

THE TEXTUAL REALIABILITY OF THE BIBLE

1. THE JOURNEY FROM AUTOGRAPHS TO ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

A. Autographs

The autograph refers to the original written document. When thinking about the Biblical books the autograph would be the very first time Matthew wrote his gospel and then sent it to his recipients. The very first time Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the first time John wrote Revelation or the first time Jonah was written down. No autographs from the Old or New Testament exist. The reason for this is that the materials these documents were written on (animal skins, etc.) over time wore down until they could no longer be used.

B. Copies

Very soon after the autograph's existed copies were made of them. Copies were made to disseminate these writing to other communities so others could benefit. The coping process and ethos for the Old Testament books and New Testament books are different.

For the Old Testament the copying process was intentional, careful, and reverent. The Jewish people prized their writings and so great care was taken in copying. A quote from Lightfoot's "How We Got the Bible" demonstrates the scrutiny taken in copying texts

A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. The length of each column must not extend over less than forty-eight, or more than sixty lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. The whole copy must first be lined; and if three words be written without a line, it is worthless. The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any colour and be prepared according to a definite recipe. An *authentic* copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least to deviate. No word or letter, not

even a *yod*, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him...Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread must intervene; between every word the breadth of a narrow consonant; between every new *parashah*, or section, the breadth of nine consonants; between every book, three lines. The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line; but the rest need not do so. Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, wash his whole body, not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him...The rolls in which these regulations are not observed are condemned to be buried in the ground or burned; or they are banished to the schools, to be used as reading books.

The New Testament copying process in contrast was much more rough, quick, and energetic. Care was still taken but there was an urgency to get the news out about Jesus the Christian faith.

New Testament Manuscript Evidence

The New Testament is the most well attested ancient documents. Here are some statistics:

- Number of Greek manuscripts: Roughly 5,800 copies
- Number of manuscripts written in other languages (Coptic, Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Armenian, etc): 15,000-20,000
- Total New Testament manuscript evidence: nearly 26,000 manuscripts
- over 1 million citations are found of the NT in the Church Fathers (authors writing from the late first century to the fifth century)
- 838 manuscripts are dated to 1000 AD or earlier and 124 are dated to within the first 300 years of the church
- compared to other ancient authors/works during the same time (300 years) there are zero literary remains

C. Collecting of Individual Books into Groups

As individual copies were made and disseminated over time there came to be groupings of certain books. The individual gospels were collected into the four gospels and Acts. Paul's letters became grouped together (Romans to Hebrews). The Catholic letters became grouped together (James to Jude). And Revelation formed its own category.

D. Codex/Codices (Ancient books of the OT and NT)

i. Significant OT Manuscripts

1. Aleppo Codex - This codex is dated to the 10th century AD and for centuries contained the entire Hebrew Bible until sections of it were lost during war time in 1947.
2. Leningrad Codex - This codex was completed in 1010 and contains the entire Hebrew Bible making it the oldest manuscript to contain the complete Old Testament. The Leningrad and Aleppo Codex come from a family of Hebrew Texts known as the "Masoretic Text". The Leningrad Codex is the main text used in critical editions of the Old Testament; thus it is a significant text for our English Old Testament.
3. Dead Sea Scrolls - The Dead Sea Scrolls are the most significant archeological find in the 20th century. The initial find comprised 7 scrolls one of which included Isaiah. They were discovered in March of 1948 and the scrolls are connected to a first century group known as the Essenes. What makes this find valuable is that the Isaiah scroll is dated to 100 BC or earlier. Before this find the earliest complete Isaiah scroll was dated to 1000 AD but the Dead Sea Scroll finding pushed the Isaiah text back to 1,100 years earlier. With the exceptions of a few minor text variants, the DDS text of Isaiah and copies of Isaiah from 1000 AD are identical. Thus providing evidence that the textual transmission of the Old Testament was stable and reliable.
4. Septuagint - A few hundred years before the time of Jesus a group of 70 translators (traditionally) translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, the common language of the time. What makes the Septuagint important is that it is the Old Testament text the New Testament authors quote from. The New Testament authors did not use the Hebrew text but the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

ii. Significant NT Manuscripts

1. Vatican Codex - This codex is dated to the fourth century and contains the whole New Testament. It is considered on the most important NT witnesses. It is currently housed in the Vatican where it has been since 1481.
2. Sinaitic Codex - dated to around and third or fourth century. It is of equal importance to the Vatican Codex.
3. Alexandrian Codex - This codex contains both the Old and New Testaments as well as a few extra-canonical books at the end of its New Testament.

E. Critical Editions of the OT and NT

From these codices and various individual manuscripts specialists known as Textual Critics piece together what they believe to be the original wording of the text (the autograph). Critical editions of the Old and New Testaments are made up of the original language with textual variants provided. From these critical editions, biblical scholars translate them into various languages, for us, English.

F. Translation process

The translation process is not a straightforward process. There are various translation methods that can be used. For major English translations there are committees who deliberate and discuss what the best way to translate the text. From this process comes our English translation.

G. English Translation

2. THE DISCIPLINE OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Textual Criticism - Textual Criticism is a field of study that seeks to reconstruct what the original wording of a document said when it is not in existence anymore. Those involved in this process are called Textual Critics.

Textual Variants - During the extensive copying process mistakes or errors are made. This is an unavoidable reality when copying takes place. When two manuscripts differ from each other even in the slightest way this is known as a textual variant. There are roughly 400,000 variants in the New Testament manuscripts.

Types of Variants - Below are types of variants that are found in manuscripts. Most variants are non-consequential.

- misspelled words, even by one letter
- skipped lines
- different word order (Jesus Christ vs Christ Jesus)
- Semi-significant variants include
 - The longer ending of Mark (Mark 16.9-20)
 - The story of the adulteress woman (John 7.53-8.11)
 - Johannine Comma (I John 5.7 reflected in the KJV/NKJV)

Principles of Textual Criticism

- The shorter reading is preferred over a longer reading
- The more difficult reading is preferred over the easier reading
- The earlier manuscript date is preferred over a later date (generally)
- The reading that fits best with the context, vocabulary, and writing style of the book
- The tradition or family the manuscript comes from. Does it come from a reliable line of texts or unreliable?