

Finer Grounds

Can We Trust Our Bibles? (Part 2)

In our last study we looked at the internal proofs of Biblical inspiration. This week we will look specifically at the Old Testament texts. How can we know that what we have in the Old Testament is the inspired word of God?

Many people claim that the Bible can't be what it claims because they had no way to write so long ago; however, writing predated the Bible by hundreds of years.

- There are clay tablets of writing from Mesopotamia dating back to approximately 3,000 B.C.
- The first alphabet that we still have records from was formed in approximately 1750 B.C.
- The earliest writings of the Old Testament date around 1450 B.C., well after writing had been established.

That being said, there are still two primary problems with the integrity of the Old Testament Scriptures: we do not have any originals of the Old Testament texts, if they exist we have not found them yet, and the earliest complete manuscripts we have are from approximately 1000 AD. This means that there is a gap of approximately 2500 years between when the Old Testament was written, and the earliest complete copies that we have. This leads us with several questions:

- How do we overcome this gap?
- Did God leave us any evidence?

- What is an acceptable time standard for ancient manuscripts that will not affect the authenticity of the copies?
- How can we see that God, in his providence, preserved this text for us today?

Lucky for us, God did preserve his Holy Word for us, and we can prove this in three main ways. The Bible records for us that there were men who devoted themselves to the accurate transmission of the Biblical texts. These men were known as Scribes. The first mention we have of the scribes is in I Chronicles 2:55, although they are mentioned all through Scripture including the New Testament.

There were several groups of Scribes through which we can trace the transmission of our Old Testament texts:

- The Sopherim – Jewish scholars and custodians of the Old Testament text between 500-300 B.C. whose responsibility was to standardize and preserve the Scriptures.
- They were followed by the Zugoth (“Pairs” of textual scholars) – in 200 B.C. until the time of Christ. This was the timeframe during which the Septuagint (the primary text quoted by Christ) was created. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

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- *Tannaim* (“repeaters” or “teachers”) – Their work began in A.D. 200.
- *Amoriam* (“Sayers”) 200-500 AD – These are the scribes who completed the Midrash, the Tosefta, and the Talmud which later divided into the Mishnah and the Gemara.
- *The Masoretes* (traditions) in 500-1000 A.D. – These are the scribes that wrote down what we use for the basis of our Old Testament today – commonly called the, “Masoretic Text”

As the various groups copied the manuscripts, the manuscripts were broken into two groups: those for the synagogues and those for private use. The synagogue copies were considered sacred and the rules for copying the synagogue scrolls were absolutely meticulous.

Samuel Davidson recorded these rules:

- *A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals*
- *Prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew*
- *Must be fastened together with strings taken from a 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 48 nor more than 60 lines; and the breadth must consist of 30 letters.*
- *The whole copy must be first-lined; and if three words should be written without a line, it is worthless.*

- *The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any other color, and be prepared according to a definite recipe.*
- *An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least 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 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,*
- *was 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.*

These were the traditions of the scribes up until about 500 AD. When the Masoretes became the scribes, they added some of their own regulations to ensure the accuracy of their manuscripts:

- *If a letter was larger or smaller than others – they were carefully duplicated as they appeared.*

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- They numbered the verses, the words, and the letters of each book,
- They calculated the middle letter, the middle word, and the middle verse of the Pentateuch, of Psalms, and of the entire Hebrew Bible.
- This ensured that whenever a scribe was finished copying the text he could check to see if his work matched in all of these areas – if it did not- it was not a usable manuscript.

Another feat the Masoretes are known for is their development of a vowel system for the Old Testament text. The Hebrew language was originally only written in consonants – while Hebrew was still a commonly spoken language this was not a problem, but by the time of the Masoretes it was clear that Hebrew was dying as a spoken dialect. To ensure that the Hebrew text would continue to be understandable, the Masoretes devised a system of vowels.

Even with the addition of the vowels, the Masoretes did not change the text; they simply inserted the vowels above the original text so that the text itself was not altered.

In what ways did the meticulousness of these scribes help ensure the accuracy of our modern Old Testament?

What do you think of the reverence with which the Scribes approached the name of God? What lessons can we learn from this?

Taking all of this into consideration, what is the quality of the manuscripts that we currently have? Let's look at the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls date all the way back to 100 BC. This is significant because before their discovery, the best manuscripts we had were Masoretic texts from about 1000 AD.

The result of comparing our modern text with the Dead Sea Scrolls was astonishing. This discovery revealed a word-for-word identity in more than 95% of the manuscripts, and the 5% variation consisted mostly of slips of the pen and spelling.

I am sure that all of this is fascinating information, but what does it actually mean for us as far as the reliability of our Old Testament?

Due to the extreme diligence of the ancient scribes and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we have:

- the original text being penned in approximately 1450 B.C.
- the earliest manuscripts we have today being penned in approximately 1300 years later in 100 B.C.
- And the manuscripts most commonly used today penned another 1100 years later in 1000 A.D.

When these texts were compared, there was a 95% word for word accuracy when our modern copies were compared with those from 100 B.C. Considering the fact that we know that the scribes had the exact same

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practices that have proven to be so accurate as far back as 500 B.C., this means that the period of time in which we have no, “proof,” of accuracy shrinks to only 900 years.

It is not at all a stretch to imagine that the level of meticulousness that led to a word for word match over a span of 1100 years, would also have led to word for word accuracy for a span of only 900 years.

This may still seem like a large span of time, until we consider other universally accepted historical writings.

- Caesar’s Gallic Wars – written in 50-58 B.C. – the earliest copy we have of it (there are NO originals) was written about the 9th century which leaves a gap of 900 years.
- The histories and annals of Tacitus – written in 100 A.D. – the earliest copy we have of it is the 8th century which leaves a gap of 800 years
- The history of Thucydides – written about 46-400 B.C. – the earliest copy we have is from 900 A.D. – a gap of 1300 years.
- The history of Herodotus – written about 480-425 B.C. – the earliest copy we have is from 900 A.D. – a gap of 1300 years.

No scholars question the authenticity of these writings, yet there is significantly more proof of the authenticity of our Old Testament.

As far as historical documents go, there is actually very little time between the earlier manuscripts and the more modern. God’s providence is seen so clearly in the preservation of His holy Word. He has ensured that we have it, and now it is our job to ensure that we study it and learn from it.

Have you ever played the, “telephone,” game, where one person whispers something which then gets passed down the line? What does this simple game teach us about God’s providence in preserving His word for us with 95% accuracy over thousands of years?

How much time do you typically spend studying the Old Testament? If we are no longer bound by the Old law (Romans 7:4-6) why did God go to such great lengths to preserve it for us?

Considering the great lengths God Almighty has gone to in order to preserve our Old Testament text, do you believe that we give it the focus and attention it deserves?
