

EVIDENCE FOR THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Can we be sure the text of the Bible we have today is what was actually revealed by inspiration? Is it possible to be certain that modern Bibles accurately reflect the ancient manuscripts?

I) Ancient Writing

- A) Discoveries made in recent times show that writing was a well-established art in many countries long before the beginnings of the Hebrew nation in Palestine
 - 1) Egypt (hieroglyphics - form of picture-writing)
 - 2) Mesopotamia (ca. 3000 BC)
 - 3) Alphabet developed about 1750 BC
- B) Writing materials
 - 1) Stone, clay, wood and wax, metal, ostraca
 - 2) Papyrus
 - 3) Parchment (leather)
- C) The Codex
 - 1) The roll form of book (scroll) eventually gave way to the *codex*
 - 2) Term for Roman writing tablet, and a book with leaves
 - 3) Sheets placed together, folded in the middle and stitched, then opened in separate pages – convenient and easy to read, refer to, and carry around
 - 4) Could be written on both sides of the pages; several books bound together into one
 - 5) Christians were the first to make extensive use of the codex
 - a) Earliest extant texts of the New Testament are in a codex; came into universal use by the second century AD

II) Early Development of Scripture

- A) Bible has reached its present stature through gradual stages of growth
- B) *Old Testament*
 - 1) God spoke orally at first, but a time came to record God's word in writing
 - 2) Moses is the first person mentioned in Bible as writing anything (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; Num. 33:2); author of first five books (2 Kgs. 14:6; Mk. 12:26; Jn. 5:46)
 - 3) Joshua (Josh. 24:26)
 - 4) Other men of God (1 Sam. 10:25; Jer. 36:2); used by others (Dan. 9:2; Neh. 8:1)
 - 5) All books written and collected by about 400 BC
- C) *New Testament*
 - 1) Books written in a shorter period of time (AD 50-100)
 - 2) Letters penned by inspired men and addressed to churches and individuals – were looked upon as authoritative writings (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16)
 - 3) Written accounts of the life of Jesus and history of the early church were written
 - 4) Book of Revelation brings collection of New Testament books to a climax
- D) Languages of the Bible
 - 1) *Hebrew*
 - a) Language of almost all of the books of the Old Testament
 - b) From Semitic family of languages (Arabic, Akkadian, Aramaic)
 - c) Written from right to left and without vowels
 - 2) *Aramaic*
 - a) Kindred to Hebrew and common tongue of Palestine after the exile (ca. 500 BC)

- b) Major portions of Aramaic text – Daniel 2:4b-7:28 and Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26
- c) Some Aramaic expressions in New Testament (Mk. 5:41; 7:34; 15:34)
- 3) *Greek*
 - a) Language of the books of the New Testament – “Koine” (common) Greek
 - b) Universal language throughout the Mediterranean world
 - c) Modern knowledge of language comes from ancient Greek papyri

III) New Testament Manuscripts

- A) “Manuscript” is a term restricted to documents of the original tongues
 - 1) A New Testament “manuscript” is a Greek manuscript
- B) Determining the age of a manuscript
 - 1) Some manuscripts were dated with the exact day and year they were copied
 - 2) Undated manuscripts are dated by examining the size of the letters and whether the words are together or separated, examining the number of columns and their appearance, and noting any punctuation, paragraph divisions, or letter forms
- C) Two major types of manuscripts
 - 1) *Uncials* – written in capital letters; earliest and most important
 - 2) *Cursives* [*minuscules*] – written in smaller and more cursivelike handwriting; from the ninth century and later, and therefore of lesser value
- D) Number of manuscripts
 - 1) Vast – more than 5,300 in all; only a few contain close to a complete New Testament
 - 2) New Testament is the best-attested book from the ancient world
 - 3) Vast majority are minuscules (9th-16th century); those of uncial script number about 650
- E) The most important New Testament manuscripts
 - 1) *The Vatican Manuscript*
 - a) Fourth century manuscript – most important witness on text of New Testament
 - b) Located in the Vatican Library in Rome since 1481
 - c) Account of its discovery unknown; was not available for all to study until a photographic facsimile was made in 1889-1890
 - d) Contains *almost* all of the Old and New Testaments in Greek; bound in book form (a codex) and has 759 leaves of the finest vellum
 - e) Believed to be the earliest of the great uncials and considered as the most exact copy of New Testament known
 - 2) *The Sinaitic Manuscript*
 - a) Of almost equal important to the Vatican manuscript
 - b) Discovered by Constantin Tischendorf in 1844 and 1859 at St. Catherine’s Monastery on the traditional Mount Sinai
 - c) Located in the British Library since 1933
 - d) Fourth century manuscript – oldest *complete* manuscript of the New Testament
 - 3) *The Alexandrian Manuscript*
 - a) Dated to the fifth century AD; known to have been kept in Alexandria for several centuries; probably brought from Alexandria to Constantinople in 1621 and was presented as a gift to King Charles I of England in 1627
 - b) Located in the British Library; has 773 leaves, with some missing from the Old Testament, and several from the New Testament
 - c) Was the first of the great uncials to come to light, and it caused much excitement, ushering in a new era of textual investigation

