Has the Bible Been Preserved Accurately?

Some Bible critics argue that we should disregard the Bible because it’s impossible that our modern versions could match the original texts. But how does this argument stand up to scrutiny?

by Ken Graham

Has the Bible been preserved accurately? Are the Scriptures that we read today the same as the ones originally written so long ago? Has the Bible been changed, or does it constitute the same inspired words written by the prophets and the apostles?

Of course, there are language differences because the Bible was not originally written in English. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with a few parts in Aramaic, and the New Testament was penned in Greek.

The Bible wasn’t translated into English until the 14th century. But did it change over the many centuries until then?

These are important questions because if it can be shown that the Bible we have today is different from the one God originally inspired, why should we pay attention to it? If we can’t trust that it has been accurately translated and preserved, there is little reason to trust that it is indeed God’s Word. So it’s very important that we see what the historical record shows. How can we know?

Has the Old Testament been accurately preserved?

The Hebrew Bible, what today is called the Old Testament, is far older than the New Testament—having been written between approximately 1446 and 400 B.C., some 25 to 35 centuries ago. Is the version we have today a faithful and accurate rendition of the original?

Let’s take a look at how it was preserved for us.

The apostle Paul wrote that the oracles of God were committed to the Jewish people (Romans 3:2). For centuries they carefully and meticulously preserved their sacred writings. The manuscripts of the Bible that we have today were written by hand long ago, well before the invention of the printing press. The Jewish scribes who made the copies of the Old Testament Scriptures from generation to generation were scrupulously cautious about their copying procedures.

This meticulous care was perpetuated by the Masoretes, a special group of Jewish scribes who were entrusted with making copies of the Hebrew Bible from about A.D. 500 to 900. Their version of the Old Testament, widely considered the most authoritative, came to be known as the Masoretic Text.

Before and during this time, trained copyists followed various meticulous and stringent requirements for making scrolls of their holy books. The Masoretes required that all manuscripts have various word numbering systems. As an example of one test they used, when a new copy was made, they counted the number of words in it. If the copy didn’t have the proper count, the manuscript was unusable and buried.

Such steps ensured that not a single word could be added to or left out of the Holy Scriptures. Through such steps the scrolls that formed the Hebrew Bible were copied meticulously, carefully and accurately, century after century.

What about the books of the Old Testament?

About A.D. 90 Jewish elders meeting in the Council at Jamnia, in Judea near the Mediterranean coast, affirmed that the canon—the set of writings acknowledged as being divinely inspired—of the Jewish Bible was complete and authoritative.

While there are some differences in organization—the Jewish Bible combines the text into 22 books while our modern Bibles divide the Old Testament into 39—the content is nonetheless the same. The differences are due to the fact that books like Joshua and Judges were written on one scroll, thus making them one book by Jewish count while they appear as separate books in our modern Bibles. Similarly, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings all made up one book in Jewish reckoning, as did 1 and 2 Chronicles, though all these were divided into multiple books in our English translations.

The Jewish Council at Jamnia rejected other questionable books, known as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, as inspired or authoritative. So they are not part of this count or the accepted Hebrew canon. Thus these books are left out of most modern Bibles.

Through the centuries the Jewish people were very careful to preserve the Old

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What do we know from the field of textual criticism?

“Textual criticism” is the field of study in which experts compare the various manuscripts in existence to one another, seeking to come as close as possible to what the original author wrote. The original manuscripts are called “autographs,” literally “self writings.” Today, with the passage of so much time, no autographs—original copies—exist of any of the Old or New Testament books.

Over the centuries minor differences (called variants) often make their way into successive copies of handwritten documents, even with the greatest of care of the scribes involved. Thus, the field of study called textual criticism exists to try to identify these variations and determine what the original texts said.

After 1455 and Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the first movable metal type printing press, the Bible could be printed over and over again with predictable accuracy, so variants no longer were a concern. However, before that time manuscripts still had variants. Thus the period before 1455 is where textual criticism comes into play.

