

The Message Of The Bible Has Not Been Changed

**The Message Of The Bible
Has Not Been Changed:**

**An Introduction
To Textual Criticism**

By

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The Message Of The Bible Has Not Been Changed

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Introduction

The Living God has revealed Himself to humanity by means of a limited number of sacred books. These writings are found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The sixty-six books of the Bible are the only written works that God has divinely inspired and revealed to the human race.

This being the case, it is absolutely essential that we know, as best as we can, how the text of these books originally read.

In this book, we will look at the subject of discovering the original text of Scripture—what did the books of the Bible say when they were first written? How do we know that they read the same way today as when originally composed?

To answer these questions, we will consider the subject of textual criticism—the science of reconstructing written texts. We will look at the various methods used to reconstruct documents when the originals are missing. This will give us an idea as to how people go about attempting to reconstruct what God's Word originally said.

This introductory study will give us assurance that it is possible to recover the original message of the books of the Bible. Therefore, we can conclude that God's Word to the human race has not been lost, added to, or subtracted from.

In sum, it will give us supreme confidence that when we read our present English translations, or whatever other language in which we are reading the Scripture, we are reading the same message that God originally gave to humanity.

Putting The Matter Into Perspective: Do We Have The Exact Wording Today Of The Biblical Books As They Were First Written?

Before we begin to examine the evidence for the reliability of the text of the Bible, in particular, that of the New Testament, it is important that we understand the question before us.

Basically, we want to know if the text of the New Testament has come down to us in a reliable manner. We will discover that the answer is a resounding, "Yes."

Having said that, if we ask if the text of the New Testament today the same wording has exactly as when first written we will give a different answer. While the text has come down to us in an accurate manner there are places where we are not exactly sure how it read.

We will explain this in detail in the following pages of this book. What we will find is that the message of Jesus is clear though in some cases we may not know the exact wording of certain verses.

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Question 1

Why Is It Important To Discover, In The Best Way That We Can, What The Bible Originally Said?

Is it really that important that we know what the biblical authors actually wrote? The answer is an unqualified, "Yes." There are a number of reasons as to why this is so. They include the following.

1. The Bible Claims To Be God's Sole Word To Humanity

To begin with, the Bible claims to be God's Word to the human race. It alone tells us who God is, what He is like, and what He expects from His creation.

In addition, it also tells us who we are, why we are here on the earth, and what will happen to us when we die. It is the only authoritative writing anywhere that does this.

If the Bible is what it claims to be, then it is crucial to know, as best as we possibly can, the exact words of Scripture as they were first written and sent out.

2. All The Words Of Scripture Were Written For Definite Purpose

We also find that the words of Scripture were given for a specific purpose. The Lord Himself emphasized this. He said:

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11 NRSV).

His Words, whether spoken or written, are given out for a specific purpose.

Paul told Timothy that the Scriptures were written to give us wisdom for salvation. He put it this way:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14,15 CSB).

Since the words of Scripture have been written with a purpose in mind, and that through them we can discover how we can be saved from our sins, we should do the best as we are able, to find out exactly what these the Scripture originally said.

3. We Must Know Exactly What It Is We Are Interpreting

In addition, before one can interpret the Scripture, or do any type of Bible study, a person must know what it is that they are interpreting. We have to

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have a clear idea what God said, and what He did not say. Therefore, the issue of discovering the original text of Scripture must be the goal before any interpretation can begin.

4. We Need To Know From What Sources We Can Form Bible Doctrine

Bible doctrine can be defined as the teaching that is revealed in Scripture. We cannot formulate any system of belief about God, His universe, or ourselves, without knowing the original words of Scripture. This makes it vital for scholars to recover the text as it was first written.

5. We Cannot Understand God's Plan Unless We Know What, It Is

Before we can understand the plan of God for humanity as a whole, or for ourselves as individuals, we need to know what He originally said to us. Unless we clearly understand the things that He has said, we cannot know His plan, or begin to follow it. We would just be guessing as to what He wants for each of us.

6. There Are No Mistakes In The Originals: There Are Only Mistakes In Copies

There is more. The original writings of the sixty-six biblical books were accomplished supernaturally by God the Holy Spirit working through the human author.

Paul emphasized that all Scripture was God-breathed. He wrote the following to Timothy emphasizing the divine nature of God's written Word:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16 NIV).

The psalmist wrote about the purity of God's words:

And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times (Psalm 12:6 NIV).

This is true whether the words are spoken or written.

The New English Translation reads:

The Lord's words are absolutely reliable. They are as untainted as silver purified in a furnace on the ground, where it is thoroughly refined (Psalm 12:6 NET)

God divinely inspired each human author to write exactly what He wanted to say. In doing so, the result was error-free. However, since we do not have the error-free originals any longer we are dependent upon copies to reconstruct the text.

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These copies are not-error free. Human mistakes have crept into the various manuscripts as a result of repeated copying. Therefore, it is important that we use all available means to discover what the error-free originals actually said.

We Will Discover That The Message Has Not Been Changed

The good news is that, at the end of the day, we will discover that the message of Scripture is consistent; it has not been changed! Indeed, as we examine the evidence, though there are some variations in the existing manuscripts, the message always remains the same!

God's message to the human race has come to us loud and clear through the Holy Scriptures.

Summary To Question 1

Why Is It Important To Discover What The Bible Originally Said?

It is absolutely vital that we know, as best as we are able, how the text of the Bible originally read. There are a number of reasons as to why this is so.

To begin with, the Bible claims to be the Word of God—God's revelation of Himself to humanity. If it is what it claims to be, then it is absolutely crucial that we know exactly what it says.

The Bible also tells us that the words of God were given to accomplish a specific purpose. We must know the precise content of His words so that we can understand His purpose.

Furthermore, before any interpretation can begin, we must know precisely what we are interpreting.

In addition, before we can formulate any Bible doctrines, we need to know what sources we can use. We cannot speak confidently about God until we are certain what He has said to us.

We also want to know who God is, who we are, and what, if anything, God requires of us. We cannot do this unless we know what the text of Scripture originally said. It is, therefore, necessary to know what was written by the authors of the Bible so that we can better know the Lord and His plan for us. We cannot follow His plan unless we know what it is.

Finally, we come to the matter of the originals and the copies. The originals of each biblical book were error-free. The copies that have been made of these books are not. Therefore, we should strive to discover, as best as we can, what the error-free originals said.

Therefore, since we do not have the original manuscripts of the books of Scripture it is vital that we use all available means to determine the exact wording of the text. Consequently, seeking to discover what God has revealed to us is an extremely important task.

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At the end of the day, we will discover that examining the existing manuscripts of the books of the Bible will bring us to this conclusion; the message of Scripture has been transmitted to us in an accurate manner.

Accordingly, when we read our Bibles in the various competent translations that are available, we can read the message with the confidence that we are indeed reading the Word of the Living God.

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Question 2

What Is Textual Criticism? Why Is The Textual Criticism Of The Bible Necessary?

Today, a book is printed from a text that has been written by the author or authors. The work is produced under the supervision of the person or persons who composed the book. Consequently, we can be confident that the printed form of the work accurately represents the author's original writing.

This, however, is not the case with works written before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. A number of important points need to be made.

The Originals Of Most Ancient Writings Have Been Lost

Before the fifteen century, all books were produced by hand. Handwritten documents are called manuscripts (abbreviated mss.). In fact, the word manuscript comes from the Latin meaning, "something that has been written by hand."

With rare exceptions, the originals of ancient works (also called the autographs) have been lost. The only things that have survived are manuscript copies of ancient works.

The texts that have survived are copies separated from the autographs by hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of years. Before we can begin to interpret these works, we must first of all determine, as best as we can, what they originally said.

Textual Criticism – The Art And Science Of Recovering An Ancient Document

The science of attempting to reconstruct the text of documents is known as "textual criticism." The person who practices textual criticism is known as a textual critic.

While the word criticism usually carries the idea of finding fault with something, this is not the case here. Rather, the term is used with the idea of weighing and evaluating the available evidence to come up with the original wording of a text.

Textual criticism collects and examines the evidence about written works in an attempt to recover the original text. Therefore, textual criticism is not criticizing the Bible.

Because no originals exist of the sixty-six books of the Bible, textual criticism must be applied to Scripture to reconstruct the true text.

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There Are Two Extremes With Respect To Textual Criticism Of The Bible

When we look at the subject of the textual criticism of the Bible, we find two extreme positions that are sometimes held.

One position holds that there is no need for any textual criticism while the other position believes there is no hope of finding the original text. Each of these positions is incorrect.

On the one hand, there are those who do not believe that any textual criticism should be applied to Scripture. They argue that God has preserved His Word intact through certain Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. These manuscripts should be the basis of every translation that is made into another language. No other manuscripts should be consulted except these certain ones that have been “providentially preserved.”

On the other hand, there is the position that it is not possible to recover the original text of Scripture. It is argued that the best we can do is to recover the latest edition of the biblical books that was edited by others than those who wrote the original.

The first position is held by people who have a very conservative view of the Bible while the second is held by those who have a very liberal attitude toward Scripture.

However, neither of these positions is the correct one. Textual criticism must be practiced on the biblical books because there is no one manuscript, or group of manuscripts, that perfectly preserve the original reading.

Yet, we do believe that it is possible to discover what the authors originally wrote. There is no need to assume that the text was changed to such a degree that we no longer have the authors’ original words. The original text can be recovered through the science of textual criticism.

The Situation With The Text Of The Old Testament

The great majority of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. There were a few parts written in Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew. The Aramaic sections of the Old Testament are found in Daniel 2:4-7:28, Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26—and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11).

The remainder was written in the Hebrew language. Biblical Hebrew is also known as “classical Hebrew.” It is interesting to note that the term “Hebrew” is not found in the Old Testament to describe the language that was spoken by the people. Instead, we have other designations. Isaiah calls it the language of Canaan. We read:

On that day five cities in the land of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear loyalty to the LORD of Hosts. One of the cities will be called the City of the Sun (Isaiah 19:18 CSB).

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It is called the language of Judah in the Book of Nehemiah. Scripture says:

Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah (Nehemiah 13:24 NIV).

Whatever we call it Hebrew, the language of Canaan, or the language of Judah, this is the language that God chose to reveal His Word to humanity before the coming of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, to the earth.

The Necessity Of Old Testament Textual Criticism

The various books of the Old Testament were written from approximately 1400 B.C. to 400 B.C. As can be expected with books written so long ago, the originals have long since vanished. In order to reconstruct what the Old Testament text originally said, we have to apply the principles of textual criticism. We have no other choice.

Therefore, textual criticism for the Old Testament is necessary for several reasons.

1. The first book of the Old Testament was written some 3,400 years ago and the last one some 2,400 years ago. Therefore, the writing of the Old Testament encompassed approximately 1,000 years.
2. The originals of each book have long since vanished.
3. The copies that we have differ in some respects. No two manuscripts read exactly alike. Therefore, the textual critic must do his work to reconstruct the text.

The New Testament

In the first century, Greek was the international language. The books of the New Testament were originally written in the common Greek of the day called *koine*. They were composed from approximately A.D. 50 to 90.

Today, we do not possess the autographs (originals) of the various New Testament books. As is true with the Old Testament, we are dependent upon copies, and copies of copies to reconstruct the text. Again, we must apply the science of textual criticism to the New Testament to discover the original wording of the text.

Therefore, textual criticism of the New Testament is also necessary for three basic reasons.

