

What is a variant?

A textual variant is simply any difference from a standard text (e.g., a printed text, a particular manuscript, etc.) that involves spelling, word order, omission, addition, substitution, or a total rewrite of the text.¹

The nature of NT variants

First, it is important to remember that the biblical manuscripts we have today are in 99% agreement with one another. Yes, there are some minor differences, but the vast majority of the biblical text is identical from one manuscript to another. Most of the differences are in punctuation, word endings, minor grammatical issues, word order, etc. – issues easily explainable as scribal mistakes.²

The volume of NT variants

- There are around 138,000 words in the Greek New Testament
- About 400,000 variants can be found scattered among the Greek manuscripts
- But that number of variants comes from estimating **every difference**, not including spelling variations, **in every surviving manuscript** from the Greek New Testament...well over 5,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts have been preserved as a whole or in part³—

Virtually all of the 400,000 differences in the New Testament documents—spelling errors, inverted words, non-viable variants and the like—are completely inconsequential to the task of reconstructing the original. Of the remaining differences, virtually all yield to a vigorous application of the accepted canons of textual criticism.

There are a few significant variants

- EXAMPLE: The rendering in the KJV of 1 John 5 appearing to echo the Trinity
- It appears in only a four manuscripts, the earliest dating from the 14th or 15th century (four others have it penciled into the margin by a scribe),
- It is almost universally acknowledged to be a corruption.
- The bottom line is the doctrine of the Trinity does not rely on this text, but is verified by many other passages not in question

Our Bibles will typically footnote these differences

- You might also remember the exclusion of Mark 16:9-20
- See also Acts 8:36

¹ <http://danielbwallace.com/2013/09/09/the-number-of-textual-variants-an-evangelical-miscalculation/>

² <https://gotquestions.org/Bible-inerrancy.html>

³ <http://www.timothypauljones.com/apologetics-truth-about-the-inerrant-originals-that-matter/>

The Value of the Variants

If only one manuscript of the New Testament had survived, there would have been zero variants (but we would be uncertain as to its validity).

The skeptics are correct that the copies of the New Testament documents differ from one another in hundreds of thousands of instances. Where they err is in their assumption that these manuscript differences somehow demonstrate that the New Testament does not represent God's inspired truth.⁴

The sheer volume of manuscripts and the sheer volume of variants is not a PROBLEM--- it is actually a SOLUTION...It has helped us to **“discover”** the originals...**Most experts estimate the actual text in dispute at less than one percent. Even in these few situations, the accurate wording is either the one presented as most likely or one or two known variants.**

⁵At the end of the day

- The New Testament is over 99% pure. In the entire text of 20,000 lines, only 40 lines are in doubt (about 400 words), and none affects any significant doctrine.
- Scholar D.A. Carson sums it up this way: “What is at stake is a purity of text of such a substantial nature that nothing we believe to be doctrinally true, and nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants.”⁶

Though inerrancy does apply only to the original revelation of Scripture, we can live confident that God's revealed words are the same words we hold today. They are powerful, living, and active (Hebrews 4:12) and can change our lives and the lives of those we serve.⁷

He has preserved and protected His word

Mat 5:18 NIV For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Inspiration

Inspiration is more than a doctrine - it has a purpose

2Ti 3:16-17 KJV All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: (17) That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

More than 3800 times in the Bible we find words or expressions such as: *And God said...* or *The Lord spoke to Moses*, or *The Word of the Lord came to Isaiah*.

⁴ <http://www.timothypauljones.com/apologetics-truth-about-the-inerrant-originals-that-matter/>

⁵ <https://compellingtruth.org/Bible-inerrant.html>

⁶ http://www.cbn.com/special/apologetics/articles/Koukl_misquoting_jesus_bart_ehrman.aspx

⁷ <https://compellingtruth.org/Bible-inerrant.html>

Examples:

- Exo 34:27 NIV Then **the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words**, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."
- 2Sa 23:1-2 NIV **These are the last words of David**: "The inspired utterance of David son of Jesse, the utterance of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, the hero of Israel's songs: 2 **"The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.**
- Jer 26:2 NIV "This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. **Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word.**
- Joh 12:49 NIV For I did not speak on my own, but **the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.**
- 1Co 14:37 NIV If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that **what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.**
- Rev 2:8 NIV "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: **These are the words of him who is the First and the Last**, who died and came to life again.

Jesus called the writings of Moses the commands of God...and the word of God

Mar 7:9-13 NIV And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside **the commands of God** in order to observe your own traditions! 10 **For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,'** and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' 11 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)-- 12 then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. 13 **Thus you nullify the word of God** by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."⁸

How did Jesus view the scripture?

