

Where Inspiration is Found: Putting the New Testament Autographs in Context¹

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INTRODUCTION

At the center of nearly every discussion over the inspiration of the New Testament (NT) are references to the “originals,” or, to the “autographs” of the scriptures. Arguments against the inspiration or inerrancy of the NT often focus at the level of “autograph.” In his bestselling work *Misquoting Jesus*, Bart Ehrman wrote that,

[R]ather than actually having the inspired words of the autographs (i.e., the originals) of the Bible, what we have are the error-ridden copies of the autographs.²

As he explains in his book, Ehrman was addressing, head on, the Christian doctrines of inspiration as he understood them and his personal inability to reconcile these doctrines with the rich textual history of the Greek NT.³ His criticism of divine inspiration focuses mainly on the “autographs” or “originals” because the commonly understood evangelical doctrine of scripture place God’s act of inspiration upon the “autographs” of the NT (however one defines this) and not upon any one manuscript or manuscript tradition.⁴ These multivalent terms used to describe inspiration or to formulate these doctrines often lead to a lack of clarity, or a misrepresentation concerning the divine origin of the scriptures. Bart Ehrman is a well-known example of how this misunderstanding can lead to the abandonment of a high view of scripture altogether.⁵

This article narrows in on a specific area of confusion as it pertains to the doctrines of inspiration and the preservation of the NT; the multivalent term “autograph” in doctrinal and faith statements and the reasons for using this nebulous descriptor. Next, the concept of an “autograph” is analyzed with regard to a few key scriptural passages that speak to inspiration. Then, the term “autograph” is defined within the context of composition and circulation practices at work in the Greco-Roman milieu. Finally, this definition of “autograph” is oriented with reference to the practice of NT textual criticism.

STATEMENTS OF FAITH

Though many books and articles have been written that clearly articulate the doctrines of the inspiration and the preservation of the scriptures, many evangelical Christians first encounter these teachings as they are encapsulated in the confessional statements of their Churches, schools, seminaries, and other Christian organizations.⁶ Following are a few examples of typical evangelical doctrinal statements to illustrate the theme of focusing the inspiration event on the “autographs” of scripture.

Moody Bible Institute. Ehrman attended Moody in 1973 and some of his foundation in Evangelical doctrines may have originated from this time.⁷ It is likely that he had Moody Bible Institute’s understanding of inspiration in mind when he wrote *Misquoting Jesus*. It is appropriate, then, to examine their doctrinal statement concerning inspiration.

Article II. The Bible, including both the Old and the New Testaments, is a divine revelation, *the original autographs of which were verbally inspired*.⁸

There is an accompanying clarifying note for Article II which dates to 1928.

The Bible is without error in all it affirms in the *original autographs* and is the only authoritative guide for faith and practice and as such must not be supplanted by any other fields of human learning.⁹

For the term “original autographs,” it appears that both a physical medium along with the wording or text is in view. In Moody’s, and in the following doctrinal statements, the terms “autograph” or “original” (or a combination of the two) are often used synonymously in these formulations.

Phoenix Seminary. Because the *Sacred Words* conference was hosted by the Text and Canon Institute of Phoenix Seminary, it is fitting to look into their doctrinal stance on inspiration as well.

We believe the 66 books of the Old and New Testament are the authoritative Word of God based on an inspired text without error in the autographs. “*Autograph*” is a theological term referring to the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts of Scripture.¹⁰

The phrasing might cause some confusion for readers as the choice of words seem to imply that any of the ancient manuscripts in existence today that contain the Old Testament (OT) in Hebrew or the NT in Greek are uniquely inspired and inerrant. Though this is most likely not the intended message, the ambiguity in the multivalent word “autograph” defined as a “theological term” describing a physical artefact might be misleading as to what doctrinal information the phrase is intending to convey.

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. An internecine debate exploded in the American evangelical community in the 1970s over the inerrancy of the scriptures which resulted in a series of meetings held in Chicago in 1978 by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. These culminated in the formulation of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (CSBI).¹¹ Though many saw the statement as killing inerrancy “with the death of a thousand qualifications,” it can still be a useful tool in its detailed explanation

of inspiration and inerrancy.¹² The CSBI often serves as a standard for doctrinal statements on inspiration and inerrancy for Evangelical institutions.¹³

*Article X. We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.*¹⁴

The words “autographic text of scripture” are further explained later in the CSBI as the “autographic text of the original documents.”¹⁵ It appears that a physical object and its wording are being conveyed as embodying the inspired and inerrant words. Though it is not stated explicitly, it is implied that the preservation of the text or wording of the “autographs” is not dependent upon the preservation of these material artefacts.