4) *The Codex of Ephraem*

- a) A *palimpsest* manuscript – the original writing on a parchment is washed or scraped off, then the parchment is written on again (mainly because of a shortage of writing material)
 - 1) Also called a rescript [rewritten] codex; often the old writing is imperfectly rubbed out, so that the old text can be seen underneath the new text
 - 2) Various means are used to bring out the older layer of writing [chemicals, ultraviolet photography, computer-enhanced imaging]
- b) Originally a manuscript of both Old and New Testaments – many leaves were lost
- c) In the twelfth century, someone took the remaining leaves and copied thirty-eight sermons of Ephraem of Syria over the Biblical text (name of manuscript taken from this top layer of writing)
- d) Dates back to the fifth century; contains material from nearly every New Testament book, but the quality of its text does not measure up to earlier uncials
- e) Located in Paris since the 1500's; Tischendorf deciphered the Biblical text in 1840's

5) *The Codex Bezae*

- a) Earliest example of bilingual manuscript (written in two languages – Greek and Latin)
- b) Owned for twenty years by Protestant reformer, Theodore Beza; he presented it to the library at Cambridge University in 1581
- c) Contains (with gaps) the Four Gospels, Acts, and a fragment of 3 John in Latin
- d) It is the most curious of the early manuscripts because of its distinctive readings; regarded with suspicion by many; little used by King James Version translators
- e) One of the chief representatives of the “Western” text type, which is characterized by paraphrase, textual expansions, and striking omissions
- f) Dates back to about the fifth century; still a valuable witness to the Biblical text when studied in comparison to the other early manuscripts

6) *Codex Claromontanus*

- a) Sixth-century manuscript of Paul's letters (including Hebrews)
- b) Written in both Greek and Latin

7) *Codex Laudianus*

- a) Dated at the end of the sixth century; written in Greek and Latin; contains book of Acts
- b) Earliest manuscript to include eunuch's confession in Acts 8:37

8) *Codex Regius*

- a) Eight-century codex of the Gospels

9) *Freer Washington Manuscripts*

- a) Codex I – collection of Paul's letters; dated to fifth century; in Smithsonian Institute
- b) Codex W – copy of Four Gospels; dated to fourth or fifth century

10) Minuscule and Lectionary manuscripts

- a) Minuscules date from the ninth century; at present there are about 2,800
- b) “Lection” – a selected passage of Scripture designed to be read in public worship
 - 1) Manuscript arranged in sections; most of Gospels, but some are of Acts and Epistles
 - 3) Studies show that they were copied a little more carefully than ordinary manuscripts
 - 4) More than 2,200 lectionaries have been enumerated

11) New Testament Papyri

- 1) Nearly one hundred pieces known; many dated from 2nd - early 4th centuries
- 2) Oldest is John Rylands Fragment of John 18:31-33, 37-38 → AD 125-135

