

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

The Bible wasn't translated into English until the late 1300s. **Did the Bible change** over the many centuries up until then?

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

Testament as we have it today. The majority of the manuscripts that we have today of the Old Testament are virtually identical to the copies made by the Masoretes, with very little difference between them.

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

How Did We Get the Bible?

How was the Bible actually put together? How do we know that the Bible contains the books that it should have? These are important questions, and many books have been written to address them.

These questions concern the *canon*—the group or list of books that are considered to be inspired by God. The word *canon* is originally from a Semitic word, *qaneh* in Hebrew. It meant “reed” or “stalk,” which is how it is used in Job 40:21 and 1 Kings 14:15. From this it conveys a secondary meaning of something with which to measure, a standard or benchmark.

The word then found its way into Greek, where it took the form *kanon*. And through Greek and into the Latin *canna*, it comes to us in the English form of *canon*—not to be confused, of course, with the large, heavy military gun known as a *cannon* (a word which also derives from the root meaning “reed” because it is a tube).

The dictionary states that other meanings of *canon* include regulations, principles, rules or standards of judgment. These bring us back to the ancient meaning of a measure, standard or benchmark—in this case the issue of which writings meet the standard or benchmark of being considered part of the inspired, hand-recorded Word of God.

The word *Bible* comes to us again through Latin from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning “books.” It contains the *books* (originally written on scrolls) that are acknowledged or understood to be the canonical—divinely inspired—books of God. One might say, accurately, that they are the *standard* by which every human being should live.

As the apostle Paul wrote to his fellow minister Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15-17: “From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

“Holy Scriptures” in verse 15 means “sacred writings”—words that were divinely inspired by God. Verse 16 says literally in Greek that “all Scripture is *God-breathed* . . .” [NIV, emphasis added throughout]. And indeed we find the Bible to truly be the breath of God for human beings in whom He placed the breath of life.

The Bible is a manual intended by God to show human beings two things: It shows us how to live, and it is a guide to God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.

What makes a book inspired or canonical?

In the book *The Origin of the Bible*, edited by Philip Comfort, contributor R.T. Beckwith writes: “What qualifies a book for a place in the canon of the Old Testament or New Testament is not just that it is ancient, informative and helpful, and has long been read and valued by God’s people, but that it has God’s authority for what it says. God spoke through its human author to teach his people what to believe and how to behave.

“It is not just a record of revelation, but the permanent written form of revelation. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is ‘inspired,’ and it makes the books of the Bible in this respect different from all other books” (1992, p. 52).

Three other comments in the same book, by Milton Fisher, show how the Church came to recognize the canon of the New Testament:

- “The church’s concept of canon, derived first of all from the reverence given the Old Testament Scriptures, rested in the conviction that the apostles were uniquely authorized to speak in the name of the One who possessed all authority—the Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 76).
- “Apostolic speaking on behalf of Christ was recognized in the church, whether in personal utterance or in written form” (p. 77).
- “This is what is really meant by canonization—recognition of the divinely authenticated word” (p. 77).

The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible

The books of the Old and New Testament canon were written and canonized over some 1,600 years, beginning in the 15th century B.C. with the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and ending near the end of the first century after Christ with the book of Revelation. No historian left a full account of the individual steps in this long process. However, we do have tidbits of information here and there along the road that give us some knowledge about what took place.

Over the thousand years during which it was written, the Old Testament underwent at least five periods of canonization. Ezra, a priest and scribe, apparently was the one responsible for the final collection and arrangement of the books of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) around 450 B.C. With his canonization, the Old Testament was essentially complete. In A.D. 90 Jewish elders and

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

this does not mean the Dead Sea Scrolls were correct and the Masoretic Text *incorrect*. We should keep in mind that the Dead Sea Scrolls were not necessarily transcribed with the same meticulous preservation prac-

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omits, ‘to the mountain of [the LORD]’.

“Such discrepancies are trifling, and there can be no doubt that the Biblical books someone stored away so carefully at Qumran two thousand years ago were as close to those we know in our present Hebrew and Old Testament Bibles as makes no difference” (*The Bible Is History*, 1999, p. 205).

Where there are differences, however,

tices as those used by the main scribes of the time. Nonetheless, the remarkable discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is astounding confirmation that the Old Testament has indeed been accurately preserved for us today.

What about the New Testament?

Compared to the scarcity of ancient Old Testament manuscripts, the New Testament is a different story. Today literally thousands

of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist, each of varying antiquity and from various locations. But, like the Old Testament, no autographs of the New Testament books exist today either.

How reliable are these manuscripts, and how do they compare to other works from this general time period?

“. . . The New Testament documents have more manuscripts, earlier manuscripts, and more abundantly supported manuscripts than the best ten pieces of classical literature *combined* . . . At last count, there are nearly 5,700 hand-written Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. In addition, there are more than 9,000 manuscripts in other languages (e.g., Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Arabic). Some of these nearly 15,000 manuscripts are complete Bibles, others are books or pages, and a few are just fragments . . .

“The next closest work is the *Iliad* by Homer, with 643 manuscripts. Most other ancient works survive on fewer than a dozen manuscripts, yet few historians question

authorities met at the Council of Jamnia, where the canon of the Hebrew Bible was confirmed as authoritative and complete, as it had evidently been considered to be long before this.

