



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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### *GOD Was Manifest in the Flesh*

#### 1 Timothy 3:16

**H**AVE YOU EVER STOPPED TO THINK THAT THERE are over 750,000 words in the Bible? Since there are that many, can a single one make much difference or really matter all that much? Can it effect doctrine one way or another?

It would seem that each word is, indeed, important. Since our Lord said that His “words shall not pass away” (Matt. 24:35), even to the extent that not one jot (the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *yod*, י) or tittle (a small line or projection on a Hebrew letter) would “pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (5:18), it would seem that each word is significant and important.

Well, there is a word in our text that has been a major point of question since the days modern textual criticism began. In fact, it’s believed to be the only text that has been examined with a microscope in an attempt to verify what the letters are.

The issue is basically this: There is no clearer statement in the New Testament of the deity of Jesus Christ than 1 Timothy 3:16—**And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory**—but the Word **God** does not appear in modern translations, being replaced with either “He” or “who.”

Once again, we broach an issue in which there is disagreement (and one we will not address again for some time to come, for this text is a key one and discussing others would be somewhat redundant). Some TOTT readers embrace the Critical Text and the modern translations based on it, so I do not wish to offend or inflame. While

there are godly men on both sides of the issue, I do defend the historic (and what I believe is the providentially preserved) text of the New Testament (i.e., Traditional or Ecclesiastical Text) instead of the modern Critical Text. (Neither am I of the radical “King James Only” camp.)

There is, however, a twist on this particular text. As we will see, the evidence, both internal and external, is absolutely overwhelming that **God** is the correct reading in this verse. The twist comes in with one of today’s most quoted defenders of modern textual criticism. For the sake of unity, I will not give the author’s name, but in his very popular book about “King James Onlyism,” he writes:

There is much to be said in defense of the King James rendering of 1 Timothy 3:16 as “God was manifest in the flesh.” In fact, I prefer this reading, and feel that it has more than sufficient support from the Greek manuscripts. I can agree with the majority of the comments made on the topic long ago by Dean Burgon.

Dean John Burgon was a contemporary of Westcott and Hort, the original developers of the Critical Text, on which was then based the English Revised Version (1881), American Standard Version (1901), and most translations since. Burgon, however, an unimpeachable scholar of enormous qualifications, but who was (and still is) virtually ignored, wrote against this revolution in textual studies. Of several works, his 300-page book, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, for example, proved beyond even the tiniest tinge of doubt that those verses are authentic, despite the marginal notes to the contrary in modern translations.

So, what makes the above statement so surprising (and, if I may be so blunt, inconsistent) is that Burgon uses the

same arguments in defense of dozens of other verses that he uses for 1 Timothy 3:16, but the above author apparently ignores this. If I may submit, one cannot “have his cake and eat it too,” nor can he mix oil and water.

### *The Textual Evidence and Theology of “God”*

Let us first look at the textual evidence concerning the correct reading in this verse and also demonstrate that it does matter theologically which one we choose. We will try to present this as simply as possible.

#### **The Problem**

The problem is basically this. Like English, Greek has upper and lower case letters. From about the 3<sup>rd</sup>- to the 9<sup>th</sup>-centuries, manuscripts were written entirely in capital letters, called “uncials,” while “minuscules” (or “cursive,” small letters) were used from the 9<sup>th</sup>-century onward.

Now, because copying uncial manuscripts was such a laborious task, a common practice was to abbreviate the name of **God** using only the first and last letter and a line above them to indicate such a contraction. Therefore:

ΘΕὸς (*theos*) is ΘΕΟΣ (uncial) and abbreviated  $\overline{\Theta\Sigma}$

The other half of the problem, then, is the relative pronoun “who.” This is the Greek ὅς (*hos*). The little apostrophe makes a big difference, adding the aspirate “h.” This was not written in the uncial form, however, and so would just be ΟΣ. Note, therefore, that the little line inside the letter and the line above the two letters was the only way to differentiate **God** from “who.” This is made even worse in some manuscripts that read “which,” the Greek ὅ (*ho*).

