

The Word "WORD" and the Issue of Manuscript Variations

The Differences in Perception

The word "word," as used in the Bible, refers to the *message*, rather than to individual, discreet groups of letters, that people today commonly call "words." Back then, "words" (as we think of them), did not exist.

Take, for instance, the following sentence:

There are seven words in this sentence.

Today, we would look at that sentence and say that it was *true*. Back then, they would have looked at it and said that the sentence was *false*. They would have said there is *one* word in the sentence - because to them, the word "word" meant something similar to our modern word "message."

Back then, sentences weren't broken up into "words" (as we think of them). Rather, they were written as a string of capital letters, without punctuation or spaces. In the New Testament era, they wrote mainly in Greek. But if we were writing an English sentence in "New Testament Style," we would write it like this:

THEREISONEMESSAGEINTHISSENTENCE

In the Old Testament, they wrote mainly in Hebrew and didn't even use *vowels*! So our English sentence, if written in "Old Testament Style," would read like this:

THRSNMSSGNTHSSNTNC

In both cases, when they reached the end of the line, they would start the next line even if they were in the *middle* of a "word" (as we think of them). It didn't matter to them, since *our* concept of "word" didn't exist. [In some cases, they even rotated the direction they wrote: right-to-left on one line, then left-to-right on the next! It may sound weird to us, but think about it... it took half the eye movement to read the same amount of text. The way *we* do it takes twice the amount of work!]

To us, who are accustomed to using vowels and spaces between "words" (as we think of them), these things can be very difficult to read. But for them, it was not a problem. They were used to it, and probably had no more difficulty with *their* system than we do with *ours*. [Even today, written words can sometimes be confusing. If I say, "I *read* the Bible," am I referring to a *present* tense action (pronounced like "reed") or to a *past* tense action (pronounced like "red")? Do I mean I *am* reading it, or do I mean I *was* reading it at some point in the past?]

It was several centuries after the Bible was completed, that the string of letters that expressed the *message* of the Bible was broken down into individual "words" (as *we* think of them), and that lower case letters, punctuation marks and vowels (in the case of the Old Testament) were introduced. (Chapter divisions and verse references were also added centuries after the Bible was completed.)

The Significance of These Differences

Normally, this difference in perspective between *their* use of the word "word" and *our* use of it, causes no problem, when we are trying to understand Scripture. The main problem arises when people try to take verses in which the Bible uses the word "word," and (based on modern-day definitions of that word) use it to reach *false conclusions about manuscript variations* - or to even deny their existence.

There are some people - fortunately not too many - who believe that their favorite *translation* of the Bible (often the King James Version) is "the *only* inspired Word of God." They not only reject *every other* translation of the Bible, but they go so far as to claim that their translation has *replaced* the original manuscripts as God's "inspired Word"! The issue of manuscript differences may have little importance to them (other than to "prove" that their "inerrant" translation is "superior" to the original manuscripts), but their view is based solely on ignorance. [I wonder what they think about translations into *other* languages - Spanish, French, etc. Do they consider those translations to be inferior to their "inspired" English translation?]

Our focus here is mainly on a second group of people. Many of them happen to use the King James Version, so I need to start with this *disclaimer*: There *are* some people who have studied manuscript issues, who understand them, and who just happen to have a preference for the manuscripts that tended to be the basis of the King James Version. These are not the people I am writing about. Though the majority of scholars who have studied these issues would disagree, there is nothing inherently wrong with these people, for reaching the conclusions they have. (They, too, are scholars, even though they have reached a different conclusion.)

But there are others who, because of a false understanding of these issues, become so fanatically in favor of their favorite translation (whether King James Version or some other translation), that they viciously attack any other translation, *along with anyone who would use them*. In their zeal, they actually accomplish more for the Devil, than for God.

For this group of people, the very mention of "manuscript differences" is threatening. They view it as an attack on the "Word of God" itself - as though God's Word was being deliberately tampered with. Often these people will presuppose that the manuscripts used to create their "preferred" translation (frequently the King James Version) are "the true Word of God" and then they view any other manuscript variation as "the devil's attempt to dilute the Word of God," or something similar. (They would attack most modern translations.) Using the modern concept of "word," they have reached the false conclusion that even *one* variation in the "words" of the ancient manuscripts undermines the integrity of the entire Bible. Sometimes they may cling to verses, such as Proverbs 30:5 (KJV), which describes God's "Word" as "pure," and then claim that these variations are nothing more than the Devil's attempt to "dilute" the "pure Word." So the admission of variants among manuscripts is tantamount to introducing the "Devil's Translation."

If only they understood what Scripture meant, when it refers to the "pure" Word (Proverbs 30:5, etc. - KJV)! The "message" *is* pure and uncorrupted, in spite of the few uncertainties we may have about the specific "wording" of certain passages. If they understood this, perhaps they wouldn't be so hostile toward those who accept manuscript variations that are different from those of their own personal preference. Let us pray that they may someday realize these things and stop attacking people who are genuine followers

of Jesus. [It would be different if we were teaching genuine error, or if we were living in sin. Then they would have a *right* to oppose us.]

Scripture tells us that God's "Word" (that is, God's message) is unchanging, and that every "word" from God (that is, everything God says) is true. Most people see this fact as having *no* incompatibility with the fact that manuscript variations *can be found* among the existing ancient copies of the Bible. After all, in spite of all the variations that might exist (and there are only about 50 that are of any significance), *the message remains unchanged*. The evidence shows that God has protected his Word (message) from corruption.

How Should We Respond to Such Variations?

First of all, we do not need to close our eyes to the presence of manuscript variations. We do not need to feel threatened or to deny they exist; for when we are talking about manuscript variations, we are *not* dealing with the *message*.

Any time people hand-copy large manuscripts - especially worn-out ones - there is a potential for accidental errors in what is copied. Even modern-day computer-generated books, with all sorts of spell-checking and grammar-checking programs, tend to contain some errors - although they tend to be fewer in number than would be typically found in a hand-copied document.

The only thing Scripture needs to guarantee is that *the message* is pure. As we examine the significant variations that can be found in the ancient copies of God's Word, we can see that this has been the case. The message *is* pure.

In cases in which there are questions about a specific text (whether it involves manuscript differences or simply our uncertainty about the meaning), there are other passages that we can look to - other passages which show us the difference between truth and error. *No teaching of Scripture is based solely on a single passage*.

When we accept Scripture "as is," the message of the Word is "self-reinforcing." When we have questions about the message in one passage, Scripture clarifies it elsewhere.

Rather than being overly-concerned (or threatened) by the existence of manuscript variations, we should be focused on the fact that God used about 40 people, with different personalities, skills and abilities (even different weaknesses), living in several different cultures (and nations), using different languages, over a span of about 1500 years, to give us one unified book with one overriding message, fully consistent in its parts and *pure in its message*. This is a display of God's power. Even the fact that manuscript variations have *not* diluted the "pure word" (message) is an expression of God's mighty power!

Rather than being threatened by these issues, we should be led to praise and worship of our Mighty God!