

How the Old Testament Was Preserved

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The Bible is without a doubt the most controversial book ever written. There are so many different opinions on what's contained in its pages.

One person says, "The Bible is nothing but a book of Jewish fairy tales."

Another person says, "I believe in the Bible and I believe in its message for me today. And I believe that God gave us a collection of writings... BUT I sometimes worry that man has corrupted the original writings in some way."

This person goes on to ask, "Why does the Bible contain the books that it does? Is it possible that some of the 66 books in the Bible really don't belong there?"

"Or conversely," they ask, "is it possible that the Bible we use today is MISSING some books that God inspired to be written?"

These are not bad questions. There's nothing wrong with wanting to know more about the accuracy and validity of Scripture. The Bible itself instructs us to "prove all things." These concerns are called questions of canon. And people have been questioning Bible canon--not for decades or even for hundreds of years. Questions of canon have been with us for thousands of years.

So let's see if we can look at the history of the Old Testament Scriptures in attempt to answer the skeptics who would have us believe the Bible is not reliable and that it has no more validity than any other book of antiquity. We need to know whether or not the books contained in God's Word have been reliably preserved for us if we are to remove all doubts about using the Bible as the most important guide in our lives.

Answering the Skeptics

Now, one of the things that the skeptics love to tell us is that we don't have any autographs of the Old Testament. What's an autograph? An autograph is the original document. In other words, Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible—Gen, Ex, Lev, Num, Deut. But we don't have any of Moses' original documents. We don't have Moses' autographs.

Not only that, we don't have any document that was copied directly from one of Moses' originals. So we don't even have a copy of Moses' originals. And guess what? We don't even have a copy of a copy of Moses' originals. What we have today are copies of copies of copies of copies.

As a result, the skeptic says, "How can you believe in the accuracy of these copies that we have today? After centuries of transcribing copies of copies of copies, there has to be hundreds or even thousands of errors in the Bibles we read today—no matter which translation we use."

That's what they say. And guess what? Their point is well taken.

Chances are, you've seen children play that game where they sit in a circle. The first kid whispers something into the ear of the second kid. The second kid then whispers that message into the ear of the third kid. It goes around the room. And the message seldom ends up being the same as the original. In fact, sometimes the final message has no similarity whatsoever with the original message, does it? This is because messages get garbled when they get repeated from person to person to person.

Here's another example of problems with transmitting information over and over again. What if I put an original document on the screen of a copy machine and I make a copy of it? Then I make a copy of the copy. Then I make a copy of that next copy. And I keep doing this. As each generation of copies is created, it's going to be less readable than the original. And, no matter how good your copier is, eventually you are going to produce a copy that's simply no longer readable. This is because we are dealing with analog copying.

Again, these are good points for us to consider when studying how the Scriptures were transmitted from generation to generation to generation.

Let's ask this question. What is the age of the oldest version of the Old Testament that's in existence today? Did you know that the oldest version of the Hebrew Scriptures that we have is less than 1,500 years old. That's not very old because the first books of the Bible were written hundreds and hundreds of years before this copy that we have.

Again, the skeptic loves to accuse the Bible being unreliable because we only have reproductions. All the originals of the Bible are gone. All of them. No matter what book of the Bible you want to talk about, its original is gone. No autographs exist today.

But there is an important fact that the skeptics are overlooking when they attempt to belittle the accuracy of God's Word. And here it is.

History of Scripture Reverence

It must be pointed out that the copying methods used in reproducing the Bible were computer-like in their accuracy. The methods used by those who transmitted the Scriptures were almost digital in their accuracy. This is quite a statement.

Let's see if we can better understand this by looking at some Scriptures: Let's start with Deut 31:24. We're going to see the beginning of the history of textual preservation.

And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying,

Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.

Here we see the beginning of the sacred trust given to the Levite tribe to safeguard the Scriptures. The "writings of words" referred to here are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books are also called Torah. Another name is the Pentateuch.

From that moment forward—right after Moses wrote those first five books--the religious leaders of Israel became the enthusiastic guardians of the Scriptures. Later, after the Babylonian captivity of the nation of Judah, these Scriptures were practically worshipped as much as was the Creator God himself.

The love that the Jews had for the Law became close to idolatry. They watched over these Sacred Writings more carefully than any other possession in the Holy Land.

Joshua's Role in Preservation

Joshua, who was Moses' successor, also instructed the Israelites to have a special concern for "all the words of the Law." This is from Joshua 8:36. Basically, he told the people, "Sit down and listen. We're going to have the whole Law read to you. And this might take several days because the Torah is a lengthy piece of literature.