In an uncial manuscript, therefore, which has no spaces or punctuation, here’s how just part of the verse reads in both versions:

**ΜΥΣΤΕΡΙΟΝ ΟΣ ΕΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ΕΝ ΣΑΡΚΙ**  
 mystery, who was manifested in the flesh

**ΜΥΣΤΕΡΙΟΝ  $\overline{\Theta\Sigma}$  ΕΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ΕΝ ΣΑΡΚΙ**  
 mystery, God was manifested in the flesh

Based upon this, it borders on the ludicrous to say, as many do, “It doesn’t really make any difference.” Are we really to believe that weakening the name **God** to a relative pronoun is irrelevant? To soften this result, some modern translations actually create a new reading, “He” (NIV, ESV), which is clearly wrong—“who” does not mean “He.” Others, such as the NASB, reads, “He who,” since *hos* is masculine. Either one, however, seems an obvious admission that “who” is not sufficient, so we must therefore “help” the reading. There is no way to avoid the harsh reality that Jesus Christ as **God** in the flesh is no longer clear because we have removed the word that makes it so.

At this point it is often insisted that “the *obvious* antecedent of who is, of course, Jesus Christ.” But just how is this obvious? How are we supposed to know that? The last

time His name appears in the preceding text is up in verse 13, but this is an entirely different context than verse 16. One of today’s greatest expositors is honest enough to admit that “no antecedent for *hos* is given” but then adds that the verse “can only be describing Jesus Christ.” But again, how do we know that? The plain truth of the matter is that this is deplorable grammar, something we should not accept as coming from the Apostle Paul.

In fact, this is such bad grammar that the result is the *masculine* pronoun “who” follows the *neuter* noun “mystery.” This simply “cannot be,” as Burgon writes: “Such an expression is abhorrent alike to Grammar and to Logic; it is intolerable in Greek as in English.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Evidence**

As one reads various commentators in studying this verse, he encounters such statements as “the word ‘God’ is not in most manuscripts” (I again withhold the writer’s name for unity’s sake). That is an extremely shocking statement, however, and makes one wonder why a commentator would say it because it simply is not so and is easily proven such. While others are not that inaccurate, they still err by saying, “Some manuscripts read **God**.”

On the contrary, the clear, demonstrable fact is that *most* manuscripts read **God**. What is the evidence? The primary debated manuscript is that of Alexandrinus, an important 5<sup>th</sup>-century uncial that resides in the British Museum and includes almost all the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Many critics assert that it reads ΟΣ (“who”) and that a later, passionately orthodox, scribe added the needed marks to make it read **God**.

That idea has been a popular one for over a century, that is, orthodox scribes actually altered the ancient text to make it read more strongly orthodox. In plain English, we are being told that godly men, men who were handling the sacred text of God, deliberately lied by making the text “read better.” One of the chief modern proponents of this is the self-proclaimed agnostic scholar Bart Ehrman. While professing to have been a born again believer in his youth, it was during his graduate studies—under Bruce Metzger at the then and now liberal Princeton Seminary—that he turned away from orthodoxy because of what he viewed as the problems of evil and suffering and the Bible’s own contradictions. His books are nothing short of blatant, in your face apostasy (which is why I do not withhold his name as I have done with others in this article). His latest book, for example—*Forged: Writing in the Name of God: Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*, released in March 2011—“reveals which New Testament books were outright forgeries” and demonstrates “how widely forgery was practiced by early Christian writers.”

In an earlier work, one wholly dedicated to the above theory, Ehrman writes concerning our present text:

We cannot overlook what the reading [*theos*] provides for the orthodox scholar—a clear affirmation of

the doctrine that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . The change must have been made fairly early, at least during the third century, given its widespread attestation from the fourth century on. It can therefore best be explained as [a] . . . corruption that stresses the deity of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Think of it! Here is an agnostic who dubs the strongest statement of the deity of Christ in all Scripture as being a *corruption*. How can any evangelical say that theology is not at issue here? It continues to baffle me why true evangelicals today continue to defend a textual theory that utilizes this and many other such God dishonoring conjectures that are obviously agenda-driven. They originated in ungodly minds bent on not only the diluting of God’s Word but also even slandering the character of his servants whom God has used to preserve it through the ages. It is sad, indeed, that while not actually quoting Ehrman, many evangelicals have still bought into this and other fantasies.

Let us just stop and think: Are we to believe that early godly scribes—who apparently weren’t really godly at all if they deliberately altered the sacred text—were so successful that no one ever noticed? Are we to believe that such error was duplicated hundreds of times without anyone ever discerning such horrific error and deception?

The evidence for the true reading of Alexandrinus, in fact, along with the weight of other manuscripts, exposes the critic’s fiction. Several outstanding scholars of the last 300 years examined this manuscript. As Burgon notes, “A man need only hold up the leaf to the light on a very brilliant day—as [Samuel] Tregelles, [Frederick] Scrivener, and many besides (including [myself]) have done”<sup>4</sup> to see that the marks were authentic. Scrivener, in fact, a brilliant, impeccable scholar, wrote in 1894:

I have examined [Alexandrinus] at least twenty times within as many years, and . . . seeing (as every one must see for himself) with my own eyes, I have always felt convinced with . . . earlier collators that Codice A reads [*theos*].<sup>5</sup>

(If I may interject, the entire textual issue is one that I wish every Christian leader would objectively examine with his “own eyes.”)

