

# Were New Testament texts corrupted by misogynists?

## THE CLAIM

‘We rely on a large number of handwritten manuscripts in Greek to provide us with our text of the New Testament. Interestingly, **it can be observed that alterations were made in the second century** in such a way as to **downplay the reported involvement and importance of women**.

Because these changes **are not followed in the majority of manuscripts**, the original text can easily be identified. But the changes suggest a climate in which some scribes were not happy to see women prominently involved. **The changes are slight**, but significant in the thinking they betray. They indicate an anti-women swing **in at least some circles** in the early churches.’<sup>1</sup>

## THE FACTS

Readers will note that Ian and Averil describe the changes as **slight**, and explain that they are not followed in the majority of manuscripts. This is a **considerable** understatement. It would be far more accurate to say that in the vast majority of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, less than a dozen such alterations have been found. Furthermore, these alterations are limited to a tiny number of texts.

Although Ian and Averil say ‘**it can be observed** that alterations **were made** in the **second century**’,<sup>2</sup> they actually provide no evidence for this (whether they realise it or not). Neither of the two sources they cite actually says this. One source they cite (Ben Witherington), says ‘**it appears that** there was a concerted effort by **some** part of the Church, **perhaps** as early as the late first century or beginning of the second’<sup>3</sup>.

However, when it comes to presenting the actual evidence which can be observed, Witherington does not cite any textual evidence earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>4</sup> some 200 years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> and most of his textual witnesses date to the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

It is significant that these errors are all found in the Western text type. This text type is most well known not for its ‘anti-feminist’ bias, but for its general tendency to paraphrase and edit the text in a particularly arbitrary manner.<sup>6</sup>

It is also significant that almost all of these errors are found in only **one** manuscript tradition of the Western text (D), with only three errors appearing in any other Western manuscript tradition (G<sup>pm</sup>, it<sup>a, b, d, k</sup>),<sup>7</sup> as this demonstrates that these are not even systematic changes to one particular manuscript tradition, let alone the entire Western text type.

This is one of the reasons why modern textual scholars generally view few (if any), of these alterations as genuinely motivated by a desire to minimize the role of women in the early church.

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whole sentences **are freely changed, omitted, or inserted**. Sometimes the motive **appears to have been harmonization**, while at other times it was the **enrichment of the narrative** by the inclusion of traditional or apocryphal material. Some readings involve **quite trivial alterations for which no special reason can be assigned**’, Metzger, ‘*A Textual Commentary On the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)*’, p. xx (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The text referred to as ‘G<sup>pm</sup>’ (the ‘pm’ stands for the Latin ‘permulti, meaning ‘very many’, and indicates that many manuscripts of this tradition have this reading), is a 9<sup>th</sup> century Greek/Latin interlinear diglot also known as Codex Boernerianus (Gregory-Aland number 012); Witherington (Ibid., p. 84), says ‘D, G pm, **et al.** [and others]’, but does not say which other manuscripts he is referring to.

The text referred to as ‘it<sup>a</sup>’ is an African Old Latin copy of an earlier Greek text (the ‘it’ stands for ‘Itala’, meaning Latin, and the other letters stand for various specific copies of this Latin manuscript); this same reading is also found in Greek and Latin manuscripts, according to the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century Christian writer Augustine.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘*All One*’, p. 181 (March 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Witherington, ‘The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the ‘Western’ Text in Acts’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (103.1.83).

<sup>4</sup> In fact he only cites one text as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>5</sup> Witherington’s most frequently referred to text is the 5<sup>th</sup> century text D (Codex Bezae), but the Greek text type (called ‘Western’), which D preserves cannot be dated any earlier than **250 AD**, even if quotations from early Christian writers are used (there are no Western type Greek manuscripts or papyri earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>6</sup> ‘The chief characteristic of Western readings is **fondness for paraphrase**. Words, clauses, and even

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*All One*’, p. 181 (March 2009).

They are so few, so inconsistently found, and some of them are so much more readily attributable to accidental scribal error or the desire to render the text more grammatically, that they contradict the idea that the New Testament was revised studiously by groups of 'anti-feminist' scribes as a result of changing attitudes to women in early Christian history.

## SCHOLARLY COMMENTARY

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It should be pointed out that Witherington is an egalitarian scholar, whose interpretation of these textual alterations is influenced by his own sensitivity to the subject. Comparing Witherington's statements on the texts with the statements of the United Bible Societies' Committee edited by Bruce Metzger,<sup>8</sup> shows that in a number of cases there is a more likely explanation for the text's alteration than any 'anti-feminist' attitude by a particular scribe.

**Matthew 5:32:** Metzger makes the point that the scribal tendency to smooth the text (in this case to create a neat parallel), and to remove material perceived as redundant, is an adequate cause for the alteration, so there is no necessity to attribute to this alteration an 'anti-feminist' motivation.

**Acts 1:14:** Metzger notes it is characteristic of the Western text type to alter the text to make it more stylistically 'interesting', and in

this case Metzger also points out that the scribe altered the text to conform to the grammatical pattern already existing in Acts 21:5, an alteration which the scribe considered to be more likely to be in conformity with the original. This is characteristic of the Western text type, so there is no necessity to attribute this alteration to an 'anti-feminist' motivation.

**Acts 17:4:** Both Witherington and Metzger agree that the text here is actually ambiguous in the first place, and could be read either way. This is therefore not clearly a matter of a deliberately 'anti-feminist' reading being introduced, but a scribal decision as to which particular interpretation of the text made more sense to them.

**Acts 17:12:** Metzger points out that the reason for Codex Bezae (D), altering the text was to smooth the grammar and render it into better Greek. This is a common feature of the Western text type, especially in Codex Bezae, so the alteration is simply what the scribes of this text type typically did in any case. There is therefore no need to attribute to this alteration an 'anti-feminist' motivation.

**Acts 17:34:** There is a case to be made that the alteration is a deliberate attempt to diminish the importance of the women in the text, but Metzger says '**It is, however, more likely**, as A. C. Clark suggests,<sup>10</sup> that a line in an ancestor of codex Bezae **had been accidentally omitted**',<sup>9</sup> so there is no

necessity to attribute to this alteration an 'anti-feminist' motivation.

**Acts 18:** Although it is possible to read the tendency in some of the Western witnesses to place Aquila first or insert Aquila's name without including Priscilla as a desire to reduce the prominence of Priscilla, there is also the fact (as Metzger observes), that the general tendency of the Western text type scribes was to 'change the unusual to the usual'. They altered the text to conform to what they considered to be more likely to be original. The fact that they did this with many other passages having nothing to do with women indicates that there is no **necessity** to attribute to this alteration an 'anti-feminist' motivation, even though in this case it is entirely likely.

**Colossians 4:15:** Metzger notes that the gender of the name was uncertain to start with, giving rise to variations in the text. The difference between the female name Nympha and the male name Nymphas was a matter of accenting the Greek letters one way or another, but the earliest manuscripts did not use any accents at all, meaning that later scribes had to make interpretative decisions at times. There is therefore no need to attribute to this alteration an 'anti-feminist' motivation, even though the ambiguity was settled in favour of the male name Nymphas.

(Jonathan Burke, 2009)

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<sup>8</sup> The committee responsible for the UBS Greek New Testament, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, the Greek text from which almost all modern English Bible translations are made.

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<sup>9</sup> Metzger, '*A Textual Commentary On the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible*

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*Societies' Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)*', p. 407 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1994).