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Transmission – from “How We Got the Bible”

By: Sid Litke, Th.M – March 18th, 2008

Introduction

The term “transmission” describes the ancient process of copying Hebrew and Greek manuscripts to preserve them for future generation and to distribute them for greater use. Since there were no copy machines, the texts had to be copied by hand. In this way they were “transmitted.”

I. Writing Materials

A. The original writings of scripture were done on a variety of materials.

- Stone – Exodus 24:12; Deuteronomy 5:22; Joshua 8:31,32
- Papyrus (made by pressing and gluing two layers of split papyrus reeds to form a sheet) – perhaps mentioned in 2 John 12 (“paper”) and Revelation 5:1 (“scroll/book”)
- Animal skins (vellum – calf or antelope, parchment – sheep or goat, leather – cow or bull) – 2 Timothy 4:13 mentions parchment.

B. To inscribe on these materials a variety of tools were used, including stylus, chisel, pen and ink.

II. The copying process of the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew)

A. Early copying

At first, during the Old Testament era, the only copies of the scriptures were kept at the temple (At first only the 1st 5 books – the Law). For many years, even the copies of the Law were lost, until they were found during Josiah’s reign (2 Kings 22:8-23:3). As the books of history (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, etc.), the books of poetry (Job, Psalms, etc.) and the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) were written and gathered together, scribes began to copy the scriptures for use in various synagogues and for private purchase and study.

B. The Masoretes

The Masoretic scribes (A.D. 500-1000) in charge of the Old Testament manuscript copying used a very meticulous system of transcription and had a deep reverence for the text. God used their almost obsessive respect for the text to preserve the text’s accuracy. They had specific rules on the type of ink and the quality and size of parchment sheets. No individual letter could be written down without having looked back at the copy in front of them. The scribe could not write God’s name with a newly dipped pen (lest it

blotch) and even if the king should address him, while writing God's name, he should take no notice of him. They were so meticulous that they counted all the paragraphs, words and even letters, so they could know by counting, if they had done it perfectly. They knew the middle letter of each book so they could count back and see if they had missed anything.

C. Existing Old Testament manuscripts

1. Masoretic manuscripts

We actually have very few complete or nearly complete Old Testament manuscripts existing today. There are 4 or 5 really significant Masoretic manuscripts that are the basis of the best Hebrew Bible available today. These copies were made between about A.D. 900 and A.D. 1000 by the Masoretes.

2. The Septuagint evidence

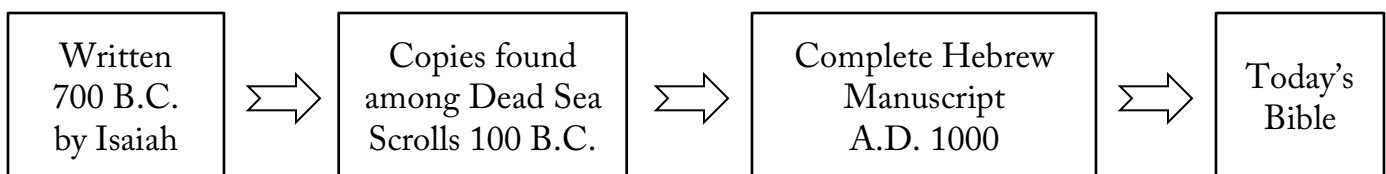
The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language which was made in the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. There are about 300 existing copies of the Septuagint. This was the common Hebrew Bible used and quoted by Jesus and the apostles (who lived in a Greek culture, of course).

Although written in Greek, scholars can generally determine what Hebrew words were being translated in the Septuagint. It provides evidence that the Hebrew Bibles were copied extremely well for all the years between the Septuagint translation (2nd/3rd century B.C.) and our best existing Hebrew copies (A.D. 900-1000).

D. The Dead Sea Scrolls

Since the oldest complete copy of a Hebrew Old Testament in existence is dated about A.D. 1000, that's a long time after the originals were written (1450-400 B.C.). But there are portions that date back farther. Most significant are the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in caves in 1947 by an Arabian shepherd boy. These well-preserved Hebrew text fragments date back to 100 B.C. They include many Bible portions, including some complete books. Their value to the credibility of our Bible is that amazingly, there is virtual agreement between these Hebrew texts and the ones dated 1,100 years later! This proves how accurately the scribes copied for all those years.

Example of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Through all the years of copying, the text of Isaiah remained virtually identical.



The evidence shows that our Old Testaments today are extremely accurate reflections of the original manuscripts.

III. The copying process of the New Testament (originally written in Greek)

A. The types of Greek manuscripts

The New Testament books were originally written in papyrus sheets (plant material – see above) or parchment (animal skin – see above). Writing at that time was done all in capital letters with no punctuation or division between words (uncial). So all the copies from the 1st to about the 6th century A.D. were done that way. (This form is sometimes responsible for confusion by Greek textual scholars today who need to determine where one word stops and the next begins.) By the 7th or 8th centuries, Greek manuscripts were put into small letters with punctuation, word, and paragraph divisions (miniscule). Both types of ancient manuscripts exist today.

B. The reliability of Greek manuscripts

The reliability of the New Testament Greek texts is even more certain than the Old Testament texts. The New Testament was written between A.D. 45 – A.D. 90. Some fragments of Greek texts exist that date back to A.D. 120 and A.D. 150. That's only 35-100 years after the originals that Paul, John, Luke and others wrote! Another big help to Greek textual scholars is the fact that there are 4,000-5,000 New Testament Greek manuscripts (partial or complete) existing. By comparing these many copies, scholars can weed out many possible copying mistakes.

So there are two factors confirming that the Greek texts, available to scholars today, are very accurate reflections of the original writing. 1) We have copies dated closely to the time of the original writing. 2) We have lots of copies.

The following chart compares the New Testament manuscript evidence with other Greek literature (considered accurate by historians) from the same era.

<u>Manuscript</u>	<u>Date of Oldest Manuscript Existing</u>	<u>Copies</u>
Plato	1,200 years later	7
Caesar	900 years later	10
Herodotus	1,300 years later	8
Aristotle	1,400 years later	5
New Testament	Only 35-100 years later	4,000-50000

Once again we see that God has sovereignly preserved His word in virtually accurate form. We can be confident that the Greek texts, used by scholars making modern

translations are very accurate.

C. Note on some differences in English translations.

Sometimes as we compare two translations of the New Testament, we find a substantial difference, such as verses or phrases being omitted (John 5:3-4; 7:53-8:11; Mark 16:9-20; 1 John 3:7,8, etc.). Some modern Bibles (NIV) also footnote a lot of smaller details (words, etc.) that differ in some manuscripts.

The debate centers on two theories about which Greek manuscripts are the best. One theory (Critical text view) is that the oldest manuscripts are the most accurate. The other theory (Majority text view) is that the type of manuscripts that survived in greatest numbers are the most accurate (even if they are less ancient). Most modern translations are based on the Critical textual theory (NIV, NASV, RSV, etc.). The King James and the New King James Versions are based on the Majority textual theory.

This explains why occasionally a significant disagreement is found in the New Testament between the KJV and Modern Translations (Example: Are Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 really part of the inspired text of the New Testament – see notes in the New International Version for the Critical Text View). This writer prefers the Majority text theory behind the KJV, although most of the modern versions may still be preferred by most English readers for overall accuracy and readability.

Regardless, the discrepancies are usually not major. Scholars and interpreters will continue to debate the theories, but no major doctrines or principles are affected by the discrepancies between Greek text and the resultant English versions of the Bible.

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