

SOME EXAMPLES OF BAD RESEARCH METHOD

By Marvin Hunn

I think most violations of research standards can be characterized as follows: unconscious bias; innocent mistakes & unintentional negligence; intentional negligence; or intentional deception. Bias can interact with the other categories. The words “innocent,” and “unintentional” indicate the researchers believe they are conforming to disciplinary standards. They are trying to do the right thing. They attempt due diligence. “Intentional negligence” indicates the researchers knowingly fail to exercise full due diligence; they consciously decide to cut corners. This may be in the name of convenience or haste. They may think no harm will be done in this instance. “Intentional deception” means the researchers attempt to persuade the readers to believe a lie. Possibly they believe a little deception is okay in order to achieve a more important goal. Below I apply the taxonomy to four case studies. Note I added boldface to quotations.

1: OVERLOOKED SOURCES

THE CASE

Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “The Grammatical Internal Evidence for ἔχομεν in Romans 5:1,” *JETS* 54 (2011):559-72, introduces his article as follows.

Textual critics have long puzzled over the εχομεν/εχωμεν variant in Rom 5:1 — that is, whether the text should read as the indicative or the subjunctive. . . .

The seedbed for this article was an observation made in a class on textual criticism taught more than forty years ago by the late Bastiaan Van Elderen of Calvin Theological Seminary. He noted that Rom 5:3 begins with ού μόνον δέ, not μή μόνον δε, which suggests that Paul is working with the indicative here, not with the subjunctive. At the time, **I figured his observation was commonly acknowledged** in commentaries on Romans that deal with textual-critical issues. But as I began to do research in the critical commentaries, I discovered **such is not the case.**[Footnote 3 here.] Moreover, while a few commentators do acknowledge that the two occurrences of καυχώμεθα in 5:2b, 3 can be either indicative or subjunctive, **no one works back from deciding this issue to see what effect it might have on the εχομεν/εχωμεν issue in 5:1** (559-60).

So Verbrugge is claiming a measure of originality. (Footnote 3 cites 15 sources; footnote 4 cites a German language dissertation on Rom 5:1-11; many other sources are cited throughout the article).

Stanley E Porter, “Not Only That (ού μόνον), but It Has Been Said Before: A Response to Verlyn Verbrugge, or Why Reading Previous Scholarship Can Avoid Scholarly Misunderstandings,” *JETS* 56 (2013):577-78, begins his rebuttal as follows.

In the September 2011 issue of *JETS*, Verlyn Verbrugge claims to have made what is to him an unexpected discovery. . . . –[U]nfortunately . . . at least two scholars have provided just the analysis that he claims is missing – one a hundred years ago, the other twenty years ago . . . I was the one who did so twenty years ago . . . This is the danger of making bold claims **without sufficiently checking the available evidence** – one runs the risk of being shown not only **not to have considered all the evidence**, but (as in this case) to have **missed major arguments** that might influence one’s conclusions.

So Porter is saying Verbrugge overlooked prior work and missed major arguments Porter advanced in 1991.

Verbrugge, “Response to Stanley E. Porter,” *JETS* 56 (2013):585-87 begins his response as follows.

First, I offer my sincerest apology to Porter for not having located his article on the textual-critical issue in Rom 5:1, which has been published in two separate places. **For some reason, neither publication showed up in my searches for articles on Rom 5:1. I am not sure why.**

So he searched but failed to find Porter’s 1991 *JBL* article (or the 1996 reprint). What went wrong? We don’t know; we can speculate. The Atla Religion Database was likely one of the sources he used. The Atla record for Porter’s *JBL* article has a Scripture Citation field entry for Romans 5 (the whole chapter), and it is easily findable by anyone searching for Romans 5 or for 5:1 specifically. However, the title of the article was “The Argument of Romans 5: Can a Rhetorical Question Make a Difference?” Possibly Verbrugge saw the title but thought it irrelevant to a textual variant in 5:1, so he didn’t read it. Perhaps the Atla search engine behaved differently in 2011 when Verbrugge wrote. There was a time long ago when it was necessary to “browse” rather than “search” the SC field to identify verse-specific works.¹ That is no longer necessary. I don’t remember when that change took place.

Verbrugge also says “It is perhaps equally surprising that neither of the two Romans commentaries published since 1991 (the year of Porter’s *JBL* article) in which authors are encouraged to deal significantly with textual-critical issues (NICNT and BECNT series) makes any reference to that article.” The first edition of Moo’s Romans NICNT vol. was copyrighted in 1996 and does not cite Porter’s 1991 article. But, as the forward explains, the portion on Rom 1-8 was completed in 1991 and then rewritten along with material on the rest of Romans. That may explain why it omits Porter’s 1991 work. Contrary to what Verbrugge says, the 1998 edition of Schreiner’s BECNT vol. does cite Porter on page 258 concerning the textual problem in Rom 5:1, and he adopts the indicative reading. The commentary separates textual explanation/exposition from technical notes, so the reader must look in two sections to find all that is said about verse one. A hasty scan for verse one might miss the second section. I suspect this is what happened.

