparatus can thus be superior to the printed or central text."

⁸The magnitude of this number for our exercise is reflected by the fact that the average number of words in the five manuscripts is 16.6 words and the total number of words in the five manuscripts together is only 83.

When we read or hear of numbers of variants we must understand not only what constitutes a variant but also how the number was calculated. If we do not know what the writer is talking of when we read of the number of variants he refers to, we may be greatly alarmed over what is in fact very little.

Evaluating the Variants

At this point is it necessary to ask whether the significance of variants lies in their number or in their nature? Is reconstructing a single text from multiple manuscripts made more difficult by the number of the variants which occur between manuscripts or by the nature of the variants that are discovered?

A review of the variants which were discovered in our five manuscripts reveals that the most frequent variant involved spelling variants (seven times). However, the nature of this variant is basically insignificant in textual reconstruction. Spelling variants do not confuse our understanding of the text even when the variants in the five manuscripts all differ from contemporary spelling (cf. "grene" and "greene" with "green"). Other less frequently occurring variants, when viewed more closely, may also be of little or no significance in reconstructing a single text. For example the difference between writing out the conjunction "and" or using the symbol "&" is of no consequence. The difference between singular and plural with some words (cf. "pasture(s)" or "water(s)") may simply reflect the nature of English words as being singular in form when they are used in the collective sense (i.e., a plural number viewed as a single unit) and thus cause no significant difference to our understanding or textual reconstruction.

The second most frequently discovered variant (4 times) was lexical; that is, it involved the use of terms which apparently differ in their meaning. Although the nature of this variant is, at first glance, more significant, it does not prohibit the reconstruction of a single text. At the same time, it may necessitate the addition of a marginal note to the text. For example, since terms for "green" ("grene" [three times] and "greene") occur in four of the five manuscripts and since

the fifth manuscript reads a “pasture full of grasse” which would be green in color, the lexical variant does not confuse our understanding or prohibit the reconstruction of the text. The reconstruction of the text would rightly read “green pasture.” A marginal note might be appropriate to note the difference found in *The Bishops' Bible* (“pasture full of grasse”). Although the choice may not be as readily made in the other three instances of lexical variation, the same general procedure may be applied. For example, in the first phrase of the verse the terms “rest,” “repose,” and “lie downe” are found in three different manuscripts. Although the terms differ from each other, they are basically synonymous and may safely be chosen as the basis of the textual reconstruction. Since the reading “fedeth/fede” in *Coverdale* and *Great Bible* is so distinct from the other three manuscripts a marginal note is necessary to honestly represent the manuscript evidence.

The significance of variants does not lie in their numbers. The most frequently occurring variant in our exercise (spelling) in no way clouds our understanding of the verse or our reconstruction of a single text. The significance of variants lies in their nature. Even if they occur only once, variants involving differences in areas such as lexical meaning (feed or lead), verbal mood (indicative or subjunctive) or verbal tense (present or future) are more significant than variants that may occur scores of times like spelling (me/mee) or the substitute of a sign for a word (& = and). However, as was demonstrated in our exercise, even these more significant variants did not appreciably affect our understanding or reconstruction of the text. Integrity would demand that the significant differences in the various manuscripts be recognized through the use of marginal notes.

A Reconstructed Text

In light of our exercise, having compared the five manuscripts that “archaeologists” presented to us for our “textual criticism,” the resulting reconstructed text might appear as follows:

He makes me to lie down^a in
green pastures; ^bhe leads me
beside^c calm waters.

- ^a Two of the oldest MSS read
"feeds."
- ^b Some MSS add "and."
- ^c Two of the oldest MSS read
"to."

Conclusions

An initial examination of the manuscripts used in our exercise reveals an astonishingly large number of potential variants (115 variants for 83 total words). Even the actual number of occurrences of categories of variants is significantly large (23 occurrences for 83 total words). However, upon closer examination it was discovered that textual variants do not affect either our understanding or reconstruction because of their number. The most frequently occurring variants are often those which least affect the text. The significance of variants is not in their numbers but in their nature. And as was demonstrated, even variants which may be considered as significant do not necessarily affect either our understanding or reconstruction. Their existence may be honestly accounted for in the reconstructed text by means of marginal notes.

