

Foundations 201: Bible Translations and Manuscripts



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A Brief Examination of Manuscript Variation Issues

Our Purpose and Course of Study

The purpose of this article is twofold, to address important issues regarding the reliability of the Biblical texts and to clarify our position regarding the existing textual traditions, in part, by comparing them. The course that we will take in our examination of these issues is as follows.

First, we will discuss the reliability of the Judeo-Christian scriptures and clarify some fundamental issues that are relevant to this topic. Second, we will present some basic information about textual variations that are present in the surviving Biblical manuscripts and texts. Third, we will discuss text types or families and how Biblical translations are made from them. Fourth, we will compare and assess the value of the antiquity of the surviving text and text types. Fifth, we will identify the key issues at stake concerning the existence of textual variations. Sixth, we will then cover the common arguments for preferring the readings of one text or text type over the others. Seventh, we will compare and assess the significance of textual alteration by heretical groups in the Alexandrian region. Eighth, we will assess the causes and implications of textual variation. Ninth, we will clarify our own position through comparison and contrast with the views of others on this subject. Tenth, we will spend some time discussing the textual variation present in John 1:18 and the relevance of the early church writings as exemplified by this passage. Eleventh, we will discuss a few other prominent, significant passages where textual variation exists. And finally, we will close with a conclusion and summary of reliability and text type preferences.

Introduction: Clarification and the Reliability of the Judeo-Christian Scripture

As we begin, the most important point that needs to be addressed up front pertains to the general question of the reliability of the Biblical documents.

It must be said that as a set of ancient documents the Biblical texts are second to none and are, in fact, head and shoulders above any other ancient text in terms of historical reliability. There can be no serious or scholarly question on the historical value of the Bible. The superiority of the Biblical texts to all other ancient documents is established by several criteria: the early writing of the

original documents in relation to the figures and events they record, the close proximity of the authors to the persons and events they record, the number of existing copies of the documents, and the proximity in time of the copies both to the originals and to the actual figures and events they describe.

For more information on the Biblical textual tradition and its reliability in comparison to other ancient documents please read the following articles in the Why Christianity study series: The Introduction to the Criteria of Assessment and The Criteria for Assessing Evidence and Reaching Conclusions sections (at the beginning of the Introduction to Why Christianity Study article); the article entitled, "Judaism and Christianity Introduction and History;" and the article entitled, "History of Judaism Continued."

In the articles mentioned above we establish from the secular, academic, historical standards for ancient documents that both the Old and New Testament texts are very highly reliable documents. More specifically, we can be certain, in light of these facts, that the New Testament is clearly and indisputably a faithful record of the teachings of Jesus Christ as passed on to the church through His apostles. Any suggestion to the contrary is either uninformed of the facts, based upon prejudicial or philosophically biased standards, is intellectually irresponsible, or worse yet, is intentionally misleading.

The reason we have taken the time to affirm the general reliability and historical value of the Biblical texts at the start is so that no one can be confused regarding the discussion that follows.

Basic Information about Textual Variation in Biblical Manuscripts

The 5,000 or so existing copies and fragments of copies of the New Testament can be grouped into families. There are three or four main groupings total and some manuscripts apparently incorporate aspects of several of the text traditions. The groupings themselves are made in recognition of variations in the readings of some verses and passages of the New Testament texts. The two most prominent text types (or families) are the Byzantine and the Alexandrian.

When we state that variations occur between various copies and textual traditions we must be clear. In no way does the presence of such variation infringe upon or call into question the reliability of the Biblical texts. In no way can the existence of variation between different copies be taken to indicate that the words and events that are written in the New Testament are not a faithful record of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ or that of his apostles or the early church. The faithfulness and historical reliability of the Bible is not in question. There are several reasons for this.

First, of all of the verses in the New Testament, only a very small proportion have variant readings in different textual traditions. The vast majority of the New Testament text is the same in every verse no matter what copy or text type (or

family) we look at. So, the relevance of New Testament textual variation pertains only to a very, very small amount leaving the large bulk of the text unaffected and in unanimous consent.

Second, the nature of the variations that do occur is, in the large majority of the cases, not of any doctrinal significance. A great many of the variations are due to simple copyist errors. Such copyist errors are understandable phenomena that remain unavoidable even after the onset of modern technology.

Alexandrian Text-Type – All extant manuscripts of all text-types are at least 85% identical and most of the variations are not translatable into English, such as word order or spelling. – wikipedia.org

Byzantine Text-Type – To give a feel for the difference between the Byzantine form of text and the Eclectic text, which is mainly Alexandrian in character, of 800 variation units in the Epistle of James collected by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, the Byzantine and Eclectic texts are in agreement in 731 of the places (a rate of 92.3%). Many of the 69 disagreements involve differences in word order and other variants that do not appear as translatable differences in English versions. According to the preface to the New King James Version of the Bible, the Textus Receptus, the Alexandrian text-type and the Byzantine text-type are 85% identical (that is, of the variations that occur in any manuscript, only 15% actually differ between these three). – wikipedia.org

There are several different types of copyist errors. There are spelling errors due to poor light, poor vision, or poor hearing (when the scribe was being dictated to). There are instances, when a scribe would accidentally skip a line or two while copying and omit part of a verse, a sentence, or a paragraph. There are times, when a scribe may perhaps have accidentally incorporated a few familiar words from a different passage into a very similar verse that they were currently copying. In other cases, where a copyist was being dictated to, a word might have been misheard or confused with a similar sounding word, and the wrong word mistakenly written instead of what was in the original. And in some cases, a copyist may have compounded a title for Jesus Christ from a shorter to a longer version of the title due to familiarity and frequent contact with longer titles in other passages. Another type of copyist error would include what is called harmonizing. This type of error pertains mostly to the gospels and occurs when something written by one gospel author may have incidentally incorporated by a scribe into a parallel account of the same events in another gospel.

It is these types of variations (erroneous spellings, additional words, skipped lines, compounded titles, harmonization, etc.) that constitute most of the textual differences in the New Testament texts. They are obvious to the trained eyes of Greek scholars and linguists. They are easily identified and corrected through comparison to the vast amount of other existing texts. And, most importantly, they have no substantive doctrinal significance, which is to say they have no bearing whatsoever on Judeo-Christian teaching.

Text Types (or Families) and Bible Translations

These types of variations do exist. And the development and compounding of such errors into various regional copying traditions can for the most part be traced and identified. Later copies may repeat any errors that existed in the source document that was copied from. In other cases, copyists using more than one source document may have been able to correct these errors and remove them by comparing the parent documents. Often scribes (or copyists) wrote notes in the margin concerning these things. And ultimately as a result of these trends, such scribal errors accumulated over time into the various text types (or families) that we have today. A text type is the categorizing of surviving texts into groups with other texts that have the same readings where variation occurs in the text.

The Byzantine text type or family is a great example of this. Of the 5,000 surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament the majority of them (95 percent or so) are considered to be of the Byzantine text type or family. For this reason, the Byzantine texts are sometimes collectively referred to as the Majority Text. As a family of texts, the Byzantine manuscripts are very consistent with one another in terms of how they read from passage to passage and how they differ from the readings of other families of texts. As such, the Byzantine text tradition is quite an amazing testament to the efficiency and faithfulness of the copyists in accurately preserving ancient and authentic Christian teaching and manuscript content with consistency and without alteration.

By contrast, the Alexandrian text type is a much smaller set of texts.

The relevance of these two text types to modern Bible translations is significant. This can be seen in the example of the King James Bible, which has been dominant in the English speaking world for several centuries going back to the 1600's. The King James Bible is based on the work of scholarly men who utilized Byzantine type manuscripts to create a single composite Greek document of the New Testament in order to translate into the English language. This composite is known as the Received Text or Textus Receptus. It was a very scholarly undertaking and produced a very fine result. However, several important aspects about the King James Version must be acknowledged.

First, the Textus Receptus is not itself an ancient Greek manuscript copy. Instead, is a composite created from existing Byzantine manuscripts. Second, while the Textus Receptus (or TR) was based on and is very close to the Byzantine text type, it is not identical with the Byzantine text tradition. There are places where the TR differs from the Byzantine text tradition (Majority Text). Third, the TR was itself altered over the course of several editions.

Byzantine Text-Type – The first printed edition of the Greek New Testament was completed by Erasmus and published by Johann Froben of Basel on March 1, 1516 (Novum Instrumentum omne). Due to the pressure of his

publisher to bring their edition to market before the competing Complutensian Polyglot, **Erasmus based his work on around a half-dozen manuscripts, all of which dated from the twelfth century or later; and only one of which was not of the Byzantine text-type. Six verses that were not witnessed in any of these sources, he back-translated from the Latin Vulgate, and he also introduced many readings from the Vulgate and Church Fathers. This text came to be known as the Textus Receptus or received text** after being thus termed by Bonaventura Elzevir, an enterprising publisher from the Netherlands, **in his 1633 edition of Erasmus' text. The New Testament of the King James Version of the Bible was translated from editions of what was to become the Textus Receptus. If the "Majority Text" of Hodges and Farstad is taken to be the standard for the Byzantine text-type, then The Textus Receptus differs from this in 1,838 Greek readings, of which 1,005 represent "translatable" differences.**[13] – wikipedia.org

Textus Receptus – Textus Receptus (Latin: "received text") is the name subsequently given to **the succession of printed Greek texts of the New Testament which constituted the translation base for** the original German Luther Bible, the translation of the New Testament into English by William Tyndale, **the King James Version**, and most other Reformation-era New Testament translations throughout Western and Central Europe. The series originated with the first printed Greek New Testament, published in 1516—a work undertaken in Basel by the Dutch Catholic scholar and humanist Desiderius Erasmus. Detractors criticize it for being **based on only some six manuscripts, containing between them not quite the whole of the New Testament. The missing text was back-translated from the Vulgate.** Although **based mainly on late manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type**, Erasmus's edition differed markedly from the classic form of that text, and **included some missing parts back translated from the Latin Vulgate.** – wikipedia.org

Textus Receptus – **The Textus Receptus was established on a basis of the Byzantine text-type, also called 'Majority text'**, and usually is identified with it by its followers. **But the Textus Receptus has some additions and variants which did not exist in the Byzantine text before the 16th century.** The Comma Johanneum in 1 John 5:7 is well known example, but there are also other texts like: Matt 10:8; 27:35; Luke 17:36; John 3:25; Acts 8:37; 9:5; 15:34; and some readings ("book of life" instead of "tree of life" in Revelation 22:19) which the Byzantine text did not have. In these cases the majority of manuscripts agree with the Alexandrian text-type against the Textus Receptus. – wikipedia.org

By contrast, a few words should be said about the Alexandrian text family. Through a process of textual criticism, Alexandrian type texts are used to create a Greek manuscript compilation (or Critical Text) that is then used as a basis for modern Bible translations such as the NIV, NASB, RSB, etc. It is important to understand several factors about the process of how the Alexandrian manuscripts are utilized to produce these modern translations.

First, the Alexandrian text family's strength is in the early dates of its documents. (It should be noted that although dating earlier, the Alexandrian documents are still copies not originals, just as the Byzantine texts are copies.) And yet, one of the Alexandrian family's weaknesses is perhaps due to this earliness. This weakness is that we simply don't have as many Alexandrian texts remaining in existence today. As we said earlier, they are by far the minority of surviving texts. Earlier we reported that the Byzantine Text Type includes 95% of the surviving 5,000 Greek manuscripts. That total includes a very large number of New Testament Greek manuscripts. In contrast, the number of surviving Alexandrian manuscripts is a much smaller number.

Alexandrian Text-Type – the Alexandrian text-type is witnessed by around 30 surviving manuscripts — by no means all of which are associated with Egypt, although that area is where Alexandrian witnesses are most prevalent. – wikipedia.org

As such, when the Alexandrian text reading is preferred over other readings such as the reading in the Byzantine (or Majority Text) type, we must be aware that we may be basing our reading of a New Testament passage in favor of a very small fraction of the existing manuscripts against a much larger majority. However, though it is important to be aware of this, it must be stated that in and of itself, this fact does not discredit the use of the Alexandrian texts for producing a reliable New Testament translation. There may, after all be very good reason for going with such a preference.

Second, as a family the Alexandrian texts do not have as much agreement or consistency as the Byzantine (or Majority) text type particularly in the Synoptic Gospels. When scholars use the Byzantine texts to produce a New Testament translation, by and large, they do not have to make selections as to which Byzantine text or texts they are going to use for how a particular passage reads. Since the Byzantine texts have so much agreement with one another they tend to collectively point to the same reading with much consistency. This is especially relevant where there is textual variation between the surviving texts and text types. The result is that the translations based upon the Byzantine or Majority texts reproduce the collective consistency and agreement of the readings of the Byzantine or Majority text group.

Byzantine Text-Type – Compared to Alexandrian text-type manuscripts, the distinct Byzantine readings tend to show a greater tendency toward smooth and well-formed Greek, they display fewer instances of textual variation between parallel Synoptic Gospel passages, and they are less likely to present contradictory or "difficult" issues of exegesis.[8] – wikipedia.org

Where there is variation present in a verse among different text traditions, the decision is whether or not to follow the Byzantine (or Majority Text) type and exclude the other options presented by other traditions or to exclude the reading of the Byzantine texts in favor of another reading. The point being that the Byzantine or Majority Text type possesses a consistency by which they are used

collectively rather than selectively. We can make this point clearer by a comparison with the Alexandrian texts.

When scholars use Alexandrian texts to produce a translation of the New Testament they sometimes have to select which specific texts from the Alexandrian family they are going to follow when rendering the reading of any verse or passage because there is a variety of options within the Alexandrian texts themselves, particularly in readings of the Synoptic Gospels.

Alexandrian Text-Type – The evidence of the papyri suggests that — in Egypt at least — very different manuscript readings co-existed in the same area in the early Christian period. So, whereas the early 3rd century papyrus P75 witnesses a text in Luke and John that is very close to that found a century later in the Codex Vaticanus, the nearly contemporary P66 has a much freer text of John; with many unique variants; and others that are now considered distinctive to the Western and Byzantine text-types, albeit that the bulk of readings are Alexandrian. Most modern text critics therefore do not regard any one text-type as deriving in direct succession from autograph manuscripts, but rather, as the fruit of local exercises to compile the best New Testament text from a manuscript tradition that already displayed wide variations. – wikipedia.org

Where there is variation present in a verse among different text traditions, the question isn't just whether or not to follow the Alexandrian texts and exclude the other text traditions. Instead, the question can also require determining which of the Alexandrian versions should be followed and which Alexandrian texts should be excluded along with the rest of the surviving texts and text types.

