

# Notes to accompany HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

Many have claimed that the Old Testament contains a number of myths and legends which were created by Jewish writers in the two or three centuries before the time of Christ or soon thereafter. Others would claim that most of the New Testament was written well into the late second century AD by Christian apologists who were creating a Jesus very different from the historical person. They would claim that the gospels are not an eye-witness account at all. Another common claim is that the original writings of the apostles were radically edited by the Catholic Church in the period after the conversion of the Roman Empire, to reflect Catholic doctrine. These people would claim that the doctrines found in the New Testament are very different from the original teachings of Jesus Christ. Still others will claim that there were additional gospels written by the apostles which were excluded by leaders in the early church because of their bias against certain teachings.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

In the case of the New Testament, some scholars have claimed that most of it was written in the second half of the second century AD. Others have pointed out that there are over two hundred thousand errors in the manuscripts that we use to reconstruct the Greek New Testament text, implying that we can only guess at the original writings. Still others have claimed that the Catholic Church made substantial changes to the Bible, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries to remove unwanted teachings and to add statements which would support their own peculiar doctrines. What is the history of the New Testament text, and is there any validity to these claims? Let us examine these questions.

## IMPORTANT GREEK MANUSCRIPTS

Scholars now have nearly ten thousand Greek manuscripts to work from in their efforts to reconstruct the original Greek text.

**1. The Codex Vaticanus, or Codex B.** The Codex Vaticanus is a vellum codex on 759 pages in uncial script. The manuscript has been dated to around 350 AD. It contains the entire New Testament, except Hebrews 9:13-end, I and II Timothy, Titus and Revelation. It also contains all of the Old Testament in Greek except the first few chapters of Genesis and several Psalms. The manuscript has been kept in the Vatican since at least 1481.

**2. The Codex Sinaiticus, or Codex Aleph.** The Sinaiticus manuscript received its name because it was discovered at St. Catharines Monastery on Mt. Sainai in 1844 by the biblical scholar Tischendorf. It was found in a basket of old parchments which were about to be thrown into a fire. This manuscript is now in the British Museum. Like the Vatican manuscript, it has been dated to around 350 AD. It contains much of the Old Testament in Greek, but most significantly, it has the entire New Testament in Greek.

**3. The Alexandrian Codex, or Codex A.** This is a fifth-century codex, containing most of the Old Testament and all the New Testament except a few pages of Matthew, two from 1st John and three from 2 Corinthians. This manuscript was found in Alexandria Egypt but was given as a gift to the king of England in 1621. The manuscript is now located on the British Library.

4. The Washington Manuscript. This manuscript from the end of the fourth century contains the four gospels. It is especially significant, as it contains Mark 16:9-20, unlike the three manuscripts already mentioned.

5. The Chester Beatty Papyri. This is a collection of a number of papyrus codex fragments, located in the Chester Beatty Museum Dublin, Ireland. One of the papyri contains thirty leaves of the New Testament in Greek which have been dated to the late second or early third century (ie. around 200 AD). Another includes 86 of 104 leaves of the letters of Paul from around from the early third century.

6. The Bodmer Papyri. This is a group of manuscripts found in the Bodmer Library of World Literature. Included are a complete manuscript of Luke and John dated to 175-225 BC, as well as a manuscript of over half of the book of John which has been dated as early as 150 AD.

7. The John Rylands Fragment. This papyrus fragment contains only John 18:31-33 and 37,38, which would make it an insignificant find except that it has been dated to 130 AD. This fragment was copied within fifty years of the death of the apostle John.

Besides, the manuscripts are not the only evidence supporting the text of the Greek New Testament. In addition, there exist a large body of letters written by the early church ?fathers? such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and others. These early Christian writers quoted extensively from every part of the New Testament. The letters known as the Epistle of Barnabus, the Didache and the Letter of Clement have all been dated from around 100 AD. These authors quote from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, I Peter and others. The early church father Ignatius was martyred in 115 AD. In a set of letters, he composed on his way to his execution in Rome, he quoted from nearly every New Testament book. Such evidence puts to rest any claims that these books were written in the second half of the second century AD, as some have claimed.

One could continue by mentioning the much more extensive writings of Justin Martyr from around 150 AD, and those of Irenaeus, from near the end of the second century. Experts have claimed that using quotes from early Christian writers in the first three centuries, one could reconstruct virtually the entire text of the New Testament.

### **MISTAKES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT TEXT?**

But what about those two hundred thousand errors in the Greek manuscripts? First of all, this number is so large because there are so many manuscripts. Dividing two hundred thousand scribal errors by the more than five thousand manuscripts brings the number of mistakes into a more realistic perspective. The text of an uncial contains all capital letters, with no spaces between the words, and with no punctuation. In this type of manuscript, if the end of a line was reached in the middle of a word, the copyist simply went to the next line in the middle of the word. For comparison, consider the passage below in uncial-like script.

