

The Original Bible

The Origin and Integrity of the Original Text of the Bible

INTRODUCTION

We do not have the autographs (originally penned documents) of the Bible. What we have are copies in the form of handwritten manuscripts and other artifacts like inscriptions on stone, metal or shards of pottery. Scholars have done remarkable work in deciphering the origins of the Biblical text as far as its careful transmission and preservation. Because we believe in both an inspired and inerrant Bible, we believe God has providentially preserved the text over many thousands of years. Subsequently, we can be confident that the Bibles we read today are based on a very accurate reflection of what was originally penned by the authors of Scripture.

Inspiration. Inspiration is the belief that God divinely inspired the text of the original Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God [i.e. God-breathed].” In other words, He directly moved particular authors (2 Pet. 1:21) to write down what He intended for them to say so that His people would know His will and purposes for history and humanity. God inspired authors in different ways (see Heb. 1:1). For example, God spoke directly to Moses, gave David inspired lyrics, supplied Solomon with divine wisdom, gave prophets dreams and visions, providentially directed historians to gather the right information, helped Jesus’ disciples to recall His teachings and prompted Apostles to write letters of authoritative instruction to the churches. In each case, these men acted as spokesmen for the very voice of God although often conveyed in language that was distinctly their own. In most cases there was no such thing as mechanical dictation and in other cases, the authors may not have even been aware that they were divinely inspired at the time they first wrote.

Inerrancy. Inerrancy is the belief that the original text of Scripture is without error. This means several things. First, it means that the authors correctly and accurately wrote down precisely what God intended them to without errors in the transmission. Secondly, because their writings reflect a divinely inspired text, the text contains no factual, historical, theological, scientific errors, etc. Because God is the author of truth and cannot lie, His word is wholly truthfully and free of any kind of errors. The only possibility of errors in the Bible are those scribal errors that may have inadvertently crept in during the process of later transmission (i.e. copies made later). However, this is so minimal that it is virtually a non-issue (see below).

Both inspiration and inerrancy concerns the autographs of Scripture (i.e. the original documents penned by the inspired authors) and not its copies. However, the extent to which we are able to recover the original text of Scripture is the extent to which we may have confidence in its inspired and inerrant character. Because we have unassailable evidence that the present critical Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT) text assembled by scholars today is essentially the same as that originally penned thousands of years ago we may have confidence in the Word of God. What few scribal errors have crept into the text of Scripture via later transmission (i.e. copies) in no way affects the overall integrity of the text. No important doctrines or critical facts are affected. Thus, the Bible we have today is wholly trustworthy and our confidence in its trustworthiness increases as more and more newly discovered evidence supports its integrity.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

The Old Testament (OT) must be treated separately from the New Testament (NT) since the environment in which it was formed and transmitted is different.

A. Origins of the Old Testament

The OT was written over a period of roughly 1000 years starting with Moses in 1445-1405 BC and ending in 450-400 BC with Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi. The OT canon (i.e. which books are inspired and therefore belong in the OT) was not decided all at once as some claim. Rather, as books were recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative, they were deposited in the Tabernacle (1440-996 BC) or Temple (996 BC – 70 AD) for safe keeping and use.

For example, after God told Moses to write everything down He spoke to him (Exod. 24:4; cf. Isa. 30:8) Moses told the Levites to put the “book of the Law” next to the Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 31:24-26) where it remained for centuries. “The book of the Law” here probably referred to all the first five books of Moses (i.e. of the OT). These books are often referred to as the “Law of Moses” or simply the “Law” (*torah* in Hebrew). Later, it seems Joshua deposited his own writings next to those of Moses (Josh. 24:26) and Samuel did the same (1 Sam. 10:25 – the phrase “placed before the Lord” means the presence of the Lord as manifested in the Holy of Holies where the Ark rested). This appears to have begun a tradition of placing books of the OT in the Tabernacle or Temple once they were written and recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative. This long tradition explains why “The book of the Law” was rediscovered in the Temple in 622 BC (800 years after Moses) by Hilkiah the High Priest during Josiah’s reign. It had been neglected during Manasseh’s 44 year reign. There appears to have been a succession of writing prophets who passed the mantle of these traditions down from one prophet to the next.

