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Is It a Bad Sign if a Church Says the Bible Is Inerrant “in the Original Manuscripts”?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether it's a bad sign when a church's statement of faith says they believe the Bible is inerrant "in the original manuscripts," how the Gospel of Mark can be inerrant if someone else added 16:9-20, and whether the Gospels were meant to be complementary.

* Is it a red flag when a church's statement of faith says they believe the Bible is inerrant "in the original manuscripts"?

* How can we say the Gospel of Mark is the inerrant Word of God if someone added 16:9-20 into it?

* Were the Gospels meant to be complementary? Did the writers intend for us to harmonize them?

Transcript

Music Hi, this is Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Cokel and you're listening to the hashtag STRS podcast from Stand to Reason. There it is.

You did it. Alright, Greg. It's been a while since we've been at the mic together.

Amy wasn't sure how to start, so I had a reminder. The name of the show. And we got it.

We got it, Greg. Okay, today we have some questions about the Bible. So we're going to start with one from Meghan.

I've started seeing on several church websites the statement, we believe all the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts. For me, this raises a red flag that indicates the church doesn't believe Bibles we receive today are without error and hence a progressive Christianity. Am I correct in being wary of this type of belief statement about the Bible?

No, I understand the concern raised by that, but just to let you know there's nothing to worry about that statement because that is the standard classical way of stating a commitment to full inerrancy of scripture because our view is the inerrancy is in the originals in the the autographs as they call them because we can't we don't affirm the inerrancy's inerrancy of copies that have errors.

And so in a lot of copies do they have they have variations they're called variants. And in fact there are tens of hundreds of thousands of variants throughout the New Testament. But because we have so many manuscripts we're able to move past the variants and to be able to calculate or figure out what the original rendering actually was.

So the fact that their variants is the reason why the statement is made in this way, our commitment is to inerrancy of the originals and not of any particular document that we have in our hands at the moment a copy of the original. All right. And we don't have to be concerned about that because we have the tools with the many copies that we have to be able to reproduce the original which we believe is inerran with a high degree of confidence.

So there's nothing to be alarmed out. It's a standard statement. In fact that our own statement of on standard reasons website is probably worded the same way.

Yeah I think it is. It's important to remember that the text of the Bible is a non-physical thing. It's a message, a worded message that's preserved through many manuscripts, not just one manuscript.

And like you said we use the many manuscripts to figure out what the original manuscript said. But imagine if there had only been one then someone could easily change it. We would never know.

So I think this is the way God's done it. This is the way he's preserved it. And so that's what we're affirming.

Yeah. And just to clarify a comment you made I think that could be misunderstood. There's a difference between a type and a token.

So I'm going to use some philosophical words that will help make refined distinctions for the lack of confusion. Okay. Tokens are representations of the type.

So when I write on the page here the word became flesh. Okay. The tokens are the letters that form words in English which have a meaning which are meant to capture our understanding of those particular words and those that meaning is the invisible sense, the invisible words if you will, that those physical tokens represent.

Okay. And to make this clear you could have the same word in many different places where the physical tokens are represented. That's why we have two Bibles sitting in front

of us, yours and mine.

The word became flesh is the same thing but that's the type. But the tokens in each book are the thing that points to that same individual type. Okay.

Or when I say the verse the word became flesh. That's a different token representing the type. So the type as you put it the invisible word so to speak which I think might give some people pause when they hear that is actually the right way to characterize it and it can be captured or represented in a written token or in a spoken token.

It can also be represented in different languages which represent tokens of a different sort spoken or written of the same type. So we are preserving the notion that there is a scripture that is the word of God that can be represented in different ways. And and and sometimes the representations might have inaccuracies but we have the ability by using the various manuscripts to to to to come to a conclusion of what that original token represented which original we don't have anymore.

So there's a clarification for the more philosophically minded tokens and types. Okay. Thanks Greg.

Here is a related question from Tom over right along here. No, this is it's going along in the same direction here. Okay.

So here's Tony's question. Why is Mark 16 9 through 20 in the Bible? How can we say this is the inerrant word of God if Mark didn't write Mark and then more unknown people added on to that? Was all that God's plan? Well that Mark wrote Mark is not part of the inerrant Bible. The record that we attribute to Mark is the inerrant Bible.