Byzantine Text-Type – Karl Lachmann (1850) was the first New Testament textual critic to produce an edition that broke with the Textus Receptus, relying mainly instead on manuscripts from the Alexandrian text-type...Depending on which modern critical text is taken as an exemplar of the Alexandrian text-type, then this will differ from the Hodges and Farstad text in around 6,500 readings (Wallace 1989). – wikipedia.org

Alexandrian Text-Type – According to the present critics codices 75 and B are the best Alexandrian witnesses, which present the pure Alexandrian text. All other witnesses are classified according to whether they preserve the excellent 75-B line of text. With the primary Alexandrian witnesses are included 66 and citations of Origen. – wikipedia.org

In particular, there are a handful of prominent Alexandrian texts that are used the most often to create a composite Greek Critical Text from which to translate a modern translation such as the NIV, NASB, or RSV. These documents include: Papyrus 66, containing most of John's Gospel; Papyrus 75, containing sections of Luke and John; Codex Sinaiticus (or Aleph as it is referred to), containing most of the Old and New Testaments; and Codex Vaticanus (also referred to as B).

On some occasions, these prominent texts may agree with each other. When they do agree, the reading they share is typically concluded to be the most reliable reading as it is typically representative of the oldest surviving texts. However, on other occasions, the prominent Alexandrian texts do not have the same reading of a passage, but instead they vary among themselves as to what the Greek wording is. To be clear, in many cases, the variation may only involve word order or a few omitted parts of phrases. When variation occurs among Alexandrian manuscripts, each individual text must be weighed by scholars against the others and a determination for the best reading of the New Testament is made based solely on the readings of a very few texts.

The bottom line is that composite Greek texts compiled from Alexandrian texts may not be consistent with the readings of any single surviving Alexandrian manuscript. Instead, critical texts that are used to create modern English translations of the Bible are an assortment of selected readings from one or more Alexandrian texts in some passages and readings from other Alexandrian texts in other passages.

Valuing the Antiquity of the Surviving Texts and Text Types

The last point of clarification that should be made has to do with comparing the antiquity and proportion of these two important text traditions. It has been noted that the Byzantine Text is the Majority Text. And it has been noted that the surviving Alexandrian texts are earlier, meaning more ancient than the surviving Byzantine texts.

However, we must keep in mind that when we are discussing such things we can only draw conclusions about the surviving manuscripts, the situation as it exists for us today. We are prohibited from drawing conclusions about the antiquity of each tradition or the proportion of either tradition in the first few centuries of Christendom.

For instance, while the Byzantine texts are the majority of the texts surviving into modern times, they are also later dating texts. This means that the majority of the manuscripts that we have surviving from the first 8 centuries of Christian history are not Byzantine, but of the Alexandrian text type or family. However, the great majority of the manuscripts we have surviving from after the 9th century or later are after the Byzantine tradition.

When we discuss the relative amounts of surviving manuscripts of particular text types from particular historical periods we must be careful. The majority of the surviving 5,000 manuscripts date from after the 8th century. In fact, of the texts that survive today from the period before the 9th century, only about fifteen are full copies of the New Testament. There are also some copies of a few books and fragments containing only a few verses. Of the fifteen fuller manuscripts dating from before the 9th century, nine can be said to be of the Alexandrian text-type, and six exhibit the Byzantine text-type.

Alexandrian Text-Type – Most Greek Uncial manuscripts were recopied in this period and their parchment leaves typically scraped clean for re-use. Consequently, **surviving Greek New Testament manuscripts from before the 9th century are relatively rare; but nine — over half of the total that survive — witness a more or less pure Alexandrian text.** These include the oldest near-complete manuscripts of the New Testament Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1209 and Codex Sinaiticus (believed to date from the early 4th century CE). **A number of substantial papyrus manuscripts of portions of the New Testament survive from earlier still, and those that can be ascribed a text-type — such as 66 and 75 from the early 3rd century — also tend to witness to the Alexandrian text.**
– wikipedia.org

Byzantine Text-Type – Amongst the earliest surviving manuscripts, the position is reversed. **There are six manuscripts earlier than the 9th century which conform to the Byzantine text-type;** of which the 5th century Codex Alexandrinus, (the oldest), is Byzantine only in the Gospels with the rest of the New Testament being Alexandrian. By comparison, **the Alexandrian text-type is witnessed by nine surviving uncials earlier than the ninth century (including the Codex Alexandrinus outside the Gospels); and is also usually considered to be demonstrated in three earlier papyri.** Modern critical editions of the New Testament tend to conform most often to Alexandrian witnesses — especially Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. – wikipedia.org

Notice how careful we are when making these statements. We cannot say that the Byzantine texts were the majority text type of the early church. We don't know that information. It might be reasonable to conclude this based on the sheer amount of surviving Byzantine texts from later times. But the fact remains that all we know for sure is that we have more Byzantine texts surviving from the 9th century through the 16th century than we do Alexandrian texts surviving from that same period.

And likewise, we cannot say that the Alexandrian texts were the majority text of the early church. Again, we simply don't have that information. It may be reasonable to conclude that this was the case due to the fact that we have more Alexandrian texts surviving from this earlier period, but their survival could also be due to other factors besides a predominance at that time. For instance, it is quite reasonable to suppose that the arid climate of Egypt helped to preserve the Alexandrian texts while texts in other regions deteriorated.

Alexandrian Text-Type – In the United States, some critics have a dissenting view that prefers the Byzantine text-type, such as Maurice Arthur Robinson and William Grover Pierpont. They assert that **Egypt, almost alone, offers optimal climatic conditions favoring preservation of ancient manuscripts while, on the other hand, the papyri used in the east (Asia Minor and Greece) would not have survived due to the unfavourable climatic conditions. So, it is not surprising that if we were to find ancient Biblical manuscripts, they would**

come mostly from the Alexandrian geographical area and not from the Byzantine geographical area. – wikipedia.org

Again, all we can say for sure is that we have more Alexandrian texts surviving from before the 9th century than we do Byzantine texts surviving from that same period. But we simply do not know the proportion of either text in comparison to the other during the earlier periods.

The main point is that that survivability into modern times does not necessarily provide any indication of prevalence or proportion of distribution in the early church.

Furthermore, while Alexandrian texts dating before the 9th century do outnumber Byzantine texts from the same period, the ratio is only about 60-66 percent Alexandrian over Byzantine. This is not comparable to the 95% majority that Byzantine texts have over Alexandrian texts beginning after the 8th century. We have nearly 5,000 Byzantine texts. The number of Alexandrian texts is much, much smaller.

Alexandrian Text-Type – the Alexandrian text-type is witnessed by around 30 surviving manuscripts — by no means all of which are associated with Egypt, although that area is where Alexandrian witnesses are most prevalent. – wikipedia.org

Likewise, it should be noted that the surviving documents of both text types (Alexandrian and Byzantine) come from centuries after the original documents were penned. The original New Testament works were penned between 40 and 100 A.D. The oldest surviving Alexandrian papyri are fragments of John and Luke, which at the earliest date to the beginning of the third century. The important Alexandrian codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus date to about the year 300 A.D. or so. The earliest surviving Byzantine texts come about a hundred years after these. Likewise, scholarly study of early church writings, other early translations, and even early manuscripts and papyri leads to the conclusion that readings consistent with or characteristic of Byzantine text type are evident prior to the dates assigned to the earliest surviving Byzantine manuscripts in the fifth century. These considerations indicate that the Byzantine text type also was present in the early centuries even in the dates assigned to the earliest Alexandrian codices like Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

Byzantine Text-Type – Other examples of Byzantine readings were found in p66 in John 1:32; 3:24; 4:14.51; 5:8; 6:10.57; 7:3.39; 8:41.51.55; 9:23; 10:38; 12:36; 14:17. This supports the views of scholars such as Harry Sturz and Maurice Robinson that the roots of the Byzantine text may go back to a very early date; although Bruce Metzger points out that this cannot be taken to demonstrate that these readings were in the original text.[15] Some authors have interpreted this as a rehabilitation of Textus Receptus.[16] Many of these readings have substantial support from other text-types and they are not

distinctively Byzantine. Daniel Wallace found only **two distinctively papyrus-Byzantine agreements.** – wikipedia.org

Byzantine Text-Type – The earliest Church Father to witness to a Byzantine text-type in substantial New Testament quotations is John Chrysostom (c. 349 — 407); although the fragmentary surviving works of Asterius the Sophist († 341) have also been considered to conform to the Byzantine text.[2] Chrysostom and Asterius used text only in 75% agreed with the standard Byzantine text. **The earliest translation to witness to a Greek base conforming generally to the Byzantine text in the Gospels is the Syriac Peshitta (though it has many Alexandrian and Western readings); usually dated to the 4th century;** although in respect of several much contested readings, such as Mark 1:2 and John 1:18, the Peshitta rather supports the Alexandrian witnesses. – wikipedia.org

Byzantine Text-Type – There are no consistent Byzantine witnesses amongst the early New Testament papyri. Nevertheless, **instances of distinctive Byzantine readings are not unusual in the earliest texts** — even though they otherwise conform more to other text-types or none. **Hence, many (and possibly most) distinctive Byzantine readings are likely to be early in date.** Two broad explanations have been offered for this observation:

- that the Byzantine text-type transmits a text closest to the primary form of the New Testament books; whose early manuscript witnesses have not survived, as this text-type predominated in regions where the climate did not favour the preservation of papyrus;
- that the Byzantine text represents a consistent exercise in textual compilation and correction from around the 4th century, the editors having eclectically selected those readings from a range of early manuscripts, that best conformed to their presupposed standards of the characteristics to be expected in the New Testament text.

– wikipedia.org

The important fact is that while the Alexandrian texts may be closer in proximity to the originals than the Byzantine texts, the difference in time between surviving texts from these two traditions is far less significant than the amount of time between either group and the originals. The reason for this is the fact that all the surviving texts date after the main period when textual variation is thought to have occurred. Because this is the case, neither text type can claim synchronicity with the earliest texts based on their relative proximity in time.

Identifying the Key Issues at Stake Concerning Textual Variation

The issue brought up by this comparison is an important one. It deals with the central aspect of the ongoing discussion over the reliability and relative value of the surviving text traditions. The key question is this: in the few passages where truly significant variations may be presented in the surviving texts, which text's reading do we regard as most likely to reflect the original wording of New Testament scripture?

Where theologically substantive variations may exist between the surviving manuscripts, it is crucial to the study, preservation, and proclamation of sound Christian teaching that we identify which version is an alteration from the original scriptural reading and which version accurately preserves the original scriptural reading. This identification should be aided and accompanied by an explanation for how and why the alternate version first diverged from the original reading in the first place.

Later on we will take a look at some of the critical passages where this process of identifying the original and the divergent readings is most important. For now, we will continue to discuss the type of textual variations where making such an identification is of the utmost importance.

Earlier on in this article we discussed the existence of what we deemed to be scribal or copyist errors. These errors included such things as misspellings, transposing words, omitting lines or parts of lines of text, misheard words replaced with similar sounding words, compounded titles, and the incorporation of phrases from other passages to a passage with a similar phrase or description. A common characteristic of these types of copyist errors is their unintentional or incidental nature.

The variations created by these types of processes are typically understood as accidentally or incidentally resulting from the nature and imperfections inherent to the process of copying large amounts of text familiar to the copyist. In no case was the scribe intentionally attempting to alter the meaning or wording of the text. And, for the most part, variations created in this manner are apparent to the trained eye of persons studied in Christian teaching, Christian history, and Biblical languages and who have access to other scriptural and ancient Christian texts for comparison.

Additionally, variations created along these lines are doctrinally insignificant and have no bearing on Christian teaching. In some cases a word or phrase included in one text or text family is not present in another, but due to the surpassing amount of material contained in the New Testament no serious loss or change of doctrinally significant material occurs. In other cases a word or phrase from one location may be added to a passage discussing a similar topic. Any absence from a particular verse usually appears elsewhere within the nearby verses, the larger context of the passage or book, or at the very least somewhere else in the New Testament. Any additional statements added to a passage are not novel to the New Testament, but are imported from other passages. The result of these types of variations is that nothing of importance to Christian teaching is lost or left unclear and nothing of a novel or contradictory theological nature is added.

Regarding these types of copyist errors, there can be no real disagreement with the idea of correcting misspellings, misheard words, or inadvertent omissions. Of course, such correcting measures are conducted through comparison to other existing New Testament texts as a part of competent translational procedures for

all modern versions of the Bible. Likewise, we have no principle disagreement with the removal of added words that result from compounding titles or the insertion of phrases from similar passages. As we said, we feel that in cases such as these, nothing of doctrinal importance is really at stake. And we do not feel that the inclusion or exclusion of such added phrases really poses any significant issue for understanding Christian teaching.

Similarly, let us clear up any confusion that may exist on a related issue. The above descriptions of variations resulting from unintentional or doctrinally insignificant scribal or copyist “errors” can be categorized as “textual variations.”

Textual variations are essentially different wordings of the Greek language in the surviving New Testament texts. We must distinguish these types of actual textual differences that occur in the Greek texts, with another type of difference that becomes present when comparing the various modern English translations that are available today.

In contrast to textual differences in the Greek texts, modern English versions of the Bible all have some degree of what might be called “translational variation.” Translational variation deals with the various English words and phrases that are used to translate the original Greek language from the surviving text traditions. Some modern English versions may more consistently or adequately convey the meaning of the Greek language. Some may use more up-to-date language. In most cases, variation in the English does not correspond to the Greek text itself. Different English words are used by different modern translations based on the exact same wording of the Greek text. As students of the Bible we can and should ask whether our English translation satisfactorily translates and communicates the meaning conveyed by the original Greek. But, such translational questions do not deal with and should not be confused with the key question of which Greek textual tradition preserves (or diverges) from the original wording of scripture in such places where textual variation occurs.

To summarize, textual variation deals with the critical issues of different versions present in the Greek texts. Translational variation deals with the less important issue of the particular selection of English words and phrases to convey the meaning of the Greek. Since a student of the Bible should not and would not base a doctrinal position merely upon the particular English wording without a study of how the underlying Greek is used, translational variations between modern English versions are not really an issue that affects the all important matter of doctrinally relevant divergence in the wording of a few passages of the surviving Greek texts.

By discussing these issues we can appropriately focus on the real issue at hand. The real issue at hand is not the doctrinally insignificant, textual variations that arise as a result of unintentional or incidentally copyist errors (or alterations) that have no doctrinal insignificance. The real issue is not the translational variation that is present between modern English Bibles. The real issue that needs to be

addressed is the few occasions where doctrinally significant textual variation may exist between the surviving Greek texts (and text types.)