Evidence of this passing of the prophetic mantle along with its traditions can be seen in the continuity of the books of the OT. For example the style, language and theology of the history of Israel finds continuity from the Pentateuch (i.e. the 5 books of Moses) through Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. These books are often referred to as the Deuteronomistic history because of the tradition Moses began in his books, particularly the book of Deuteronomy. Note the similarity in links between the conclusions and beginnings of these historical books:

Compare Deut. 34:5 with Josh. 1:1

Compare Josh. 24:29-31 with Judg. 2:6-9

Note similar Farewell speeches in:

Deut. 34 (Moses); Josh 23 (Joshua); 1 Sam. 12 (Samuel); 1 Kings 2:1-4 (David);

1 Kings 8:54-61 (Solomon); and 2 Kings 17 (grand conclusion by author)

The history of the kings also reflects the passing of the prophetic mantle. In this regard we see a tradition of a succession of prophet-historians who carefully chronicled Israel’s royal history.

King: Prophet-historian:

David Samuel, Nathan & Gad (1 Chron. 29:29)

Solomon Nathan, Ahijah & Iddo (2 Chron. 9:29)

Rehoboam Shemiah & Iddo (2 Chron. 12:15)

Abijah Iddo (2 Chron. 13:22)

Jehosaphat Jehu (2 Chron. 20:34)

Manasseh “Seers” (i.e. prophets) (2 Chron. 33:18-19)

According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon had 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs. According to Prov. 25:1, men from the days of Hezekiah (250 years later) transcribed a portion of these proverbs for the book of Proverbs which also contains wise sayings from other men. A similar compilation was done for the Psalms which contains largely poetry from the pen of David as well as other Hebrew poets and song writers. Since the Psalms were crucial for Israel's worship, no doubt this collection of inspired poetry was retained in the Temple precincts where worship was centered.

The divinely authoritative nature of the OT was widely recognized in its writings. For example, the phrase "Thus says the Lord" occurs 419 times in the OT, a stock phrase of the prophet acknowledging the divine source of his message. Daniel acknowledges Jeremiah as being divinely inspired as he mentions him while consulting "the books" (Dan. 9:2). "The books" (note the plural) was a euphemism for the various books that made up the Hebrew Scriptures. There must have been an accessible collection of the presently acknowledged Scriptures while the Jews were in exile. During the post-exilic period, both Ezra and Nehemiah put a renewed emphasis upon the Scriptures. Both in Ezra 9-10 and Neh. 8-9 the Scriptures take on renewed importance for the returning exiles. According to 2 Maccabees 2:13 (a non-canonical book written in 124 BC) Nehemiah housed books of the OT in the newly rebuilt temple.

It was during the inter-testamental period of time (400 BC to the birth of Christ) that the OT canon was regarded as complete and took on the 3-fold designation that continues for Jews to this day. The Hebrew Scriptures took on the name TaNaK (Tanach). The term is an amalgam of the first letters for the 3 divisions of the Hebrew Bible:

T = Torah (Law)

N = Neviim (Prophets)

K = Ketuvim (Writings)

Jesus acknowledges this 3-fold designation in Luke 24:44: "Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" The "Psalms" here was another way of referring to the Writings since the book of Psalms was the first book to appear in the Writings. Sometimes the OT went by the short-hand designation of "the Law and the Prophets" (cf. Matt. 5:17; Luke 16:16-17). In Luke 11:51, Jesus acknowledges the beginning and end of the Hebrew canon when He speaks of the blood of Abel (Genesis) to the blood of Zechariah (see 2 Chron. 24:20-22). Josephus (a first century Jewish historian) acknowledged the same designation for the canonical Hebrew Bible and even mentioned the number of books which corresponds to the accepted canon of 24 books (not the 39 of the Christian canon, but the same books nonetheless). The Hebrew Bible (Tanach) looks like this:

The Law (Torah/ Pentateuch/ 5 Books of Moses) – 5 Books

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

The Prophets (Neviim) – 8 Books

Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1&2), Kings (1&2),

Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (Minor Prophets)

The Writings (Ketuvim) – 11 Books

Poetry: Psalms, Proverbs, Job

Five Little Scrolls (Megilloth): Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther

Histories: Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles (1&2)

B. The Integrity of the Old Testament's Later Transmission

Having explored the history of the origin and formation of the Hebrew Bible, the question that remains is how do we know that what we read today accurately reflects what was originally written? The question has been answered by the scholarly discipline of textual criticism. Textual criticism involves the careful examination of all the copies we have of the OT in an effort to determine what the original said. We have copies of the OT in the form of handwritten manuscripts dating back to 250 BC as well as artifacts and inscriptions on pieces of stone, metal and shards of pottery. Most of these documents and archeological artifacts are written in Hebrew (both the older Paleo-Hebrew script and the later Aramaic square script that is still used today).