¹ See https://library.dts.edu/Pages/RM/DBM/EBSCO/atla_tips.pdf for a discussion of this issue.

However, in the 2018 edition, Schreiner says Verbrugge's overall argument is likely correct.

Verbrugge (2011), in a study of grammar and usage, argues that οὐ μόνον δέ with καυχώμεθα in 5:3 supports the notion that both uses of καυχώμεθα are indicative. S. Porter (2013) contests Verbrugge's argument and shows that there are exceptions. Verbrugge (2013) acknowledges that exceptions exist but still thinks they evidence supports the indicative. The matter is complicated and certainty is impossible, but Verbrugge's argument seems more probable (p. 265)

Let's suppose Verbrugge did make a credible argument for the indicative in 5:1. But his database searches failed, and his perusal of commentaries failed. These elementary failures undermined his main argument and his credibility.

THE LESSON

The mistakes were elementary, but this could happen to you, too. So be careful.

I view these as innocent mistakes. Verbrugge was apparently careless, but he thought he was being reasonably careful. He was trying to do the right thing. He did in fact do many things well. In such cases, we should humbly acknowledge our errors and then move on. We should be kind to others who commit such errors. We should offer constructive corrections.

What can you do to prevent careless errors? I find this question difficult to answer because it is so general; it does not specify carelessness of a particular kind or in a particular task. So consider carelessness in the specific task of compiling a bibliography. If I understand correctly, Verbrugge searched databases for relevant literature, and he also compared what he found with the works cited in many other sources. So he had a safeguard, a way to detect overlooked sources. Good. But that safeguard was not sufficient. He missed the citation in Schreiner and in databases. I think we can only limit and mitigate mistakes, not completely prevent them.

2: UNINTENDED PLAGIARISM

THE CASE

Peter O'Brien had a long and successful career in academic scholarship and higher education until he was charged with plagiarism² in 2016. After careful investigation of

² See "Eerdmans Statement on Three New Testament Commentaries," (<http://www.eerdmans.com/Pages/Item/59043/Commentary-Statement.aspx>); "Statement from Zondervan Academic," (<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/statement-from-zondervan-academic/>), and the IVP "Update – NSBT Volumes by Peter O'Brien," (original link broken, but content available from Internet Archive WayBack Machine:

the charges, Eerdmans, IVP and Zondervan withdrew six of his books from publication, including books which had sold well (and were making money for the companies).

Eerdmans said "what we found on the pages of this commentary runs afoul of commonly accepted standards with regard to the utilization and documentation of secondary sources."

Later, IVP said "his flawed work practices have generated unambiguous plagiarism that cannot be overlooked."

Still later, Zondervan said his book "does not follow commonly accepted standards for the use and documentation of secondary resources."

According to Eerdmans, O'Brien said ". . . although I have never deliberately misused the work of others, nevertheless I now see that my work processes at times have been faulty and have generated clear-cut, but unintentional, plagiarism. For this I apologize without reservation."

IVP said "[w]e recognize that it was not Dr. O'Brien's intention to misuse secondary sources."

Zondervan said "we have no reason to believe that Dr. O'Brien intentionally misused secondary resources."

THE LESSON

The consequences were large. O'Brien ended his career with a damaged reputation. The books were tainted so extensively that they were retired by publishers rather than being revised.

Both O'Brien and the publishers indicated it was (could be) a matter of unintentional misuse due to flawed work processes. He was responsible not only to cite correctly, but also to follow sound processes (procedures). He was negligent because he followed unsound processes. I think he must have known his processes were error-prone and invited disaster. So I count this as intentional negligence which unintentionally resulted in plagiarism. Be prepared to comment on the following.

- What kind of work processes/practices/procedures might produce such misuse?
- What processes might prevent such misuse?

<https://web.archive.org/web/20171221112349/http://www.ivpbooks.com/2016/09/26/update-nsbt-volumes-peter-obrien/>).