When doctrinally significant textual variation may exist between the surviving Greek texts (and text types) it is necessary to identify which text (or which text type or tradition) has preserved the original scriptural reading and which text has diverged from the original reading. This identification requires some understanding of how divergences could have occurred in the first place. It is this question, how textual variations or divergences of doctrinal significance occurred, that separates the two main schools of Biblical text scholars. It is this question that causes many modern scholars to prefer selected readings present in particular and prominent Alexandrian texts where variations exist. It is this question that causes other modern scholars and many scholars of the past to prefer the readings present in the Byzantine or Majority Text tradition where variations exist.

What is not at issue between the Christian scholars who support either the Alexandrian or Byzantine text types is the idea of intentional additions and alteration by pious scribes. While it is true that some fringe groups, such as the Jesus Seminar, might be willing to assert that pious scribes intentionally added and altered scripture texts, this is a view that should not and need not be ascribed to pro-Alexandrian text supporters.

Neither Alexandrian text supporters nor Byzantine text supporters explain the textual variations that exist between surviving copies of the New Testament as the result of intentional additions or alterations by pious scribes. Both of these groups of scholars discard that idea as untenable for several reasons.

First, pious scribes had the utmost reverence for the sacred texts and for the authority of the apostles' teaching. They believed very firmly that the words they were copying were written by men of greater understanding and wisdom than themselves. They were deeply convinced that the text they were handling was the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, penned by the apostles of Jesus Christ, and preserved by divine providence.

Second, the abiding faithfulness of the scribes in reproducing thousands of copies of the scriptural texts with consistency and with only very minimal variation over thousands of years clearly demonstrates both the high degree of diligence with which the scribes approached their task and the reverence that they held for sacred text itself. This consistency that we have in the body of surviving New Testament texts indicates that as a rule scribes did not intentionally alter or add to sacred texts.

These facts together lead Christian scholars of both the pro-Alexandrian and pro-Byzantine text types to doubt the suggestion that at any point a truly pious scribe would have looked at a New Testament document and said "I don't think that's right, I think it should say this instead."

Alexandrian Text-Type – However, **most scholars generally agree that there is no evidence of systematic theological alteration in any of the text types.** – wikipedia.org

The Grounds for Preferring the Readings of One Text or Text Type over Others

Where Christian scholars truly differ in their assessment of how divergence occurred in the first place is really an issue of whether or not they see any doctrinal issues are at stake when selecting from the available text variations. Scholars who support the use of selected Alexandrian readings do not typically view any textual variations as having real doctrinal consequence. As a result of this conclusion, pro-Alexandrian text scholars tend not to consider the intentional alteration of scriptural texts by heretics to be a serious potential cause of doctrinally significant divergences in the surviving New Testament texts. And consequently, pro-Alexandrian text scholars may typically conclude that all textual variation must be understood solely as the result of incidental and unintentional copyist errors.

It is this view that separates the pro-Alexandrian text scholars from those who support the Byzantine or Majority Text. Like the supporters of the Alexandrian texts, supporters of the Majority (or Byzantine) Text acknowledge that the unintentional and incidental copyist errors described above can and did result in doctrinally insignificant textual variations. However, unlike the pro-Alexandrian text scholars, pro-Byzantine (or Majority) text scholars view some textual variations as potentially having doctrinally significant consequences. As a corollary, pro-Byzantine (or Majority) text scholars insist that the historically documented text tampering of Alexandrian heretics could be a potential contributor to textual variation which should be considered when determining which reading has diverged from the original.

By comparing the approaches of these two scholarly camps, we arrive at two additional critical questions of this discussion. First, do some textual variations perhaps have doctrinal implications? And second, should heretical text tampering be considered a potential cause for the textual variation that exists in surviving New Testament copies? Obviously, these two questions are related. In answering them the first point to establish is the whether heretics in Alexandria were intentionally altering Biblical texts.

There are many non-canonical writings that have survived to us from the early church period. The men who wrote during this time recorded the history of this very important period spanning the first few centuries A.D. As works documenting historical information, the writings of such men as Tertullian and Eusebius provide a great deal of information about the activities of the prominent heretical groups of these early centuries. And what we find is not only what these heretical groups believed and taught, but most importantly, what we are told by

these early church historians is that the heretics did most certainly alter sacred texts to better fit with their deviant teachings.

We can also learn from the early church where the heretics who were altering the text were based geographically and the language they used to spread their false doctrine. When we study early church history we find that although Gnostic heretics did spread their views in other parts of the Roman (or Byzantine Roman) world, some of them were centered in Alexandria, Egypt even in early centuries. Early prominent Gnostic heretical leaders like Valentinus and Basilides were first active in Alexandria during the middle of the second century A.D.

Alexandrian Text-Type – the Alexandrian text-type is witnessed by around 30 surviving manuscripts — **by no means all of which are associated with Egypt, although that area is where Alexandrian witnesses are most prevalent.** – wikipedia.org

In the twenty seventh chapter of his work Against Heresies, Book I, Irenaeus, a second century apologist, recorded the beliefs of the Gnostic heretic Marcion. In the fifth chapter of his third book, Tertullian, a Christian apologist who lived and wrote between approximately 160-230 A.D., records that Marcion tampered with the Biblical texts. As such Tertullian's testimony that Marcion deliberately altered the scriptural texts in a theologically consequential manner is informative of this practice among heretical leaders. Notice from the quote below that Marcion is not an isolated incident, but his followers are said to be "daily retouching" the New Testament texts.

"For if the (Gospels) of the apostles have come down to us in their integrity, whilst Luke's, which is received amongst us, so far accords with their rule as to be on a par with them in permanency of reception in the churches, it clearly follows that Luke's Gospel also has come down to us in like integrity until the sacrilegious treatment of Marcion. In short, **when Marcion laid hands on it, it then became diverse and hostile to the Gospels of the apostles.** I will therefore advise **his followers**, that they **either change these Gospels, however late to do so, into a conformity with their own, whereby they may seem to be in agreement with the apostolic writings (for they are daily retouching their work,** as daily they are convicted by us); or else that they blush for their master, who stands self-condemned either way — when once he hands on the truth of the gospel conscience smitten, **or again subverts it by shameless tampering.**" – Tertullian, Book III Chapter V

(NOTE: The above passage from Tertullian is quoted from Tim Warner's article "Demise of the Westcott-Hort Theory.")

Similar accounts are provided by two the fourth century writers, Eusebius and Theodoret, concerning the heretic Tatian. In the twenty eighth chapter of his work Against Heresies, Book I, Irenaeus, relates followed after the Gnostic beliefs of men like Marcion. And like his predecessor Marcion, Eusebius and Theodoret record that Tatian also altered the Biblical texts. Again, this information

demonstrates clearly the practice of early heretics to deliberately alter the scriptural texts in a doctrinally significant fashion.

5. They, indeed, use the Law and Prophets and Gospels, but interpret in their own way the utterances of the Sacred Scriptures. And they abuse Paul the apostle and reject his epistles, and do not accept even the Acts of the Apostles. 6. But their original founder, **Tatian, formed a certain combination and collection of the Gospels, I know not how, to which he gave the title Diatessaron**, and which is still in the hands of some. **But they say that he ventured to paraphrase certain words of the apostle**, in order to improve their style. - Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book IV, Chapter XXIX - The Heresy of Tatian

“Tatian the Syrian...also composed the gospel which is called ‘Diatessaron,’ cutting out the genealogies and whatever other passages show that the Lord was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.” – Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrhus, Ante Nicene Fathers, Vol. IX, p. 37, 38

(NOTE: The above passage from Theodoret is quoted from “Tim Warner’s article Demise of the Westcott-Hort Theory.”)

In the quote below, Eusebius records that doctrinally significant text tampering was common practice of the Gnostic heretics. One of the men, Theodotus, was a disciple of the prominent second century Gnostic heretic Valentinus who founded the Gnostic school at Alexandria. Notice again from the quote below that Theodotus is not an isolated incident, but his followers are said to be “daily retouching” the New Testament texts.

“...Theodotus, the leader and father of this God-denying apostasy, as the first one that asserted that Christ was a mere man... **The sacred Scriptures...have been boldly perverted by them;** the rule of the ancient faith they have set aside, Christ they have renounced, not inquiring what the Holy Scriptures declared, but zealously laboring what form of reasoning may be devised to establish their impiety...But as to these men who abuse the acts of the unbelievers, to their own heretical views, and who adulterate the simplicity of that faith contained in the Holy Scriptures,...**For this purpose they fearlessly lay their hands on the Holy Scriptures , saying that they have corrected them. And that I do not say this against them without foundation, whoever wishes may learn; for should any one collect and compare their copies one with another, he would find them greatly at variance among themselves.** For the copies of Asclepiodotus will be found to differ from those of Theodotus. **Copies of many you may find in abundance, altered, by the eagerness of their disciples to insert each one his own corrections, as they call them, i.e. their corruptions.** Again the copies of Hermophilus do not agree with these, for those of Appollonius are not consistent with themselves. **For one may compare those which were prepared before by them, with those which they afterwards perverted for their own objects, and you will find them widely differing.** ... For either they do not believe that the Holy Scriptures were uttered by the Holy Spirit, and they are thus infidels, or they deem themselves wiser than the Holy Spirit, and what alternative is there but to

pronounce them daemoniacs? For neither can they deny that they have been guilty of the daring act, when the copies were written with their own hand, nor did they receive such Scriptures from those by whom they were instructed in the elements of the faith; nor can they show copies from which they were transcribed.” – Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Reprinted 1991. pp. 214-216

(NOTE: The above passage from Eusebius is quoted from Tim Warner’s article “Demise of the Westcott-Hort Theory.”)

From the available historical records we have of the early church period we can see clearly that it was the common practice of the Gnostic heretics to alter the scriptural texts.

This historical information is an important factor for considering how textual variation of doctrinal significance occurred that cannot responsibly be left out of our discussion. We should be aware that heretics were intentionally altering sacred text in the century or so before the copies that survive to us today were made when considering how and why doctrinally significant textual variation may have occurred. To be clear it is not necessary to suggest that the Alexandrian manuscripts we have today are the direct product of Gnostic copyists. A more plausible scenario might involve a pious scribe in Alexandria producing a copy of the New Testament from a set of earlier texts including papyri which in some cases may have been quite fragmented. Perhaps one of these earlier texts included Gnostic readings which the later scribe incorporated unknowingly into his copy. Once these issues are considered it becomes difficult to overlook or entirely rule out the possibility that some textual variation may have resulted from the incorporation of heretically altered readings of certain passages into Alexandrian texts which may have potential doctrinal significance. Even though this explanation is plausible it is not absolutely provable or necessary. It may be the case that all textual variation, even in passages which could be considered to have theological implications, can be better explained through accidental copying errors made by pious scribes.

Assessing the Significance of Textual Alteration by the Heretics in Alexandria

The presence of heretical groups in Alexandria and any potential influence they could have inadvertently had upon the Alexandrian texts deserves further discussion because heretical groups were present in both Alexandria and Byzantium.

It is true that heretical ideas were present in Byzantium in the period of the fourth century before the texts from that region that survive today were made. However, several key points must be noted regarding the heresy of fourth century Byzantium and that of Alexandria.

First, the heresy that became present in Byzantium at the time of the fourth century was Arianism. Arianism held that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was a divine being, but that He was a created being of a lower level than God the Father rather than the orthodox, historic Trinitarian position that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is uncreated and is of the same being as the Father.

Furthermore, this fourth century heresy was an offshoot of the second century Gnostic teachings present in Alexandria. After all, Arius himself began teaching this heresy in Alexandria, Egypt before later spreading it to Constantinople (or Byzantium). Among those who opposed Arian doctrine we find Athanasius, who later became bishop of Alexandria. Among those who supported Arius we find Emperor Constantine, other members of the imperial household, as well as Eusebius of Caesarea the court historian. The eventual result of the conflict was that a council was held to decide the matter at a city not far from Byzantium (or Constantinople) called Nicaea. In its decrees the council of Nicaea soundly upheld orthodoxy and condemned Arianism.

Second, we might note that textual variation is largely a second century phenomenon. The differences that we see between surviving Alexandrian and Byzantine texts are simply the continuation and accumulation of the variations that occurred over a hundred years or more before the surviving copies themselves were made. As such, variations present in surviving texts are not the result of new alteration occurring in the fourth century when Arius and Athanasius came to Byzantium. Rather, the differences present in the surviving texts are the result of divergences that took place much earlier, at the same time that heretics in Alexandria were seeking to deceive people into thinking that their false religion was the true teaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles. Thus, the more important factor may be where the heresies were present when the textual variation was initially occurring, not where heresies later appeared long after most of the initial textual variation had emerged. This factor again may, though not conclusively, again point to Alexandria as having a greater potential for heretical text alterations.

A third factor distinguishing Byzantium from Alexandria regarding any potential heretical influencing of sacred text transmission should be noted. This fourth factor regards the question of what evidence we might have for suggesting heretical tampering in either region.

As a matter of historical information, we know that in the second century Gnostic heretics were centered in Alexandria. And we know that some Gnostics were actually practicing text alteration in accordance with their own doctrine. But what about Byzantium? Is there any historical testimony that heretics in Byzantium may have been seeking to alter sacred texts? No information to this affect is found in the early church writings of the period. So, we do not have a cause for concern from the historical record regarding any heretical tampering of Byzantine texts.

Beyond historical attestation what reason is there to suspect the surviving New Testament texts from either region of having potentially been influenced by heretical text tampering?

The readings presented in the Alexandrian text in a few particular passages may seem to reflect the Gnostic teachings (as may be the case in John 1:18 for example). So, the cause of suspecting heretical text tampering in Alexandrian texts can be based on the correlation of the Alexandrian readings with the language of Gnostic teaching and the awareness the Gnostic heretics were altering New Testament texts in the century or so prior to the creation of the documents that survive from the area of Alexandria today.

But what about the Byzantine texts? Are the Byzantine text readings charged with reflecting heretical views of either the Gnostics or the Arians? No, they are not.

Alexandrian Text-Type – Alexandrian popular proponents counter that the Byzantine church was dominated by Arianism (which is in opposition to mainstream Trinitarian Christological dogma) around the time that we first see evidence of the Byzantine text emerging. However, **most scholars generally agree that there is no evidence of systematic theological alteration in any of the text types.** – wikipedia.org

Unlike, the Alexandrian texts, it is not contended by either group of scholars (pro-Alexandrian or pro-Byzantine) that the variations present in the Byzantine text bear any resemblance at all to heretical doctrine. Instead, the orthodoxy of the Byzantine readings is affirmed in all cases even if it is contended not to be a reflection of the original text.

