



Lesson 12: Critical Questions on Bible Inspiration

Preservation and Transmission of the Text

HAS THE TEXT OF THE BIBLE BEEN CHANGED AS IT HAS BEEN COPIED THROUGH THE CENTURIES? If we accept that the original Scriptures were truly inspired by God, there are still important issues to consider. For one thing, none of the original "autograph" books of the Bible still exist. We have none of the original works in the handwriting of inspired men or their scribes. What we have for the most part are copies of copies of copies. So the question is this, have the original texts been preserved by accurate copying through the centuries?

Many critics of the Bible claim that it cannot be trusted because so many errors have occurred in the copying, transmission and translation of the original text. Even some who claim to believe that the Bible was originally inspired make such allegations. This would include Mormons and Muslims who claim to believe that God gave us the Bible, but do think that it has been accurately copied and translated – especially in places where it contradicts what they believe and practice!

GOD PROMISED TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE HIS WORD IN THIS WORLD!

Those who deny that we have an accurate reproduction of God's word, while claiming to believe in God, are in essence saying that God has not kept His promise to preserve His word. In Isaiah 40:8, the prophet of God said, "The word of our God stands forever." In His first epistle, the apostle Peter quotes this passage from Isaiah and also affirms that Christians have "been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and **abides** forever" (1 Peter 1:23). Psalm 100:5 states that, "the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations."

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

Jesus trusted copies! What inspired writings or Scripture did Jesus have access to? The Scriptures Jesus used were originally written from 1,400 to 400 B.C. Scribes copied and recopied these texts. What was available in Jesus day were copies of copies of the Hebrew text and translations of it into Greek and Aramaic. Jesus' use of these copies shows that He regarded them as legitimate renderings of God's word. In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus read from a copy of Isaiah, a book written 700 years earlier, and copied for generations.

Jesus used translations! The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek about 280 B.C. in a translation that is known as the *Septuagint* (LXX). Scholars believe that more than one half of the New Testament citations from the Old Testament are from the Septuagint. Jesus appears to refer to the Septuagint translation in Mark 9:12 and elsewhere [Malachi 4:6 in the Septuagint states that Elijah would "restore" the hearts of the fathers].

The *Targum* is an Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible. There are significant examples in which Jesus' language agrees with the Targum. His reference to Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark 4:12 concludes with ". . . and it be forgiven them." Only the Isaiah

Targum reads this way. The Hebrew and the Septuagint read "heal" (as it does in Matthew 13:15 and John 12:40).

The witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The initial discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was made by a young Bedouin herdsman named Muhammed edh-Dhib (*Muhammed the wolf*) in 1946 or 1947. Looking for a stray goat, Muhammed stumbled onto a cave near the Dead Sea containing a number of jars, some holding ancient scrolls. As news of the discovery spread, both archeologists and Bedouins began to search other caves in the area for more scrolls. Among the hundreds of caves explored, a total of eleven that contained manuscripts were found in the region of the Wadi Qumran on the northwest side of the Dead Sea. These caves produced twelve complete scrolls and thousands of scraps and fragments. In all, parts of 800 distinct manuscripts were discovered in the 11 caves. Among the many Biblical scrolls, there are 200 copies or partial copies representing every book of the Old Testament except Esther.

Scholars are now nearly unanimous in dating the writing of these scrolls from 250 BC to 68 AD. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament was the 10th century A.D. Aleppo Codex. The Dead Sea manuscripts of Old Testament books predate the Aleppo Codex by 1,000 years. Two important observations should be made:

- First, the Old Testament text that had been copied and handed down over the centuries (the Mesoretic Text) varies little from the texts of Old Testament books found at Qumran. This fact bolsters our confidence that manuscripts which have been copied and copied and copied for centuries can still be very accurate.
- Second, the variations that do exist are also often found among the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves in instances where multiple scrolls of the same texts have been discovered and compared. The fact that there are slight variations among even the Dead Sea texts indicates that they themselves must have been the end product of copying copies of copies for centuries.

