Inerrancy and the Text of the New Testament: Assessing the Logic of the Agnostic View

Daniel B. Wallace
Executive Director,
Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts
(csntm.org)

Synopsis

This paper addresses a popular argument that is used against those who hold to an inerrant Bible. Essentially, the argument is posed as a question: "How can you claim to have an inerrant original text when we don't even have the original text?" On its face, this argument has seemed so compelling that some people never get beyond it. This paper will show what are the underlying assumptions behind this question, and why they are fallacious.

1. The Problem

The fundamental doctrinal commitment of the Evangelical Theological Society—the doctrine on which this society was founded in 1949—is as follows: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs."[1]

This is a good representation of the modern doctrine of inerrancy. The question we are wrestling with in this section involves the last word of the statement—"autographs." The modern definition of inerrancy usually qualifies the doctrine as relating only to the *original manuscripts*, or autographs. Copies are not inerrant, nor are translations. But the original is claimed to be. This articulation found its greatest impetus in Benjamin B. Warfield, the prolific Princeton Theologian a couple generations ago (1887-1921), notably in his book, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*.[2]

But with this view of things there is a nagging question: How can anyone believe that the scriptures are inerrant in the original when we do not even possess the original documents? This question is raised so often from those who do not embrace the doctrine of inerrancy that it has become almost a rhetorical question. The answer seems obvious: No thinking individual can hold to this doctrine because the originals are lost and therefore the doctrine cannot be verified. One must be agnostic *at best* about such a doctrine. Consider the following statements to this effect:

> First, the original manuscripts are not accessible today. If the scriptures derive their authority from their inspiration and inerrancy, then only the original manuscripts carry any authority, for the copies we have now are neither inspired nor inerrant. This forces the conclusion that every Bible believing Christian places his faith in an authority that doesn't exist.[3]

---

[1] In recent years, ETS added a second doctrine that all members must also subscribe to: "God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

[2] See B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948; reprint 1970) 46: "Christians need not be worried about the fact that the autographa are lost." The reasons for this lack of worry are given in n. 22 on the same page.

[3] Darin M. Weil, "Inerrancy and its Implications for Authority: Textual Critical Considerations in Formulating an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture," *Quodlibet Journal* 4.4 (November 2002) 1

> It has been frequently pointed out that if God thought errorless Scripture important enough to inspire its composition, he would surely also have further inspired its copying, so that it might remain error free. Surely a God who can inspire error-free composition could also inspire error-free copying. Since he did not, it would appear he did not think our possession of error-free Scripture very important. But if it is not important for us, why was it important originally?[4]

> Presumably if we could ever recover the original manuscript of a NT book it would be very close to what its author intended. Even here, however, the text might not be completely correct. If the author wrote it himself, he could have made mistakes; if he dictated it to a scribe, the latter could have made mistakes.[5]

These are representative quotations regarding skepticism about such a doctrine. And, as mentioned above, such questions are almost framed as though rhetorical—that is, no answer is truly expected since the person asking the question assumes that no answer can possibly be given. This one question is the thinking man's trump card to inerrancy, and it is viewed as both decisive and irrefutable. But has it truly been thought through?

An important procedural point here: Regardless of whether one embraces inerrancy or not, this essay is simply addressing the argument from agnosticism, viz., that since the autographa don't exist one really can't claim the inerrancy of the originals. My fundamental point is that that argument really is not valid, as the following will make clear. I am not here attempting to defend, define, or attack inerrancy; rather, I am simply trying to focus on the first (and sometimes only!) objection to it by skeptics, to set the record straight about whether this line of reasoning is sound.

2. The Response

In response to this question, we will note three things. The argument here is not to be found in any one of these, as though each were a self-contained unit. Rather, the argument is inductive and the points are linked.

