

THE AUTHENTICITY AND INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 17:21¹

The saying traditionally attributed to Jesus in Matt 17:21, “But this kind does not come out except through prayer and fasting,” has generally been neglected by modern commentators on the ground that it does not belong in Matthew’s Gospel. Bruce Metzger summarizes the basic rationale for the verse’s inauthenticity thus:

Since there is no good reason why the passage, if originally present in Matthew, should have been omitted, and since copyists frequently inserted material derived from another Gospel, it appears that most manuscripts have been assimilated to the parallel in Mk 9.29.”²

Kurt and Barbara Aland offer a fuller explanation:

The relative lack of support here for the *lectio brevior* is not surprising in view of the significance of fasting and the respect for it characteristic not only of the early Church but also of monasticism throughout the medieval period. Yet \aleph^* B 0274 k and Clement of Alexandria are quite adequate support for the shorter form of Mark 9:29. It is significant that in Matt. 17:21 the phrase $\epsilon\nu$ ουδενι δυναται εξελθειν taken from Mark is changed in the majority of the witnesses to the smoother $\epsilon\kappa\pi\omicron\rho\epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$. It is also significant that besides $\epsilon\kappa\pi\omicron\rho\epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ the tradition also has the readings $\epsilon\kappa\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$

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² Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (corr. ed.; London: United Bible Societies, 1975), 43. Philip W. Comfort extends Metzger’s note in this way: “The external evidence against including this verse is substantial, including \aleph^* B (the two earliest manuscripts), 0281 (a seventh-century manuscript discovered at St. Catherine’s Monastery in the late twentieth century) and early witnesses of Old Latin, Coptic, and Syriac. If the verse was originally part of Matthew’s gospel, there is no good reason to explain why it was dropped from so many early and diverse witnesses. Thus, it is far more likely that this added verse was assimilated from Mark 9:29 in its long form, which has the additional words ‘and fasting.’ In fact, the same manuscripts (\aleph^2 C D L W $f^{1,13}$ Maj) that have the long form in Mark 9:29 have the additional verse here. Thus, a scribe took the full verse of Mark 9:29 as presented in his manuscript and inserted it here; most other manuscripts maintained this insertion in the transmission of the text. (The short form in Mark 9:29 appears in \aleph^* B.) The verse is included in KJV and NKJV and excluded in all other modern versions except NASB and HCSB which include the verse in brackets” (*New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* [Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2009], 51). Hort’s brief note on the passage is more rigorous: “Though earlier than Origen’s (mainly Western) MS, this interpolation from || Mc ix 29 can hardly belong to the earliest Western text, being absent from the African *e* and from syr.vt, and being subsequent to the interpolation of $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota\alpha$ into Mc’s text. It occurs with much variation: *daemonii* is a well attested Latin addition to $\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\varsigma$; the verb is $\epsilon\kappa\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ in \aleph^c latt.omn Ps.Ath (not D syr.vg Orig.*loc*); $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\epsilon\upsilon\chi\eta$ and $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota\alpha$ are inverted in vv and Orig.*loc*.lat; &c” (Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction, Appendix* [2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1907], Appendix:14).

and εἰρηχεται. It is a further indication of the secondary character of Matt. 17:21 that the influence of the Marcan text occurred at various times and in various forms. ⚭* the verse is added typically by the second hand) B Θ 33. 892* *pc e ff¹ sy^s and sy^c* as well as the preponderance of the Coptic tradition are more than adequate evidence for the originality of the omission of verse 21 from Matthew's text. On the other hand, no one would have deleted a text of such popular appeal, and the relatively great number of witnesses for the omission (particularly astonishing is the presence of the Old Syriac and the Coptic traditions, representing cultures where monasticism and fasting were especially esteemed) offers further confirmation of the hardy tenacity characteristic of the New Testament textual tradition.³

Here the consensus view against Matt 17:21 is most properly conveyed. The degree of certainty behind this opinion is demonstrated, in part, by the "A" rating that accompanies the textual evidence in UBS⁴.⁴ Consequently, if the verse is clearly a scribal addition, there is little reason for commentators to struggle with its possible interpretative difficulties.⁵ On the other hand, if reasons for rejecting it are insufficient, then the verse's implications for Christian faith and practice should be revisited. Indeed, while internal arguments against Matt 17:21 may appear formidable at first sight, deeper examination suggests that they are overstated at best and merely conjectural at worst. What follows is a case for the authenticity of Matt 17:21 based on external and internal grounds with a note on its interpretation.

1. External Evidence

Below is external evidence for and against Matt 17:21, followed by several relevant and early patristic citations. Internal arguments in favor of the verse appear under heading 3.

1.1 External Evidence against Matt 17:21

Matt 17:21 is omitted in ten of the 1700 or so surviving Greek MSS of Matthew, including two from the fourth century (⚭ B), one from the eighth (0281), three from the ninth (Θ 33. 892*), one from the eleventh (788), and three from the thirteenth (579. 1604. 2680). One lectionary MS from the eleventh century (*l* 253) omits it. The versional evidence for omission

³ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 301.

⁴ *The Greek New Testament* (ed. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger; 4th rev. ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 65. The Introduction states: "The letter A indicates that the text is certain" (3*).

⁵ Comfort, in reference to Matt 17:21 and other passages he considers inauthentic, states: "The key theological issue pertaining to these passages concerns their right to be considered 'Scripture.' If they are clearly scribal additions, then they cannot be considered part of the original text and therefore must not be treated on the same par as divinely inspired Scripture" (*Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005], 329). Theodor Zahn at least offers an explanation of how the verse, were it original, should be interpreted before dismissing it thus: "But the textual tradition confirms without doubt that v. 21 is an interpolation brought over to this place with little variation from Mark 9:29" (*Das Evangelium des Matthäus* [Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1903], 560).

includes: two Old Latin MSS, Palatinus (e/2) of the fifth century and Corbeiensis I (ff¹) of the eighth or ninth century; two Old Syriac MSS, Sinaiticus (sy^s) from the late fourth century and Curetonianus (sy^c) from the fifth; the Palestinian Syriac from the fifth or sixth century; the Sahidic (sa), including Papyrus Bodmer XIX from around 400, and part of the Bohairic (bo^{pt}); and part of the Georgian (geo^{1.A}). No church father explicitly opposes the verse, although Eusebius is sometimes cited in support of omission based on, at best, a subjective interpretation of his canon at this place and at Mark 9:29.

