

Independent Research

**The External Evidence for the Authorship of Luke 23:34a: An Examination of the Evidence
from the Manuscript and Church Father Witnesses**

For the purpose of personal research in an effort to better understand the NT text. Work
submitted to *A Collection of NT Textual-Critical Issues* by Joshua M. Haub

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IS LUKE 23:34a PART OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE?

The question of who wrote Luke 23:34a is a difficult one to answer. While some scholars think that the internal evidence points to the passage being original to the Gospel of Luke, the external evidence (especially the manuscript tradition, but also the church fathers) seems to point to the text more probably being an interpolation.¹ If the author of Luke did write it, why is it missing from the earliest manuscripts we have recovered?² Why do some manuscripts, in the same century, have it while others do not?³ It is my objective to examine the external evidence of the manuscripts and Church Fathers and show that this passage is more likely an interpolation.

MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

B. Metzger in his textual commentary addresses Luke 23:34a.⁴ He states that verse 34a is “probably not a part of the original Gospel of Luke.”⁵ However, he also notes that verse 34a “bears self-evident tokens of its dominical origin, and was retained, within double square brackets, in its traditional place where it had been incorporated by unknown copyists relatively

¹ Scholars who argue that verse 34a is original to the Gospel of Luke do so on the basis of the themes of forgiveness and ignorance, Lukan verbiage (found in both Luke and Acts), and the statement by Stephen in Acts 7:60. For a concise list of the internal evidence, see D. Bock, “Crucifixion (23:26-49),” R. L. Hubbard Jr., *Luke 9:51-24:53*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 1996), 1867-8. The manuscripts which omit verse 34a are “ β^{75} κ^{2a} B D* W Θ 070. 579. 1241 a sy^s sa bo^{pt}.” For the complete list of manuscripts which either omit verse 34a, include it, or cite it in a footnote, see Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28. revidierte Auflage. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 283.

² The earliest manuscripts we have recovered are “ β^{75} κ^{2a} B D*.” β^{75} is dated to the “early third century.” κ^{2a} is dated to the “fourth century.” B is dated to the “fourth century.” D* is dated to the “fifth or sixth century.” For these dates, see K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 15.

³ For example, D* (5th century) omits verse 34a, C (5th century) has verse 34a in a footnote, and A (5th century) includes it in Luke 23:34. For the dates of these manuscripts, see K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 15.

⁴ For much of what follows, I am indebted to B. Metzger and his work found in B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, UBS (1971), 180.

⁵ Ibid., 180.

early in the transmission of the Third Gospel.”⁶ Metzger also notes that verse 34a “can scarcely be explained as a deliberate excision by copyists who, considering the fall of Jerusalem to be proof that God had not forgiven the Jews, could not allow it to appear that the prayer of Jesus had remained unanswered.”⁷ Metzger therefore thinks that it is unlikely the saying was removed by a scribe who believed that Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness had not been answered by God. Thus the manuscript evidence, according to Metzger, points to the beginning of verse 34 being an interpolation by a later scribe, probably inserting the saying into the text because it was believed to have been said by Jesus on the cross.

T. Bolin argues against Metzger and says that the beginning of verse 34a is part of the original text of the Gospel of Luke.⁸ He notes that “if one looks more closely at the internal evidence, and re-examines the manuscript tradition, it can be seen that on both internal and external ground there are *no strong reasons* (emphasis mine) to classify Luke 23:34a as a later addition.”⁹ In the article, Bolin charts all the witnesses for both the omission and inclusion of verse 34a. He argues from his chart “that the manuscript tradition is divided evenly on this saying.”¹⁰ He also notes that “while the oldest uncials (𝔓⁷⁵) omits it, one of the oldest complete MSS of the Bible (𝔓) includes it.¹¹ He says that even though the uncials have more witnesses for the omission of verse 34a, there are more witnesses for the inclusion of the saying in the other three categories (minuscules, versions, and overwhelmingly, the early church fathers).¹² Bolin

⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁷ Ibid., 180.

⁸ For much of what follows, I am indebted to T. Bolin and his work found in T. Bolin, “A Reassessment of the Textual Problem of Luke 23:34a,” *Proceedings: EGL and MWBS* 12 (1992): 131-44.