Some six decades earlier, Jesus Christ Himself affirmed His acceptance of the three divisions of the Old Testament (Law, Prophets and Writings) as canonical. Notice His statement in Luke 24:44: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in *the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms* concerning Me.” (The last section here is also known as the Writings, called “Psalms” after its first and largest book.)

The three-part organization of the Old Testament was commonly known and understood in Jesus’ day. The Christian churches have long since accepted the Old

The Bible is composed of several dozen books containing history, prophecy, poetry, laws, biographies and personal letters. How did these particular books become a part of the Bible?

Testament in this format as Scripture.

The New Testament

No one is absolutely certain about how the New Testament canon came together. We do know that in A.D. 397 the Synod of Carthage confirmed as canonical the 27 books of what is now our New Testament. But it really only recognized that these 27 books already had been in use and read in the churches for some three centuries.

There are two theories about how the canon of the New Testament came together. The one adhered to by most today says that it was a gradual process over nearly three centuries and that no one person was key in the process.

The second, lesser-known theory holds that the apostles Paul, Peter and John were the final canonizers of the New Testament, and that John, with help from other believers, was able to finish and distribute copies of the entire 27 books to the churches in Asia Minor and the Holy Land.

Neither theory has explicit proof, though both have some supporting evidence.

The latter view, which the publishers of *The Good News* consider to be correct, appears to be supported in several New Testament passages. One is 2 Peter 3:16, where the apostle Peter, writing to the early Church, commented that he considered the letters of Paul part of the “Scriptures.”

Peter was putting the writings of the apostle Paul on an equal footing with the Old Testament Scriptures. This would indicate that the apostles already considered some of the apostolic writings divinely inspired and deserving to be included in the canon of Holy Scripture.

Paul himself appears to have had a hand in the process of canonization of the New Testament, selecting which books and letters, particularly of his writings, were to be preserved for us.

In 2 Timothy 4:13, the last of Paul’s prison letters that remains from before his execution, he tells Timothy to “bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and *the books, especially the parchments.*”

This is a puzzling request, unless Paul was asking Timothy to bring books and letters from which he would select those that would be part of the canon. We know that some of his letters, such as the one to the church in Laodicea mentioned in Colossians 4:16, were *not* preserved—so obviously some selection process took place. Presumably those Paul chose were then passed off to other apostles, likely Peter and then John.

It seems most likely that the apostle John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20) and who outlived all the other apostles, under God’s inspiration made the final selections of the writings that would be included as Scripture in what we know as the New Testament.

In Revelation 22:18-19, in the final chapter of the final book of the Bible, John gives a warning that appears to indicate that the Bible was then complete, with nothing more to be added or taken away. “If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”

In A.D. 397 the Synod of Carthage accepted the 27 books that comprise our New Testament as canonical. But they were not the canonizers of these books. They had long since been distributed and were accepted and read in churches throughout the empire for some 300 years.

We can rest assured that the eternal God had a sure hand in ensuring His Word would survive for future generations and we have exactly the writings He chose to be preserved for us.

the historicity of the events those works describe . . .

“Not only does the New Testament enjoy abundant manuscript support, but it also has manuscripts that were written soon after the originals . . . The time gap between the original and the first surviving copy is still vastly shorter than anything else from the ancient world. The *Iliad* has the next shortest gap at about 500 years; most other ancient works are 1,000 years or more from the original. The New Testament gap is about 25 years and maybe less.

“. . . The early church fathers—men of the second and third centuries such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and others—quoted the New Testament so much (36,289 times, to be exact) that all but eleven verses of the

New Testament can be reconstructed just from their quotations . . . So we not only have thousands of manuscripts but thousands of quotations from those manuscripts” (Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, 2004, pp. 225-228).

Sir Frederic Kenyon, authority on ancient manuscripts, sums up the status of the New Testament this way: “It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient

authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world” (*Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, revised by A.W. Adams, 1958, p. 23).

Dealing with different translations

Critics may use textual differences and claims of errors to discredit the Bible. But the fact remains that God is ultimately responsible for His Word, and its accurate preservation and transmission over so many centuries is nothing short of miraculous.

However, God did choose to record and preserve His Word in the Hebrew and Greek languages. When the Hebrew and Greek are translated into English, no one English translation preserves the complete essence of God’s inspired thoughts. Regrettably, in moving from any language to another, something is always lost because not all words and concepts translate precisely.

Most people have found that they benefit from using several translations rather than relying on only one. And God has seen to it that we have several excellent English translations with which to obtain understanding, each with their own different strengths. We have found that the New King James Version usually best serves our publishing efforts in putting across the gospel message as clearly as possible.

God promises to guide, through His Holy Spirit, the true believer into understanding the essence of His Word (John 16:13). He also provides an educated, trained ministry to explain His Word clearly and accurately for the edification and instruction of those He has called (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-4). To this end *The Good News* magazine serves as a tool to help you better understand the Bible. We can be sure that the Word of God has been preserved accurately for us today. We must make sure to read it, study it, treasure it and put it into practice in our lives. **GN**

Why Are There Differences in Ancient New Testament Manuscripts?

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.

Recommended Reading

You can discover many proofs that the Bible is the accurate, inspired Word of God. To learn more, request or download your free copy of *Is the Bible True?* This booklet explores some of the proofs from science, history and archaeology that the Bible truly is God’s Word to humanity. To better understand the differences in Bible translations, request or download our free reprint article “Which Bible Translation Should I Use?”



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