1.2 External Evidence for Matt 17:21

For including the verse is 99.4 percent of all the Greek MSS, including three from the fifth century (C D W), three from the sixth (O Σ Φ), one from the seventh (κ²), two from the eighth (E L), nine from the ninth (F G H K Y Δ Π 565. 1424), and also the important Lake (*f*¹) and Ferrar (*f*¹³) groups, whose archetypes go back to the fourth century. The lectionary system supports its inclusion. Versional support for the verse is striking: most Old Latin MSS, including Vercellensis (a/3) of the fourth century, Veronensis (b/4), Bezae (d/5), Corbeiensis II (ff²/8), and the St. Gallen MS (n/16), all from the fifth century, and other important witnesses (c/6 g¹/7 f/10 l/11 q/13 r¹/14 aur/15); the Vulgate (vg); the Syriac Peshitta (sy^p) and Harklensis (sy^h); the Middle Egyptian codex Schøyen (mae², ca. 350) and part of the Bohairic (bo^{pt}); part of the Georgian (geo^B); the Armenian (arm); the Ethiopic (aeth); and the Old Church Slavonic (slav). Lastly, important church fathers representing a broad provenance had the verse in their copies, including Origen and possibly Clement of Alexandria in the third century, Juvencus, Asterius, Hilary, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, and Chrysostom in the fourth, and Jerome and Augustine in the fifth.

1.3 Patristic Citations

Below are relevant patristic citations from Pseudo-Clement, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Juvencus, while others, such as Asterius, Hilary, Basil, Athanasius, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine are not pursued in detail due to lack space.

1.3.1 Pseudo-Clement (ca. 100–200)

The authorship of the *Letters on Virginity* preserved only in Syriac is still debated, with Catholic scholars ascribing it to Clement of Rome (ca. 100) and Protestants to someone else who lived in the late second century. Either view still makes this citation the earliest possible reference to Matt 17:21. Pseudo-Clement writes:

Such men are “like a sounding pipe, or a tinkling cymbal;” and they bring no help to those over whom they make their adjurations; but they speak with terrible words, and affright people, but do not act with true faith, according to the teaching of our Lord, who hath said: 'This kind goeth not out but by fasting and prayer,' offered unceasingly and with earnest mind.⁶

⁶ Ps.-Clem. *Ep. de virg.* 1.12 [ANF 8:59].

It is significant that the wording reflects Matthew's simpler phraseology (οὐκ ἐκπορεύεται) more than Mark's (ἐν οὐδενί δυναται ἐξελεῖν). This circumstance is not surprising since it was *not* Mark's Gospel but rather Matthew's which was more popular in the early church. In addition, the inversion of "prayer and fasting" is due to the medium in which the work is preserved, namely, Syriac, since a common protocol of Syriac translation is to invert pairs of things. If the citation is not from Matthew, although such cannot be proved, it still represents the earliest support for the presence of "and fasting" in Mark 9:29. Nevertheless, good reasons suggest that Pseudo-Clement more probably cites Matt 17:21 than Mark 9:29.

1.3.2 Clement of Alexandria (200)

Clement, in his *Extracts from the Prophets*, speaks thus concerning prayer:

The Savior plainly declared to the believing apostles that prayer was stronger than faith in the case of a certain demoniac, whom they could not cleanse, when he said, "Such things are accomplished successfully through prayer." He who has believed has received forgiveness of sins from the Lord, but he who abides in knowledge, inasmuch as he no longer sins, receives from himself the forgiveness of the rest.⁷

The key to assigning this allusion to Matthew is Clement's assertion that Jesus "plainly declared . . . that prayer was stronger than faith." Whereas in Mark there is no mention of the disciples' lack of faith or the faith that can move mountains, the faith theme is integral to the pericope in Matthew,⁸ and only through the presence of Matt 17:21 does Clement's difficult interpretation that prayer is "stronger than faith" make any sense. Moreover, that Clement does not mention fasting is understandable since (1) he is not quoting but alluding to Scripture, and (2) his talk in this section is on prayer, not fasting, in much the same way that Tertullian mentions only fasting and not prayer.

1.3.3 Tertullian (215)

Tertullian clearly supports the Byzantine text of either Matt 17:21 or Mark 9:29 when he says:

After that, he prescribed that fasting should be carried out without sadness. For why should what is beneficial be sad? He also taught to fight against the more fierce demons by means of fasting. For is it surprising that the Holy Spirit is led in through the same means by which the sinful spirit is led out?⁹

For the following reasons it seems more probable that Tertullian was referring to Matt 17:21:

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Ecl.* 15.1–2.

⁸ Cf. "faithlessness" (17:17), "unbelief" (17:20), "faith of a mustard seed" (17:20).

⁹ Tertullian, *Jejun.* 8.2c–3.

(1) it does not appear that Tertullian ever explicitly cites Mark in the 17 chapters of *On Fasting, against the Psychics*; (2) in the immediate context he cites either Matthew alone or Matthew where Luke is parallel;¹⁰ (3) he explicitly cites Matthew alone several other times.¹¹

1.3.4 Origen (250)

Origen's significance as a witness for the presence of Matt 17:21 cannot be understated since his *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei* not only represents an explicit reference to Matthew (as opposed to Mark) but also predates by a full century *any evidence of any kind* that omits the passage. Origen says:

That those, then, who suffer from what is called lunacy sometimes fall into the water is evident, and that they also fall into the fire, less frequently indeed, yet it does happen; and it is evident that this disorder is very difficult to cure, so that those who have the power to cure demoniacs sometimes fail in respect of this, and sometimes with fastings and supplications and more toils, succeed.¹²

In the same work he later states, more specifically:

But let us also attend to this, "This kind goeth not out save by prayer and fasting," in order that if at any time it is necessary that we should be engaged in the healing of one suffering from such a disorder, we may not adjure, nor put questions, nor speak to the impure spirit as if it heard, but devoting ourselves to prayer and fasting, may be successful as we pray for the sufferer, and by our own fasting may thrust out the unclean spirit from him.¹³

1.3.5 Juvencus (330)

Juvencus predates Jerome's Vulgate by at least 50 years and thus proves the presence of Matt 17:21 in Old Latin copies as far away as Spain by the early fourth century. The Old Latin tradition must have been present in Spain by the middle of the second century, since Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.10) and Tertullian (*Adv. Jud.* 7) both mention the presence of churches there in their time. Juvencus writes:

For by means of limitless prayers it is faith and much fasting of determined soul that drive off this kind of illness.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. 8.2a = Matt 4:1–3 || Luke 4:1–3; 8.2b = Matt 11:19 || Luke 7:34; 8.2c = Matt 6:16–18.

¹¹ Cf. 2.8 = Matt 22:40; 8.2c = Matt 6:16–18; 14.3 = Matt 13:52; 15.6a = Matt 5:6.

¹² Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 13.6 [ANF 9:478–9].

¹³ *Ibid.*, *Comm. Matt.* 13.7 [ANF 9:479].

