

THE JESUS SYMPOSIUM

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ΤΩΝ ΠΛΥΝΕΤ
ΛΕΒΑΡΤΟΣ
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ΣΤΑΙ ΕΩΣ ΕΠΕΤΕΡΑ
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ΓΗΣ ΔΕ ΛΥΓΜΑ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΕΣΤΙ
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ΚΙ ΔΑΝΕΙ ΑΥΤΟΝ ΕΑΝ ΔΕ ΤΗ ΛΑΥ

Based on the November 13, 2009
presentation by Pastor Dan Russell

First Christian Church
Laramie, Wyoming



The Jesus Symposium:

Historical and Textual Reliability

Some months ago I came across a website discussing the Gospels, and whether they give a reliable historical portrait of Jesus (or whether he even existed). The author of the site made an interesting comment: “Why would you trust documents written 500 years after the event?” It caught my attention, so I wrote him and asked if the question included a typo—did he mean to write “50” rather than “500?” He wrote me back and quite sternly informed me that, no, the number was not a typo, and then proceeded to berate me for not being familiar with the dating of the Gospels. I responded by asking a couple questions: first, what were the sources for this number, as I was unaware of any scholar who would date any Biblical document that late; and second, how did he reconcile it with manuscript copies of the Gospels predating that date—indeed, entire *collections* of the New Testament? He never wrote me back.

While the date given above is by far the most extreme I have seen in regards to New Testament documents, the claim that the documents were written late (and are thus questionable in their historical portrayal) is becoming common. Similarly the charge that the texts have been changed—perhaps radically—and that equally viable documents give a very different portrait of Jesus. The Jesus Symposium was put together to discuss these claims; this writing addresses the points made therein, allowing also for further detail on many points.

The Jesus Symposium of November 13, 2009, sought to cover two blanket statements:

- We cannot reliably know anything about Jesus—including whether he existed
- Jesus was copied from prior mythic deities, and nothing about him is original

It likewise sought to address these statements on their own merit; to not appeal to Scripture as a spiritual authority trumping other forms of evidence. Not everyone shares this view; when the spiritual is taken out of the equation, what view of Jesus remains?

We cannot reliably know anything about Jesus—including whether he even existed

Objection #1: There is no evidence for Jesus outside the Bible

The above heading tends to be based on three objections, the first of which is noted above. However, this initial objection is a faulty statement for at least two reasons, the first being that it treats the Bible as a *singular* document. Of course traditionally, Christians do accept the Bible as a “book” (Book?), and as authoritative; one could even say traditional Christianity accepts a singular author ultimately behind the writings (God). But as noted above, this study will not appeal to the New Testament on these grounds.

There is another important aspect to the New Testament: it is a *collection* of twenty-seven separate documents, written by at least nine different authors, spanning several decades and literary genres. Each of these documents was written in the 1st century, and each document affirms the historicity of Jesus (meaning he was a historical, or “real,” person). These are the earliest Christian writings; and indeed, they are the earliest documents at all to discuss Jesus.

Returning to the original objection, the question to then ask is why the act of compiling these twenty-seven testimonies into a single volume negates their historical value? For example, if we compiled every known account of C.S. Lewis into a single massive book (say, “The Exhaustive C.S. Lewis Compendium”), who would seriously question his existence as a historical figure on the grounds that no account of him now exists outside this collection? In this context, these twenty-seven documents must be given their due merit, and as such do provide claims, and serve as evidence, for the historical Jesus.

The second reason this statement is faulty is that we do have mention of Jesus outside these documents. The most important of these comes from an historian named Josephus. His writings are a wonderful tool for understanding the world of 1st century Israel: he elucidates figures such as Herod, Pilate, and John the Baptist; he explains the theologies and philosophies of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And he mentions Jesus twice.

Both references come in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*, written towards the end of the 1st century. As such they are the earliest non-Christian references to Jesus, though one of them is problematic. Known as the *Testimonium Flavianum* (after his Roman name Flavius), it traditionally has read as follows:

“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, because the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the sect of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

Antiquities of the Jews 18:63 – 64

Some of the descriptions of Jesus above, including pronouncement of his resurrection and identification as Messiah, has called the authenticity of this passage into question: why would a

Jewish writer speak about Jesus in such a way? If he believed Jesus' resurrection and identity as Messiah, why wasn't he a Christian? On these grounds, some charge the passage is a forgery.

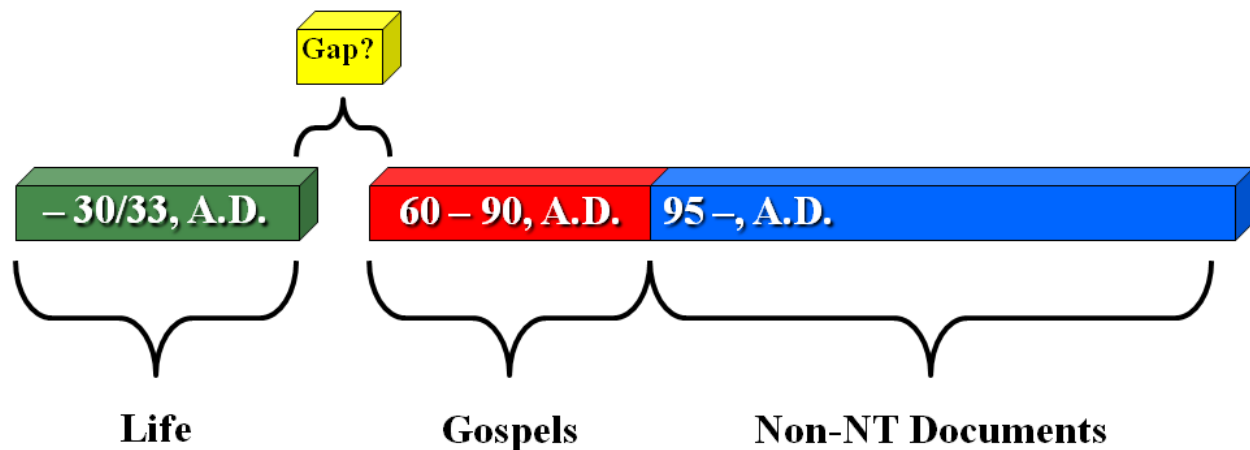
Others, however, have argued that the passage rings not of fabrication, but interpolation: that a passage did originally exist which later Christian copyists "tweaked." As it turns out, a work from the 10th century, Agapius' *Universal History*, quotes the passage from Josephus, but in a very different way:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders."