We begin with the data available to us today, the extant manuscripts.

a. The Quantity and Age of Witnesses

The data are growing; every decade, and virtually every year, new manuscripts (MSS) are discovered. Currently, the number of Greek NT MSS is approaching 5700—far more than any other ancient literary text. The average classical author's writings, in fact, are found in about twenty extant MSS. The NT—in the Greek MSS *alone*—beats this by almost 300 times! Besides the Greek MSS, there are Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, and many other versions of the NT. The Latin MSS alone number almost 10,000. All told, the NT is represented by approximately 1000 times as many MSS as the average classical author's writings. And even the extraordinary authors—

(conveniently accessible at www.Quodlibet.net). Mr. Weil is an inerrantist, and spends the rest of his essay addressing this and similar issues.

[4]Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1998) 71-72.

[5] Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 54 (§56).

such as Homer or Herodotus—simply can't compare to the quantity of copies that the NT enjoys. Homer in fact is a distant second in terms of copies, yet there are there are fewer than 2500 copies of Homer extant today.

But there's more: besides the Greek and versional witnesses, the NT is also reproduced in patristic commentaries and quotations. Over a million quotations. Indeed, if all the Greek MSS and versions were destroyed, scholars could reproduce almost the entire NT from the patristic quotations alone.

The fundamental problem of NT textual criticism is not lack of data,
but an embarrassment of riches.

What about the dates of these MSS? Although the vast majority of NT MSS are over a millennium removed from the autographs, there are significant numbers of documents in the first millennium. Naturally, the closer we get in time to the originals, the fewer the MSS. But the numbers are nevertheless impressive—especially when compared with other ancient literature.

The average ancient Greek author's writings have no copies until at least five hundred years later. In many cases, if not most, it is closer to 1000 years. Not so with the NT. The earliest fragments come from the second century—within 100 years of the originals. In the 1930s, there was but one fragment of the NT in the early second century, $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$, a fragment of John 18 that has been dated between AD 100 and AD 150.[6] Today there are

[6] This date and the relevance of this papyrus for dating John's Gospel have been recently disputed. See Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P^{52}: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *HTR* 98.1 (January 2005) 23-48. Nongbri concludes his article as follows:

> What emerges from this survey is nothing surprising to papyrologists: paleography is not the most effective method for dating texts, particularly those written in a literary hand. Roberts himself noted this point in his edition of P^{52}. The real problem is the way scholars of the New Testament have used and abused papyrological evidence. I have not radically revised Roberts's work. I have not provided any third-century documentary papyri that are absolute "dead ringers" for the handwriting of P^{52}, and even had I done so, that would not force us to date P^{52} at some exact point in the third century. Paleographic evidence does not work that way. What I have done is to show that any serious consideration of the window of possible dates for P^{52} must include dates in the later second and early third centuries. Thus, *P^{52} cannot be used as evidence to silence other debates about the existence (or non-existence) of the Gospel of John in the first half of the second century*. Only a papyrus containing an explicit date or one found in a clear archaeological stratigraphic context could do the work scholars want P^{52} to do. As it stands now, the papyrological evidence should take a second place to other forms of evidence in addressing debates about the dating of the Fourth Gospel.

The thesis of the article is that the standard dating of P^{52} to 100-150 CE is disputable and thus the date of John's Gospel is again open to question. The date of 100-150 CE was originally assigned to the fragment in 1935, when Colin H. Roberts, the man who discovered the manuscript in the bowels of the John Rylands Library at Manchester University, inquired from three of the leading papyrologists in Europe as to its date. Each one independently confirmed a date in the first half of the second century. (To be sure, some scholars date it later than that, but they are in a distinct minority. Further, Deissmann thought it could be dated as early as the late first century.) But that the long-held date of P^{52} can be so cavalierly put aside (by simply arguing for what is possible, rather than by noting what is probable) seems to be a desperate measure, born out of a postmodern agenda: skepticism must reign over all matters related to the scriptures. The prerequisites for a *certain* date that Nongbri suggests (explicit date on the manuscript or *in situ* discovery that places the fragment among other artifacts that can be dated) are of course well known. But short of certainty are many shades of probability. The author's statement that "paleography is not the most effective as many as a dozen or so Greek NT MSS from the second century. And once we approach the third century, we begin to have some of the most important MSS ever discovered for establishing the text of the NT. Ì^{66,} Ì^{75,} Ì^{45,} Ì^{46} are but a few of these significant papyri, and all come from no later than the early third century. Between them, ten of Paul’s letters, four Gospels, and Acts are represented. Once we get into the fourth century—within 250 years of the completion of the NT—we have the great uncials, Í and B. Í (or Codex Sinaiticus) when it was discovered in 1859 was found to contain the entire NT. Today, it is still the oldest complete NT by over 500 years. But even if this precious MS had never come to light, there are plenty of other early MSS to fill in the gaps. We are not dependent on one MS to determine the wording of the NT.