⁹ Ibid., 131.

¹⁰ Ibid., 132. For the chart, see Ibid., 132.

¹¹ Ibid., 132. According to Nestle-Aland 28th edition, the uncial *𝔓* originally contained the saying (marked as *𝔓** in NA28) but then it was removed by a corrector (*𝔓^{2a}*) before finally being readded by another corrector later (*𝔓^{2b}*). This sequence may suggest that some scribes were uncertain about the authenticity of the saying.

¹² For the chart, see Ibid., 132.

states that “while the evidence leans slightly towards the omission among the uncials, and strongly towards it among the versions, there is strong support for the reading in both the minuscules and most notably among the early church writers.”¹³ Ultimately, Bolin’s argument for the saying being original to the Gospel of Luke rests on the evidence from the Church Fathers and the internal evidence rather than on the manuscript witnesses, the earliest of which does not contain the beginning of verse 34.¹⁴ Bolin believes that the reason that critical editions of the New Testament bracket verse 34a (thus suggesting it is an interpolation) is because of “a ranking of text-types founded upon circular reasoning as to which MSS are the ‘best’ for preserving the ‘original’ text; and... a disregard for internal criteria.”¹⁵ In his conclusion, Bolin states:

For Luke 23:34 to be a later addition, a scribe would have had to be able to compose a saying which (a) contains no anomalous vocabulary; (b) fits into the overall redactional activity of the crucifixion narrative; (c) deftly uses a motif found in Acts without verbatim copying; and (d) either by accident or design becomes the center of the developing theology of forgiveness and the significance of Jesus’ death in Luke-Acts.¹⁶

Bolin believes that the overall evidence points to this passage being original to the Gospel of Luke. It seems unlikely, in his opinion, this is an interpolation.

¹³ Ibid., 132-3.

¹⁴ This manuscript is “𝔓⁷⁵,” from the 3rd century. For more on the manuscript witnesses, see Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28. revidierte Auflage. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 283. For the dating of this manuscript, see K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 139. The critical editions of the New Testament in Bolin’s day were the NA27 and UBS4, respectively.

¹⁶ Ibid., 139.

J. Whitlark and M. Parsons disagreed with Bolin in an article in which they discussed the reason *why* a scribe might insert verse 34a into the text.¹⁷ They state that Bolin's "arrangement of the external evidence is overly simplistic and does not recognize mixture in the documents from the fourth century."¹⁸ The reason a scribe may have added verse 34a, Whitlark and Parsons suggest, is because of the significance of the number seven in the New Testament and early Christianity.¹⁹ They comment that there is "a numerical motivation that arose as a result of the collection and/or the harmonization of the four Gospels."²⁰ Their argument is based upon the collection of the four Gospels. When the four Gospels are grouped together, there are only six sayings of Jesus on the cross (if Luke 23:34a is excluded).²¹ This would seem "incomplete" to early Christians, who saw the number seven as being very important.²² An important manuscript that they discuss in their article is Tatian's *Diatessaron*, which they date to "c. 170" and "is our earliest extant witness."²³ This document is a collection of the four Gospels into "a single narrative."²⁴ This document does include Luke 23:34a, but Whitlark and Parsons think that its inclusion actually points to its inauthenticity rather than being a key witness in favor of its inclusion. The version of the *Diatessaron* that has Luke 23:34a is the Arabic version and "is an important witness to the original Syriac version."²⁵ Whitlark and Parsons note that there are two important Syriac versions, which are manuscripts "Syr^c" and "Syr^s," respectively.²⁶ Syr^s is

¹⁷ For much of which is to follow, I am indebted to J. Whitlark and M. Parsons in their work found in J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, "The 'Seven' Last Words: A Numerical Motivation for the Insertion of Luke 23:34a," *NTS* 52, no. 2 (2006): 188-204.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 191. This is stated in a footnote.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion on the number seven in the New Testament and early Christianity, see J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, "The 'Seven' Last Words," 197-201.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

²¹ These passages are Matt. 27:46/Mark 15:34; Luke 23:43, 46; John 19:26-7, 28, 30.

²² For the full discussion on the number seven in the New Testament and early Christianity, see *Ibid.*, 197-201.

²³ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 201. This is stated in a footnote.