1. We do not possess any of the original writings of the New Testament. Like the Old Testament, we are dependent upon copies to reconstruct the text.
2. The copies of the New Testament manuscripts we now possess differ in some respects from each other because of scribal mistakes that

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have crept into the text. As is true with the Old Testament, no two manuscripts are exactly alike. While the differences are mostly accidental, there are differences among the manuscripts.

3. In the case of the New Testament, there is an abundance of material to evaluate.

Before any type of biblical interpretation can begin, we must first determine what the text originally said. Therefore, textual criticism of the Scripture is an absolute necessity.

Some Important Observations About Textual Criticism

There are a number of important observations that should be made about the science of textual criticism. They include the following.

1. Textual Criticism Is Not Limited To The Bible

Textual criticism is not limited to the Bible. No originals exist of any of the classical writers such as Plato, Aristotle, or Euripides. Likewise, none of the original writings of the early Christians still exist, or even the original works of William Shakespeare.

Therefore, textual criticism is a discipline that is used for any ancient or modern work where the originals have vanished.

2. The Rules Are The Same For All Written Documents

The rules by which the textual critic seeks to discover the original text of a document are the same for the Bible as they are for non-biblical documents.

There are no special rules that need to be applied when attempting to reconstruct the text of Scripture. The text of the Bible is evaluated and reconstructed in the same way as we would evaluate the writings of Shakespeare.

Of course, that does not mean that the Bible and Shakespeare have the same value. The Bible is unique in the fact that it is God's sole revelation of Himself to the human race. Yet to reconstruct the text of each of these writings the same principles must apply.

3. Believers And Unbelievers Practice Textual Criticism The Same Way

Textual criticism is practiced by both believers and unbelievers. While they may disagree as to the nature of the Bible, there is no disagreement when it comes to the subject of textual criticism.

Both use the same Hebrew Old Testament and the same Greek New Testament. Both examine the same manuscripts, and the same variant readings that are found in the manuscripts. When examining the text, the

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same rules are applied by both believers and unbelievers and the same conclusions are drawn.

Therefore, the practice of textual criticism is not a battleground between believers and unbelievers.

4. The Practice Of Textual Criticism Is Not Easy

The practice of textual criticism is not easy. One must attempt to reconstruct a document by working backward with the evidence that still exists. Sometimes there is an abundance of evidence to help reconstruct a text, while at other times there is little evidence to follow.

Whatever the case may be, the reconstructing an ancient text is both an art and a science. It is a science because there are certain rules to follow but it is an art because these rules cannot be applied in a mechanical way.

5. The Present Text Of The Bible Is An Accurate Representation Of The Original

There is something has to be emphasized about where the evidence eventually leads. When all the facts are in, it will be seen that the text of the Bible has been transmitted to us in a very accurate way. We can be confident that the Bible we read today represents what was originally written.

Consequently, competent translations of Scripture are the authoritative Word of God. We can read them with confidence and rely on the promises contained within its pages.

The great textual scholar of the last century, Sir Frederic Kenyon, put it this way:

The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries (Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible And The Ancient Manuscripts*, New York, Harper and Row, 1958, p. 55).

There is more. Even if we would adopt every possible alternative reading that is found in Hebrew and Greek manuscripts the text would still read basically the same!

Indeed, the story of the Bible would be essentially the same, and the reader would get the same central message of who God is and what He wants from His creation.

Therefore, when we put the Bible through the art and science of textual criticism it demonstrates that God's Word comes through loud and clear.

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Summary To Question 2

What Is Textual Criticism? Why Is Textual Criticism Of The Bible Necessary?

When the very first book of the Bible was written, the text began to be transmitted through various copies. The text continued to be transmitted by handwritten copies until the invention of printing in the fifteenth century.

Textual criticism is a science which attempts to establish the correct text of a document. It is applied to secular as well as sacred works. The rules for its practice are the same whether the text is sacred or secular. The textual critic works with the materials available and works backward to establish, as best as possible, how the text originally read.

Textual criticism is necessary in both testaments. The originals of each book of the Old Testament no longer exist. The copies that still exist have different readings in the text. Textual criticism is also necessary for the New Testament. The originals no longer exist, the manuscripts that do exist differ from one another, and there is an abundance of material to consider.

Therefore, to recover the original wording of Scripture, the science of textual criticism must be applied.

We also noted that textual criticism is not limited to the Bible—every document with a missing original must undergo textual criticism. The same rules apply to believers and unbelievers who practice this discipline.

Textual criticism is a science and an art. It has rules but they are not to be applied mechanically.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the text we have today is an accurate representation of the original. Indeed, no matter what manuscripts that have come down to us are examined, the message always remains the same.

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Question 3

What Recent Progress Has Been Made In New Testament Textual Criticism That Everyone Should Be Aware Of?

In one sense, this is one of the most important questions that we will deal with in this book. The study of textual criticism, particularly in the New Testament, has made great strides in the last few decades. With the rise of the internet, and the direct access to ancient works, which were previously difficult, if not impossible, to find, we are now able to paint a clearer picture of the situation. Consequently, we do not have to rely on secondary sources to come to our conclusions about the reliability of the text of the New Testament.

Myths, Misconceptions And Mistakes

Accordingly, there are a number of myths, misconceptions and well as outright mistakes in the area of New Testament textual criticism that need to be cleared up.

An excellent book that deals with this topic is *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* edited by Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry, IntersVarsity Press 2019. In fact, for anyone who wants to understand the current state of the subject, this book is absolutely essential!

In their acknowledgements, the authors explain what led them on this course:

The book started life as an idea during our PhD programs. We love the Bible and are fascinated by how it came to be, especially at the level of its textual history. But as we progressed in our studies, we began to see a troubling trend among others who also who love the Bible and wanted to explain how it came to be. What we saw repeatedly were statistics, facts, and arguments meant to bolster the confidence in the Bible that were actually having the opposite effect because they were misinformed, misapplied, or misstated.

Simply put, some of our previous arguments for the reliability of the New Testament text need to be refined, as well as nuanced. We must be careful not to make the same mistakes that were made in the past by presenting arguments that should not have been made, or could have been better made.

In other words, we must recognize that not all questions that we ask may not have definitive answers. Indeed, in some areas, absolute certainty is not possible.

While it would take an entire book to list all the previous arguments that need refining, the best course of action is to simply state, without exaggeration what we do know about the text of the New Testament as we have it today. Therefore, some of the arguments we have used in the past will be restated, or dropped, to reflect our current state of knowledge.

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In one sense, nothing has really changed. The message of the Bible comes across loud and clear in the pages of Scripture. It continues to be a trustworthy revelation of God's dealings with the human race.

In short, when all the evidence is considered, we do NOT have to change our view that the Bible is God's Word to humanity and that it has been brought down to us in a reliable manner. Indeed, the statement of Stephen Neil more than fifty years ago remains true to this day:

The very worst Greek manuscript now in existence...contains enough of the gospel in unadulterated form to lead the reader into the way of salvation (Stephen Neil, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961*, The Firth Lectures, 1964, Oxford University Press, pp. 63-64).

In sum, we can indeed read our Bible's today with absolute confidence that we are hearing God's message to the human race. The good news about Jesus comes across loud and clear!

My Personal Testimony

There is something else that I'd like to add. Indeed, this is an important question that is very personal to the author. I'd like to give a little bit of the history behind it. So, please indulge me.

When I became a Christian in 1970, I went to college the next year at Biola University, majoring in Bible. I took a number of classes in Greek at Biola including a year-long class in New Testament textual criticism. It was probably the hardest class I've ever taken as well as the most interesting and the most productive. It was hardest because our Professor Dr. Harry Sturz piled on the work! For this, I will ever be thankful.

Dr. Sturz was a pioneer in the field of New Testament textual criticism. Indeed, he recognized that the later Byzantine manuscripts, though copied many hundreds of years after the time of Christ, contained readings that were found to be early in the history of the text. In other words, even though they were produced centuries after the time of Christ, they copied from a text that was produced relatively shortly after the time of the apostles. His work is finally being recognized as ground-breaking.

Later in 1976, I traveled for a year with Josh McDowell. Among other things, I helped with the update of his best-selling book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. Part of my work was attempting to discover the latest evidence with respect to the New Testament text, the manuscripts, etc. Since these were the days before the internet, I had to spend my time in libraries combing through old books to discover what I could.

As time marches on, so does our understanding of the past. Thankfully, we have a new generation of Bible-believing scholars who have entered the field of New Testament textual criticism. They certainly have the advantage over those of us who labored in the 1970's. This is why it is important to always discover the latest information on this or any other topic. I'll have much more to say on this in later editions of this book.

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Question 4

What's The Difference Between The History Of The Text Of The Old Testament And The History Of The Text Of The New Testament?

The goal of textual criticism is to establish, as best as one possibly can, the original wording of a text. It is practiced the same way with respect to both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

While the same rules are applied in both testaments each has a different textual history. The differences can be summed up as follows.

1. The Two Testaments Were Written In Different Languages

To begin with, the two testaments were composed in different languages. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew with a few parts in Aramaic; a language similar to Hebrew.

The New Testament, however, was entirely composed in Greek. It is a language that bears no similarity to either Hebrew or Aramaic.

Indeed, Hebrew and Aramaic were written right to left while Greek, like English, was written left to right.

2. The Books Of The Old Testament Were Written Much Earlier

The books of the Old Testament were written between 2,400 and 3,400 years ago. The first book may have been written as early as 1400 B.C. while the last book was written about 400 B.C.

3. The Old Testament Was Written Over A Longer Period Of Time

The books of the Old Testament were written over a one-thousand-year span. In contrast, the New Testament was entirely composed within fifty years, a relatively short period of time.

During the time of the Old Testament, the Hebrew language went through a number of changes. For example, the letters in which ancient Hebrew alphabet was written were updated about the 5th century B.C. to different looking characters.

In addition, the spelling of certain words in ancient Hebrew was updated as the years went by. This is similar to what has happened to almost every language, including English. Modern readers of English would not be able to read, or understand, the Old English of six or seven centuries ago.

There is something else which must be considered. There were changes in the names of certain biblical places. Cities that had been previously named by their inhabitants had the name changed by later inhabitants.

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There was no such problem with the New Testament because of the short time frame which it was composed. There were no changes in the writing of the language, or the spelling of words. Geographical references would not change within this short period of time.

4. The Earliest Copies Of The New Testament Are Nearer In Time To The Original

There is another difference between the two testaments. The earliest manuscript copy of a book from the Old Testament is some three hundred years after the Old Testament was completed.

With respect to the New Testament, there is a small fragment from the gospel of John that may have been copied within fifty to a hundred years after the gospel was written.

From the first three hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, some seventy different manuscripts that contain part of the New Testament still exist.

In fact, these seventy manuscripts make up about two thirds of the text of the New Testament.

5. The Books Of The Old Testament Were Sent To One Geographical Area

The destination of the Old Testament writings was the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. The books were all written by those individuals from the nation Israel and were sent to Israel or Judah.

However, the New Testament writings went to a large geographical area. For example, the writings of Paul went to Gentile churches in Europe and Asia.

Thus, the originals of the New Testament were spread out geographically, while the writings of the Old Testament, for the most part, were limited to the geography of Israel.

6. The New Testament Books Often Circulated Individually, Or In Groups

When it comes to discovering the text of the New Testament, each individual book has its own textual history. Before the fourth century, the New Testament books circulated as either individual writings, or as a smaller collection of writings, such as Paul's letters or the four gospels.

The Book of Acts and the "General Letters" (the writings of James, Peter, and Jude) were often transmitted together. The Book of Revelation was usually transmitted by itself.