The point in all this is that we have sufficient data in the extant witnesses to construct the original NT in virtually every place. Most scholars, in fact, would argue that there is no place for conjectural emendation[7] in NT textual criticism because of the great wealth, diversity, and age of the materials that we have to work with. Whether this is entirely true, the fact remains that the NT is the best preserved religio-literary document of the

---

method for dating texts” seems to imply that a better method is available to us for this fragment. That is not the case, as Nongbri admits. Indeed, he uses paleography to attempt to discredit the standard dating of this fragment! But he does not seem willing to grant the likelihood that P^{52} brings a lot to the table concerning the date of John. His conclusion that the papyrus “*cannot be used as evidence*” for the date of John is certainly overdone. That the vast majority of NT MSS are dated strictly on paleographical bases, and that there are several other papyri of John from as early as the second century, suggests that Nongbri’s skepticism is unwarranted. [7]That is, reconstructing the wording of the text without any MS support, a practice that is required for almost all other ancient literature. Kurt and Barbara Aland go so far as to say, “The principle that the original reading may be found in any single manuscript or version when it stands alone or nearly alone is only a theoretical possibility” (*The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 281), and “Textual difficulties should not be solved by conjecture, or by positing glosses or interpolations, etc., where the textual tradition itself shows no break; such attempts amount to capitulation before the difficulties and are themselves violations of the text” (ibid., 280). Cf. also G. D. Kilpatrick, “Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament,” *New Testament Textual Criticism* (Festschrift for Metzger), edd. E. J. Epp and G. D. Fee (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 349-60. For a specific treatment on conjecture, in which the author rejects it outright, see D. A. Black, “Conjectural Emendations in the Gospel of Matthew,” *NovT* 31 (1989) 1-15. On the other hand, on rare occasions a NT scholar will put forth a conjecture. But such are not only few and far between; they are also a self-consciously uphill battle. Cf., e.g., J. Strugnell, “A Plea for Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament,” *CBQ* 36 (1974) 543-558.[8]Cf., e.g., D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 56, 65.

ancient world, and if conjectural emendation is necessary, it is only necessary on extremely rare occasions.

Thus, the argument against inerrancy because of the non-existent autographs depends for its force on an unstated supposition, viz., that the original cannot be recovered from the existing materials. But that supposition is, in the opinion of most scholars, hardly the case.

b. The Quality of Variants

Let us play devil's advocate for a moment, taking the most extreme position. Let's assume that conjectural emendation is necessary in a few places (surely no more than a dozen) in the NT. If so, would that nullify evangelicals' claims that the autographs are inerrant? That depends on the quality of the variants. Regarding such, most NT scholars are of the opinion that no doctrine is jeopardized by textual variants. The view goes back to J. A. Bengel (1687-1752), the Swabian pietist who did much for biblical criticism. Since his day, many others have argued the same thing: no doctrine is jeopardized by textual variants.[8]

My view is not quite as optimistic, but the relevant point for our purposes in this essay is untouched. I would argue that *no cardinal doctrine is jeopardized by any viable variant*. The adjectives 'cardinal' and 'viable' are important here. By cardinal I mean any doctrine essential for salvation; by viable I mean any variant that has a legitimate chance of representing the wording of the autographs. Now, I will be quick to add that I do not regard inerrancy as a cardinal doctrine. At the same time, I would include it in the principle that this statement espouses. Perhaps we could modify the statement as follows: No cardinal doctrine nor many other doctrines are jeopardized by any viable variant. Of course, stating it this way is rather vague. The "many other doctrines" could be a number of things! Nevertheless, the point for our purposes is that even inerrancy does not seem to be jeopardized by viable textual variants.