This is more in line with what we would expect a Jewish historian to report, and on these grounds it is largely accepted that Josephus did write, in this section, about Jesus. It is likewise important to note that questions of authenticity are only about this passage; the authenticity of second passage, though much smaller (a passing comment), is not disputed.

There are other references by non-Christian writers as well, including Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, the Talmud (a collection of Jewish writings), and Lucian. Granted, they don't give lengthy accounts (nor would we expect them to), but they do affirm the existence of Jesus as an historical person, or the Christian religion as having been founded by an historical figure. The question now becomes whether their comments can be considered reliable.

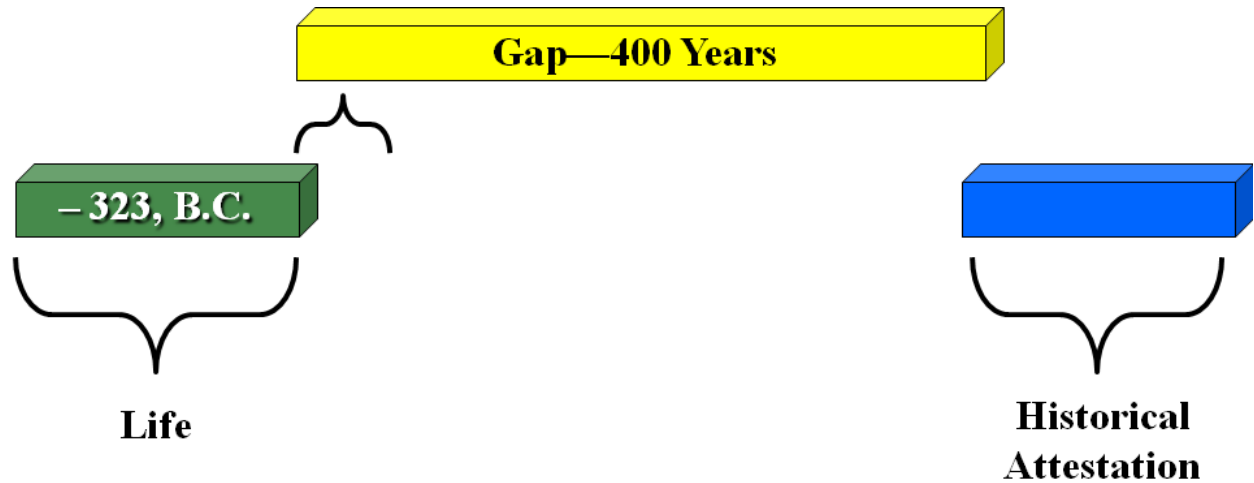
Objection #2: Too much time passes between his death and the writing of the documents



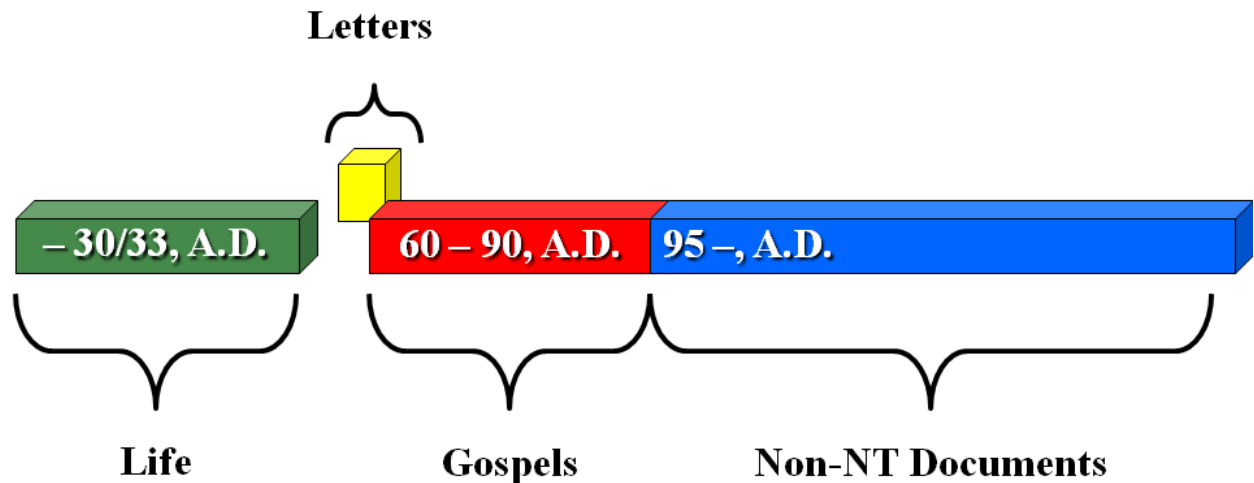
The objection is based on the fact that we don't start getting non-Christian mention of Jesus until the end of the 1st century (Josephus, above). Indeed, even the Gospels were written perhaps three decades after his death; we have no writings by Jesus himself, and no accounts contemporary to his life (writings while he was still alive).

Here again, though, this applies to Jesus a standard not levied to other figures of antiquity. Most historically-accepted figures in antiquity did not themselves offer writings;

likewise, many (if not most) historically-accepted figures of antiquity do not have writings about them contemporary to their lives. Most writings about figures in antiquity come after their death. This is even true for such figures as Socrates, and Hannibal the great Carthaginian military leader: we have no writings about them contemporary to their lives, only after their death.