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Therefore, many of the manuscripts that we find are part of one New Testament book, or part of a manuscript that originally contained the four gospels, Paul's writings, or Acts and the General Letters.

The situation with the Old Testament was different. The sacred works were written upon scrolls and kept in the temple in Jerusalem. They did not circulate as individual writings or in groups of writings in the same way as the New Testament books.

7. Old Testament Scribes Deliberately Destroyed Their Worn Out Manuscripts

When an Old Testament manuscript began to wear out, a new manuscript was copied. The old one was then destroyed or buried. This was to protect the purity of the text. Since the new copy would be an exact representation of the older one, there was no need to keep the older manuscript.

There is no record of New Testament scribes deliberately destroying worn out manuscripts. However, it is possible that some of the first scribes, who were Jews, continued this practice.

These scribes believed that the Old Testament had been supernaturally given by God. It explained where their nation came from as well as the wonderful future that was promised.

8. Those Who Copied The Old Testament Text Did Their Job With Incredible Precision

From what we know about the practices of Old Testament scribes, we can conclude they were extremely careful in their copying of Scripture. There were so many safeguards put in place in the copying of the text to ensure accuracy.

At the beginning of Israel's history, the Old Testament text was the responsibility of the priests. The Law of Moses assigned specific responsibility to various Old Testament groups and officials. To the Levites was given the custody or care of the written Scriptures. We read the following in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Moses wrote down all of these laws and teachings and gave them to the priests and the leaders of Israel. The priests were from the Levi tribe, and they carried the sacred chest that belonged to the LORD (Deuteronomy 31:9 CEV).

As time went on the responsibility came to a group known as the Sopherim (the counters). They worked from about 500 B.C. to A.D. 100. The Sopherim established an intricate system of safeguards to ensure the text would be transmitted accurately.

Two other groups of scribes, the Tannaim and the Amoraim, continued the work of the Sopherim until about A.D. 500.

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The standardization of the Hebrew text came from the Masoretes (the traditionalists. They were in charge of transmitting the text between A.D. 600 and 950.

During that time the Masoretes added accents and vowel points to the text. They also devised a number of complicated safeguards for the making of copies. They counted virtually everything that could be counted with respect to the Old Testament text.

They are the ones who standardized the text to what we have today. Indeed, the standard text used for the Hebrew Bible is known as the Masoretic text.

First century writer, Flavius Josephus described the care that was taken with the text:

But that our forefathers took no less, not to say even greater care than the nations. I have mentioned in the keeping of their records—a task which they assigned to their chief priests and prophets—and that down to our times these records have been, and if I may venture to say so, will continue to be, preserved with scrupulous accuracy. I will now endeavor to briefly to demonstrate (Josephus, Against Apion, 1.6)

Therefore, because of the unbroken history of Hebrew scribes copying the sacred text, we have every reason to assume that the Old Testament text of today is an accurate representation of the original.

9. Most Of The Text Of The New Testament Was Written While All The Authors Were Still Alive

The situation is a little different with respect to the New Testament. Since the entire New Testament was written within one generation, the authors were alive when the other books were being composed. This is in contrast to the Old Testament writers who, for the most part, did not know each other.

At the beginning, as can be imagined, the people were more interested in hearing a live apostle relate their experiences with Jesus rather than reading about the apostle's experiences. Once the New Testament writers began to die, there was more attention paid to the copying of their writings.

While the New Testament scribes did not employ the same type of safeguards in copying the text, we can be confident that the text has been transmitted accurately. At the beginning of the church age, some of the copies of New Testament documents were made by ordinary people rather than by professional scribes. Consequently, they would make some simple copying errors.

However, these copying errors were minor and did not alter the text or its meaning. We know this because *every* New Testament manuscript that has been discovered reads basically the same. Indeed, there are no great differences in the manuscripts!

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There is something else. The writings of the New Testament contained authoritative teaching for the church. This fact would cause the people to be as careful as possible in copying the text. Since many of the early believers were Jews, we can be assured that they treated the writings with the same reverence as the Old Testament documents. As God's authoritative Word, the teachings of Jesus Christ were just as authoritative as the Old Testament writings.

The Believers Were Persecuted

In addition, when the church experienced an Empire-wide persecution at the beginning of the fourth century, they undertook to hide copies of the Scripture. Rather than revealing the location of the hidden texts to the authorities, many believers paid with their lives. This gives another indication of the reverence and respect the early church had for the New Testament Scripture.

Professional scribes were eventually employed in the church. When the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian, he ordered fifty copies of the New Testament to be produced by professional scribes. From that time on, we have a more complete understanding of the history of the New Testament text.

10. Old Testament Scribes Kept Records Of Variant Readings

There is another difference between the text of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament. The Old Testament scribes would make notes of different readings which were found among the manuscripts. These different readings are known as variants. While they would not change the text, they would note certain variations that were found.

However, the New Testament scribes made no record of variations in the text. They would, however, make notations and corrections in the manuscripts.

Some of the more important New Testament manuscripts were proofread and corrected. For example, Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth century manuscript that contains the entire New Testament, had at least eight proofreaders and correctors.

11. There Are Fewer Old Testament Manuscripts That Still Exist

Because of the Jewish practice of destroying worn out copies, there are relatively fewer Old Testament manuscripts that exist when compared to the New Testament. However, because of their precise copying practices, we can be confident that these fewer manuscripts that still exist are faithful representatives of the original. Still, the total number existing Old Testament manuscripts is in the thousands.

The case is different with the New Testament. The problem with almost all ancient writings is the lack of existing manuscripts to reconstruct the

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text. Most ancient writings have the slimmest manuscript evidence by which scholars attempt to establish the original.

In the case of the New Testament, however, there is no such problem. We are not lacking manuscripts to reconstruct the text.

On the contrary, we have such an abundance of manuscripts that it makes the establishment of the text virtually certain. The total number of manuscripts, the handwritten copies of the New Testament, that still exist number in the thousands.

To sum up the differences: the Old Testament was copied with more care than the New Testament and therefore has fewer variant readings. While the Old Testament was completed some four hundred years before the time of Christ, the manuscripts that still exist are generally better than those of the New Testament.

Having said this, we want to again stress that the existing manuscripts of the New Testament contain the same message about Christ.

Summary To Question 4

What's The Difference Between The History Of The Text Of The Old Testament And The History Of The Text Of The New Testament?

While textual criticism needs to be practiced on both testaments, there is a big difference between the history of Old Testament textual criticism and New Testament textual criticism.

For one thing, the books of the Old Testament were written from 2,400 to 3,400 years ago while the earliest New Testament book was written less than two thousand years ago.

The Old Testament was written over a span of one thousand years while the New Testament was written within fifty years.

The books of the Old Testament were written to one geographical area. However, the books of the New Testament were sent to various areas of the Roman Empire.

The New Testament books circulated individually or in small groups or writings such as Paul's letters or the gospels. The Old Testament books were not circulated or copied in this manner.

There was also the practice among the Hebrews of destroying old, or worn out, copies of Scripture. There is no record of this happening among New Testament scribes.

The Old Testament scribes put in place a number of safeguards to guarantee the accuracy of the text. The New Testament scribes did not resort to the same type of extraordinary measures.

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All of the New Testament writers lived at the same time while the Old Testament writers, for the most part, did not know each other.

Old Testament scribes kept records of the variant reading in the text while the New Testament scribes made corrections in existing manuscripts.

Finally, there are relatively few Hebrew manuscripts to reconstruct the Old Testament compared to the abundance of material to reconstruct the Greek New Testament. Yet, the Hebrew manuscripts still number in the thousands.

This sums up some of the differences between the history of the text of the Old Testament and the history of the text of the New Testament.

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Question 5

Why Don't We Possess Any Of The Original Manuscripts Of The Books Of The Bible?

The original manuscripts in which the books of the Bible were written have been lost. This is true for the originals of almost all other ancient writings as well. There are several reasons why this is so. They include the following.

1. The Books Were Written Upon Perishable Materials

The first reason we do not possess any of the originals of the biblical books concerns the materials upon which they were written. Surfaces such as papyri and parchment (animal skins) were not as durable as stone tablets. They would wear after long years of use. Only under the most ideal conditions can we expect this type of material to survive. Because most of the biblical text was originally written upon perishable material, we should not expect the autographs (originals) to last.

2. The Books Were Written Thousands Of Years Ago

There is also the factor of time. The last written book of the Bible was composed some nineteen hundred years ago. The first books of Scripture, the writings of Moses, were composed about thirty-four hundred and fifty years ago.

Over this long period of time, manuscripts can become lost or worn out through constant usage. This factor, along with the perishable surfaces of the documents, makes it nearly impossible for an original text to have survived.

3. Some Manuscripts Were Destroyed By Those Copying The Text

Furthermore, Hebrew texts that had worn out were often buried or destroyed when a new copy was made. The ancient scribes would meticulously copy a new manuscript from the old worn out one. When the new manuscript was checked and found correct, then the old manuscript would be destroyed or buried to keep it from being defiled. Such was the reverence the Jews had for the text.

There is also the possibility that early scribes who copied New Testament manuscripts observed the Jewish practice of destroying old worn-out copies when the new ones were made. This would cause the loss of the original as well as older copies.

4. The Nation Israel Went Through Many Difficult Times

The history of the nation Israel must also be considered. The nation has been twice removed from its homeland. The first time was for seventy years while the second time was for almost nineteen hundred years.

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At the seventy-year Babylonian captivity, the people were sent off to a foreign nation. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple burned, and all its treasures taken away. It is a testimony to God's providence that the Scripture survived the deportation of the nation to Babylon.

The psalmist wrote of this difficult time:

How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?
(Psalm 137:4 NIV).

As God had promised, the people returned to the land and again sang the songs of the Lord.

At the second exile, the city and temple were again destroyed. Those who survived were taken to Rome and sold as slaves. The nation did not again become an actual functioning state for almost two thousand years.

The Holy Scriptures had to contend with this sort of conflict from those who opposed the nation. The text would have had to have survived these two deportations as well as other calamities the nation faced.

5. The Texts Were Destroyed By Those Who Did Not Like The Message

There is an example of the text of Scripture being destroyed by one of the kings of Judah, Jehoiakim. We read about this episode in Jeremiah 36. It says:

Baruch read Jeremiah's words to all the people from the Temple room of Gemariah son of Shaphan. This room was just off the upper courtyard of the Temple, near the New Gate entrance. When Micaiah son of Gemariah and grandson of Shaphan heard the messages from the LORD, he went down to the secretary's room in the palace where the administrative officials were meeting. Elishama the secretary was there, along with Delaiah son of Shemaiah, Elnathan son of Acbor, Gemariah son of Shaphan, Zedekiah son of Hananiah, and all the others with official responsibilities. When Micaiah told them about the messages Baruch was reading to the people, the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah, grandson of Shelemiah, and great-grandson of Cush, to ask Baruch to come and read the messages to them, too. So Baruch took the scroll and went to them. "Sit down and read the scroll to us," the officials said, and Baruch did as they requested. By the time Baruch had finished reading, they were badly frightened. "We must tell the king what we have heard," they said. "But first, tell us how you got these messages. Did they come directly from Jeremiah?" So Baruch explained, "Jeremiah dictated them to me word by word, and I wrote down his words with ink on this scroll." "You and Jeremiah should both hide," the officials told Baruch. "Don't tell anyone where you are!" Then the officials left the scroll for safekeeping in the room of Elishama the secretary and went to tell the king. The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll. Jehudi brought it from Elishama's room and read it to the king as all his officials stood by. It was late autumn, and the king

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was in a winterized part of the palace, sitting in front of a fire to keep warm. Whenever Jehudi finished reading three or four columns, the king took his knife and cut off that section of the scroll. He then threw it into the fire, section by section, until the whole scroll was burned up (Jeremiah 36:10-23 NLT).