¹⁴ Juvencus, *Libri evangeliorum quattuor* 3.379–80: "Nam genus hoc morbi precibus sine fine fidesque

The passage from Book 3 is decidedly from Matthew.¹⁵ In lines 371–2 the disciples ask Jesus why their cure for the boy was unsuccessful, and then in lines 373–8 comes the Lord's reply about their unsteady faith and the illustration of the mustard seed and moving mountains.

1.3.6 Others

Space do not permit the exploration of other fathers who may be said to have cited Matt 17:21 in their writings, such as Asterius (340), Hilary (355), Basil (370), Athanasius (375), Ambrose (385), Chrysostom (395), Jerome (400), and Augustine (430). It is enough to say that these fathers represent not only an early but also a widespread recognition of the passage. Such overwhelming patristic attestation strongly corroborates the evidence of over 99 percent of all Greek MSS and also representatives from all the early versions.

2. Modern Discussion of the Text

Before discussing specific scholarly opinion, it is beneficial to review the modern history of Matt 17:21 in the critical editions. The first scholar in modern times to reject the verse was John Mill (1707). Yet none of the editors who immediately followed him were persuaded, such as Bengel (1734), Wettstein (1751), Matthäi (1788), Griesbach (1796), Lachmann (1842), Scholz (1830), and Tregelles (1857), although the latter editor bracketed the verse. Only after the discovery of codex Sinaiticus in 1844 did the scholarly consensus begin to change, but even then, Tischendorf retained the verse in all his editions prior to his eighth major critical edition, the first volume of which (1869) contained the Gospels. Some notable editions since then have omitted the verse, including Westcott-Hort (1881), Nestle (1898–), and von Soden (1911–1913), although Merk (1938) merely bracketed it while Bover (1943) and Vogels (1955) actually *included* it.

2.1 John Mill (1707)

The authenticity of Matt 17:21 was not questioned in any printed edition of the Greek NT prior to 1707, when John Mill published his famous edition that noted 30,000 Greek variations and contained his Prolegomena of critical ideas and suggestions for correcting the Greek text.¹⁶ Mill noted in the appendix to his Greek NT: “And indeed, it is not of this

// Multaque robusti jejunia pectoris arcent” (Karl Marold, *C. Vettii Aquilini Iuveni libri evangeliorum IIII* [Lipsiae: B. G. Teubneri, 1886], 67).

¹⁵ “Throughout the body of the work Juvencus follows the Gospel of Matthew for the most part. He almost entirely ignores Mark but does excerpt some material from Luke and John. . . . Parts of Book 2 are drawn from John’s Gospel, but in Book 3 Juvencus follows only Matthew” (Carl P. E. Springer, *The Gospel as Epic in Late Antiquity: the Paschale Carmen of Sedulius* [Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 2; Leiden: Brill, 1988], 54).

¹⁶ John Mill, *Novum Testamentum Graecum* (Oxonii: E. Theatro Sheldoniano, 1707). Mill’s magnum opus consumed the last thirty years of his life, from 1677 to 1707, and Frederick H. Scrivener lauds his Prolegomena as that which “well deserve to be called ‘marmore perenniora,’” *like the rather limitless sea*, while also remarking, “Of the criticism of the New Testament in the hands of Dr. John Mill it may be said, that he

Evangelist, even though it occupies a residence in just about all of our manuscripts, but rather of Mark alone, just as the Eusebian Canon reveals.”¹⁷ Mill’s apparatus shows that the external evidence behind his decision was one Greek MS (33), two versions (Coptic and Ethiopic), and one father (Eusebius). Although such evidence generally indicates a text current from at least the fourth century, it seems that *internal* evidence, not external, was decisive in Mill’s decision. Thus Matt 17:21, according to Mill, is a scribal interpolation from Mark 9:29.

2.2 Daniel Whitby (1724)

Daniel Whitby quotes Mill’s statement and then responds:

But one may find it in the writings of Origen on Matthew . . . and in the Syriac and Arabic versions, which all had their origins before the [Eusebian] canon was constructed; also Jerome, although he prefixed the [Eusebian] canon to Matthew, acknowledges the very same verse, just as the Greek scholia and the rest of the versions also acknowledge it.¹⁸

While Whitby does not mention any internal reasons in support of the passage, he neither invokes the majority of MSS but rather offers alternative and complementary external evidence for consideration: the verse was included in the MSS of an earlier father (Origen), in all the rest of the versions including two early ones (Syriac and Arabic), in the Greek scholia, and by Jerome who himself used the Eusebian canon.

2.3 Johann Albrecht Bengel (1734)

J. A. Bengel defended Matt 17:21 with these words:

For this portion actually best answers the question [i.e., “Why could we not cast it out,” Matt 17:19]. Mill adds Eusebius’ canon, in which Mark proceeds alone at this place: but this rationale also removes verses 19 and 20. This canon not very accurately puts Mark alone, since it already had united Matthew with another place in Luke. In the end, some of the words are Mark’s, others are Matthew’s: therefore the words have not been brought over to this place from there [i.e., Mark 9:29].¹⁹

found the edifice of wood, and left it marble” (*A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament* [ed. Edward Miller; 2 vols.; 4th ed.; London: George Bell & Sons, 1894], 2:201, 202). Samuel P. Tregelles mentions that Mill’s monumental edition presented to the reader “*thirty thousand* various readings” (*An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament* [London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1854], 48).

¹⁷ “Neque quidem huius Evangelistae est, licet hic sedem occupet in omnibus propemodum libris nostris, sed Marci solius, quod ostendit Canon Eusebianus” (Mill, Appendix:7).

¹⁸ “Sed reperias illum apud *Origenem* in Matth. p. 313, apud Syrum & Arabem interpretem, qui omnes ante vixerunt quam *Canon* iste conficeretur; agnoscit etiam *Hieronimus*, quanquam *Canonem* istum *Matthaeo* praefixerit, sicut etiam agnoscunt eundem versiculum Graeca Scholia & reliquae Versiones” (Daniel Whitby, *Examen variantium lectionum Johannis Millii* [Lugduni Batavorum: Joh. Arn. Langerak, 1724], 152–3).

¹⁹ “Nam haec pars vel maxime quaestioni respondet. Addit Millius *Eusebii* canonem, in quo Marcus hic

Bengel's argument is significant since it (1) dismisses the notion that Eusebius' canon amounts to evidence against the verse, and (2) produces intrinsic evidence that the verse is authentic, namely, (a) it best answers the disciples' question in 17:19, and (b) the expression, uncharacteristic of scribal interpolation, is verbally distinct from its counterpart in Mark 9:29.

