

**What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16
*really say?***

Does it call Jesus “God”, or not?

by

Dr Trevor R Allin

Second edition
with a response to objections

www.livingwater-spain.com

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

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AV (“KJV”): “Authorised Version”, 1611 (out of Copyright), also known as the King James Version

NIV: “Holy Bible, New International Version ® NIV ®” Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by the International Bible Society

NRSV: “New Revised Standard Version”, Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

About the Author

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For many years he taught a range of languages up to “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in Spain and England on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

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A note about the second edition

This article has sparked a lively debate in some circles, and frequently claims are made that are completely unsubstantiated and often totally erroneous. We look at some of these claims in a new Post Script.

Trevor R Allin
August 2021

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Introduction

The Authorised (King James') Version of 1 Timothy 3:16 reads:

“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.”

It will be obvious to anyone familiar with the message of the New Testament that the one who was “preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” can only be Jesus Christ.³ So, according to the Authorised Version translation of this verse, Jesus, who was “manifest in the flesh” is described as being God.

However, most modern translations do not have the word “God” in this verse. For example, the NIV (2011 edition) has:

“Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”

and the NRSV has:

“Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.”

Regardless which translation we prefer, the passage is clearly about Jesus Christ, but does it call him “God” or does it just say “he”? Which one is right? The Authorised Version and other translations like it that have the word “God”, or the NIV, NRSV and other translations that have the word “He”?

One would certainly hope that no translator faced with the Greek word Θεός (“theos”, “God”) would translate it with the English word “he”, and indeed the different translations reveal a difference of one word between the Greek text used by the translators of the Authorised Version and the Greek text used by the translators of the NIV and NRSV.

The Greek text used by the translators of the Authorised version⁴ has:

Θεός ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί
[“**theos** efanerōthē en sarkī”]
God was manifested in flesh

whereas the Greek text used by the translators of the NIV and the NRSV⁵ has:

ὁς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί
[“**hos** efanerōthē en sarkī”]
who was manifested in flesh

³ He was also “seen of angels”, but so were other people, so this phrase, too, could refer to Christ and in the context it clearly does. What does “justified in the Spirit” mean? Perhaps the TEV makes this clearer with its rendering, “was shown to be right by the Spirit”. The NIV has “was vindicated by the Spirit” and the NRSV has “was ...vindicated in spirit”. A more detailed study of this particular phrase is outside of the focus of the present article.

⁴ The quotation here is from the edition of Stephanus in 1550, which used the Greek text prepared by Desiderius Erasmus and published in 1516. This text was subsequently given the name “Textus Receptus” (TR).

⁵ This is the Nestle-Aland 27th edition of the Greek New Testament (NA27), in which the text is the same as in the United Bible Societies’ 4th edition (UBS4).

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The difference is just one word in the Greek text: Θεός [“theos”] in the Textus Receptus and ὅς [“hos”] in the NA27/UBS4.

The Greek text of both the Textus Receptus and the NA27/UBS4 was based on a study of the selection of Greek manuscripts that were available to those who were preparing the Greek text that they subsequently published. The texts that Erasmus was able to consult in the sixteenth century had the word Θεός [“theos”]. The editors of the NA27/UBS4 text had access to many more manuscripts than Erasmus. Some of those manuscripts had Θεός [“theos”] and others had ὅς [“hos”].

So the questions that we must seek to answer are:

- How were the earliest Greek manuscripts written?
- How did it come about that some manuscripts have “God” and others have “who”?
- What is the manuscript evidence in the case of 1 Timothy 3:16?
- Is it likely that the Apostle Paul could have used the word Θεός [“theos”] here?
- Are both of these words possible in this context?
- Faced with two different words in the manuscripts before them, why did the editors of NA27/UBS4 choose the word ὅς [“hos”] and reject the word Θεός [“theos”]?
- Did they take the correct decision?

This article will address these questions and also look at the key principles that researchers in any discipline must observe.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 1: How were the earliest Greek manuscripts written?

First, we need to have some background information on how Greek was written at the time when the New Testament was written and copies of it (“manuscripts”) were made. First, we will look at the form of three letters of the Greek alphabet, to see how they were written in antiquity.

The letter O (omicron)

The shape of the letter omicron has not changed since its early use in Classical Greek: a vertical slightly oval shape that may become a simple round circle when the letter is written small.

The letter “S” (sigma)

In the more than 2,000 years that the Greek language has been written, the form of certain letters in the Greek alphabet has changed. In Modern Greek the capital “S” is written “Σ”. The name of this letter is “sigma”. The lower case version of sigma is nowadays written as “σ” when it occurs inside a word and as “ς” when it occurs at the end of a word, and these are the forms of the letter that will be seen in modern printed versions of the Greek Biblical text.

However, over a period of many hundreds of years both before and after the time when the New Testament was written, the Greek form of the letter “S” was “C”, and this is the form that we find in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, including all of the manuscripts that we shall consult here.

The letter Θ (theta)

The current form of the letter Θ in Greek consists of a vertical oval shape with a horizontal bar across part of all of the centre of the letter. In fact, in an earlier form of the letter “theta”, instead of a central horizontal bar across most or all of the “O”, there was just a dot in the centre, thus: \odot , or a very small bar that did not reach the two sides of the letter. Such a form is still used for the capital Θ up to the present day in some fonts. Maude Thompson says that “the dotted circle ... [was] common to all varieties of the alphabet”.⁶ Such a form would almost certainly have been seen by the scribes who produced manuscript copies of the Bible, and may even have been used by them.

Continuous script

For hundreds of years, both Greek and Latin were written with no gaps between the words. In Latin, this is referred to as “scriptio continua”⁷. For three principal reasons, this did not present problems to readers of the time:

1. Greek spelling was at the time largely phonetic, that is to say, words were spelt according to the sounds that they contained.
2. When people speak – whether Greek or any other language – there are no gaps (silences) between the words said.
3. Readers at that time used to read out loud, even if they were on their own. When this is done with a language that is written phonetically, the meaning becomes obvious.

⁶ Maude Thompson, Sir Edward, “An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography”, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1912, recently reprinted (no date), p.4 para. 1. cf. also charts in same book on pp. 7 and 144.

⁷ Readers will find more information on this in chapter 7 of the review on this website of the book by Jason BeDuhn, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>.

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Nomina Sacra

In ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, certain words that were considered to have a special, sacred, significance were usually written in a special, abbreviated form. Writing in 1907, the German theologian Ludwig Traube gave to this phenomenon the Latin name “*nomina sacra*” (singular: “*nomen sacrum*”).⁸

Modern explanations of this phenomenon can be found in Hurtado, “The Earliest Christian Artifacts”⁹ and in Comfort, “Encountering the Manuscripts”.¹⁰

Key words that were treated as *nomina sacra* included: God, Father, Jesus, Christ, Spirit and Son, with some other words being added over the course of a few centuries. For these words, usually only the first and the last letter of the word was written. Frequently the word was marked with a horizontal bar above the word – although sometimes the scribe forgot to add the horizontal bar. This bar was frequently thinner than the lettering and often did not extend the full length of the abbreviation. Thus, the Greek word for God (Θεός in the printed form of Biblical Greek) was usually written:

Θ̄C

(the letter “theta” followed by the letter “sigma”). Sometimes the bar was either omitted or is now extremely difficult or impossible to see on older manuscripts where the ink may have faded or there is an irregularity in the surface of the parchment, vellum or papyrus, or damage to it. In these cases, what is visible may be only:

ΘC

Nomina sacra forms were pronounced normally: the whole of the word that was indicated was said.

“Breathings” and accents

When a Greek word begins with a vowel, the initial letter may or may not be preceded by a sound like the English “h”. This is called a “rough breathing” and is indicated in modern printed editions of Biblical Greek with a symbol like a raised, flipped comma: '^{h} . However, at the time when the Biblical manuscripts were written and in the copies that were made over the course of many hundreds of years thereafter, no symbol was used to indicate “breathings”.

In the modern printed form of Biblical Greek, the word “hos”, which means “who”, is written as ὅς, with the rough breathing printed over the initial vowel (to which, in this word, an accent has been added). This word is pronounced “hos”.

Accents were also not normally written in most Greek manuscripts (whether sacred or secular) that were written or copied prior to the time of Christ or in the first 500 years or more of the Christian era.

Thus ὅς [“hos”] was written in manuscripts as:

OC

(the letter “omicron” followed by the letter “sigma”).

⁸ Traube, Ludwig, “Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung“, reprinted: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967

⁹ Hurtado, Larry, “The Earliest Christian Artifacts”, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge (England): William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, chapter 3 (pp. 95-134)

¹⁰ Philip W Comfort, “Encountering the Manuscripts”, Nashville, TN, 2005: Broadman & Holman Publishers, chapter 4 (pp. 199-253)

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The remarkable similarity in shape between the letters that comprise the written form of the Greek words for “God” and “who” immediately becomes clear.

Materials on which texts were written

In antiquity, texts were written on all sorts of surfaces, including clay tablets, stone and wood.¹¹ The major Biblical manuscripts were generally either written on parchment, vellum or papyrus.

Parchment/vellum

Parchment and vellum are made from specially prepared animal skins, usually the skin of a calf, a kid or a sheep. (The term “vellum” is reserved exclusively for surfaces prepared from calf skin. Because of the difficulty in determining whether a material is parchment or vellum without a laboratory analysis, the word “parchment” is commonly used as a cover term for both materials.) Naturally, there are occasionally defects in parchment and vellum, such as marks or small holes. It is interesting to see how scribes have split the text round these marks and holes, in order to make the best use of the support material, which was an expensive product.

The two different sides of the skin affect the writing in different ways:

- the hair side (from which the hair has been removed)
This side tends to be slightly darker. It also absorbs ink better, giving a result with higher contrast and greater sharpness of the lettering.
- The flesh side
Centuries later, the text on the flesh side is slightly fainter than the text on the hair side. With some manuscripts, the text on the flesh side is a lot fainter.

Papyrus

Papyrus was made from the papyrus plant, initially in Egypt, with strips laid vertically and then a second layer of strips laid horizontally. These two layers were then beaten or compressed to make them combine and form a sheet of papyrus. Normally, the side with the horizontal strips was considered to be the front and so was written on. Sheets of papyrus that have been re-used may have a subsequent text on the back, where the strips run vertically.