As far as handwritten documents, the Scriptures were written on papyrus, leather or parchment. Papyrus is a plant that grows along the Nile River in Egypt. The stem was cut and unrolled and then its strips were laid down side by side with another layer laid on top at right angles. The milky liquid from the stem served as a glue for the strips. These were then formed into scrolls to be written on. Parchment (a later writing material) was made from specially treated animal skins and was more durable and expensive than papyrus. Hebrew scribes (those who copied the Scriptures) had meticulous methods for copying the OT books. When copies became worn from use and age they were taken out of active use and stored in a room called a genizah (meaning "hidden"). After a period of time, the documents were ceremonially buried where they eventually deteriorated. Copies were never destroyed due to the fear of desecrating the sacred name of God, Yahweh (LORD in English Bibles). This tradition explains why we do not possess very many ancient Hebrew copies of the Scripture.

Nonetheless, what we do have confirms for us that we possess a very accurate text today. The reason is because the Hebrew scribes took great care in copying the Scriptures. By the first century, scribes had developed careful rules for copying Scripture which probably has a tradition going much further back in OT times. Ezra (5th century BC) renewed the scribal practices of the Jews that probably formed the basis for the scribal practices we know were present in the first few centuries AD. Some of these rules are as follows:

Scribal Rules

- 1) One must have an authentic master to copy from. No word or letter could be copied from memory. The scribe must copy directly from the master and in no case was he to deviate.
- 2) While transcribing the scribe must sit in full ceremonial dress.
- 3) Only clean parchments could be used and the whole document carefully lined.
- 4) Each column could have no less than 48 and no more than 60 lines.
- 5) The ink must be black of a special mixture.
- 6) Each word must be verbalized aloud as it was written.
- 7) The pen must be wiped clean and the body must be fully washed before writing the sacred name of God, "Yahweh" (LORD in English Bibles).
- 8) A review was to be made after 30 days. If 3 pages required correction, the document was to be discarded and a new one started.
- 9) The letters, words and paragraphs must be counted. The middle letter, word and paragraph must correspond with the master copy. Also, no 2 letters could touch each other. If these requirements were not met, one was to start again.
- 10) No document containing God's Word could be destroyed. Instead, they were stored in special hiding places and then buried where the elements later destroyed them.

Witnesses to the Hebrew Bible

There are both primary witnesses (documents written in Hebrew) and secondary witnesses (documents written in other languages – i.e. translations) to the original text of the Hebrew Bible.

Major Primary Witnesses (Hebrew)

- Silver Amulet (650 BC)
- Nash Papyrus (169-37 BC)
- Dead Sea Scrolls (225 BC – 68 AD)
- Masoretic Text (895-1100 AD)

Major Secondary Witnesses (Translations)

- Samaritan Pentateuch (1150 AD)
- Septuagint (150 BC to 850 AD)
- Aramaic Targums (150 to 750 AD)
- Syriac Peshitta (450 to 650 AD)

Masoretic Text

The Masoretic text is the most important witness to the OT. The Masoretes were scribes that operated in schools from 500 to 1100 AD. They used hundreds of medieval manuscripts of the OT that are lost to us today to make their copies of the OT. They developed a highly sophisticated “textual apparatus” that consisted of careful textual notes in the margins of the manuscripts they worked from. These included variant readings where the traditional text seemed to be in error. They kept the traditional reading in the main body of the text with the corrected version in the margins based on careful analysis of all the manuscripts they worked from. They also developed a system of pronunciation in the form of vowel markings that went above and below the consonantal text (Hebrew only has consonants, no vowels). For example consider the Hebrew text for Genesis 1:1 (note Hebrew reads from right to left):

בְּרֵאשִׁית
בְּרָא
אֱלֹהִים
אֵת
הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְאֵת
הָאָרֶץ׃

in the beginning
created
God
the
heavens
and the
earth

Several thousand Masoretic manuscripts have been found dating from as early as 895 AD. The 2 most important are the incomplete Aleppo Codex (925 AD) and the complete Leningrad Codex (1008 AD). The Leningrad Codex is a copy of the complete OT and is the basis for the modern critical Hebrew text of the OT (*Biblia Hebraica*) from which most modern translations are made.



