

How We Got Our Bible

Lesson 3: Preservation

by Kit Johnson
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I. Introduction

- A. Autographs: The original manuscripts of the biblical books
- B. Challenge: None of the autographs have been preserved.
- C. Doctrinal Significance
 - 1. “It must simply be maintained that the original documents have *primal or chief* authority, and that copies and translations have *derivative* authority from the original documents. That is, they derive their inspiration and authority from the original documents...In sum, copies and translations are authoritative insofar as they faithfully reflect the message of the original text. And, insofar as they do, they may be called the *Word of God*” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 1:97–98).
 - 2. “We believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament canon which, being inerrant in the original manuscripts is the sole authority on all matters of faith and practice. (2 Pet 1:21; 2 Tim 3:16-17)” (Life Point Baptist Church Constitution, Article III, Section 1).

II. Preservation of the Old Testament

- A. Meticulous Process
 - 1. “Early in the history of Israel, clans of professional copyists emerged to preserve the sacred writings of their people. Some of the descendants of Judah became ‘clans of scribes’ or ‘Sopherites’ (1 Chron 2:55). Over time, Jewish copyists developed detailed practices for copying and counting letters to keep every syllable of the text pure” (Jones, *How We Got the Bible*, p. 39).
 - 2. “Careful guidelines governed the copying of every Old Testament text. According to the Talmud...‘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 forty-eight or more than sixty lines; and, the breadth must consist of thirty letters;...An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate; no word or letter...must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him’” (Jones, p. 40).
- B. Masoretic Text
 - 1. Around A.D. 600 several families of Jewish scholars arose in Babylon, Palestine, and Tiberias that were dedicated to preserving the Hebrew Bible. We know them today as the Masoretes. They continued the tradition of meticulous copying.

- a. “The Masoretic scribes knew how many words and letters belonged in every book in their Bible. They even knew which word and what letter should stand at the exact center of every book” (Jones p. 39).
 - b. They rejected and destroyed any scroll that had more than 3 errors on a single page.
2. Until 1947, the oldest known Hebrew manuscripts were Masoretic texts from the 9th century A.D. The oldest complete manuscript of the OT was *Codex Leningradensis* from the early 11th century.
- C. Dead Sea Scrolls
- 1. As the story goes, a 16-year-old shepherd made the first discovery in 1947, while looking for a lost goat.
 - 2. The DSS were the work of the Essenes—a strict sect of Judaism that developed during the 400 silent years over controversy related to the temple.
 - 3. The most valuable scroll in the original discovery was a complete scroll of Isaiah from the 2nd century B.C. It was over 1,000 years older than any other extant manuscript!
 - 4. After the initial discovery, archaeologists discovered scrolls in 25 other caves. In all they discovered 930 fragmentary documents with 232 of them being biblical manuscripts. Every OT book was represented except Esther.
 - 5. The DSS are remarkably consistent with the MT. This discovery proved that the text of the OT has been well-preserved for millennia.
- D. Septuagint: The Septuagint serves as an important witness in modern textual criticism due to its ancient roots.

III. Preservation of the New Testament

A. Classification of Manuscripts

1. There are 5,916 catalogued NT manuscripts.

Papyri	140
Uncials	323
Minuscules	2,956
Lectionaries	<u>2,497</u>
Total	5,916

2. Papyri

- a. The papyri were written on papyrus. Papyrus is highly perishable; however, we have papyri fragments of every NT book, except 2 Timothy.
- b. The oldest extant papyri is P⁵². It is a fragment of the Gospel of John that dates to A.D. 125–150. P⁴⁵ (ca. A.D. 250) includes large sections of the Gospels and demonstrates that they were collected early. P⁴⁶ (ca. A.D. 225) is a portion of a manuscript that originally contained Paul’s epistles, excluding the Pastorals and maybe Philemon. It included Hebrews.