The Codex

Famously, Christians developed the concept of the book, known as the Codex, in which both sides of the parchment or papyrus are used for writing. Before starting to write, each sheet was folded in half vertically down the middle, to create four surfaces or pages on which to write. A number of sheets were folded together, one within another, and then stitched down the spine. This set of sheets is known as a “quire”. In the case of Codex Sinaiticus, each quire usually consists of four sheets of parchment, resulting in 16 pages on which text is written.

To make each quire, the first (unfolded) sheet was placed hair-side down. The next sheet was placed flesh side down, the next one hair-side down and the last one flesh-side down. The four sheets were then folded. Because of the different characteristics of each side of the parchment (explained above) pages will alternately have contrasty, sharp text and then less sharp text with lower contrast. As the sheets were placed with the flesh side facing the flesh side of the next sheet,

¹¹ An excellent and comprehensive introduction to this can be found in Maunde Thompson, Sir Edward, “An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography”, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1912, recently re-printed (no date), Chapter II.

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and the hair side facing the hair side of the next sheet, the contrasty text will face another sheet with contrasty text, while the fainter text will face a sheet with fainter text.

Likewise, the different characteristics of the two sides of papyrus mean that the side with the horizontal strips of papyrus was generally easier to write on than the side with the vertical strips.

We can thus understand that the quality and clarity of the text can be expected to vary even within one manuscript, depending on the side of the writing base used and of course also depending on any defects in the individual sheet.

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Chapter 2:

How did it come about that some manuscripts have “God” and others have “who”?

When we look at the way that the letters were formed in the uncial (capital letter) script in which the earliest New Testament manuscripts were written, we can see that for “hos” the scribe would write a circle or a slightly-squeezed vertical oval and then the letter C (sigma). To write “theos”, he¹² would again form the circular or oval shape, lift the pen from the parchment or papyrus and then add the horizontal bar, whether long or short, or the dot, to the middle of the letter, to turn the O (“omicron”) into a Θ (“theta”).

After adding this line or dot, the scribe would then write the final letter of the word, C (“sigma”). Then, in the case of words that were *nomina sacra*, he would then normally go back and add a short horizontal bar above at least part of the letters that formed the word (just two letters, in most cases).

Köstenberger and Kruger state that “A simple scribal slip could easily turn one word into the other”¹³ – but see in chapter 3, below, their further comments on this passage.

We have already referred to the remarkable similarity in shape between these two words, in the form in which they were written by Christian scribes or for Christian readers.¹⁴ If we add to this the wear to which manuscripts were subjected, it is easy to see that after a while some letters may no longer have been clear on some manuscripts. Metzger says,¹⁵ “It is not difficult to imagine what would happen in the course of time to one much-handled manuscript, passing from reader to reader, perhaps from church to church (see Col. iv.16), and suffering damage from the fingers of eager if devout readers as well as from climatic changes.”

If we add to this the imperfections on the surfaces of the materials on which the words were written, it is possible to understand that a scribe, often copying in poor light, might easily have misread an O for a Θ for instance, if a joint between the horizontal strips of the papyrus coincided with the centre of the letter O. Likewise, the presence of similar imperfections in the papyrus or parchment might have resulted in the horizontal bar in the middle of the Θ being misinterpreted as a defect, with the result that an O would be written instead of the Θ.

In the vast majority of cases, such copying errors, whether caused by imperfections in the writing surface or mistakes by the copyist, would result in non-words or nonsense words, such that it would be obvious which word was intended, or which word must have been in the original text, and given the thousands of manuscripts that we have, a doubtful or even wrong letter in one manuscript rarely leaves us in doubt as to the original text.

The case of 1 Corinthians 13:3

However, in a few instances, such errors did produce meaningful words. An example of this is 1 Corinthians 13:3. Some translations have “give up my body so that I may boast” and other

¹² Or she: it is reported that in ancient times there were Scriptoria that employed women scribes to copy manuscripts.

¹³ Köstenberger, Andreas J & Kruger, Michael J, “The Heresy of Orthodoxy”, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010, p. 222.

¹⁴ In manuscripts of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that were produced by or for Jews, *nomina sacra* abbreviations were apparently not used. This enables scholars to determine whether a copy of the Septuagint was made by/for Jews or by/for Christians.

¹⁵ Metzger, Bruce M., “The Text of the New Testament”, 3rd, enlarged edition, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 201, fn 1.

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translations have “give up my body to be burned”. The different translations are due to a difference of just one letter in the Greek manuscript, in this instance, Θ and X. In the following table, the key letter is indicated in bold type and underlined.

KAY X HΣΩMAI ¹⁶	that I may boast
KAY Θ HΣΩMAI	that I may be burned

In this case, the shapes of the two letters are not at all similar, but clearly at some point a scribe misread the word before him, thus inadvertently creating the new form.

So which is the original form? To determine this, specialists in ancient texts follow various steps. Amongst other things, they look at:

- the date of composition of each manuscript
- the general reliability of the rest of the manuscript in each case
- the number of manuscripts that have each form.

Naturally, the earlier the date of composition of a manuscript, the more weight is normally given to the form of the text that it contains. As regards the number of manuscripts with each form, it is not simply a matter of totalling up the manuscripts with each form, not only because later manuscripts will be given less weight but also because if a copying error enters a manuscript at an early stage, this can be replicated through many subsequent manuscripts copied directly or indirectly from it.

Other criteria include:

1. Which form is in keeping with the style of the author?
2. Which form results in a meaningful sentence?
3. Which form is more probable in the immediate context?

In this example, we note that:

1. Paul frequently talks about boasting (30 times in the NIV translation of 1984). However, he only once uses a verb related to the above verb for burn, “to burn up”, in 1 Corinthians 3:15.¹⁷
2. It can be convincingly argued that the phrase “that I may burn” does not result in a meaningful sentence.
3. Looking at the immediate context, we note that 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 presents a series of examples of behaviour that does not demonstrate Christian love, which is contrasted in the rest of the chapter. Most important of all, in the very next verse, Paul says “Love ... does not boast”, a deliberate rebuttal of the previous statement. We also remember that the division into verses and even most of the paragraph divisions are not in the original texts, so that here Paul is clearly presenting one continuous argument on the same theme, deliberately repeating some of the same words.

Given these considerations, it would seem to be clear that in verse 3 Paul was talking of boasting that was in opposition to Christian love.

Some of the principles that we have employed here in evaluating this textual variant will prove helpful to us when we evaluate the text of 1 Timothy 3:16.

¹⁶ In these two words, the modern shapes of Greek letters are given. In the cases of Θ and X, the shape has not changed since ancient times. KAY**X**HΣΩMAI is pronounced “ka**uch**ēsōmai” (with the “ch” pronounced as in the Scottish word “loch”); KAY**Θ**HΣΩMAI is pronounced “ka**uth**ēsōmai”.

¹⁷ In the two other cases where the NIV has “burn” in a text by Paul (1 Corinthians 7:9 and 2 Corinthians 11:29), the original word is quite different, a form of the verb *πυρόω* [“purōō”].

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Chapter 3:

What is the manuscript evidence in the case of 1 Timothy 3:16?

There are three major manuscripts that originally contained the whole of the Bible in Greek, that is, the New Testament text plus the translation of their Hebrew Scriptures that the Jews had made into Greek, before the time of Christ, which is known as the Septuagint. They are:

Manuscript	Approximate date of production
Codex Sinaiticus	340 A D
Codex Vaticanus	360 A D
Codex Alexandrinus	420 A D

A significant number of pages at the end of Codex Vaticanus is missing, including the whole of 1 Timothy, so it cannot be consulted for this text. We will therefore look at the other two manuscripts. There are also numerous other manuscripts of 1 Timothy, some of them significantly older than the above copies, although they may not contain the whole of the New Testament. We will also refer to some of them.

Codex Sinaiticus

Codex Sinaiticus is well known for its numerous corrections. This is not a weak point. On the contrary, it shows that at that time the text of the New Testament was already regarded as fixed and that introducing changes was not permitted.

Each of the scribes corrected their own copying, by referring back to the manuscript from which they were working, and then one of the scribes also corrected parts of the manuscript that had been copied by other scribes, according to the conclusions of experts in ancient handwriting (palaeographers) who have studied the manuscript. However, experts have not reached agreement as to how many different “hands” (as they call them) are present in the handwriting, and therefore, how many scribes were involved in the production and correction of the manuscript.

It is normally presumed that such corrections were made by consulting the source manuscripts from which Codex Sinaiticus was copied, or other manuscripts that even at that time were already ancient. Bearing in mind that Codex Sinaiticus has so far survived for more than one thousand six hundred years, it is easy to see that the source manuscripts from which it was copied could easily have been 200 or more years old, which would, at the most conservative estimate, take us back to manuscripts produced in about 140 AD. Such manuscripts could credibly have been copied from the original texts or copies that had been made at the same time that the original texts were written by their authors. It is thus possible to see the immense importance of Codex Sinaiticus, and even of the corrections that it contains.

In 1 Timothy 3:16, Sinaiticus has OC, which has been corrected to ΘC. However, Constantin Tischendorf, who brought nearly all of the manuscript to Europe from a monastery in Sinai in the 19th century, did not include the correction in his non-photographic reproduction of the manuscript, which was published in St Petersburg in 1862.

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ΕΑΝ ΔΕ ΒΡΑΔΥΝΩ
ἸΝΑ ΕΙΔῆΣ ΠΩΣ
ΝΑΣΤΡΕΦΕΣΘΑΙ
ἩΤΙΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΕΚΚΛΗ
ΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ ΖΩΝΤΟΣ
ΣΤΥΛΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΔΡΑΙ
ΩΜΑΤΗΣ ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑΣ
ΚΑΙ ΟΜΟΛΟΓΟΥΜΕ
ΝΩΣ ΜΕΓΑ ΕΣΤΙΝ

ΤΟΤΗΣ ΕΥΣΕΒΕΙΑΣ
ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ὅς ἔ
ΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ΕΝ ΣΑΡ
ΚΙ· ΕΔΙΚΑΙΩΘΗ ΕΝ
ΠΝΙΩΦΘΗ ΑΓΓΕΛΟΙΣ
ΕΚΗΡΥΧΘΗ ΕΝ Ε
ΘΝΕΣΙΝ ΕΠΙΣΤΕΥ
ΘΗ ΕΝ ΚΟΣΜΩ· ἡ
ΑΝΕΛΗΜΦΘΗ ΕΝ
ΔΟΣΗ

Reproduction from "Bibliorum Codex Sinaiticus Petropolitanus, Vol IV",
published in St Petersburg, 1862¹⁸

In Codex Sinaiticus, the text is presented in four columns per page.¹⁹ 1 Timothy 3:15-16 comes at the bottom of column 2 and the top of column 3.

