

Scribes

Images

Scribe's Tools



This first-century A.D. Roman pen and ink pot were excavated from the Tiber River.
(*The British Museum*)

We can gain an insight into the life of a scribe by the comments ([colophons](#)) they sometimes wrote in the margins or at the end of a manuscript.

"He who does not know how to write supposes it to be no labor; but though only three fingers write, the whole body labors."

"Writing bows one's back, thrusts the ribs into one's stomach, and fosters a general debility of the body."

"As travellers rejoice to see their home country, so also is the end of a book to those who toil [in writing]."

"The end of the book; thanks be to God!"

"O reader, in spiritual love forgive me, and pardon the daring of him who wrote, and turn his errors into some mystic good."

"There is no scribe who will not pass away, but what his hands have written will remain forever."

"Whoever says, 'God bless the soul of the scribe', God will bless his soul."

"Mercy be to him who wrote, O Lord, wisdom to those who read, grace to those who hear, salvation to those who own. Amen."

"Write nothing with thy hand but that which thou wilt be pleased to see at the resurrection."

"It is cold today." "That is natural; it is winter." "The lamp gives a bad light." "It is time for us to begin to do some work." "Well, this vellum is certainly heavy!" "Well, I call this vellum thin!" "I feel quite dull today; I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Fool and knave, can't you leave the old reading alone and not alter it!"

"I adjure you who shall copy out this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his glorious advent when he comes to judge the living and the dead, that you compare what you transcribe, and correct it carefully against this manuscript from which you copy; and also that you transcribe this adjuration and insert it in the copy."

Manuscript Transmission

Manuscript Replication

The task of writing, while a part of Hellenistic education, was primarily the occupation of professional writers generally known as "[scribes](#)." In order to preserve an aging and deteriorating document or to make an additional copy, a scribe was employed to copy the contents of the original onto a new surface. The scribe was paid according to the quality of the work and by the number of lines. A single scribe most likely read aloud to himself as he copied from the exemplar (the original) to the new document. In a scriptorium, the ancient "copy center," there could be a group of scribes who make multiple copies as a lector (reader) reads the exemplar for them to duplicate.

The ancient manuscript was a dynamic text in that it could be corrected and added to. Only under extreme scrutiny can the textual layers be distinguished as attributable to the original scribe or a later corrector.

Transmission Errors

While the study of transmission errors can be fascinating in itself, it is more than an object of curiosity. The identification of transmission errors may help determine the relationship of one manuscript to another or, even more importantly, determine the textual variant which most likely represents the reading of the original manuscript.

It may be said that a discussion of the transmission errors is not a criticism against the trustworthiness of the documents.

... in spite of the very real possibilities for corruption of the text in the course of its transmission, and the actual existence of many differences among the various manuscripts of the NT, the work of the copyists of the NT was, on the whole, done with great care and fidelity. It has, in fact, been seriously estimated that there are substantial

variations in hardly more than a thousandth part of the entire text (an estimate by Fenton J. A. Hort, quoted with approval by Caspar Rene Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907], p. 528).

Finegan, *Encountering the New Testament Manuscripts*, p. 55.

Unintentional Variants

Scribal errors create variants in the textual tradition. One type is referred to as unintentional variants and have several causes.

- Errors Caused by Sight

Some errors seem to have been caused by a visual difficulty during the copy process.

- [Permutation](#)
- Parablepsis

Parablepsis ("looking by the side") refers to errors that occur when looking at the left or right margins of text.

- [Haplography](#)
- [Dittography](#)
- [Errors Caused by Faulty Hearing](#)
- Errors Caused by Memory Lapse

During the process of reading from the exemplar and beginning to write it on the copy, a scribe could make mistakes as he repeats the line.

- [Substitution of Synonyms](#)
 - [Variations in Sequence](#)
 - [Transposition of Letters](#)
 - [Assimilation of Wording](#)
 - [Errors Caused by Poor Judgment](#)
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Intentional Variants

"They write down not what they find but what they think is the meaning; and while they attempt to rectify the errors of others, they merely expose their own." (Jerome, *Epist. lxxi.5, Ad Lucinum* concerning scribes copying his own works.).