Now, here is one interesting point. Many people assume that the apostle Paul wrote more of the Bible than any other servant of God. Actually, Paul wrote more books than anyone else, but Moses wrote more content or more volume. Yes, Moses only wrote five books. But each of Moses' books was much longer than any of Paul's books. Each of Paul's books was much shorter than the books written by Moses. All in all, Moses wrote about three times as much material as Paul.

Now, let's go back to the time of Joshua. We talked about a great reverence developing within the tribe of Levi for the Scriptures. The Levites were the ones who were in charge of preserving the texts.

But later on, we see that the Levites (just one of the twelve tribes) weren't the only ones who were to have a great love for God's Word. God knew that the day would come when His people would reject Him as their king and that they would insist and having a human king. We read this is Deuteronomy 17.

God says in Deut 17:18 regarding future kings:

And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites:

And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them.

This is a fascinating instruction. Notice that God is saying that each king of Israel had to study and obey the Law. And each king had to do it daily. And each king had to write his own personal copy of the Law--his own copy that he made with his own hand.

So, early in the history of Israel, we have a reverence developing for the Scriptures. And this reverence inspires the creation of a system of copying which is nothing less than astounding. It was computer-like. The Levites had to create a system of making new copies of the Bible as old copies wore out and had to be destroyed. The Levites knew it would be really easy to make a mistake in copying a new transcript, so here is what they did.

They developed elaborate and meticulous rules for transcribing. Here are some examples:

The Rules of Copying

They decreed that, when a person was making a new text, he had to copy the original page with such exactness that the number of words on a page could not be changed. This means that, if the original page had 288 words, then the page being copied also had to have the exact same 288 words.

Another example: Each line on a new page had to be the exact same as the line on the old page. If the first line of the original page had nine words, the first line on the copy page had to have nine words.

After a page was copied, the number of letters on that page was counted and compared with the original.

After a page was copied, each letter was counted and compared with the original. After a page was copied, someone would check to see what the middle letter was on the original and on the copy.

I'm reading from a book entitled, "Hebrew Text of the Old Testament" by Professor Davidson. He writes, "A synagogue roll [remember they didn't have paper back then as we do today] must be written on the skins of clean animals, the length of each column must not extend less than 48 or more than 80 lines; the breadth must consist of 30 letters. No word or letter, not even a yod, must be written from memory...

"Between every letter the space of a hair or thread must intervene, between every book three lines. Besides this the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, and wash his whole body."

Notice that the scribes weren't allowed to copy sentence for sentence or even word for word. They had to copy letter for letter.

After a page was copied and checked by another, still a third person would check to see what the middle word was on the page. Then, when the whole book was finished, another person would count the just the phrases.

These are just a few examples of the great detail that went into ensuring the accuracy of the Scriptures. There were many more steps taken in the process. All of this could be characterized as what Bullinger calls,

...a fence to the Scriptures (Massorah) because it locked all words and letters in their places...

It records the number of times the several letters occur in the various books of the Bible; the number of words, and the middle word; the number of verses, and the middle verse; the number of expressions and combinations of words, etc...

All this...for the set purpose of safeguarding the Sacred Text, and preventing the loss or misplacement of a single letter or word.

These men who were involved in transcribing new copies of the Scriptures had no worry whatsoever that there even MIGHT have been an error. For that reason, they felt no more need to keep their older copies than an Information Services Manager feels a need to keep old printouts when he knows his current hard copies are accurate.

The Role of the Scribes

Now, let's talk about the Scribes. The ancient Israelites kept a copy of the Scriptures in the first Temple. They put it inside the Ark of the Covenant. This copy became known as The Temple Scriptures.

Even though the first temple was destroyed and the Jews were taken to Babylon, the Scriptures were preserved. In the Babylonian captivity, a group of Levites who became known as the Scribes painstakingly copied and disseminated the Scriptures to other Jews.

One of the most important historical figures during this time was Ezra. He was not only a scribe, but he was also the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was probably the author of the book of Chronicles and is said to have fixed the Old Testament canon around 400 BC.

After the Jews returned to Palestine, the Scribes continued to take an active part in preserving and distributing the Scriptures. When the second Temple was built, another master copy was put into the Holy Place.

By the time Jesus was born, the Scribes had become so obsessed with counting jots and tittles that they forgot the very messages that were in the sentences they were transcribing. Their obsession with detail caused Jesus to say in Matthew 23,

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law— judgment, mercy, and faith.