ἐὰν δὲ βραδύνω,
ἵνα εἰδῆς πῶς
δεῖ ἐν οἴκῳ θεοῦ ἀ
ναστρέφεσθαι,
ἣτις ἐστὶν ἐκκλη
σία θεοῦ ζῶντος,
στῦλος καὶ ἐδραῖωμα
τῆς ἀληθείας.
καὶ ὁμολογουμένως
μέγα ἐστὶν

τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας
μυστήριον· ὅς ἔ
φανερώθη ἐν σαρ
κί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν
πνεύματι, ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις,
ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔ
θνεσιν, ἐπιστεύ
θη ἐν κόσμῳ,
ἀνελήμφθη ἐν
δόξῃ.

Transcription of the above text, using a modern Greek font and inserting spaces between words,
and adding accents, breathings and punctuation.

The meaning of this text is²⁰:

if I delay,
so that you may know how
it is necessary in the house of God
to behave,
which is the church of the living God,
the pillar and mainstay
of the truth.
And confessedly
great is

the of piety
mystery who was mani-
fested in the fles-
h, was justified in
spirit, appeared to angels,
was preached among the gen-
tiles, was believed
on in the world,
was received up into
glory

¹⁸ Reprographic copy published Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969

¹⁹ Except for Old Testament poetical works, in which the meaning-units of the original text are clear. These generally result in longer lines of text, so in these books Sinaiticus presents the text in two columns per page.

²⁰ The aim here is not to produce a normal translation into flowing English, but to translate each word individually as closely to the Greek as possible.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

For an explanation of this odd translation, readers are referred to Chapter 5, below. In this English translation I have broken up words at the ends of some lines in order to simulate equivalent breaks in words in the Greek. (Readers will observe that Greek did not use a hyphen when breaking a word at the end of a line.)

Why did Tischendorf not accept the correction in 1 Timothy 3:16?

The British Library website states²¹ that “further extensive corrections [were] undertaken probably in the seventh century.” Again, we cannot know which manuscripts these later correctors used, nor can we even be certain exactly when such corrections were made.

It must be assumed that Tischendorf concluded that the handwriting of the correction from OC to ΘC in 1 Timothy 3:16 was sufficiently different from the handwriting in original text that it was not contemporary with the production of the manuscript.

Evidence that suggests that this correction should be accepted

Köstenberger and Kruger state that “four of the uncial witnesses (Ⲁ, A C D) show that OΣ (“who”) was actually *corrected* by the scribe to read ΘΣ (“God”) – meaning the scribe did it consciously”²² – i.e., this was not a “scribal slip”.

Some have claimed that these corrections were made in order to promote a particular doctrinal position. However, Köstenberger and Kruger continue by saying, “But the fact that these four scribes did it consciously is not the same as saying that they did it for *theological reasons*. These are not the same thing. These scribes may have simply thought the prior scribe got it wrong, or maybe they simply corrected it according to what was on their exemplar.”²³

Köstenberger and Kruger also point out that “Moreover, a number of other majuscules have ΘΣ (“God”) but not as part of a correction (K L P Ψ).”²⁴

How to see the original of Codex Sinaiticus

Most of the pages of Codex Sinaiticus are in the British Library in London and a part of the manuscript is on permanent display to the public in a room with very subdued lighting in the Sir John Ritblat Treasures Gallery. However, it is naturally not possible for members of the public (or even most academic researchers!) to handle such a treasured and now somewhat fragile document, so only the pages that the curators have chosen to display can be seen.

However, the whole of the text of the Codex Sinaiticus has been digitised, and at the time of writing²⁵ can be seen at <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/> . Even though the original pages of this manuscript are not all in one place,²⁶ the above website does contain digital copies of all surviving pages discovered so far.

²¹

http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/codexsinai.html?ns_campaign=treasures&ns_mchannel=ppc&ns_source=google&ns_linkname=Codex%20sinaiticus&ns_fee=0&gclid=CjwKEAjr_rIBRDJzq-Z-LC_2HgSJADoL57HUxGAiuY4DTMv90PXgWpwIUSvRoHuynzIA3i88n5nOhoCWxPw_wcB consulted on 19.5.17

²² Op. cit., p. 222. Emphasis in the original.

²³ Op. cit., pp. 222-223. Italics in original text. Underlining added by the present author.

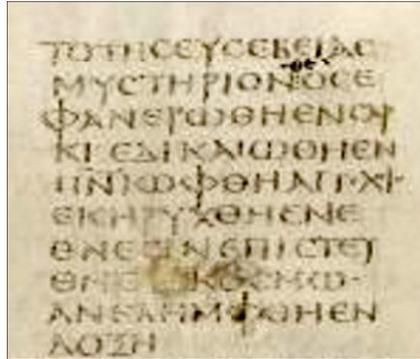
²⁴ Op. cit., p. 223.

²⁵ Consulted on 19.5.17.

²⁶ Forty-three sheets (86 pages) are in the library of the University of Leipzig, two sheets (four pages) are in the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg and fragments that were discovered in St Catherine’s Monastery in 1975 are housed there.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Navigating the website to any Biblical passage is easy, and the on-line copy of the top of the third column on this page is as follows:

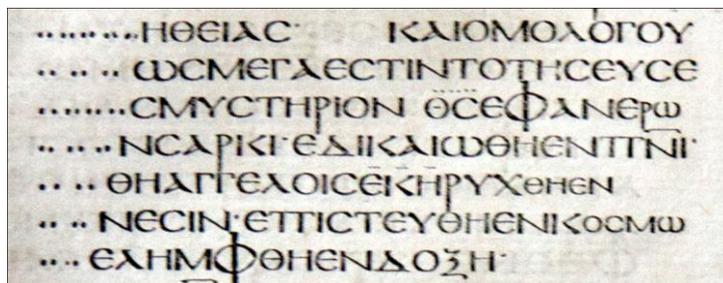


1 Timothy 3:16 as seen on the website of the Codex Sinaiticus project.
Courtesy of the website of the Codex Sinaiticus Project and the British Library

Even though the resolution of the on-line copy, as reproduced here, is not good, the correction from OC to ΘC is clearly visible on line 2 of the text. Readers desirous of consulting a much higher-resolution copy are referred to the excellent printed facsimile published in 2010 by the British Library in London and Hendrickson in the USA.²⁷

Codex Alexandrinus

The other major manuscript of substantially the whole of the Bible is Codex Alexandrinus, which has been in London since 1627. In 1786, which was prior to the invention of photography, the British Museum published a facsimile copy of the New Testament section of Alexandrinus, prepared by the Orientalist and Biblical manuscript scholar Carl Gottfried Woide, who was on the staff of the Museum. Woide's facsimile of 1 Timothy 3:16 has the following:



Woide's transcription of 1 Timothy 3:15-16

Note that the top left-hand corner of the page had been damaged at some point before Woide studied the manuscript (possibly centuries earlier), so some letters at the beginning of the higher lines of the column are missing. However, the absence of these letters does not affect the word that interests us here.

Here is my transcription (in modern Greek letters) of this text, with spaces added between the words and accents, breathings and punctuation added, as well as the letters presumed to have been present in the damaged portion of the page, here enclosed in square brackets:

²⁷ "Codex Sinaiticus", London: The British Library and Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2010.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

[τῆς ἀλ]ηθείας. ¹⁶ καὶ ὁμολογοῦ
[μέν]ως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσε
[βεία]ς μυστήριον Ἐς ἐφανερῶ
[θη ἐ]ν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι,
[ῶφ]θη ἀγγέλοις, ἐκηρύχθη ἐν
[ἔθ]νεσιν, ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ,
[ἀν]ελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

The word that interests us is in the third line of the text given here, just beyond the mid point of the line.

We see that Woide reproduced this word as Ἐς i.e., “God”. So, according to him, in the mid 1780s, the word “God” was clearly visible on the manuscript. The meaning of the resulting text is²⁸:

[of the tr]uth. And admitt
[ed]ly great is the of pie
[ty] mystery: God was manifest
[ed i]n the flesh, was justified in the spirit
[app]eared to angels, was preached among the
[gen]tiles, was believed on in the world,
[was re]ceived into glory.

Much more information on the Codex Alexandrinus is given in an appendix to this article, where further reproductions of this text will be found.

Other manuscripts of the New Testament

Numerous other ancient manuscripts have Ἐς, while others have Ὁς. In his Greek-Spanish interlinear New Testament²⁹, César Vidal states³⁰:

“The Nestle-Aland/UBS [edition of the Greek text] replaces “God” with “who”. The reasons for this substitution – regardless of the fact that it has extended into numerous translations – lack substance. In the first instance, all the uncial manuscripts (except for Aleph³¹, which gives the masculine form of “who” and D³², which gives the neuter form of the same word) have “God” and not “who”.”

²⁸ I have followed standard procedure in seeking to replicate the phenomenon of re-constituting missing letters in the manuscript. The exact letters enclosed in square brackets in the English correspond as closely as possible to what has happened to the Greek text. This word-by-word transcription makes no pretence at being a translation into fluent English.

²⁹ Vidal, César, “El Nuevo Testamento interlineal griego-español”, Grupo Nelson, 2011. Readers wishing to see the original Spanish of this quotation will find it in the Spanish version of this article on this website.

³⁰ In an extensive footnote to 1 Timothy 3:16

³¹ This Hebrew letter, **א**, designates Codex Sinaiticus.

