

GLEANINGS — February 1, A.D. 2015
Textual Criticism, Part Three

Textual criticism has a legitimate place in the work of faithfully dividing the word of truth. It concerns the TRANSMISSION of the Bible. Locksmiths and their trade provide an analogy to help us grasp what this scholarly discipline involves...

If you have an original door key and copy it, then copy the copy, then copy that copy and so forth, eventually you will have a key that no longer opens the door. That's because each successive descendant (so to speak) of the original key is slightly deteriorated; less conformed to the tumblers inside the lock.

We do not deny that VARIANT readings of some passages of Scripture exist. They arose as the original, inerrant MANUSCRIPTS (MSS) of the Holy Spirit inspired writers were manually copied and recopied until Herr Gutenberg put scribes out of business. We only have descendants of the original, but we also have divine promises about Scripture that copiers of door keys do not have! Variants have not taken away the key of knowledge, they have not corrupted the word of God. In fact, they enter into the wondrous story of how God has providentially preserved His word.

Let's go back to our door lock and keys analogy. It stands to reason that a second generation key will work the lock more smoothly than a tenth generation key. But does the same reasoning apply as forcefully regarding Bible MSS? Is older necessarily better? Here's another analogy...

Suppose that before the day of information clouds and e-books, a pastor had a couple of books in his library, namely The Book of Mormon and the Watchtower Tract and Bible Society's New World Translation. He referred to these sources of heretical teaching as he contended for the faith once delivered to the saints and refuted error in the spirit of Jude verse 4 and Titus 1:9. Through such works of the devil a minister of the true word of God is better able to know his enemy.

Since he only used them for reference, those volumes remain in great condition to this day. They have no dog eared pages, no broken bindings, and the ink has not faded. It is not so regarding his favorite study Bible! That volume was lovingly handled again and again. Some pages are torn, there are a couple of coffee stains on others, the cover is ragged. In fact, it is the third study Bible he has owned, the first two having become so worn out that they had to be replaced.

It stands to reason that in the days before the printing press, a corrupt Bible MSS would be kept for reference only and hence survive after many centuries, while the MSS known to be quite faithful to the AUTOGRAPHS (original writings of the inspired writers) would become worn out, recopied, and discarded. Result: more recent MSS trumps older MSS for faithfulness.

Another truth of Scripture to keep in mind for this discussion is this: there is but ONE divine Author of the entire Bible. The skeptic who believes the Bible to be only a human book denies this. To him, appealing to another book of the Bible to help resolve a difficulty arising from textual variation is not acceptable. For the believer who knows that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), cross referencing is not only acceptable, but is an indispensable interpretive tool.