Fair-mindedness and Caution in Assessing the Causes and Implications of Textual Variations

However important this historical information is concerning the Gnostic text alteration and the centrality of Gnostic teachers in Alexandria during the second century, it must be said that this information is not in and of itself grounds for dismissing the Alexandrian texts in favor of the Majority or Byzantine texts. On the other hand, it is enough to cause us to be cautious as we consider where and how Alexandrian texts and Majority (or Byzantine) texts differ from one another and as consider which reading preserves the original and which diverges from it, particularly with regard to any potentially doctrinally significant variations.

By contrast, while it is true that the Byzantine (or Majority) Text may itself have accumulated alterations, as we have said these alterations are not doctrinally significant and are not considered by any side to conflict with clear orthodox, Biblical teaching. The same may also be said for at least the great majority (but not necessarily all) of the textual variations that are exhibited in the Alexandrian texts. It is also very unlikely and unreasonable to suppose that pious scribes could or would have intentionally or unintentionally introduced doctrinally conflicting

material into the New Testament. And in fact, pro-Alexandrian text supporters do not assert that alterations or additions by pious scribes introduce unorthodox or conflicting doctrinal statements into the New Testament or that pious scribes intentionally altered the text at all. Instead, as we have said, Alexandrian text supporters simply view all textual variation as the result of unintentional or incidental scribal error with no doctrinal significance in any case.

Alexandrian Text-Type – Alexandrian popular proponents counter that the Byzantine church was dominated by Arianism (which is in opposition to mainstream Trinitarian Christological dogma) around the time that we first see evidence of the Byzantine text emerging. However, **most scholars generally agree that there is no evidence of systematic theological alteration in any of the text types.** – wikipedia.org

So, a distinction must be made between the Alexandrian and Byzantine (or Majority) texts in this category as well. The Alexandrian texts present at least a few passages with readings, which may be seen as containing heretical statements and implications reflecting Gnostic concepts conflicting with the whole of Biblical teaching. On the other hand, the readings of the Byzantine or Majority Text are not considered by scholars to contain any readings which could be heretical or conflicting with the whole of orthodox, Biblical teaching.

Clarifying Our Own Position through Comparison and Contrast to the Views of Others

Much work has been done in this field by others. So, we will not expound on or repeat their important work in this article. Instead, we will now take the time to clarify our position on the matter in comparison to two scholars whose work we appreciate on the subject, but who disagree with one another.

The particular authors we are referring to are Tim Warner and Dr. James R. White. For a more thorough discussion of the historical and grammatical issues involved in this subject we recommend reading their works on the matter and researching the issues they discuss in them. Dr. White is fairly well published and his book, *the King James Only Controversy* is not hard to find. Tim Warner's works may be a little more difficult to get a hold of, but are available online at pfrs.org, lasttrumpet.com, or by request from biblestudying.net.

Dr. White is a supporter of the Alexandrian text traditions, and though he prefers their reading in many cases over the reading offered by the Textus Receptus, he does not devalue the Byzantine or Majority Text. Dr. White's book *The King James Only Controversy* is useful in this regard, but it must be noted that the evaluation and comparison of the competing text traditions is peripheral to the main topic of the book, which is the much deserved refutation of those who believe that the King James Version of the Bible is itself inspired and the only God-sanctioned Bible worthy of studying. In this book, Dr. White mentions several other works on the subject of text traditions by both sides of the debate,

which are worth checking out for anyone who seeks to study this topic more fully. Perhaps most importantly however, typically White does not present heretical alteration as a viable or likely explanation of textual variation and he does not seem to consider textual variation to present any real doctrinal issues.

On the other hand, Tim Warner is a supporter of the King James Version of the Bible as the best translation to date. He is not a King James Only advocate, but he does hold to the superiority of the Byzantine or Majority Text due to the historical likelihood that the existing Alexandrian texts have incorporated some heretical alterations. Warner recognizes the historic practice of Gnostic heretics deliberately altering scriptural texts and does contend that at least some readings of passages in the Alexandrian texts have doctrinally significant consequences. In his material Warner offers arguments for preferring the Byzantine reading over the Alexandrian in specific places of doctrinally significant variation including and especially John 1:18. Although Warner does not completely devalue any usefulness of the Alexandrian texts, he does as a general rule go with the reading provided by the Textus Receptus where the two traditions differ.

Our own assessment is somewhere between the positions of these two men.

We agree with Dr. White in some areas, agreeing that the Alexandrian texts, being earlier and of a different line of copies, may tend not to possess the doctrinally insignificant and unintentional type of copyist errors discussed earlier, which may be more prevalent in the Byzantine or Majority Text family. As such we feel that it is entirely acceptable in principle to eliminate variations that accrued in later texts by comparison to the Alexandrian text. However, we are aware and cautious of the tenuous nature of preferring an Alexandrian reading over a Majority Text reading in passages which may contain doctrinally significant variations.

But, unlike Dr. White, we do believe that in at least a few passages textual variations may have doctrinal significance. Nonetheless, in principle, in verses where doctrinal issues are clearly not at stake we do not object to Dr. White's approach of preferring the readings of the Alexandrian texts.

Likewise, we acknowledge along with Dr. White that there are passages where the English translation found in modern versions is, in fact, superior for conveying the clear meaning of Christian teaching than that of the King James Bible. And, we acknowledge that for the most part there is little if anything lost doctrinally where modern translations rely upon Alexandrian text readings or where they do not include aspects of passages found in the King James.

We would also like to state clearly our agreement with Dr. White's refutation and objection to the tactics and views of the King James Only camp. Tim Warner himself criticizes the extreme positions and actions of the King James Only camp and so we find harmony with him on this as well. Similarly, while the motives of all persons involved in modern translations cannot be known, there is no need to go about suggesting a "satanic conspiracy" on the part of pro-Alexandrian text scholars or modern Bible translations.

On the other side, we do have some additional disagreements with Dr. White that bring us closer to the position of Tim Warner. We are perhaps more comfortable than White may be with the Textus Receptus because of its great conformity to and basis in the Majority or Byzantine Text. While the Byzantine Text may perhaps have accumulated a larger proportion of scribal errors and incidental alterations, these variations are not doctrinally significant to Christian teaching. It is good to acknowledge, identify, and be aware of where they may occur, but it does not threaten or affect the doctrinal soundness or historical reliability of the Biblical texts to include these variations.

Textual Variation in John 1:18 and the Historic Relevance of Early Church Writings

Lastly, we must mention that we disagree with Dr. White on his preference for the Alexandrian readings of some important New Testament passages and we disagree with his failure to conclude that some of these passages may have serious doctrinal significance. For instance, we believe that there is reason to consider that the Alexandrian reading of John 1:18 might be derivative of Gnostic alterations. It is our opinion, that in such cases as John 1:18, scribes in Alexandria could have inadvertently incorporated these heretically altered readings into their copies without realizing it. (We believe that the hypothesis that pious scribes unintentionally incorporated heretically altered texts without realizing it is at least as historically valid and reasonable as suggesting that pious scribes intentionally “corrected,” altered, or added to the texts of their own accord.)

In his articles on John 1:18, Tim Warner examines the historical information presented by the early church and provides support for the conclusion that the Alexandrian reading “only begotten God” reflects the incorporation of the Gnostic alteration in accordance with the Gnostic language and belief that Jesus was a created being, but none the less a divine emanation from the fullness of the ultimate God. Thus, the phrasing “only begotten God” could reflect Gnostic language used to relate their belief that the Word is begotten in regard to his deity rather than the clear New Testament teaching that Christ was begotten solely in regard to his humanity and incarnation.

In his article, Warner presents early documents examining the language of the Gnostic heretical teaching on this matter and the practice of altering this very passage. He includes a portion of a commentary on John’s Gospel by Ptolemy who was a disciple of the Alexandrian Gnostic Valentinus.

Valentinus - As with all the non-traditional early Christian writers, **Valentinus has been known largely through quotations in the works of his detractors, though an Alexandrian follower also preserved some fragmentary sections as extended quotes. A Valentinian teacher Ptolemy** refers to "apostolic tradition which we too have received by succession" in his Letter to Flora. - wikipedia.org

Ptolemy (gnostic) - Ptolemy the Gnostic, or Ptolemaeus Gnosticus was a disciple of the Gnostic teacher Valentinius, and is known to us for an epistle he wrote to a wealthy woman named Flora, herself not a Gnostic. Ptolemy was probably still alive c. 180. It is not known when Ptolemy became a disciple of Valentinius, but Valentinius was active in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and in Rome... In his cosmogonic depiction of the universe, Ptolemy referred to an extensive system of aeons, emanated from a monadic spiritual source. Thirty of these, as he believes, rule the higher world, the pleroma. This system becomes the basis of an exegesis which discovers in the prologue of St. John's Gospel the first Ogdoad. - wikipedia.org

Below is the quote excerpted from Warner's article on the subject.

“John, the disciple of the Lord, intentionally spoke of the origination of the entirety, by which the Father emitted all things. And he assumes that the First Being engendered by God is a kind of beginning; he has called it "Son" and **"Only-Begotten God."** In this (the Only-Begotten) the Father emitted all things in a process involving posterity.” – Layton, Bently, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 316

(NOTE: The above passage is quoted from Tim Warner's article “The Gnostic Connection.”)

It should be noted that Ptolemy is not here quoting John 1:18. As Warner elsewhere notes, what survives from Ptolemy's commentary on John 1 only continues to verse 14.

That this corruption is a part of the text that the Gnostic Ptolemy was using is shown from Ptolemy's own commentary on John. Unfortunately, his commentary covers only verses 1 through 14. But, Ptolemy does use the _expression "only begotten God" in the opening sentences of his commentary. - Tim Warner, *The Gnostic & Arian Corruption of John 1:18*, Copyright © June 2001, <http://studytoanswer.net/bibleversions/john1n18.html>

Similarly, Irenaeus reports that Valentinius' school of Gnosticism (first taught by Valentinius in Alexandria, Egypt) had co-opted the Greek word “monogenes” that appears in John 1:14 and 18 as a name for one of the gods or aeons in their divine hierarchy. As the quotes from Irenaeus show, apparently Valentinians conceived of “the divine Monogenes” in terms of John's Prologue (John 1). The Gnostic Monogenes was the offspring of the unbegotten, eternal Father or Propator who was invisible to all others besides Monogenes. In the Valentinian Gnostic scheme Monogenes is responsible for revealing to the rest of creation the greatness of the Father. Below are the texts of Irenaeus' descriptions and, for comparison, John 1:18.

John 1:18 No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten (“monogenes”) Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

1. **THEY maintain, then, that in the invisible and ineffable heights above there exists a certain perfect, pre-existent AEon,(4) whom they call Proarche, Propator, and Bythus, and describe as being invisible and incomprehensible. Eternal and unbegotten,** he remained throughout innumerable cycles of ages in profound serenity and quiescence. There existed along with him Ennoea, whom they also call Charis and Sige.(5) At last this Bythus determined to send forth from himself the beginning of all things, and deposited this production (which he had resolved to bring forth) in his contemporary Sige, even as seed is deposited in the womb. **She then, having received this seed, and becoming pregnant, gave birth to Nous, who was both similar and equal to him who had produced him, and was alone capable of comprehending his father's greatness. This Nous they call also Monogenes,** and Father, and the Beginning of all Things. - Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter I - ABSURD IDEAS OF THE DISCIPLES OF VALENTINUS AS TO THE ORIGIN

1. **They proceed to tell us that the Propator of their scheme was known only to Monogenes, who sprang from him;** in other words, only to Nous, while to all the others he was invisible and incomprehensible. And, according to them, **Nous alone took pleasure in contemplating the Father, and exulting in considering his immeasurable greatness; while he also meditated how he might communicate to the rest of the AEons the greatness of the Father, revealing to them how vast and mighty he was, and how he was without beginning,—beyond comprehension, and altogether incapable of being seen.** But, in accordance with the will of the Father, Sige restrained him, because it was his design to lead them all to an acquaintance with the aforesaid Propator, and to create within them a desire of investigating his nature. In like manner, the rest of the AEons also, in a kind of quiet way, had a wish to behold the Author of their being, and to contemplate that First Cause which had no beginning. - Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter II - THE PROPATOR WAS KNOWN TO MONO-GENES ALONE.

Fragments of Valentinus' writings are available at ccel.org which report a similar finding regarding the use of "monogenes Theos" in John 1:18 as well as the Gnostic use of the term "monogenes" to refer to a particular divine figure ("the Monogenes") which they identified with John 1.

Valentinus, founder of a Gnostic sect, founder of one of the Gnostic sects which originated in the first half of 2nd cent. I. *Biography*.—According to the tradition of the Valentinian school witnessed to by Clemens Alexandrinus (*Strom.* vii. 17, 106, p. 898, Potter), Valentinus had been a disciple of Theodas, who himself, it is very improbably said, knew St. Paul. Valentinus cannot have begun to disseminate his Gnostic doctrines till towards the end of the reign of Hadrian (117–138). *The System*.—**A review of the accounts given by the Fathers confirms the judgment that,** with the means at our command, it is very difficult to distinguish between **the original doctrine of Valentinus and the later developments made by his disciples. A description of his system must start from the Fragments, the authenticity of which** (apart from the so-called ὄρος Οὐαλεντίου in *Dial. de Recta Fide*) **is unquestioned.** But from the nature of

these fragments we cannot expect to reconstruct the whole system out of them. **From an abundant literature a few relics only have been preserved... The doctrine of the Aeons** stands as much behind the anthropological and ethical problems in these excerpts as it does **in the fragments. We find something about the Pleroma in an interpretation of the prologue of St. John's Gospel** (Excerpt. §§ 6, 7). By the ἀρχή of St. John i. 1, in which the Logos "was," we must understand **the Μονογενής "Who is also called God" (the reading ὁ μονογενής θεός John i. 18 being followed). "The Logos was ἐν ἀρχῇ" means that He was in the Monogenes, in the Νοῦς and the Ἀλήθεια—the reference being to the syzygy of Λόγος and Ζωή which is said to have proceeded from Νοῦς and Ἀλήθεια. The Logos is called God because He is in God, in the Νοῦς. But when it is said ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, the reference is to the Ζωή as σύζυγος of the Logos. The Unknown Father (πατήρ ἄγνωστος) willed to be known to the Aeons. On knowing Himself through His own Ἐνθύμησις, which was indeed the spirit of knowledge (πνεῦμα γνώσεως), He, by knowledge, made to emanate the Monogenes. The Monogenes having emanated from the Gnosis, i.e. the Enthymesis of the Father, is in Himself Gnosis, i.e. Son, for it is through the Son that the Father is known. The πνεῦμα ἀγάπης mingles itself with the πνεῦμα γνώσεως as the Father with the Son (i.e. the Monogenes or Νοῦς) and the Enthymesis with Ἀλήθεια, proceeding from the Aletheia as the Gnosis proceeds from the Enthymesis. The μονογενής νίος, Who abides in the bosom of the Father, emanates from the Father's bosom and thereby declares (ἐξηγεῖται) the Enthymesis through Gnosis to the Aeons. Having become visible on earth, He is no longer called by the apostle Monogenes (simply), but ὡς μονογενής. For though remaining in Himself one and the same, He is in the creation called πρωτόκοτος, and in the Pleroma Μονογενής, and appears in each locality as He can be comprehended there. - ccel.org, Henry Wace, A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wace/biodict.pdf>**

On this point we also feel that it is important to describe Dr. White's position on John 1:18 because it exemplifies the oversight we feel should be avoided. Dr. White concludes that no doctrinal difficulties are present in the Alexandrian reading of this passage. As a result, he sees no reason to conclude that heretical tampering could or should be considered as a possible cause of the textual variation. As such, Dr. White concludes that the variation must simply be a result of incidental scribal alteration. Specifically, because it is difficult to see how "theos" ("God") would have accidentally been inserted by a scribe if the Greek word for "son" was originally present, Dr. White concludes that the alternative ("Theos") must be the original wording. The result is Dr. White's conclusion that at some point a scribe accidentally replaced the Greek word "theos" with the Greek word for "son" due to the coupling of "son" with "monogenes" elsewhere in the New Testament in reference to Jesus Christ.