3. Uncials
 - a. The uncials were recorded on vellum (i.e., parchment). This writing material was made from animal skins. It was more durable than papyri, and the sheets could be larger.
 - b. Codex Sinaiticus (ca. A.D. 350) is the oldest extant complete copy of the NT. Codex Vaticanus (ca. A.D. 325) is a near complete copy of the NT and also includes some OT apocryphal books. Codex Alexandrinus (ca. A.D. 400) is a near complete copy of the NT, though portions of the Gospels and Paul's letters have not survived.
 4. Minuscules: Miniscule is a lower-case cursive script that allowed for quicker copying. It was first used for NT manuscripts at the beginning of the 9th century. Early minuscules were recorded on parchment, and later ones were recorded on paper.
 5. "Lectionaries are manuscripts in which the Scriptures are written, not in ordinary sequence, but in sections arranged in units for reading in church services. These are written on parchment (and later on paper) beginning in the 6th century and continuing through the age of printing" (Combs).
 6. Ancient Translations: "All told, there are between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand handwritten copies of the New Testament in various languages" (Wallace, "The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts," in *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning*, pp. 112–113).
 7. Ancient Quotations: "To date, over a million quotations from the New Testament by the church fathers have been catalogued" (Wallace, p. 113).
- B. Variations among the Manuscripts: Among all the NT manuscripts we possess, there are hundreds of thousands of variants. How confident can we be that our Bibles are an authentic record of the autographs?
1. The NT is far and away that best preserved ancient text in the world. For example, we only possess 210 copies of Plato's works, and the oldest copy dates to A.D. 895, more than 1,200 years after Plato wrote them.
 - "The wealth of material that is available for determining the wording of the original New Testament is staggering: more than fifty-seven hundred Greek New Testament manuscripts, as many as twenty thousand versions, and more than one million quotations by patristic writers. In comparison with the average ancient Greek author, the New Testament copies are well over a thousand times more plentiful. If the average-sized manuscript were two and one-half inches thick, all the copies of the works of an average Greek author would stack up for feet high, while the copies of the New Testament would stack up to over a mile high! This is indeed an embarrassment of riches" (Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, p. p. 82, quoted in Jones, p. 110).
 2. These variants are spread across 5,000+ manuscripts. A variant only has to appear in one text for it to be added to this number. As a result, we confidently know that a vast majority of them are not original.

3. The vast majority of the variants are inconsequential or easily identifiable. They are things like changes in spelling, changes in word order, accidental omissions of a word, or obvious nonsense due to a copying error.
4. Less than 1% of variants affect meaning and involve viable differences (i.e., the evidence is divided).

C. Textual Criticism

1. "Textual criticism...is the science that compares all the known manuscripts of a given work in an effort to trace the history of variations within the text so as to discover its original form" (Fee, "The Textual Criticism of the New Testament," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1:419).
2. External Evidence
 - a. The manuscripts almost all fall into one of three general families.
 - The Alexandrian text is an ancient family of texts that have their roots in North Africa. The most significant papyri and uncials come from this family.
 - The Western text is also very ancient, but it has more variety than the Alexandrian text, making it less trustworthy.
 - The Byzantine/Majority text family makes up over 80% of the manuscripts. This is due to the instigation of Constantine in the East. The earliest complete Byzantine text we possess is from the 8th century.
 - b. One of the most important and divisive questions in textual criticism is whether the Alexandrian or Byzantine texts are more trustworthy. This decision will shape a critic's conclusions as much as any other issue.
3. Internal Evidence
 - a. Scholars attempt to evaluate how certain variants could have developed and what is most likely the original. For example, "It is usually true that the more difficult reading is probably the original one, because it was the tendency of scribes to make the text easier to read. Again the shorter reading is often the original one, because the scribes tended to add to the text" (Fee, 1:430).
 - b. Scholars also evaluate things like "the style and vocabulary of the author, his ideas as they are elsewhere known, and the probabilities based on the immediate context" (Fee).

- D. Conclusion: "When it comes to more difficult variants, so many manuscripts and fragments of the New Testament have survived that scholars can almost always reconstruct the original reading of the text. In those few instances where uncertainty about the right reading remains, none of the possibilities changes anything that Christians believe about God or about his work in the world" (Jones, p. 107).