²⁶ Whitlark and Parsons note that "these manuscripts are believed to be from the fourth-fifth century, but their texts are thought to go back to the early second and third century," *Ibid.*, 202.

believed to be the older of the two, perhaps dating to before Tatian's day.²⁷ This manuscript does not contain the saying. However Syr^c, which is post-Tatian, does contain the saying.²⁸ When Ephraim wrote his commentary on the *Diatessaron* in the 4th century, it 'has some correspondence to the Arabic witness.'²⁹ When Ephraim got to the seven sayings of Jesus, he did not note Luke 23:34a until the very end of the discussion. Why? Whitlark and Parsons propose that this was because "early on the logion, 'Father, forgive them,' was not fixed in the text of Third Gospel but was a 'floating tradition.'³⁰ Whitlark and Parsons, then, agree with Metzger: this saying is an interpolation and probably was originally an oral tradition. Whitlark and Parsons conclude that the addition of this saying to the list of Jesus' last words allows "a satisfying sense of completion when Jesus utters his 'seventh word' from the cross."³¹

N. Eubanks disagreed with Whitlark and Parsons in his article on the saying.³² Eubanks states that "Jason A. Whitlark and Mikeal C. Parsons have attempted to characterize the prayer as a distinctively Western reading, claiming that 'the evidence for the inclusion of Luke 23.34a is restricted to the Western text prior to the fourth century.'³³ Eubanks disagrees, stating, "Yet the only pre-fourth-century witness to the text of Luke are \mathfrak{P}^{75} and a handful of church fathers, hardly enough evidence to justify speaking of a variant being confined to a particular text

²⁷ Whitlark and Parsons suggest that Syr^s is from the second century. See J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, "The 'Seven' Last Words," 202.

²⁸ Whitlark and Parsons state that Syr^c is from the early third century. See J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, "The 'Seven' Last Words," 202.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204. The "seventh word" would have been either "It is finished!" (John 19:30) or "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). All references are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 ed.), hereafter NASB95.

³² For much of what follows, I am indebted to N. Eubanks and his work found in N. Eubanks, "A Disconcerting Prayer: On the Originality of Luke 23:34a," *JBL* 129, no. 3 (2010): 521-36.

³³ *Ibid.*, 522.

type.”³⁴ Eubanks records all the early Church Father quotations of the saying and quotes Kim Haines-Eitzen, who says, “These witnesses demonstrate that the prayer was known in the second century in Gaul, Alexandria, Palestine, Syria, and Rome.”³⁵ Based on Eubanks’ perception of early Church Fathers’ knowledge of the saying, along with a detailed discussion of the internal evidence, Eubanks’ concludes that the saying is original to the Gospel of Luke.³⁶ He states that “the external evidence for Luke 23:34a is far from conclusive.”³⁷

CHURCH FATHERS: DID JESUS REALLY FORGIVE HIS ENEMIES?

Eubanks gives a detailed discussion of the Church Fathers’ interpretation and usage of Luke 23:34a.³⁸ The difficulty of this saying for the early Church Fathers is that it seems as though Jesus is forgiving the Jews even though they killed him. Eubanks notes:

Ambrose (*Job* 5.12-13), Jerome (*Ep.* 120.8.2 [*PL* 22:993]), Theodoret (*Interpretatio in XIV epistulas sancti Pauli* [*PG* 82:241]), Leo the Great (“Sermon 52”), and John Chrysostom (*Cruc.* [*PG* 49:405]) downplay this fact by admitting that the Jews may indeed have had the opportunity to be forgiven, but their subsequent recalcitrance demands that they be punished anyway.³⁹

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 522. Eubanks also notes that the “pre-fourth-century witness is Origen (ca. 185-254), whose citations of Luke consistently support the Alexandrian text,” *Ibid.*, 522.