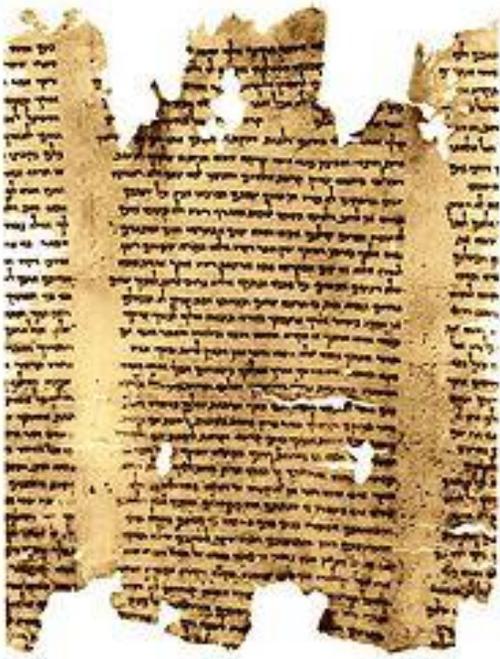
Aleppo Codex – book of Deuteronomy



Leningrad Codex – book of Exodus

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The most important Biblical archeological find to date is the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 along the hills of the Dead Sea near the town of Jericho. A shepherd boy discovered a cave that contained jars with hundreds of scrolls rolled up inside (eventually 11 caves with such scrolls were found). They were part of a group of Jews known as the Qumran community. Roughly 230 of these manuscripts contain either portions or entire scrolls of every book in the OT except Esther. They date from 225 BC to 68 AD (nearly 1200 years earlier than the Masoretic text). 80% closely match the Masoretic text while the other 20% follows the Greek Septuagint and other versions of the OT (see below). A complete Isaiah scroll (125 BC) is virtually word for word the same as the Masoretic text. Only 3 words differ between the 2 and those words are merely a difference in spelling. As an analogy consider how the British spell *saviour* instead of the American *savior* (the difference being the addition of ‘u’ after the ‘o’).



Scroll of Isaiah (Dead Sea Scrolls)



Nash Papyrus

Nash Papyrus

In 1928 the Society of Biblical Archeology in England acquired a papyrus fragment from an Egyptian antiquities dealer that contains a combination of OT texts. The texts include Exod. 20:2-17 from the 10 commandments and Deut. 6:4, the famous “Shema” (Hebrew for “hear”) which says: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” This papyrus dates to the Hasmonean period (169-137 BC) and was likely used for devotional or liturgical purposes.

Silver Amulets

Another amazing archeological find were silver amulets (called the Ketef Hinnom Plaques) that contains the priestly benediction from Numbers 6:24-26. This artifact dates back to around 650 BC (the time when Manasseh was king of Judah and Nahum was a prophet). Again, the text on the amulets accurately reflects that of the Masoretic text some 1700 years later.

The Septuagint

The Septuagint (Latin for “seventy”) is a Greek translation of the OT (it is sometimes designated as LXX – 70 in Roman numerals). The Septuagint was commissioned by the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II (285-246 BC) so that the great library in Alexandria could have a copy of the OT. The High Priest Eleazar appointed 6 scribes from each of the 12 tribes to do the translation (thus, 70 rounded from 72). The text does not reflect the Masoretic text as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls and thus represents a variant textual tradition of a proto-Masoretic text. The Septuagint was the primary Bible of Jews living outside of Israel (who were called the Diaspora). These Jews were not as familiar with Hebrew and were influenced by Hellenism (Greek culture). The Septuagint was also widely quoted in the NT and this shows that even though it was based on a slightly different textual tradition that did not keep it from forming part of the divinely inspired text of the NT. Here is a list of some of the more important manuscripts of the Septuagint:

