

Misquotes, Misuse, and Misunderstandings in the Bible

HPC Trinity Sunday school

September 22, 2024



Cover of the Oldest existing Masoretic Text, 1008 AD, called the Leningrad Codex

This is actually a kind of catch-all lesson. It begs the question, “What happens when people try to articulate the ancient and eternal Word of God?”

Yahweh

Which of these 6 names does NOT mean “God”?	
Elohim	Kyrios
Yokheved (or Jochebed)	Adonai
YHWH (or Yahweh)	Jehovah



YHWH is the name of God in Hebrew which was revealed to Moses in the book of Exodus. The Hebrew language has no vowels, only consonants.¹ But why this name? Many scholars believe it to be a shortened version of “Yahweh-Asher-Yahweh,” which means “He Brings into Existence Whatever Exists.”

As Judaism spread to other parts of the world the word “YHWH” was replaced with “Elohim”—a more generic Hebrew name for God. Also about this time (3rd C. BC) Jewish leaders decided that the divine name was too sacred to be uttered, so it was replaced during synagogue worship with “Adonai” (“My Lord”), which translates into Greek as “Kyrios.” Even today the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, uses “Kyrios.”

¹ The Masoretes worked diligently for centuries (@600 to 800 AD) attempting to reproduce the original text of the Hebrew Bible. They were the ones who added vowels to “YHWH,” using God’s other names, Adonai and Elohim--thus the name “YAHWEH.” [“Many Greek transcriptions indicated that YHWH should be pronounced Yahweh.”—Encyc. Britannica]

Early Latin-speaking Christians had difficulty pronouncing the Hebrew name of God, so they replaced it with a “J” or an “I.” As a result, we commonly see “Jehovah” (JeHoWaH).

Jesus’ Birth

Ever since we were toddlers we have heard this beautiful story:

“It’s about 2000 years ago, the evening of December 25. Mary rides into Bethlehem on a donkey, urgently needing to deliver her baby. Although it’s an emergency, all the innkeepers turn her and Joseph away. So, they deliver baby Jesus in a stable. Then angels sing to the shepherds. Afterwards, they are joined by three kings with camels in worshipping the quiet newborn babe.”



However, this is not what the Bible says.

The Gospel of Luke is our best source here.



[READ LK 2:5-7]

- **On a donkey??** We don’t know how Mary got to Bethlehem. The Bible simply says that Joseph went there with Mary, who was pregnant (LK 2:5).
- **Mary delivers her baby the night they arrive in Bethlehem??** Again, the Bible simply states that “while they were there [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born” (LK 2:6). They could have arrived weeks or months earlier, which would have made more sense, considering that Mary would not travel well, being that late in her pregnancy. (Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 70 miles...uphill.)



- **December 25??** Probably not. “A more probable time would be late September, the time of the annual Feast of Tabernacles, when such travel was commonly accepted. Thus, it is rather commonly believed (though not certain) that Jesus’ birth was around the last of September.² The conception of Christ, however, may have taken place in late December of the previous year. Our Christmas celebration may well be recognized as an honored observation of the incarnation of ‘the Word made flesh’ (JN 1:14).”³

² *Christian Answers*, pg. 5. The early church believed that the archangel Michael was the heavenly being leading the host of angels in praise (LK 2:13-14). Michaelmas, meaning “Michael sent,” was celebrated on the same day as the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which is September 29th.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

- **No innkeeper is mentioned.** Luke 2:7 says there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the *pandocheio*, which would have been a commercial inn, similar to our motels today. Instead, Jesus was likely born in a *katalyma* or guest room [READ MK 14:14], possibly belonging to relatives. This would have been a spare room, which often had a sheltered animal stable and stall (with a manger) on the other side of the wall.

- **Angels??** Having angels present at Christ's birth seems logical, but the "great company of the heavenly host" appeared to the shepherds, not at Jesus' manger. And the shepherds who witnessed the angels were not in Bethlehem, but were in the open field.