You may recall that I began this paper by noting that I am neither defending nor attacking the doctrine of inerrancy, but rather am addressing an argument against it that, to me, lacks logical force. The preceding paragraph may seem to be a denial of this neutral stance. But it is not, as you will see in the final section.

The remarkable thing to note about the minimal impact of textual variants on doctrine is that there are so many variants—hundreds of thousands of them! The best estimates today are that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 textual variants among the NT witnesses. For a book that has less than 140,000 words (in Greek), that is quite significant. Yet the vast majority of these variants are mere spelling differences that affect nothing of substance. Then there are synonyms and minor additions—such as replacing a pronoun with a name or adding "Christ" to the title "the Lord Jesus." These, too, do not materially affect the meaning of the text. To be sure, there are several hundred textual variants that affect exegesis, or the meaning of a given passage. But no viable variant affects any cardinal doctrine, and even the non-viable variants have a minimal impact on the teachings of the NT.

A few examples would be suitable here. One of the most notorious textual problems is the **ecomen**/**ecwmen** problem of Rom 5.1. Does Paul say, "We have peace" (**ecomen**) or "let us have peace" (**ecwmen**)? The difference between the indicative and subjunctive is a single letter. The omicron and omega were most likely pronounced alike in Hellenistic Greek (as they are in later Greek), leaving the decision even more difficult. Indeed, scholars are split on this textual problem. But the point here is this: Is either variant a contradiction of the teaching of scripture? Hardly. If Paul is saying that Christians have peace, he is speaking about our positional status with God the Father. If Paul is urging Christians to have peace with God, he is urging them to grab hold of the "indicatives of the faith," the foundational truths on which the Christian life is based. We have plenty of examples in the NT of both kinds of utterances, even within the *corpus Paulinum*: the apostles both declare our reconciled standing with God, and also urge Christians to be reconciled to God. Both utterances are true, but on different levels. The real question in Rom 5.1 is not whether either variant is true, but what Paul is talking about. The problem ultimately is one that affects exegesis, but not theology.

Or consider Matt 18.15: **Ean de amarthsh** ***ei" se*** **o adelfo" sou**… ("If your brother sins *against you*…") Here the **ei" se** ("against you") is in doubt. Now, what is at stake is a matter of orthopraxy (i.e., how church discipline is to be conducted), but not orthodoxy. That is, does Christian A have the right and responsibility to address the sin of Christian B *only* if that sin is directed against Christian A? Or does he have the right and responsibility to address the sin of Christian B if he was not the victim of the sin? The textual problem is difficult to solve, but it does not impact any cardinal doctrine.

The same can be said for 1 Cor 14.34-35, a passage that some scholars believe should be excised from the text. Gordon Fee and Philip Payne have written most cogently in this regard. But whether the passage is part of the autograph of 1 Corinthians or not, no cardinal doctrine is affected. True, the text is addressing the role of women in the church—and this thus becomes a very important passage for them! But the doctrine of salvation does not hang in the balance.

Another illustration is the Western text of Acts 1.11, where **ei" ton ouranon** ("into heaven") is lacking in this clause: **outo" o Ihsou" o analhmfqei" af umwn ei" ton ouranon** ("this Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven…"). There are some who claim that the Western text undercuts the doctrine of the ascension of Christ because of this verse. However, to maintain that view the Western text must lack *all* references to the ascension. Yet the first and third **ei" ton ouranon** in this verse are untouched. And most other ascension texts are untouched as well.[9] It may be that the Western scribes

[9]Some scholars (such as K. W. Clark; see previous note) attempt to show that a doctrine is suppressed in various texts, but this again does not demonstrate that a doctrine is eradicated, jeopardized, or affected. There are several textually debatable passages regarding the deity of Christ, for example, but the doctrine is not in jeopardy in the slightest because of them. This method is also what KJV Only folks use to denounce modern translations: a MS here or there that does not mention the blood of Christ, that God is *our* Father, or the deity of Christ is often viewed as produced by heretics who conspired against the word of God. The most notable text used by KJV Only folks is the *Comma Johanneum*, 1 John 5.7-8, where the Trinity seems to be in view in the third edition of the *Textus Receptus.* The textual basis for the words here

were trying to trim words and phrases for stylistic reasons, but it is doubtful in the extreme that they were attempting to eradicate any reference to the ascension of Christ. If so, they were singularly incompetent in their attempt. Still more, it is completely unreasonable to think that the NT originally did not speak of the ascension of Christ and that this teaching was only added later.