³² The letter D is used for two different manuscripts. One of them is Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis, also known as 05. This manuscript is located in Cambridge University Library, where it has the reference Nn. 2.41. It contains the four

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Uncial manuscripts are those that are written entirely in capital letters (sometimes called majuscule script), which is the case with all of the most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament (and secular texts of the same period). Uncial script was used exclusively until the 8th century A.D., and continued to be used in some documents later than then. In the ninth and tenth centuries (A.D.), a script was developed that contained both capital letters and what we now call “lower case” letters. This is known as minuscule or cursive script. In this script, letters are frequently joined up.³³

To return to the quotation from César Vidal:

“The same occurs with the cursive manuscripts, all except one of which has “God” and not “who”.”

Quotations from the Bible in other ancient manuscripts

As well as Biblical manuscripts themselves, an important source of evidence is Biblical quotations in the works of other writers in the early centuries of Christianity. Some of these writers made hundreds of quotations from the Bible. Vidal states:

“The testimony of the Church Fathers is also very clear. Gregory of Nyssa³⁴ quotes the text 22 times using “God” and not “who” or “which”. Gregory of Nazianzus³⁵ gives “God” twice. Didimus of Alexandria³⁶ cites it with “God” three times. Pseudo-Dionysius of Alexandria³⁷ quotes the passage with the word “God” four times. Diodorus of Tarsus³⁸ cites it with “God” five times. John Chrysostom³⁹ cites it with “God” and not “who” at least three times. We find this same referral to the text always with “God” and not with “who” in Cyril of Alexandria⁴⁰ (7

gospels, the book of Acts and 3 John only. Vidal’s reference is not to this manuscript, which does not contain 1 Timothy. The other manuscript that is designated with the letter D is Codex Claromontanus, which is also known as 06 and is sometimes designated as D^P. It is located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, where it has the reference Gr. 107 AB. It contains the epistles of St Paul and the letter to the Hebrews in Greek and Latin. Constantin Tischendorf transcribed it and his transcription was published by the University of Leipzig in 1852. This must be the manuscript to which Vidal refers.

³³See the Wikipedia article on Greek minuscule: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_minuscule . Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁴ According to Wikipedia, Gregory of Nyssa was born between 330 and 335 A.D. and died between 394 and 400. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nyssa Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁵ Born about 329 A.D., died 25 January 390, Archbishop of Constantinople. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nazianzus. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁶ Assumed here to be the writer also known as “Didymus the blind”. Born about 313 A.D., died 398. Didymus was a theologian who wrote many commentaries on books of the Bible. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didymus_the_Blind. Consulted on 13.5.2017. Another “Dídimo de Alejandría”, (known in Latin as Didymus Chalcenterus and in Greek as Δίδυμος χαλκέντερος) was born about 63 B.C. and died in 10 A.D. before Christ reached adulthood. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didymus_Chalcenterus. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁷ Assumed to be the writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, late 5th to early 6th century. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudo-Dionysius_the_Areopagite. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁸ Bishop of Tarsus and theologian. Died about 392 A.D. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diodorus_of_Tarsus. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

³⁹ Born about 349 A.D., died 14 September 407, Archbishop of Constantinople. Wikipedia states, “Chrysostom was among the most prolific authors in the early Christian Church exceeded only by Augustine of Hippo in the quantity of his surviving writings.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chrysostom. Consulted on 21.12.2017.

⁴⁰ Born about 376, died 444. Patriarch of Alexandria 412-444. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyril_of_Alexandria. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

times), in Theodore⁴¹ (4 times), in Severus of Antioch⁴² (1), Macedonius (506 A.D.)⁴³, to whom the reading “God” has absurdly been attributed, of course also reproduces it; Eutalio⁴⁴ and John Damascene⁴⁵, twice each and to all of these must be added Epiphanius⁴⁶ in the 7th Council of Nicea (Nicaea) (787), Oecumenius⁴⁷ and Theophylact⁴⁸.”

This is virtually a “roll call” of most of the best-known early Church Fathers plus a few later writers.⁴⁹ It provides highly convincing evidence, at least in the case of the earlier writers (who are the majority) in favour of the reading “God”.

Church lectionaries

As early as at least the third century A.D., Christians compiled selections of readings from the Bible, for use when they gathered for worship.⁵⁰ These collections of readings came to be referred to in subsequent centuries with the word “lectionary”. While a lectionary does not contain the complete text of books from the Bible in one place, it is an invaluable source of evidence of early readings of New Testament texts.

With reference to 1 Timothy 3:16, César Vidal states: “In addition, all the ecclesiastical lectionaries of the sixth or fifth century read “God” instead of “who” or “which”.”⁵¹

⁴¹ Assumed to be Theodore of Mopsuestia, c. 350-428, Bishop of Mopsuestia (as Theodore II) from 392 to 428. Also known as “Theodore the Interpreter” and “Theodore of Antioch”. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_of_Mopsuestia. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

⁴² Baptised (as an adult) in 488. Died between 538 and 542. Wikipedia states, “He was a very copious writer, ... and wrote in the Greek language but ... A very large number of his writings exist only in Syriac translation.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severus_of_Antioch. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

⁴³ Assumed to be Macedonius II of Constantinople, Patriarch of Constantinople from 495 to 511 A.D. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macedonius_II_of_Constantinople. Consulted on 21.12.2017.

⁴⁴ No internet article on Eutalio found (on 13.5.2017 or on 21.12.17).

⁴⁵ Also known as “John of Damascus”. According to Wikipedia, “born in Damascus in the third quarter of the 7th century AD”. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_Damascus. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

⁴⁶ Also apparently known as Epiphanius the Monk, Epiphanius Monachus or Epiphanius of Constantinople. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphanius_the_Monk Consulted on 21.12.17.

⁴⁷ Information on Oecumenius is fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. Spanish Wikipedia says, “His period is uncertain and could correspond to the tenth century, which coincides with the fact that in his commentaries he names Focio, who lived in the second half of the ninth century.” See <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenio> (text in Spanish), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oecumenius> (text in English). Consulted on 21.12.2017.

⁴⁸ Assumed to be Theophylact of Ohrid. Appointed Bishop about the year 1078. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theophylact_of_Ohrid. Consulted on 13.5.2017.

⁴⁹ Quotations from the Bible in these sources are sometimes referred to as “Patristic quotations.”

⁵⁰ See, for instance, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectionary> . Consulted on 21.12.17.

⁵¹ Part of his note on 1 Timothy 3:16 indicated above.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 4:

Is it likely that the writer of this letter, the Apostle Paul, could have used the word Θεός [“theos”] here?

Is it likely that the Apostle Paul would have called Jesus “God”?

When we were seeking guidance in which was more probably the correct wording of 1 Corinthians 13:3, we looked at the words and ideas that Paul commonly used, as indicated in his other letters. In this case, we must ask:

1) Is calling Jesus “God” in line with what Paul writes elsewhere?

Alternatively:

2) Does it go against his teaching elsewhere?

The answers to these two questions will show us whether it is likely (or even possible!) that Paul would have applied the designation “God” to Jesus Christ.

Writing to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul contrasted Jews and non-Jews. With reference to the Jews, he wrote,

... ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα, ⁴ οἵτινές εἰσιν Ἰσραηλῖται, ... ⁵ ὧν οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὧν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

(Romans 9:3-5)

The most obvious translation of this is:

...concerning my brothers and sisters, my relatives according to the flesh, ⁴who are Israelites, ...⁵ of whom are the patriarchs and out of whom according to the flesh is Christ, the one being over everyone, God blessed forever, amen.⁵²

The NIV (2011 revision) renders this as:

for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. ... ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.

This seems to describe Christ clearly as “God over all”.⁵³

However, perhaps even clearer is Paul’s use of quotations of verses from the Old Testament that unequivocally apply to God in the source text but are applied to Jesus Christ by Paul. Here, we shall limit ourselves to looking at just two examples.

Isaiah 45:23-24

The NIV, 2011 translation of these two verses is:

By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. ²⁴ They will say of me, "In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength."

⁵² Unpolished, literal translation by the author of this article.

⁵³ As is to be expected, the Jehovah’s Witnesses challenge this translation. By splitting the sentence into two separate sentences and adding extra words, they manage to prevent the word “God” from being applied to Christ. This is not the place to spend further time on their translation of this verse.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

The use of “LORD” in capital letters is an indication in the NIV and many other translations that the word in the original is יהוה, Yahweh, which the Jehovah’s Witnesses erroneously translate as “Jehovah”.⁵⁴

The Septuagint Greek translation of the key phrases in this passage is:

ἐμοὶ κάμψει πᾶν γόνυ καὶ ἐξομολογήσεται πᾶσα γλῶσσα τῷ θεῷ²⁴ λέγων δικαιοσύνη καὶ δόξα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἥξουσιν

The NETS English translation⁵⁵ of this is:

“to me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall acknowledge God,²⁴ saying, Righteousness and glory shall come to him”

It is unambiguously clear that the one to whom “every knee will bow” and that “every tongue shall acknowledge” is God.⁵⁶

The Apostle Paul quotes this passage twice in the New Testament. In Romans 14:11 we read:

γέγραπται γάρ· ζῶ ἐγώ, λέγει κύριος, ὅτι ἐμοὶ κάμψει πᾶν γόνυ καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται τῷ θεῷ.

Translation:

For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, to me shall bow every knee and every tongue shall acknowledge God’⁵⁷

The immediate context in Romans 14 indicates that the referent is God.

The Apostle also quotes these same verses from Isaiah 45 in his letter to the Philippians:

¹⁰ ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων ¹¹ καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς. (Philippians 2:10-11)

Translation:

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, those in heaven, those on earth and those under the earth ¹¹ and all tongue shall acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.⁵⁸

What is remarkable here is that the Apostle Paul is unashamedly applying to Jesus Christ the fulfilment of a prophecy that he knows refers to bowing the knee to God and acknowledging Him as Lord.

⁵⁴ For a more detailed study of this, readers are referred to the article on Matthew 6:9 and “Jehovah” on this website, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/yhwh.pdf>

⁵⁵ Pietersma, Albert and Wright, Benjamin G., editors, “A New English Translation of the Septuagint”, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007

⁵⁶ The Jehovah’s Witnesses recognise this, using the word “Jehovah” in verse 24.