2.4 Christian Friedrich von Matthäi (1788)

C. F. Matthäi states, in part:

I cannot be astonished enough at Mill, who recommends that this verse should be removed on the authority of Colbertinus 8 [= 33], the Ethiopic, and the Coptic against all the Greek manuscripts, against those ancient scholia, which I have presently cited, against Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius, who eloquently explain these. For it is not credible that the words have been brought over to here from Mark 9:29, insofar as Mark has *εν ουδενι δυναται εξελθειν*, while Matthew on the other hand has *ουκ εκπορευεται*. In addition, with regard to interpolated passages, there is generally a great variety of readings in those manuscripts that contain an interpolated passage. The authority of Eusebius does not help Mill. For if Mark alone had verses 28 and 29 of chapter nine as the canons of Eusebius note, not only should verse 21 of this chapter in Matthew be removed, but also verse 19. The notes of Eusebius, if I am not mistaken, are so situated here, and therefore beside those two verses, to indicate with canon X section 92 of that unique to Mark, that Mark alone wrote *εις οικον*. But I judge that Eusebius' harmony and canons were not altogether meant to be examined so carefully. After consulting Bengel, I see that the same has satisfied him. I suspect that this verse was omitted at some time in some manuscripts of the Latin version, which Colbertinus 8 [= 33], the Ethiopic, and the Coptic follow a hundred times elsewhere. Not only do the rest of mine have this passage, but also the divine "v" and the very old gospel lectionaries "b" and "h," and this in the middle of the lection and not at the end. For the church reading pertains to verses 14 through 23.²⁰

solus incedat: sed haec ratio etiam versum 19 & 20 tolleret. Marcum canon ille parum accuratus ponit solum, quia Matthaicum cum alio Lucae loco junxerat. Denique alia Marci, alia Matthaei verba sunt: ergo non ab illo ad hunc traducta" (Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Apparatus criticus ad Novum Testamentum* [ed. Philipp David Burk; 2d ed.; Tubingae: Io. Georgii Cottae, 1763], 125).

²⁰ "Non possum satis mirari Millium, qui hunc versum, auctoritate *Colb. 8. Aethiop. Copt.* contra omnes Codd. Graecos, contra vetusta illa scholia, quae modo laudavi, contra Chrysostomum, Theophylactum et Euthymium, qui haec diserte explicant, tollendum censuit. Nam ex Marc. IX, 29. huc translata esse, non est credibile, quod Marcus habet, *εν ουδενι δυναται εξελθειν*, Matthaicus autem *ουκ εκπορευεται*. Accedit etiam, quod in locis interpolatis plerumque maior est varietas lectionum in iis Codicibus, qui interpolatum locum habent. Eusebii auctoritas non adiuvat Millium. Si enim Marcus solus habuit capituli noni versum 28. et 29. uti canones Eusebii notant, non solum apud Matthaicum versus 21. huius capituli, sed et 19. tollendus est. Eusebii nota, ni fallor, eo tantum spectat ac propterea binos istos versus, ut unius Marci Canone X. Sect. 92. indicavit, quod Marcus solus dixit *εις οικον*. Omnino autem Eusebii harmoniam et canones non nimis severe examinandos iudico. Dum consulo Bengelium, video idem illi placuisse. Suspicio, hunc versum omissum esse quondam in non nullis Codd. versionis Latinae, quam centies alibi sequitur *Colb. 8. Aethiop. et Copt.* Habent hunc locum cum ceteri mei, cum divinus v. et vetustissima Evangelitaria b. et h. idque in lectione media, non in fine. Pertinet enim lectio ecclesiastica a vers. 13. ad 23. . . ." (Christian Friedrich von Matthäi, *Evangelium secundum Matthaicum graece et latine* [Rigae: Ioann. Frider. Hartknochii, 1788], 268–9).

The argument of Matthäi, an early proponent of the Byzantine text, has several facets: (1) externally, a few witnesses should not override all the rest, the ancient scholia and prominent fathers support the verse, and Eusebius' canon is inconclusive since it also indicates that 17:19 should be omitted; (2) transcriptionally, against the idea that scribes imported the verse from Mark, Matthew's *οὐκ ἐκπορεύεται* differs from Mark's *ἐν οὐδενί δυναται ἐξελεῖν*, and usually interpolated passages show great variation in the MSS that contain them, but such is virtually absent in Matt 17:21; and (3) internally, the cause of the omission in the few witnesses was latinization, or conformation to Latin MSS that omitted the verse. Original to Matthäi is the peculiar suggestion that Eusebius' canon X in Mark was merely to show that he alone read *εἰς οἶκον*.

2.5 Johann Jakob Griesbach (1796)

J. J. Griesbach's comment echoes that of Bengel and Matthäi:

Omitted by some and rejected by Mill, verse 21 firmly rests on the consensus of the oldest Alexandrians with the most ancient Westerns, with which also the remaining families of manuscripts agree. It does not appear very probable that it has been brought in to this place from Mark; for instead of *οὐκ ἐκπορεύεται* he has *ἐν οὐδενί δυναται ἐξελεῖν*, neither has any reason been apparent why an interpolator would have changed it into the former. Eusebius indeed assigned the parallel passage of Mark for us (Mark 9:28–29) to his tenth canon [i.e., “X”], in which the pericopes singular to only one Evangelist are specified, which more preferably ought to have been assigned to the sixth canon [i.e., “VI”], which has been set up for the places common to Matthew and Mark. And so from here Mill thought it could be deduced that our verse 21 had not been read by Eusebius. But far nearer to hand are other reasons why our passage is missing from the sixth Eusebian canon. Without doubt the Ammonian “*ρσ*” section of Matthew encompasses whatever lies between the end of our verse 18 and the beginning of verse 22. Therefore, Eusebius wrongly assigned this section to his fifth canon which exhibits the parallel places of Matthew and Luke, and this he connected, not very suitably, with the “*σ*” section of Luke, that is, with Luke 17:5–6. Having proceeded from here to the sixth canon, it was this one which he repeatedly was unable or unwilling to produce uniformly. The rest I do not pursue, such as what in the past could have presented the occasion for omitting this verse. There are those who suspect that at some time it was omitted in some manuscripts of the Latin version, which others followed in turn. But truly in my mind I cannot comprehend, why is it that the Latins should be judged more probably and earlier than the Greeks, either to have caused this verse to leap over or to have excised it? Not to mention that not only the Vulgate but also the oldest manuscripts of Italy [i.e., the Old Latin] (with the sole exception of Corbeiensis I [i.e., ff¹]) have preserved this verse, with Hilary of Poitiers and Juvencus joining in support.²¹

²¹ “Versus 21 omissus a nonnullis et repudiatus a Millio, firmiter nititur consensu antiquissimorum alexandrinorum cum vetustissimis occidentalibus, ad quos caeterae etiam codicum familiae accedunt. E Marco invectum huc esse, parum probabile videtur; ille enim pro *οὐκ ἐκπορεύεται* habet *ἐν οὐδενί δυναται ἐξελεῖν*, nec ulla adfuit causa cur interpolator hoc in illud transmutaret. Ex Eusebii autem canonibus, ad quos Millius

Griesbach's external argument involves the combined support of the "consensus" of the oldest Alexandrians (although he was unaware of Sinaiticus [Ⲛ]), the oldest Westerns, and the "remaining families of manuscripts," with corroboration from the Vulgate, Old Latin, and early Latin writers Hilary and Juvencus. Transcriptionally, verbal dissimilarity between Matt 17:21 and Mark 9:29 argues against scribal translocation of the verse from Mark to Matthew. Also, Eusebius should not be seen as evidence against the verse, and, uncharacteristically, Griesbach decides not to pursue reasons why or how the verse came to be omitted.