Among the textual problems that are usually cited as causing the most trouble for inerrantists are the following[10]:

Matt 1.7-8	:Asaf vs. jAsav(“Asaph” vs. “Asa”)
Matt 1.10	jAmwv vs. jAmwn (“Amos” vs. “Amon”)
Mark 1.2	ejn tw/ ᾿Ησαΐᾳ τῷ προφήτῃ vs. ejn toi" profhvtai" (“in Isaiah the prophet” vs. “in the prophets”)
Mark 2.26	ἐπὶ ᾿Αβιαθὰρ ἀρχιερέως vs. *omit*[11] (“when Abiathar was high priest” vs. omission of this line)
Mark 5.1	Γερασηνῶν vs. Gadarhnwh (“Gerasenes” vs. “Gadarenes”)Luke 23.45 τοῦ ἡλίου ἐκλιπόντος vs. kai; ejskotivsqh oJh{lio" (“the sun was eclipsed” vs. “the sun was darkened”)
John 7.8	oujk vs. ou[pw (“not” vs. “not yet”)
Acts 12.25	εἰς ᾿Ιερουσαλήμ vs. ἐξ ᾿Ιερουσαλήμ vs. ἀπὸ ᾿Ιερουσαλήμ (“into Jerusalem” vs. “out of Jerusalem” vs. “from Jerusalem”)
Acts 16.12	conjecture vs. various readings[12]
Acts 20.4	Derbaio" vs. Dobhvrio" (“Derbe” vs. “Doberius”)
2 Pet 3.10	eujreqhvsetai (“will be found”) vs. various readings[13]

These are among the more interesting and significant textual problems in the NT with reference to theological formulation. But standard commentaries on the NT will show that the problems they raise are more apparent than real. Suffice it to underscore our previous point: no cardinal doctrine is jeopardized by any viable variant.[14]

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, F. J. A. Hort was bold enough to think that less than 1/1000th of the text was in doubt. That would mean that only about 140 or so words could not be positively confirmed. I suspect the number is significantly higher than that, but nevertheless lower than what many skeptics are willing to believe. At the upper limit,

---

is as poor as it gets, and virtually all NT scholars recognize this. Further, no more than 1% of the members of the Evangelical Theological Society (the estimate is generous) embrace the *Comma Johanneum* as authentic. Yet *all* members of the ETS must annually sign their confession in the Trinity. If the removal of the *Comma Johanneum* is destructive of the Trinity, then how could all these members of ETS sign the confessional statement?

[10] In each instance, the reading of the NA^{27} text is listed first.

[11] In this case, the Western text omits the phrase in order to eliminate the historical discrepancy. But few textual critics today, if any, would accept the Western reading as authentic.

[12] See discussion in Metzger, *Textual Commentary*^{2}, 393-95.

[13] See discussion in Metzger, *Textual Commentary*^{2}, 636-37.

[14] Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, thinks he has produced other textual variants that are more significant, those that directly impact cardinal doctrines. For the most part, the passages he brings up were already mentioned in his 1993 scholarly volume, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Yet several scholars criticized Ehrman in that tome for either being wrong in his textual choices or wrong in his interpretations.

we are dealing with about 1% of the text of the NT in doubt—less than 1400 words. And yet, in all these places, the true text can be found in *some* MSS. Further, as we have argued already, no cardinal doctrine is at stake in any of them. To put this pragmatically, when one looks at the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, he or she is looking at the original text—either in the text or in the apparatus. The argument, then, that inerrancy is an unsupportable doctrine because the autographs are gone is moot: we *have* the original somewhere on the page of the Greek NT.

c. Evangelicals and Text-Critical Theories

Finally, we come to the diversity of opinions among evangelicals concerning the text of the NT. By 'evangelical' I mean those Christians who, *inter alia*, embrace the doctrine of inerrancy. To be sure, not all evangelicals hold to inerrancy, but those that are in view here do. Perhaps a better title, however, would be "Inerrantists and Text-Critical Theories," but inerrantists include many who are not evangelicals (such as members of heterodox Christian groups and many fundamentalists who don't care for the title 'evangelical'). So, 'evangelicals' will have to do.