Though many more doctrinal statements could be studied in detail, these few are broadly representative of evangelical institutions and Churches throughout North America. A unifying feature of these statements is that they focus the act of divine inspiration on the “autographs,” a term which is often left undefined or only vaguely defined as a now lost physical medium and its wording.

WHY THE FOCUS ON THE AUTOGRAPHS?

The reason for this doctrinal focus on the “autograph” becomes apparent in light of a few key scriptural passages that speak to inspiration. There are several types of revelatory and inspirational events testified in the NT writings which fall broadly under the following categories.

Direct revelation in which the author was divinely commanded to write down specific words either through a vision, dream, or theophany. Much of the book of Revelation falls into this category (Rev 1:9-11).¹⁶

Divine revelation that was given through the inspiration of the Spirit on the writers that set down historical events in the Gospels and Acts. These authors made selections concerning certain events, teachings, and miracles from a much larger story that occurred in the distant or more recent past (Luke 1:1-4, John 14:26, 20:30-31).¹⁷

Though the epistles were occasional compositions, writings that addressed a specific need, controversy, or other concern, these were divinely inspired words that are formative for the Christian faith.¹⁸ Within these epistles, different methods of composition were employed such as scribes (Rom 16:22), or co-authors (1 Cor 1:1, 2 Cor 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Col 1:1).¹⁹

It is important, then, to revisit a few select scriptures that inform our doctrine of inspiration in order to better orient the term “autograph” within the context of these doctrinal statements.

2 Peter 1:12-15, 20-21:

Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. (ESV)

... knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

In these verses Peter, who was nearing the end of his life, was communicating his intent to set down the knowledge of Christ (discussed in vv. 1-11) so that this knowledge may be referenced and studied by his readers.²⁰ This is an obvious allusion to writing something down in order to give it permanence. A few verses later (vv. 20-21) Peter referred to men being carried along by the Holy Spirit to speak the words of God. This describes a process that occurred at a specific time and place in which unique words from God were spoken. Notice the process involved two agents; men who spoke, and God, through the Holy Spirit, who moved them. Spoken words are in view here, yet written words are not excluded, especially if Peter was including his earlier promise to set down his teaching in writing for them to recall (1:12-15). These verses occur directly after Peter mentions his eyewitness testimony to the transfiguration (1:16-18). This testimony he couples with the “firm word of prophecy” which appears to include his own experience

of observing the transfiguration (v. 19).²¹ If so, then 1:20-21 also applies to the apostolic testimony of Peter concerning his eyewitness account of Jesus's ministry and not just to the Old Testament prophetic word.

2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (ESV)

Paul uses language reminiscent of the creation account in Genesis, the scriptures are enlivened by God breathing them out.²² This describes a process that occurred during the originating moment of the scriptures, an event limited to particular texts and words. Writings are clearly in view here because the reference is to writings (γραφή).²³ Because only certain writings were God breathed, this necessitates an event limited in scope and content with definitive contours. Paul doesn't explicitly declare which writings were scripture, the assumption is that Timothy will know. Though God is the only agent mentioned, human agency is implied. The men who wrote scripture and God who breathed life into these writings.

Luke 1:1-4:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (ESV)

The preface to Luke's Gospel is a glimpse into the physician's composition practices. He tells us that some predecessors had already set down an account and Luke was continuing in this practice by giving his own ordered composition of the tradition handed down by the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word."²⁴ This process that Luke describes necessitates editing at some level, ordering the eyewitness accounts, weaving in scriptural quotations,

and selecting from a larger corpus of Jesus's parables (Gospel of Thomas Saying 22; John 20:30-31) using the composition tools and practices of his Greco-Roman milieu.²⁵

John 20:30-31:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (ESV)

When composing his Gospel, John made selections from a larger body of Jesus's teachings and miracles that he did not include in his crafting of events.²⁶ Certain parables, stories, and events in Jesus's life were selected and arranged by John so his readers might believe that Jesus was truly the Messiah. Not unlike what Luke describes, this clearly testifies to an editing process by John in formulating his Gospel account.²⁷

Despite the testimony of scripture reviewed above, it seems that many Evangelicals have a concept of divine inspiration that conforms to a simplistic version of direct revelation that does not take into account the myriad ways God moved men to write his inspired words using the tools and methods available to them. For example, Bart Ehrman seems to have accepted this type of overly simplistic doctrine of inspiration in his evangelical youth that emphasized the divine aspects at the exclusion of the human elements. Because much later, his scholarship forced him to notice the human elements of NT authorship which then necessitated the exclusion of a divine origin for the scriptures. This then paved the way for his de-conversion.²⁸

In order to avoid a similar one-dimensional view, our understanding of divine inspiration must incorporate both the testimony of scripture that speaks to its divine origins and the human elements of Greco-Roman composition and epistolary practices that are evident in the NT writings.