✚ The Greek word *aineō* (praising) found in LK 2:13 could mean "to praise in song."

- **"...shepherds abiding in the fields"** is possible, because the Greek word indicates they were bivouacking. But **"keeping watch over their flocks at night"** would be very out of place in the winter. Sheep would have been allowed to remain out at night only during the mild months of spring and early fall. Otherwise, they would be in the fold for warmth and protection.

- **Did three kings appear on camels at the birth??** The Bible does not say that kings or camels visited Jesus at his birth. It also does not report from where specifically these wise men (*magi*) came, nor does it say how many there were. Only the Book of Matthew mentions this event.

Most Bible translations show the word "magi" to mean "wise men." Magi (the plural of the Old Persian word "magos") is also translated in some Bibles as "astrologers" or "magicians." Magi were considered professional seers. They "were common in the Mediterranean world and were well known to early Christians. Except for the Magi who came bearing gifts for the Christ child, the NT gives an unfavorable impression of these men,"⁴ partly because they were often attached to the courts of Roman leaders. Thus, they had both power and an

⁴ *Interpreters, "Magi,"* vol. 3, pg. 222. Simon Magus and Elymas Magus were vile and immoral.

opulent lifestyle. Most, however, had a reputation for sound judgement and good character ...(at least, in Rome's eyes).

- **Three costly gifts**—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—are mentioned, which led to later speculation that one gift was brought by each “king.”⁵ Luke doesn't tell us exactly where these magi originated, only that they were from the East.

And as for timing, these wise men did not visit the manager, as is often pictured on our Christmas greeting cards. We know that they arrived much later, possibly two-plus years later, because LK 2:22-39 shows them travelling here after Christ's presentation in the Temple in Jerusalem. At that point Jesus would have been considered a “child,” older than a baby.

True or False:

The Bible we now have is the inerrant word of God. It contains no mistakes.

[The key words here are “we now have.”]

“The New Testament is now known, in whole or in part, in nearly 5,000 Greek manuscripts alone. Every one of these handwritten copies differs from every other one. A study of 150 Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke has revealed more than 30,000 different readings.”⁶ On the positive side, “among the multitude of manuscripts, we find one to two percent of the Bible has relevant variations.”⁷

So, why don't we just go back to the originals? Modern scholars and theologians try to do this very thing, by attempting to discover the oldest form of any given text. It's known as “textual criticism.”

Unfortunately, we can't just go back to the original writings, which are known as “autographs.” “Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have first copies of



⁵None of the early church fathers suggested that the magi were kings. (*Interpreter's*, vol. 4, pg. 594 (“Text, NT”))

⁶ In the 40 years since this publication 700 more manuscripts have been discovered. (Ehrman, pg. 88).

⁷ Rast, pg. 2.

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."⁸ On top of this, it wasn't until the 5th Century that copyists and editors considered these letters and stories to be "the Holy Bible."

What's wrong with the copies? Aren't they accurate? The problem is two-fold: many are simply minor human mistakes; some involve intentional editing and are more serious. Both kinds occurred mostly in the second and third centuries.

Human error #1—The vast majority of errors in the Bible are from unintentional human foibles, and have nothing to do with theology. These early scribes were not pros—such things didn't exist until 300-plus years after Jesus. Few people at that time could read or write, so the task of copying letters, taking dictation, and other writings was left to whomever had even an inkling of these skills.

✚ Example from 1 Cor. 5:8---Paul tells his followers to not eat the "old leaven, the leaven of wickedness and evil." The final word, *evil*, is spelled PONĒRAS in Greek, which looks a lot like PORNEIAS, meaning "sexual immorality" or prostitution. As a result of a possible sleepy or inattentive copyist, some surviving manuscripts have Paul warning the Corinthians of sexual immorality instead of evil.