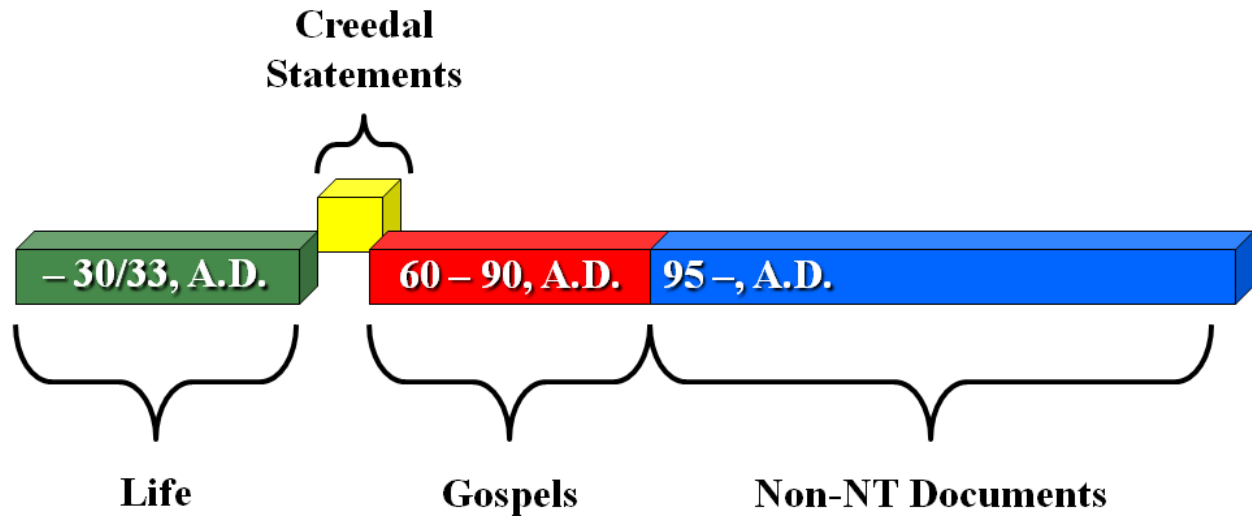


As for whether the Gospels were written too long after the death of Jesus to be historically reliable, most historically-accepted figures in antiquity do not have writings about them until many decades, if not centuries, after their death. The earliest surviving biographies of Alexander the Great, by Plutarch and Arrian, come 400 years after his death, yet they are accepted as being generally accurate. These authors relied on previously published accounts now lost to us; but then again, so did the Gospels (see especially Luke 1:1 – 3).



It's also important to remember the documents published prior to the writing of the Gospels, such as Paul's letters, which date as early as the late 40's A.D. They give even stronger attestation to the theological beliefs of early Christianity, including the resurrection and belief in Jesus' divinity. Furthermore, they quote pre-existing creedal statements from the early Church. Examples of such statements can be found in Philippians 2:6 – 11, Colossians 1:15 – 20, and perhaps most importantly 1 Corinthians 15:3 – 5, which reads as follows:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve...”



We find in this passage the quotation of a creedal statement that was in use in the early Church. Paul claims it as a statement given to him when he became a Christian, generally dated about two years after Jesus’ death. We don’t know if he received it at that time, or when he met with the Apostles three years later. What the quotation demonstrates, though, is a full theological creedal statement in use within the first five years of Christianity. This tells us is that Christianity was not a religious system which changed and evolved over the first several centuries, or even decades; it had a fully developed theological belief system in place within just a few years of its inception, if not from the very beginning.

While preparing the Symposium, I contacted five scholars via e-mail: Drs. Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Craig Evans, Daniel Wallace, and Craig Keener. I asked them two questions, one of which as follows: “Looking at the New Testament as a compilation of twenty-seven documents, written by at least nine authors, all affirming the historicity of Jesus: is there any other historical figure of antiquity who enjoys that degree of attestation?” All five responded the same day.¹ Several noted that some of the Caesars of that era do receive more attestation, which is to be expected; the consensus was, though, that other than the Caesars, the answer to the question is “no,” no other historical figure of antiquity enjoys that degree of attestation. Contrary to the statement we are addressing, Jesus becomes one of the most historically attested figures in antiquity.

Objection #3: The texts themselves are unreliable, having been changed throughout the years

In a sermon delivered November 8, I drew attention to a footnote at the bottom of the page in the Bible, noting that the line “For Thine is the Kingdom...” (from the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6) was a later addition to the text—it was not originally a part of what Matthew wrote.

¹ Complete copies of their response found in the appendix.

Though such footnotes are in most Bibles for all to see, many of us actually pay them little attention. To be told, then, that there are textual variants in Scripture often comes as a surprise.

Concern over this issue has largely been brought to bear in recent times by Bart Ehrman's book, *Misquoting Jesus: the Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. The phrase in the book, which he often repeats in interviews, is as follows:

“Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals.”

He then goes on to say that the copies we *do* have are different from each other; going so far as to conclude, “There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.” It may be further surprising to learn that in both statements, particularly the last, he is largely correct; to which we might ask, how then can we possibly know what the original text said?

It's important to put these statements in context, including Ehrman himself. In *Misquoting Jesus* and subsequent interviews, Ehrman states that these variants are what took him out of the Christian faith—that if he couldn't trust the reliability of the text, then he couldn't trust the entire faith system. And yet, in 2008 Ehrman wrote another book, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. Here, Ehrman states it was the problem of evil that took him out of the Christian faith. And sure enough, in *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)* Ehrman infers it was those pesky contradictions that did the deed.

In the 2008 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Public Forum, Daniel Wallace suggested that, while in his public writings Ehrman makes fairly sensational claims, he is much more reserved when writing for scholarly journals—journals which will be reviewed by peers with the academic credentials and foundation to critique such statements. His specific observation was, “It seems that Bart puts a far more skeptical spin on things when speaking in the public square, just as he did tonight, than he does when speaking to professional colleagues.” I've found the same to be true. There is no doubt Ehrman is capable of some of the best scholarly work, particularly in the field of textual criticism (see below). However, I purchased *God's Problem* while in the middle of a sermon series which touched on suffering; I wanted to see how Ehrman approached the same Scriptures I was using. To my surprise, Ehrman passed over them altogether. The entirety of the book comes dangerously close to simply asserting that people suffer, and the Bible offers no reason for it; there is little to no engagement with the centuries of Christian writers, theologians, and scholars who have likewise wrestled with the issue and offered their perspectives, nor any interaction with what I felt were some of the most important passages on the matter. In the first chapter of *Jesus, Interrupted*, he laments how few Christians are aware of the “massive scholarly endeavor” currently ongoing within Biblical scholarship; yet I can't help but wonder if he will likewise fail to mention the massive scholarly endeavor which has addressed the same apparent contradictions his book will put forth. Even the titles of his public writings are misleading: is it the Bible that “Fails” to answer “God's Problem,” or Ehrman? Are the contradictions he discusses truly “hidden,” or is this merely a tired rehash of materials and issues which have been discussed for years?