3. Internal Reasons for the Authenticity of Matt 17:21

Several internal reasons for retaining Matt 17:21 are presented below, including narrative consistency, verbal dissimilarity with Mark 9:29, intrinsic probability of exceptive language in Matthew, relative consistency of the passage in the MS tradition, and ten reasons why the passage could have been omitted.

3.1 Narrative Consistency

Bengel rightly observes that actually Matt 17:21 best answers the disciples' question regarding why they could not cast out the demon (17:19). While it is true that unbelief was the reason behind the failed exorcism, the verse demonstrates that casting out this particular kind of demon (or demon possession) required additional faith apparently acquired only through prayer and fasting. Bengel notes in his *Gnomon*, "The disciples were not accustomed to fasting (see ch. ix. 14); and they appear to have been somewhat self-indulgent (*sobrietatem . . . minus servare*) during their Lord's absence."²² But Jesus appears to have been accustomed to prayer and fasting even though his disciples were not (cf. 4:2; 6:16–18; 9:14; 14:23; 26:36–45), and thus he set an example for his disciples through his spiritual preparation to heal the young boy from this special kind of demon or demon possession.

3.2 Verbal Dissimilarity with Mark 9:29

provocat, nil certi effici potest. Eusebius quidem locum Marci nostro parallelum (Marc. 9, 28. 29.) ad canonem suum decimum, in quo pericopae uni tantum Evangelistae peculiare enumerantur, retulit, quem potius ad canonem sextum, locos Matthaeo et Marco communes sistentem, referre debuisset. Atque hinc Millius, versum nostrum 21 ab Eusebio haud lectum fuisse, colligi posse putavit. Sed longe aliae subsunt causae, cur locus noster in canone Eusebiano sexto desideratur. Nimirum sectio Matthaei ammoniana poe complectitur quicquid interjacet inter commatis nostri 18 finem et commatis 22 initium. Hanc igitur sectionem Eusebius perperam amandaverat in canonem suum quintum, Matthaei et Lucae parallelos locos exhibentem, eamque cum Lucae sectione σ, hoc est cum Luc. 17, 5. 6. parum commode copulaverat. Hinc ad canonem sextum progressus, eandem iterato in medium producere nequivit vel noluit. Caeterum haud assequor, quid omittendo olim huic commati occasionem praebere potuerit. Sunt qui suspicentur, omissum id quondam fuisse in nonnullis latinae versionis codicibus, quos alii deinceps secuti sint. Sed mente equidem comprehendere non possum, quid sit, quod latini potius ac prius quam graeci versum hunc sive transilivisse sive jugulasse censeri debeant? ne dicam, Vulgatam non solum sed antiquissimos etiam Italiae codices (uno corb. I. excepto) servasse hoc comma, adstipulantibus Hilario quoque pictaviense et Juvenco" (Johann Jakob Griesbach, *Commentarius criticus in textum graecum Novi Testamenti* [2 vol.; Ienae: J. C. G. Goepferdt, 1798, 1811], 1:146–7).

²² Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament* (5 vols.; notes on Matthew trans. James Bandinel; rev. and ed. Andrew R. Fausset; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1857–8), 1:340.

Bengel, Matthäi, and Griesbach all mention the verbal dissimilarity between Matt 17:21 and Mark 9:29 as an argument for the authenticity of the verse in Matthew. In the words of Griesbach: “It does not appear very probable that it has been brought in to this place from Mark; for instead of οὐκ ἐκπορεύεται he has ἐν οὐδενί δυναται ἐξελεθῆναι, neither has any reason been apparent why an interpolator would have changed it into the former.”²³ The internal argument has weight not only here but also in other places where harmonization is claimed as the cause of a textual addition but where verbal dissimilarity and other reasons unite to suggest textual *omission* as more likely. Maurice A. Robinson argues similarly for the authenticity of το ρηθῆν ὑπο Δανιηλ του προφητου in Mark 13:14.²⁴

3.3 Intrinsic Probability of Exeptive Language in Matthew

Matthew is no stranger to exceptions, the most famous, of course, appearing in 5:32 and 19:9 in reference to divorce. Other similar exeptive language occurs in 5:11, 20; 6:15; 18:3, 35; 21:22, and elsewhere. In fact, it was this Matthean feature that formed the basis of one of David Alan Black’s arguments for the authenticity of ἐκκη in Matt 5:22.²⁵

3.4 Relative Consistency of the Passage in the Manuscript Tradition

Textual critics often consider multiple variations within a variation unit to be a sign of a secondary addition. Kurt and Barbara Aland, for example, note in regard to the longer form of Matt 5:44 that the “variety of forms in which this occurs in the manuscript tradition only underscores the secondary character of the expansion,” and in reference to the doxology at Matt 6:13 that its “supplemental character is obvious from the variety of forms it has taken.”²⁶ The argument is that a secondary addition that occurs in one area will develop different forms as its life grows and begins to compete with and enter the already multiplying MS tradition in other areas. Assuming for the moment that the critical rule has validity, the variation of Matt 17:21 in the Greek MS tradition, if secondary, is far from what one should expect. The only substantive variation one finds is that instead of ἐκπορεύεται \aleph^2 has ἐκβαλλεται and some others have ἐξέρχεται. Matthäi reasoned that such minimal variation reflects the verse’s authenticity, for “there is generally a great variety of readings in those manuscripts that contain an interpolated passage.”²⁷ In addition, given that the reading of \aleph^2 is a reinsertion of the verse that is missing in \aleph^* , it is not surprising that the verse would have been reinstated *imperfectly*. Therefore, the basis of the critical canon itself is questionable for this very reason, that multiple variations within a variation unit may have arisen from nothing

²³ Griesbach, 146–7.

²⁴ Maurice A. Robinson, “Two Passages in Mark: A Critical Test for the Byzantine-Priority Hypothesis,” *Faith and Mission* 13 (1996): 66–111.

²⁵ David Alan Black, “Jesus on Anger: The Text of Matthew 5:22a Revisited,” *NovT* 33:1 (1988): 1–8.