In his book, Dr. White seeks to defend the Alexandrian "monogenes Theos" rendering against the accusation that it implies that Jesus was not eternally God. Dr. White argues that "monogenes" does not mean "only begotten." He asserts instead that "monogenes" means "one of a kind." From this understanding, Dr.

White suggests that the translation “one of a kind” or “unique” is actually more accurate than “only begotten.” In this way, Dr. White explains the Alexandrian reading of John 1:18 as the unique God (“monogenes Theos”). White contends that having the verse speak of Christ as “the only God” rather than “the begotten God” eliminates the implication that the Word is a created divine (“begotten”) being.

It is our assessment that Dr. White’s position has two problems. First, he under-appreciates the potential doctrinal significance of the conjunction of the Greek word “monogenes” with the Greek word “Theos” as it occurs in the Alexandrian readings of John 1:18. Second, as a result he fails to see the potential that the Alexandrian reading of this passage may be the result of the incorporation of a heretically-altered reading.

Concerns about the under-appreciation of the potential doctrinal significance of “monogenes Theos,” can be seen through the usage of the Greek word “monogenes” in other New Testament passages. New Testament passages where “monogenes” is used but where Jesus is not in view clearly show that “monogenes” refers to the relationship of a parent to their child, especially an only child. In cases where a child is not an only child “monogenes” is used to refer to a unique relationship that the child has to the parent, such as in Isaac’s relationship to Abraham, as his heir and child by God’s promise. In any case, such passages inarguably convey the uniqueness of the child, but they also inherently convey the relationship of the child to the parent, as an offspring to its progenitor. Therefore, when we see this word applied to Jesus, we cannot remove this inherent feature of the vocabulary. To remove this meaning is not consistent with the inherent meaning of the language or the whole of the New Testament usage.

This consistent usage of “monogenes” in the rest of the New Testament informs us as regard to its meaning in John 1:18 when it is used to refer to Jesus. Contrary to White’s position, since “monogenes” does refer to the relationship between a parent and child it does have potential doctrinal significance if it is applied here in John 1:18 to God (“Theos”). Throughout the other New Testament instances where “monogenes” is used to refer to Jesus, it refers specifically to His being begotten as a man at His incarnation. In fact, John 1:14 is the first New Testament verse to use “monogenes” in regard to Jesus. Here John clearly is coupling “monogenes” with the Word’s incarnation, his becoming a Son to the Father. Throughout the New Testament (and especially in John’s writing) “monogenes” is never used to discuss the Second Person of the Trinity in any other aspect besides His sonship to the Father through His incarnation. Therefore, when “monogenes” is used to refer to Jesus, the orthodox expectation, established through the New Testament, is to find it coupled with the Greek word for “son” denoting his incarnation as a man. In comparison, the coupling of “monogenes” with the word “Theos” is at least potentially more in line with the Gnostic idea that the Second Person of the Trinity is a created divine being. As such, this could very much be a potentially doctrinally significant variation and certainly warrants the consideration that the reading present in Alexandrian texts may reflect earlier tampering by the Gnostics.

Furthermore, in part Dr. White's conclusion that "monogenes" indicates "one of a kind" is based upon his interpretation of the Greek word "genos" (Strong's No. 1085) to mean "kind." "Genos" is related to or perhaps one of the root words that are compounded to form "monogenes." The other root word is the Greek word "monos" (Strong's No. 3441), which means "alone, or only." When we put the two together we arrive at Dr. White's interpretation of the compound word "monogenes" as "one of a kind" or "unique."

"Genos" certainly does refer to a "kind" as Dr. White asserts. However, the meaning that "genos" conveys as a "kind" typically speaks of common descent from a single ancestor. This is supported by ancient usage of the word in both non-biblical and biblical texts. Earlier we mentioned the New Testament usage of "monogenes" outside of John 1, which all are used to speak of a parent-to-child relationship. A listing of various ancient Greek uses of "monogenes" outside the biblical text is provided by wikipedia.org in their article on "monogenes." As the listing below shows most of the samples indicate "monogenes" use to refer to an only child.

Monogenes - Classical Greek texts - The following examples are taken from the Greek text uses of monogenēs in the Perseus database.

-Hesiod, Theogony 426 "Also, because she is **an only child (monogenēs)**, the goddess Hecate receives not less honor, ... 446 So even though **she is her mother's only child (monogenēs)** "Hecate is honored amongst all the immortal gods."

-Hesiod, Works and Days 375 "**There should be an only son (monogenes)** to feed his father's house, for so wealth will increase in the home; but if you leave a second son you should die old."

-Herodotus 2.79.3 "Maneros was **the only-born (monogenes) of their first king**, who died prematurely,"

-Herodotus 7.221.1 "Megistias sent to safety **his only-born (o monogenes, as noun)** who was also with the army."

-Plato, Laws 3, 691e: The Athenian stranger to Megillus and Clinias: "To begin with, there was a god watching over you; and he, foreseeing the future, restricted within due bounds the royal power by making your kingly line no longer single (monogenes) but twofold. In the next place, some man, (Lycurgus) in whom human nature was blended with power divine, observing your government to be still swollen with fever, blended the self-willed force." [5]

-Plato, Critias 113d, The Story of Atlantis: "Evenor with his wife Leucippe; and they had for offspring **an only-begotten (monogene) daughter**, Cleito." [6]

-Plato, Timaeus 31b "one only-begotten Heaven (monogenes ouranos) created."

-Plato, Timaeus 92c "the one only-begotten Heaven (monogenes ouranos)."

-Apollonius of Rhodes, Argonautica 3:1007: "And propitiate **only-begotten Hecate, daughter of Perses**"

An exhaustive listing of monogenēs can be found in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database. - wikipedia.org

Again, these non-biblical uses of “monogenes” show the regularity of this term to depict the relationship of parent to offspring. This is further supported by the fact that the related Greek verb “ginomai” (Strong’s No. 1096), which the noun “genos” is derived from, speaks of coming into existence or being made. In fact, New Testament lexicons commonly state that “monogenes” is derived from “monos” and “ginomai” rather than “monos” and “genos.” Again, this supports the idea that “monogenes” is meant to refer to a creation event as when a child is born from their parents or animals producing after their kind.

These facts about Greek language as well as John 1:14’s use of “monogenes” provide a good basis for concluding that the Alexandrian phrasing “monogenes Theos” should be translated to include the idea of “begetting” (as “only begotten God”) and not merely as “unique.” If “monogenes” is therefore applied to Christ’s deity by being coupled with “Theos” then it may contain the doctrinal implication that the divine nature of the Second Person of the Trinity was a created, generated, or begotten God that was not an eternal being. The fact that this wording reflects the terminology and teaching of the Gnostic heretics, who were centered in Alexandria and some of whom were altering scriptural texts, gives us reason to doubt Dr. White’s position on this passage. In addition, translating “monogenes” to include the idea of “begetting” seems necessary to explain the distinction John is making between God the Father and the Word here in verse 18. The Word is “unique” from the Father in that the Word was incarnate, while the Father was not. But if the Word’s being begotten through the incarnation is not included in verse 18’s use of “monogenes” then in what way is John intending to make the Word “unique” from the Father? Here the question of the internal coherence of verse 18 should be considered alongside the contextual data from John 1 (especially verse 14) as well as the rest of John and the New Testament using of “monogenes” to refer to parent-child relationships and the Word’s incarnation.

In addition, we feel that the fact that the rendering “only begotten God” appears nowhere else in the New Testament is itself informative. In all other cases the New Testament phrasing is “only begotten Son”. Likewise, while the phrasing “only begotten Son” is well known to the earliest Christian writers, the phrase “only begotten God” may not be authentically used by the earliest writers except in perhaps a couple of occasions outside of mentions by authors writing in Alexandria. In the first few centuries the church writers overwhelmingly use “only begotten Son” in reference to the incarnation of the Word. In his articles on this subject, Tim Warner discusses additional historical documents surviving from the early church period regarding Gnostic teachers in Alexandria altering this very text from this very passage including John 1:18.

So, while it may not be entirely impossible to explain “monogenes Theos” in a theologically sound manner*, we are, for the reasons stated above, drawn instead to conclude that “Son” rather than “God” was the original phrasing employed by the apostle John in John 1:18. *(For instance, the NRSV, which is based on a critical text, translates John 1:18 as “God the only Son.” Like its predecessor the RSV, the NRSV is here seemingly translated from “monogenes Theos” but the

translation expresses that “sonship” is inherently implied by “monogenes” even without “huios” similar to Hebrews 11:17’s statement about Isaac. Consequently, by translating “monogenes theos” as “God the only Son,” the NRSV reflects the possibility that “monogenes” is meant to invoke the incarnation, rather than “uniqueness” or “divine procreation,” as the basis for distinguishing the Word from the Father. As such, in the NRSV text John 1:18 would simply be discussing two persons who are both identified as God/theos: one who remains unseen identified as the Father and one who through the incarnation becomes known as the only Son. Such wording hardly seems to present any insuperable theological difficulty. To the contrary it would fit well enough with both John 1:1-3 and John 1:14 as well as the rest of the New Testament.)

On the other hand, the argument for supporting the Alexandrian reading of “monogenes Theos” stems largely from the earliness of the texts that contain this reading. It is clear that the earliest surviving Greek texts that we have today contain the “monogenes Theos” reading. Texts from before the fifth century include: p66 (typically dated to around 150-175 AD), p75 (200 AD), Vaticanus/B (325-350 AD), and Sinaiticus/Aleph (330-360 AD). By contrast, the earliest surviving Greek texts with the “monogenes Huios” reading date from the fifth century AD. From this data it can and has been argued that the “monogenes Theos” reading is earlier (comes before) the Byzantine reading (“monogenes huios”) and that, therefore, “monogenes Theos” is the original reading.

However, besides the antiquity of texts presenting the “monogenes Theos” reading, other factors should be included in any consideration of which reading of John 1:18 is, in fact, the most ancient, and therefore likely to be original. These other factors include early translations of the New Testament into other languages besides Greek and the writings of the early church.

The earliest church writers outside the New Testament texts date to the first and second centuries AD. A survey of the writings of this period should be taken into account when discussing John 1:18.

Some early writers don’t quote John 1:18 at all and do not exhibit any use of either phrase, “only-begotten Son” or “only-begotten God.” (Such writers include: the Shepherd of Hermas, first or second century AD; the Epistle of Barnabas, circa 100 AD; Clement of Rome, 96 AD; Papias, 70-155 AD; Lactantius, 240-320 AD; Venantius, 250 AD; Asterius Urbanus, Victorinus, died: 303 AD; Dionysius, died: 171; The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles/ Didache, 40-60 AD). These writers and texts provide little insight into the matter of John 1:18.

Other writers do not quote John 1:18, but do use the phrase “only-begotten Son” (Ignatius, 107 AD; Justin Martyr, 165 AD; Mathetes/Letter to Diognetus, 130 AD; Polycarp, 110-135 AD.) While these men were aware of the phrase “only-begotten Son” their works do not display any awareness of the phrase “only-begotten God.”

Then we have the writers which do quote John 1:18 directly. There is a quote using "only-begotten Son" in a work falsely attributed to Ignatius (Epistle to the Philippians, Chapter 2). There are two quotes of John 1:18 which use "only-begotten God" which are found in the longer versions of Ignatius' seven epistles. However, the longer versions of these letters are provided in sets with spurious works falsely attributed to Ignatius and are themselves thought to include additions not in Ignatius' originals. Therefore, none of these quotes should be taken as evidence regarding which reading of John 1:18 was known by (or accepted by) Ignatius.

Of the seven Epistles which are acknowledged by Eusebius (Hist. Eccl., iii. 36), we possess two Greek recensions, a shorter and a longer. It is plain that one or other of these exhibits a corrupt text, and 47 scholars have for the most part agreed to accept the shorter form as representing the genuine letters of Ignatius. - ccel.org, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.v.i.html>

Introduction to Ignatius of Antioch - Of the letters of Ignatius there are extant three recensions. 1. The long recension. - The most widely found contains not only the seven letters of which Eusebius speaks, but also six others...2. **The short recension.** - It was early seen that **the long recension contained several letters which were clearly not genuine**, and that **those which had the most claim to acceptance, as having been mentioned by Eusebius, were greatly corrupted by obvious interpolations.** - <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ignatius-intro.html>

St. Ignatius of Antioch - Of later collections of Ignatian letters which have been preserved, the oldest is known as **the "long recension"**. This collection, the author of which is unknown, dates from the latter part of the fourth century. It **contains the seven genuine and six spurious letters, but even the genuine epistles were greatly interpolated** to lend weight to the personal views of its author. For this reason they are incapable of bearing witness to the original form. **The spurious letters in this recension are** those that purport to be from Ignatius

- to Mary of Cassobola (Pros Marian Kassoboliten);
- to the Tarsians (Pros tous en tarso);
- to the Philippians** (Pros Philippesious);
- to the Antiochenes (Pros Antiocheis);
- to Hero a deacon of Antioch (Pros Erona diakonon Antiocheias). Associated with the foregoing is
- a letter from Mary of Cassobola to Ignatius.