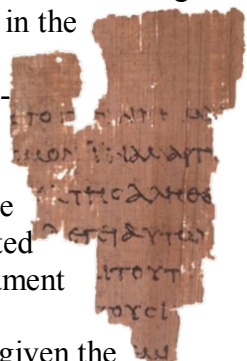
As for Wallace's observation, Ehrman's response was two-fold. Wallace made his point by offering two seemingly contradictory statements: his suggestions in *Misquoting Jesus* that we

cannot know what the original text said, and statements made at the 1997 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and the opening to his own *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, suggesting we have managed to largely reconstruct the original text and need not go further. Ehrman responded by saying both statements are reconcilable; that we have largely reconstructed the original text, yet we still cannot know entirely what it initially said. This defense was fair and appropriate, but what came next was a shock: he proceeded to suggest that even some of the *original* texts of the New Testament had errors—that a scribe misheard Paul’s dictation due to someone else in the room coughing—and that all and every copy of those texts likewise contained additional errors (specifically, “There are mistakes being made at every point”). Given that he had just been accused of exaggerating his case, I was very surprised he would then go on to make the biggest exaggeration of his presentation.

This is all to say that comments as found in books such as *Misquoting Jesus* need to be put into proper context. Indeed there are variations in the copies, and the field of this study is known as Textual Criticism—the study of textual variants. A textual variant is where one copy of a document is different from another copy. This includes *any* copy, and *any* kind of mistake: we could have over a thousand copies all saying, word-for-word, the same thing, and then one single copy 12 centuries removed from them that contains one single spelling error (even an obvious one, or a single letter)—this counts as a variant.

Part of the reason we have so many variants is that we have so many copies of the New Testament texts. The latest number, which is growing, is roughly 5,700 copies of the New Testament documents in the original language alone (Greek); this does not include the 10,000 copies in Latin, nor copies in other languages. There is no other literature in the ancient world enjoying this degree of bulk copy. The closest is Homer’s *Iliad*, of which we have 2,400 copies. Given that it predates the New Testament by eight hundred years, one would think we’d have more; and even then, the earliest copy is one thousand years removed from the original. Such comparisons could go on: the earliest copies of Livy are four hundred years removed (and of which there are only 27), the earliest copies of Tacitus are eight hundred years removed (of which there are only 3), etc. Of any ancient literature, the New Testament documents have the most copies, and the dates of the copies are the closest to the originals.

This puts the first Ehrman quote above in perspective: that we don’t have the originals is true of *all* ancient literature. Of all ancient literature, the New Testament documents are the best preserved, and even Ehrman acknowledges that. As for the second quote (we don’t have copies of copies of copies²), that statement *might* not be entirely accurate. Of interest here is a fragment scholars call P⁵², clumsily discovered in the John Rylands University Library in the early 1900’s, and containing text from John’s Gospel (18:31 – 33, 37 – 38). This tiny fragment (3½ by 2½ inches, roughly the size of a credit card) single-handedly changed scholarship. Before its discovery, academics had been arguing that the Gospel of John should be dated to the mid-2nd century. This newly-discovered fragment, however, could be dated as early as the end of the 1st century, and scholarly consensus today is that John’s Gospel should be dated somewhere in the 90’s. It is presently the single earliest copy of a New Testament text we have.



It was also the topic of my second question to the 5 scholars above: “given the early date of the John Ryland’s fragment/ P⁵² (and granting that we can’t know for sure), is it possible that P⁵² could be a direct copy of the original, or a ‘copy of a copy?’” On this question,

² In the Greer-Heard discussion, he verbally takes this to six degrees of copies!

I received mixed answers. Daniel Wallace said no, but on the grounds that he dates the writing of John early, to the 60's (admittedly minority). Others said "yes." For a couple, though, this question seemed to have touched a nerve. The frustration was that the question implies that if we don't have direct copies of the originals, the copies we do have are unreliable—which simply isn't true.

It is helpful here to discuss the different kinds of textual variants. The most common are simply spelling. Ehrman puts it this way: "As it turns out, the majority of mistakes that you find in manuscripts show us nothing more than that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than my students can today." One such variant is known as a movable "nu," referring to the Greek letter ν (equivalent to our letter "n"). In English, we see subtle spelling variations depending on grammar: a book, *an* apple. The Greek language sees similar variations with the movable ν , but these are optional, and the presence or absence of a ν makes no difference at all (even to the grammar)—and as it turns out, this is the single most common variant. There are other spelling variations, including mistakes and differences (certain names, for example, have different spellings). Such spelling variations make up roughly 80% of all textual variants. Once you have removed these variants from the equation, we no longer have "more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."

The next set of variants come in the form of synonyms: for example, writing "Lord" instead of "Jesus," or perhaps adding "Christ" to the end of "Lord Jesus." While these are different words, they do not at all change the meaning of the text, as the identity of the synonym is not in doubt. Similarly, many variants merely employ different word ordering. In English, "Dan loves Cheryl" and "Cheryl loves Dan" are two different statements (specifically, who is the giver, and who is the recipient, of love); in English, word order matters. In Greek, however, word order does *not* matter. Daniel Wallace often notes that, in Greek, there are at least sixteen different word combinations for the simple statement, "Jesus loves John." Such differences in word order are counted as variants, even though the meaning of the text does not change.

Additionally, there are obvious mistakes: a blatant error easily recognizable, such as accidentally leaving out a word or line. These types of mistakes also do not change the meaning of the text, because the mistake, especially when compared to other copies, is easily recognized. All together, the aforementioned variants account for (literally) over 99% of all textual variants. In other words, the majority of these vaunted variants amount to nothing.

This is not to say, though, that there are not also meaningful variants. Here we move into the realm of those Biblical footnotes. Two different copies (or sets of copies) may have two different words. Often these are largely inconsequential: one copy may say "Behold" where another says "See now"; though technically more than merely a synonym, it does not necessarily change the meaning of the statement which follows. Other one-word variants, however, might change the meaning. A favorite example of Ehrman's is Mark 1:41; was Jesus filled with compassion, or anger? Likewise, we might even see the insertion of a phrase or sentence, such as the ending of the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:13. Sometimes these were originally scribal or liturgical notes written in the margins, and then carelessly copied as part of the text. The reason we know these are variants is because we can track many of these changes: they do not appear in the earliest or best manuscripts.