3: DEPENDING ON UNREAD SOURCES

THE CASE

Have you ever cited a source without actually reading it? David Cook (“Stephanus Le Moyne and the Dissection of Philippians,” *JTS* 32 [1981]:138-42) outed some big names for that practice. His article can be summarized as follows. According to W. Schmithals, R. Jewett, B. D. Rahtjen, J.-F. Collage and many others, Stephanus Le Moyne was the first person to assert that Philippians consists of two separate documents which were combined.³ According to Cook, Le Moyne said no such thing. Cook scolds the scholars. On p. 139 he says “**none of our modern authorities has read Le Moyne.**” Further, he speaks of the practice of “**lifting another writer’s references without ascertaining whether they be true.**” On p. 142 he says Le Moyne never claims Philippians is a “composite work” and never says there is a “sudden shift” between documents at 3:1. This false view was perpetuated “only through a **lack of integrity in scholarship**” and “**the unverified adoption of others’ references.**”

V. Koperski, “The Early History of the Dissection of Philippians,” *JTS* 44 (1993):599-603, affirms Cook on the main points. I can’t read Le Moyne’s Latin text, so I used Google Translate. That is not scholarly. I can’t really verify their work but I suppose Cook and Koperski are correct, and I suppose you also suppose they are correct. We smile at the irony (of affirming rigorous scholarship but not practicing it by verifying Cook and Koperski), but this is an important matter.

There are mitigating factors. Le Moyne’s book was very rare and nearly inaccessible through the twentieth century.⁴ Further, it is written in Latin and there is no translation into another language. These factors may have discouraged any attempt to examine the text. Some may have consulted the Latin text but misunderstood it. After all, Le Moyne mentions “*duas Epistolas*” (two epistles). On the other hand, these scholars were real polyglots. One interesting possibility is that perceived unimportance could be a factor. The scholars were focused on the important issue of alleged literary and theological disunity in Philippians due to composite sources, not on the unimportant issue of who first propounded the two source view. Perhaps they were reluctant to do so much work to verify such a small matter.

But mitigation is no excuse. If Le Moyne’s role is an unimportant matter, then a secondary citation (17.9.3 in Turabian 9th ed) would seem acceptable. So instead of citing

³ The main text is *Varia sacra seu sylloge variorum opusculorum Græcorum ad rem ecclesiasticam spectantium. Cura et studio Stephani Le Moyne ... qui collegit, versiones partim addidit, & notis & observationibus uberioribus illustravit. Tomus 1-2.* 1st ed., Leiden: Daniel à Gaesbeeck 1685; 2d ed., Leiden: apud Cornelium Boutesteyn, 1694. Some catalog records and citations have Lemoine instead of Le Moyne, or the genitive(?) Stephani instead of Stephanus, or Etienne instead of Stephanus.

⁴ But digital copies are now available in Google Books and HathiTrust. Rare but now accessible to all! Internet Archive began in 1996, Google Books in 2005, and HathiTrust in 2008.

Le Moyne, they could have said “according to Dr. XYZ, Le Moyne was the first.” If Le Moyne’s role is important, then there is no easy way out; they *must* use the primary sources themselves.

THE LESSON

The scholars who perpetuated the Le Moyne myth knew they were cutting corners, falling short of scholarly standards. So it is a case of intentional negligence. Technically it is also a case of intentional deception: they lied; they pretended to have consulted the cited source. Yet they thought they were telling the truth about the source. I see this as primarily an example of intentional neglect. The root cause of the lie is the neglect. We (all of us) are weak, and we use lies to hide our neglect.

What might help you and your peers do to prevent this sort of thing from happening? Be prepared to comment in class.

4: EXTENSIVE INACCURACY, AND PERHAPS DISHONESTY

THE CASE

In this case study we are looking at Grudem’s critique⁵ of Kroeger's article on 'Head' in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Pages 64-65 from Grudem follow.

One final comment should be made about the widely influential article on "Head" with which we began. This article by Catherine Kroeger in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, a major reference work, should be troubling to those who care about accuracy in scholarly work. The article is peppered with references to extra-Biblical literature and therefore gives the appearance of careful scholarship. But only someone with access to a major research library, the ability to translate extensive passages from untranslated ancient Greek literature, and many days free for such research, could ever have discovered that **this is not careful scholarship. In fact, in several sections its disregard of facts is so egregious that it fails even to meet fundamental requirements of truthfulness.**

With respect to patristic material, **the striking new quotation that she said was from Chrysostom does not exist.** Her claims for the meaning of κεφαλή in Chrysostom are proven false by numerous statements in Chrysostom's writings. The other patristic references that she cites either give clear support to the meaning "leader, authority over" or else are ambiguous. She fails to mention that Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, on the page on which several of her references are found, does not give the meaning "source," which she claims for κεφαλή. She also **fails to mention that the meaning "chief, superior" or its equivalent occurs five times on that same page as the primary metaphorical meaning that attaches to κεφαλή when it is used of persons.**

⁵ Wayne Grudem, "The meaning of κεφαλή ('head'): an evaluation of new evidence, real and alleged," *JETS* 44 (2001):25-65.