²⁶ Aland and Aland, 306.

²⁷ Matthäi, 268.

other than the *attempted restoration of the original text that was deemed to have been wrongly omitted*. Nevertheless, in this case the absence of significant variation only reinforces a strong presumption in favor of the verse's authenticity.

3.5 Reasons Why Matt 17:21 Could Have Been Omitted

Perhaps the most frequent and favorite objection to Matt 17:21 is that "no one would have deleted a text of such popular appeal."²⁸ The argument, however, is only superficially attractive and after examination completely unsatisfactory. For there are a number of reasons why the verse might have been omitted, some of which receive brief treatment below.

3.5.1 Accident

As with hundreds of other passages and almost always in only a minority of MSS, the omission of the verse, as H. A. W. Meyer states, "may only have happened accidentally."²⁹ Most omissions of text happened by sheer accident,³⁰ and current scholarship is basically united that scribes habitually omitted more often than added text.³¹ In fact, the most recent

²⁸ Aland and Aland, 301. The same argument is the basis of Metzger's one-sentence defense of the omission: "Since there is no good reason why the passage . . . should have been omitted, . . . it appears that most manuscripts have been assimilated to the parallel in Mk 9.29" (43). Comfort similarly states: "If the verse was originally part of Matthew's gospel, there is no good reason to explain why it was dropped from so many early and diverse witnesses" (51).

²⁹ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. from the 6th German ed. Peter Christie; rev. and ed. Frederick Crombie and William Stewart; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890), 307.

³⁰ Frederick H. Scrivener states in reference to Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲙ): "This manuscript must have been derived from one more ancient, in which the lines were similarly divided, since the writer occasionally omits just the number of letters which would suffice to fill a line, and that to the utter ruin of the sense; as if his eye had heedlessly wandered to the line immediately below. Instances of this want of care will be found in Luke xxi. 8; xxii. 25, perhaps John iv. 45; xii. 25, where complete lines are omitted: John xix. 26; Heb. xiii. 18 (partly corrected); Apoc. xviii. 16; xix. 12; xxii. 2, where the copyist passed in the middle of the line to the corresponding portion of the line below. It must be confessed, indeed, that the Codex Sinaiticus abounds with similar errors of the eye and pen, to an extent not unparalleled, but happily rather unusual in documents of first-rate importance; so that Tregelles has freely pronounced that 'the state of the text, as proceeding from the first scribe, may be regarded as *very rough*' (N. T. Part ii. p. 2). Letters and words, even whole sentences, are frequently written twice over, or begun and immediately cancelled: while that gross blunder technically known as Homoeoteleuton (ὁμοιοτελευτον), whereby a clause is omitted because it happens to end in the same words as the clause preceding, occurs no less than 155 times in the N. T., though the defect is often supplied by a more recent hand" (*A Full Collation of the Codex Sinaiticus with the Received Text of the New Testament* [Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, & Co., 1864], xv).

³¹ Cf., e.g., James R. Royse, "Scribal Habits in the Transmission of New Testament Texts," in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. Wendy D. O'Flaherty (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 139–61; idem, "Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes; Studies and Documents 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239–52; idem, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Peter M. Head, "Some Observations on Early Papyri of the Synoptic Gospels, Especially Concerning the 'Scribal Habits,'" *Biblica* 71 (1990): 240–47; idem, "The Habits

study on early scribal habits in Matthew's Gospel has confirmed that scribes *omitted from the text more than twice as often as added to it*, and that hastiness was a contributing factor.³²

3.5.2 Harmonization to Luke 9:37–43

As the Gospels began circulating as a group by the end of the first century, both biblical critics and enemies of Christianity naturally began comparing them with each other. Later, the Ammonian sections and Eusebian canons made comparing passages between the Gospels even easier. In Luke the pericope ends after Jesus heals the child. It is possible that a scribe or critic, noting the absence of the words from Luke's account of the story, felt justified in omitting what Luke thought unnecessary to mention anywhere in his Gospel. In fact, the very omission of the saying from Luke's version of the story, which more closely follows Matthew's account, is *prima facie* evidence against the notion that "no one would have deleted a text of such popular appeal." If Luke himself was willing to part with the saying, why not a single early scribe or editor?

3.5.3 Harmonization to Luke 17:6

The Eusebian canon assigns Matt 17:19–21 to Luke 17:6 because of the common saying of the faith that moves mountains, but in Luke the disciples' question before the saying and Jesus' statement after the saying (whether original or not) is absent, and not without reason, since these statements more properly would have belonged to the pericope contained in Luke 9:37–43. As mentioned above, a scribe or critic may have judged that what was not found in Luke's Gospel was not altogether necessary and thus dispensed with it.

3.5.4 A Misreading of the Eusebian Canons

As the Eusebian canons were popular and in common use by the middle of the fourth century, it is not outside the realm of possibility that a critical misreading of this valuable study aid contributed to the omission of the verse. As mentioned above, the Eusebian canon assigns Matt 17:19–21 to Luke 17:6 because of the common saying of the faith that moves mountains, and then assigns Mark 9:28–29 to its own individual canon, but wrongly as Bengel, Matthäi, and Griesbach all agree. For certainly Matt 17:19 is in common with Mark 9:28, yet the Eusebian canon totally ignores this agreement, and for this very reason any appeal to Eusebius as evidence against Matt 17:21 is dubious at best. Furthermore, it may be that the individual canon given to Mark 9:28–29 was merely to show the *absence* of the

of New Testament Copyists: Singular Readings in the Early Fragmentary Papyri of John," *Biblica* 85 (2004): 399–408.

³² Kyoung Shick Min, *Die früheste Überlieferung des Matthäusevangeliums* (Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung 34; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005): "Bei Omissionen ist auch bemerkenswert, dass sie mehr als doppelt so häufig vorkommen wie Additionen, was bei alten Papyri üblich ist. . . . Omissionen sind das Ergebnis eines schnellen Schreibflusses eines Schreibers" (97).

saying about the faith that moves mountains, just as the dual canon given to Matt 17:19–21 and Luke 17:6 was to show its *presence* in spite of the fact that Luke did not contain, as in Matthew, either the disciples’ question before the saying or Jesus’ statement after the saying.³³ Regardless, the zeal of modern critics to use Eusebius as evidence against the verse against the warnings of the early masters of NT textual criticism is enough to warrant the suggestion that the same notion could have occurred to an ancient scribe or critic—especially considering Eusebius’ widespread and acknowledged distinction in that day—to omit the phrase in Matthew on account of an erroneous interpretation of the Eusebian canons.