- <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07644a.htm>

Writing at around 170-180 AD, Irenaeus, the disciple of Polycarp, the disciple of John the Apostle provides three quotations of John 1:18. The final one is often suggested to be an interpolation, not in Irenaeus' original writings due in part to the fact that it contradicts Irenaeus' earlier two quotes of John 1:18.

6. For "no man," he says, "hath seen God at any time," unless "the only-begotten Son of God, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared

[Him]."(11) For He, the Son who is in His bosom, declares to all the Father who is invisible. Wherefore they know Him to whom the Son reveals Him; and again, the Father, by means of the Son, gives knowledge of His Son to those who love Him. – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III

6. ...But as He who worketh all things in all is God, [as to the points] of what nature and how great He is, [God] is invisible and indescribable to all things which have been made by Him, but He is by no means unknown: for all things learn through His Word that there is one God the Father, who contains all things, and who grants existence to all, as is written in the Gospel: **"No man hath seen God at any time, except the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father; He has declared [Him]."**(9) – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV

11. If, then, neither Moses, nor Elias, nor Ezekiel, who had all many celestial visions, did see God; but if what they did see were similitudes of the splendour of the Lord, And prophecies of things to come; it is manifest that the Father is indeed invisible, of whom also the Lord said, "No man hath seen God at any time."(3) But His Word, as He Himself willed it, and for the benefit of those who beheld, did show the Father's brightness, and explained His purposes (as also the Lord said: **"The only-begotten God,(4)** which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared [Him];" – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter XX

If the final quote is spurious, then Irenaeus only knows the “only-begotten Son” reading. But regardless of the authenticity of Irenaeus’ final quote of John 1:18, it must be noted that Irenaeus does seem to provide support for the “monogenes Huios” (only-begotten Son) reading at least in the earlier two quotes, in which case he would appear to know both versions. And this is the most critical point. Irenaeus’ work *Against Heresies*, from which all three quotes are taken, is dated to approximately 180 AD. And this would mean that the “only-begotten Son” reading was known to prominent Greek-speaking Christian leaders at this time and is contemporary with the earliest surviving copies of the “only-begotten God” reading found in p66 (typically dated to around 150-175 AD) and p75 (200 AD).

Saint Irenaeus - (born c. 120, /140, Asia Minor—died c. 200, /203, probably Lyon...**His work *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*), written in about 180,** was a refutation of Gnosticism...**Early career.** - Though his exact birth date is unknown, **Irenaeus was born of Greek parents** in Asia Minor...**Irenaeus’ writings: conflict with the Gnostics.** - His principal work consists of five books in a work entitled **Adversus haereses. Originally written in Greek about 180,** *Against Heresies* is now known in its entirety only in a Latin translation, the date of which is disputed (200 or 400?). **A shorter work by Irenaeus,** *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, also written in Greek,* is extant only in an Armenian translation probably intended for the instruction of young candidates for Baptism. - <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293911/Saint-Irenaeus> - <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293911/Saint-Irenaeus>

And Irenaeus is by no means a lone example that would establish widespread and equally early presence of the “only-begotten Son” reading. Clement of

Alexandria, writing between 150-215 AD provides four quotes of John 1:18. Three of these quotes contain the “only-begotten Son” reading. The other contains the “only-begotten God” reading.

But what is loveable, and is not also loved by Him? And man has been proved to be loveable; consequently man is loved by God. For how shall he not be loved for whose sake **the only-begotten Son is sent from the Father’s bosom**, the Word of faith, the faith which is superabundant; the Lord Himself distinctly confessing and saying, “For the Father Himself loveth you, because ye have loved Me;”¹⁹⁸ and again, “And hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me?”¹⁹⁹ What, then, the Master desires and declares, and how He is disposed in deed and word, how He commands what is to be done, and forbids the opposite, has already been shown. – CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, The Instructor, Book I, Chapter III.—The Philanthropy of the Instructor.

Again, the expounder of the laws is the same one by whom the law was given; the first expounder of the divine commands, **who unveiled the bosom of the Father, the only-begotten Son.** – CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, The Stromata, or Miscellanies, Book I, Chapter XXVI.—Moses Rightly Called a Divine Legislator, And, Though Inferior to Christ, Far Superior to the Great Legislators of the Greeks, Minos and Lycurgus.

And John the apostle says: “No man hath seen God at any time. The only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him,” 2249—calling invisibility and ineffableness the bosom of God. Hence some have called it the Depth, as containing and embosoming all things, inaccessible and boundless. – CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, Elucidations, Book V, Chapter XII.—God Cannot Be Embraced in Words or by the Mind.

XXXVII. For what further need has God of the mysteries of love? And then thou shalt look into **the bosom of the Father, whom God the only-begotten Son alone hath declared.** – Fragments of Clemens Alexandrinus, Who is the Rich Man that shall be saved?

Hippolytus, writing between 170-235 quotes John 1:18 using the “only-begotten Son” reading.

5. For John also says, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared [1627] Him." – Hippolytus, Against the Heresy of One Noetus

And Tertullian, writing at around 200 AD, likewise uses the “only-begotten Son” reading.

And we have seen His glory, **the glory as of the only begotten of the Father;** "179 that is, of course, (the glory) of the Son, even Him who was visible, and was glorified by the invisible Father. And therefore, inasmuch as he had said that the

Word of God was God, in order that he might give no help to the presumption of the adversary, (which pretended) that he had seen the Father Himself and in order to draw a distinction between the invisible Father and the visible Son, he makes the additional assertion, ex abundanti as it were: "No man hath seen God at any time." What God does he mean? The Word? But he has already said: "Him we have seen and heard, and our hands have handled the Word of life." Well, (I must again ask,) what God does he mean? It is of course the Father, with whom was the Word, **the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, and has Himself declared Him.** – Tertullian, Against Praxeas, Chapter XV. New Testament Passages Quoted. They Attest the Same Truth of the Son's Visibility Contrasted with the Father's Invisibility.

To this list we can also add Origen (185-254 AD) who also exhibits the “only-begotten Son” reading in a quote of John 1:18.

Jesus taught us who it was that sent Him, in the words, “None knoweth the Father but the Son;” and in these, **“No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.”** – Origen Against Celsus, Book II, Chapter LXXI, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.pdf>

Another third century bishop, Archelaus quotes John 1:18 using the “only-begotten Son” reading.

Archelaus - Archelaus, **bishop of Caschar in Mesopotamia, third century bishop** to whom is attributed a Disputation with Manes - wikipedia.org

Furthermore, there is but one only inconvertible substance, the divine substance, eternal and invisible, as is known to all, and as is also borne out by this scripture: **“No man hath seen God at any time, save the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father.”** - Archelaus, The Acts of the Disputation with the Heresiarch Manes, Chapter XXXII, 280 AD

The fourth century bishop, Hilary of Poitiers, gives us several quotes of John 1:18. In all five occurrences he has “only-begotten Son,” not “only-begotten God.”

Hilary of Poitiers - Hilary (Hilarius) of Poitiers (c. **300** – c. **368**) was **Bishop of Poitiers** and is a Doctor of the Church. He was sometimes referred to as the "Hammer of the Arians" (Latin: Malleus Arianorum) and the "Athanasius of the West." - wikipedia.org

8. ...and **the Evangelist, No one hath seen God at any time, except the Only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father;** - Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book IV

42. Now I ask you what sense you would assign to **No one hath seen God at any time, save the Only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father,** when

Jeremiah proclaims God seen on earth and dwelling among men? - Hilary Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book IV

33. **The Apostle, the Evangelist, the Prophet** combine to silence your objections. Isaiah did see God; even though **it is written, No one hath seen God at any time, save the Only-begotten Son Who is in the bosom of the Father; He hath declared Him**, it was God Whom the prophet saw. - Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book V

34. **Thus the Only-begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father**, has told us of God, Whom no man has seen. - Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book V

39. **John**, who was left behind and appointed to a destiny hidden in the counsel of God, for he is not told that he shall not die, but only that he shall tarry. **Let him speak to us in his own familiar voice:—No one hath seen God at any time, except the Only-begotten Son, Which is in the bosom of the Father.** - Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book VI

Slightly later, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, also uses “only-begotten Son” in a quote of John 1:18.

John Chrysostom - John Chrysostom (c. **347–407**, Greek: Ἰωάννης ὁ Χρυσόστομος), **Archbishop of Constantinople**, was an important Early Church Father. - wikipedia.org

“No man hath seen God at any time; **the Only-begotten Son**, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.” [1.] God will not have us listen to the words and sentences contained in the Scriptures carelessly, but with much attention. - John Chrysostom, Homily XV., John i. 18

And another fourth century bishop, Gregory of Nyssa, likewise quotes John 1:18 exhibiting the “only-begotten Son” reading.

Gregory of Nyssa - **Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395)** (also known as Gregory Nyssen) was **bishop of Nyssa from 372 to 376**, and from 378 until his death. - wikipedia.org

But my mind was penetrated most of all with this thought; that the Lord of all creation, **the Only-begotten Son, Who was in the bosom of the Father**, Who was in the beginning, Who was in the form of God, Who upholds all things by the word of His power, humbled Himself not only in this respect, that in the flesh He sojourned amongst men, but also that He welcomed even Judas His own betrayer, when he drew near to kiss Him, on His blessed lips; - Gregory of Nyssa, Letter to Flavian

Ambrose (330-397 AD), bishop of Rome, also reflects the “only-begotten Son” reading in a quote of John 1:18.

24. Lest you should regard this argument as mere speculation take this sentence of authority. **“No man,” saith the Scripture, “hath seen God at any time, save the Only-begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father; He hath revealed Him.”** How can the Father be in solitude, if the Son be in the bosom of the Father? How doth the Son reveal Him, Whom He seeth not? The Father, then, exists not alone. - Ambrose, Exposition of the Christian Faith, Book III, Chapter III

There is also Augustine, Ambrose' pupil (born: 354, Christian writings: between 386 and 430 AD). Augustine quotes John 1:18 on multiple occasions most likely following the Latin translation. Except the first quote which omits both “Son” and “God” all other instances reflect the “only-begotten Son” reading.

17. And lest, perhaps, any one should say, And did not grace and truth come through Moses, who saw God, immediately he adds, **“No one hath seen God at any time.”** And how did God become known to Moses? Because the Lord revealed Himself to His servant. What Lord? The same Christ, who sent the law beforehand by His servant, that He might Himself come with grace and truth. **“For no one hath seen God at any time.”** And whence did He appear to that servant as far as he was able to receive Him? But **“the Only-begotten,”** he says, **“who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”** - p. 33, Augustine, Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John, Tractate III, Chapter I. 15-18

3. For, **“No man has seen God at any time, except the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him:”** 594 and, “None knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” 595 - p. 311, Augustine, Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John, Tractate XXXI, Chapter VII. 25-36

5. **Hear the evangelist himself speaking** in another place, and, if thou canst, understand it; if not, believe it: **“God,” saith he, “no man hath ever seen, but the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.”** - p. 338, Augustine, Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John, Tractate XXXV, Chapter VIII. 13, 14

3. For He Himself hath said: **No one hath seen God at any time; but the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.”** - p. 433, Augustine, Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John, Tractate XLVII, Chapter X. 14-21

We also have Alexander, bishop of Alexandria quoting John 1:18 and exhibiting the “only-begotten Son” reading between 273-326 AD in his letter to Alexander of Constantinople.

I. To Alexander, Bishop of the City of Constantinople. To the most reverend and like-minded brother, Alexander, Alexander sends greetings in the Lord...4. But

that the Son of God was not made “from things which are not,” and that there was no “time when He was not,” **the evangelist John sufficiently shows, when he thus writes concerning Him: “The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father.”** - Alexander, 273-313-326 AD, **Epistles on the Arian Heresy** And the Deposition of Arius. - ANF06. Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius, and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius,
[http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0300_Alexander_Alexandrinus_Epistles_on_the_Arian_Heresy_\[Schaff\]_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0300_Alexander_Alexandrinus_Epistles_on_the_Arian_Heresy_[Schaff]_EN.pdf)

And Athanasius (296-373 BC) as well, in his works three times uses the “only-begotten Son” reading in quotation of John 1:18.

62. Moreover, as was before said, not in connection with any reason, but absolutely it is said of Him, **“The only-begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father;”** -
 - p. 976, Athanasius, Against the Arians, Discourse II, Texts Explained; Sixthly, Proverbs viii. 22, Continued. Our Lord not said... - NPNF2-04. Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters, Schaff, Philip,
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.pdf>

20. Nor does scripture say that the Word knows the Father, but the Son; and that not the Word sees the Father, but **the Only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father.** - p. 1101, Athanasius, Against the Arians, Discourse IV, Since the Word is from God, He must be Son. Since the Son is from everlasting,... - NPNF2-04. Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters, Schaff, Philip,
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.pdf>

26. Therefore the Son is the Word and Life which is with the Father. And again, **what is said in the same John, “The Only-begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father;”** shows that the Son was ever. - p. 1107, Athanasius, Against the Arians, Discourse IV, That the Son is the Co-existing Word, argued from the New Testament Texts... - NPNF2-04. Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters, Schaff, Philip, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.pdf>

Two quotes of John 1:18 are provided by Basil of Caesarea (329-379 AD). Both exhibit the “only-begotten God” reading.

Basil of Caesarea - Basil of Caesarea, also called Saint Basil the Great, (329 or 330 – January 1, 379) (Greek: Ἅγιος Βασίλειος ὁ Μέγας) was the Greek **bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, Asia Minor** (modern-day Turkey). - wikipedia.org

15. Now are we to call these passages, and others like them, throughout the whole of Holy Scripture, proofs of humiliation, or rather public proclamations of the majesty of the Only Begotten, and of the equality of His glory with the Father? We ask them to listen to the Lord Himself, distinctly setting forth the equal

dignity of His glory with the Father, in His words, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father;”⁸⁰³ and again, “When the Son cometh in the glory of his Father;” that they “should honour the Son even as they honour the Father;” and, “We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father;” **and “the only begotten God which is in the bosom of the Father.”** Of all these passages they take no account, and then assign to the Son the place set apart for His foes. A father’s bosom is a fit and becoming seat for a son, but the place of the footstool is for them that have to be forced to fall. - Basil, On the Holy Spirit, VI

27. For none “can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost,” and **“No man hath seen God at any time, but the only begotten God which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”** - Basil, On the Holy Spirit, XI

The late fourth century document called the Constitutions of the Apostles uses the phrase “only-begotten God” on several occasions, but not as a quote of John 1:18.

In his writings, Eusebius the fourth century historian only quotes John 1:18 once (Oration of Constantine, Chapter XII). But here he uses the phrase “only-begotten Word” rather than “only-begotten Son” or “only-begotten God.” In his writings, Eusebius does not show an awareness of the Alexandrian-type phrasing “only-begotten God.”