Within the field of NT textual criticism, there are several schools of thought. On the far right are those who would embrace the majority text, or the MSS that are typically Byzantine in flavor and usually comprise a majority, even a large majority. The text that such scholars construct has not been of a sort to cause them *Angst* over inerrancy. That is, *if* the majority text is the true text, then evangelicals do not all of a sudden have to abandon inerrancy because of this text.

On the other side are those who give priority to internal evidence (known as rigorous or thoroughgoing eclectics). To be sure, there are not too many evangelicals in this camp (perhaps because there are not too many textual critics in this camp!). And the text that they believe is the original has not caused them to abandon inerrancy either. Two points are important here, however. First, although this approach to textual criticism is more prone to adopting conjectural emendation than any other school, rigorous eclectics are generally quite opposed to adopting a reading that does not have at least some MS support.[15] Second, evangelicals are generally the least likely group of NT scholars to adopt conjecture. They tend to have such a high regard for the MS evidence that such an approach is unthinkable. But precisely because of this, the text that they claim to be inerrant is one that is found in the MSS, not one that is made up *ex nihilo* to safeguard inerrancy. And it should be underscored that conjecture is almost always suggested in a passage because of the discrepancies the wording seems to create. Thus, evangelicals *should* be the most prone to come up with conjectural emendation, if those discrepancies truly produced errors in the text that they couldn't live with.

In the middle are those who are best styled as reasoned eclectics. This group comprises the majority of textual critics today, whether they be evangelicals or otherwise. This

---

[15]So G. D. Kilpatrick, "Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament," *New Testament Textual Criticism* (Festschrift for Metzger), edd. E. J. Epp and G. D. Fee (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 349-60. More recently, J. K. Elliott, Kilpatrick's student, has indeed allowed for conjecture in Mark 1.1, marking a new departure for rigorous eclectics.

approach to textual criticism stands behind most of the modern translations of the Bible. There are many permutations within this broad camp, but even accounting for them all, evangelicals are found at every point. The text that they construct as the original has not caused them to abandon inerrancy.[16]

These various schools of thought all construct a different original NT, yet inerrantist evangelicals are found in each school. *There is no text-critical school that, by its very nature, excludes inerrantists from membership.* Thus, the NT text that evangelicals in various schools adopt is viewed by them as inerrant. And, as we mentioned earlier, evangelicals are not prone to employ conjecture to solve textual difficulties. Thus, the argument that since the autographs have disappeared means that there is no way we can know if the text was inerrant becomes—*especially* for evangelicals—a faulty assumption. This line of argument could only be true (a) if conjectural emendation were a necessity in given places, (b) if in such places only the conjecture resolved a discrepancy in the text of such a nature that the doctrine of inerrancy were in jeopardy otherwise, *and* (c) if only evangelicals adopted the conjecture (for then they could be charged with special pleading). But these conditions are manifestly not met. Consequently, the agnostic argument is vacuous.[17]

3. Conclusion

Regardless of what one thinks about the doctrine of inerrancy, at least the argument against it on the basis of the unknown autographs is logically fallacious. We have the text of the NT somewhere in the MSS. And the text we have in any viable variants is no more a problem for inerrancy than other problems where the text is secure. Now, to be sure, there are definitely challenges in the textual variants to inerrancy. This is not denied. But they are minor challenges compared to the bigger challenges that inerrancy faces.