<u>Manuscript:</u>	<u>Date:</u>	<u>Contents:</u>
Chester Beatty Papyri	2 nd to 4 th c. AD	Various parts of OT
Oxyrhynchus Papyri	1 st to 9 th c. AD	Genesis thru Ruth, Psalms & Prophets
Rylands Papyri	2 nd c. BC to 5 th c. AD	Gen., Deut., Chron., Job & Isa.
Codex Vaticanus	4 th c. AD	All of OT (originally)
Codex Sinaiticus	4 th to 5 th c. AD	Most of OT
Codex Alexandrius	5 th c. AD	All of OT (originally)

Samaritan Pentateuch

The Samaritan Pentateuch is the product of the Samaritans who were post-exilic Jews that were forced to intermarry with other Semitic people after the Assyrian conquest in 8th century BC (cf. 2 Kings 17). By the Hasmonean period (2nd cent. BC) the Samaritans developed their own peculiar brand of Judaism in which they only accepted the Pentateuch (i.e. 1st 5 books of Moses). The Samaritan Pentateuch was written in a special script that was an archaic form of Hebrew using a distinctive Samaritan alphabet. Therefore, it differs from the later square script used in the Masoretic tradition. It was first penned sometime between the 5th and 2nd centuries BC. The earliest manuscripts date from the 11th to the 13th century AD. It differs considerably from the Masoretic text and sometimes follows the Septuagint. The value of the Samaritan Pentateuch is in its explanatory notes which help textual critics understand the Masoretic text better.

Aramaic Targums

During the Babylonian Captivity (605 to 536 BC) the Jews adopted Aramaic alongside Hebrew. Subsequently, the Jews translated portions of the OT (except Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel) into Aramaic. The term “targum” means explanation or commentary. The targums were in fact expanded translations (like a modern paraphrase) and also included explanatory notes on the text. Various versions of the Targums date from the 2nd to the 8th century AD.

Syriac Peshitta

The Syriac Peshitta (meaning “common”) originated in the 1st to 2nd century AD, possibly in either Jewish or Christian circles. It was written in Old Syriac, another Aramaic version of the OT. The earliest copy is from the 5th century AD with a complete version in the 7th century. It follows the Masoretic text in most places and the Septuagint in others. Sometimes it resorts to paraphrase like the Aramaic Targums.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

A. Origins of the New Testament

The NT was written over the course of about 50 years. The first book was written by James around AD 45 and the last book of Revelation was written around AD 95. The NT consists first of all of 4 gospels that chronicle the life and teachings of Christ. Attached to Luke's gospel is the book of Acts, a chronicle of the early Church up to the time of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome around 60 AD. The rest of the NT consists of letters written to churches, individuals or groups of believers in particular regions of the Roman Empire.

The Gospels and Acts

The 4 gospels have received tremendous attention in the scholarly world especially since the 1980's. There are at least 4 reasons for this.

- The gospels represent an unprecedented literary form in the ancient world.
- They contain the primary source material for the life of Christ.
- The person of Christ has generated universal appeal.
- The life of Christ has produced the most remarkable incidents in biographical history and subsequently He has become the most interesting and polarizing person in history.

The written gospels are based on oral tradition. As was common in early rabbinic culture, Jesus gathered a community of disciples who sat under His teaching (i.e. Rabbi means teacher). It was common for rabbinic students to memorize the teaching of their rabbi. Ancient Near Eastern oral culture maintained carefully memorized significant events in the life of their community.

In this case, Jesus' disciples maintained careful memory of significant events in Jesus' 3 year ministry (possibly even keeping notebooks). In fact, Jesus promised His disciples that they would recall His teaching by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The 12 disciples served as gatekeepers of this oral tradition as it spread within the early Christian community – first in Jerusalem and then elsewhere (Eph. 2:20; Heb. 2:1, 3-4; I John 1:1-4; Jude 1:3). As leaders of the community, it was their responsibility to make sure the oral tradition maintained its accuracy. Oral cultures have a remarkable degree of accurate retention of facts and sayings. This explains the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke which are often called the synoptic gospels (meaning from the same point of view). The slight differences between these 3 accounts are because they represent a common but independent oral tradition in connection with each author. Matthew represents the tradition he maintained and historically Mark represents the tradition Peter maintained. Some believe each of the gospels were dependent on each other in one way or another. That is not necessarily the case. If it were, we would expect far more homogeneity (i.e. precise identity in all parts) between the gospels. The fact that none agrees in every detail indicates independent traditions based on the same common transmission of the facts.