NOTEVERYONEWHOSAYSTOMELORDLORDWILLENTERTHEKINGDOMOFHEAVEN  
BUTONLYHEWHODOESTHEWILLOFMYFATHERWHOISINHEAVEN

With this type of script, it is easy to imagine even the most careful copyist making a minor mistake such as dropping off a letter, interposing two letters, repeating a line, or skipping a line. The vast majority of the supposed two hundred thousand mistakes in the Greek manuscripts are just such scribal slips of the pen. These errors

are very easily detected and corrected by the scholars who study the Greek text of the New Testament. They have absolutely no effect on the integrity of the Greek New Testament.

Errors:

1. Minor slips of the pen of a copyist. Easily corrected by comparison to other manuscripts.
2. Small changes such as an article being added or a singular being made plural, in an attempt by a copyist to "improve" the text. These have no effect on the meaning.
3. A copyist trying to "improve" the text by making two different accounts in the gospels identical. For example, if the Greek manuscripts exhibit two variant readings of a particular passage in Matthew, and if one of the two readings is identical to a parallel passage in Mark, scholars will lean toward using the reading of Matthew which is different from that in Mark. They do this on the assumption that a scribe had tried to make the two passages identical in an unfortunate but well-intentioned attempt to "improve" the text.
4. Slight differences. For example, in Matthew 11:19, two slightly different readings are found in the Greek manuscripts. Some end with the phrase, "But wisdom is proved right by her children." Others end with the phrase, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions." In this case, the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, the Vatican and Sinai, have actions, while most of the later manuscripts have children. Despite the fact that a majority of manuscripts have the alternative reading, because the earliest manuscripts have actions, most English translations use the word actions.
5. When all the truly minor supposed mistakes in our received Greek New Testament are removed from consideration, the student of the Bible is left with only about a half dozen non-trivial variations in the Greek text. These would include:
  1. John 7:53-8:11. The story of the woman caught in adultery. None of the earliest and most reliable versions include this passage. It is probably a very early tradition of the primitive disciples which was later inserted into John. Almost certainly it is a genuine story, but it was not part of the original book of John. This passage is not controversial because the story is so consistent with everything we know about Jesus.
  2. Acts 8:37 and 1 John 5:7. These examples are listed together because the nature of the evidence is similar. In both cases, absolutely none of the earliest manuscripts include these passages. They are both rather transparent attempts by scribes to "improve" the text to support orthodox doctrine. They found their way into the King James version because in 1611 only much later Greek manuscripts were available. None of the modern English translations include these passages, except in the marginal notes.
  3. Mark 16:9-20. This is an account of Jesus' final words to his disciples. Virtually every Greek manuscript, including the Alexandrian, includes this passage. The problem with this is that the two exceptions are the Sinai and the Vatican codices. These two are universally considered the most authoritative manuscripts. Besides, the oldest version of the Syriac translation of the New Testament also does not include Mark 16:9-20. In

the final analysis, one cannot say with absolute certainty whether this passage was in the original Mark or not.

4. Mark 15:28. The phrase “and the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘He was counted with the lawless ones.’” Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include this verse. It is fairly likely that a later scribe added this comment, pointing out the fact that Jesus fulfilled Isaiah 53:12, after Mark wrote his gospel. Clearly, the meaning of Mark is not changed one way or another by including or excluding this little phrase. Either way, we have Isaiah 53:12 in our Bibles, and Jesus fulfilled this prophecy.

A couple of other similar but less significant examples could be mentioned, but that is it! Of the five examples listed above, only one is actually controversial.

## **THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON**

The fact is that the authority of the letters of Paul, of the Gospels and the book of Acts, as well as the other books of the New Testament was established in the early second century by acclamation of the church. The New Testament books were chosen by the church as a whole on the basis of the fact that these particular books had apostolic authority. The data is conclusive that by about 150 AD a more or less fixed list of accepted writings was already circulating amongst the churches throughout the Roman world. There were minor differences in some of the lists, but these were worked out by about 200 AD.

## **THE TEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

1. The Cairo Codex (Codex Cairensis). A codex of the former and latter prophets dated at 895 AD.
2. The Leningrad Codex of the Prophets. This codex includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets. It is dated at 916 AD.
3. The Leningrad Codex (Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus) This is the oldest Hebrew copy of the entire Old Testament. It was copied in 1008 AD.

All of these manuscripts are examples of what is known as the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were a group of Jewish scribes who were active in Tiberias, a town on the Sea of Galilee from about 500-1000 AD.

Before even starting to copy the scrolls or codices, the scribe was required by the Masoretes to go through an elaborate ceremony. In order to preserve the integrity of the text, the Masorete scribes counted all the letters in the Old Testament. They kept track of such arcane details as the middle verse of the Pentateuch (Leviticus 8:7). They also found the middle verse of the entire Hebrew Bible (Jeremiah 6:7). They were aware of the middle word of the whole Old Testament, as well as the middle word of each book. They also kept record of the middle letter and verse of each book. Taking it to the extreme, they also counted the number of times each Hebrew letter appeared in each book and counted the number of verses which contained all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. All this was intended to produce exact copies of the Scriptures. Imagine doing all this letter and word counting, and using it to check every copy of the entire Old Testament. And they did not have word processors!