He believed the scripture spoke prophetically about Him

- Luk 24:44 NIV He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the **Law** of Moses, the **Prophets** and the **Psalms**."
 - **Tanakh** is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of each of the Masoretic Text's **three traditional subdivisions**: Torah ("Teaching", also known as the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im ("Prophets") and Ketuvim ("Writings")—hence **TaNakh**.⁹

He believed the Old Testament was spoken by God Himself, or written by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, even though the pen was held by men

- Mat 22:28-32 NIV Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" 29 Jesus replied, "You are in error because **you do not know**

⁸ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-we-believe-the-bible-part-1#Verballnerrancy>

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanakh>

the Scriptures or the power of God. 30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. 31 But about the resurrection of the dead--**have you not read what God said to you,** 32 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

- Mat 22:41-45 NIV While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. 43 He said to them, "How is it then that **David, speaking by the Spirit,** calls him 'Lord'? **For he says,** 44 "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" 45 If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" **[This is a quote from Psalm 110:1]**

He quoted Scripture as the basis for his own teaching.

- Mat 7:12 NIV So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, **for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**
- Mat 22:40 NIV **All the Law and the Prophets** hang on these two commandments.
- Luk 16:29-31 NIV "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 30 "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 "He said to him, **'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'**"

He believed every word / every jot and tittle was important

- Mat 22:23-32 NIV ... 32 'I **am** the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

Summary Jesus' view of Scripture [and remember He read from a copy - the LXX]

The Lord committed the task of all writing of the Word of God to fallible men—guided by the infallible Holy Spirit. Jesus honored those Scriptures as the word of God. We should do the same.

- 2Ti 3:15-16 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

Inerrancy

Inerrancy means that *the Bible is without error.* It's a belief in the "total truthfulness and reliability of God's words" Jesus said, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). This inerrancy isn't just in passages that speak about salvation, but also applies to all historical and scientific statements as well. It is not only accurate in matters related to faith and practice, but it is accurate and without error regarding any statement, period (John 3:12).

It is impossible for God to lie

Heb 6:18 NIV God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.

If the Bible is not inerrant, can we rely on it at all?

- If we can't trust Scripture in things like geography, chronology, and history, then how can we be sure we can trust it in its message of salvation and sanctification?
- When inerrancy is denied one may expect some serious fallout in both doctrinal and practical areas. Some doctrinal matters which may be affected by denying inerrancy include the following.¹⁰

In the words of Jesus

- Mat 5:18-19 NIV For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, **not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen**, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
- Joh 17:17 NIV Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

Summary

So we have a modern Bible, based upon manuscripts. Can we reconcile Textual Variants with Biblical Inerrancy? First, whatever minor copyists' errors that may, or may not, exist in Scripture, the overall message comes through loud and clear. Man is sinful by nature, God is holy and must punish sin, Christ came to take that punishment on our behalf, and all who come to Him in faith will have eternal life, while those who reject Him live eternally in hell.

No important theological or biblical issue is thrown into doubt by any supposed error or contradiction. Biblical manuscripts from the 15th century agree completely with manuscripts from the 3rd century. We can have absolute confidence that the Bible we have today is almost exactly identical to what the apostles and prophets wrote 2000+ years ago.¹¹

Conclusion

The Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error *in the original manuscripts*

¹⁰ https://bible.org/seriespage/6-bible-inerrant-word-god#P468_98256

¹¹ <https://gotquestions.org/Bible-inerrancy.html>

The Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, copies, fragments and any translation (regardless of language) are inerrant to the degree they faithfully line up with the meaning that the words of the original manuscripts carried.

Translations will differ from each other in some matters - but where those differences occur there is no effect on doctrine or practice.

Due to the number of manuscripts and the practice of textual criticism we have narrowed down our understanding of the original documents to be as close as 99% accurate.¹²

Where differences still occur, perhaps future discoveries of other manuscripts may help sort out those few remaining issues. In the meantime we can have confidence that even our bible¹³ is inerrant, authoritative and inspired, and should demand our allegiance and obedience.

In the end confidence in the word of God is a matter of Faith and Revelation

- Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:6. The God who created light in the beginning must shine into our dark cell to reveal himself. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ **has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**”
- He sent Paul “**to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God**” (Acts 26:18).
- Heb 11:3 KJV **Through faith we understand** that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.
- Heb 4:1-2 KJV Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. 2 For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, **not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.**

¹² <https://carm.org/manuscript-evidence>

¹³ Note some translations are word-for-word translations, others are thought-for-thought, still others are paraphrases