These are some of the main causes of variants that can be described as intentional.

- [Spelling and Grammar Changes](#)
- [Harmonistic Alterations](#)
- [Corrections](#)
- [Conflations](#)
- [Doctrinal Alterations](#)

Permutation

Explanation

Letters which resemble one another are difficult to distinguish. This is especially true if the letters were not written carefully in the manuscript which is being copied and if the copyist is hurrying, is working in poor light, or suffers from astigmatism. The copyist reads the text as representing a different word or combination of words and writes that down. When an unusual change is found in a manuscript involving letters which look alike, then it is possible that the error arose from permutation.

Examples

Acts 20:35

Three minuscule manuscripts (614, 1611, and 2138) have the same reading which goes back to an [uncial](#) ancestor written in [scriptio continua](#).

ΚΟΠΙΩΝΤΑ ΕΔΕΙ ΚΟΠΙΩΝΤΑ ΕΒΕΙ (kopionta edei)

ΚΟΠΙΩΝΤΑΣ ΔΕΙ ΚΟΠΙΩΝΤΑΣ ΔΕΙ (kopiontas dei)

I Timothy 3:16

The earlier manuscripts have a relative pronoun while many later manuscripts read the usual contraction for God.

ὅς ος (os) "he who"

θεός θεος (theos) "God"

II Peter 2:13

Some letters were easily confused if the cross-bars or the legs of the letter had not been written carefully.

ΑΠΑΤΑΙΣ απαταις "dissipations" or "deceptions"

ΑΓΑΠΑΙΣ αγαπαις "love feasts"

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation, carousing with you.

Rom. 6:5

If two lambdas (l) were written too close together, they could be mistaken for the letter mu (m) as in the case of Codex Augiensis (F 101) and Codex Boernerianus (G 012), both of the ninth century.

ΛΛΛΛ αλλα (alla) "but; yet, certainly"

ΛΜΛ αμα (ama) "together"

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly (or "together") we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection (NASB)

II Peter 2:18

A lambda (l) followed closely by an iota (i) may look like the letter nu (n). Notice that the tau (t) and the gamma (g) have also been confused in this reading found in Codex Sinaiticus (4th cent.), Codex Ephraemi (5th cent.), and Codex Porphyrianus (9th cent.).

ΟΝΙΓΩC ολιγως (oligos) "scarcely"

ΟΝΤΩC οντως (ontos) "really"

For, uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error.

Haplography

Explanation

The error of parablepsis (a looking by the side) is caused by homoeoteleuton (a similar ending of lines). The omission referred to as haplography occurs when text is missing owing to lines which have a similar ending in a manuscript.

Examples

John 17:15

There is a curious omission in Codex Vaticanus. The exemplar from which the scribe of this manuscript was copying probably had the following arrangement of lines.

ΟΥΚΕΡΩΤΩΙΝΑΛΡΗΣΑΥΤΟΥΣΕΚΤΟΥ
ΚΟΣΜΟΥΑΛΛΙΝΑΤΗΡΗΣΗΣΑΥΤΟΥΣΕΚΤΟΥ
ΠΟΝΗΡΟΥ

I do not pray that thou shouldst take them from the [world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the] evil one.

I Cor. 9:2

In Codex Alexandrinus, an entire verse is missing because two lines end with the similar phrase.

ΟΥΚΕΙΜΙΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΣΟΥΚΕΙΜΙΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΣΟΥΣΙΗΣΟΥΝΤΟΝ
ΚΥΡΙΟΝΗΜΩΝΕΦΡΑΚΛΑΟΤΟΕΡΓΟΝΜΟΥΜΕΙΣΕΣΤΕΕΝΚΥΡΙΩ
ΕΙΑΛΛΟΙΣΟΥΚΕΙΜΙΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΣΑΛΛΑΓΕΥΜΙΝΕΙΜΙΗΓΑΡ
ΣΦΡΑΓΙΣΜΟΥΤΗΣΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΗΣΥΜΕΙΣΕΣΤΕΕΝΚΥΡΙΩ

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? [If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.] This is my defense to those who would examine me.