With respect to classical Greek material, **of the fourteen sources she cites to prove "the classical view of head as source," four do not even contain the term κεφαλή.** Of the remaining ten, only three are from the pre-NT "classical" period in Greek. **No dates were provided for any references, some of which came from the third, fifth, and even ninth century AD.** Several references were cited in such obscure ways that they took literally days to locate. Six of the references repeat the same sentence about Zeus, in which Zeus is seen as the "beginning," or "first in a series," but not as the "source." Two of the references actually speak of "head" as "leader, one in authority." Several of the sentences use κεφαλή with ἀρχή, but the ambiguity of ἀρχή makes them inconclusive as evidence, and the clear use of ἀρχή in Chrysostom and others to mean "ruler" suggests this as a possible meaning in the ambiguous texts as well. In sum, no evidence clearly demonstrated the meaning "source," and several pieces of evidence argued against it.

In terms of accuracy with sources, only fourteen of the twenty-four references cited were both accurate citations and contained the word κεφαλή, "head."

Then, in her 1998 response to all of these concerns about accuracy, rather than correcting these errors, Dr. Kroeger gave yet another citation from Chrysostom that, when checked, showed that she had omitted contrary evidence that was at the beginning, middle, and end of the very passage she cited. Sadly, this is not the first time that concerns have been raised about the trustworthiness of materials written by this author. [footnote 102]

People who read reference books have a right to expect that they will be basically trustworthy, and that where evidence is cited it will, if checked, provide clear support for the points being claimed. When one does check the evidence in an article and it turns out to be unreliable or used in tendentious ways, or even non-existent, it undermines confidence in the trustworthiness of the author and in the editors and the publisher who have produced the work. **Because this topic has been so controversial, one would expect that those responsible for the volume would have taken particular care to insure accuracy. But did anyone check any of this evidence? Did any editor at IVP? [footnote 103]**

Yet the primary responsibility for this article rests with Dr. Kroeger, and the article is troubling at its core, not only for what it claims, but for the model of scholarly work that it puts forth. The scholarly task is an exciting one, especially in the area of Biblical studies. But it is too large for any one person, and scholarship can be advanced in a helpful way when we are able to read and benefit from one another's work. **Even when we disagree with the conclusions of an article, we should be able to expect that the citations of evidence are fundamentally reliable.**

But the lack of care in the use of evidence as manifested in this article, if followed by others, would throw the entire scholarly process into significant decline. We would begin to wonder if we could trust anything that was claimed by anyone else unless we checked the original data for ourselves. For most topics, there would never be enough time to do this, and thus all the gains of scholarship that are represented in our major reference books would no longer be useful, for neither scholars nor lay persons would know if any reference works could be trusted.

Such a threat to the trustworthiness of facts cited in academic articles and reference books is a far more serious matter than the meaning of an individual Greek word, even a word as important as κεφαλή. **We may differ for our whole lives on the interpretation of facts, for that is the nature of the scholarly task. But if our citations of the facts themselves cannot be trusted, then the foundations are destroyed.**

So Grudem accuses Kroeger of large-scale factual inaccuracy, and intentional deception. This is not just a disagreement over conclusions.

THE LESSON

Our purpose in this case study is not linguistic; we will not investigate the meaning of κεφαλή in ancient Greek literature. Our purpose is not theological; we will not discuss egalitarianism and complementarianism. Our purpose is not to put Kroeger on trial;⁶ we will not attempt to determine whether this is an instance of intentional deception. Our purpose is to think about how to ensure accuracy in scholarship, particularly in the way primary sources are used.

We might begin our thinking with a model of scholarly progress. Since the 1800s (maybe long before), the scholarly enterprise has been pictured as a team constructing the great temple of knowledge. The structure emerges from the cooperative work of many. Each person contributes a stone to the structure. Stones rest on other stones. Stones must fit together. The structure will survive only if each stone carries its weight and fits properly. Damaged stones must be repaired or removed. Grudem is concerned about the soundness of the whole structure. Without factual accuracy and honesty, the scholarly system will collapse like an unsound building.

The scholarly craftsmen are experts in their fields, with extensive knowledge and understanding. So they are competent, well qualified master builders. They also accept the responsibility of pursuing truth by using good disciplinary methods and complying with standards. Society depends on them. They are accountable.

As you think about the issues, be practical. Be prepared to comment in class about the following.

⁶ I have not tested Grudem's claims.

- What can you do to ensure personal accuracy?
- How does the scholarly system support accuracy?