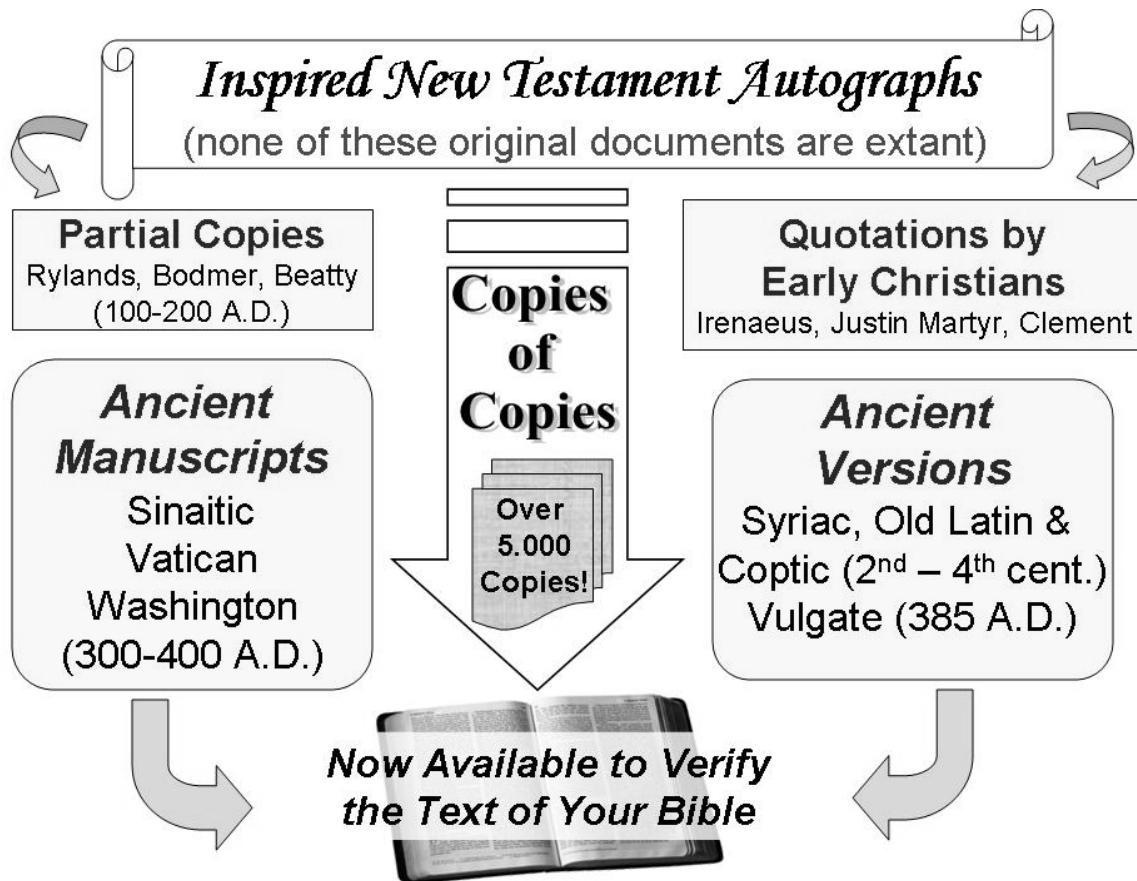
Because of the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts, scholars are now more confident than ever that what we have in our Bibles today is an accurate rendering of the original 39 Old Testament books. As we shall see, confidence in the faithful transmission of the New Testament text is even greater.

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

From the beginning, the writings of the New Testament were meant to be shared and spread among Christians (see Colossians 4:16; Galatians 1:1-2; Revelation 1:4). The original inspired autographs were copied, copied and recopied and handed down from generation to generation. This text is sometimes called the Received Text. The King James Version was translated from Received Text sources in 1611 A.D. Since that time, there have been earlier partial and entire manuscripts discovered such as Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Codex Washingtonius. There are also many quotations of Scripture in the uninspired writings of early Christians. Doy Moyer states that, “Even if we did not have full copies of New Testament documents, the text of the New Testament could be virtually reproduced through the quotes of early church leaders” (*Standing on Solid Ground*, p. 55).

There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, over 10,000 Latin Vulgate translations and at least 9,300 other early versions (MSS). We have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in existence today.

No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers. In comparison, the *Iliad* by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century A.D. Plato lived from 427-347 B.C., and we have only seven copies of his writings, the earliest dating to 900 A.D., over 1,200 years after being written. Nobody doubts that we have faithful copies of *The Iliad* or the writings of Plato, but the text of the New Testament has far greater textual validation than those works. In fact, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament" (F.F. Bruce)



THE ISSUE OF VARIATIONS IN THE MANUSCRIPTS

How many variants are there? When one hears that there are thousands of variant readings in the Greek NT, he must consider that "if one word is misspelled in 3,000 manuscripts this is counted as 3,000 variant readings" (Geisler & Nix). Renowned textual scholar F.J.A. Hort said, "The amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole...and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the test." Virtually every noteworthy textual variation (and some that are not noteworthy) can be found and examined in the footnotes of many of the newer translations of the Bible into English. It is possible to judge for yourself the reliability of the text.

FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: How would you answer someone who claimed that our Bibles cannot be trusted because they are filled with alterations from being copied and translated?