

Interpreting the Bible 6 – Bible Manuscripts & Translations

Introduction

- * Is the Bible in your lap *exactly* what the writers of Scripture actually wrote? Why or why not?

The Languages of Scripture

- * Old Testament: *Hebrew; small portions in Aramaic*
- * New Testament: *Greek*

The Texts of Scripture

- * **Autographs:** the original texts penned by the hands of the biblical writers
- * **Manuscripts:** copies of the original texts of Scripture
 - o *Robert L. Plummer:* "Because our modern culture is so accustomed to technologically advanced methods of communication, we sometimes exhibit suspicion toward more ancient methods of literature production. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christian scribes usually exercised great precision in the copying of biblical texts. Jewish scribes followed detailed systems for counting letters in manuscripts and checking for accidental variations. Likewise, Christian scribes showed great caution, often having multiple correctors read through their copies to check for errors. Inevitably, all hand-copied manuscripts have some variations, but striking accuracy is evidenced in most ancient copies of our Old and New Testaments."¹

The Reliability of Existing Manuscripts


- * **Old Testament:** *Dead Sea Scrolls*
 - Discovered in 1947 in the Qumran caves near the Dead Sea. About 25% of the DSS (210 scrolls out of 900) were copies of biblical books and texts. The DSS represent the oldest (earliest) significant copies of the Old Testament dating to 250 B.C.
 - The *scroll of Isaiah* was the most significant part of the DSS discovery, and is believed to have been copied directly from the prophet's original writing (700 B.C.)
 - The Isaiah scroll of the DSS is over 2000 years old, over 1000 years older than any previously existing copy, and is 95% identical to what we have today and the other 5% are mainly spelling variations that do not affect the meaning of the text.

¹ Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 48.

* **New Testament: Sheer manuscript volume**

- *Plummer*: “We have nearly six thousand ancient manuscripts or portions of manuscripts of the New Testament. The oldest extant fragment of the New Testament comes from about A.D 130. *No other ancient text comes even close to having this amount of early textual evidence.*”²
- *Textual Variants*: Sometimes, different Bible versions (translations) will include footnotes that say something like, “Some manuscripts . . .” (see screenshot below). These notes are provided by the translators to make you aware of important variants among the manuscripts.

³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus⁴ charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished

 ¹ Some manuscripts add verse 16: *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear* ² Greek goes out into the latrine. ³ Some manuscripts omit *and Sidon* ⁴ Greek he

Bible Versions (Translations)

- * *Types of Bible Versions*:
 1. Word-for-Word (more literal, but less readable)
 2. Thought-for-Thought (more readable, but less precise)
 3. Paraphrase (the most readable, but least accurate)
- * All versions make interpretive choices when translating because a true 1-to-1 translation from Hebrew & Greek to English is impossible. However, the fewer interpretive choices Bible translators make, the better, which means that “word-for-word” translations should generally be preferred.
- * See Bible translation chart handout

² Ibid., 50.