Here we have an ironic example of the Scripture being destroyed by a Jewish king. However, we are told that the burned scroll was rewritten by Baruch the scribe. We read:

After the king had burned Jeremiah's scroll, the LORD gave Jeremiah another message. He said, "Get another scroll, and write everything again just as you did on the scroll King Jehoiakim burned" (Jeremiah 36:27,28 NLT).

The Word of God cannot be destroyed!

6. New Testament Documents Were Also Destroyed

While there has been purposeful destruction of the Old Testament Scripture, there was also persecution of the New Testament documents. The early Christians, and their sacred writings, were made the object of persecution. One particular persecution, at the beginning of the fourth century, was Empire-wide.

The church historian Eusebius witnessed this persecution first-hand. He wrote the following account about this persecution:

All this [persecution] has been fulfilled in our day, when we saw with our own eyes our houses or worship thrown down from their elevation, the sacred Scriptures of inspiration committed to flames in the midst of the markets (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8::2:1).

Therefore, like the Old Testament texts, the New Testament documents were also destroyed by those who objected to the Christian faith.

7. They Have Been Used As An Object Of Worship

While there are historical reasons as to why the originals of Scripture no longer exist, there are also some people who have advocated theological reasons as to why these books have not been preserved.

They believe that if the originals of any books of the Bible had survived, they would be made into objects of worship. The faith of the believer, they contend, would be placed in the wrong object. The text, rather than the ultimate author of the text, would receive worship.

In fact, it seems that this is what did happen. In the writings of Peter of Alexandria, who died in A.D. 311, he relates how the original of the Gospel of John still existed in his day. He made the comment that this copy was "adored by the faithful."

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This sounds like the people were giving a status to the actual writing that it did not deserve. We do not worship the text of Scripture! On the contrary, we worship the God whom the text of Scripture reveals.

The Text Is Still Trustworthy

These are some of the reasons as to why we do not possess the originals of any of the biblical books. However, the text we now have, while made from copies, is a completely trustworthy text.

This is not surprising. Indeed, God made the following promise some 2,700 years ago. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever (Isaiah 40:8 NIV)

God's Word has lasted forever.

Consequently, we can conclude that the Bible has been transmitted in such a reliable manner that we can trust what it says. The message has not been lost or distorted.

Summary To Question 5

Why Don't We Possess Any Of the Original Manuscripts Of The Books Of The Bible?

There are a number of reasons as to why we do not have the originals of the books of the Bible.

First, the materials used to copy the texts were perishable. They would wear out through constant use. This is to be expected with any ancient writing.

In addition, thousands of years have gone by since the most recent biblical book was written. Again, we should not expect them to survive over such a long period of time.

There was also the practice of the Hebrew scribes of destroying old copies to keep them from being corrupted by unbelievers. This would cause the originals to perish.

The nation Israel, with all of the upheavals they faced, made it difficult to protect the ancient manuscripts from destruction.

We also have one example of a king of Judah destroying the original writing of Jeremiah. However, we are also told that Jeremiah was told by the Lord to produce a new copy of the Scripture.

We know of the destruction of copies of Scripture by the enemies of God. There was an Empire-wide persecution of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century.

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There is also the fact that original copies of Scripture may have become objects of worship. Because we do not have the original writings (autographs) of the books of the Bible, the science of textual criticism is absolutely necessary in reconstructing the text from the manuscripts we do have.

The good news is that the text has come down to us in a remarkable manner. This is in accord with the promise of God that His Word would last forever. The evidence shows that it indeed has.

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Question 6

What Is Earliest Old Testament Part Of The Old Testament That Still Exists? What Is The Earliest New Testament Manuscript That Still Exists?

The originals of the Book of Scripture do not exist any longer. What we have left are copies of the originals. It is often asked about the identity of the earliest copies of an Old Testament text and a New Testament text. Are the earliest writings from the testaments found in manuscripts or are they contained on something else?

The Earliest Part Of The Old Testament Manuscript That Still Exists Is Not A Manuscript

Curiously, the oldest part of the Old Testament that still exists is not found in a document. In 1985, some ancient silver amulets were discovered in the old city of Jerusalem by Israeli archaeologist Gabriel Barkay. It seems they would have been worn either around the neck or as bracelets. These amulets have been dated from between the sixth and the seventh century B.C. They contain a passage of Scripture from the Book of Numbers (6:22-27).

The text of the amulet is very close to the Masoretic, or traditional text, of the Old Testament. It reads as follows:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord turn his face toward you and grant you peace.

The oldest manuscript that still exists from the Old Testament is a series of fragments from the Book of Leviticus. These fragments go back about four centuries before Christ. They were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The oldest complete manuscript we have of a biblical book is also from the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah which is dated about 100 years before the time of Christ.

The oldest complete copy of the entire Old Testament that still exists comes from about A.D. 1100.

The Oldest New Testament Manuscript That Still Exists – P⁵²

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the oldest manuscript whose date is unquestioned is the John Rylands fragment. It is called P⁵². This means it is the 52nd papyrus document of the New Testament that was catalogued. This manuscript is housed in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England.

P⁵² is a very small fragment, 18cm x 22cm, or 2½ inches x 3½ inches. It consists of one leaf (page) that has writing on both sides. It contains John

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18:31-34 on the front (called the *recto*) and John 18:37-38 on the back (the *verso*).

P⁵² has been variously dated from A.D. 110-200. If this early date is correct, then it is possible that it was copied just a few short years after the Gospel of John was composed.

The oldest complete copy of the New Testament is *Codex Sinaiticus*. It was copied about A.D. 350. It also contains the entire Old Testament in Greek.

Codex Vaticanus is a near complete copy of the New Testament. It was written a little earlier than *Codex Sinaiticus* (about A.D. 325). It contains the entire New Testament to Hebrews 9.14.

The letters of Paul to Philemon, Timothy and Titus, along with the Book of Revelation are missing from this manuscript.

Earlier Dates Are Claimed For Three Other Manuscripts

While P⁵² has the early uncontested date for a New Testament manuscript, there have been claims by various scholars that three other texts are actually earlier. They are 7Q5 from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the papyrus fragment labeled P⁶⁴, and the Chester Beatty papyri P⁴⁶.

7Q5

The Dead Sea Scrolls is the name given to thousands of manuscripts that were found in caves alongside the Dead Sea in 1947. These manuscripts found were mostly written in Hebrew. Many of them contained copies of Old Testament books. In fact, there are copies of parts of every Old Testament book except Esther.

However, one entire cave, Cave 7, contained fragments written in Greek. At first, one particular fragment in Cave 7, called 7Q5, had not been identified with any known writing. In 1972, A Spanish scholar named Jose O'Callaghan claimed that this tiny fragment was actually from the Gospel of Mark. 7Q5 has been dated at A.D. 50.

This would mean that a copy of Mark's gospel was already made less than 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no doubt about the early date of this fragment, what is in doubt is its identification with the New Testament. In fact, most scholars today have rejected this identification of 7Q5 with Mark.

P64/P67 (P4)

P⁶⁴, the 64th papyrus manuscript of the New Testament that was catalogued, is usually dated about A.D. 200.

However, in 1994 a German scholar named Carsten Peter Thiede, contended that this small fragment from Matthew's gospel should be dated in the first century—possibly as early as A.D. 66. If true, this would clearly

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mean that the gospel of Matthew was written at an early date when eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus were still around.

It has been discovered that P⁶⁴ is part of the same manuscript as another papyrus fragment, P⁶⁷. In addition, some think that P⁴, a different papyrus document, was also originally part of that same manuscript.

As is true with 7Q5, most scholars reject the early dating of this manuscript.

P⁴⁶ - The Chester Beatty Papyri II

P⁴⁶, part of the collection of Chester Beatty papyri, contains all of Paul's letters except First and Second Timothy and Titus. The usual date for this manuscript is around A.D. 200.

However, in 1988, a scholar named Young K. Kim, dated them in the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian, A.D. 81-96 of the first century. If his dating is correct, then we have a copy of Paul's letters which were written less than thirty years after his death.

Yet, like the previous two examples, the early dating of these manuscripts has not won favor in the scholarly community.

Therefore, we should not use them to argue for an early date of the New Testament.

Summary To Question 6

What Is The Earliest Part Of The Old Testament That Still Exists?

What Is The Earliest New Testament Manuscript That Still Exists?

The oldest written portions of the Old Testament that still exist are a number of silver amulets dating from the sixth to the seventh century B.C. The oldest fragment from a manuscript that still exists is from the Book of Leviticus. It could be dated as early as four centuries before the time of Christ. The earliest complete copy of an Old Testament book is the Isaiah scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was copied some one hundred years before the time of Christ.

The oldest undisputed fragment of the New Testament that has survived is known as P⁵². It contains a small portion of the Gospel of John. It has been dated from A.D. 110-200. The oldest complete copy of the New Testament is Codex Sinaiticus which dates from around A.D. 325-350.

There are three other writings that have had earlier dates claimed from them. Fragment 7Q5 from the Dead Sea Scrolls has been identified by some as coming from the Gospel of Mark. P⁶⁴ is claimed to have been composed in the first century A.D. Claims have also been that the Chester Beatty manuscript, P⁴⁶, was actually written late in the first century.

The claims concerning these three documents have not convinced a majority of scholars.

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Question 7

Upon What Materials Were The Books Of The Bible Originally Written?

During its history, the books of the Bible were written upon a number of different surfaces. There is evidence from the writings of the Bible with respect to what surfaces it was written upon. They include the following.

1. Stone

One of the most ancient of all writing surfaces was stone. Job mused:

Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! (Job 19:23,24 NIV).

We also read that the Ten Commandments were written upon stone tablets. The Book of Exodus says the following:

One day the LORD said to Moses, “Cut two flat stones like the first ones I made, and I will write on them the same commandments that were on the two you broke” (Exodus 34:1 CEV).

Therefore, we have a couple of instances where Scripture speaks of engraving or writing something in stone.

2. Wooden Tablets

Some of the notes made by the prophets Habakkuk and Isaiah were perhaps written upon wooden tablets. We read the following:

The LORD answered me: Write down this vision; clearly inscribe it on tablets so one may easily read it (Habakkuk 2:2 CSB).

Isaiah also spoke writing on a tablet:

Now, write this on a tablet for them, and inscribe it in a book so that it will be there in the future as a permanent witness (Isaiah 30:8 God’s Word).

Thus, we have biblical evidence that tablets were also used to record Scripture.

3. Clay Tablets

Clay tablets were popular in the ancient Middle East for the straight lines of cuneiform script. However, they were not as adaptable to the Hebrew script with its curved lines. It is possible that some of the early books of the Bible, including possible sources for the Book of Genesis, were written upon clay tablets.

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The above materials would only have been suitable for texts of short length. The writing of the biblical books probably employed other surfaces.

4. Papyrus

Papyrus is one of the most ancient writing materials known to humans. It was used in Egypt three thousand years before the time of Christ. This surface was made from the papyrus plant which grew in swampy areas in the delta of the Nile River. Papyrus is referred to in the Bible. We read the following in the Book of Job:

Can papyrus grow up where there is no swamp? Can rushes grow tall without water? (Job 8:11 God's Word).