³⁵ K. Haines-Eitzen as qtd. in *Ibid.*, 524. The Church Fathers’ whom Eubanks cites are “Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.18.5) and apparently... Marcion (in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 42.11.6) in the second century, Hippolytus (*Pasch.* 2.43.7-14; *Hom. Lev.* 2.1.5) in the third [century] and Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23) in the fourth [century].” He also notes that “Ephrem cites the prayer three times in his commentary on the *Diatessaron*, which suggests that the prayer was in Tatian’s text in the middle of the second century (10.14; 21.3; 21.18).” He goes on, “the prayer is found in the Pseudo-Clementine literature (*Rec.* 6.5; *Hom.* 11.20); Achelaus, *Disputation with Manes* 44; *Apos. Con.* 2.3.16; 5.3.14; *Didascalia* 25; *Gos. Nic.* 10; and *Acts of Philip* (*ANF* 8:500).” For this discussion, see *Ibid.*, 523-4.

³⁶ For the discussion of the Church Fathers, see *Ibid.*, 528-34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 535.

³⁸ For the discussion of the Church Fathers, see *Ibid.*, 528-34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 529.

One way that early Christians dealt with the difficulties of Luke 23:34a was by applying the prayer to other passages to change its message. One such example is Archelaus who used the story of Moses and Pharaoh. He combined both stories, thus making Jesus parallel to Moses and the Pharisees parallel to Pharaoh.⁴⁰ This “allows Archelaus to acknowledge the compassion of Moses and Jesus while simultaneously casting the Pharisees in the role of Pharaoh, someone who did not receive forgiveness in the end.”⁴¹

Another way that early Christians dealt with the difficulties of the saying, according to Eubanks, was by changing the word ἀφες (forgive) to συγχώρησον (permit/pardon). Eubanks notes, “beginning during the fourth century with Epiphanius (*Pan.* 77.7.14) and stretching on into the twelfth, some commentators cite Luke 23:34a with συγχώρησον in place of ἀφες: ‘Father, *yield to them* (emphasis mine), for they do not know what they are doing.’”⁴² “According to this form of the text, Jesus prays not for the forgiveness of the Jews but that God would yield or defer to them, allowing them to do their worst.”⁴³ Thus completely changing the meaning of the prayer.

For some early Christian writers, “it seemed that God had ignored Jesus’ prayer.”⁴⁴ One such writer was “Hypatius, the archbishop of Ephesus in 532, [who] stated the problem succinctly: if the Jews were not forgiven, then ‘either the Christ, though he prayed earnestly, did not receive an answer, or he did not really pray’ (*Fr. in Luc.* 152).”⁴⁵ For these reasons, Eubanks argues that this passage has more reason to be removed than inserted, since it was controversial

⁴⁰ N. Eubanks cites Archelaus, “*Disputation with Manes* 44 [ANF 6:220].” See *Ibid.*, 530.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 530.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 531.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 532.

⁴⁵ Hypatius as qtd. in *Ibid.*, 532-3.

among early Christians. Thus, according to Eubanks' research, it seems less likely that a scribe would *create* controversy by adding the saying than a scribe *eliminating* controversy by removing the saying.⁴⁶ Eubanks concludes, "in all likelihood, Luke 23:34a was omitted fairly early, possibly by multiple scribes, while other scribes corrupted the text by changing ἀφες to συγχώρησον."⁴⁷

Bolin also discusses the evidence of the saying in the Church Fathers.⁴⁸ He notes that the saying is found "in the Persian Diatesseron, Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Amphilochius, Ambrosiaster, Hilary, Basil the Great, the Apostolic Constitutions, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, Theodoret and John of Damascus."⁴⁹ Bolin states that "the only omission among the writers is that of Cyril of Alexandria."⁵⁰ Bolin notes that four of the writers he mentioned are "from the second century."⁵¹ Bolin says that these four are "a century before our earliest MSS witness to this saying."⁵² To Bolin, the amount of witnesses to the saying in early church writers gives "weight leaning slightly in favor of the reading," even though the manuscript evidence is "evenly divided... with regard to age types of witnesses."⁵³

ANALYSIS

Answering the question of authorship of Luke 23:34a is difficult. As I researched, there seemed to be evidence that pointed in either direction, making a conclusion difficult to come to.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 536. While Eubanks may not say this specifically, his arguments concerning the controversy of the saying in early Christian writings seems to suggest this is his stance on the issue.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 536.

⁴⁸ T. Bolin, "A Reassessment of the Textual Problem," 131-44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁵¹ Ibid., 132. These four are "the Diatesseron, Justin, Irenaeus and Origen," Ibid., 132.

⁵² Ibid., 131.