Variants and the Biblical Text

The Fact of Variants

Without the immediate, continuing, supernatural, miraculous intervention of God every time a Jewish copyist or medieval monk reproduced God's Word by hand and every time a believing or unbelieving typesetter or proofreader prepared to reproduce it mechanically,⁹ variations will enter into copies of God's Word.¹⁰ The

⁹Even with the invention of printing presses the introduction of variants into the Biblical text was not eliminated. In researching this article the author came across variants in the 1611 *Authorized Version* text as found in "The Difference a Translation Makes" (*Church History*, issue 43, vol. 13:3, 17), the *Hexaplar Psalter*,

fact is that textual variants are evident in all extant ancient manuscripts—no two handwritten manuscripts are identical.¹¹ The transmission history of the Hebrew text is one and a half millennia longer than that of the Greek New Testament and involves three times the material. Over such an extended period of time with such a large body of material in the hands of thousands of copyists along with the effects of time, climate, etc., it is impractical to think that no variants have crept into the text.

and in both a facsimile and original edition of the 1611 Authorized Version located in our seminary library.

¹⁰The Scripture record does not support this type of immediate, miraculous preservation. For example, Jeremiah 36:1-32 records a period of at least hours if not days during which the autographa and only copy of this text was lost due to human destruction. God did not miraculously preserve His Word, however, he did choose, in this instance, to replace the lost portion through a new act of revelation and inspiration.

Secondly, II Kings 22:8 and II Chronicles 34:14-16 report that for a period of at least 50 years (ca. 675-622 B.C.) the entire Pentateuch, the law of Moses, was lost due to human neglect. It was only subsequently discovered by accident during temple repair. God did not immediately or miraculously intervene in preserving His Word to that generation.

Thirdly, the text of I Samuel 13:1 ("*Samuel was . . . years old*") has for a period of at least 2,500 years (ca. 700 B.C. to A.D. 1996) suffered the loss of one word of revelation due to scribal error or lacunae (a hole or tear which damages the manuscript) which has not as yet been discovered (see S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of Samuel*, Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, reprint 1984, 96-97). "One celebrated instance is I Samuel 13:1, where MT reads, 'Saul was . . . year(s) old when he began to reign.' Unfortunately textual criticism does not help us, for both LXX and the other versions have no numeral here. Apparently the correct number fell out so early in the history of the transmission of this particular text that it was already lost before the third century B.C." (Gleason Archer, *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 50).

¹¹James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 38. See also Peter C. Craigie, *The Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 35; and Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 16.

The current estimate of textual variants is at least 200,000.¹² One's first reaction might be astonishment seasoned with concern that this number of variants undermines the possibility of recovering God's words. However, this number actually reflects a positive condition. The existence of thousands of variants is indicative of the fact that a large number of manuscripts are available for comparison¹³ and that number grows with the discovery of additional manuscript materials.

Significance of the Variants

The significance of variants is not in their numbers but in their nature. The novice and experienced Bible student alike should not be intimidated or discouraged by the thousands of variants that are in fact found in the manuscripts available today. Understanding the nature of variants, the methods that are used in calculating their total, their effect on clarity of understanding and reconstructing the Biblical text provides for a proper reaction to the thousands of variants in Biblical manuscripts. Their significance in recovering the Biblical text is evidenced by those who have faithfully handled God's Word.

B.B. Warfield's evaluation in 1887 was that,

Roughly speaking, there have been counted in it some hundred and eighty or two hundred thousand 'various readings' . . . we must guard against being misled by this very misleading statement. It is not meant that there are nearly two hundred thousand places in the New Testament where various readings occur; but only that there are nearly two hundred thousand various readings all told; . . . Dr. Ezra Abbot was accustomed to say that about nineteen-twentieths of them have so little support

¹²White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 38; "One number that appears often in this context is 200,000 variants in the New Testament alone!"

¹³White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 39; "There are currently over 5,300 manuscripts catalogued of parts of the New Testament alone."

that, although they are various readings, no one would think of them as rival readings; and nineteen-twentieths of the remainder are of so little importance that their adoption or rejection would cause no appreciable difference in the sense of the passages where they occur. Dr. Hort's way of stating it is that upon about one word in every eight various readings exist supported by sufficient evidence to bid us pause and look at it; that about one word in sixty has various readings upon it supported by such evidence as to render our decision nice and difficult; but that so many of these variations are trivial that only about one word in every thousand has upon it substantial variation supported by such evidence as to call out the efforts of the critic in deciding between the readings.