Finally, there is what I call the two "biggies." The first is the ending to Mark's Gospel. In most Bibles, this is noted by a line after the original ending, followed by the disclaimer "the earliest manuscripts do not contain the following." The ending to Mark's Gospel is rarely

lamented; indeed, it is often something of a relief—we don't have to pick up snakes!³ Sometimes it is noted that, without this extended variant, we don't actually *see* the risen Jesus in Mark's Gospel (though he predicts his resurrection, and it is announced); some more clumsy detractors have gone so far as to assert this is proof that the resurrection was a later development in the Christian community. Said comments, however, forget the Pauline Epistles, which predate Mark's Gospel and have a fully-formed understanding of the resurrection.

The other “biggie” is often greeted with a higher degree of dismay: it is John 8, the story of the woman caught in adultery. This of course is the story everyone knows, and even among non-Christians it is a favorite story of Jesus; to hear that it was not originally part of John's Gospel can be disconcerting to say the least. Yet the textual evidence is overwhelming; as best I can tell, its first manuscript appearance is not until the late 4th century, at best. Further manuscripts are not certain where to place it; it is sometimes placed at the end of John's Gospel or even, on at least two occasions, in Luke's Gospel. There is, however, some interesting scholarly discussion on the *historicity* of the story—on whether it is an historical event. Papias, the early 2nd century writer, appears to know something of it, and it is likewise mentioned in a 3rd century document known as the *Didascalia*. It thus appears to be a story known to the early Church, which was later inserted into the Gospel of John. On these grounds, many scholars posit that, though not originally part of the Gospel text, it may nonetheless have been an actual historical story of Jesus.

When considering the sum total of textual variants, we find two things. First, that no theological system rests on a variant. Variants aside, Jesus is always born of a virgin, always resurrected, and always divine.⁴ Furthermore, we find no evidence of sweeping changes to the texts. 99.5% of variants are meaningless; the remainders are hardly substantial. Ironically, even the two “biggies” came very late, at a time when the texts were already well established.

On the other hand, if the early Church had played “fast & loose” with these texts, we would expect to see certain things. We would expect to see difficult teachings clarified: those teachings of Scripture, and even Jesus, with which Christians have wrestled from the earliest days (and still do today). If the early Church felt free to make changes, we would expect such difficult teachings explained. Likewise, we would expect “embarrassing” passages removed altogether, or significantly altered. For example, Mark 6:5 tells us that Jesus, hindered in some way by the disbelief of others, was unable to perform miracles in his hometown. To this day the comment raises questions about Jesus' power. One would think the early Church, if it felt free to alter the texts, would seek to shore up the image of Jesus by removing such embarrassing passages. And finally, given the vast number of manuscript copies we have, we would expect to find *far more* variants. We do not.

Two concluding statements, then: we have more historical attestation of Jesus than most other figures in antiquity; and, the New Testament documents are better, and more closely, preserved than any document of antiquity. But with these conclusions need also come a moment of intellectual honesty.

³ Alas, some snake jugglers in the south base their entire movement on this variant.

⁴ Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* seems to suggest that statements of Christ's divinity tend to stem from textual variants (see p. 113: “...in most instances references to Jesus' divinity are taken away.”). Yet in the Greer-Heard debate, he almost laments that whenever he tries to question a particular doctrine by virtue of textual variants (tending also to point to obvious variants such as 1 John 5:7), others are always able to point to additional passages, not contested, which affirm said doctrines.

These facts, even though undisputed, do not go so far as to “prove” Jesus is the Christ, or his resurrection from the dead, or other miracles. Though those claims are historical (in that the authors claimed they happened as an historical event), to accept the accounts as *accurate* history is ultimately a conclusion made within the realm of faith. That we have 5,700 well-preserved copies of a text means only that they are well-preserved; it does not necessarily speak to the authenticity of the history they purport to tell. Likewise, that we can date a theological belief system of the resurrection to within a few years of Christianity’s beginnings does not necessarily speak to the validity of the claim. What it does do, though, is counter the charge that the texts are unreliable from a historical or textual standpoint, or that earliest Christianity looked radically different from what it eventually became. Likewise, detractors must concede that the objections noted above apply to Jesus, and Christianity, a standard of proof that is not applied in other areas of historical study. If one questions the authenticity of a historical Jesus, one must likewise question the authenticity of *anyone* in ancient history.

Other Gospels?

The question now turns to other documents: is it true that other accounts of Jesus were written which were not included in the New Testament? Though the Symposium's focus was not squarely on this area, for some it does speak to the question of historical reliability (or more specifically, alternative historical accounts), and so deserves at least a small degree of attention.

There are indeed other documents, including documents often called "Gospels," and they do give a different portrait of Jesus. However, they were written over a century after Jesus' death, and their tales are at odds with the much earlier historical accounts; as such, they are not considered historically reliable.⁵ Despite the names by which they are known today—Gospel of Judas, or Gospel of Philip—they often do not claim to be written *by* that person; rather, they are an account *about* the person (say, Judas or Philip). Likewise, they show obvious theological exaggeration: the Gospel of Peter seeks to describe Jesus exiting the tomb upon his resurrection; included are angels so tall their heads reach into the heavens, a Jesus even taller, and a walking and talking cross—and this is one of the more understated accounts. Compared to these documents, the New Testament accounts come across as reserved: though angels pronounce the resurrection to the women, they are not fantastic in appearance, and speak calmly.

The early Church did wrestle with whether to include certain books in the New Testament collection, what is known as the "Canon."⁶ Such questions, though, tended to be about smaller books, such as 3rd John or 2nd Peter. The four Gospels—and *only* the four Gospels—and Paul's letters were never in doubt.

Likewise, it was never a "struggle of equals," as is sometimes portrayed today. The groups to which these other documents belonged never represented mainstream Christianity; they represented later (2nd century at the earliest), smaller, fringe groups.