Because of the strict requirements and few locations where the Old Testament was copied, few variants or versions of the Old Testament ever came into existence. When the Dead Sea Scrolls (primarily portions of the Old Testament dating mostly from the first century B.C.) were discovered in 1947, many people were initially concerned that they would show marked differences with the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. Because the Dead Sea Scrolls were a thousand years older than the oldest and most reliable Masoretic Text we have today (the Leningrad Codex, dating to A.D. 1008), scholars thought they might find drastic differences over that long passage of time. But did they?

After years of study, they found that the Dead Sea Scrolls they examined have only a relatively few minor, insignificant differences from today’s Masoretic Text of the Old Testament.

“These oldest-known Biblical texts have one absolutely crucial feature,” explains historian Ian Wilson. “Although . . . a thousand years older than the texts previously available in Hebrew, they show just how faithful the texts of our present Bibles are to those from two thousand years ago and how little they have changed over the centuries. Two Isaiah scrolls, for instance, contain the Isaiah text almost exactly as it is in our present-day Bibles . . .”

“Although there are, as we might expect, some minor differences, these are mostly the interchange of a word or the addition or absence of a particular phrase. For example, whereas in present-day Bibles Isaiah 1:15 ends, “Your hands are covered in blood,” one
of the Dead Sea pair adds, "and your fingers with crime." Where Isaiah 2:3 of our present-day Bibles reads, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of [the LORD], to the house of the God of Jacob", the Dead Sea Scroll version omits, "to the mountain of [the LORD]."

". . . The New Testament documents have more manuscripts, earlier manuscripts, and more abundantly supported manuscripts than the best ten pieces of classical literature combined . . ."
In the ancient world, copies of the New Testament books were made in several major locations. The manuscripts originating in these locations are grouped in what are called families of texts. Manuscripts from these locations generally have variations common to other texts from the same location.

Textual critics hold different opinions about how many families of texts there are of the New Testament. Some will say there are three major families; others might argue there are four or five.

The three major locations and families are the Western (mostly Latin) texts from Italy and the West, the texts from around Asia Minor in the east (Constantinople/Byzantium in what is now Turkey), and those from Egypt, particularly Alexandria.

Some scholars say that Syriac, or texts from western Mesopotamia, constitute a fourth family. Others declare that the Caesarean versions, those originating around Palestine, might be a fifth family.

Because of geographic isolation, through the centuries each of these families tended to “inbreed” or become unique to itself producing identifiable variations.

Today textual critics are divided on which of the thousands of manuscripts and papyri coming from these areas are most accurate. For most, the arguments boil down to two areas—the Alexandrian (Egyptian) Greek and the Byzantine Greek texts. When we compare the manuscripts from each we find a number of variants between these families. So there was some failure to copy one or the other accurately. The question is, which is more accurate and which is less accurate?

Most scholars today think that the texts from Alexandria, because they are older, are more accurate or closer to the originals. The oldest Alexandrian manuscripts date from around the fourth century after Christ while the oldest Byzantine manuscripts come from around the seventh century. However, does older necessarily equate to better? There are several factors to consider.

First, we must consider that there are fewer than 45 texts from Alexandria, compared with around 5,000 of the Byzantine manuscripts. Thus the Alexandrian texts appear to be a tiny minority.

Second, Alexandria was a major center of gnosticism, a religious/philosophical movement that corrupted early Christianity. When we look at the variants in the Alexandrian texts, we find that their gnostic leanings tend to portray Jesus Christ as neither divine nor having come in the flesh as a physical human being.

A third area to consider is that the Byzantine scribes were known to be reputable in their faithfulness in the copying process. Many more points could be argued, but English translations based on the Byzantine texts of the New Testament appear to be more accurate. (For more information, request or download our reprint article “Which Bible Translation Should I Use?”)

For your peace of mind, however, the numbers of variants of any real significance between the Alexandrian texts and the Byzantine texts are few. We could sum up the differences by saying that 99.5 percent of the New Testament is the same no matter which version you have or use. The remaining half a percent would amount to about 20,000 variants. Of these, the overwhelming majority are minor scribal errors such as differences in spelling.

Of some 2,500 real differences, only about 300 involve any substantial difference in meaning. These variants involve less than one tenth of one percent of the text of the New Testament. The numbers of variants that actually affect the meaning—not just spelling—of the text are minuscule.