Burgon goes on to note several other scholars who attested to **God** as the correct reading. Patrick Young (1584–1652), a Scottish scholar, royal librarian to King James VI and I and King Charles I, as well as *the original collator* of Alexandrinus and had it in his possession for over 20 years, stated that **God** was the original reading. This is important, Burgon notes, since overuse and handling over 150 years ultimately resulted in the fading of the marks, but the marks were there nonetheless. Among others, Burgon also notes Bishop John Pearson (1612–1686), an English theologian and scholar who stated, “We find not *hos* in any copy” (emphasis in the original). Burgon also mentions J. Berriman,

(who delivered a course of Lectures on the true reading of 1 Tim. 3:16, in 1737-8) [and] attests emphatically that he had seen it also. “If therefore” (he adds) “at any time hereafter the old line should become altogether undiscoverable, there will never be just cause to doubt but that the genuine, and original reading of the manuscript was **God**.”<sup>6</sup>

That evidence, and much more we could report, demonstrates that, as Burgon’s successor Edward Miller puts it, “There can be no real doubt, therefore, that [Alexandrinus] did witness for *Theos*.”<sup>7</sup>

But Alexandrinus is far from the only evidence. In fact, Burgon discusses two other disputed uncials and then lists nearly 300 minuscules (cursives) as well as 36 lectionaries<sup>8</sup> that give undisputed support to **God** in this verse.

In stark contrast, *only six* manuscripts in all read *hos*, not one of which is a cursive, and only three lectionaries. So why is this reading retained? Because of the popular (though illogical) myth that “the oldest manuscripts are the best” (see the importance of the Greek Church Fathers in this regard below.)

### *The History of “God”*

Not only are the manuscripts on the side of *Theos* in this verse, but Church History is as well. Of special note are the Greek Church Fathers. As Miller notes: “The overwhelming testimony of Fathers to manuscripts in their use, reaching back further than any existing manuscripts, adds a very powerful witness.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, these men reach back to the days before any of the manuscripts that exist today were copied, so their testimony carries great weight. Besides other factors, this one does much to negate the “older is better” mantra. In this case, while *hos* is attested to “*not for certain by a single Greek Father*,”<sup>10</sup> some 20 Greek fathers confirm *Theos*.

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–107), for example, who was a student of the Apostle John, made three clear allusions to this verse: “God Himself being manifested in human form”; “There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh”; “There is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word, not proceeding forth from silence.”<sup>11</sup> Space does not permit further quotations, but other Fathers include: Dionysius of Alexandria (died 264), Barnabas (late 1<sup>st</sup>-century), Hippolytus (220); Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390); John Chrysostom (344–407); Gregory of Nyssa (335–394); etc.

We must agree with Burgon in his response to Bishop Ellicott, who passionately opposed *Theos* in this verse: “How you can witness a gathering host of ancient Fathers illustrious as these, without misgiving, passes my comprehension.”<sup>12</sup>

I once read the following from a very popular writer/scholar/commentator in his book on textual criticism

(I again withhold the name): “I cannot think of a single great theological writer who has given his energies to defend a high view of Scripture and who has adopted the [*Textus Receptus*], since the discovery of the [older manuscripts].” That puzzles (and shocks) me every time I read it because a man of his learning and stature should be familiar with Robert L. Dabney. Dabney was an outstanding theologian; his *Systematic Theology* (1871) is a classic. A. A. Hodge (son of Charles Hodge), in fact, wrote of him, “The best teacher of Theology in the United States if not the world.” Well, in Volume 1 of his three volume work *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Dabney clearly defended the TR against the then new Critical Text Theory. For example, after outlining the basic “few old manuscripts” vs. “the many recent manuscripts” debate, Dabney wrote: “Now, shall these few, which are claimed to be old, discredit the many more recent? We reply, No.”<sup>13</sup>

On the present text, therefore, this “single great theological writer” states without apology that “the *theos* is changed to *hos*, thus suppressing the name of God in the text.” He goes on:

