

Bible Questions and Answers

(By Robert C. Veil, Jr.)

Question: I have heard that there are “textual problems” in the Bible. Does this mean that there are errors in the original manuscripts? How can we depend upon a book which is so full of problems with the original text?

Answer: To borrow from a famous quotation from Mark Twain, the reports of errors in the Bible have been “greatly exaggerated!” As we dig a little deeper, we generally find that these so-called problems do not amount to very much. Let me give you an example, which illustrates this point.

In Paul’s first letter to the church at Thessalonica, the following statement appears: “But we were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children,” (1 Thess. 2:7). Critics of the Bible have claimed that the original Greek manuscript containing this passage was tampered with, and that we really have no way of reconstructing it, or even knowing what the original actually said. Therefore, they argue, we cannot rely upon this and other such passages as being genuine.

Let’s take a closer look at the facts. It is true that there is a “textual problem” at 1 Thess. 2:7. In fact, the respected Bible scholar Leon Morris labeled it “a first-class textual problem.” But notice what the “problem” is. The original Greek word translated “gentle” is very similar to the Greek word for “babes.” In fact, there is only one letter different in the two words, “babes” begins with an “n” and “gentle” does not. An error in copying is all the more understandable inasmuch as the preceding word ends with this letter, and there were no spaces placed between the Greek words at that time. So, it is easy to see how a scribe might have deleted one “n” by mistake.

Textual studies down through the years have shown that these so-called problems are generally quite minor, and a look at this “first-class problem” shows just how insignificant most of these turn out to be. For, no matter which view is taken, the overall meaning of the passage in context is not altered or lost for a moment. What occupies the scholars for hundreds of pages of discussion ends up being rather tiny, doesn’t it?

As it turns out, the oldest and best manuscripts are in almost total agreement. The “discrepancies” usually appear in more recent, less reliable copies. And as we have continued to discover older and more reliable manuscripts over the last 50-75 years, they have, by-and-large, simply confirmed what we already had. In the very few situations where a question still remains, as in the passage before us, it makes practically no difference anyway. Paul was either saying that he and his fellow teachers were very “gentle” in teaching the Thessalonians, or that they were as “babes” (simple) among the Thessalonians.

The truth is, the most serious, “first-class” textual problems of the Bible provide the basis for lengthy theoretical discussions, but they make very little practical difference in the grand scheme of the Bible message. If that is the most the critics can come up with, we will perhaps be excused for not getting overly concerned.

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