Actually, the English word "Bible" is derived from the word *byblōs* which is a word for papyrus.

6. Leather

Another surface used was leather. Leather scrolls had the advantage over papyrus in that they did not wear out as quickly. Of all the ancient materials used for writing, only papyrus and leather were capable of being adapted to a scroll format.

7. Animals Skins (Parchment)

The skins of animals were also used to receive writing in the ancient world. This is known as parchment or vellum. Parchment was the main surface used for books from the fourth century A.D. until the Middle Ages.

8. Paper And The Printing Press

Paper began to come into use during the Middle Ages. It had been invented in the first century A.D. in China and the knowledge of its manufacture came to Europe during the eighth century.

Finally, with the invention of the printing press, the Scriptures were mass-produced.

This briefly sums up the various materials upon which the books of Scripture were originally written.

Summary To Question 7 Upon What Materials Were The Books Of The Bible Originally Written?

The books of Scripture were written on a number of different surfaces. These include stone, wooden tablets, clay tablets, skins of animals (parchment), papyrus, leather, paper.

Finally, they were able to be mass-produced with the printing press.

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Question 8

In What Form Were The Biblical Books Originally Written?

The common book format of antiquity was the papyrus scroll or the leather scroll. As far as we can tell, all of the books of the Old Testament were originally written upon scrolls.

The Use Of Scrolls

The papyrus scrolls were made by gluing sheets of papyrus together and then winding the strips around a stick. The leather scrolls were made by sewing together a number of pieces.

This was a difficult form of book to work with because it required both hands: one to hold the scroll, the other hand to slowly draw out the sheets. After the scroll had been read, the reader would reroll it.

Some of the scrolls were lengthy. The standard size of a papyrus scroll was ten inches high and about thirty feet long.

The Division Of The Biblical Books Into Scrolls

This standard scroll size was probably the reason that the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses, were divided into five equal parts. It would be similar to a modern work that is published in five volumes—it was a large, unified work by one author.

While First and Second Samuel are two different books in modern English Bibles, the Jews considered them as one book. The same holds true for the books of Kings and Chronicles.

Each of these books could be written on a single scroll in Hebrew. However, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, it was necessary to use two scrolls for each of these books. This is due to the fact that Greek writing uses more space than the Hebrew because it has vowel letters while the original Hebrew did not. Hence, we now have First and Second Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

The Isaiah Scroll

The only biblical scroll that was found complete was the one from Isaiah. There were seventeen leather sheets that were sewn side by side to make this scroll. The scroll had fifty-four columns with twenty-nine to thirty-two lines of writing. The entire scroll had 1633 lines.

Jesus Read From The Scroll Of Isaiah

Jesus read a portion from the scroll of Isaiah in a synagogue in Nazareth. Scripture records the event as follows:

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He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-20 NIV)

This passage speaks of Jesus unrolling the scroll. He would have held the book in both hands and unrolled it with his left hand. To reach chapter 61 of Isaiah Jesus would have had to unroll most of the scroll and then roll it up again.

The Scrolls Were Plentiful

Scrolls were plentiful during the time of Christ because they were not that expensive to make. It has been calculated that the entire Isaiah scroll could have been copied in three days.

Therefore, to produce a scroll of that size it would cost hiring the scribe for three days as well as the cost of the materials. For a cheap papyrus scroll, a scribe would be paid about two denarii a day.

Thus, if a person wanted to buy a copy of the Isaiah scroll, they would pay for the work of the scribe as well as the cost of the materials.

Consequently, to own a scroll of Isaiah, the total cost would be about four days wages for the average working man of that time.

The Codex

The codex was different from the scroll. It was made with papyrus sheets which were assembled in leaf form and written on both sides. There is good evidence that the codex was invented by Christians in the first century A.D. to arrange the different biblical books into one volume and make the passages easier to find.

There are remains of papyrus codices (the plural of codex) containing Greek texts of the Old and New Testament books that have survived from the first and second centuries A.D.

At first, the codices were made of papyrus. However, it was soon discovered that parchment, or treated animal skins, could also be written on both sides. These animal skins were more durable and would last longer than papyrus. The parchment codex made it possible to produce many, or all, of the books of the Bible in a single volume.

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All of the early existing manuscript copies of the New Testament were written in codex form. In other words, they all have pages. Until this time, the codex was only used for note taking.

This is in contrast to the Old Testament and the Greek literature of the time which were all written upon scrolls. It was not until the fourth century that we find more texts in book-form rather than in scroll form.

The Codex Encouraged The Books To Be Placed In A Certain Order

In fact, it was the invention of the codex that caused believers to consider what order to place the various books. When only scrolls existed, this was not a problem. They could all be kept separately in a container. However, once you place a number of writings in codex, the books must be placed in some kind of order. At first, the order of the books was not consistent. Eventually, it became more standardized.

Some Advantages Of The Scroll Over The Codex

The codex had the following advantages over the scrolls:

1. The scribe could write on both sides of the papyrus or parchment manuscript rather than just on the one side.
2. Because the codex was writing on both sides, only half as much space was used to write the document. The scroll was much more wasteful because only half of it was used.
3. The codex was much easier to carry. It allowed Christians to put their sacred books into one bound volume instead of carrying a number of scrolls.
4. The scroll was awkward to use. To find a particular passage it may have involved unrolling several feet of the scroll. A person could find a particular passage much easier in a codex.
5. The codex would encourage some sort of regular, or standard, order to be given to the books of Scripture.

However, even after the invention of the codex, scrolls continued to be used for some time.

Summary To Question 8 In What Form Were The Books Of The Bible Originally Written?

The biblical books were originally written on scrolls. Eventually they were put into codex or book form. The codex, or book form, made reading and studying much easier.

There is evidence that Christians actually invented this particular form in the first or second century A.D.

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Question 9

How Is The Age Of An Ancient Manuscript Determined?

Most ancient writings are undated. In other words, there is nothing in the text that specifically states when it was written. This is also true for the copies of the biblical manuscripts.

The earliest New Testament manuscript that has a date in it comes from the 9th century A.D. Consequently, scholars must use a variety of methods to determine the age of a manuscript. They include the following.

1. The Materials Upon Which The Work Is Written

One way that the age of a manuscript can be determined is by the materials upon which the document was written. The earliest writings of humans were preserved in stone. As time progressed, the materials changed.

Leather scrolls were used prior to the use of papyrus codices (books). The materials are an important key in dating the work because of the different historical periods when these surfaces were in use.

2. Letter Formation - Paleography

Paleography is the science of the study of ancient writing. It examines the way scribes formed their letters when they were writing or copying something.

As writing progressed, the way in which the various letters, and combination of letters were formed changed somewhat. By closely observing the changes, paleographers can provide a basic time frame when the document was written.

For example, the earliest Hebrew characters resembled pronged-shape Phoenician script. This is known as paleo-Hebrew. After 400 B.C. the letters were written in more a square shape.

In addition, the size and shape of letters changed as writing evolved. Certain letters were formed differently during history. Sometimes a document can be dated almost precisely, due to the way some of the letters were formed.

To determine the various handwriting styles during different times in history, it is necessary to have documents that contain some type of date in them. Fortunately, there are a number of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic documents that do indeed have dates.

For example, there are Aramaic texts from an ancient Jewish military colony in Egypt that contain dates in the reign of King Darius II of Persia. We know that he ruled from 423-404 B.C.

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Consequently, scholars can use these documents to determine the way letters were formed during that time. More and more ancient documents are being discovered with dates in them. This allows scholars observe how the formation of letters changed over time.

When one discovers an ancient text without a date, the handwriting is compared to a dated text which is similar in style. Since most of the documents in the ancient world were written by professional scribes, they tended to look relatively similar for a given period of time.

Gradual changes would enter and these changes can be readily observed. Since more and more of these dated ancient documents are being discovered, scholars can be more precise in their dating of documents that have no date contained in the manuscripts.

However, the science of paleography can only give general dates to manuscripts—not exact dates.

In the New Testament period, documents were first written in large letters known as uncial script. There also was no space between the words.

About the ninth century, New Testament manuscripts began to be written in a different style known as “minuscule” writing. This form of writing became popular and eventually all manuscripts were copied in this style. Therefore, we know the general periods when scribes used uncial writing and when it changed to the minuscule style.

3. The Color Of Ink

Later New Testament manuscripts were written in colored ink and were lavishly adorned by scribes. This is particularly true with Latin manuscripts. When we find a manuscript written in such a manner, we can give an approximate date to it based upon this practice.

4. The Language In Which It Was Written

When we find copies of the New Testament written in languages other than Greek, we can place them into a general time frame. This is because we know approximately when these translations were first made.

Consequently, we know that the manuscript could not have been copied before a certain date.

5. Carbon 14

The carbon-14 dating method was discovered in 1947. It is possible that the process of carbon dating can also be applied to date the existing biblical manuscripts. However, to do this, part of the manuscript must be destroyed.

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In the early years, none of the Dead Sea Scrolls were subjected to carbon 14 dating. Too large a portion of these brittle manuscripts would have had to have been destroyed to get a precise date.

6. Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS)

Accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) is recent innovation. It is a refinement of the carbon-14 dating method. AMS can test documents by using only a fraction of the material that was needed for carbon-14 dating.

Eight manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls were tested with the AMS method. In all but one instance, they confirmed the date that had been given to them by paleographers.

7. Punctuation

The earliest New Testament manuscripts contained no breaks between the words. About the sixth century A.D. punctuation marks began to be used.

By the eighth century many different punctuation marks such as commas, colons, and periods (full stops), as well as spaces between words, were used. Since the employment of punctuation was a gradual process, it helps determine the period during which a manuscript was written.

8. Other Documents Found With The Manuscript

If there were dated documents found with the manuscript, this would help with approximate dates.

For example, biblical manuscripts have been found that have been wrapped inside other documents. Some of these documents have a date on them. This gives us a general idea of the time they were written.

These Factors Help Give Approximate Ages To Ancient Documents

These factors, along with some others, help scholars determine the approximate time a manuscript was composed. However, unless there is a date written on the manuscript, we can only approximate when it was actually written.

Summary To Question 9 How Is The Age Of An Ancient Manuscript Determined?

There are a number of factors that go into determining the age of an ancient manuscript. This includes the material upon which it was written, letter formation, color of ink, the language in which it was written and punctuation. Tests such as carbon-14, and the newer technique AMS, can also give fairly precise dates to ancient documents. Finally, certain biblical documents have been found wrapped inside dated documents. This also gives scholars a general idea as to when the document was written.

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Question 10

When Is The Last Time That The Autographs Of The Biblical Books Were Known To Still Exist?

As far as we know, all of the originals (autographs) of Scripture have long since perished. This brings up the question as to the last time the original of any biblical book was still known to exist. Do we have any information about this particular issue? Did the originals last for centuries?

1. The Book Of The Law Found During The Time Of Josiah

We know from the Old Testament, that a copy of the Book of the Law was found during the time of King Josiah of Judah. This occurred in about 621 B.C. We read about this in Second Chronicles. It states it in this manner:

While they were bringing out the money that had been brought into the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD given through Moses. Then Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan (2 Chronicles 34:14,15 ESV).

We are not certain what "the Book of the Law" refers to. It may be the entire writings of Moses, or it may have been a portion of the Law, we cannot be certain.

In addition, we do not know whether this was the original Law of Moses, or merely a copy of it.

Whatever the case may be, it was an ancient copy of what Moses had written that had been neglected for a number of years. From the time Moses originally wrote the Law, until the time of the discovery of this book in the temple, about eight hundred years had passed.