The Talmud contains rules for copying the Hebrew scriptures similar to those of the Masoretes. One list of the regulations from the Talmud is recorded below.

A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. The length of each column must not extend over less than forty-eight, or more than sixty lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. The whole copy must be first lined; and if three words be written in it without a line, it is worthless. The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any other color and be prepared according to a definite recipe. An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate. No word or letter, not even a yod (a vowel mark), must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him?. Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread must intervene; between every word, the breadth of a narrow consonant; between every new section, the breadth of nine consonants; between every book, three lines. The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line, but the rest need not do so. Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, wash his whole body, not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him?. The rolls in which these regulations are not observed are condemned to be buried in the ground or burned; or they are banished to the schools, to be used as reading books.[1]

## **THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS**

Before 1948, despite all the evidence already presented, the oldest available Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament were made over one thousand three hundred years after the original. Clearly this is a very long gap, allowing great room for errors in transcription. This gap was closed considerably with the discovery of what is known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The story of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is now famous. In 1948, an Arab boy looking for a lost goat happened upon a cave in the hills above the Dead Sea. In the cave he discovered a trove of clay jars containing a number of very old parchment scrolls. He removed some of the scrolls from the jars. Ultimately, some of the scrolls ended up in a marketplace where they were recognized by a dealer for what they were. These scrolls had been hidden in the cave by members of the Qumran community.

Following the initial discovery, a careful search of the caves in the area revealed a large number of well-preserved scrolls. The scrolls had been hidden away some time around 100 AD, but some of the manuscripts were as old as 250 BC. The Dead Sea Scrolls include at least fragments of almost every Old Testament book. Included is a manuscript of the entire book of Isaiah which has been dated to 100 BC or earlier. Also included in the Dead Sea Scrolls were two manuscripts of the books of Samuel. One of these is a copy of forty-seven out of an original fifty-seven pages of the book from the first century BC. The other is a partial manuscript of 1st and 2nd Samuel from the third century BC. That is only about two hundred years after the last book of the Old Testament was completed. Another major find is a scroll containing forty of fifty-seven pages of the book of Exodus in a very old type of Hebrew script known as paleo-Hebrew. This manuscript is from just after 200 BC.

To get a feel for how significantly the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls moved the date of the earliest available manuscripts toward the time of the books actually having been written, consider the graph below.

(Editor's note: This graph will be visible in the power point. It shows that about 80% of the gap between the last book of the OT was written and the time of the previously oldest manuscript was bridged by the discovery of the DSS)

Last	Oldest	Oldest available
OT book	Dead Sea	manuscript before
written	Scroll	Dead Sea Scrolls

Do we have a nearly perfect copy of the original Old Testament writings? The simple answer is no. We know from the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls what we could have guessed without it. Over the many hundreds of years in which the Jewish scribes copied the Old Testament, a significant number of minor changes in spelling, word order and grammatical usage crept into the text.

In fact, the Hebrew script is particularly prone to minor copying errors. Some of the Hebrew letters are very similar. For example, the Hebrew letters kaph (?) and resh (?) are very difficult to distinguish. Similarly, the letters he (?) and heth (?) could easily be mistaken for one another. The fact that the Hebrew text, like the Greek, includes letters without large spaces between words, made it very difficult to produce perfect copies. Besides this, the original Hebrew writing was without vowels. This was an additional impediment to producing perfect copies.

Another problem in producing a perfect copy of a Hebrew manuscript arose with the use of numbers. The Hebrew script used letters for numbers, similar to the use of Roman numerals. With words, a copier can use the context to help decide what letter is being used. For example, if one saw a manuscript with a line such as the man ran to the store, with one obscured letter, they can easily decide that the missing letter is an 'n', not a 't'. In general, numbers do not offer such contextual clues. It is easy for 510 soldiers to become 500 or 51 or 5100. In general, one should be careful about assuming that when numbers are found in the Old Testament, they are exactly the same as written in the original.

It would be helpful to summarize some of the conclusion of this chapter:

1. We have a Greek text of the New Testament which is an almost exact copy of the original writings.
2. Theories that all or parts of the New Testament were written well into the second century or that major changes were made to the New Testament during the third or fourth centuries are simply unsupported from the evidence.
3. The New Testament canon was essentially fixed by 150 AD and has certainly remained unchanged since about 200 AD.

4. The canon of the New Testament was set by general consensus of the first and second century Christian teachers based on apostolic authority.

5. It would be an overstatement to say that we have a Hebrew text of the Old Testament which is an almost exact copy of the original writings. Copying the rather difficult Hebrew script over many centuries allowed a number of changes in numbers, in spelling and in other minor details. Nevertheless, the evidence allows one to conclude that the received text of the Old Testament is remarkably close to that of the original writings.

6. The canon of the Old Testament was set by general consensus of the Jewish teachers perhaps as early as 400 BC, but almost certainly by 200 BC. The books were chosen because they had the marks of inspiration.

[1] From Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1958) pp. 78-79.