

WEEK 2

HAVE COPIES OF THE BIBLE REMAINED UNCORRUPTED?

*Books referenced in this message are *"Beyond Belief to Convictions"* by Josh McDowell, and *"Evidence That Demands a Verdict"* by Josh & Sean McDowell

Last week we learned that God spoke through 40 ordinary human beings: shepherds, soldiers, prophets, poets, monarchs, scholars, statesmen, musicians, masters, servants, tax collectors, and tentmakers. In other words, God chose to speak through ordinary people to reveal Himself to us.

But God also took great care to ensure that His words were accurately copied and passed down to each generation without His truth being corrupted. You see, we know the original manuscripts – called *autographs* – were inspired by God and without any error or mistake. But those original manuscripts no longer exist. What we read now are copies, of copies, of copies. So how do we know the truth of Scripture was not corrupted through the centuries as the manuscripts were copied and re-copied?

First of all, you have to understand that the Bible was composed long before printing presses were invented. So, if a document was going to be preserved and passed down to the next generation, it had to be written by hand. And, over time, the ink would fade, and the material that it was written on would deteriorate. So, new handwritten copies would have to be made or else the document would be lost forever.

But, what if years later someone who was not inspired by God decided to add some new idea/teaching to the Bible? What if one of the scribes, who was handwriting the copy, got tired and just skipped a whole section or totally misquoted some key verses?

In other words, even if the original authors recorded *exactly* what God inspired them to write, how can we have confidence that what we read today remains true to what they originally wrote?

Thankfully, God didn't leave that to chance. Just as He went to great lengths to ensure that His word was recorded exactly, so He has miraculously ensured that it's been accurately passed down from one generation to another. How?

1. God raised up meticulous scribes.

Scribes were men who dedicated themselves to carefully preserving the ancient manuscripts and producing new copies when necessary. They were well-educated, well-trained men and most (if not all) were priests. So, they understood the Scriptures

that they were copying. And this is one of the reasons that God created the people and nation of Israel (starting with Abraham). He raised up a people who would accurately record, preserve, and pass on God's Word to future generations. From their earliest days as a nation, God told them...

Deuteronomy 6:6–9 “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

The Lord was instilling within the Jewish people a meticulous commitment to God's Word. In fact, it became such a part of the Jewish identity that an entire class of Jewish scholars (called scribes) were established...

- The ***Soferim*** (meaning “scribes”) became the caretakers of the Hebrew Scriptures (around 5th century BC).
- The ***Talmudic Scribes*** took over from AD 100-500.
- The ***Masoretic Scribes*** from AD 500-900.

The Masoretic scribes were even more meticulous than the others. They had incredibly stringent rules for copying the Word of God...

- Each scribe began his day by ceremonially washing his entire body, then getting dressed in specific Jewish clothing before sitting at his desk to begin.
- As he wrote, if he came to the Hebrew name of God, he could not begin writing the name with a newly dipped quill for fear that the ink would smear the name.
- Once he began writing the name of God, he could not stop or allow himself to be distracted, even if the King entered the room. He had to continue without interruption until he finished writing the holy name of God.
- He could only use scrolls (parchments) made from “clean” animal skins, and scrolls could only be joined together with thread made from clean animal skins.
- Each scroll/book had to be written with a specified number of columns, equal throughout the entire book.
- The length of each column had to be no *less* than 48 lines, but no *more* than 60 lines.
- The width of each column had to be exactly 30 letters.
- Each page was first “lined,” then each letter followed the line.
- The ink was to be black, prepared according to a certain recipe.

- The space of a hair had to appear between every consonant, and the space of a small consonant between each word.
- The space of exactly 9 consonants had to separate each column.
- If more than one book was on a single scroll, a space of three lines had to separate each book.
- Nothing – not even the shortest word – could be copied by memory. Each word had to be copied letter by letter while carefully matching it with the original.
- The scribe had to count the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurred in each book and then compare it to the original.
- If a manuscript was found to contain even *one* mistake, it was thrown out and the scribe had to start over.

One scribe told his son, who was in training...

"My son, be careful, because your work is the work of heaven; should you omit one letter or add one letter, the whole world would be destroyed."

– Quoted in *"Evidence That Demands a Verdict"*, pg. 97

Why would they be so thoroughly consumed with getting it right? Because God raised them up for that very purpose! But how do we know their copies remained theologically accurate through the centuries? One great example is because...