The authorship in the case of the gospel of Mark is is not part of an erancy because it's not in the text. Now in Paul's letters he says I Paul right to you so to speak. Well now you have the authorship embodied in the text and and that that representation in the text is part of the inspired text.

Okay. So just to clarify then the gospel of Mark what has happened over the years is as time has passed we have discovered more manuscripts older manuscripts more complete manuscripts in some cases or some might argue less complete because when we discover older manuscripts which arguably are going to be more accurate than more recent manuscripts and there's a debate about that in the field. More recent manuscripts we have more examples of that more more of what's called the majority text but the majority text is actually not as old and this that's why there's more of them.

And so the question is do you go with the the the preponderance of representations that's more recent or do you go with the fewer representations that are more ancient? I think the second is probably wisest. So what happens though because there's this debate and they find older manuscripts that just don't include some of the things more

recent that are some of the manuscripts that are more recent. So what now what do you do? It seems by doing careful textual analysis that some of the things that people thought were in the Bible like the long ending of Mark actually were not part of the original came from somewhere we don't know where they came from but it's pretty clear that that's the case.

Well two things here there's almost nothing in the long ending of Mark except for maybe snake handling or something like that or at least some the way some people understand that reference that's not in other parts that are uncontested okay and the fact is in the book of Acts Paul did get bit by a snake and he shook it off and it even though it was poisonous he didn't get hurt. So it isn't like the people had all these false ideas about God from a text that turns out to be more recent and added to the text it didn't cause any damage but since it had been classically part of scripture and especially the what's called the textus receptus which is the underlying Greek manuscripts that were the source for the King James Version very popular for hundreds of years new translators will put will include that material but then clarify in the the margins that the earliest manuscripts do not contain this so the reader is alerted that this is probably not part of the the original but it has been part of the biblical record the translations for a long time so we're just leaving it in there but before warned this is also true by the way about the woman caught an adultery that we find at the end of John 6 in the beginning of John 7 well it turns out that that account actually shows up in different manuscripts in different gospels different locations and the earliest manuscripts do not include that you know the whoever he is without sin cast the first stone that whole incident I actually think that's a authentic incident that it actually took place but that it was not in the original documents it came in later that's another discussion though but there's another example of something that has become very very popular but the rendering in scriptures nowadays makes it very clear that this was probably not in the original the way we're really getting out just so you know kind of thing and therefore I think people would really be uncomfortable if all of a sudden these parts started disappearing because they think people were taking away the word of God which is what some people claim especially the King James only crowd but if it's not textually supported in earliest manuscripts it's probably not in the earliest manuscripts including the original and so it's good that the Bible reader know that and that's why it's still there but with qualifications and that's important to remember for the first question also that our Bibles will note when something is contested and there are still people who argue that the ending of Mark does belong there and there's still arguments over that but you can always look and see if something is is contested and so then don't build your theology on a contested passage and most of the time anything that's important is going to be repeated quite a number of times theologically important and so you don't have to depend on one contested passage I remember Bart Erman who has made his whole career based on as a writer based on challenging the Bible and the legitimacy of the New Testament and he'll boldly claim this is a verse that's not in your Bible then he'll cite a passage in one of