Finally, their understanding and theology of Jesus was quite different from orthodox Christianity. Alternative portraits of Jesus consistently exaggerated his divine attributes while downplaying, or eliminating altogether, aspects of his humanity.⁷ Whereas today many might show an affinity for Jesus as a teacher, but reject claims of divinity, the earliest Christian alternatives to orthodoxy did just the opposite. In this historical context Bruce Shelby's *Church History* tells us: "Thus we have what a modern Christian must think a striking surprise. The first major test to faith in the Event was not denial of Jesus Christ's deity, it was rejection of his humanity."

⁵ Karen King of Harvard, and Elaine Pagels of Princeton, two experts in the field of Gnostic documents, suggest the documents were never even intended to be historical; rather, they seek to reflect tension with orthodox Christianity in a kind of metaphorical narrative.

⁶ "Canon" refers to a Greek word meaning "measure"; the "Canon" of Scripture (or Canonical documents) are those books which "measure up" to the high standard of being considered God's Word.

⁷ The one exception is perhaps the group commonly known as the Ebionites from the mid-2nd century. It has become fashionable of late to suggest the Ebionites rejected, outright, claims of Jesus' divinity, holding solely to a human Jesus. No Ebionite writing survives, but rather quotations of their works from Epiphanius (*Panarion*). Epiphanius reports that, while they did reject a full Trinitarian view, they still viewed Jesus as being "created as one of the archangels." Claims that this community held Jesus solely to be human would seem to be an exaggeration; they downplayed his supernatural aspects, but did not reject it entirely.

Myth Parallels

We now come to the second statement: “Jesus is a copy of prior mythic deities, and nothing about him is original.” Claims similar to this were made in the late 19th/early 20th century, but were so rebutted by scholars that by 1956 H. Risenfeld was calling the claim “outdated.”⁸ However, a kind of resurgence (resurrection?) has emerged, making similar claims. The impetus for discussing the claim comes from Bill Maher’s film *Religulous*. In it he asserts that many earlier mythic figures parallel Jesus; specifically:

Krishna:

- A carpenter
- Born of a virgin
- Baptized in a river

Mithra:

- Born December 25th
- Performed miracles
- Resurrection on the 3rd day
- Known as “The Lamb, the Way, the Truth, the Light, the Savior, Messiah”

Horus:

- Son of the God Osiris
- Born to a virgin mother
- Baptized in a river by Anup the Baptizer—who was later beheaded
- Tempted in the desert
- Healed the sick, blind, cast out demons, walked on water
- Raised Asar (Lazarus) from the dead
- Had 12 disciples
- Was crucified
- After 3 days, 2 women announced his resurrection

The bottom line is that most of these claims have no bearing in fact. In the film, Maher is asked by an interviewee, “Are you saying that was written in history?” It’s the right question to ask. Maher responds, “Well, absolutely”; however, this is incorrect.

In some ways, this was the most difficult assertion to address—how do you approach claims with no positive evidence in their favor? And how do you maintain an academic approach to a subject that is not respected within academia? Very little credible writing has been done on the issue. As far as I can tell, the source of Maher’s claim comes from *Zeitgeist, the Movie*. This film was initially released online, though DVD’s are now available for purchase. In addition to the alleged parallels above, *Zeitgeist* also claims the United States government was complicit in (or outright organized) the 9/11 attacks, and that international bankers are responsible for modern world wars.

⁸ See his article, “Mythological Background of the New Testament Christology.”

Zeitgeist in turn quotes the work of D.M. Murdock, who goes by the pen name Acharya S (an Amazon.com search even shows a few books written under both names, which seems a bit disingenuous). The pertinent work is Murdock's *The Christ Conspiracy: the Greatest Story Ever Sold*. Though I do not have a published copy, I was able to obtain a computer PDF file, and just a cursory reading revealed some very blatant errors. She asserts "...it took well over a thousand years to canonize the New Testament..."; in point of fact, the Canon of the New Testament was officially recognized in less than half that time. She asserts that the Gospels were written at the end of the 2nd century, yet I'm unaware of a single scholar who holds that view⁹; as has already been mentioned, we have manuscript evidence predating such a late date. The book is problematic in other areas as well. She speaks of Christianity as having spread almost entirely through force rather than persuasion: "Christianity was thus fervently resisted wherever it invaded, as nation after nation died under the sword fighting it off, because its doctrines and proponents were repugnant and blasphemous." One of the claimed points of resistance was Christianity's "anti-feminist doctrines"; counter this, though, with Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, a sociological view of early Christianity which devotes an entire chapter to the appeal of Christianity to women: "...within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large."

When making these claims, Murdock does give frequent endnotes. However, others who have more closely examined her work point out that many of the endnotes are contradictory: they cite sources which, upon review, are contrary to her assertion. Even writers with similar views, such as Richard M. Price, have apparently sought to remove themselves from her work, lamenting "...it causes us chagrin to be lumped together with certain writers with whom we share the Christ Myth but little else..."¹⁰

Murdock herself seems to have been inspired by the writings of Gerald Massey, a self-styled amateur Egyptologist. Massey also made sweeping claims which have since been addressed as faulty by expert Egyptologists, most notably in W. Ward Gasque's article, "The Leading Religion Writer in Canada...Does He Know What He's Talking About?" (most Egyptologists responding to Gasque's inquiries didn't even know who Massey was).¹¹ Massey is one of the few writers to offer a form of ancient evidence for his claims, though as it turns out his evidence was based on misreading of ancient hieroglyphs. No other author in these areas offers ancient sources for the alleged parallels; they merely make assertions. From time to time, including *Religulous*, it is stated that the source is the Egyptian Book of the Dead. However, no citations from the document are given, and those familiar with the document dispute the claim.

Maher and others claim that Krishna, like Jesus, was born of a virgin. However, research into Krishna shows he was the eighth child of Princess Devaki, and he did have a father. In an interview with the Centre for Public Christianity, Chris Forbes, Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at Macquarie University, put it this way: "She's had seven children already. I don't think she's a virgin." Similarly, crucifixion did not exist in ancient Egypt. The closest the alleged parallels come to resurrection claims are descriptions of the afterlife, a far cry from the bodily resurrection claims of 1st century Christians. Many, if not most, of the other parallels are equally without merit.

