

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

Step #4 - Preserving and Transmitting Revelation

The transmission of the Biblical texts could be sub-divided several ways, but the major topics would have to be Old Testament/New Testament and handwritten/printed. Prior to the invention of the printing press, everything would have been hand-copied and both the effort and expense involved would mean far fewer copies were available than we have grown to expect in the era of mechanical printing.

The Old Testament works were hand-copied, probably controlled by the priests down to the time of the Babylonian exile, and were probably always few in number. While we now take for granted the availability of personal copies of Scripture, for the common people in ancient Israel to have a knowledge of God's Word it was necessary for the Priests to teach the Law (Leviticus 10:9,10) and read it publicly to all every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:10-12). At times, the OT Scriptures were virtually unknown to most Jews (Judges 2:10,11; 2Kings 22:8) and the only Israelite king on record that made an attempt to have the Law systematically taught to the people was Jehoshaphat (2Chronicles 17:7-9). After the exile, Ezra publicly read the Law to the people and it was explained to them (Nehemiah 8). After Ezra's time, the synagogues and Rabbis would come to hold some or all the scrolls and these would still have been relatively precious and few. No original manuscripts exist for any OT books, but it can be demonstrated that they were carefully copied by the *Sopherim*/"Scribes" (450 B.C. - 200 A.D.), the Talmudic Scholars (200-500 A.D.), who added word & paragraph divisions, and the Masoretic Copyists (500-1000 A.D., who added the vowel pointing). The Dead Sea Scrolls, written sometime between 100 B.C. and 70 A.D. and discovered in the late 1940's A.D., reveal that the Masoretic copyists had done a marvelous job of preserving the OT text between 100-900 A.D. – the variations were so slight that only a handful of passages were significantly different to warrant a change in how they were translated in English versions and none of these affected any doctrinal issues. Prior to the discovery of these scrolls, the oldest OT Hebrew manuscripts came from the 10th century A.D.

The copying of NT manuscripts began early, as churches exchanged letters (cf. Colossians 4:16). Papyrus rolls, probably about 35 Feet long, were eventually replaced with the bound-leaf codex form for collections. Costly parchment was often scraped, washed, and re-smoothed for re-use (*palimpsest*). Lectionary manuscripts were divided into lessons for teaching purposes and the religious calendar. Several significant codex manuscripts come from the period 300-500 A.D. - Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi. The "John Ryland Fragment" (P⁵²) shows John's Gospel was in Egypt by 125 A.D. In addition to the many Greek manuscripts that can be compared, questioned passages can also be checked against numerous versions (translations) and quotations in the apostolic fathers.

Textual Criticism

"Textual Criticism" ("Lower" Criticism) is concerned, simply, with seeking the original text and this is a necessary element in modern Biblical scholarship for two reasons - there are many manuscripts and they don't perfectly agree! Don't worry, none of these variations raise serious

doctrinal questions. But, why do these differences exist? Corruptions in the original language texts could enter in for numerous reasons.¹ First, there are “unintentional changes,” which come about when scribes failed to visually distinguish similar letters from a written source or, when copying from an oral/read source they might fail to correctly hear or remember accurately long enough to get it copied down. After the invention of the European moveable type printing press (c. 1450 A.D.), there was a real danger of typesetting errors, which could easily result in numerous bad texts being produced.² Second, it was possible that “intentional changes” could occur when scribes made spelling changes, attempted to make the Gospels agree by harmonizing or adding fuller parallels, made changes to help a reader, inserted doctrinal amendments, or tried to accommodate Church liturgy.

Textual criticism is able to recognize such changes and arrive at the most likely original text in questioned passages through three lines of evidence. First, the earliest Greek manuscripts can be divided into three textual "families" - Byzantine, Alexandrian, & Western. Second, early translations into other languages were made and these help to narrow the search for the original reading of a passage. Finally, the writings of the early Church Fathers provide enough quotations of Scripture that large portions of the New Testament could be reconstructed from these alone.

Printed Greek Testaments

Hans (Gutenberg) Gensfleisch's moveable-type press made printed Bibles a possibility (1452). The first printed Greek NT came from Cardinal Ximenes (1514) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1516), with Erasmus' text on the market first. Robert Estienne (Stephanus) issued 4 Greek New Testaments with the last (1551) numbering the verses. The *Textus Receptus* was Erasmus' text, reworked by Stephanus, Beza, and the Blzevir brothers. Also called "Antiochan, Syrian, & Byzantine," it was the standard up to 1900. Older manuscripts reveal its errors. However, the revolutionary thing about printed Greek texts was that now there was a means of checking for errors in the Latin Vulgate translation used by the Roman Catholic Church.

Charles E. McCoy
04/12/2006

¹ Bruce Manning Metzger, The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1068).

² Jack P. Lewis, The English Bible From KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 37-38.