Yet, evangelicals are not prone to alter the text where the big problems are. Which evangelical would not like a clean harmony between the two records of Judas' demise, uniform parallel accounts of Peter's threefold denial of Jesus, or an outright excision of the census by Quirinius? And who would not prefer that in Mark 2.26 Jesus did not speak of David's violation of the temple as occurring during the days of "Abiathar the high priest"? These are significantly larger problems for inerrancy than the few, isolated textual problems—and they are not in passages that are capable of facile text-critical

[16] To be sure, evangelicals within one camp are sometimes prone to accuse those in another of not being able to hold to inerrancy. This is particularly true of those in the majority text camp—i.e., they tend to accuse other evangelicals of embracing an errant text. (Cf. James A. Borland, "Re-examining New Testament Textual-Critical Principles and Practices Used to Negate Inerrancy," *JETS* 25 [1982] 499-506.) Occasionally, even outside the majority text camp one finds an evangelical who claims, "If you don't hold to this textual variant, the Bible is no longer inerrant." Most notably, Gordon Fee has argued this in his *NICNT* commentary on 1 Corinthians, claiming that if 14:34-35 is authentic, then the apostle Paul is caught in a contradiction: "Of even greater difficulty is the fact that these verses stand in obvious contradiction to 11:2-16" (G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 702). But most evangelicals—indeed, most NT scholars—have not been persuaded by Fee's arguments against the authenticity of these verses, and most see little problem harmonizing this text with chapter 11.

[17] To be sure, OT textual criticism is a different animal in that conjecture must be applied in some places. Nevertheless, the third condition is still not met, leaving the agnostic argument without merit.

solutions.[18] The argument thus is from the greater to the lesser: If these major challenges to inerrancy are not resolved via conjectural emendation by evangelicals, then the minor challenges that involve textual variants are certainly not sufficient to cause evangelicals to abandon this doctrine.

This in no way is meant to suggest that the major problems are incapable of a solution. Rather, our argument here is simply that there are bigger fish to fry for inerrantists than a few minor textual problems.

Simply put, the doctrine of inerrancy is embraced by evangelicals even in the face of a less-than-certain text of the NT. And that's because even though there is not 100% certainty over the wording of the NT, the words of the original text are evident—in either the text or the variants of, say, the Nestle-Aland[27] text. Conjectural emendation is virtually unnecessary. And no viable variant in that apparatus has been persuasive enough to evangelicals as a whole to dislodge their belief in this doctrine.

As a matter of intellectual integrity, I would urge those who use the agnostic argument to retire it. As good as it sounds on the surface, once it is probed just a bit, it crumbles. Or, in the immortal words of a former Texas governor, Anne Richards, "That dawg won't hunt."

In sum, there is an assumption made by non-evangelicals when they pose the question of inerrancy and the autographs. It is that the wording of the autographs is, in places, completely unrecoverable—that is, unknown and unknowable. But this assumption implies that the wording of the original in some places cannot be found in the manuscripts. That is manifestly not true. Pragmatically, the wording of the original is to be found either in the text *or the apparatus* of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament. We have the original in front of us; we're just not sure at all times whether it is above the line or below it.

We could add the second point: evangelicals belong to all major camps of textual criticism. Thus, regardless of what is considered a viable variant (i.e., one that has a genuine possibility of reflecting the wording of the autographs), evangelicals have not been shaken in their belief in inerrancy. To be sure, there are challenges to inerrancy in relation to textual criticism. But overall, these are *minor* (and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address them). They simply do not show up as the major problems for this doctrine.

Dan Wallace (Ph.D., Dallas Seminary) has focused on Greek grammar and textual criticism for the past thirty years. His *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1996) is the standard intermediate Greek grammar used in seminaries today. Recently his attentions have shifted from syntactical and text-critical issues to more specific work in John, Mark, and early Christology. His most recent book, *Reinventing Jesus*

[18] Although a few MSS, especially of the Western variety, delete the offensive words in Mark 2.26. But this illustrates my larger point: evangelicals do not tend to run to the text-critical solutions to difficult problems for inerrancy if the text-critical solutions are not on other grounds particularly compelling.

(Kregel, 2006), co-authored with Ed Komoszewski and Jim Sawyer, addresses the postmodern skepticism about the historical roots of the Christian faith. His postdoctoral work includes studies at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England and the Institut fuer neutestamentliche Textforschung in Muenster, Germany. Dan is professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Seminary and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (csntm.org).