2. God preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In 1947 a shepherd boy was playing near some caves on the West side of the Dead Sea near Jerusalem. When he tossed a rock into a cave and heard pottery smash, he decided to investigate. Inside this dry cave, he found jars filled with ancient scrolls. And by 1956, a total of 11 caves had been discovered, containing over 1,000 scrolls!

(Show pic of caves, pot, Isaiah scroll)

Some of these scrolls/books dated back to several hundred years before Jesus was born. Every Old Testament book was found in these scrolls, except the book of Esther. But Isaiah was the only complete book found. This was an amazing discovery because these scrolls were over 1,000 years *older* than any of our other known copies of the OT.

And here's the cool part: when the Dead Sea Scrolls were compared with our modern Bible, it was identical, word for word, in more than 95% of the text.



But what about the other 5%?

Those were mainly just spelling variations, some stylistic changes, or abbreviations that don't change the text in any meaningful way. Let me give you an illustration...

Illustration: Pretend your Aunt Sally (who lived before the printing press) developed a recipe that was worth a LOT of money. When she got the recipe just perfect, she scribbled out the handwritten instructions on a piece of paper.

Then she sent three handwritten copies to her three best friends. They, in turn, made 10 copies each for their own friends. So, now there's 34 copies in existence – Sally's original, 3 to her best friends, and each of them made 10 copies for their friends.

Everything was great until one day Aunt Sally's dog ate the original recipe. So, in a panic she contacts her three friends who have also lost their copies. So, they get all their friends to bring over the remaining 30 copies so they can try to recover the original wording.

When Sally spreads them all out on the kitchen table, she immediately notices differences/variations within the remaining 30 copies...

- **26 copies are the same except for some misspelled words and abbreviations** ("tomatoe" rather than "tomato" and "mayo" rather than "mayonnaise")
- **One copy lists some of the ingredients in a different order** ("bacon, lettuce, cheese" instead of "lettuce, cheese, bacon")
- **Another copy had two phrases inverted** ("mix then chop" instead of "chop then mix").
- **One copy included one ingredient not mentioned in any other copy.**



Can Aunt Sally accurately reconstruct her original recipe from this evidence? Of course she can...

- Sally can easily spot the misspellings and abbreviations and correct them. But even if she didn't, they don't change the recipe anyway.
- She knows that the changed word order doesn't affect the recipe in any meaningful way.
- Sally spots and corrects the inverted phrase easily because she knows you can't mix something that hasn't been chopped.

- She marks out the extra ingredient on the one copy because she knows that it's far more plausible that one person would mistakenly add an ingredient rather than 29 people accidentally omitting it.

This illustration of a recipe is very simplified of course, but you get the point. As an experienced and knowledgeable cook, Sally was able to easily spot and make sense of the variations. And the same is true for experienced and knowledgeable Bible scholars – they're able to easily spot and make sense of the variations in the ancient Scriptures.

So, when you remove those easily explained issues from the 5% of variations, you're left with only about 1% of words or verses that are in question, and that's why your Bible will put a footnote in those locations to point out the word or phrase or verses and say, "Early manuscripts do not have this word/phrase/verse." No one is trying to be secretive about that word/phrase/verse that's in question. And this leads us to our third point...

3. We can trust God's sovereignty.

Even though we have these variations in Old and New Testament copies, none of the variations affect the teachings of the Bible in any meaningful way. And that's why even the most outspoken critics of the Bible like Bart Erhman say...

"Most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology." – "Misquoting Jesus" by Bart Erhman, pg.55

Bart Erhman is the Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He loves to say (in his class, talk shows, podcasts, etc.) that the NT has tons of "mistakes" and "errors." But he *intentionally* and *conveniently* leaves out this statement (above) unless he is pressed to answer the question.

So, LET ME CLARIFY some things. Don't leave here thinking, "I can't trust the Bible anymore because it's full of mistakes and errors." None of the variants found in the Old and New Testament copies affect the fundamental truths of the Bible. Critics (like Bart Erhman) will certainly *imply* that these variants should cause you not to trust the Bible, but those critics are looking for any reason not to trust the Bible.

We have FAR MORE copies of ancient Scriptures than ANY other documents in human history, so we can compare them and see that we have every reason to be FULLY CONFIDENT in the truthfulness or trustworthiness of the Bible!

For a more detailed explanation on the variations within the copies of Scripture, go to: [Scribes & Scripture: How We Got the Bible | with John Meade & Peter Gurry - Cross Examined](#) and ["Misquoting" Jesus? Answering Bart Ehrman \(str.org\)](#) and [Textual Variants: It's the Nature, Not the Number, That Matters \(str.org\)](#)