3.5.5 Confusion over Who Was to Pray and Fast

S. W. Whitney, who wrote a textual commentary on the NT, suggested that the verse was omitted on account of the difficulty brought on by confusion over who exactly was to pray and fast:

There is, in the statement itself, room for question and perplexity to readers of a certain class; and this might easily have led to its rejection, just as other readings have been rejected on account of their obscurity or offensiveness. A person holding that, in order to a cure, faith was necessary only on the part of the healer, would be likely to reason thus: “The verb *goeth out* seems to imply that prayer and fasting are required of *the sick*; but it is incredible that Jesus should have taught such a doctrine respecting persons in this condition.” Consequently, as the simplest mode of overcoming the difficulty, the passage is dropped; while others, like the sixth-century corrector of the Sinaitic Codex, substitute “is cast out” for “goes out,” as if called for by verse 19, while seeming to clear up the passage and determine its meaning. The omission, however, having once been made and at a very early day, retained its hold for a while, but only within a comparatively limited territory.³⁴

Indeed, as Meyer notes, the interpretation that prayer and fasting were required by the *sick persons themselves* has been held in modern times by such critics as Heinrich Paulus and Christoph Friedrich von Ammon, and the view that fasting was required by *both* the healer *and* the sick person was held by Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius Zigabenus.³⁵ Thus it is not difficult to imagine that the same interpretation could have been held by one or another scribe or critic, who then took action to alleviate the difficulty by removing the verse.

3.5.6 Apparent Contradiction with Matt 17:20a

In reply to the disciples’ question regarding why they could not cast out the demon, Jesus

³³ I owe this observation to Tony Pope through an email communication on 25 March 2010.

³⁴ Samuel Worcester Whitney, *The Reviser’s Greek Text* (2 vols.; Boston: Silver, Burdett, & Company, 1892) 1:122.

³⁵ Cf. Meyer, 315–6.

answers that it was because of their unbelief.³⁶ An early scribe or critic could have reasoned that if lack of faith was the reason why the demon would not come out (cf. also the rest of 17:20), then it was not for lack of prayer and fasting. The supplementary nature of Matt 17:21 appeared not only superfluous but rather incompatible and was thus removed.

3.5.7 Pietistic Improvement of the Text

A pietistic scribe, wishing to portray the apostles in the best of light, thought to remove the text because it seemed to reflect poorly upon the character of the holy apostles. The words clearly infer that the apostles were not praying and fasting, and because of this lack of spiritual discipline they failed to cast out the demon. In support of this notion is the fact that basically the same witnesses that remove the verse also alter “unbelief” to “little faith” in 17:20, possibly indicating a common origin for *both* variations.³⁷ The alteration of “unbelief” to “little faith” was a pietistic attempt to lighten the unfavorable charge against the holy apostles. The same effect would have resulted from the removal of Matt 17:21.

3.5.8 Apparent Contradiction with Matt 17:20b

The passage that is more memorable and more frequently cited in patristic literature is not Matt 17:21 on the importance of prayer and fasting but rather Matt 17:20 on the power of faith that can move mountains. Considering the early Christian doctrine of salvation by faith and not works, it is not surprising that some might have begrudged the presence of Matt 17:21 after Jesus’ great statement on the power of faith. For the very presence of the verse might have been seen to diminish the significance of faith, in that no matter how great one’s faith is, certain demons nevertheless require prayer and fasting, which not infrequently were thought of as meritorious works in the early church.³⁸ Clement of Alexandria’s statement that prayer is “stronger than faith” confirms that such an interpretation of Matt 17:21 would not only have occurred to scribes but also to erudite fathers of the church.³⁹ Such a pronounced difficulty could easily have influenced an early critic to cancel the verse at this location but not at Mark 9:29, where the statement about the power of faith is absent.

³⁶ A few witnesses (ⲛ B Θ f^{1,13} 33. 579. 700. 892 l 2211 pc sy^c co; Or) understandably soften the expression “unbelief” (ἀπιστιαν) to “little faith” (ὀλιγοπιστιαν). The minority reading ὀλιγοπιστιαν in Matt 17:20 may also reflect assimilation to Matt 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, and/or 16:8.

³⁷ See previous note.

³⁸ Cf., e.g., Cyprian, *Dom. or.* 33: “Cito orationes ad Deum adscendunt, quas ad Deum merita operis nostri imponunt.” Note also 2 *Clem.* 2.16: “Good, then, is alms as repentance from sin; better is fasting than prayer, and alms than both; ‘charity covereth a multitude of sins,’ and prayer out of a good conscience delivereth from death. Blessed is every one that shall be found complete in these; for alms lightens the burden of sin” [ANF 9:255].

³⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Ecl.* 15.1–2. See also sub-sub-heading 1.3.2 above.

3.5.9 Apparent Contradiction with Jesus' Teaching Elsewhere

It is not unreasonable to suggest that some scribes, familiar with Jesus' teaching on fasting elsewhere, would have thought to remove Matt 17:21 due to its apparent incompatibility with such passages. A comment of W. F. Rinck, who rejects the verse, is nevertheless sufficient to demonstrate the point:

Not even in Mark 9:29 are the words *καὶ νηστεία* sufficiently secure, which are missing from B and are transposed by some witnesses, inasmuch as they are not very consistent with the pleas Christ professed elsewhere (Matt 9:14; 11:19; 15:11, 17).⁴⁰

As in many other places, it is the more difficult reading that invited alteration, and the apparent inconsistency of Matt 17:21 would have made it more difficult to one or another critic. Yet, as mentioned above,⁴¹ Jesus appears to have set an example of fasting for his disciples which they took up soon after his departure (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:27).

3.5.10 Orthodox Corruption

A frequent objection to the authenticity of Matt 17:21 is that “the addition of this verse from the parallel location in Mark 9:29 was easy and fitting to the lifestyle of scribal monks”⁴² But this objection ignores the correlative circumstance of *anti-asceticism*, not only against overly ascetic factions within the church but also against super-ascetic cults, many of which thrived in Egypt where most of the representatives for omitting Matt 17:21 appear to have originated. The idea that anti-ascetic forces tampered with Matt 17:21 and Mark 9:29 is not new. In 1860 Samuel Bloomfield, for example, proposed his answer to why the verse was omitted: “I doubt not from doctrinal reasons, lest it should be thought to favour asceticism.”⁴³ In response to Henry Alford's surmise that Matt 17:21, Mark 9:29, and 1 Cor 7:5 were tampered with by the ascetics, Bloomfield counters, “They might how[eve]r be tampered with by the *anti-ascetics*: and that such *was* the case in the two passages of Matth. and Mk., the state of the evidence renders next to certain.”⁴⁴ That the orthodox tampered with Scripture

⁴⁰ “Ne in Marco 9, 29 quidem verba *καὶ νηστεία*, quae a B absunt et ab intt. nonnullis transponuntur, satis firma sunt, utpote placitis, quae Chr. alibi professus est (c. 9, 14, 11, 19, 15, 11, 17), parum convenientia” (Wilhelm Friedrich Rinck, *Lucubratio critica in Acta Apostolorum, Epistolas Catholicas et Paulinas* [Basileae: Fel. Schneideri, 1830], 264).

