

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

How close are our English Bibles today to the original wording of the New Testament?

Until the invention of the printing press around 1450, the Bible, like all books, was copied by hand. Whenever a person copies a long text by hand, mistakes are inevitable. For example, the copyist of Codex Vaticanus accidentally left out the bracketed words from John 17:15: "I do not ask you [to take them out of the world, but] to keep them from the evil one."

Scholars think we are very close to knowing the original wording of the New Testament, closer than with any other ancient literature, with the possible exception of the Quran. This is mainly because we have manuscripts in Greek that were copied

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relatively soon after the books of the New Testament were composed.

Scholars today group Greek manuscripts of the New Testament into three text-types: Byzantine, Alexandrian and Western. Most scholars consider the Byzantine Text the least valuable of the text-types. All Bibles before the English Revised Version of 1885, including the King James Version, were based on Byzantine manuscripts.

That leaves the Western Text and the Alexandrian. Both date to the early days of Christianity, yet the two are very different in character. The Western Text shows early copyists dealt with the text

in a free manner, modifying the text with paraphrases and additions. The Alexandrian Text, however, seems to be a very carefully done, accurate text.

The big question is whether the Alexandrian Text is virtually the original text, or is a recension (revision) of a confused textual "mess" (the Western Text)? This question has stumped scholars for more than 100 years.

This uncertain state of affairs is not what Christians would like. Christians naturally want their Bibles to be as close to the actual words of Jesus and Paul as possible. Sadly, the New Testament text has not been preserved intact, partly because early copyists did not share our concern for accurate copying. Apparently God didn't think it necessary for us to have perfectly accurate Bibles, since God didn't see to it that the Bible was preserved without textual corruption.

"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16) without needing to be inerrant and perfectly preserved. Holy Scripture can and has functioned as it should in the life of the Church and in the lives of individual believers without our having every jot and tittle of the original text. God has always used our imperfect copies and our imperfect translations to touch lives. So we give thanks to God for the Bible, whether we have in our hands a translation of exactly what was originally written or as close an approximation of it as possible.

The Rev. William G. Gartig, an Episcopal priest, holds a doctorate in Bible from Hebrew Union College. He will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zn.com.

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