⁵⁷ The New World Translation, which was made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, recognises that Romans 14:11 is a quotation from Isaiah 45:23-24, and uses that to justify adding to the text of Romans the word “Jehovah”, a word that nowhere occurs in any Greek New Testament manuscript.

⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, here the Jehovah’s Witnesses decide not to add the word “Jehovah”.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Joel 2:32

The NIV, 2011 translation of this verse (from the Hebrew) is:

And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved

Again, the original uses יהוה, Yahweh, to indicate clearly that it is those who call on God who will be saved.

The Septuagint Greek translation of this verse is:

πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται⁵⁹

An exact translation of this is:

everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved

It is from this Greek translation that the Apostle Paul quotes in Romans 10:13, although, as a Jew thoroughly trained at the feet of the great Jewish teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), he will have been familiar with the Hebrew original and he did know Hebrew and Aramaic, which he spoke fluently (Acts 21:40). However, he chose to quote here from the Greek translation. Accordingly, the text in Romans 10:13 is:

πᾶς γὰρ ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται.⁶⁰

“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ ”

Whereas the prophecy by Joel said that the object of this action obligatorily had to be Yahweh and clearly stated that in order to be saved, one had to call on the name of God, the Apostle Paul had no hesitation in applying this prophecy to Christ, as the context makes unambiguously clear (cf verse 11, with its statement “Jesus is Lord”).

In another verse, Philippians 2:6, speaking of Christ (see verse 5), the Apostle Paul describes him prior to his coming to earth as “being in very nature God (NIV)” (NRSV: “in the form of God”).

In Colossians 1:15, Paul described Christ as “the image of the invisible God” and in Colossians 2:9 he wrote, “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (NIV).

Conclusion

We make no effort here to provide a comprehensive review of the Apostle Paul’s statements about Jesus Christ. However, from the above examples we can see that:

- 1) Paul had what theologians call “a very high view” of Jesus. (Some theologians call this a “high Christology”.) More than this, he did not consider this view of Christ to be controversial. He argued with other Jewish Christians about circumcision and about whether or not Jewish Torah law had to be followed, but he didn’t argue with other Christians about the high, divine, status of Jesus. He assumed that they agreed with him! To ascribe deity to Jesus was not controversial in the early church, because it was accepted by those who had accepted that Jesus was the Messiah – and this from a very early date, since Paul’s letters are the earliest writings

⁵⁹ The Septuagint text has a different chapter division, in consequence of which the reference in it is Joel 3:5.

⁶⁰ The rules of Greek grammar do not permit the Greek word γὰρ [“gar”, “for”] to occupy the first position in a sentence, which is why in Romans 10:13 it is the second word. Allowing for this, the quotation by the Apostle Paul comes verbatim from the Septuagint.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

in the New Testament, some of them having been written in the early fifties of the first century, well before the gospels were composed.⁶¹ Readers who wish to investigate this further are referred to Hurtado's "Lord Jesus Christ".⁶²

- 2) For Paul to have called Jesus "God" in 1 Timothy 3:16 does not go against his teaching elsewhere.

We must therefore conclude that it is highly likely that Paul could have been referring to Jesus as "God" in 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁶¹ For these insights, I am indebted to Dr Larry W Hurtado, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language and Literature at the University of Edinburgh, through various of his books and through his blog, which can be seen here: <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/>. Consulted on 14.5.2017.

⁶² Hurtado, Larry W, "Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity", Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, England: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 5: Is ὅς [“hos”] possible in this sentence?

The alternative that is proposed to Θεός [“theos”] in 1 Timothy 3:16, and that is attested in some manuscripts, is the Greek word ὅς [“hos”].

Θεός [“theos”] means “God”. Grammatically, it is a noun, and the form that is has here is the nominative, which is the form of the word that is used as the subject of a verb.

ὅς [“hos”] means “who”. It is a relative pronoun. In order to evaluate whether or not this word is possible in this sentence, we need to remind ourselves what a relative pronoun is.

A relative pronoun is a word that combines *two* functions into one word:

1. It refers back to a subject that has already been mentioned in a different clause in the same sentence. This is the “relative” part. The subject that it refers back to is called the *antecedent*.
2. The relative pronoun is also the *subject* of a verb that follows it. This is the “pronoun” part.⁶³

Duff says:⁶⁴

The relative pronoun is not difficult in Greek – it functions in basically the same way as in English. ... the function of the relative is to join together into one [“complex”] sentence what would be two sentences.

- There will be two main verbs in a complex sentence – one from each of the two constituent sentences. ...
- The relative pronoun functions as the join between the two constituent sentences.

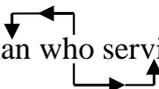
An example will make this clearer:

I saw the man who services your car.

In this sentence, the relative pronoun is “who”. We must ask the question, “Which person is the word ‘who’ referring to?” or “What is the antecedent?” Answer: it is referring to “the man”. A relative pronoun must always have a subject that it refers back to (an antecedent).

We could illustrate this by means of arrows:

I saw the man who services your car.

A diagram with the sentence "I saw the man who services your car." The word "man" is underlined. Two arrows originate from the word "who": one points left to the underlined "man", and the other points right to the word "services".

In this example, the word “who” refers back to a noun in the first clause (“I saw the man”). That noun is known in grammar as *the antecedent*. At the same time, the word “who” is the subject of the verb “services”, which is in the second clause of the sentence. Because of the presence of the relative pronoun “who”, we understand that the person who services your car is the man that I saw, mentioned in the first part of the sentence.

⁶³ There are relative pronouns that are objects of various sorts, but the sort of relative pronoun that is seen in some manuscripts of 1 Timothy 3:16 is in the subject (nominative) form, so we shall here limit our explanation to this type of relative pronoun.

⁶⁴ Duff, Jeremy, “The Elements of New Testament Greek”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 111.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

In English, it is usually possible to replace the relative pronoun “who” with the word “that”, which in this context is also a relative pronoun that behaves in exactly the same way as “who”:

I saw the man that services your car.

If we only had the phrase “... who services your car” or the phrase “... that services your car”, we would know that something was missing from the sentence: the subject or antecedent to which the word “who” or “that” refers back,⁶⁵ as a relative pronoun must always have a subject (an antecedent) that it refers back to.

Before we evaluate the options with 1 Timothy 3:16, it will help us to look at a couple of other examples of the use of the relative pronoun ὅς [“hos”] in the New Testament.

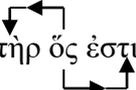
Luke 2:11

ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτήρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος

“there has been born to you today a Saviour, who is Christ (the) Lord”

What is the antecedent of ὅς [“hos”] in this verse? Answer: σωτήρ [“sōtēr”, “saviour”]:

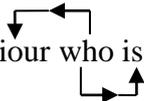
ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτήρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος



In this example, the word ὅς, “who” refers back to the word σωτήρ [“sōtēr”, “Saviour”] in the first clause (“there has been born to you today a Saviour”). That noun is the antecedent of the relative pronoun “who”. At the same time, the word “who” is the subject of the verb “is”, which is in the second clause of the sentence. Because of the presence of the relative pronoun “who”, we understand that the one who is Christ the Lord is the Saviour who was born today, mentioned in the first part of the sentence.

If we similarly add arrows to the English translation, the result is as follows:

there has been born to you today a Saviour who is Christ (the) Lord



Thus, the relative pronoun “who” refers back to its antecedent, the word “Saviour” in the first clause, while also being the subject of the verb “is” in the second clause.

1 Peter 3:21-22

A second example illustrates the same principle in another verse:

δι’ ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ²² ὅς ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ

“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who is at the right hand of God”

⁶⁵ We should not confuse these examples with the question sentence, “Who services your car?” Although English appears to use the same word here, it is actually performing a totally different function. It is not a relative pronoun but a question word (called an “interrogative pronoun” in English grammar). More importantly, in Greek the interrogative pronoun is a totally different word, τις [“tis”]. The word τις [“tis”] does occur elsewhere in the New Testament, but never in 1 Timothy 3:16, in any manuscript.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

What is the antecedent of ὅς [“hos”] in this verse? Answer: Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [“Iēsou Christou”, “Jesus Christ”]. Here again is the schematic representation (for which we have omitted the verse reference, which is not in the original text):

δι’ ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὅς ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ

In this example, the word ὅς [“hos”], “who”, refers back to the words Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [“Iēsou Christou”, “Jesus Christ”] in the first clause (“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”). That name is *the antecedent* of the relative pronoun “who”. At the same time, the word “who” is the subject of the verb “is”, which is in the second clause of the sentence. Because of the presence of the relative pronoun “who”, we understand that the one who is at God’s right hand is Jesus Christ, mentioned in the first part of the sentence.

If again we similarly add arrows to the English translation, the result is as follows:

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ who is at the right hand of God

Thus, the relative pronoun “who” refers back to its *antecedent*, the words “Jesus Christ” in the first clause, while also being the subject of the verb “is” in the second clause.

Now let us look at what 1 Timothy 3:16 says, according to those who claim that the word “God” is not present.

ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον· ὁὗς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι, ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις, ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν, ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ, ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

Admittedly, the mystery of piety is great, who was manifested in the flesh, was justified in the Spirit, appeared to angels, was preached among the Gentiles, was believed on in the world, was received up in glory.

If the above translation (by the author of the present article!) sounds odd, it is not because of a translation error *but because it stays faithful to the Greek text as presented here* – the text that is claimed by some to be the original Greek text.

What is the antecedent of ὅς [“hos”, “who”] in this verse? Answer: ***There isn’t one!*** There is no word or phrase earlier in the sentence to which this relative pronoun could refer back.

Vidal states,

“the reading “who” poses the problem of knowing to what antecedent the relative pronoun refers.”⁶⁶

That is because there isn’t one. This is why of all the English translations that assume that the Greek text has ὅς [“hos”], *not a single one translates it correctly as “who”*. Why not? Because in English, as in Greek, a relative pronoun requires to have an antecedent to which it refers. So instead of translating the Greek word ὅς [“hos”] correctly, with the word “who”, *they substitute the*

⁶⁶ Readers desirous of seeing the original Spanish text of Vidal’s comments are referred to his Interlinear New Testament (reference as above) or to the Spanish version of this article, which is on this website.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

word “he”! But not a single manuscript has the Greek word for “he”.⁶⁷ Manuscripts *either* have the word Θεός [“theos”, “God”] *or* they have the word ὅς [“hos”, “who”].