Dittography

Explanation

The error of parablepsis (a looking by the side) is caused by homoeoteleuton (a similar ending of lines). Dittography is when a word or group of words is picked up a second time by the scribe and as a result the same line is copied twice when it only appears once.

Example

Acts 19:34

The phrase "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" appears twice in codex Vaticanus while it only appears once in other manuscripts.

Errors Caused by Faulty Hearing

Explanation

It is easy for someone with perfect hearing to hear incorrectly when words are confused because of similarly sounding letters. The scriptorium -- the ancient "copy center" -- worked by having one person dictate to a group of scribes who produced the copied manuscripts. Even when a scribe copied a manuscript alone, he would have read a portion out loud and then written it down. During the time from reading a text to writing it down, errors are bound to happen. Writing down something that sounds the same as that which was read is a common error that is detectable.

Examples

Variants Chart

Variants Caused by Similarly Sounding Letters

Letter	Homophones	Text	Homophones	Text
ω	εχωμεν	Rom 5:1	ωδε	Luke 16:25
ο	εχομεν		οδε	
αι	ερχεσθαι	Luke 14:17	ζηλουσθε	Gal. 4:18
ε	ερχεσθε		ζηλουσθαι	
ου	λουσαντι	Rev. 1:5		
υ	λυσαντι			

Itacisms

There are a group of vowels and diphthongs (vowel combination) that came to be pronounced alike. This kind of error is referred to as an *itacism* when one of the seven is

confused with another. In the following examples, notice the underlined letters in the Greek, which are the itacisms, and then see how it affects the English translation.

Itacisms η ι υ ει οι υι η

I Cor. 15:54

ΚΑΤΕΠΟΘΗΘΑΝΑΤΟΙCΕΙCΗΚΟC

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

ΚΑΤΕΠΟΘΗΘΑΝΑΤΟCΕΙCΗCΗΚΟC

"Death is swallowed up in conflict."

Rev. 4:3

A strange reading is found in codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus which was caused by an itacism.

ΚΑΙΠΙCΚΥΚΛΟΘΕΝΤΟΥΘΡΟΝΟΥΟΜΟΙΟCΟΡΑΙCΕΙCΜΑΡΑΓΔΙΝΩ

"and a rainbow encircled the throne that looked like an emerald."

ΚΑΙΠΕΡΕΙCΚΥΚΛΟΘΕΝΤΟΥΘΡΟΝΟΥΟΜΟΙΟCΟΡΑΙCΕΙCΜΑΡΑΓΔΙΝΩ

"and priests encircled the throne that looked like an emerald."

Matt. 2:6

Certain consonants also were interchanged because they sounded alike. In this case, the closing letter of one form and the opening letter of the next (k & s) when combined form the sound of the single letter (as in x). It can be represented as "ek sou" or "ex ou".

ΕΚCΟΥΓΑΡΕΣΕΛΕΥCΕΤΑΙΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΟC

"For from you a leader shall come"

ΕΞΟΥΓΑΡΕΣΕΛΕΥCΕΤΑΙΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΟC

"For from whom a leader shall come"

I Thess. 2:7

This is another instance in which ending sounds can become combined with the beginning sounds of the next form. Here a closing consonant could also be the opening consonant of the next form. A scribe would not be able to hear the difference.

ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗΜΕΝΗΠΙΟΙ (egenēthēmen ēpioi)

"we were gentle"

ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗΜΕΝΝΗΠΙΟΙ (egenēthēmen nēpioi)

"we were babes"

Errors Caused by Mental Lapse

Substitution of Synonyms

Explanation

From the moment a [scribe](#) read or heard the phrase he was to copy down until he finished writing it out, there was a danger that what he held in memory could become distorted in some way. One way seems to have been writing down a synonym for a word that he was supposed to copy. In this case, perhaps the scribe was more conscious of the sense of what he was writing than the exact words themselves.