To these early church writers we can also add what can be learned from early translations of the New Testament into other languages. While the early writer Tatian doesn’t quote John 1:18 in his own writings, his compilation of the four gospels into a single document (known as the Diatessaron) does contain John 1:18. The Diatessaron is dated between 160-175 AD. At the time, Tatian may have still been a pupil of Justin Martyr.

Diatessaron - The Diatessaron (c 160–175) is the most prominent Gospel harmony created by Tatian, an early Christian apologist and ascetic.[1]... **Tatian was an Assyrian who was a pupil of Justin Martyr in Rome**, where, Justin says, the apomnemoneumata (recollections or memoirs) of the Apostles, the gospels, were read every Sunday. **When Justin quotes the synoptic Gospels, he tends to do so in a harmonised form, and Helmut Koester and others conclude that Justin must have possessed a Greek harmony text of Matthew, Luke and Mark. If so, it is unclear how much Tatian may have borrowed from this previous author in determining his own narrative sequence of Gospel elements.** It is equally unclear whether Tatian took the Syriac Gospel texts composited into his Diatessaron from a previous translation, or whether the translation was his own. Where the Diatessaron records Gospel quotations from the Jewish Scriptures, the text appears to agree with that found in the Syriac Peshitta Old Testament rather than that found in the Greek Septuagint—as used by the original Gospel authors. The majority consensus is that the Peshitta Old Testament preceded the Diatessaron, and represents an independent translation from the Hebrew Bible. Resolution of these scholarly questions remained very difficult so long as no complete version of the Diatessaron in Syriac or Greek had been recovered; while the medieval translations that had survived—in Arabic and

Latin—both relied on texts that had been heavily corrected to conform better with later canonical versions of the separate Gospel texts. An ancient commentary in Armenian also exists.[7] There is scholarly uncertainty about what language Tatian used for its original composition, whether Syriac or Greek.[7] Modern scholarship tends to favour a Syriac origin; but even so, the exercise must have been repeated in Greek very shortly afterwards—probably by Tatian himself. – wikipedia.org

Below is the quote of the relevant section of the Diatessaron containing the parallel to John 1:18.

46 This man came to bear witness, that he might bear witness to the light, that every man might believe through his mediation. He was not the light, that that he might bear witness to the light, which was the light of truth, that giveth light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made 50 by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. And those who received him, to them gave he the power that they might be sons of God,--those which believe in his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and took up his abode among us; and we saw his glory as the glory of the only Son from the Father, which is full of grace and equity. John bare witness of him, and cried, and said, This is he that I said cometh after me and was before me, because he was before me. And of his fulness received we all grace for grace. For the law was given through the mediation of Moses, but truth and grace were through Jesus Christ. SECTION IV. 4 1 **No man hath seen God at any time; the only Son, God, which is in the bosom of his Father, he hath told of him.** – Diatessaron, <http://church-of-the-east.org/library/diatessaron.txt>

We can see that while the Diatessaron appears to include the word “God” in John 1:18 it does so after the phrase “only-begotten Son” in a manner which seems to reinforce that the person identified as the “Son” is, in fact, God. In this way, John 1:18 reflects the “only-begotten Son” reading of verse 18 in a way that connects the person identified as the “Son” in verse 18 with the Word of verse 14 who is identified as God in John 1:1-3.

Along with the Diatessaron, we also have the Latin Vulgate, a translation from the Greek made by Jerome at around 382 AD.

Latin Vulgate – The Vulgate is a late 4th-century Latin translation of the Bible. It was largely the work of St. Jerome, who was **commissioned by Pope Damasus I in 382 to make a revision of the old Latin translations.** – wikipedia.org

Since it does not use Greek, the Vulgate does not employ either “monogenes Theos” or “monogenes Huios” in John 1:18. However, it does use the phrase “unigenitus filius” which is the Latin equivalent to “monogenes Huios.” Both phrases mean “only-begotten Son.”

John 1:18 - Deum nemo vidit umquam: **unigenitus Filius**, qui est in sinu Patris, ipse enarravit. – The Latin Vulgate, <http://www.dukhrana.com/peshitta/index.php>

While the Vulgate is only a fourth century translation, Jerome's notes on his translation of the gospels from earlier Greek manuscripts is also informative. In these notes, Jerome refers to variations created from scribal errors. And he declares that his Latin version was made only from old Greek books and was undertaken with the request to correct those mistakes that had occurred in subsequent copies. In this way Jerome attests that Greek manuscripts which could be considered old in the fourth century presented the "monogenes huios" (only-begotten Son) reading.

You urge me to make a new work from the old, and that I might sit as a kind of judge over the versions of Scripture 3 dispersed throughout the whole world, and that I might resolve which among such vary, and which of these they may be which truly agree with the Greek. Pious work, yet perilous presumption, 6 **to change the old and aging language of the world, to carry it back to infancy**, for to judge others is to invite judging by all of them. Is there indeed any learned or unlearned man, who when he will have picked up the scroll in his hand, and taken a single taste of it, and seen what he will have read to differ, might not instantly raise his voice, 9 calling me a forger, proclaiming me to be a sacrilegious man, that I might dare to add, to change, or to correct anything in the old books? Against such infamy I am consoled by two causes: that it is you, who are the highest priest, who so orders, and truth is not to be what might vary, as even now I am vindicated by 12 the witness of slanderers. If indeed faith is administered by the Latin version, they might respond by which, for they are nearly as many as the books! **If, however, truth is to be a seeking among many, why do we not now return to the Greek originals to correct those mistakes which either through faulty translators were set forth, 15 or through confident but unskilled were wrongly revised, or through sleeping scribes either were added or were changed? Certainly, I do not discuss the Old Testament**, which came from the Seventy Elders in the Greek language, changing in three steps until 18 it arrived with us. 1 Nor do I seek what Aquila, or what Symmachus may think, or why Theodotion may walk the middle of the road between old and new. This may be the true translation which the Apostles have approved. **I now speak of the New Testament, which is undoubtedly Greek, except 21 the Apostle Matthew, who had first set forth the Gospel of Christ in Hebrew letters in Judea. This (Testament) certainly differs in our language, and is led in the way of different streams; it is necessary to seek the single fountainhead.** I pass over those books which are called by the name of Lucian and Hesychius, 24 for which a few men wrongly claim authority, who anyway were not allowed to revise either in the Old Instrument after the Seventy Translators, or to pour out revisions in the New; with the Scriptures previously translated into the languages of many nations, 27 the additions may now be shown to be false.

Therefore, **this present little preface promises only the four Gospels, the order of which is Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, revised 30 in comparison with only old Greek books.** They do not disagree with many familiar Latin

readings, as we have kept our pen in control, but only those in which the sense will have been seen to have changed (from the Greek) are corrected; the rest remain as they have been.

– Jerome, BEGINNING OF THE PREFACE FOR THE GOSPELS OF SAINT JEROME THE PRESBYTER, NOTE: 1 That is Hebrew to Greek to Latin, <http://www.bombaxo.com/prologues.html>

We should also include the Peshitta in our discussion. The Peshitta is a translation of the New Testament Greek manuscripts into Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) which is generally dated between 160-180 AD.

Peshitta – The New Testament of the Peshitta, which originally excluded certain disputed books (2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation), had become the standard by the early 5th century...Of the New Testament, attempts at translation must have been made very early, and among the ancient versions of New Testament Scripture the Syriac in all likelihood is the earliest. It was at Antioch, the capital of Syria, that the disciples of Christ were first called Christians, and it seemed natural that the first translation of the Christian Scriptures should have been made there. The tendency of recent research, however, goes to show that Edessa, the literary capital, was more likely the place. **If we could accept the somewhat obscure statement of Eusebius [4] that Hegesippus "made some quotations from the Gospel according to the Hebrews and from the Syriac Gospel," we should have a reference to a Syriac New Testament as early as 160-80 AD, the time of that Hebrew Christian writer.** – wikipedia.org

Below are three different translations of the Peshitta into English. All three quotes of John 1:18 exhibit the “only-begotten God” reading.

John 1:18 - ALOHA no man hath ever seen: **the one-begotten God**, he who is in the bosom of his Father, he hath declared him.

John 1:18 - No man hath ever seen God; **the only begotten God**, he who is in the bosom of his Father, he hath declared [him].

John 1:18 - No man has ever seen God; but **the firstborn of God**, who is in the bosom of his Father, he has declared him.

– Peshitta of John 1:18 translated by Dr. John W. Etheridge, Dr. James Murdock, and Dr. George Lamsa, <http://www.dukhrana.com/peshitta/index.php>

And lastly, we have a fourth century Coptic translation preserved in Papyrus Bodmer III, which exhibits the “only-begotten God” reading of John 1:18.

Papyrus Bodmer III - Codex Bodmer III, is a Coptic uncial manuscript of the four Gospels, dated palaeographically to the 4th century. It contains the text of the Gospel of John with some lacunae. It is written in Bohairic dialect of Coptic language.[1] It is the oldest manuscript of the Bohairic version. Originally codex contained 239 pages, but the first 22 are damaged and only small fragments have survived. The Gospel of John is followed by the text of Book of Genesis (1:1-4:2) with page numbers beginning with α in a new series.[1] It has also

fragment of Epistle to Philippians in Sahidic dialect. **The first occurrence of "God" in John 1:1 is in contracted form as the Nomina Sacra, whereas the second occurrence is spelled fully. In John 1:18 the word "God" (which no one has seen) is contracted (as the Nomina Sacra), while the word "God" (only-begotten) is spelled out.** The scribe may have been a Gnostic.[2] The text of the codex is a representative of the Alexandrian text-type. Because its text is different than later Bohairic manuscript (from 12th century and later) it was called to be the proto-Bohairic version (Papyrus Bodmer III). The manuscript was discovered by John M. Bodmer of Geneva in Upper Egypt.[1] It was published by Rodolphe Kasser in 1958.[3] Currently it is housed at the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana (P. Bodmer III) in Coligny.[1] - wikipedia.org

Quotations of John 1:18 dating from before the fifth century are summarized in the following chart. Highlighted in green are texts which contain the Alexandrian reading "only-begotten God." In black are texts which contain the Byzantine reading "only-begotten Son." The quotes are organized by the century in which they occur in order to focus on the earliness of data supporting either reading.

Second Century Quotes of John 1:18:

Valentinus, 117-138 AD, fragments
 p66, 150-175 AD
 Diatessaron (Tatian), 160-175 AD
 Peshitta (Syriac), 160-180 AD
 Irenaeus, 170-180 AD (twice)
 Clement of Alexandria, 150-215 AD (three quotes)
 Clement of Alexandria, 150-215 AD (one quote)
 Hippolytus, 170-235 AD

Third Century Quotes of John 1:18:

Tertullian, 200 AD
 p75, 200 AD
 Origen, 185-254 AD
 Archelaus, third century AD

Fourth Century Quotes of John 1:18:

Alexander of Alexandria, 273-326 AD
 Codex Vaticanus (B), 325-350 AD
 Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph), 330-360 AD
 Athanasius, 296-373 AD (three quotes)
 Hilary of Poitiers, 300-368 AD (five quotes)
 Basil of Caesarea, 329-379 (two quotes)
 Latin Vulgate (Jerome drawing only on already "old" Greek manuscripts), 382 AD
 John Chrysostom, 347-407 AD
 Gregory of Nyssa, 335-395 AD
 Ambrose, 330-393 AD
 Augustine, 354-430 AD (four quotes)
 Papyrus Bodmer III, fourth century AD (Coptic)

A look at the historical attestation of the variant readings of John 1:18 in chart form is helpful in assessing claims of earliness of either version. While it is true that the earliest surviving New Testament texts contain the “only-begotten God” reading (p66, p75, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus), these documents are not the only early writings which are capable of reporting on the rendering of John 1:18.

Given the importance that is often placed on Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, we should draw attention to the fact that the “only-begotten Son” reading is contained in several works and prominent writers which are contemporary to these two fourth century codices (for example Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, and Hilary of Poitiers). While many of the fourth century attestations to the “only-begotten Son” reading do still post-date Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, the interval of separation is now as little as only a few decades. Likewise, we must consider Jerome’s translation of the New Testament into the Latin Vulgate in relation to these historical facts. While the Vulgate post-dates Vaticanus and Sinaiticus by half a century or so, Jerome reports that its readings were taken from Greek New Testament texts which he considered to be old in the year 382 AD. In fact, these copies are so old that Jerome refers to them as the “Greek originals.” No doubt he does not mean to infer that these were the actual autographs. Nevertheless, such language attests to his perception that the copies he was working from were very early and indeed were themselves the basis from which more recent copies had been made. From this it may be inferred that Greek manuscripts containing the “only-begotten Son” reading that Jerome used in the Vulgate did likely exist at the time of or even before Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

These historical observations diminish the significance of fourth century attestation of the “only-begotten God” reading based on the two Alexandrian codices (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus). Fourth century attestation to the “only-begotten Son” rivaling the competing Alexandrian reading requires that appeals to earliness rest on material from before the fourth century.

If we turn to the third century, we have four quotes of John 1:18. Three of these attest to the “only-begotten Son” reading (Tertullian, 200 AD, Origen, 185-254 AD, and Archelaus, third century AD). Only one document, the fragmentary p75 contains the “only-begotten God” reading and it is only roughly as early as Tertullian’s quote which uses the “only-begotten Son” reading. Third century texts certainly do not favor the conclusion that the “only-begotten God” reading was the earlier of the two. This leads us to the second century.

The earliest quotes of John 1:18 come from sources that date to the second century. It is in this period that the question of earliness of the variants really resides. And yet, the historical data is far from conclusively supporting the Alexandrian “only-begotten God” reading. The second century provides four witnesses to the “only-begotten God” reading. The first and earliest of all quotes of John 1:18 possibly comes to us from fragments of the writings of the Alexandrian Gnostic Valentinus between 117-138 AD. Of course, any quote of

John 1:18 by Valentinus only supports that the earliest occurrence of “only-begotten God” reading emerges from a heretic. This is not really the kind of evidence we would hope for to validate the claim that the “only-begotten God” reading was the authentic reading of the New Testament. For this we would need to turn to p66, a fragmented copy of John’s Gospel which is typically dated to 150-175 (though dates of 200 AD or even 100-150 AD have also been offered). Contemporary to this we have the Peshitta, a Syria translation reflecting the “only-begotten God” reading of the Greek Alexandrian text-type.

