

GOD'S WORD WITHOUT ERROR

The Issue of Manuscript Variations

Down through the ages, people have made copies of God's Word, so that it would be available to others. Sometimes they would make mistakes, as they hand-wrote page after page of text. (Try it yourself! Spend several *weeks* hand-copying a large manuscript, from sun-up to way after sun-down. You will make mistakes, too!) Most of these are obvious mistakes, such as spelling errors, omitted lines, repeated words, etc. - things that happen even today, with all our high-tech printing capabilities. Some involve numbers or names in long genealogies - things which we remain uncertain about, but which have little or no impact on our understanding of the Word. After we discount all of these obvious mistakes, we find ourselves with a relatively *few* passages in which we have some degree of uncertainty as to what the original manuscripts said.

However, this is no reason for alarm, for there are thousands of ancient copies of the Word - vastly more than exist for any other ancient book. When we examine these thousands of ancient copies, we discover that there is *no* passage in which the uncertain text has any significant effect on the over-all message of the Word. We might have uncertainty, as to the exact original words, in isolated passages, but this plethora of manuscript evidence shows us what options (different textual variations) are available. It demonstrates that there are *no* "uncertain" passages, in which the potential readings make a significant impact on the over-all message of the Word. We will *not* be led into error, if we accept the "wrong" textual variation.

Try it yourself! Take the same manuscript you hand-copied (see the first paragraph) and make nine more copies of it. Then make some copies of those copies, and when you are finished, compare all your manuscripts for differences. With the occasional mistakes you would have accidentally made, you would probably discover several "manuscript variations." Most would be obvious mistakes, yet there could be a few instances in which you were not completely sure about the original wording. Nevertheless, *you would still know what your potential choices were.*

This suggested activity illustrates (in a simplified way) how most Bible manuscript variations would have come into existence, as well as the way we can evaluate them. However, there is one big difference between this example and the manuscripts of the Bible: Our illustration (if it were actually done) could easily result in a *greater* degree of uncertainty in significant areas of the text, than are present in *all* the Bible's "uncertain" texts, combined. There are no serious variations in the Bible text that would have an impact on any major issue. This shows that, even in the matter of manuscript variations, God has protected the message of his Word from error.