the synoptics for example Matthew Mark Luke and say this is a contested verse it's not in the original well the irony is since it's a part of the synoptics it does occur in one of the other the other gospels and it's not contested there it's not a variant so it is in your Bible it's just not in every place where it occurs it's as uncontested so all to say there's nothing there's nothing to worry about with these variations this is resolvable do you have any thoughts on his comment on I mean you said a quick thing at the beginning but Mark not writing Mark do you have any thoughts on whether that's a case or we have extra biblical information from UCBS I think that Mark wrote down the account in his gospel based on his association with Peter so Peter is the apostolic authority for the tenant Mark okay there's an interesting little comment in Mark by the way there are indications that this is the case not just from UCBS but from details or whatever and a mark being what might be called the amanuensis or the scribe who records all of this and in the in the scene on good Friday where Jesus is betrayed there's a sentence about a young man who is watching the events and they try to grab him and he runs away and they grabbing his cloak and he runs away and you know a cloak comes off and so he's streaking naked in his escape what the heck is that all about you know why is that in there well it is likely that that's Mark John Mark who was a young man at the time and of course later became a disciple of Peters and became the one who recorded this it's it's likely he inserted that it autobiographically even though it has no real relevance to the to the flow of thought there so that's another indication that Mark was probably the author of that but the authorship is determined by other things than attestation in the text okay if we're holding to inerrancy then if the text says I Paul write this to you then Paul is in one writing based on our commitment to inerrancy but if it just says the gospel the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ I think that's where Mark begins then we don't know who wrote that from the internal evidence we know it from the external evidence and sometimes we're not even clear about that and I'm not talking about the gospels here I'm talking about the book of Hebrews because that's another one where they're not sure who wrote it Paul didn't write it and it's clear because of some statements in there it cannot be Pauline but that many way just to say okay let's go on to a question from Sabra I read that the gospels are to be harmonized or rather are meant to be complementary I can't find that in the gospels did the writers intend for us to do that well the statement that the gospels are complementary is an assessment from the outside so we read these different gospels each writer had his own intention with writing to accomplish a certain thing we read in Luke for example at the beginning he's giving an orderly account to the ophilis of things that he's heard about okay so that's the purpose of the gospel we learn in John excuse me that the purpose of his gospel and this is at the end is to give evidence that Jesus is the Christ so that we might believe in him and that's why he cites the different miracles he has and gives the account of Jesus' life okay so we can in some cases have individual characterizations of what this author was about what he was trying to do but when we stand back and we see well these are distinct accounts in many ways there are lots of crossover except in John John's very unique mostly unique material we realize well these guys were trying to do different

things okay they weren't trying to repeat exactly what the other ones were saying they're trying to give different perspectives based on the intent that they wrote their gospel with and so in that sense we conclude these complement each other each one gives us a little different set of information a little different perspective that all four together give us a much richer fuller understanding of Jesus of Nazareth right they didn't set out to say okay i'm going to say this part and you say that part it just turns out that because they were writing their testimony you see things that fit together in ways that are actually surprising and you can read about these are called i don't know if this is unintended consequences and design coincidences coincidences coincidences coincidences yeah a lot of close so they are complementary in that way but it wasn't as if they they were trying to do that it's just that's just a feature of testimony so that's how it turns out yeah an example of that just so people are clearing it is you have Jesus being struck and then people say who struck you and well why would you ask that question when somebody standing in front of you and hits you well what you don't know is from that gospel account is something you do learn in a different gospel account that they also blindfolded him and when you put the two together then you realize what's going on Jesus was blindfolded then he was struck then they asked him who struck you okay and so that's the that there was no collaboration obviously between the writers uh in the sense that wait he left that out so i've got to add this information so it makes it clear no they were just giving their accounts of what happened and this creates some ambiguities but when you read all of them so many of these ambiguities or points of apparent confusion are resolved so when she asked you know did the writers intend for us to do that to harmonize them or to put everything together i think in a way yes because that's in the sense that if you are giving true testimony then of course they want you to see it as true testimony and put all the the truth that they have together not that they were trying to do it from different angles on purpose and fill in different things but of course they want you to see it as being true testimony that's clear from the text and so just because that's the nature of what it is then of course they're going to expect you to harmonize them well would it be better to say that maybe God intended us to see the holistic picture not that when mark is writing because he's writing first so he can't have intention about somebody else's writing that's to come later they were just writing their things but what God God superintending the process with the four authors is intending to give us a richer fuller picture right and so we should see it and understand it that way i think what i would say the the the writers were intending is for us to take it as true testimony yes uh-huh and so of course they don't want people to pick and choose the parts they're going to believe they want them to take it all together right but i agree God was the one who was putting the details together so that they would give us a full picture when i think of intention i think this it was in the mind of the writer at the time i'm writing this because somebody else is writing another one and i hope that they all will people will read them all in error all right well that's it for today thank you Megan Tony and Sabra we appreciate hearing from you i always like talking about the bible as you all know hopefully by now all right if you'd like to send us your questions send it on

twitter with the hashtag strask or you can go to our website if you just go to our hashtag strask podcast page you'll find a link there so you can leave us your question we look forward to hearing from you this is amy holl and greg kokal for stand to reason