The scriptures testify to a superintending process of divine inspiration that is verbal (it is text based), plenary (it extends to all of the words), and confluent (divine inspiration through the personal agency of man).²⁹ Though the exact nature of this process remains a mystery, the scriptures that speak to divine inspiration point back to an originating moment of composition from which the succeeding manuscript tradition descended. Doctrinal statements

have often labelled this moment as the “autograph” or the “original” or some other similar designator.³⁰

Another reason that doctrinal statements limit inspiration to an originating moment (i.e., “autograph”) is because of the many textual additions, corruptions, and mistakes present within the manuscript tradition. Much of this was due to simple human error and the fact that there was no centralized ecclesiastical or state sanctioned authority with the power to safeguard or guarantee the transmission of the biblical text. Already, during the apostolic era, doctrinal corruptions and power-struggles are evident in the NT epistles. Outside of their teaching influence, the apostles were mostly powerless to stop these false teachers who twisted the apostolic witness. They would be similarly powerless against any textual corruptions as well. Following are select examples illustrating this phenomena.

2 *Thessalonians 2:1-2:*

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Here Paul mentions that the Thessalonian Church had apparently already received a letter falsely attributed to himself.³¹ This pseudo-epistle gave them a false theology regarding the day of the Lord. Paul was writing to the Church not a short time after he was forced to leave by a mob organized by non-believing Jewish leaders. In a short period of time he had to contend with those who would plant seeds of corrupt teaching in his name.³² The only defense Paul had against this was to warn the Thessalonians.

2 *Peter 3:15-16:*

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

Peter mentions in passing, not only a distinctive letter collection of Paul, but also that there were those who were twisting the teaching contained in them.³³ Peter's only defense against this was to warn his readers that this was occurring and to be wary of it.

Besides the doctrinal twisting of the apostolic message as reviewed above, there is early evidence that the New Testament writings were being textually altered and corrupted as well. This occurred both intentionally and unintentionally, though it is nearly impossible for the modern scholar to discern the initial source or motivation behind most variants. Following are a few examples of textual corruption from the period not long after the apostles.

Irenaeus 5.30.1, Revelation 13.18.

Near the end of the second century (ca. 180 AD) the Church leader Irenaeus of Lugdunum, Gaul, discussed a textual variation in the book of Revelation with regard to the mark of the Beast.³⁴ Irenaeus noted in his *Against Heresies* that some manuscripts read 616 rather than the more familiar 666 for the mark of the beast. He preferred the better known number of 666, however, for the "most approved and ancient manuscripts" as well as Johannine tradition, supported this as the authorial reading (*Haer.* 5.30.1).³⁵

Irenaeus 3.10.5, Mark 16:19.

Irenaeus quoted from Mark 16:19 indicating that though some early sources did not contain the longer ending of Mark, the longer ending was present in at least some manuscripts at the end of the second century (*Haer.* 3.10.5).³⁶

The mention of a variant reading in the manuscripts of Revelation reveals that within 100 years of Revelation being written there were already some corruptions of the textual tradition significant enough to affect meaning. In reference to the ending of Mark, Irenaeus evinced an early text with the longer ending (Mark 16:9-20). Yet by the fourth century, this longer ending was absent from our two earliest witnesses for the text of Mark, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and Jerome mentions that the long ending was absent from all the Greek codices in his day.³⁷ Thus, the ending of Mark also demonstrates an element of fairly large scale variation in this gospel at an early date. Doctrinal statements, then, must account for this early textual corruption in the manuscript tradition and should not consider any physical manuscript or tradition as especially divinely inspired.³⁸

WHAT IS AN AUTOGRAPH?

Therefore, in light of composition practices and the errors introduced into the text early on during transmission, it is both historically and doctrinally appropriate to place the definitive accomplishment of divine inspiration on an originating moment: the period closest to the time of composition yet after the document had been completed by the author. Doctrinal statements refer to this document, at this moment, as the “autograph.”³⁹ Because of its multivalent meaning, it is important that the term “autograph” be properly understood and its meaning unpacked.