But ὅς [“hos”] does not make sense in the context. Grammatically, it is not a possible word in this context. To use it results in a failure to communicate. Without an antecedent, it is without meaning, *meaningless*. That is why translators who *believe* that the source text contains the word ὅς [“hos”] do not translate it correctly, but *replace* it with a different word, “he”.

⁶⁷ “He” in Greek is rendered with αὐτός [“autos”, “he”] or (with slight differences of meaning) with οὗτος [“houtos”, “this one”] or ἐκεῖνος [“ekeinos”, “that one”]. None of them could be easily confused visually with ὅς [“hos”, “who”], whether by any reader or by any copyist.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 6:

Faced with two different words in the manuscripts before them, why did the editors of NA27/UBS4 choose the word ὅς [“hos”] and reject the word Θεός [“theos”]?

As stated above, when researchers studying ancient manuscripts of the New Testament find a word that is different in one manuscript from the word at that point in another manuscript, they use a series of principles to help them to evaluate which variant is more likely to correspond to the original text.

Presuppositions

As well as looking at the age and reliability of the rest of the text of the manuscripts in question, these researchers are also guided by a series of presuppositions. These presuppositions were often first enunciated in the 19th century, at a time when many scholars of ancient documents still wrote in Latin.

One of these presuppositions is “*lectio brevior lectio potior*”, which Aland and Aland translate as “the shorter reading is the more probable reading.”⁶⁸ This proposes that where one reading is longer than another, *extra words have been added*, so the shorter version is more likely to be original. This does of course ignore the fact that it was easier for a scribe to skip a line of the original text by accident than for him or her to *compose* additional text, especially as the text was viewed as sacred and as such the scribe knew that it should not be changed. Since in the case of 1 Timothy 3:16 the two variants are of equal length (ΘC and OC), this presupposition does not enter into consideration here. However, we can see that the presuppositions proposed by these scholars are not necessarily reliable.

Another presupposition, and one that is relevant in this case, is “*lectio difficilior lectio potior*”, which Aland and Aland translate as “the more difficult reading is the more probable reading.”⁶⁹

The rationale behind this is the belief that no scribe would have deliberately changed an easy passage to make it hard, but he (or she) is more likely to have changed a hard passage to make it easy. The scholars who support this presupposition claim that this applies equally to the actual words used and to the theological implications of the text.

Therefore, this argument goes, the variant that is linguistically or theologically more difficult is more likely to be original. In other words, given two versions, one of which is grammatically or linguistically correct and the other that is grammatically or linguistically incorrect, the grammatically or linguistically incorrect version is more likely to be original. Likewise, where one version makes theological sense, or supports theological beliefs of the time, and another version does not make theological sense, or does not support theological beliefs of the time, then – according to this argument – the theologically difficult version is more likely to be original.

Aland and Aland do however concede, “this principle must not be taken too mechanically, with the most difficult reading (*lectio difficilima*) adopted as original simply because of its degree of difficulty.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Aland, Kurt and Aland, Barbara, “The Text of the New Testament”, translated from the German by Rhodes, Erroll F. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2nd English edition, 1989, paperback edition, 1995, p. 281

⁶⁹ Reference as above

⁷⁰ Reference as above

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

However, Metzger, who acted as secretary to the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 4th revised edition, states as the *first* of the presuppositions of the Committee:

“In general, the more difficult reading is to be preferred, particularly when the sense appears on the surface to be erroneous ...”⁷¹

*This seems to be precisely what has happened in the case of the Nestle-Aland/UBS text of 1 Timothy 3:16:*⁷² the difficult, “*apparently erroneous*” reading has been given preference by the Editorial Committee.

⁷¹ In “A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament”, 2nd edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft / United Bible Societies, 1994, p. 12*

⁷² The United Bible Societies have accepted the judgments of the Nestle-Aland team, so it is inevitable that their text follows NA27 and the immediately-preceding editions.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 7: Did they take the correct decision?

The researchers who produce the modern critical editions of the Greek text of the New Testament merit the gratitude of all those who care about the text of this important book. They also deserve the greatest respect because of their detailed knowledge of thousands of manuscripts and their indefatigable and meticulous work looking at every letter and every word.

However, it would be unreasonable to expect perfection from any human team, no matter how dedicated, nor indeed do they claim this for themselves or their work. They have combined their knowledge of the texts with their judgments, based on the principles and presuppositions that guide them. No doubt in most cases they do reach the right conclusions. And indeed, in the vast majority of the cases of textual variants, the evidence in favour of one version and not the other is overwhelming.

Also, many “variants” consist of insignificant spelling differences, inevitable when a language that was written phonetically was copied on a different continent and/or in a different century. Such changes, which account for most of the “thousands of variants” that are referred to by critics of the Bible, have no effect at all on the meaning or even on the words used.

In this particular case, it is my opinion that the members of the committee that prepared the text for Nestle-Aland 27 (and its successor) and for UBS 4 and its successor have reached the wrong conclusion, for the following reasons:

1. A text that is meaningless is less likely to be original than a text that does have meaning.
2. As indicated in chapter 5, above, the use of the word ὅς [“hos”, “who”] in this sentence is a grammatical impossibility, since there is no antecedent in the sentence to which the supposed relative pronoun could refer.⁷³
3. Indeed, *all* of those Bible translators who claim that the word in the Greek is ὅς [“hos”, “who”] and not the word Θεός [“theos”, “God”] do not translate it “correctly” as “who”, but instead substitute a different word (“he”), since “who” is not possible here in English, either.

To their credit, Aland and Aland admit that, “In textual criticism the pure theoretician has often done more harm than good.”⁷⁴

In the light of all these considerations and the Apostle Paul’s repeated attribution to Jesus of divine status, I conclude that it is far more likely that the original Greek text did indeed say “**Θεός** ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί” [“**theos** efanerōthē en sarki”], “**God** was manifested in flesh.”

⁷³ Someone might propose that the supposed relative pronoun ὅς [“hos”] refers back to the noun μυστήριον [“mysterion”, “mystery”]. However, this is not possible grammatically, since μυστήριον is a neuter word, while the alleged relative pronoun ὅς is masculine and so cannot be referring to a word that has neuter gender. In any case, the meaning is clear: it was not “a mystery” that was “manifested in the flesh, received up into glory”, etc., but Christ himself, as is also unambiguously clear from the context. For similar reasons, it is not possible that the antecedent of the supposed relative pronoun might be the noun εὐσεβείας [“eusebeias”, “piety”], since that noun is feminine whereas, ὅς [“hos”] is masculine, as indicated above. The sentence would in any case also be meaningless if the antecedent were εὐσεβείας [“eusebeias”, “piety”].

⁷⁴ Aland, Kurt and Aland, Barbara, *op. cit.*, p. 281

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Chapter 8: Research Principles

The aim of all research should be to discover and disseminate knowledge and information that is new to at least the researcher and to his or her potential audience. The researcher may have a hunch, a theory or a supposition that (s)he sets out to investigate or even to prove, but the only research that is valid is that which examines all of the available evidence and goes where the evidence leads – even if it is not in the direction that the researcher expected to go. The results of the research may be surprising. They may even cause researchers and experts to improve their understanding and even to change their beliefs.

In the area of New Testament manuscripts, research over several hundred years has revealed that most of the time the text is not disputed. As indicated in Chapter 7, generally all or virtually all manuscripts agree, with the principal differences being changes in spelling that do not lead to any doubts as to the original words. Other changes may include minor changes in word order that do not affect the meaning and are usually untranslatable. This is merely a reflection of the flexibility of word order in Greek.

The fact that here we are looking at just one letter in one word shows how insignificant most variants are.

However, researchers generally approach their work in any area of human knowledge with a series of presuppositions and assumptions as to what they expect that they are going to find. In order to be sure of reaching the correct conclusions, they must be prepared to be proved wrong. In other words, they must make strenuous efforts to avoid bias.

Am I neutral or biased?

In the light of the above considerations, it is necessary to ask if I have an interest in the text having one of these words rather than the other. Do I have preconceived notions about this passage? Am I predisposed to one viewpoint and not the opposite? Do I have a preferred conclusion or a preferred result? Fundamentally, do I have theological prejudices that could influence my conclusion? In other words, What do I want this passage to say?

This is an extremely important question. Many writers and even some researchers start off with the conclusion that they wish to prove, and work back from there. The method employed is to quote from sources that support, or can be made to seem to support, the stance of the writer, and to ignore or denigrate sources that undermine the argument being promoted. This approach is exemplified by Jehovah's Witness writers but is not limited to them.⁷⁵ An example of this approach is seen in BeDuhn's book on the Jehovah's Witness version of the Bible.⁷⁶ In fact, such an approach can occasionally be seen in most areas of human knowledge, from holocaust deniers to proponents of all sorts of political and religious agendas and all the way to those who claim that men never landed on the moon and that global warming is a hoax.

An internet search will usually unearth websites and claims that support any point of view whatsoever, no matter how outlandish it may be. The fact that someone else, somewhere in the world, supports, or has at some point in the past apparently supported, the ideas with which the person doing the web search is obsessed, is no guarantee that the ideas are accurate or even that

⁷⁵ In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, readers are referred to the article on this website on their use of experts, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/experts.pdf>

⁷⁶ See the review of his book on this website, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

they have any actual foundation at all. Accordingly, the results of web searches must be viewed with caution, in some areas of knowledge, even with suspicion.