IV. History of Textual Criticism

- A. Erasmus published the first Greek New Testament in 1516.
 - 1. “The Greek text was hastily put together. Erasmus had only 8 manuscripts of the NT, and none of these contained the entire NT. Three of the seven contained the Gospels, three contained Acts, and five contained the Pauline Epistles. For Revelation Erasmus had only one manuscript, which lacked the final page that contained the last six verses. He translated these from his Latin Vulgate back into Greek and thus created readings that are not found in any known Greek manuscript. None of the manuscripts used by Erasmus were earlier than the 11th century” (Combs Syllabus).
 - 2. Erasmus published revised editions in 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535; however, they were all based on limited manuscripts. His final edition still included his translation of portions of Revelation from Latin into Greek.
- B. Robert Estienne produced four editions of the GNT based on Erasmus’s work (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551). He created our modern verse divisions in his 4th edition.
- C. Theodore de Beza produced 9 editions of the GNT based off the work of Erasmus and Estienne.
 - 1. Beza consulted more manuscripts than his predecessors but made very few changes.
 - 2. The original King James translators used Beza’s 1588/89 edition.
- D. Bonaventura and Abraham Elzevir produced 7 editions of the GNT between 1624 and 1678.
 - 1. The name Textus Receptus (i.e., Received Text) comes from their 1633 edition.
 - 2. The name Textus Receptus is now applied to all of Erasmus, Estienne, Beza, Bonaventura, and Elzevir’s editions.
- E. 1633–1831: Archaeologists discovered many more ancient manuscripts; however, the TR remained the standard and all translations were based on the TR.
- F. 1831–Present
 - 1. During the 19th century, scholars began to break from the TR and take advantage of recent manuscript discoveries. They noticed relationships among text families and began developing the guidelines for textual criticism mentioned earlier.
 - 2. In 1881 B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort produced their landmark edition of the GNT. Their GNT was the first to fully apply all the new textual criticism guidelines and manuscript discoveries. Their work is the foundation for most modern Greek editions and Bible translations.
- G. Rise of the TR-Only Movement: After the completion of Westcott and Hort’s GNT, scholars began producing new English translations using their work. Since the KJV had been the standard English Bible for over 200 years, some were startled by the changes in these new translations, especially those that were due to advances in textual criticism.
 - 1. The most serious charge against Westcott and Hort’s GNT concerns the doctrine of preservation. According to some, any “improvements” to the TR based on new

discoveries necessarily involves a denial of the doctrine of preservation. It would mean that God withheld his pure Word from the church for centuries.

2. Some have gone so far as to claim that the TR is the perfectly preserved Greek text. “It is my own personal conviction and belief, after studying this subject since 1971, that the words of the Received Greek and Masoretic Hebrew texts that underlie the King James Bible are the very words which God has preserved down through the centuries, being the exact words of the originals themselves. As such, I believe they are inspired words” (D. A. Waite, *Defending the King James Bible*, pp. 48–49).
3. The basic problem with this view is that Scripture does not teach it. 2 Kings 22:8–10 describes a period of at least several years when Judah had no access to the Law.
4. Some have tried to justify the TR theory of preservation using passages such as Matthew 5:17–18 (“one jot or one tittle”). However, they can’t account for the 1400+ years between the completion of Scripture and the first edition of the TR. As well, the TR has gone through multiple revisions.
5. “The true situation is this: God has preserved his Word to this day, but because of the means he has chosen to use to accomplish this preservation—providentially, through secondary causation—the words of the autographs have not been inerrantly preserved. Instead, God has chosen to allow for variations to occur—variants within the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek copies of the autographs. God has providentially provided all these copies in order to preserve the Scriptures. So it is proper to say that preservation has taken place in the totality of manuscripts. Because God chose this method of preservation, it was not possible to provide a perfectly pure text with no variations (errors). It was sufficient for God’s purpose to preserve his Word in copies of the autographs whose exact wording contains some variation. This level of purity is sufficient for God’s purposes” (Combs, “The Preservation of Scripture,” p. 37).

H. Conclusions

1. Without question, the Textus Receptus played a monumental role in making the Scriptures more widely and accurately known than ever before. We ought to give thanks for those who produced it and for how God has used it. However, we should also give thanks for the superior resources available today for discerning the original text. There are no biblical or logical grounds for insisting on a TR-only position.
2. We can be confident that God has preserved his Word. He may not have done so as simply as we would prefer, but we can still be confident that our Bibles are the inspired, preserved Word of God.