According to Webster’s Dictionary, the meaning of the term “autograph” is defined straightforwardly as “something written or made with one’s own hand.”⁴⁰ As Peter Williams has articulated, terms such as “original” or “autograph” have multivalent meanings that can include notes, draft copies, and un-sent letters and other written material as well as completed works and would even include post-publication authorial changes.⁴¹ It can mean a physical object and the text it contains. “Autograph” can also simply mean the *wording* of the autograph.⁴²

In order to illustrate that, at the level of “autograph,” the text can be quite fluid, here are two examples of authorial copies of literary compositions. Paleographically dated to the third century AD, P.Oxy 7.1015 is a well preserved writing that praises a young local gymnasiarch.⁴³ It shows signs of authorial alterations with interlinear corrections and erasures.⁴⁴

Also dated paleographically to the third century AD, P.Köln 6.245 is the remains of a larger book roll that retells the Homeric epic.⁴⁵ The fragment has interlinear corrections, and extensive rewritings.⁴⁶

These papyri reveal that there was textual fluidity at the authorial level before a writings was completed. Thus, the term “autograph” is not very helpful in describing the multifaceted aspects of divine inspiration and the composition of the NT writings, because at every phase of the draft stages, the document(s) would technically be “autographs.” Yet this is clearly not what is meant by “autograph” in doctrinal statements. Any definition of the original text, or “autograph,” must take these aspects into consideration. In order to better understand the Greco-Roman milieu in which the NT writings emerged the discussion will now turn to a brief overview of ancient composition and publication practices.

ANCIENT AUTHORSHIP AND PUBLICATION

The composition process, whether of personal letters or a larger literary work, often involved scribes who wrote on behalf of an author. This is evident in both Greco-Roman and Christian sources. Romans 16:22 states that “I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you” (ESV). This is implied in Paul’s statements at the end of many of his epistles, where he indicates that he is writing in his own hand (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; Philemon 19).⁴⁷ Cicero, a first century BC Roman statesman, and his secretary Tiro, provide several examples of Tiro suggesting editorial changes in the writings of Cicero (*Fam.* 16.4; 16.17) along with simply copying dictation.⁴⁸ Though a secretary or scribe was used, this did not remove responsibility of authorship from the originator of the work.⁴⁹

Of course, the composition process, especially of history, biography, and technical or scientific writing, involved significant research by the author, a selection process by which a body of knowledge or a larger story was edited down. Loveday Alexander considered that the preface to Luke’s Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) finds its closest parallels in the prefaces of “scientific,” that is, “technical” works.⁵⁰ Alexander notes that a common characteristic of these works is that they are “the distillation of the teaching of a school or a craft tradition as it was passed down from one generation to another.”⁵¹ Luke 1:1-4, along with John 20:30-31; 21:25, evinces this type of process for the Gospels. The integration of composite quotations of OT texts by the Gospel authors reveals a studied knowledge of the Prophets to produce a Midrash of messianic prophecies.⁵² As Larry Hurtado has argued, religious “experiences,” such as visions from the risen Jesus and other prophetic revelations, led to new insight into OT passages and “inspired exegesis.”⁵³ During the stages of notation, study, and editing, these unfinished versions would fall into the realm of “autograph.” Yet, because the work was in the draft phases of composition, the divine inspirational event would not yet be complete.

PUBLICATION

During the first century, books (whether the roll or the codex) were made entirely by hand, there was no printing press or the mass production, marketing and distribution of books.⁵⁴ No copyright existed and books could

be copied out in their entirety with no legal ramifications or remuneration to the author. The distribution or “publication” of a book occurred through both commercial and private social networks. This phenomena can be briefly illustrated by a few sparse references to contemporary figures.

Writing to the historian Suetonius in the beginning of the second century AD, Pliny the Younger urged him to publish his work, declaring that he wanted to hear that his friend’s books were “being copied out, sold and read” (*Ep.* 5.10).⁵⁵ Pliny revealed here the three broad avenues of “publication” available to his contemporaries; through copying for personal use; through commercial book sellers; and through the reading out of a work in a public setting. Both the private and more commercial aspects of book production can be seen in the following letters from antiquity, P.Oxy 2192, and P.Petaus 30.