Naturally, readers are fully entitled to bring the same scepticism to this website. Indeed, I would encourage them to do so. Those who read carefully the articles on this website will find that the points made are constantly supported by detailed reference to the most authoritative, respected and accepted sources, including the leading dictionaries of Koiné Greek and some of the most prestigious academics from respected universities and other academic institutions world-wide. In terms of statements from the Bible, I always seek to give a fair and balanced overview of what it says on the topic being studied, and always give chapter and verse. *I encourage readers to look up the verses in a selection of mainstream translations, and to read the context.* It is easy for writers to spatter an article with vast numbers of Bible references that either have nothing to do with the topic being presented or even contradict it, when read in context.⁷⁷

So, am I biased about the text of 1 Timothy 3:16? I have to confess to being a Christian. I have also been convinced by my reading of the New Testament and by my study of this theme over many decades that New Testament believers very soon accorded Jesus divine status. However, when, a number of years ago, a leading Jehovah's Witness came to my home, insistent that the Authorised Version, which has the phrase "God was manifest in the flesh", has got this verse wrong, I replied, "You may be right. I don't need this verse in order to believe that the New Testament teaches the deity of Christ." And indeed I don't. In numerous other places, the New Testament makes this claim. A few verses from the Apostle Paul have been referred to above. Many others could be quoted, as well as verses from other New Testament writers and even quotations from Christ Himself. However, that is not the theme of this article, so it will not be pursued here.

In fact, when I replied to that challenge from the visiting Jehovah's Witness, I had not seen any of the Biblical manuscripts. My assumption was that the text of the Nestle-Aland 26th and 27th editions of the Greek New Testament text⁷⁸ would be correct. My interest in researching this verse arose, years later, after seeing early Biblical manuscripts and realising that the different interpretations were due to a tiny difference in the shape of just one letter. So I consulted other manuscripts, both at the British Library in London and by studying facsimiles of the texts. Then I applied the best principles that must underline honest research: I followed where the evidence led. Indeed, it was the evidence that I saw that changed my mind and led me to a different conclusion.

Do the Jehovah's Witnesses have an interest in 1 Timothy 3:16 having one reading and not the other, or are they neutral?

I do not *need* 1 Timothy 3:16 to say "God", *but the Jehovah's Witnesses do need it not to say "God"*. If it says "God", their doctrine that Jesus is the Archangel Michael is wrong. If it does not say "God", they have one less verse to do battle with, and can turn their attention to modifying the text of other verses and "translating" them in ways that do not torpedo their doctrines. Inevitably, they end up falsifying the meaning of many Bible verses. However, in the case of 1 Timothy 3:16, they do not need to falsify the text, *provided that they use the text of Nestle-Aland 27⁷⁹* or *some* of the other modern editions of the Greek text.

⁷⁷ This approach is epitomised by most of the writings of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

⁷⁸ Equivalent, as regards the words (but not all of the punctuation) to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 3rd and 4th editions, respectively.

⁷⁹ This text reflects the decision for this verse by Westcott and Hort in their version of 1881. "The New Testament in the Original Greek".

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Conclusion

Here, we have sought to carry out a serious and fair investigation of the text, accurately presenting two opposing points of view. For the reasons given in this article, I conclude that the experts who have stated that the original text contained the word ὅς [“hos”], “who”, are mistaken and that the original word was indeed Θεὸς [“theos”], “God”. I leave it to readers to reach their own conclusions.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Appendix: Additional information on Codex Alexandrinus

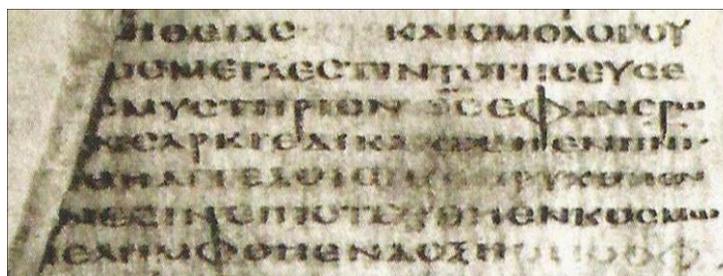
In 1627, the manuscript that we know as Codex Alexandrinus was donated to King Charles I of England by the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Cyril Lucaris, who had taken it with him when he left Alexandria.

The facsimile of the New Testament section of that document that was published by the British Museum in 1786, prior to the invention of photography, was prepared by the Orientalist and Biblical scholar Carl Gottfried Woide, who was a curator at the museum. For the facsimile, special type was made in four sizes, based on the shape of the letters in the manuscript. The facsimile reproduced the layout of the original text very faithfully, and where letters were missing or indecipherable in the original text, they were missed out in the facsimile.

In the main body of this article we reproduced a small section of that edition of the text, containing 1 Timothy 3:16. Woide's transcription was challenged by some writers in the late 19th century. However, various events have led to a serious deterioration in the quality of the manuscript since 1786. Over the centuries since Codex Alexandrinus arrived in London, there had not been an awareness of the damage that would be caused to the manuscript by sunlight or other bright lights, which could cause the ink to fade. In 1879 the British Museum photographed the New Testament section of Codex Alexandrinus and published a full-size photographic facsimile⁸⁰. To do this, the pages were removed from the binding and pinned to a wall in a courtyard in the British Museum, where they were photographed, illumination being provided by sunlight. This will inevitably have caused some fading of the ink, as well as incidental damage to the parchment.

The photographs were somewhat under-exposed, resulting in images that were much darker than the original manuscript. With faint text, this can be helpful, but the sunlight struck the pages at an oblique angle, and where the parchment was not smooth this resulted in the contours of the parchment surface casting shadows that can make the text difficult to read.

Also, the lens used to take these pictures did not deliver optimal sharpness in the corners of the image, and the word that interests us is not far from a corner. The Θ (or O?) is slightly blurred and the bar that is part of the letter Θ is not fully visible, although a dark mark in the centre of the O appears to be part of the bar that makes it into a Θ. However, the photographic image does clearly show the bar that was written over *nomina sacra*. This bar would not have been written above the word "hos" ("who"). It therefore seems extremely probable that the word is indeed ΘC ("God") and so Woide's transcription approximately a century earlier had been accurate.



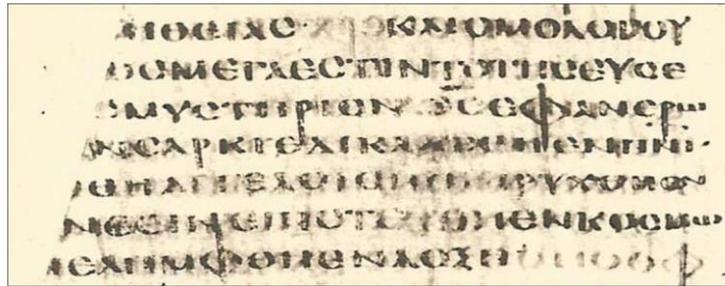
Copy of 1 Timothy 3:16 from the 1879 edition
© The British Library Board (Royal Ms. D VIII)

⁸⁰ The Old Testament pages were photographed and published over the course of the following three years. This photographic copy can be consulted in the British Library in London by those who have been granted a Reader's Card for the purpose of research.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

In Woide's edition, we can even see the same letters showing through from the other side of the parchment (see p. 15), in very nearly the same places (see bottom line in this example), so we can see how meticulous he was.

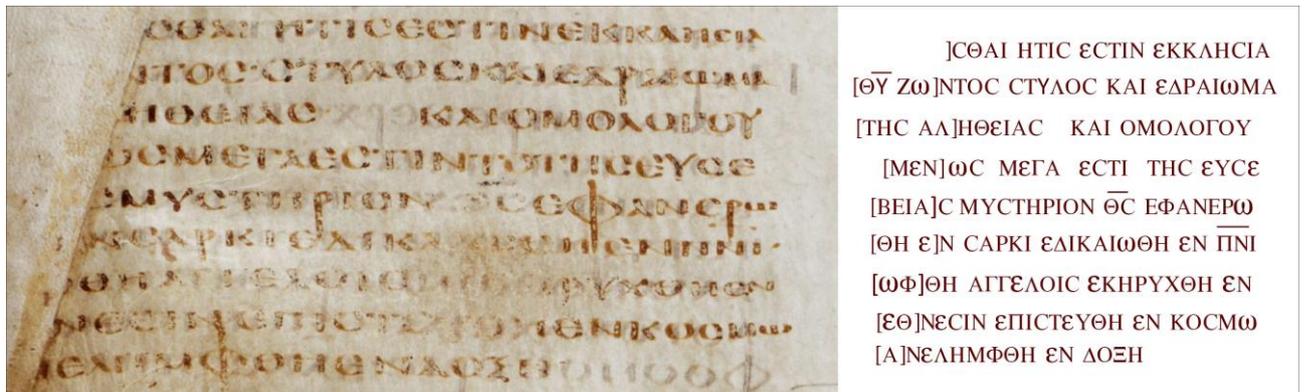
In 1909, the British Museum published a new photographic facsimile of the New Testament section of Codex Alexandrinus.⁸¹ The lens that was used in 1909 had significantly better resolution than the one used thirty years earlier and the improvement in sharpness is particularly clear at the edges of the text. The exposure was also more accurate, resulting in much lighter images. In consequence, even though the 1909 edition does not reproduce the text full size, on the whole, it is easier to read, although where the original text is faint, the 1879 edition can help. The continued deterioration of the manuscript and the progressive fading of the ink is also obvious in some places.



Copy of 1 Timothy 3:16 from the 1909 edition
© The British Library Board (Royal Ms. D VIII)

In the early 21st century, the New Testament was photographed in its new home, the British Library, this time digitally and in colour. The results have not been published in printed form but can be consulted on-line, here:

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_1_d_viii_fs001r For 1 Timothy 3:16, look for folio 120 recto (which has non-original page number 145 in Arabic numerals at the top of the page).



Copy of 1 Timothy 3:16 from the 21st century digital edition
© The British Library Board (Royal Ms. D VIII)

In this copy, the transcription on the right that has been made by the author of this article uses a font that resembles that used in the manuscript as closely as possible. The text reproduced here starts two lines higher up the page than the previous reproductions, half way through verse 15. The word Θεός [“theos”, “God”] is therefore on the fifth line of the text, just before the large Φ of “manifested”.

⁸¹ The Old Testament was apparently re-photographed at the same time, but its publication was delayed. It appeared in four parts between 1915 and 1957.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

The first thing that is obvious from the 21st century photograph is how terribly the text has faded in the course of the past century. Already in the 1870s, the textual expert Scrivener had commented on the deterioration of the text: “the vellum has fallen into holes in many places, and ... the ink peels off ... whensoever a leaf is touched a little roughly.”⁸²

It is thus easy to see how in some ancient manuscripts, if a few millimetres of ink have lifted from the support material, the form of a letter may become incomplete. In the case of 1 Timothy 3:16, a Θ (“theta”) may easily have been perceived as an O (“omicron”).