✚ Sometimes a simple human error can be disastrous. In John 17:15, for example, Jesus prays to God on behalf of his followers:

"I do not ask that you keep them from the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."

However, in one of the best manuscripts available to us (the Codex Vaticanus from the 4th century) the scribe skipped a line. The result:

"I do not ask that you keep them from the evil one."

✚ Things seemed even worse to the famous church father Origen, who penned this complaint in about 225 A.D.:

*"The differences among the manuscripts have become great either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please."*⁹

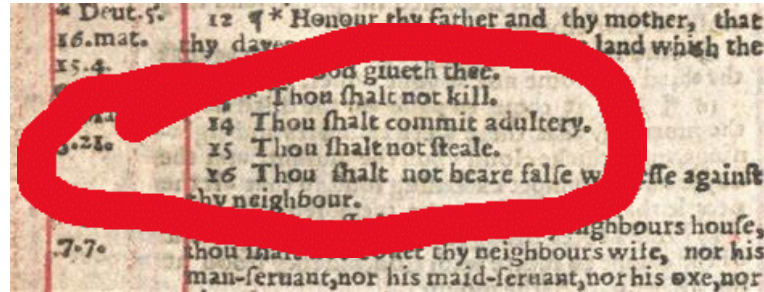
✚ Not all errors were from scribes—even the printing press had them.

---The beloved King James Version of 1611 had a major problem with

⁸ Ehrman, pg. 10.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 52. A century before this the pagan critic Celsus argue that Christians changed their text at will, as if drunk from a drinking bout. (*Ibid.*, pg. 101.

MT 26:36: “Then cometh Judas,” which was later corrected to “Then cometh Jesus.” And its 1631 edition was labeled as the “wicked Bible” because printers had omitted the word “not” in the seventh commandment of (EX 20:14). Some rogues thus felt encouraged to commit adultery.



Human Error #2—You have probably seen this on T-shirts:

“Let’s eat Grandma!” v.s.



**“Let’s eat,
Grandma!”**

(Thank goodness for Grandma’s sake we now have commas!)

Remember that the writing in Jesus’ and Paul’s time contained no punctuation (*scriptuo continua*). There were no spaces between words, and all was in capitals.

How many “KAI” words
do you see below?

If this style were in use today, what does this say?:



GOD IS NOWHERE

Scribes would sometimes abbreviate words to save time and space. For instance, the Greek word “kai” (“and”) would be shortened to simply “k” with a flared downstroke. Other oft-used words, such as “God” and “Christ” were also abbreviated. All of this led to confusion for later scribes.

For example: In Romans 12:11 Paul urges his reader to “serve the Lord.” But the word Lord (*KURIW*) was often shortened in manuscripts to KW with a line drawn over it. Later, some scribes misread this as an abbreviation for *KAI RW*, which means “time,” thus causing those manuscripts to show Paul encouraging his followers to “serve the time.” (The Coverdale Bible and the Tyndale Bible of the 1500’s say exactly this: “Applye youre selves to ye tyme.”)

Intentional editing presents a different problem. In many cases theologians know that a certain text has been altered, but they can’t determine which is the correct (“original”) one.

✚ At other times it's obvious.

Example: **[READ MT 24:36]**. Jesus is predicting the end of the age. Some scribes found the phrase “not even the Son” (which is in the oldest known manuscripts) to be offensive, so they removed those words.

✚ Sometimes an older version of the Bible will have a verse that does not appear in newer ones. **[READ MT 17:20-21]**

Most Bible have eliminated vs. 21, which is still found in older Bibles (and the KJV). Did these new versions eliminate v. 21? No, because the oldest ancient manuscripts do not have this verse. The KJV, Holman, and other Bible versions, however, “stick to their guns” by using this wording which was added by later copyists.¹⁰

✚ Paul's writings were not exempt from being tampered with.

Followers of Paul, some two or three generations after his death, would occasionally insert remarks and side notes into manuscripts. Sympathetic scribes later transferred these into the text itself (on purpose or not), thus making it appear to be from Paul the apostle.