Apart from this passage, we have no reference to the originals of any Old Testament book existing later in time.

2. The Original Copy Of The Book Of Jeremiah Was Destroyed

We know that the prophet Jeremiah had a copy of his text destroyed. However, after it was destroyed God told Jeremiah to compose it again. The Bible records the episode in this manner:

The Lord spoke to Jeremiah after Jehoiakim had burned the scroll containing what Jeremiah had spoken and Baruch had written down. He said, "Get another scroll and write on it everything that was written on the original scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah burned ... Then Jeremiah got another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah. And as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on this scroll

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everything that had been on the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah burned in the fire. They also added on this scroll several other messages of the same kind (Jeremiah 36:27,28,32 NET).

Happily, none of his original words were lost.

3. The Information Is Slight For The New Testament

Unfortunately, not that much information about the autographs of the New Testament books has come down to us. At best, we seem to have only a couple of references. They include a reference from Peter of Alexandria as well as a reference from the church father Tertullian.

The Testimony Of Peter Of Alexandria

In the writings of Peter of Alexandria, who died in A.D. 311, we find a reference to the autograph of the gospel of John still existing. He wrote:

Now it was the preparation, about the third hour, as the accurate books have it, and the autograph copy itself of the Evangelist John, which up to this day has by divine grace been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful (Alexander Roberts et al, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* down to A.D. 325, Revised by A. Cleveland Coxe, American and auth. ed. 10 Volumes (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1885-1887, reprint edition., Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956-1957) Volume 6: *Fathers of the Third Century*, p. 283).

The Writings Of Tertullian Of Carthage

Tertullian was an early Christian leader who died around A.D. 220. We may have a reference in his writings about the existence of some of the originals of New Testament books. He wrote:

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, utter the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, (in which) you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; (and there too) you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, to get to Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes into our own hands the very authority of the apostles themselves (Alexander Roberts, vol. 3 *Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian*, arranged by A. Cleveland Coxe, p. 260).

While this reference may be to the existence of the originals of some of the New Testament documents at that time, there is a certain ambiguity about what Tertullian wrote.

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It seems the best that can be said is that he may have referred to the originals when he used the words “their own authentic writings are read.”

As we can observe, the information we possess about the missing autographs is scarce and any conclusions we draw are only tentative.

Summary To Question 10

When Is The Last Time The Autographs Of The Biblical Books Were Known To Still Exist?

There is no much available information concerning the existence of the autographs of Scripture. There is a reference in 2 Chronicles to the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple. This was more than six hundred years after the time of Moses. Whether this was the original writing of Moses, or a copy of it we are not told.

We find two references in the writings of men in the early church who refer to the original still existing in their day. Peter of Alexandria speaks of the existence of the original Gospel of John as still existing in the fourth century.

Earlier in the third century, Tertullian, seems to allude to certain originals of New Testament documents that existed in his day. Beyond that we have little information about the fate of the originals of the books of Scripture.

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Question 11

What Exactly Does The Term Autograph Of Scripture Mean?

We must be clear as to what we mean when we are speaking about the “autograph” of a biblical book. There is some confusion, as well as some controversy, as to what exactly the autograph consisted of.

The Autograph Was The Authors’ Original Work

The usual way of describing an autograph of Scripture is the finished work of the author that was sent out to others. It is only this final work that was sent out that can be called the autograph. This could be called the “published edition.”

Could There Have Been Later Additions By The Author?

This brings up an interesting question. What if the author of a biblical book sent out more than one edition of his work? Which one would then be considered the autograph? Would it be the first, the second, or both?

Some Argue There Were Two Editions Of John’s Gospel

For example, some argue that the last chapter of the gospel of John was written by John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, years after the first twenty chapters. Chapter twenty ended with these statements:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30,31 NIV).

It is contended that John put this appendix on his gospel sometime toward the end of his life, chapter twenty-one.

This appendix was written to dismiss a rumor that Jesus said John would not die. We read in John 21:

Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:23-25 NIV).

Therefore, it is contended that the Gospel of John circulated in two forms. It originally contained chapters 1-20 and later, chapters 1-21. The second edition set the record straight about what Jesus said to them about John.

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If this is true, then which do we consider the autograph copy of John's gospel? Most would argue that both versions are divinely inspired Scripture but that the final edition is what we would consider the autograph.

Were There Other Editions Of Ezekiel And Jeremiah?

Some Old Testament scholars have argued that the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah were also published in more than one edition. The reason this is suggested is because there seems to be more than one form of the text for these two books. Because the text seems to be found in more than one form, it is contended that the work was published or produced in separate editions.

Not All Agree There Were Additions To The Autographs

The idea that certain books of Scripture were sent out in more than one form is not universally agreed upon by everyone. There are those who argue that each New Testament book was sent out originally as we find it today without any later additions.

Therefore, it is not an issue as to whether or not there was more than one edition of a particular work. This includes the gospel of John.

The same is true for the books of the Old Testament. The different form of the text for books such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah can be better explained by assuming that they were copied in different geographical areas, one in the Holy Land and the other in Babylon. This would account for the differences in the text as we now have it.

Summary To Question 11

What Exactly Does The Term Autograph Of Scripture Mean?

The term autograph of Scripture stands for the text that the biblical writer sent out. Yet it has been argued that some writers may have sent out their work in more than one version.

For example, it is contended that John's gospel was originally sent out without what we today call chapter twenty-one. It was only sometime later that this chapter was added by John and then sent out. His purpose was to set the record straight as to what Jesus said about whether John would or would not die.

However, not everyone believes this is what happened. Many argue that there was no "second edition" of John's gospel or any other New Testament work. They believe that what we have today represents the only authoritative edition that was sent out.

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Question 12

Could There Have Been Additions To The Autographs Of Scripture By Later Biblical Writers?

Could later biblical authors edit, or bring up to date, the work of a previous author? Would they have the right to change anything that an earlier author wrote?

If this did happen, then which one of the two would be considered divinely inspired? Would it be the original, the later additions, or both?

These are some of the important questions that arise when we consider the possibility of later changes to the biblical text.

Were The Writings Of Moses Brought Up To Date?

This type of change in the text has been claimed to have had occurred in the Old Testament; particularly with the first five books of Scripture, the Books of Moses. The reasons for this claim are as follows.

1. An Area Was Called Dan Before Dan Came Into Existence

The writer of Genesis records the account of Abram, or Abraham, and his men pursuing those who had taken his nephew Lot. The text says that they went as far as the area of Dan in their pursuit:

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan (Genesis 14:14 NIV).

The use of “Dan” in this verse is seen by many as an updating of an ancient place name. We read in the Book of Judges that the original name of this city was Laish or Leshem:

They named it Dan after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel—though the city used to be called Laish (Judges 18:29 NIV).

At the time the event in Genesis 14 occurred, there was no tribe of Dan. Indeed, Dan had not even been born. The birth of Dan is recorded later in Genesis:

Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son. Because of this she named him Dan” (Genesis 30:6 NIV).

We are also told that the tribe of Dan did not settle in that geographical area until after Israel entered into the Promised Land. This was *after* the death of Moses. The city of Dan received its name when the Danites conquered that particular area. We read in Joshua:

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(When the territory of the Danites was lost to them, they went up and attacked Leshem, took it, put it to the sword and occupied it. They settled in Leshem and named it Dan after their ancestor.) These towns and their villages were the inheritance of the tribe of Dan, according to its clans (Joshua 19:47, 48 NIV).

The term Dan was commonly used later in Israel's history to refer to the northernmost part of the Promised Land. Since that area was not named Dan until long after the death of Moses, it would not have been possible for the place to have been called Dan during the time of Abraham, some four hundred years before Moses.

Therefore, Moses would not have been able to call this particular geographical place, "Dan" as it was later called by Israel.

Consequently, it is argued that a later writer of Scripture brought this ancient place name up to date so his readers would understand where this episode took place.

It Could Have Been A Different Area Called Dan

There are some scholars who argue that Dan was the ancient name of the place where these events occurred in the time of Abraham. They contend it was not the same place that later received the name Dan. Therefore, we have an ancient area named Dan that existed before the time of Moses, and a later area called Dan that was named after the ancestor of the tribe. They were not the same place.

2. The Death And Burial Of Moses Is Recorded In The Books Of Moses

There is another case of a portion of Genesis to Deuteronomy that does not seem to be the work of Moses. If the Book of Deuteronomy was actually written by Moses, then why does it include the account of his death and burial?

So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab facing Beth-peor, and no one to this day knows where his grave is (Deuteronomy 34:5,6 CSB).

How could Moses record his own death and burial? There are two possible answers to this often-made assertion.

First, we do not have to assume that Moses wrote the last chapter of Deuteronomy. His writing ended in the previous chapter. Someone, likely Joshua, added the last chapter to close out the career of Moses.

Others argue that Moses did write this chapter. Knowing that he was about to die, he wrote this chapter prophetically of his impending death.

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3. The List Of Edomite Kings Before There Were Kings In Israel

The Book of Genesis contains a list of Edomite kings that ruled before there was any king in Israel:

These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king ruled over the Israelites (Genesis 36:31 CSB).

Genesis 36 then goes on to list a number of different Kings of Edom. To many, this seems like something that was written after the time of Moses. There were no kings in Israel until the time of Saul, hundreds of years after the death of Moses.

So, here is the question. Why does the writer name these kings of Edom that existed hundreds of years before there were kings in Israel? The simplest answer seems to be that this list was not written by Moses, but rather inserted into the text long after his death.

These are three of a number of examples where it seems that Moses did not write the text that is traditionally credited to him. What are we to make of this? How should this question be answered?

What Do We Make Of These Possible Changes?

If these changes did indeed take place, then how should they be classified? There are different views that Christians hold with respect to this issue.

1. These Changes Are Called Scribal Additions, Not Additions To The Autograph

It is usually argued that any later addition to the writings of Scripture were works done by scribes who were copying the text. Since the ancient terms had become incomprehensible to the later reader, the scribe, copying the text replaced the ancient term with the more understandable one.

Therefore, the changes were made to allow the readers to understand exactly where the event took place.

In the case of the Edomite kings, the scribe added the fulfillment of the prophecy that there were eventually to be kings from Jacob's family. The fulfillment occurred during the time of Saul.

2. The Text Was Updated By A Divinely Inspired Prophet

Others hold that a later prophet, under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, brought the text up to date. Instead of considering it the work of a scribe copying the text, it was actually the work of prophet of God who was divinely led to update the text.

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It has been suggested that the changes could have been made by either the prophet Samuel, King David, or the scribe Ezra. Each of them was divinely inspired of God to write Scripture.

Therefore, it would not be inconsistent to argue that God used them to update the text in a few small places.

Objections To The Idea That Changes Were Made By Later Prophets

Those who believe that these were not changes made by later prophets make the following arguments.

1. They Were No Changes Made In The Original

Some argue that none of these so-called scribal additions ever occurred. They argued that everything that is presently found in Genesis through Deuteronomy was originally written by Moses. They offer a number of alternative explanations for the so-called scribal additions.

For example, it is argued that Moses could have spoken prophetically. He could have written the names of the cities as they would eventually be called, not what they were originally named.

While this is certainly possible, it would mean that the text of Scripture would have stood for a number of years without anyone understanding it. Only when the names of the cities were changed would the story make sense.

2. Only The Original Writer Was Divinely Inspired

It is also contended that only the original writer of the document was divinely inspired. Therefore, any later changes, additions, or subtractions would be categorized as the work of scribes copying the text.