Even after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Scribes continued their work. They were eventually replaced by the Massoretes, who were in charge of preserving the Scriptures from about 500 AD to 100 AD. These new custodians of the Scriptures have left us the Masoretic text which is the basis of most modern translations of the Bible.

Has the Old Testament been accurately preserved for us today? Absolutely. Jack Finegan, a noted Bible scholar said, “It has been...estimated that there are...variations in hardly more than 1000th part of the text.” This means that the Old Testament is at least 99.9% true to the original.

That should give assurance to all of us that the Old Testament we read today is right on the money.

Do We Have the Right Books?

Now, the question is asked, “The books we have today have the same words that were written thousands of years ago. But how do we know we have the right books? Are there books in our Bibles that shouldn’t be there? Or, are there books that should be in the Bible but somehow got left out?”

To find our answer, we begin by noting that we don’t have to research this issue all the way back to the ancient Israelites who were the original writers and preservers of the Hebrew texts. To find our answer, we only have to go back to the time of Jesus.

If the Jews during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry were using wrong books, you can be sure He would have mentioned it and that the Gospel writers would have

recorded it. Such an error would be way too important to be left out of the New Testament. In fact, when we read Luke 24:44, we see Jesus putting his stamp of approval on the Old Testament that was utilized by the Jews of His time. This Scriptures validates the three major sections of the Hebrew Texts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings or the Psalms.

Jesus made many references to Old Testament events. He talked about the Creation epic and the Flood. He talked about men such as Abel, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and others. He talked about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jesus had no problem whatsoever with the Old Testament canon that existed in His time. He had no reservations about using the Hebrew Scriptures that were extant in His day. And nor should we. Because the Scriptures used by Jesus were the very same ones that we have in most of our modern translations today.

This should give comfort to those who are concerned about the validity of the Bible.

The Apocrypha

Now what about this thing called the Apocrypha? What is the Apocrypha? These are books that are included in the Catholic Bible and in a few other versions. The books of the Apocrypha include Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, Judith, Tobit, and I & II Maccabees. There are a total of 14 apocryphal books which some believe should be part of the Old Testament.

Actually, there were hundreds of such books.

The word Apocrypha comes from the Greek word meaning “secrets.” Most of these books are mystery books and were written between 200 B.C. and 100 B.C.

Hebrew history tells us that Ezra closed the Old Testament canon around 400 B.C. The apocryphal books were written AFTER Ezra’s closing of the Old Testament.

Virtually all of the Old Testament was written by Israelites who lived in the area of Palestine. The Apocrypha, however, appears to have been written by Jews in Alexandria, Egypt. Alexandria had a large Jewish colony before the birth of Jesus.

The Catholic Church rejected the Apocrypha all the way until the Council of Trent in 1546 A.D. It was at that point that they finally accepted it into their Bible.

So this is why we feel that the Apocrypha is not part of the sacred canon.

Masoretic Text or Septuagint (LXX)?

And then we come to the argument of the Masoretic Text vs. the Septuagint.

Remember that the Masoretic text came from the Levites, the Scribes, and the Masoretes.

But there is also what is called the Septuagint text. It’s also called the LXX. Here is the history of that document.

Supposedly, in the third century B.C., 72 Jewish scholars from Jerusalem went to Alexandria. In 72 days, they translated the Old Testament into Greek, and their translation became known as the Septuagint or the LXX. It was probably originally known as the LXXII, which would be the Roman numerals for the number 72. And the number 72 stands for the 72 scholars and 72 days. But this heading, LXXII, became abbreviated to LXX.

If you read from a translation that is based on the LXX, you should keep the following in mind. The LXX is a translation of a translation. For example, the Catholic Bible is translated from the Greek Septuagint, which was translated from the original Hebrew. But most other Bibles are direct translation from the original Masoretic text and are thus more reliable than those translated from the Septuagint.

The Catholic Church rejected the Septuagint all the way till the Council of Trent in 1546 A.D. It was at that point that they finally accepted it into their Bible.

Other Books

Some people point out that there are 14 books mentioned in the Bible that are not part of the official canon. Here are some examples:

== Jude 14 talks about the book of Enoch.

== Numbers 21 talks about the Book of Wars.

== II Samuel 1 talks about the book of Jashur.

== I Chronicles 29 talks about the Book of Gad.

Again, there are 14 books mentioned in the Bible that are not in the final canon. But this shouldn't surprise us. Just because the Bible talks about other books doesn't mean that these books are the inspired Word of God. After all, the apostle Paul quoted Greek poets in Acts 17 and in Titus 1.

The bottom line is that there are no lost books of the Bible. Friends, we can rest assured that the Bible has been accurately preserved for us.

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