Luke explains his gospel in his prologue which says (Luke 1:1-4):

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

When Luke speaks of his “account” as representing that which was “handed down” he is most likely talking about the oral tradition that has been transmitted to the Christian community over time and may consciously include the accounts of Matthew and Mark. Luke was not content to accept the tradition without confirming the facts by “having investigated everything carefully from the beginning.” Notice also that the eye-witnesses are a reference to the disciples. Luke is concerned about the “exact truth” and so he demonstrates his trust in the oral tradition represented by the Apostles as seen in Mathew and Mark. But because his gospel is an independent confirmation of the facts it does not agree in every respect with the other 2 synoptic accounts. Matthew, Mark and Luke were written somewhere between the early 50’s to the early 60’s AD, some 20 to 30 years after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension.

John is the most unique of the 4 gospels. It was written sometime between 80-90 AD, some 50 to 60 years after the fact. It differs from the other accounts in that John did not see the need to repeat the same material that had become fixed in the synoptic tradition. Instead he drew from a wider source of the tradition (the gospels obviously did not record everything Jesus said and did – cf. John 21:25) which included His own personal eye-witness recollections (John 21:24). John records a greater deal of Jesus’ extended teaching and several other important events.

The transition from the strictly oral tradition to the written gospels became important once Christianity spread beyond the smaller tighter knit Christian communities in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. The inability to maintain the accuracy of the tradition as Christianity spread to other parts of the Roman Empire where the Apostles had less control precipitated the need to have these accounts written down. Additionally, as they knew they would not live forever, a permanent record of Christian origins was necessary. We do not know where Mathew and Mark’s tradition was first composed and for whom it was composed. But it becomes clear that each of the gospels proliferated the early church very quickly. Luke’s gospel was composed for a man named Theophilus. He was most likely a high ranking Roman official (note how Luke addresses him as “most excellent”) and convert who may have paid Luke to compose an account of the life of Christ in addition to a second account of the early spread of Christianity in the Empire (see Acts 1:1). John’s gospel may have been composed for the churches of Asia Minor located around Ephesus which became an important center of Christianity in the late 1st century. John ministered in this city for many years before his death around the turn of the century.

The NT Letters

As Christianity spread, the need for local churches arose. Much of the spread of early Christianity was the work of planting churches in strategic cities throughout the Roman Empire. Many of these churches were planted by the prolific efforts of the Apostle Paul. Thus, the bulk of the NT letters were written by Paul (13 out of 21 letters). The rest were written by the Apostle Peter (2), the Apostle John (3), the author of Hebrews (who is unknown), James the half-brother of Jesus and Jude the other half-brother of Jesus. Both of Jesus’ half-brothers became believers after His death and resurrection. James was the primary pastor and leader of the early church in Jerusalem. We could add to this collection of letters the book of Revelation. This book began as a series of visions the Apostle John received while in exile on the isle of Patmos and is largely prophetic in nature. However, it was originally composed and sent to the 7 primary churches of Asia Minor. As each of the NT letters was recognized as having Apostolic authority, they were copied and disseminated throughout the churches across the Empire (cf. Col. 4:16).

The Codex

A codex is a bound set of hand-written manuscripts in pages called “leaves” similar to all modern books. The codex as a format for written documents was first prominently used by Christians in the early church. The reason the codex was adopted was because manuscript materials (mostly parchment and papyrus) could be written on both sides making it more efficient and inexpensive than scrolls. A codex could contain a larger amount of written material than scrolls. Codices also were more convenient to use and read. The evidence indicates that early on many of the books of the NT were bound together in sets and distributed throughout the churches. For example early codices of the 4 gospels have been discovered as well as codices of all Paul’s letters. Some scholars believe Paul made personal copies of his letters and may have later published them in such bound editions for distribution. In either case, the binding of large numbers of NT books in codices allowed the Church to recognize and preserve these books as part of the accepted canon of new divinely inspired Scriptures.