Paleographically dated to the second century AD, P.Oxy 18. 2192 is a letter in which the main body of text is no longer preserved but two postscripts are still readable.⁵⁶ The first postscript is written by the sender of the letter and requests the recipient to have copies made of a series of books (presumably from the collection of the recipient) and then to send these copies back to the sender of the letter. The second postscript appears to be written by the recipient and responds that “Demetrius the bookseller” has some of the desired volumes. The recipient also makes a request asking that, if the sender has any volumes of “Seleucus’s work,” to make copies and send them in return. The recipient also briefly makes reference to another community of readers, “Diodorus’s circle,” that also might have a few desirable books from which to make copies.⁵⁷

P.Petaus 30 is a letter written on papyrus, dated paleographically to the second century AD, that a certain Julius Placidus sent to his father concerning a bookseller named Dius who traveled to Placidus’s location.⁵⁸ Here he mentions being shown parchment codices, of which he did not purchase but did collate his manuscripts against, for the cost of 100 drachmas.⁵⁹

Similar avenues of copying and distribution can be seen in the Christian community as well; Colossians 4:16 “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea”; 1 Thessalonian 5:27, “have this letter read to all the brothers”; 1 Timothy 4:13, “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture.”⁶⁰ Much like the avenues mentioned by Pliny above, these passages indicate that Paul’s letters were distributed through copying

and also through reading out in the Church worship gathering.

In the second century, this same process continued, as revealed by Polycarp (ca. 115 AD) in his letter to the Philippians 13.1-2, “We are sending to you the letters of Ignatius that were sent to us by him together with any others that we have in our possession.”⁶¹ Much like the letters of Paul in Colossian 4:16, Polycarp was copying and distributing the letters of Ignatius to the Philippian Church. Not long after the time of Polycarp, The Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 2.4, reveals that Christians disseminated their works by copying them and by reading them out to the congregations; “Therefore you will write two little books, and you will send one to Clement and one to Grapte. Then Clement will send it to the cities abroad.”

Though later than the period under discussion, the following papyrus fragment illustrates that books were being requested and copied within Christian circles in a similar manner as evidenced by P.Oxy 18.2192. The fourth century AD letter preserved in P.Oxy 63.4365, reads, “To my dearest lady sister, greetings in the Lord. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the little Genesis. Farewell in God from us.”⁶² Though a simple statement, it indicates that Christians were lending and borrowing books amongst themselves and presumably making copies for themselves from these borrowed books.

ACCIDENTAL PUBLICATION

Authors attempted to maintain control over the writing process and only released their composition once the work was completed. Sometimes, however, books were circulated prematurely before the author completed the draft and re-writing stages. Pliny the Younger wrote to his friend Octavius warning him that some of his poems had been circulating without his knowledge or consent (Ep. 2.10). Cicero bitterly protested to his friend Atticus who had prematurely given away a book to a friend before Cicero was finished editing it (Att. 3.12). These authors complained about the untimely releasing of their work because once these writings began to circulate, the authors lost control of the composition process and could no longer edit or polish their writing.

Recently, Mathew Larsen has latched onto this phenomena of the “accidental publication” of a work and has argued that many texts, such as the Christian Gospels, were not meant to be finished or completed.⁶³ Working against this thesis, however, are the previously mentioned authors Cicero and Pliny the

Younger. They reveal that additions or deletions and plagiarisms of their prematurely released writings was not acceptable and these were considered textual corruptions and theft by the authors and the communities that circulated these writings. These authors reveal that, whether intentional or unintentional, once a writing began to circulate, the composition was, for all intents and purposes, finished. I have given a more thorough treatment of this issue elsewhere.⁶⁴

DEFINITION OF AUTOGRAPH IN DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

The autographic papyri mentioned above (P.Oxy 7.1015, P.Köln 6.245) reveal that, at the level of “autograph,” the text can be quite fluid. The difficulty in the case of the examples given is that it is impossible to know for sure the completed form of these two compositions. This uncertainty would change if a copy of these writings were known to have been circulated. Even if a manuscript was inadvertently released before the author was satisfied with its form, the work would, in all practicality, be completed, for the author would lose any control over the fate of the document at that point. Working against the views of Larsen, the instant at which a manuscript was released beyond the immediate control of the author, whether accidentally or intentionally, effectively ended the composition stages of writing.

In light of this, the NT writings can be said to be “completed” once they were released by the authors and began to circulate as definitive works. These documents were no longer under the control of their authors and would have circulated as distinct writings. Therefore, in reference to the NT, the “autograph,” as often discussed by apologists, theologians, and doctrinal statements, should be defined as *the text of the completed authorial work the moment in which it was released by the author for circulation and copying, not earlier draft versions or layers of composition.*⁶⁵ This working definition better accounts for the multifaceted process of divine inspiration, whether through direct revelation, “inspired exegesis,” midrash, or the investigation of eyewitness and written sources, the composition process of which was superintended by the Holy Spirit. When the writing was released, and began to be copied and circulated, the inspiration event was effectively over.