⁹ Even like-minded skeptic Earl Doherty, in one of the latest dates I've seen, concedes the Gospel of Luke as having been written by the early 2nd century (see <http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/rfset4.htm#Michel>). Scholarly consensus across the board, though, holds John to have been the last of the four Gospels written, at the latest in the 90's A.D.

¹⁰ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6407/is_200106/ai_n25620749/

¹¹ <http://hnn.us/articles/6641.html>

Many of the claims, even if true, are inconsequential. That Horus might not have had accounts of his childhood recorded—much like Jesus—is not so much evidence of a parallel as it is an example of ancient biographical practice: writers in antiquity rarely devoted space to inconsequential childhoods; rather, biographers focused on significant events. As for the claim that others were born on December 25th, it is true that some pagan systems held that time (winter solstice) in high regard. However, the Christian claim is not that Jesus was born on December 25th; rather, that is the day Christians *celebrate* the birth. In point of fact we have no records of when Jesus was born, whether day or season. The decision to celebrate it on December 25th was made in the mid-4th century; it is a later tradition.

It simply appears that others have taken elements of the story of Jesus and assert that the same are true for various mythical characters. I'm quite comfortable going so far as to say that some of the supposed parallels are nothing more than outright fabrications; no ancient texts are accurately cited because the parallels *do not exist*—they are recent inventions. The irony as pertains to *Religulous* is that Maher spends the movie criticizing the religious for blindly accepting things without asking critical questions; yet in this regard he seems to have done the same. This is as close to a blanket dismissal as we came in the Symposium, the reason being that there is no bearing in fact for these claims.

Addendum: Miracles, Bias, and Contradictions in the Ancient Sources

One area of discussion we were not able to address in the Symposium, simply due to time constraints, is the charge that the earliest sources for Jesus (the New Testament documents) are additionally unreliable because they make miraculous claims, show obvious bias, or are contradictory. Two of the accusations (miracles and bias) are true, but is the conclusion (unreliability) fair? And to what extent are the texts contradictory?

The New Testament documents, particularly the Gospels and Acts (though also the Epistles' talk of resurrection), do indeed make miraculous claims, and further assert that said miracles happened in history. But do such claims call the reliability of these documents into question? As noted above, the miracle claims of the canonical documents are far more reserved than later Gnostic and apocryphal documents, which show obvious signs of sensationalizing. More important, though, is a protestation already made: such accusation applies to these documents a standard of proof which is not applied to other historical documents.

The ancient world did believe in the supernatural, and modern forms of atheism were rare, if not unheard of. Thus many other ancient accounts are likewise laced with supernatural elements. Various myths surrounded the historical person of Alexander the Great. Suetonius includes the supernatural in his account of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Yet the historicity of these men and events are not brought into question. Likewise, that miracles—even the resurrection—were attributed to Jesus does not *ipso facto* negate his historicity. The standard naturalist approach to history is to sift through such accounts, making various judgments on what is historical and what is exaggeration. Even the majority of secular scholarship does the same with the Jesus: while they may not affirm miracles, they do affirm the existence of the man. If one rejects the historicity of Jesus on the grounds of the miraculous, one must likewise reject the historicity of many other figures in antiquity, most of whom are not questioned by the academic community.

Similarly, bias alone does not negate the historicity of Jesus, or any person or event. It may call the trustworthiness of certain elements of the story into question, particularly if the testimony appears overly sympathetic or vindictive towards the subject; but historical reconstruction does not typically reject the entirety due to questions of detail. Craig Blomberg notes that the method of (supposed) “unbiased reporting” is a relatively recent trend in history. Most writers in antiquity had a reason for writing beyond merely recording history. Furthermore, one is faced with the dilemma that, bias aside, the best portraits of historic (or any) figures are given by those closest to the person.¹² Our best sources for the atrocities of the Holocaust are the survivors themselves. Given the claims of the Christian texts, of course said accounts will show bias; it's difficult to speak of a changed life in a wholly impassionate manner.

As for alleged contradictions, once again a standard of proof is placed upon the Christian claim which is not generally directed towards other historical claims. In any other area, even the modern, historicity never precludes variance in minor details. Returning again to Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, there are several accounts of this event, and said accounts vary. Yet I'm unaware of any single historian who questions the historicity of the event. Of greater concern here is the tendency to exaggerate the effects of the contradictions. Often terms such as

¹² Josephine Marcus Earp is known to have given an exceedingly biased portrayal in *I Married Wyatt Earp*, and as such the claims within are taken greatly with a grain of salt—but the historicity of Wyatt Earp is not brought into question, and her account likewise carries value.

“conflicting,” “woefully contradictory,” or “hopelessly irreconcilable” are seen applied to said issues, yet what examples tend to follow? Mark and Matthew describe a single angel at the empty tomb, whereas Luke and John describe two. Setting aside the question of whether this qualifies as a genuine historical discrepancy (partial omission is rarely elsewhere considered a contradiction), such detractors must ignore the uniformity of the accounts: that *all* sources agree on Jesus’ death, his method of death, the length of his death, the empty tomb, and the resurrection. The overwhelming convergence of the accounts is ignored in favor of a very minor and questionable incongruence. To dismiss claims solely on these grounds is an irresponsible approach to history. Moreover, one must ask what the accusation would be if the accounts were uniform in every respect: no doubt unreliability due to *obvious collaboration* would be the charge.

This Symposium, and subsequent writing, has sought to address the claims and concerns stated therein on the same grounds upon which they are made: to approach the question of Jesus’ historicity, and the textual reliability of the documents, on the same grounds upon which conclusions concerning other figures of history, and other ancient texts, are made. It is only fair to ask that the reverse be done as well; that those who question the historicity of the man, and the reliability of the documents, approach these questions in the same manner with which other areas are approached. The suggestion is sometimes made that only through “special pleading” (the dubious rhetorical method of arbitrarily and conveniently applying greater or lesser precedence to certain positions, arguments, or proofs) can the historical claims of Christianity stand. Instead, what has been seen here is that the double standard is applied *against* the Christian historical claims; that standards of proof, historicity, and exactness of reporting are levied against Christianity in a way not applied to any other system. It is fair to note that extraordinary claims—such as the Resurrection—require a higher degree of evidence, and the difference between faith conclusions and historical conclusions is noted above. Perhaps later Symposiums can address these questions as well.