The great mass of the New Testament, in other words, has been transmitted to us with no, or next to no, variation; and even in the most corrupt form in which it has ever appeared, to use the oft-quoted words of Richard Bentley, 'the real text of the sacred writers is competently exact, . . . nor is one article of faith or moral precept either perverted or lost . . . choose as awkwardly as you will, choose the worst by design, out of the whole lump of readings.'¹⁴

Philip Schaff in 1903 wrote,

Only about 400 of the 100,000 or 150,000 variations materially affect the sense. Of these, again, not more than about fifty are really important for some reason or other; and even of these fifty not one affects an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching. The *Textus Receptus* of Stephens, Beza, and Elzevir, and of our English Versions, teach precisely the same Christianity as the uncial text of the Sinaitic

¹⁴B.B. Warfield *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1887), 13-14.

and Vatican MSS., the oldest versions, and the Anglo-American Revision.¹⁵

Alva J. McClain states,

This whole problem of variant manuscript readings is a thing which, like the death of Mark Twain, has been greatly exaggerated. Among the manuscripts of the Old Testament there are practically none. And when the critic triumphantly announces that there are between 150,000 and 200,000 variant readings in the whole number of New Testament manuscripts, we need not become frightened. Too often the critic fails to tell the whole story. First, he often fails to explain that the same variant reading is counted every time it occurs in all the different manuscripts. Second, he does not explain that the vast majority of these variant readings are of little importance, and that in no instance is any vital Christian doctrine involved. Third, he omits to mention that . . . it is improbable to suppose hundreds of copyists, working at different times and in various localities, would all make the same mistake in the same place. Where one copyist got drowsy and left out a word, we have several hundred others to give us the true reading. Fourth, he fails to state the conclusions of competent scholarship in the field of text criticism, that only about one word out of every thousand in our present text is really under any serious suspicion.¹⁶

Gleason Archer remarks that,

A careful study of the variants (or different readings) of the various earliest manuscripts reveals that none of them affects a single doctrine of Scripture. The system of spiritual truth

¹⁵Philip Schaff, *A Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version* (New York and London, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1903), 177.

¹⁶Alva J. McClain, *The "Problems" of Verbal Inspiration* (Winona Lake: The Brethren Missionary Herald Co., n.d.), 17-18.

contained in the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament is not in the slightest altered or compromised by any of the variant readings found in the Hebrew manuscripts of earlier date found in the Dead Sea caves or anywhere else.¹⁷

Peter Craigie comments,

One of the most valuable treasures in my library is an enormous four-volume work from the nineteenth century compiled by J.B. de Rossi; it is in Latin, but its title in English would be *Variant Readings of the Old Testament*. De Rossi was one of the few scholars who set himself the task of examining the Hebrew text, in the light of the numerous manuscripts that had survived, to establish the authenticity and clarity of the text according to the manuscript tradition. In the course of his work, he consulted more than seven hundred Hebrew manuscripts and about three hundred other editions of the Bible, including the early versions. He compiled long lists of variant readings, but the overwhelming conclusion of his work is that there was extraordinary uniformity among the manuscripts.¹⁸

The thousands and hundreds of thousands of variants that exist in the thousands of manuscripts of the Bible that are available today do not rob us either of God's Word or of clarity of understanding God's Word. The least significant variants are the most numerically prominent. And the most significant variants do not change or alter any Biblical doctrine.

¹⁷Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 18-19.

¹⁸Peter C. Craigie, *The Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 35-36.

Conclusion

Textual variants—villainous or validating? Although our reaction to the seemingly overwhelming number of variants might be one of astonishment and fear, we must not allow our reaction to cloud proper judgment. A fair evaluation of variants reveals that their significance is not in their number but in their nature. In truth the most numerous variants carry the least significance. Those variants whose significance is weighty are of such small number as to be almost negligible in light of the whole of Scripture. And even when viewed separately and individually, variants recognized as significant cast no doubt on any Bible principle or doctrine. In actuality the number of textual variants validates God's providential preservation of His Word. The large number of textual variants reflects a rich history of textual copying and the large number of manuscripts which have come down through the ages to our day.