In the 21st century, in places Alexandrinus is now extremely difficult to read. The staff of the British Library have recognised the immense damage to the manuscript that has been caused by its exposure to the sun and other bright sources of light. Its repeated manhandling without careful precautions has also damaged the parchment itself in many places and in consequence it is now extremely fragile. It is now stored with great care and rarely are researchers allowed to handle it. It may also only be viewed in extremely subdued light.

In my transcription of the text, I have, in accordance with standard convention, included the letters that would have occurred on the part of the page that is now missing, putting them within square brackets. The space available indicates that the letters in square brackets are probably the correct ones. Given that in most cases, a part of these incomplete words – or well-known phrases – has survived, there is no doubt about which words were present.

The meaning of the resulting text is:

[be]have, which is the church
[of God li]ving, pillar and mainstay
[of the tr]uth. And admitt-
[ed]ly great is the of pie
[ty] mystery: God was manifest-
[ed i]n the flesh, was justified in the spirit
[app]eared to angels, was preached among the
[gen]tiles, was believed on in the world,
[was re]ceived up into glory.

As with my translation of Tischendorf’s 1862 edition of Codex Sinaiticus, I have broken up words at the ends of some lines in order to simulate equivalent breaks in words in the Greek. Readers will recall that Greek did not use a hyphen when breaking a word at the end of a line. Again, this word-by-word translation makes no pretence at being a translation into fluent English. Such a translation would be along the lines of:

⁸² Scrivener, Frederick Henry, “Six Lectures on the Text of the New Testament”, Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1875, p. 52. Quoted in Smith, W. Andrew, “A Study of the Gospels in Codex Alexandrinus”, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014, p.39. This is a revised version of Smith’s Ph.D. thesis on Codex Alexandrinus.

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

“... behave, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and mainstay of the truth. And admittedly, great is the mystery of this spiritual message: God was manifested in the flesh, was justified in the Spirit, appeared to angels, was preached among the Gentiles, was believed on in the world and was received up into glory.

It thus seems to me clear that the Greek text does indeed say, “**God** was manifested in the flesh”, thus attributing deity to Christ

What does the text of 1 Timothy 3:16 really say?

Post Script: A Challenge to this Article

In August 2021 a visitor to this website wrote to me:

“The other day I was discussing with someone about the correct reading of 1 Tim 3:16. I was advocating for "theos" and he was arguing for "hos". To vindicate his stand, he sent me this following piece of information:”

This was followed a long passage of dense text, more than 950 words long, arguing that θεός is not possible and that the text must be “οἶ”, which I assume must be a mis-rendering of ὅς [“hos”].

My correspondent concludes, “I am at a loss on the above information.”

My response: That was precisely the intention of the writer! The passage supplied could have come straight from the writing department at Jehovah’s Witness headquarters in New York State, USA, and indeed probably does, as it contains many of the characteristics of the writings of that “Organization”:

1. The author is not named
2. The passage uses unnecessary and even uncommon “technical” vocabulary, such as “a six-strophed hymn”. This style is adopted by the Jehovah’s Witness Watchtower Organization not with the purpose of improving understanding but to intimidate the reader by presenting arguments that are not intended to clarify but to persuade. A former highly-placed writer in the Organization describes this as “intellectual intimidation”.⁸³ We have looked at this elsewhere on this website, for instance, in the article on John 8:58, here: http://livingwater-spain.com/John8_58.pdf (in the chapter “A Rule of Greek Grammar?”, page 7 in the edition consulted on 19.8.21) and in the review of BeDuhn, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf> (in chapter 12, “BeDuhn The Neutral Investigator”, page 57 in the edition consulted on 19.8.21).
3. The passage gives Bible references without quoting the verses. The Organization demands that its members spend hours every week reading materials produced by the Organization, and it can be confident that most members will simply not have the time needed to look up every reference.
4. The same technique is employed in the Organization’s magazines, “Watchtower” and “Awake!”.
5. The passage makes claims that even minimal investigation reveals to be manifestly false.
6. If the references are checked, it generally becomes clear that they do not support the claims made and indeed in many cases the source material proves that the claims are false, as here. In other cases, some references given are simply irrelevant to the claims made.

The item seems to have been copied directly from the CD that was previously distributed by the Organization or from the defensive arguments that can now be accessed from its website by members. The intention is to present people who challenge the Organization’s claims with a mass

⁸³ Franz, Raymond, “In Search of Christian Freedom”, Atlanta: Commentary Press, 2007, especially pp. 453-454. As a former member of the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a former writer for their books and magazines, Franz was well-placed to be aware of the use of this technique.

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of text that is understood neither by the person who copies it nor by the person who receives it. The purpose is to silence debate and stop rational analysis.

One is reminded of words in 2 Peter: “some things ... which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:16, NIV)

In my initial response to my correspondent, I wrote:

As regards the commentary that you reproduce, it is mostly speculative. That is to say, it presents proposals for which there is no evidence and imagines what might have been the motivations or attitudes of various unknown copyists.

These speculations do not provide a firm basis for rejecting the arguments that I present in my article, based both on the grammatical structure of the passage and on a wide range of important manuscripts and lectionary readings, many of them from a very early date.

I repeat that our starting point must always be the text and what it actually says, not what we would like it to say. Much discussion on 1 Timothy 3:16 starts from the beliefs of the speakers/writers, who then seek to impose their beliefs on the passage.

As I wrote in the above article, I do not *need* 1 Timothy 3:16 to say “God”, as there are many other Bible passages that indicate the deity of Christ. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses (and others who are opposed to the deity of Christ) *do need it not to say “God”*, so they are strongly motivated to impose their beliefs on the passage, whereas I can be quite neutral about it and just examine the relevant evidence.

As regards the specific claims in the objections presented, we shall here briefly look at some of them.

The passage supplied indicates some manuscripts that it reports have ὃς [hos], but it principally refers to “virtually the entire Latin tradition”, which, it says, “read[s] the neuter relative pronoun ο [Greek omicron], (ho “which”)”. We note the use of the Greek letter omicron here.

There are three things wrong with this claim:

1. The “Latin tradition” was written in the Roman alphabet, so it cannot have had the Greek letter “ο”, as claimed by the writer.
2. “virtually the entire Latin tradition” indicates that not all Latin texts have a relative pronoun. So which Latin texts have it, and which do not? We are not told. This claim can therefore not be verified.
3. What “virtually the entire Latin tradition” says is in any case irrelevant when we have a plethora of ancient manuscripts in the original Greek.

Next, the passage suggests that in 1 Timothy 3:16 the Bible verse was changed by scribes, and it speculates on why they might have done this. This is of course only speculation, with no evidence or sources given. On this claim, I quote two established and respected academics, Köstenberger and Kruger, who write⁸⁴ (in response to another writer):

⁸⁴ Köstenberger, Andreas J and Kruger, Michael J, “The Heresy of Orthodoxy”, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010

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“the fact that these four scribes [corrected] it consciously is not the same as saying that they did it for *theological reasons*. These are not the same thing. These scribes may have simply thought that the prior scribe got it wrong; or maybe they simply corrected it according to what was in their exemplar. Moreover, a number of other majuscules⁸⁵ have ΘΣ (“God”), [which appears in the original text,] but not as part of a correction (K L P Ψ), so there is no indication that they did it intentionally. In the end, the explanation for the variant in 1 Timothy 3:16 is likely a very boring one. Simply a mistake.”⁸⁶

The passage that objects to this article also states:

the rest of 3:16, beginning with *οἱ*, appears to form a six-strophen hymn. As such, it is a text that is seemingly incorporated into the letter without syntactical connection. Hence, not only should we *not* look for an antecedent for *οἱ* (as is often done by commentators), but the relative pronoun thus is not too hard a reading... Once the genre is taken into account, the relative pronoun fits neatly into the author's style (cf. also Col 1:15; Phil 2:6 for other places in which the relative pronoun begins a hymn, as was often the case in poetry of the day).

My comment: first, everything claimed is based on suppositions. Note the use of the words “appears” and “seemingly”. The rest of the section assumes that these suppositions are correct, although no evidence has been presented to support this claim.

Second, the reference to “genre” is irrelevant.

Third, and much more important is that the writer's claims are not supported by the Bible verses that he lists. . He states that in “poetic genre” relative pronouns are used without antecedents and he then gives two Bible references, which he claims “fit neatly into the author's style”.

He thus implies that in Colossians 1:15 and Philippians 2:6 ὃς [hos, “who”] is used without an antecedent, but this is not true. For Colossians 1:15 the antecedent is earlier in the same sentence, in the section that we know as verse 13, remembering that there were no verse numbers in the original text. It is

τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ
[tou huiou tēs agapēs autou]
“of the Son of the love his”

“of the Son of his love”. The passage thus reads, “of his beloved Son ... who is the image of the invisible God”. “Son” is the antecedent of the relative pronoun ὃς [hos, “who”].

As regards Philippians 2:6, the antecedent for ὃς [hos, “who”] is in fact the previous two words: Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ [Christō Iēsou] (Phil. 2:5)! The passage states, “Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God ...”, in which “Christ Jesus” is the antecedent to which the relative pronoun ὃς [hos, “who”] refers.

We thus see that the author of that passage was making allegations that were disproved by the very Bible passages that he referred to!
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At best, we must infer that he was not competent in his reading of the Greek text; at worst, that he was deliberately misleading his readers, trusting that they would assume that his statements were

⁸⁵ These are the oldest manuscripts, which were written entirely in capitals letters. They are also often called “uncials”.

⁸⁶ op. cit., pp. 222-223, emphasis added

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correct and that they would not check with the Greek text, indeed, that they would be unlikely to have the skills necessary in order to understand the Greek text and recognise its grammatical structure.

As regards the "poetry of the day", he presents no data to support this claim, which is in any case totally irrelevant when we have the enormous body of data that comprises the Greek New Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint.

This really does demonstrate most clearly possible that the writer of the claims quoted does not handle the data honestly. We therefore cannot justify wasting more time to disprove his other unsubstantiated claims.