

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

In June, I spoke of unintentional scribal errors found in biblical manuscripts (and other manuscripts, to be sure). Now we turn to intentional changes in the New Testament made by scribes. Although it is Muslim belief that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures have been deliberately falsified (or else they would never contradict the Quran), most intentional changes in biblical manuscripts look like well-intentioned attempts of the part of scribes to correct what they thought were errors in the manuscript.

The most common intentional change in New Testament manuscripts is “correcting” what the scribe apparently saw as bad spelling and grammar. The New Testament was written in Hellenistic (Koine) Greek, which differed in a number of ways from the “correct” classical Greek of Athens in the days of Plato (Attic Greek). Many educated scribes routinely “corrected” the text in the direction of Attic correctness.

Another common change was to “harmonize” parallel passages so that

the same words occurred in both places. For example, the shorter form of the Lord’s Prayer found in Luke 11:2-4 in many manuscripts was made to agree with the more familiar, longer form in Matthew 6:9-13. The words the risen Jesus speaks to Paul on the Damascus Road in Acts 9:5-6 in some manuscripts are made to agree with what is related in the parallel account of Paul’s conversion in Acts 26:14-15.

Most doctrinally-motivated intentional changes are not deliberate alterations of the text to support heretical views. Apparently that happened, since many church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, accused heretics of corrupting the Scripture in order to garner support for their special views. For example, Marion in the mid-2nd century removed all references to Jesus’ Jewishness from the version of Luke his congregations used. He believed Jesus had not been Jewish, but his Jewish disciples falsely made him to be a Jew. But Marion’s edited Luke and heretically altered manuscripts in general have not come down to us,

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because of the practice of destroying the works of heretics in order to “stamp out” their viewpoints.

What doctrinally motivated textual changes we do find tend to be in the opposite direction: orthodox, pious scribes

“correcting” the text to make it more orthodox. For example, several Old Latin manuscripts and the Gothic translation of the New Testament in Luke 1:3 have Luke write, “It seemed good to me and to the Holy Spirit to write an orderly account,” the phrase in italics having been added in imitation of Acts 15:28 (“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”). Apparently a scribe thought Luke should have referred to Divine approval of his decision to compose a gospel.

The best manuscripts give Luke 23:32 as, “And also other criminals, two, were led away with him to be crucified,” but, to avoid the implication that Jesus was also a criminal, most Greek manuscripts have changed the order of words to read, “And two others, criminals, were led away with him to be crucified.”

Some references to Joseph and Mary apparently required “correcting” in order to safeguard Jesus’ virgin birth. For instance, in Luke 2:41 & 43, instead of the words “his parents,” some manuscripts read “Joseph and Mary.”

Generally speaking, a textual critic reasons that the more orthodox reading is a secondary attempt to “correct” a reading that did not sufficiently honor Christ’s divinity and might lead one to draw a wrong or heretical conclusion.

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