⁵³ Ibid., 139.

Some of the pro-Lukan arguments were persuasive, such as Eubanks seemingly suggesting that the controversy among early Christian writers may point to a higher likelihood the saying would be removed rather than inserted.⁵⁴ However, based on the external evidence alone, I find the interpolation argument more persuasive. Metzger argues that the manuscript evidence points to the text being an interpolation, which many of the writers I read acknowledged.⁵⁵ Bolin provided a lot of analysis on the external evidence and how it could be used to point to the authenticity of the saying. However, according to my research, the earliest writer who said that the saying was found within the Gospels is Origen who lived in the 2nd or 3rd century.⁵⁶ However, Origen does not specify *which* Gospel(s) contained the saying. It seems likely that Origen meant the four Gospels we have today, but the manuscript we have recovered from his day does not contain the saying.⁵⁷ The research done by Whitlark and Parsons concerning the Arabic *Diatesseron* was helpful because their research, as discussed above, showed a possible beginning of the saying being included within the four Gospels. It is plausible that the saying may have begun circulating with the Gospels at this time.⁵⁸ However, I found Whitlark and Parsons' argument concerning the reason why a scribe may have included the saying less persuasive because it seemed more

⁵⁴ N. Eubanks, “A Disconcerting Prayer,” 536.

⁵⁵ The list of scholars I read who, at the very least, acknowledged the evidence pointing towards the manuscripts leaning towards the pro-interpolation argument: B. Metzger, 180; I. Marshall, 867-8; D. Bock, 1867-8; A. Plummer, 544-5; J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, 188. For citations of these authors, see Bibliography below.

⁵⁶ Origen wrote, “The Lord also confirms this *in the Gospels* (emphasis mine) when he says, ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.’” See Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.5, trans. Rufinus (ca. 403–404), English trans. G. W. Barkley, in *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 39–51. Origen is dated to “ca. 185–254.” See N. Eubanks, “A Disconcerting Prayer,” 522.

⁵⁷ The manuscript is “ β^75 ” and dates to the 3rd century. For the dating, see K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 15.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the saying is recorded: “Our Savior made supplication to His Father for those who sinned, as it is written in the Gospel, ‘My Father, they know not what they do, nor what they speak, yet, if it be possible, forgive them.’” Did the author of the *Did. Ap.* know the prayer as an oral tradition but cite it as part of “the Gospel”? This seems unlikely. However, it is interesting that the author adds “nor what they speak, yet, if it be possible.” Perhaps this is evidence of another form of the prayer that was known in antiquity. This may strengthen the pro-interpolation argument. However, it is too ambiguous to make a definitive argument from. See M. D. Gibson, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in English*, Horae Semiticae 2 (London: C. J. Clay and Sons; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 32.

speculative.⁵⁹ Whatever the reason for its inclusion, it seems probable that the saying was originally an oral tradition (probably authentic to Jesus) and not originally found in the Gospel of Luke. Instead, it was added later, perhaps around the time of Tatian. The saying being an authentic oral tradition may account for the parallel prayer in Acts 7:60 by Stephen and all the following Church Fathers up until the day of Origen who knew the saying from the Gospels because by then it had been added into them, probably in Luke 23:34 since that is the only place the saying is found within the manuscript tradition.

CONCLUSION

There is no easy answer to the question of the authorship of Luke 23:34a (and a detailed discussion of the internal evidence makes it even more difficult). Probably the most persuasive argument for the pro-Lukan stance is asking why the author of Luke-Acts would record the saying in Acts 7:60 and not in Luke 23:34a. Did he not sense the parallels between Jesus and Stephen in his own writing? If he knew Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies on the cross, why would he leave that saying out while including Stephen's parallel prayer? Still, the external evidence seems to support the pro-interpolation stance that the saying was not originally in Luke but was an authentic oral tradition, perhaps entering the text in the second century. But more work needs to be done before a more conclusive answer can be found. Until then, the saying will continue to be read in the Gospel of Luke in 23:34a.

⁵⁹ As noted before, Whitlark and Parsons argue that a scribe may have included the saying so that there would be a total of seven saying of Jesus on the cross. For their discussion of "seven," see J. Whitlark and M. Parsons, "The 'Seven' Last Words," 197-201.

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