Example (Chart of Substitutions)

SUBSTITUTION OF SYNONYMS

ΕΙΠΕΝ	ΕΦΗ
ΕΚ	ΑΠΟ
ΑΠΟ	ΕΚ
ΕΥΘΥΣ	ΕΥΘΕΩΣ
ΕΥΘΕΩΣ	ΕΥΘΥΣ
ΟΤΙ	ΔΙΟΤΙ
ΠΕΡΙ	ΥΠΕΡ
ΥΠΕΡ	ΠΕΡΙ
ΟΜΜΑΤΩΝ	ΟΦΘΑΛΜΩΝ

Variations in Sequence

Explanation

It appears that sometimes a scribe confused the sequence of words. In Greek, the word order is not crucial. There could appear a variation of the sequence without altering the sense of a phrase.

Example

Mark 1:5

In this example, the sequence of three words appear in manuscripts three different ways.

ΠΑΝΤΕΣΚΑΙΕΠΒΑΠΤΙΖΟΝΤΟ

And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

ΚΑΙΕΒΑΠΤΙΖΟΝΤΟΠΑΝΤΕΣ

And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized all by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

ΚΑΙΠΑΝΤΕΣΕΒΑΠΤΙΖΟΝΤΟ

And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and the people of Jerusalem; and they all were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Transposition of Letters

Explanation

A totally different word can be formed by simply transposing a letter. The results can be devastating to the meaning of a passage.

Examples

John 5:39

Sometimes a transposition of letters can result in a completely different word being written which totally destroys the sense of the passage. In this example the scribe of Codex Bezae has made a real blunder.

ΚΑΙΕΚΕΙΝΑΙΕΙΣΙΝΑΙΜΑΡΤΥΡΟΥΣΑΠΕΡΙΕΜΟΥ

And they (the Scriptures) are the ones testifying concerning me.

ΚΑΙΕΚΕΙΝΑΙΕΙΣΙΝΑΙΑΜΑΡΤΑΝΟΥΣΑΠΕΡΙΕΜΟΥ

And they (the Scriptures) are the ones sinning concerning me.

Assimilation of Wording

Explanation

Scribes who worked for many years in copying the same manuscripts (e.g. Biblical) became very familiar with the wording of the texts. This could account for some of the times when a phrase in a manuscript has included in it the wording from a parallel passage.

Examples

Matt. 19:17

The earlier manuscripts of Matthew contain this quotation of Jesus as being distinct from the other Synoptic Gospels (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). Yet later manuscripts have a variant reading which assimilates the wording from the parallel passages.

Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. --Matt. 19:17

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. (assimilated to Mk. 10:17; Lk. 18:18)

N.B. It is impossible to determine whether this is unintentional assimilation or intentional harmonizing.

Col. 1:14

Some of the letters ascribed to Paul contain passages that closely parallel other of the Pauline letters. Assimilation often occurs.

In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14)

In whom we have redemption through His blood the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7)

In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins through His blood (Col. 1:14 assimilating Eph. 1:7)

N.B. It is impossible to determine whether this is unintentional assimilation or intentional harmonizing.

Errors Caused by Poor Judgment

Explanation

There are times when [scribes](#) inadvertently copy a marginal [gloss](#) right into the text itself. This shows that some scribes were not paying attention to what they were doing and perhaps did not even think about what they were writing.

Examples

II Cor. 8:4

In many [minuscule](#) manuscripts there is a variant apparently influenced by an assimilation of wording from 2 Cor. 6:1 (adding at the end of the verse the words *dexasthai*

2Cor 8:4 μετα πολλης παρακλησεως δεομενοι ημων την χαριν και την κοινωνιαν της διακονιας της εις τους αγιους [δεξασθαι ημας]
begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints --

2Cor 6:1 Συνεργουντες δε και παρακαλουμεν μη εις κενον την χαριν του θεου δεξασθαι υμας-

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.

umas).

[It seems that a scribe added a note in the margin which read "in many of the copies thus it is found." A scribe of a subsequent manuscript, according to J. A. Bengel (1687-1752), incorporated this comment directly into his text as though it were part of Paul's words.]

Luke 3:23-38

The fourteenth-century codex 109 of the Four Gospels was transcribed from a copy which must have had Luke's genealogy of Jesus in two columns. Instead of following the columns, the scribe copied across the columns with disastrous results. Of course, everyone is made the son of the wrong father. Worse than that, instead of ending with "...Adam, the son of God," this manuscript has God being the son of Aram and the source of the whole race is not God but Phares!