These changes, even if true, are not to be considered divinely inspired Scripture. It would be the same situation as later scribes copying the text. Their changes are not to be given the same status as the original text.

Of course, the problem with this view is that all we have in manuscript form is the text as it stands *today*. The original names, if they were there, are not found in any copy of the Old Testament. This would seemingly mean that we do not have the divinely inspired Scripture in these cases, only later scribal changes.

3. Where Do We Stop?

There is also the concern that once we allow for later changes in the original text of Scripture, there is no place where it stops. Why stop with just a few instances? Why not argue that certain books were not really the work of the traditional author but rather later additions by a person, or persons, who used the name of the biblical author?

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Indeed, once we allow any changes to the divinely inspired text, there is no reasonably place to stop. This is exactly what the unbelievers argue. They assume prophets like Isaiah or Daniel did not actually write the books that are credited to them. However, this is not where the evidence leads us.

Furthermore, it is not necessary to assume that this practice was widespread. One can argue that this happened in only a very few instances rather than assuming this was a standard practice.

Thus, we are dealing with a small number of instances where the text may have been updated by either a later scribe or by an inspired prophet of God. Whatever the case may have been, it does not affect the meaning of the message nor does it contradict the idea of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Summary To Question 12 **Could There Have Been Additions To The** **Autographs Of Scripture By Later Biblical Writers?**

There is question as to whether or not later authors updated some of the place names that were used by earlier authors? Could this have happened? If it did, then which would be considered the autograph?

Would it be the original writing by the biblical character?

It seems that there are a few places in the Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, where the text was later updated to be more understandable by later generations.

There are a number of ways in which believers deal with this issue. One perspective is to deny that there were ever any changes made. What we have today in the first five books of Scripture is exactly what Moses originally wrote.

Others do not feel this is a satisfactory answer. Some contend that any changes that were made were scribal changes to the text. As the text was copied, the scribes changed the ancient name to the more modern name to make it understandable to the readers.

There are others who believe that the changes were not made by scribes but rather by prophets who had written other parts of Scripture under divine inspiration.

In these cases, the divinely inspired authors brought the ancient names up to date. The meaning of the passages certainly would not change with the updating of place names.

It does not seem inconsistent with the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture that later prophets could do some small editing in the work of former prophets—particularly if the meaning of the text was not altered by the changes. In any case, these changes were rare.

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Question 13

How Does The Practice Of Textual Criticism Relate To The Idea Of A Divinely Inspired Bible?

Textual criticism is the discipline of recovering the exact wording of a text. Some people feel that the practice of textual criticism is unnecessary when it comes to Scripture because it undermines the belief in a divinely inspired Bible. Since the Bible is God's Word to humanity, it is not for human beings to attempt to establish what the Lord said and what He did not say.

However, this perspective does not take into account the facts as they exist. There are a number of important points that should be made.

1. The Autographs Are Missing

The autographs, or originals, of each book of the Bible have long since perished. There does not seem to be much chance of the discovery of the original version of any of the biblical books.

2. No Manuscript Or Printed Text Is Identical To The Original

We also know that no manuscript that we presently have, not any printed text that has been produced, is identical to the autographs. Every manuscript has mistakes that were made by copyists. While these errors may not change the meaning of the text, their existence shows the manuscript is not word for word the same as the original. This is true for both the Old and New Testament.

3. There Are Not That Many Significant Variations In The Text

We should also emphasize that the percentage of variant readings in the text of Scripture is not that high.

For example, in the standard Hebrew printed text, BHS, only about 10% of the text has any variation whatsoever. This means that 90% of the text is certain. With respect to the 10% where there is some uncertainty, no doctrine of Scripture is affected by their existence. The message of Scripture would remain the same no matter which of the variant reading were chosen to put into the text.

The situation with the text is even better in the New Testament. There are only about fifty places in the entire New Testament where there is any variant reading that has any significance. No doctrine of the Christian faith, or command for people to obey, rests upon a questionable text.

Therefore, the issue of variants in the text should be put in some sort of overall perspective.

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4. The Errors Can Be Detected

A point that needs to be stressed is that the great majority of the errors in the transmission of the text can be easily detected. For the most part, they are obvious errors of copyists.

For example, we sometimes see the same word written twice in the text. We also find that an entire line of text has been omitted because the last word on the next line had a similar ending as the line that was being copied.

Thus, the scribe, seeing the ending that he had just copied, accidentally skipped an entire line of text. Fortunately, humans are able to spot errors such as these and correct them.

5. The Originals Were Error Free

Again, we stress that when originally given, the books of Scripture were error-free. The science of textual criticism is working backward from the available evidence to reconstruct a perfect document.

Therefore, the divine inspiration of Scripture, on the one hand, only refers to the originals, while, on the other hand, the printed text that is made from the manuscript copies is essentially error-free.

Summary To Question 13

How Does The Practice Of Textual Criticism Relate To The Idea Of A Divinely Inspired Bible?

The doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture takes into account the fact that the autographs are missing and that textual criticism is necessary to recover the original text. It also realizes that no two Hebrew or Greek manuscripts read exactly alike. Surviving manuscripts that contain more than a few verses will have some copyist errors in them.

Yet when we consider the entire text of Scripture the number of copyist mistakes is minimal. We have every reason to believe that the originals were without error.

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Question 14

Where Can We Find The Biblical Manuscripts That Still Exist?

There are many manuscripts (hand-written copies) of Scripture that still exist. Indeed, thousands of Old Testament manuscripts survive, while upwards of thirty thousand New Testament manuscripts are known to exist. These manuscripts can be found today in museums, private collections, and libraries around the world—there is no central place where all of them are kept.

Listings Can Be Found Of The Major Manuscripts

There are certain reference works that list where the major manuscripts of the Bible are kept. This is true for manuscripts of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. A list of the biblical manuscripts can be found the following sources

1. Some Lists Of Existing Old Testament Manuscripts

A list of important Hebrew manuscripts can be found in the latest edition of BHS (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*). This is the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament. BHS lists the major Hebrew manuscripts and where they can be found.

In addition, Claremont Graduate School, in Claremont, California, has an archive of biblical manuscripts which include both Old and New Testament.

2. Some Lists Of Existing New Testament Manuscripts

A listing of some of the important New Testament manuscripts, and their present location, can be found in the latest edition of the Greek New Testament that is published by the United Bible Society; *The Greek New Testament*, 5th Revised edition, edited by Barbara Aland and others, United Bible Society, 2014.

This gives a small sampling of some of the places where the one can find where the various biblical manuscripts are housed.

Summary To Question 14

Where Can We Find The Biblical Manuscripts That Still Exist?

There are many thousands of manuscripts that still exist which contain part of the biblical text. For example, thousands of Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament are in existence today. In addition, over 5,000 Greek manuscripts still exist. Add to this there are thousands of copies of versions, or translations, of Scripture are still in existence. These manuscripts can be found in various places around the world including museums, libraries, and private collections.

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Question 15

What Does The Bible Teach About The Providential Preservation Of Scripture?

One of the main issues of discussion among Bible-believing Christians with respect to discovering the original text of the Bible revolves around what is known as the “providential preservation of Scripture.”

Simply stated, “Does the Bible teach any doctrine as to whether the Scriptures will be miraculously or providentially preserved by the Lord throughout history?”

In other words, do we find any promises in the Bible that God’s written word will always be preserved intact with nothing added and nothing deleted? Basically, we can put Bible-believing Christians into three categories.

Option 1: There Is No Providential Preservation Taught In Scripture

One side says there is nothing in Scripture which promises God’s Word will be providentially preserved. While they do not deny that the written Word of God has been preserved throughout history, they do not believe that any passage of Scripture clearly teaches this to be true.

In other words, while the providential preservation of Scripture has actually happened in history, nothing found in the Bible makes this a necessity.

Those who argue against the Bible teaching the providential preservation of Scripture make the distinction between the divine inspiration of Scripture and its providential preservation. They claim that there is nothing in the doctrine of the divine inspiration which necessitates that the Scriptures be providentially preserved. The texts used by those who claim Scripture does indeed teach providential preservation have been either misunderstood or misused.

Option 2: Providential Preservation Is Taught In Scripture

On the other hand, there are Bible-believers who say that the Scripture either directly or indirectly does teach the providential preservation of Scripture. The Bible says that God’s written Word must be preserved—it is not possible that anything has perished.

However, those who affirm this position are divided as to exactly how the Scripture has been preserved.

Option A: The Case For Providential Preservation In All Manuscripts

Some feel God has preserved the text of Scripture in all of the existing manuscripts of the Bible (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). His Word can be

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found among all of the texts which have come down to us throughout history.

However, they do not argue that this has occurred in a miraculous manner. God has used secondary causes to bring this about rather than directly intervening to make it happen.

Thus, while the Bible clearly teaches that God's Word is indestructible, it does not tell how and where His written Word is preserved. God has providentially preserved His word to the human race in the various manuscript copies of the sacred text. It is only by a thorough study and comparison of these manuscripts that we can ascertain the original wording of the text.

Option B: Preservation In A Certain Manuscript Tradition

Some, however, go even further. It is argued that if the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testament Scriptures is a true doctrine, the doctrine of the providential preservation of the Scriptures must also be a true doctrine. God would not allow the same Scripture that He divinely inspired to be lost or corrupted.

Thus, they hold the position which says we should not compare the Scripture to all other books written. We make a mistake when we do this. They do believe that the preservation of this one Book has been miraculous.

God has been directly involved in assuring the Scriptures be preserved. He did so with the Masoretic text, or the traditional Hebrew text, for the Old Testament and the Received Greek Text, the text behind the King James Version, for the New Testament.

Passages Used For Providential Preservation

The following passages are among those often cited to support the doctrine of the providential preservation of the Scripture. We will offer comments on each of these verses to determine if they truly teach the doctrine of providential preservation. The psalmist wrote:

And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times (Psalm 12:6 NIV).

While this verse says that the words of the Lord are without flaw, it says nothing specifically about the preservation of these words. Thus, it does not deal directly with the subject. The psalmist also said:

Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens (Psalm 119:89 NIV).

God's Word is eternal and does stand firm in the heavens but this says nothing about His written Word which has been given to humans.

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In the same Psalm it says:

Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever (Psalm 119:152 NIV).

This passage may be seen as some type of promise that God's written Word would be providentially preserved. The fact that He has established them forever may be viewed as a promise of preservation.

Later, this same psalmist wrote something similar:

All your words are true; all your just laws will stand forever (Psalm 119:160 NLT).

Here we have another verse which could possibly be used to teach that God has promised to preserve His Word forever. The prophet Isaiah said:

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever (Isaiah 40:8 RSV).

These words from the prophet Isaiah can certainly be understood to teach some sort of providential preservation of God's written Word.

We find that Jesus made it clear that nothing from the Hebrew Scripture would ever pass away. He said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17–18 NRSV).

While this could be understood to mean that nothing written would be lost, there are other possible meanings of Jesus' statement.

John records Jesus saying that the Scriptures cannot be broken:

If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35 KJV).

This seemingly has to do with the truthfulness and proper understanding of Scripture rather than a promise that the text would survive intact.

Jesus said that His words would never disappear or pass away. Matthew records Him saying the following:

The earth and the heavens will disappear, but my words will never disappear (Matthew 24:35 God's Word).

This is truly an amazing prediction—a prediction which has come true. Yet it is limited to His spoken words for as far as we know, Jesus never wrote anything.