⁴¹ See sub-heading 3.1.

⁴² So Rinck: “. . . hoc comma, cujus adjectio e l. p. Marc. 9, 29 facilis et victui monachorum exarantium consentanea fuit . . .” (264); also Aland and Aland: “The relative lack of support here for the lectio brevior is not surprising in view of the significance of fasting and the respect for it characteristic not only of the early Church but also of monasticism throughout the medieval period” (301).

⁴³ Samuel Thomas Bloomfield, *Critical Annotations* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1860), 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

is not new to criticism, and in fact the heretics of the early church were the first to experience the effects of such alterations.⁴⁵ In 1993 Bart Ehrman presented a compilation of hundreds of places where he thinks the orthodox were guilty of altering Scripture.⁴⁶ It is futile to deny that in many cases his judgment is probably right.⁴⁷

A striking observation is that on at least four occasions in the NT the term “fasting” is missing in a minority of Greek MSS,⁴⁸ and that without these passages there hardly remains a single prescriptive passage in favor of fasting in the entire NT. There was certainly a motive for some in the early church to remove such ascetic references in their fight against opponents such as Tatian, for example, who was expelled for his encratic and extremely ascetic views, rejecting not only marriage but also meat and wine. It becomes evident that some sects of the early church (such as, e.g., the Montanists) began to overvalue fasting, so that even by the beginning of the third century Clement of Alexandria felt compelled to address the excesses with the words of Paul: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, therefore neither abstinence from wine and flesh, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹ The *Apostolic Constitutions and Canons* contains a strongly anti-ascetic statement, which may be dated to around 400:

If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or indeed any one of the sacerdotal catalogue, abstains from marriage, flesh, and wine, not for his own exercise, but because he abominates these things, forgetting that “all things were very good,” and that “God made man male and female,” and blasphemously abuses the creation, either let him reform, or let him be deprived, and be cast out of the Church; and the same for one of the laity.⁵⁰

Needless to say, a scribe or critic with similar sympathies could have altered the text to remove arguably the most popular NT references to Christian fasting. It is likely that further investigation into the ascetic practices of the followers of Valentinus, Saturninus, Marcion, and later the extremely ascetic Gnostic and Manichaean cults, among others, will turn up similar reasons why several references to fasting in the NT were more probably removed by orthodox scribes or critics rather than added by them.

⁴⁵ Johann Leonhard Hug wrote in the 1820s that the heretics “bore no part” in the many intentional alterations of Scripture (*An Introduction to the Writings of the New Testament* [trans. Daniel Guildford Wait; 2 vols.; London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827], 1:134). He further remarks that “we must, first of all, make use of our literary discoveries to explain the phenomenon how the orthodox, with all the good will, with all the reverence, which they possessed for the sacred books, could introduce such disorder among them” (1:142).

⁴⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ One such alleged orthodox corruption is the anti-adoptionistic alteration of “only begotten Son” to “only begotten God” in John 1:18 (*ibid.*, 78–82).

⁴⁸ Matt 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor 7:5.

⁴⁹ Cf. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1859), 324–5.

⁵⁰ *Apos. Con.* 8.47.51 [ANF 7:503].

4. Interpretation of Matt 17:21

As demonstrated above, the difficulty of Matt 17:21 has given rise to many problematic interpretations, such as, for example, Clement of Alexandria's statement that prayer is "stronger than faith." But one need not view prayer and fasting as competitive with faith, but rather as *strengthening* it, as most older commentators agree. Meyer's comment on this verse is outstanding:

The climax in vv. 20 and 21 may be represented thus: if you have only a slender amount of faith, you will, no doubt, be able to accomplish things of an extraordinary and seemingly impossible nature; but, in order to expel spirits of so stubborn a character as this, you require to have such a degree of faith as can only be reached by means of prayer and fasting. You have neglected the spiritual preparation that is necessary to the attainment of so lofty a faith. Comp. Acts xiv. 23. Prayer and fasting are here represented as means for promoting faith, not *as good works*, which are *of themselves effectual* in dealing with the demons (Schegg and the older Catholics).⁵¹

The neglect of prayer and fasting prohibits the attainment of that mighty faith of unlimited spiritual power. Just as the early church seized upon this power, so must Christians build up their faith through prayer and fasting to attempt and to bring about great things for God.

5. Conclusion

The external evidence for the authenticity of Matt 17:21 predominates the Greek ms tradition by a ratio of 99:1, and includes six of eight of the earliest extant MSS (from the sixth century and earlier). The five Old Latin witnesses from the fifth century and earlier (a b d ff² n) indicate that the verse was current in the second century in the West, just as the Lake-Ferrar groups (*f*^{1.13}), the Latin Vulgate, and the Syriac Peshitta demonstrate its presence in the fourth century in other regions. Significantly, it is present in the *earliest* Coptic MS for the passage, the Schøyen Codex (ca. 350). The Greek manuscript, lectionary, and versional evidence in combination with the presence of the verse in such fathers as Origen and probably Clement of Alexandria in the third century, Juvencus, Asterius, Hilary, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, and Chrysostom in the fourth, and Jerome and Augustine in the fifth, prove the antiquity and widespread recognition of the verse in every region where churches existed. In short, there is not a single region of the church where Matt 17:21 was not read since as far back as the physical evidence goes.

Internal evidence for retaining Matt 17:21 merely corroborates the preponderate weight of the consensus of all external witnesses. The passage demonstrates consistency within the narrative, is verbally dissimilar with Mark 9:29 and intrinsically justifiable on account of Matthew's tendency toward exceptive language, and exhibits no unusual internal variation in the MS tradition. In addition, contrary to popular claims, there are at least ten reasons why the passage could have been omitted by one or another early scribe or critic, with orthodox corruption perhaps the more likely reason considering the omission of "and fasting" in three Greek MSS at Mark 9:29. Consequently, the MSS that reflect critical editing

⁵¹ Meyer, 315.

of the text by removing or alleviating difficulties, if found to do so on a perpetual basis, ought to receive less weight in the evaluation of other textual variations. Furthermore, the circumstance that only a few related MSS in both Matt 17:21 and Mark 9:29 depart from the overwhelming consensus of all MSS, versions, and fathers suggests that those few witnesses should be rejected for the same reason that most critics reject singular variant readings: they represent relatively late deviations from the mainstream MS tradition that had long been multiplying itself with the result that it dominated not only in number but also in provenance. Ultimately, the present investigation has concluded that the appeal of the claims against the authenticity of Matt 17:21 is found gradually to diminish, and finally to disappear.