It is necessary to briefly unpack these ideas further. Certainly, the physical properties of the autograph (whether papyrus, parchment, wax or wooden tablet, etc.) helped to shape the text, however, it is the text—the

wording—that was inspired, not the physical medium of the material autograph.⁶⁶ Passages in the scriptures, such as Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonian 5:27, and 1 Timothy 4:13, imply a copying and distributing process. For Paul, addressing these congregations, it was imperative that the recipients received the *text* of the epistle, not the original physical material autograph penned by the sender of the letter.

This same mentality can be said of the previously mentioned references as well. When Polycarp wrote to the Philippian church (13.1-2), he was concerned that they received *copies*, that is, the *text*, of Ignatius's letters, not the physical papyrus that Ignatius had sent to the various Churches. This can be clearly seen in The Shepherd of Hermes, Vision 2.4. Copies of the vision Hermas had received, and had written in "two little books," was considered the same work as the original physical autograph written down on papyrus or parchment.

Books and writings were requested, borrowed, lent, and transcribed. As long as these manuscripts were quality transcriptions then these same books were considered to be in the possession of the one who had these copies. Each of the above examples reveal that different physical copies of texts were considered the same text; it's the wording that the author wrote that mattered.⁶⁷

INSPIRATION, THE AUTOGRAPH, AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM

It would be beneficial to examine the ways in which this new understanding of inspiration and the term "autograph" meshes with the practice and purpose of NT textual criticism. The science of textual criticism attempts to trace the history of textual transmission from author to the present day. David C. Parker defined the practice of NT textual criticism as "the analysis of variant readings in order to determine in what sequence they arose."⁶⁸ Of course, in order to understand "in what sequence [the variants] arose," one must also determine the originating text, that is, the text that gave rise to the tradition, the authorial text. In light of this, Michael W. Holmes wrote,

"Something got sent" (in the case of a letter), or something was released for copying (in the case of other genres), and it is the wording of that "something," in the form(s) in which it was sent off or released, that is a reasonable and legitimate goal of text-critical research and investigation.⁶⁹

As Holmes notes above, it is the wording of the text as it was released and circulated that gave rise to the succeeding manuscript tradition. As soon as these writings were copied, errors crept into the text (as we saw already with Irenaeus and Revelation) and, within the lifetime of the apostles, the teaching of these writings were being twisted and corrupted (note Peter's statement, in 2 Peter 3:15-16, that there are those who are twisting Paul's teaching contained in his letters). One of the goals for textual critics is to work through the extant manuscript tradition in order to recover or confirm the wording of the "authorial text" of the NT writings. Contrary to Ehrman's conclusions quoted at the beginning, though we may not always be able to discern between authorial text and scribal additions, we can be mostly certain that what we have today contains the inspired *text* of the autographs.⁷⁰

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1. This paper began as an invited talk that was delivered at the "Sacred Words" conference at First Baptist Church, Tempe, Arizona, February 21, 2020. This was the inaugural conference of the newly formed Text and Canon Institute of Phoenix Seminary, directed and co-directed by Dr. John Meade and Dr. Peter Gurry respectively.
 2. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 5.
 3. *Ibid.*, 10.
 4. J. Gresham Machen provides such an example when he wrote, "Only the autographs of the Biblical books, in other words-the books as they came from the pen of the sacred writers, and not any one of the copies of those autographs which we now possess-were produced with that supernatural impulsion and guidance of the Holy Spirit which we, call inspiration" (*The Christian Faith in the Modern World* [1936, reprint; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978], 39).
 5. Ehrman explains that it is due to the reality that none of the originals or autographs of the NT writings were preserved to the present day that led him to abandon the Evangelical view of inspiration; "my study of the Greek New Testament, and my investigations into the manuscripts that contain it, led to a radical rethinking of my understanding of what the bible is" (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 11).
 6. It would be impossible to list out in full a bibliography of works dedicated to laying out the doctrine of inspiration and the intertwined topic of inerrancy. For a multi-author volume discussing many aspects of scriptural authority and inspiration with related bibliographies, see D. A. Carson, ed, *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). For an overview of the history of the Christian view of inspiration, inerrancy, and biblical authority, see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/Kim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982). See also Ronald F. Satta, *The Sacred Text: Biblical Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007). There are also several formative works in the Presbyterian tradition, Archibald A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1866), 67-77; Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration." *Presbyterian Review* 6 (1881): 226-60; Warfield, "The Inspiration of the Bible." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 51 (1894): 614-640.
 7. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 4. Ehrman writes about his time at Moody, "I decided to major in Bible theology, which meant taking a lot of biblical study and systematic theology courses. Only one perspective was taught in these courses, subscribed to by all the professors (they had to sign a statement) and by all the students (we did as well): the Bible is the inerrant word of God" (4).
 8. Italics added. Statement taken from www.moodybible.org/beliefs/.
 9. Italics added for emphasis. Statement taken from www.moodybible.org/beliefs/.