This is but an expedient, unwarranted by [the reviser’s] own preferred text, to cover from the readers’ eyes the insuperable internal evidence against reading the relative *os* instead of *Theos*; that for the relative there is no antecedent in the passage. So they intrude an antecedent! Yet this does not give them, still, a tenable sense; for Christ is never called by Paul the mystery, or blessed secret, of godliness. It is the doctrine about Christ which he always so calls. Nor are the defenders of this innovation even candid in their statement as to the testimony of the manuscripts, when they say, no old uncial has *Theos*. The Alexandrian indisputably has it. . . . the *prima facie* [at first view or appearance, or on first examination] evidence of the Alexandrian manuscript is for *Theos*.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, the aforementioned writer has surely heard of Charles Hodge. In his monumental *Systematic Theology* (1871–73), he likewise defended the TR: “The internal evidence, so far as the perspicuity of the passage and the analogy of Scripture are concerned, are decidedly in favour of the common text.”<sup>15</sup>

Neither can we ignore earlier comments, such as one from the great 17<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Francis Turretin: “[Paul] does not say simply that the divinity in the abstract, but ‘God’ (*Theon*) in the concrete, was manifested (to wit, the person of the *Logos* was manifested because incarnation is not of the divine nature absolutely, but of a person).”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, in his wonderful work, *Manual of Theology* (1857), the great theologian John Dagg quotes the verse, “God was manifest in the flesh,”<sup>17</sup> as did the equally illustrious John Gill (1839) before him,<sup>18</sup> and Puritan Thomas Watson long before both (1692).<sup>19</sup>

Do we not see a pattern in such men? They did not

permit their heads to be turned by the “new scholarship,” but rather stayed with biblical and historical truth.

## Conclusion

Please ponder this: Does it not give us pause when we open the Jehovah’s Witness “Bible” (*New World Translation*) and read, “He was made manifest in the flesh,” just as in our modern translations? Is this not the same “Bible” that mutilates John 1:1? Do we really think there is no agenda here? This underscores that “He” could refer to anyone from Adam to Moses to John the Baptist. *Only the word God tells us exactly who is meant.*

This verse has often been called the *crux criticorum*, Latin for “the cross for critics, a riddle or puzzle for the critics.” But may we ask (and pity my simplicity if you wish), does God give us word puzzles that we must solve? Does He lay out the crossword grid and then give us clues to figure out how all the words will match vertically and horizontally? Does He pose riddles for us to unravel in our rationalism? I for one simply cannot accept such an idea.

Whether *hos* is a deliberate perversion of the text by Arians or Gnostics, as some argue, or simply an unintentional error by a copyist, it really doesn’t matter. Either way it cannot be tolerated. It is wrong textually, theologically, and historically.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Revision Revised* (Conservative Classics, reprint of 1883 edition), 426.
- <sup>2</sup> Only Matthew 1:1—25:6; John 6:50—8:52; and 2 Corinthians 4:13—12:6 are missing.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993), 78.
- <sup>4</sup> Burgon, 431.
- <sup>5</sup> *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), Vol. II, 392.
- <sup>6</sup> Burgon, 433.
- <sup>7</sup> *A Guide to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886), 136.
- <sup>8</sup> “Lection” comes from a root word in Latin that means “to read.” One way to describe Lectionaries is “church service books,” copies of portions of Scripture that were read in the churches.
- <sup>9</sup> Miller, 137.
- <sup>10</sup> Burgon, 496 (emphasis his).
- <sup>11</sup> *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1: The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians (Ages Software), chap. 19, 115; chap. 7, 103; chap. 8, 125.
- <sup>12</sup> Burgon, 457. Note his discussion of the Fathers, 455–476.
- <sup>13</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical And Theological* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, first published in 1891), Vol. 1, p. 365.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 393–94.
- <sup>15</sup> *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989), Vol. 1, 518.
- <sup>16</sup> *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (P&R, 1994), Vol. 2, 315.
- <sup>17</sup> *Manual of Theology* (Gano Books, 1990 reprint), 183.
- <sup>18</sup> *Body of Divinity* (Baptist Standard Bearer reprint, 1995), 165.
- <sup>19</sup> *Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth reprint, 1992), 110, 163, 192.

## ANNOUNCING A NEW BLOG

We would like to announce a new blog that launched last month: “Expositing Ephesians: The Christian's Wealth and Walk.” *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* is one of the chief passions of Pastor Watson’s life and ministry. He believes this epistle is at the very core of the Christian life. He spent years in the study of it and then three and one half years expositing it from the pulpit. While the complete exposition is on our website, we felt “bite sized” blog posts would be easier for readers to access. We hope this blog will be a blessing to you. We also hope you will tell others about this blog. Please check for new posts each *Monday* and *Friday*: <http://expositingephesians.blogspot.com/>.