Intentional Variants

Spelling and Grammar Changes

Explanation

During the early centuries of the Common Era the spelling of many Greek words had not become standardized. The literati who revived a study of Classical Greek considered it necessary to improve the Hellenistic (or Koine, "common") Greek of the New Testament.

It is said that he (Tatian) was bold enough to alter some of the Apostle's expressions as though trying to rectify their phraseology.

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 4.29.6.

Example

Rev. 1:4

The book of Revelation is notorious for its grammatically defective Greek. In this verse, the author follows a preposition which takes the genitive case with the article in the nominative case. There are a few different ways in which scribes attempted to alleviate the syntax.

ἀπὸ [θεοῦ or κυρίου] ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος

from [God or the Lord] the one who is and who was and is to come.

Harmonistic Alterations

Explanation

Since many scribes knew much of their Scriptures by heart, they recognized the places in which there are parallels or quotations which do not completely follow their antecedents. In order to harmonize these passages, they would sometimes alter the text to make it agree with the antecedent parallel or quotation.

Example

Luke 11:2-4

The shorter form of the Lord's Prayer in Luke was assimilated in many copies of Luke to agree with the longer form in Matt. 6:9-13. Note that the passage from Matthew given

here does not contain the well-known final verse which has a weak manuscript authority ("For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen").

Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. (Matt. 6:9-13)

And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation." (Luke 11:2-4)

Corrections

Explanation

Scribes often felt it their duty to correct the text they were copying if they felt that there were historical or geographical conflicts in what was written.

Examples

Mark 1:2

The composite quotation from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 is introduced by the formula "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet." Later scribes (Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Washingtonensis, Family 13, Majority Text, Harclean Syriac, Bohairic Coptic) attempted to alleviate the discrepancy by changing the formula to read "...in the prophets."

Mark 8:31

Some copyists seemed to have been troubled by Mark's quotation of Jesus that he would rise again "after three days." They emended the text to read "on the third day." (Metzger, p. 199.)

Conflations

Explanation

Rather than choosing between two variant readings for a text, many scribes decided to use both by conflating the variants. In this way, both readings would be preserved.

Example

Luke 24:53

Luke ends with the statement that the disciples "were continually in the temple blessing God." This is supported by P75, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and others. Codex Bezae has "praising" instead of "blessing." There are a number of manuscripts that have the conflation "praising and blessing" (e.g. codices Alexandrinus and Washingtonensis).

Doctrinal Alterations

Explanation

The Church Fathers repeatedly accuse the heretics of corrupting the Scriptures in order to support their special views. For example, Marcion, in the mid-second century, expunged his copies of the Gospel of Luke of all references to the Jewish background of Jesus. Either a scribe eliminated or altered what was potentially damaging to his own views or introduced alterations which would support his view.

Examples

John 7:8

Although in this verse Jesus states that he is not going to the feast, he seems to have changed his mind after his brothers leave (v. 10). It seems to suggest that Jesus either lied to them about going to the feast or went back on his prior decision. In any case, scribes were struck by the possible inconsistency and in order to alleviate it, changed the "not" to "not yet" which also appears in a later clause.

Luke 23:32

To avoid the implication in this text that Jesus was also a criminal, most Greek witnesses have changed the sequence of words to solve the difficulty. Of the modern translations, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version all follow the largest number of manuscripts instead of the stronger support based on antiquity and on internal evidence.

P75 Ἦγοντο δε και ετεροι κακουργοι δυο συν αυτω αναιρεθηναι.
Sinaiticus
Vaticanus And also other criminals, two, were led away to be put to death with him.

Alexandrinus
Ephraemi
Bezae Ἦγοντο δε και ετεροι δυο κακουργοι συν αυτω
Regius
Wash. And also two others, criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.
NB. Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae (Old Latin) adds that the names of the
two criminals were Jothas and Maggistras.

The above information is adapted from [Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts Web](#), one of the best online resources for gaining a basic understanding the process of NT Bible criticism.

Much of the material can be found verbatim in Bruce Metzger's, [The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration](#).