▪ A good example of this is found in 1 Cor. **[READ 1Cor 14:33-35]**

Verses 26-33 are Paul's thoughts on how orderly worship should be conducted. This thought continues in vss. 36-40. But in between—in vss. 34-35-- we find a slap to women: they are not to be heard in church. Most theologians believe that vs. 34-35 were originally just scribal side notes, which in later copies became part of the main message. This is because:

1. women played a major behind-the-scenes role for Paul and his ministry. They accompanied him on his journeys, and some provided for him and his disciples financially;
2. earlier in this letter Paul even gives instructions on how women are to pray and prophesy in church;
3. Several ancient manuscripts each show vss 34-35 being shuffled around in different order within Paul's actual message.

Final Example: [READ Romans 16:7].

Paul's Letter to the Romans is the only place in the NT where a woman is referred to as an apostle. Yet, early scribes and/or editors who wanted to keep women in their “place” made some “minor” alterations.

1. They changed her name. Junia was a common name for a woman in Paul's time, but “there is no evidence in the ancient world for ‘Junias’ as

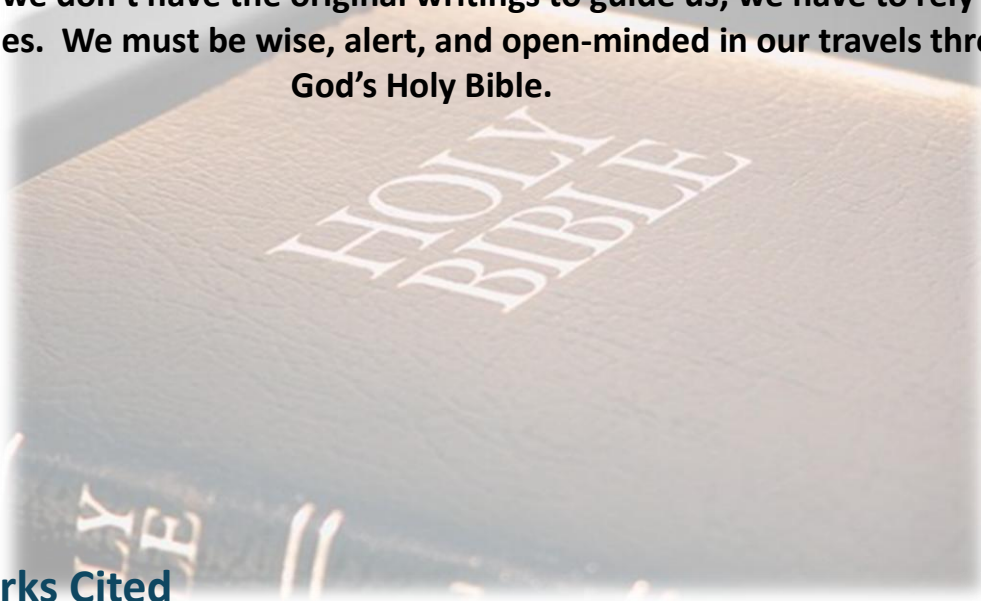
¹⁰ A partial list of other non-verses includes MK 7:16, Mk 11:26, Acts 8:37, and Acts 9:6.

a man's name.”¹¹ Paul is here obviously praising a woman and considers her a disciple of Christ.

2. They reworked the sentence to end with, “...and also greet my fellow prisoners who are foremost among the apostles.” This wording excludes both Andronicus AND Junia as apostles.

[What does your Bible say? My 1996 NIV says “Junias,” unfortunately, but newer versions show “Junia.”]

In summary, we all want to be good Christians and follow God's word. The problem is, we don't have the original writings to guide us; we have to rely on copies of copies. We must be wise, alert, and open-minded in our travels through God's Holy Bible.



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¹¹ Ehrman, pg. 185.

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