IV) The New Testament Text

- A) Textual criticism - seeks to recover the exact words of the author's original composition
- B) Authorities used for investigating the text
 - 1) *Manuscripts*
 - a) First and primary source of information
 - 2) *Versions*
 - a) Translations into different languages; an independent line of witness
 - 3) *Early Christian writers*
 - a) "Church Fathers" who lived near end of 1st – 2nd century; quoted frequently from the New Testament; their copies would have been older than our manuscripts today
- B) Mistakes of Copyists
 - 1) Unintentional errors
 - a) Mistakes of the hand, eye, and ear – frequently occur but easy to identify
 - 1) Mistake one word for another; confuse words of similar sound
 - 2) Romans 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 John 1:4; Revelation 1:5
 - b) Errors of omission and addition
 - 1) Similar words at a corresponding point in two lines of close proximity
 - 2) Transcribe a word twice in succession; repeat or omit a letter
 - c) Scribal marginal notes
 - 1) Could get incorporated into the main body of text
 - 2) Intentional errors
 - a) Intention of scribe may have been good in order to "correct" the text – an improperly spelled word, make two parallel passages agree, etc.
 - b) John 7:39; Acts 2:47; Matthew 11:19 & Luke 7:25
 - 3) These mistakes are called *variants* – variations between copies of the text
 - a) Number of variations has been counted as high as 200,000 – high number because *all* the variations in *all* the manuscripts are counted
 - 4) Consequences of Variations
 - a) *Trivial variations* [minute differences – the majority of variants]
 - 1) Words spelled slightly differently over a period of years as Greek language changed
 - 2) Proper names (Jn. 1:28; 5:2); order of words (Matt. 1:18)
 - b) *Substantial variations* [usually involve a whole verse or several verses]
 - 1) *John 7:53-8:11* – Story of the adulterous woman
 - 2) *Acts 8:37* – Eunuch's confession
 - 3) *1 John 5:7* – Three that bear witness: Father, Word, Holy Spirit
 - 4) *Mark 16:9-20* – ending of the Gospel of Mark (seriously debated over the years)
 - c) "The variant readings in the manuscripts are not of such a nature that they threaten to overthrow our faith. Except for a few instances, we have an unquestioned text; and even then not one principle of faith or command of the Lord is involved" (Lightfoot, p. 103).
 - d) "If comparative trivialities, such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like, are set aside, the words in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament" (Westcott and Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 1911, p. 565)
 - e) "Only 400 or so of the 150,000 variants materially affect the sense, and of these perhaps 50 are of real significance. But no essential teaching of the New Testament is greatly affected by them" (Ira M. Price, *The Ancestry of Our English Bible*, 1956, p. 222).

C) Modern Greek Text of the New Testament

- 1) The first attempt to put together a “restored” Greek text to be used for translation was by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1516); Stephanus produced several editions (1546-51)
 - a) These efforts produced the text that was the basis of the English translation by the King James Version scholars (1611); became known in 1633 as the “*the text now received by all*” (“Textus Receptus” or “Received Text”)
- 2) By the latter half of the nineteenth century, significant manuscript discoveries improved our knowledge of the original text of the New Testament, and an improved Greek text was demanded
 - a) Westcott and Hort - *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (1881)
 - b) Nestle and United Bible Society texts are the accepted Greek texts today

V) Old Testament Manuscripts

A) *The Aleppo Codex* (tenth century AD)

- 1) First in rank among Hebrew manuscripts; unfortunately, large sections were destroyed in Arab riots in 1947 in Aleppo, Syria; presently located in Jerusalem

B) *Leningrad Codex* (AD 1010)

- 1) Oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible; now in St. Petersburg, Russia

C) *Cairo Codex* (AD 895)

D) *Leningrad Codex of the Prophets* (AD 916)

E) *British Library Codex of the Pentateuch* (tenth century AD)

F) Why are copies of Hebrew Bible late in comparison to New Testament materials?

- 1) Jews regarded a new copy as good, or better, than older copy
- 2) Older manuscripts were hidden and buried to prevent the misuse of sacred material

G) Scribes were extremely careful in their work – they tried to eliminate all scribal slips

- 1) Duplication was done exactly, even when uncertain about a letter or word
- 2) Counted verses, words, and letters of each book; calculated middle letters, words, and verses of sections of Hebrew Bible

H) Reflected long-standing traditions (*Massorah*) of scribes

- 1) Became known as the *Massorettes* ; go back to AD 500, and succeeded earlier scribes
- 2) The Old Testament text they handed down is known as “Massoretic Text”

I) Present Status of Old Testament Text

- 1) A rather wide separation of centuries exist between the original Old Testament autographs and our manuscripts today
- 2) Confidence in the text today is supported by the extreme care taken by Jewish scribes as they made copies of the Old Testament text
- 3) Such strict regulations guarantee *accurate transmission* of the Old Testament text
- 4) The 200 pieces of Biblical texts found at Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) pushed the date of manuscripts back 1200 years and demonstrated that the Old Testament text has been well preserved and accurately handed down to us

“The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries” (Sir Frederic Kenyon, quoted in Lightfoot, p. 126).

Sources and Additional Reading:

- Neal R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, (Third ed.) 2003
 Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nix, *From God to Us*, 1974
 Philip Wesley Comfort, ed., *The Origin of the Bible*, 1992
 F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, (Rev. ed) 1984

IMPORTANT NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

9 of the 650 total
uncial manuscripts