Appendix: the E-Mail Responses

Dr. Craig Blomberg

[Regarding historical attestation]

No, not that I'm aware of.

[Regarding p52]

Yes, esp. the "copy of a copy" option.

Keep up this important work!

Dr. Darrell Bock

[Regarding historical attestation]

----- I am not aware of any other figure who has this degree of attestation, except perhaps some fo the key Caesars of the ancient world (But they do not have the kind of textual attestation that the New Testament has).

[Regarding p52]

----- I find that unlikely, but does it matter? What we have is a veritable feast of manuscripts in distinct locales and from a variety of periods in which the vast majority of the text is very clear.

Dr. Craig Evans

Just off the cuff: (1) I am not sure, apart from a few Roman emperors, several sources from within a generation or so of the person in question; (2) P52 was composed sometime 120-140 AD, when the original of John was probably still extant. I attach something you may find useful.

Dr. Craig Keener

Thanks for writing.

I'm sure there are figures in antiquity whose historicity was affirmed by many contemporary authors (Nero, for example), though through lack of interest these have not always been preserved. I think I'd be quite safe to say that Jesus is the only figure where we have his contemporaries attesting the historicity of his resurrection, though! J

As far as copies of copies, there's no way to prove p52's status in that regard, but the argument is silly, reflecting an impossible burden of proof. Virtually nothing in antiquity (apart from business documents and inscriptions) exists in the original. Classicists do not for that reason discard the evidence. When someone raises the bar of evidence so high that nothing in antiquity can meet it, they are not interested in fair debate.

I hope this helps!

Dr. Daniel Wallace

Thank you for inquiring. How is your ministry going there? I know so little about how the church is doing in Wyoming, even though I've done seminars there on two occasions.

As for your questions: Question 1: It's an interesting way in which you put things. Yes, there are some, especially emperors. Mostly indirectly, however: quite a few non-literary papyri have been found in which the emperor's name is mentioned, in particular by way of date (e.g., 'third year after Caligula's accession to the throne...'). There are, of course, also coins, statues, inscriptions, and historians who speak of the emperors. As for historians of the first century, the major ones are Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius. But there's also Josephus and Luke, to name just a couple more. Then there are letters to the emperors and edicts from them. Many still preserved.

As for the NT, the way the question is normally posed is via eyewitnesses. To take a less-than-conservative viewpoint (such as Ehrman's): none of the evangelists were eyewitnesses; Acts was not written by an eyewitness; Paul was not one; 1-2 Peter are inauthentic; 1-2-3 John were not written by an eyewitness; Jude and James are pseudonyms; and Revelation was written by other than John the apostle. This liberal view ends up imploding on itself, however, and in two ways. First, assuming that they're right, this would mean that the most influential person in all of human history (even admitted by Ehrman) left such a minimal impact on his followers that not one of his inner circle of 12, nor the larger circle of 70, nor any of the 120 of Acts, nor any of his kin, took enough notice of him to pen a document about him. I would find that to be incredible in the max, and because such skepticism is so uncritical of its own position, it is self-defeating. Secondly, although Paul was not an eyewitness, even Ehrman accepts seven letters as actually by Paul: Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians. And what is significant here is that in 1 Cor 15 as well as Gal 2, we see Paul speaking about numerous eyewitnesses to Christ--both before and after his resurrection. In Gal 2, he speaks of his gospel being confirmed by James, Peter, and John. Galatians was written in c. AD 49--within two decades of the crucifixion. If this is authentic and it's that early, then Paul affirms at least three men from the inner circle of Jesus' disciples as not only knowing Jesus but also agreeing with the essentials of Paul's gospel about Jesus. This single fact is enough to destroy any notion that Paul's gospel was significantly different from that of the apostles. And in 1 Cor 15, he speaks of more than 500 believers who, at one time, saw the resurrected Christ. And he adds that most of them were still alive when he wrote this letter in the mid-50s. These two facts--the lack of self-critical examination of the hyper-skeptics and the historical affirmation of the Jerusalem

apostles as sharing the same core kerygma with Paul--argue very strongly that we have at least a historically credible picture of Jesus in the NT.

Regarding P52, there is indeed the possibility that this MS is a very early copy in the chain of transmission, possibly (though just barely) even a direct copy of the original of John. We know three important facts about this papyrus: first, it was found in Egypt; second, it most likely dates from the first half of the second century; third, it was written on a codex rather than a scroll. But we don't know if it was written out in Egypt, only that it ended up there. Indeed, Kurt Aland has argued that it most likely was not copied in Egypt because of the lack of large churches in the first half of the second century there. The hand is elegant, almost a professional scribe's hand. This would mean that it most likely came from a large church--large enough to employ professional scribes or at least able draftsmen--to copy the sacred texts. But Egypt may not have had such before 150. Its date might suggest that it was a direct copy, but this, in part, depends on the date of John. I think John was written in the 60s (a minority, but growing viewpoint). If so, it probably was not a first-generation copy. If John is from the 90s, it could possibly be a first-generation copy, especially since most papyrologists would date P52 closer to 100 than to 150. But the third piece of evidence seems to be against this: it's written on a codex. That form was not invented until the last decade of the first century AD. Although Christians very early on popularized it (virtually all extant NT MSS were written on a codex, while it took another 500 years before non-Christian documents were mostly written on a codex), for this to be a first-generation copy would mean that before John's Gospel was written, the church consciously chose to use the codex form. Yet the Revelation speaks of a book as being a scroll (cf. Rev 5: the seven-sealed book almost surely must have been a scroll since one had to open the seals in sequence rather than in any order he chose). So, why would the church begin to use the codex but John still conceived of books as scrolls?

On the other hand, even a first-generation copy would not necessarily have to be immediately after the original. Like a mother who has children spanning twenty years, first generation copies could span several years. Ehrman seems to imply that one copy would have been of the originals, then a copy would be made of that copy, and so on. What he doesn't acknowledge is the possibility--indeed, likelihood--that even later copies would be written by comparison with older MSS. Irenaeus hints at this phenomenon in one place for he is aware of early and late MSS of Revelation, implying that responsible scribes would also be aware of these distinctions and would, at times, consult earlier MSS. This argues strongly against the implications that Ehrman seems to suggest about linear copying.

I hope this helps.

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