10. <https://ps.edu/about/statement-of-faith/>.
11. Roger E. Olson, *The SCM Press A-Z of Evangelical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 154-156.
12. *Ibid.*, 155.
13. Brogan, "Can I Have Your Autograph?," 101-102.
14. Ronald Youngblood, ed., *Evangelicals and Inerrancy: Selections from the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 233.
15. *Ibid.*, 238.
16. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, eds, *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 30; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Prolegomena, Bibliology, Theology Proper* (Vol 1. *Systematic Theology*: Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 56-57.
17. Carl F. H. Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 26-28; Barry G. Webb, "Biblical Authority and Diverse Literary Genres," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (D. A. Carson, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 601-605; William Lane Craig, "Men Moved By The Holy Spirit Spoke From God' (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology: Providence, Scripture, and Resurrection* (ed. Michael Rea; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 169.
18. E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 224-229; Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Revelation and God* (Vol 1. *Reformed Systematic Theology*: Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 441; Barry G. Webb, "Biblical Authority," 605.
19. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 33-36, 81-93.
20. Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 74.
21. Gene L. Green, *Jude and Second Peter* (Robert Yarbrough, ed. Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 218-219.
22. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 705-706.
23. Paul is most assuredly including both the Jewish scriptures (referred to by Paul in 2 Tim 3:15) and the gospel message proclaimed by Paul and entrusted to Timothy (2 Tim 1:13-14), much of it contained in his own letters, many of them (such as Romans) were already written by this time. See the arguments of L. Timothy Swinson, *What is Scripture: Paul's Use of Graphé in the Letters to Timothy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 146-154.
24. Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 122-131.
25. Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1:4 and Acts 1:1* (Margaret E. Thrall, ed. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
26. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 44-45.
27. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 362-365.
28. Erhman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 211-212.
29. For a chapter length treatment of the doctrine of double agency, or double authorship of the scriptures see, Henri A. G. Blocher "God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, 497-541. For a brief overview see the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 644-645.
30. Also note the qualifications made by James M. Gray in the widely influential *The Fundamentals* volumes ("Inspiration of the Bible—Definition, Extent and Proof," in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, eds. [Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917]; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 2:12-13.
31. Origen references 2 Thess 2.1-2 as an example of pseudepigraphy (*De adult. libr. 7*). For an example of a forged letter from Caesar to Cicero which was exposed by him, see Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 146.
32. G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 13-16.
33. Timothy Mitchell, "Exposing Textual Corruption: Community as a Stabilizing Aspect in the Circulation of the New Testament Writings during the Greco-Roman Era," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43.2 (December 2020): 285.
34. For an introduction to Irenaeus see Sara Purvis and Paul Foster, eds., *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).
35. Amy M. Donaldson, *Explicit References to New Testament Variant Readings Among Greek and Latin Church Fathers. Vol 1* (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2009), 94-96.
36. Robert H. Stein, "The Ending of Mark," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18.1 (2008), 82; Bruce M. Metzger, A

- Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd Edition. German Bible Society: Stuttgart, 1994), 103.
37. Jerome Ep. 120 (ca. ca. AD 406-407) (Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 322). See also the extensive treatment of the long ending of Mark in Donaldson, *Explicit References to New Testament Variant Readings Among Greek and Latin Church Fathers. Vol 2* (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2009), 397-407.
 38. For example, see Dewey M. Beegle's observations, "When it became clear to lovers of scripture that copies of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament contained some errors, it was quite natural to transfer the quality of accuracy or inerrancy to the original writings" (*Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 156).
 39. George I. Mavrodes argued that limiting inspiration to the "autographs" (defined as a physical medium of writing from the author) and not to other manuscript copies introduces problems in the doctrine that inhibit a proper understanding of the inspiration event ("The Inspiration of Autographs," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 41.1 (1969): 19-29).
 40. "Autograph." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed November 17, 2020. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autograph>
 41. Peter J. Williams engages with several multivalent terms used by Christian theologians and apologists and the problems these words inject into the discussion in "Ehrman's Equivocation and the Inerrancy of the Original Text," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, 389-406. See also the conclusions drawn in Timothy N. Mitchell, "What are the NT Autographs? An Examination of Inspiration and Inerrancy in Light of Greco-Roman Publication," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59.2 (2016): 304.
 42. Williams, "Ehrman's Equivocation," 399-400. Though Williams's observations are specifically in regard to the term "original" they equally apply to the term "autograph" as these words are often used interchangeably.
 43. Raffaella Criboire, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 242. For an image of P.Oxy. VII 1015, see E. G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (ed. P. J. Parson; 2nd ed.; Institute of Classical Studies, Bulletin Supplement 46; London: University of London Press, 1987), 91.
 45. Arthur S. Hunt, ed., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Part VII* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1910), 111-114.
 46. Maryline G. Parca, *Ptocheia, or, Odysseus in Disguise at Troy (P. Köln VI 245)* (American Studies in Papyrology 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), ix. For an image of P. Köln VI 245, see <http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/NRWakademie/papyrologie/PKoeln/PK5932r.jpg>.
 47. Parca, *Ptocheia*, 4-6
 48. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 175. See also Bahr, Gordon J. "The Subscriptions in the Pauline Letters," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87.1 (March 1968): 27-41.
 49. Mitchell, "What are the NT Autographs?," 295.
 50. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* 81-84.
 51. Loveday Alexander. "Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing." *Novum Testamentum* 28.1 (1986): 57.
 52. *Ibid.*, 69.
 53. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 129-156.
 54. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 73-74, 565-578, 588-594.
 55. Timothy Mitchell, "Myths About Autographs: What They Were and How Long They May Have Survived," in *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 28-29.
 56. English translation taken from Pliny, *Letters*, trans. William Melmoth and W. M. L. Hutchinson, 2 Vols.; (LCL; New York: Macmillan, 1915).
 57. For English translations of the post scripts see Rosalia Hatzilambrou, "Appendix: P. Oxy. XVIII 2192 Revisited," in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts* (ed. A.K. Bowman, R.A. Coles, N. Gonis, Dirk Obbink and P.J. Parsons; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007): 282-86.
 58. Colin H. Roberts, "2192. Letter About Books," in Edgar Lobel, Colin H. Roberts, and E. P. Wegner (eds.), *GRM 26, The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XVIII* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1941), 150-152.
 59. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 53.
 60. For an image of P.Petaus 30 PK376r.jpg (850x670) ([uni-koeln.de](http://www.uni-koeln.de)).
 61. Translations are from the *English Standard Version*.
 62. English translation of Polycarp's letter to the Philipppians and The Shepherd of Hermas are taken from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations, 3rd ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

63. English translation taken from Thomas J. Kraus, "The Lending of Books in the Fourth Century C.E. P.Oxy. LXIII 4365—A Letter on Papyrus and the Reciprocal Lending of Literature Having Become Apocryphal," in *Ad fontes: Original Manuscripts and Their Significance for Studying Early Christianity* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Wendy Porter; TENT 3; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 187.
64. Larsen, "Accidental Publication, Unfinished Texts and the Traditional Goals of New Testament Textual Criticism," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39.4 (2017): 379–380. See also his book length treatment of the topic, *Gospels Before the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
65. This topic has been addressed in full in Timothy Mitchell, "Exposing Textual Corruption: Community as a Stabilizing Aspect in the Circulation of the New Testament Writings during the Greco-Roman Era," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43.2 (December 2020): 266-298.
66. Mitchell, "What are the NT Autographs?", 306.
67. Williams, "Ehrman's Equivocation," 399.
68. *Ibid.*, 399.
69. David C. Parker, *An Introduction to The New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 159.
70. Michael W. Holmes, "From 'Original Text' to 'Initial Text': The Traditional Goal of NT Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion," in *The Text of the NT in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, 2nd ed. (ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes; NTTSD 42; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 659.
71. Greg L. Bahnsen, "Autographs, Amanuenses and Restricted Inspiration," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 45.2 (April-June 1973), 101-102. Some scholars betray a lack of confidence in our ability to reconstruct the original wording using the tools of modern textual criticism. See the discussion in John J. Brogan, "Can I Have Your Autograph? Uses and Abuses of Textual Criticism in Formulating an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture," in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (ed. Vincent E. Bacote, Laura Miguelez Quay, and Dennis L. Okholm; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 93–111.