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Peter wrote about the Word of God abiding forever:

You have been born again, not from a seed that can be destroyed, but through God's everlasting word that can't be destroyed. That's why Scripture says, "All people are like grass, and all their beauty is like a flower of the field. The grass dries up and the flower drops off, but the word of the Lord lasts forever." This word is the Good News that was told to you (1 Peter 1:23–25 God's Word).

God's Word cannot be destroyed and it has not been destroyed! Yet this does not necessarily mean that every word will be providentially preserved.

Conclusion From The Biblical Evidence

From a look at the biblical evidence we do not find any explicit reference to the providential preservation of God's written Word.

However, there are passages from which this may be inferred. There is certainly no specific promise that His Word will be preserved in any one set of Hebrew or Greek manuscripts as some claim.

The good news, to which all can agree, is that God's Word has come down to us in a marvelous way! The Bible we read today provides us with a clear message of who God is, who we are, and what He wants from us.

Summary To Question 15 What Does The Bible Teach About The Providential Preservation Of Scripture?

Does the Bible teach that the Scripture will be providentially preserved throughout history? Do we have God's direct word that nothing in His written Word will be lost or changed? Christians continue to debate this issue among themselves.

Some believers say that God has specifically promised that His written Word will be preserved while others say that He has not.

However, even those believers who do not think the Scripture explicitly teaches the providential preservation of God's Word consider that the historical evidence shows it has been accurately preserved. Therefore, everyone believes that the end result, the Bible, has been providentially protected by the living God.

Basically, believers can be divided into three groups over this issue. First, are those Christians who do not believe that God has specifically promised that the Scripture will be preserved. Again, while not seeing any specific promise in Scripture to this effect, they still believe this is what has happened in history.

A second group believes that the Bible does promise that God will providentially preserve His Word. However, they do not claim that this

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preservation is limited to any one set of Greek or Hebrew manuscripts. It is a general promise of God.

There is a third point of view which claims that not only has God promised His Word will be preserved providentially, this also occurs in a specific groups of biblical manuscripts.

These people advocate the Greek text behind the *King James* translation for the New Testament as well as the standard Masoretic Hebrew text for the Old Testament as the only true text. They insist that all other textual traditions are corrupt.

As for the evidence of providential preservation, there are a number of verses which are cited as direct proof that God has promised such a thing. However, many of them prove no such thing.

There are, however, two verses in Psalm 119 which come the closest to being a specific promise of providential preservation of God's written Word (Psalm 119:152,160).

Other passages could possibly be understood as indirectly teaching or implying the same thing.

While these passages seem to support some idea of the providential preservation of Scripture, they do not support the view of preservation that is put forth by certain individuals and groups—that God has perfectly preserved the Bible to our day in one textual tradition.

Instead, these passages seemingly give a general promise of preservation without specifying either the method which the Lord used or the exact extent as to how He has preserved His Word throughout history.

What we can conclude is that the Word of God has come down to us accurately and the message has come through loud and clear.

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Question 16

What Different Sources Are Used To Establish The Text Of The New Testament?

As far as we know, the autographs (originals) of all of the New Testament books have perished long ago. Thus, we are left with hand-written copies (manuscripts), and copies of copies, to establish the original text.

There Are Three Lines Of Evidence To Establish The Text

In the case of the New Testament there are three lines of evidence available to reconstruct the original. They are the Greek manuscripts, the versions, and the writings of the church fathers.

1. Greek Manuscripts

The oldest and most important evidence to reconstruct the New Testament text are the Greek manuscripts. These manuscripts are categorized according to writing material (papyri), the size of the letters (majuscule and minuscule manuscripts) and the format of the document (lectionaries).

Papyri

The first group of manuscripts, the papyri, is named after the material they were written upon. Papyrus is the surface upon which the originals (autographs) of the New Testament were composed. Strips of the papyrus reeds were pressed together to make this writing material—which is extremely perishable, surviving only in warm, dry climates.

The papyrus fragments that have survived contain some of the earliest witnesses to the New Testament text. In fact, the sixty-five of the earliest New Testament fragments we possess were written on papyri (all dating before A.D. 300).

At the turn of the twentieth century there were only nine known papyrus fragments that contained parts of the New Testament. There are now some one hundred and forty and still counting. These papyrus manuscripts are designated by the letter “p” followed by a superscript Arabic number (e.g. p⁷⁵ or by a capital P followed by the number, e.g. P⁵²).

Majuscules

The second line of evidence to reconstruct the text of the New Testament are known as majuscule manuscripts. There are approximately three hundred majuscule manuscripts of the New Testament—all written on parchment (animal skins). It has been estimated that it would have taken the hides of about 360 sheep and goats to produce *Codex Sinaiticus* (a majuscule manuscript that contained the entire Greek Old Testament and New Testament). Majuscule manuscripts consist of upper-case letters that are deliberately and carefully written.

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There was no punctuation in the sentence and no space between the words. The majuscule manuscripts were basically written between the fourth and tenth centuries—there are five fragmentary majuscules that date from the third century.

Minuscules

In the ninth century A.D., majuscules began to be replaced by a faster method known as minuscule writing. Minuscule writing was a script of smaller letters not as carefully executed as majuscules. By using minuscule writing, books could be turned out much faster. Minuscule writing was in use from the ninth to the sixteenth century.

Lectionaries

The fourth witness, to the New Testament text, are Scripture portions known as lectionaries. The church followed the custom of the synagogue which had a fixed portion of the Law and the Prophets read each Sabbath.

In the same manner, Christians developed a practice where they would read a fixed portion of the gospels and the New Testament letters every Sunday as well as upon Holy Days. These fixed portions are the lectionaries. Fragments of lectionaries come from as early as the sixth century A.D., while complete manuscripts are found as early as the eighth century.

The total number surviving of Greek manuscripts is somewhere around 5,000.

They Are Not Necessarily Complete Manuscripts

When we speak of manuscripts, we are not necessarily speaking of complete manuscripts. For example, of the approximately 5,000, Greek manuscripts that have been catalogued, most are fragmentary. Only three of the uncials are complete. There are fifty-six minuscule manuscripts that contain the entire New Testament. Two other majuscule manuscripts, and another one hundred forty-seven minuscule manuscripts, contain the entire New Testament except for the Book of Revelation.

Material from the gospels is found in 2,328 manuscripts, Acts and the universal letters in another 655 manuscripts, Paul's writings in 779 manuscripts, and the Book of Revelation in 287. No other ancient book has anywhere near the amount of manuscript testimony as the New Testament.

As far as the dates of these manuscripts are concerned, about 125 of them are from the first five centuries (two and one half per cent of the total) while 65% of the manuscripts are from the 11th through 14th centuries.

Other Evidence Written In Greek

Apart from the manuscript evidence, there are some parts of the New Testament found written in Greek on ancient inscriptions and on ostraca,

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or pottery. This evidence is very slight and not really that helpful in determining the original text of the New Testament.

2. Versions (Translations)

Though the total number of surviving Greek manuscripts is larger than all other ancient works, they are not the only means available for reconstructing the original text. A second line of evidence by which the New Testament text can be established comes from the versions. Versions are translations of the different New Testament books into languages other than Greek.

Ancient literature was rarely translated into another language with the New Testament being an important exception. From the very beginning, Christian missionaries, in an attempt to spread their faith, translated the New Testament into the various languages of the people they encountered. These translations, some made as early as the middle of the second century, give us an important witness to the text of that time. Indeed, by the sixth century the entire Bible had been translated into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, and Ethiopic.

When the copies of the manuscripts of the versions are catalogued, again we have a large number, in the thousands.

Because the versions are translations from the original Greek, they are not as valuable as the Greek manuscripts in reconstructing the text. However, they are an important witness to the text's reliability.

3. The Church Fathers

A third line of evidence, used in establishing the New Testament text, are quotations from the writings of the early Christians known as the "church fathers." In their writings, they often quoted from the New Testament text. Every time we find a biblical quotation, we have a further witness to the text.

There Is Early Testimony To The Text

For example, seven letters have survived which were written by a man named Ignatius (A.D. 70-110). In those letters he quoted from eighteen different books of the New Testament. Every time he cites Scripture, we can observe the Greek text he was using.

Consequently, the early church fathers provide us with an excellent early witness to the text. We must be careful, however, in relying too heavily on the fathers because sometimes their quotations were paraphrases (not word for word citations) of the biblical text. In addition, the manuscripts of their writings have gone through a period of copying, during which time mistakes have slipped into the text. Nevertheless, their writings remain an important witness to the New Testament.

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The New Testament Compares Favorably To Shakespeare

We can go a step further and compare the New Testament to the works of William Shakespeare. He wrote thirty-seven plays in the seventeenth century, all after the invention of printing. The originals of Shakespeare's plays have not survived.

Therefore, we are dependent upon copies to reconstruct the text. In every one of his plays there are gaps in the printed text where we do not know what was originally written. Textual scholars attempt to fill in the gaps in the printed copies by making an educated guess as to what it originally said. The New Testament, written some sixteen centuries earlier than Shakespeare, with three quarters of its history copied by hand, is in much better textual shape, needing *no* educated guesses to fill in the blanks.

There Is No Guesswork Needed To Establish The Text

Since we do possess so many manuscripts, we can be assured the original text has been preserved. Consequently, we never have to revert to guessing to determine what the text originally said. The great scholar Samuel Tregelles wrote:

We possess so many mss, [manuscripts] and we are aided by so many versions, that we are never left to the need to conjecture as the means of removing errata (Samuel Tregelles, *Greek New Testament, Prolegomena*).

Modern day textual scholar Michael Holmes concurs:

The sheer volume of the information available to the New Testament textual critic makes it practically certain that the original text has been preserved somewhere among the surviving witnesses (Michael Holmes, *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, Editors David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, Zondervan, 1991, p. 106).

The well-known textual authority, Sir Frederic Kenyon, also emphasized that the totality of the evidence showed that nothing was lost of the original text of 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 (Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and Ancient Manuscripts*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941, p. 55).

All in all, we find that the totality of evidence available causes us to believe that the text of the New Testament has come down to us in a trustworthy manner.

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Summary To Question 16: What Different Sources Are Used To Establish The Text Of The New Testament?

There are three basic sources in which to reconstruct the text of the New Testament. The most important are the Greek manuscripts since the New Testament was originally written in Greek. Consequently, we go to them first to recover the original text.

We have four types of Greek manuscripts to reconstruct the text. They are papyrus manuscripts, majuscules manuscripts minuscule manuscripts, and the lectionaries. The 5,000 or so Greek manuscripts date from the second century until the invention of printing. From the combined evidence of the Greek manuscripts we can be assured that what we are reading today is the same thing as what was originally written.

A second line of evidence is found in the various versions or translations of the Greek New Testament. There also exists thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament in various versions or translations.

However, we are not finished. A third line of evidence can be found in the writings of the church fathers. Quotations found in their writings provides us further information about the text.

With this abundance of evidence there is no doubt whatsoever that the text of the New Testament has come down to us in an accurate manner. Indeed, we can be confident that we are reading the same things which were originally written by the authors of Scripture.

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About The Author

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Don is a best-selling and award-winning author having authored, or co-authored, over seventy books. This includes the best-selling *Answers to Tough Questions*, with Josh McDowell, as well as the award-winning book *Family Handbook of Christian Knowledge: The Bible*. His various writings have been translated into over thirty different languages and have sold over a million copies. His available books can be found on his website www.educatingourworld.com.

Don has traveled around the world proclaiming and defending the historic Christian faith. He has also taught both Hebrew and Greek at the undergraduate level and Greek at the graduate level.