

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

Do we have originals of any biblical books? I know handwritten manuscripts contain errors, but what kind of errors do we find in manuscripts of the Bible?

No, we do not think we have the original manuscript for any biblical book. Those have perished, whether by accident (as in a fire) or because the original became unusable from too much handling (oil from the fingers discolors and darkens manuscripts) and had to be “retired” and was eventually burned in a fire.

Some differences between manuscripts can be explained as accidental mistakes. There are accidental errors of hearing when two words sound alike or similar, and the scribe wrote the wrong one. There are also accidental errors of sight. Some letters in the Hebrew alphabet look similar and, if the scribe was not very precise in how he formed

those similar letters, another scribe copying from his work might easily write the wrong letter. The same things can occur when copying Greek manuscripts.

Another visual error results in an entire line from the copied manuscript being omitted from the new manuscript. As a scribe works, he reads a phrase, puts it into his “short-term memory,” and then writes that phrase from memory. Then he looks back to find the phrase he had just copied, so he can go on to the next phrase. But if two adjacent lines both ended with the same phrase or word, his eye might go to the end of the second of the lines and accidentally omit an entire line. This

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error of sight can also happen within a line, if the same word occurs more than once in a line. It can also happen between two lines, if the same word occurs on two lines, but close together. In all these cases, the copyist's eye may return to the second occurrence of the word, resulting in the omission of everything between the two occurrences of the word.

What is so sinister about this sort of error is that unless you have a manuscript where this error has not occurred,

you may not even know that an omission has happened. Or if you suspect this error has occurred because the text does not make sense, you have no way to guess what the lost words were. In the case of biblical manuscripts, if such an error happened very early in the history of the text and we have no manuscript without the error, we will never be able to restore the lost words and can only suspect that some words have “dropped out” of the text. That is why textual critics pray for more manuscript discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls!

Next month: Intentional changes in biblical manuscripts.

The Rev. William G. Gartig 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 to gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.