However, these two second century texts containing the “only-begotten God” reading are not unchallenged. Diatessaron, Tatian’s compilation of the four gospels, is dated to about 160-180 AD, the same decades as p66 and the Peshitta. It contains the reading “only-begotten Son, God.” Like the Peshitta, the Diatessaron relied on previous copies of the gospels. We also have Irenaeus who, at least twice quotes John 1:18 using the “only-begotten Son” reading at around this same point, 170-180 AD. And Clement of Alexandria, likewise, uses the “only-begotten Son” reading on three occasions in the same decades or perhaps a few decades afterwards. Hippolytus also exhibits the “only-begotten Son” reading a few decades or so later. We may also consider one quote by Irenaeus and one by Clement of Alexandria which reflect the “only-begotten God” reading, though this quote from Irenaeus is generally considered to be a later interpolation. In either case, the attestation for earliness can hardly be qualified as clearly favoring one reading over the other. Even the second century only offers two or three sources which contain the “only-begotten God” reading alongside three (possibly four) sources containing the “only-begotten Son” reading. Though dating for these sources may vary somewhat, all of them are typically estimated to the same two or three decades. Again, a strong, clear case for earliness seems elusive when we look at the sources.

In summary, there are Greek-speaking Christian writers (such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hypolytus) that provide a half dozen quotes of John 1:18 using the phrase “only-begotten Son” at dates that overlap (and potentially even pre-date) the timing of the earliest Alexandrian manuscript copies (p66 and p75). Only if we assume the earliest possible dates for p66 (100-150 AD) would it pre-date these early, Greek quotations of the alternate reading of John 1:18. And, even if we do assume the absolute earliest dates, p66 is only perhaps a decade or two earlier than quotes of the “only-begotten Son” reading. But these are just dates for a single copy (p66) and for quotes. These are not dates for the originals from which the copies and quotes are derived. And the fact that the “only-begotten Son” reading is being attested to by quotations in extra-biblical works has additional relevance pushing the date of the original even earlier.

These authors drew these quotes from a direct reading of copies of the biblical texts that they had in their possession at the time (or from memory of copies they had seen even earlier). Unless we want to make the unlikely assumption that the authors of these extra-biblical texts were working from very recently-made copies of the biblical texts they quoted, we must assume that their quotes were drawn from copies that pre-dated their own writings by several years, possibly even a

decade or more. Moreover, these quotes come from no less than 3 extra-biblical authors in 3 separate geographic locations. Irenaeus was bishop of Lyon in modern day France. Hippolytus was bishop in Rome. And Clement was bishop in Alexandria, Egypt. Since p75 is typically not dated until 200 AD, p66 is the only biblical copy dating to this same early time period. In contrast, here we would have at the very least 3 Greek copies of John 1:18 with the alternate reading distributed throughout the ancient world around the earlier dates proposed for p66. But these are unlikely to have been the only 3 copies of Greek New Testament copies with the “only-begotten Son” reading in existence at the time. In reality, there is likely to have been many more Greek New Testament manuscripts with the “only-begotten Son” reading distributed to churches throughout the ancient world at that time and of which the 3 known to Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Clement were but a random sample. Consequently, the source of the “only-begotten Son” reading would have in turn predated the copies distributed to places such as Lyon, Rome, and Alexandria by 150-160 AD when they came into the hands of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Clement. How long would it have taken for this reading to have been copied and distributed so far in the ancient world? It is no stretch to suggest it might have taken a decade or two. Ultimately, these factors would push the minimum early dates for both readings to the same period of time, the first few decades of the second century AD.

From this investigation we can see how a survey of the early church can be a useful tool in helping to determine which textual version is the preservation of the original and which is divergent from the original. In fairness, both Warner and Dr. White acknowledge this fact, but often disagree regarding the implications of early church readings. This source information makes it difficult to rely on claims based on the earliness of biblical manuscripts as the only or primary factor in determining which reading of John 1:18 is the original. The fact that a full consideration of all the historical evidence places both readings are on equally ancient footing shifts more consideration back to other areas of analysis including the linguistic and potential theological considerations that we have discussed earlier in this section. In any case, passages where the early church supports the Byzantine reading over the Alexandrian text demonstrate at the least that the Byzantine text tradition was known in the early church period before the fourth century and existed elsewhere in the church alongside the Alexandrian traditions in Egypt.

At this point it is worth mentioning that the usage of Byzantine type readings in the early centuries of the church across a large geographic area by prominent church leaders, especially those with apostolic connections, would go far toward demonstrating that the Byzantine or Majority Text type was itself the prevalent text type even in early times. However, from the discussion of both camps, whether the early church heavily supports the Alexandrian or Byzantine tradition over the other is not agreed upon. Both sides argue that, in general, the early church usage supports their own view. While this lack of clarity may persist regarding the text traditions in general, it is clear that in some specific important passages the early church clearly exhibits a familiarity with one text type over the other. Whether this fact can be further taken to indicate or imply a clear

dominance of that text type in all other cases has not been concluded with certainty.

On Other Prominent Passages and Textual Variations

Before we close we might take some time to mention a few of the more prominent passages where doctrinally significant textual variation occurs between different text traditions.

The first passage we will mention is 1 Timothy 3:16. In the Textus Receptus, which is based on the Byzantine (or Majority) text tradition, this passage states that “God was manifest in the flesh.” In versions based upon Alexandrian texts the passage states simply “He appeared in a body.”

Here we can happily declare that we find agreement with both Dr. White and Tim Warner in preferring the reading presented in the Byzantine (or Majority) text. The phrasing in the Greek, from which we obtain the English phrase “God was manifest in the flesh,” is more consistent with apostolic and scriptural teaching, which proclaim that the Word became flesh. The likely explanation for this variation deals with the use of nomina sacra in the Greek manuscripts. In ancient texts, divine names were sometimes abbreviated.

Nomina Sacra - Nomina sacra (singular: nomen sacrum) **means "sacred names" in Latin, and can be used to refer to traditions of abbreviated writing of several frequently occurring divine names or titles in early Holy Scripture, used in Greek, Latin, and Coptic manuscripts.** Bruce Metzger's book *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible* lists **15 such expressions from Greek papyri: the Greek counterparts of God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, Son, Spirit, David, cross, Mother, Father, Israel, Savior, Man, Jerusalem, and Heaven.** The nomen sacrum for mother did not appear until the 4th century CE,[1] but all other Nomina Sacra have been found in Greek manuscripts from the 1st - 3rd Centuries CE. **The contractions were indicated with overlines.** There has been a dispute about the nature of Nomina sacra, whether they represent **a mere shorthand or these overlined words** indeed bear a sacred meaning.[2] **Starting sometime in the 1st Century CE (exact date unknown), the nomina sacra were sometimes shortened by contraction in Christian inscriptions,** resulting in sequences of Greek letters such as IH (iota-eta), IC (iota-sigma), or IHC (iota-eta-sigma) for Jesus (Greek Iēsous), and XC (chi-sigma), XP (chi-ro) and XPC (chi-rho-sigma) for Christ (Greek χριστός/Christos). Here "C" represents the "lunate" form of Greek sigma; sigma could also be transcribed into the Latin alphabet by sound, giving IHS and XPS.[3] - wikipedia.org

In early texts which used capital Greek letter forms, the nomina sacra for “God” (in the Byzantine reading) of 1 Timothy 3:6 looks very similar to the “he” which occurs in the Alexandrian reading. The cause for the variation from “God” using the nomina sacra to “he” is understandably attributable to scribal confusion

involving striations in the texture of the papyri or manuscript and the placement of the line which was used to indicate the abbreviation of one of the nomina sacra.

Another often talked about passage is the long ending of Mark 16, specifically verses 9-20. Regarding whether this set of verses was included in the original text written by Mark, we are uncertain. Including the passage seems quite reasonable as some version of it appears in nearly all the ancient manuscripts (with the exception of the early Alexandrian codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus). Likewise, there is nothing in the passage, which would indicate heretical tampering. Nor is there anything in the passage that is not presented in some other New Testament passage. On the other hand, if this portion of the passage is not included, we lose nothing that isn't presented to us elsewhere in the New Testament record. It may very well be that these 11 verses were included in Mark as a summary of events that followed the resurrection and were contained elsewhere in New Testament teaching.

Lastly, we mention perhaps the most frequently discussed textual variation presented in the surviving manuscript traditions, which is 1 John 5:7, also known as the Johannine Comma. The fact that this verse does not appear in Byzantine or Alexandrian texts is a strong reason for supposing that it might originally have been a scribal note in the margin that was later incorporated as part of the passage. However, internal evidence does provide some reason to consider that the verse was part of John's original writing.

The strongest reason for concluding that John did originally write this verse is the use of the peculiar identifier for the Second Person of the trinity that is unique to John's writing. In his gospel, John begins his description of Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became incarnate. The Greek word translated as "Word" is "Logos." This use of the Greek word "Logos" throughout John 1 and in John's other works as a descriptor for Christ is distinctly characteristic of John and the language he used for identifying Jesus Christ, particularly when not referring to Jesus' unique son-ship to the Father through his incarnation as a man. In fact, the term "Son of God" has a particular technical meaning and is only used in New Testament, apostolic teaching to speak of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, whereby in becoming man, for the first time He Himself became part of creation and therefore a son to God, our Father and Creator.

However, 1 John 5:7 is not discussing the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in relation to the First Person of the Trinity or Jesus' life or ministry on earth. By contrast, 1 John 5:7 is a reference to all three Persons of the Trinity in relationship to each other in the context of their work in heaven. As such, the use of descriptor Logos (rather than "Son") for the Second Person of the Trinity is uniquely fitting to the context and is very consistent with and particularly characteristic of both John's understanding of the Trinity as well as his writing about the Trinity.

This use of the Greek word "Logos" in this verse, rather than "Son," is an important trait that must be addressed. If this verse is a later scribal addition we

have to wonder why the standard Trinitarian formula (Father, Son, and Spirit) was not used instead as was common practice. Nowhere in the New Testament or the earliest church writings do we see a coupling of the Father and the Word. Rather, Father and Son coincide as a reference to the special aspect of their relationship that was initiated for the first time as a result of the incarnation. And the standard mode of Trinitarian reference is always “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” With this in mind, it becomes more reasonable to suggest that the verse was written by John and not a later scribe. Of course, the difficulty is that if John did originally pen this verse, how do we explain the equally important alternative question that then emerges. That question concerns how an authentic New Testament verse became so universally absent from the surviving texts?

On this point, it should also be noted that the fact that verse 8 begins with a similar phrasing could explain how this passage, if authentically Johannine, did come to be omitted in the later copies. As mentioned earlier, one scribal error, which is known to have commonly occurred, is the omission of a verse or part of a verse due to the presence of similar phrasing in a nearby verse. When this occurs it is usually the second line that is omitted based upon the similar endings in the lines. Perhaps in this case, a very early copyist accidentally skipped the initial verse and proceeded to the second line due to the presence of similar initial phrasing, thereby, omitting the first verse entirely. Such a suggestion would not at all be out of sync with the types of scribal error that are acknowledged by both sides to have occurred at times in the process of textual transmission.

Additional relevant points have been made by other scholars in support of the conclusion that this verse was authentically written by John. They include appeals that the Greek grammatical structure dealing with gender agreement would require the inclusion of this verse in order to function correctly. However, Greek scholars disagree on this matter and we have not come across a satisfactory or thorough discussion of the issue on which to base a conclusion.

Likewise, it is asserted that the phrasing of verse 8 anticipates or rather indicates that a parallel statement was originally included in this passage. And, in our opinion, a survey of the early church writers on this point leaves the issue unsettled. Simply put, it is difficult to assess whether a writer is quoting this passage and thus, attesting to its presence in early texts, or is merely expressing the common Trinitarian formula without indicating a familiarity with this verse.

Furthermore, as an addition this verse would certainly not be categorized as a heretical type of variation. Instead, it exhibits a considerably astute grasp of the orthodox Christian teaching expressed repeatedly elsewhere throughout the New Testament. Our conclusion at this point is threefold. The inclusion of the verse as authentically Johannine (authored by John the Apostle) is possible on linguistic grounds, especially concerning the usage of the Greek word “Logos.” Though admittedly, it is difficult to explain the widespread omission of 1 John 5:7 from all of the surviving Greek manuscripts prior to the Middle Ages, it does not seem unreasonable to us to consider that this omission could have resulted from an

early, accidental scribal oversight not altogether very different from other commonly occurring unintentional omissions.

On the other hand, it may very well be the case that a very astute scribe wrote this statement in the margin as he reflected on the text he was copying only to have later scribes perhaps assume that it was part of the original, which had accidentally been omitted in the parent document. In either case, no doctrinal information is lost if it is not included given the fact that the concept of the Trinity is supported clearly throughout the scripture. And likewise, no harm is by any means done by including it since it reflects a sound Christian teaching of the Trinity already contained elsewhere in the New Testament and does possess some uniquely Johannine features.

Conclusions on Biblical Reliability and Text Type Preferences

What we can safely conclude from all of our discussion is that the Biblical texts have faithfully preserved the teachings of the Judeo-Christian faith as handed on in both the Old and New Testaments, by the ancient patriarchs to Israel and by Jesus Christ and His apostles to the church. Through our discussion of manuscript issues the importance of thorough and informed scriptural and historical study on the part of the Christian disciple is stressed. What we can affirm with all confidence is that God's truth has been preserved for us, but that it does take effort and diligence on our part in our pursuit of understanding it. That is not to say that understanding the Bible is an elusive endeavor only that it is not without the effort, thought, and study that cultivate our personal growth in Christ. Without such personal efforts growth in Christ is often and easily stifled or non-existent.

Ultimately, a thorough analysis of the scripture with an awareness of textual issues will eliminate any difficulties or chances of forming a poor understanding of Christian teaching based upon textually related matters. In this sense, the remarkable and undeniable historical preservation of the Biblical texts has resulted in a robust document that is not so fragile or frail as to leave important Judeo-Christian teaching unclear due to textual variation and preservation issues.

And as we have said, we believe that a serious and sound doctrinal study on any issue will include and be based upon an analysis of the Biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and will not be founded solely upon English word choices. That is not to say that we believe one must be fluent in the Biblical languages in order to properly or adequately study the Bible or understand Christian teaching. All one needs is a sufficient set of resource materials including concordances, historical reference dictionaries, and perhaps (for the sake of speed) computer software allowing the quick cross-referencing of Biblical languages and passages. In addition, a general understanding of church history and manuscript related issues and a few English Bible translations for comparison (including, but not necessarily limited to the King James) are helpful.

Regarding the text types themselves, we do not rule out the value of consulting the wording of the Alexandrian texts where variations exist, but we do feel that there are a few passages where Alexandrian readings do contain potential doctrinal difficulties. As such, we are uncomfortable with and hesitant about siding with Alexandrian texts against the Byzantine texts in those instances.