B. The Integrity of the New Testament’s Transmission

Having explored the history of the origin and formation of the NT, we turn now to its transmission and preservation in the centuries to come. Can we be certain that the NT we read today accurately reflects what the authors originally composed? The short answer is, yes as will be seen in the evidence presented below. As with the OT, we have no autographs (i.e. originally penned documents by the authors). But, the discipline of textual criticism allows us to reconstruct the original NT by collating thousands of extant manuscripts dating from as early as 125 AD thru the first several centuries of church history. There is a far greater abundance of NT manuscripts than there are for the OT mainly because the early Christians did not have a tradition of burying worn out copies of the Scripture nor limiting their distribution. Nonetheless, the early Christians were as meticulous as the Jews in accurately copying the NT books.

Witnesses to the New Testament

There are primary witnesses (manuscripts in Greek) and secondary witnesses (translations, lectionary readings and citations from the Church Fathers) to the original text of the NT.

Major Primary Witnesses (Greek)

Papyrus Manuscripts (125 AD – 6th cent.)

Uncial Manuscripts (4th to 10th cent.)

Minuscule Manuscripts (9th to 16th cent.)

Major Secondary Witnesses

Lectionaries (Greek)

Translations

Patristic Citations (various languages)

Papyrus Manuscripts

The earliest and most important witnesses to the NT are early manuscripts written on Papyrus. There are 137 such manuscripts. Two of the most important collections are the Chester Beatty Papyri (2nd to 3rd century) and the Bodmer Papyri (175-200 AD). The Chester Beatty collection contains all of the books the NT and the Bodmer collection contains portions of John, Acts, 1-3 John, Jude and 1 & 2 Peter. The earliest manuscript of the NT is a portion of John 18 dating to 125 AD (part of the Rylands Papyri collection). It is called P⁵² (Papyrus 52). That would place this manuscript roughly 40 years after the original. A newly discovered manuscript (2011) has been made of a portion of the gospel of Mark called P¹³⁷ (Papyrus 137), the latest of the important papyri manuscripts. It has Mark 1:7-9 on the front side and Mark 1:16-18 on the back side. It dates to around 200 AD.

Uncial Manuscripts

Early Greek handwriting was of 2 sorts. For normal everyday documents, a ‘running’ cursive style of script was used because it was faster to write. For special literary documents, a carefully written script that employed upper case letters was used. Thus, most of the early copies of the NT employed the Uncial style of script. There are over 300 such manuscripts for the NT. In this style, there is no separation of words (i.e. all the letters run together and is called *scriptio continua*) sometimes making it a little more difficult to decipher (although that is rare). For comparison sake, the English letters GODISNOWHERE could be read as “God is nowhere” or “God is now here.” Also, these manuscripts often employed special *nomina sacra* (i.e. “sacred names”) where divine names like “God”, “Lord”, “Jesus”, “Christ” and “Son” were written only using the first and last letters of the name. This is important evidence that the Church very early on regarded Jesus as divine contrary to what many critical scholars today try to say about the early Church.

There are 3 important Uncial manuscripts. Codex Sinaiticus is regarded as the most important of these. It is dated to the 4th century AD and contains the whole NT. Its name derives from the fact that it was discovered in 1844 in a monastery at the foot of the traditional site of Mount Sinai. It was among a group of manuscripts that the monks had intended to burn, but was saved by a visiting German scholar named Konstantin von Tischendorf. Close in importance to this manuscript is Codex Vaticanus located in the Vatican Library at Rome. It also dates to the 4th century and contains the whole NT. These 2 codices reflect a text that dates back to the 2nd century AD. Another important manuscript is Codex Alexandrius. It dates to the 5th century and contains most of the NT. It is missing most of Matthew and some of John and 2 Corinthians.

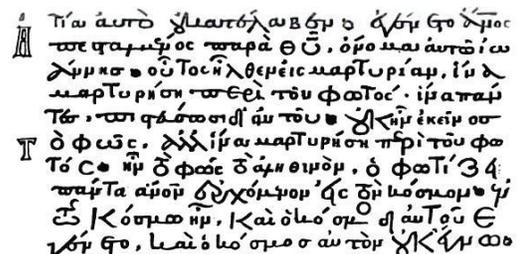
Miniscule Manuscripts

Miniscule manuscripts started to become popular in the 9th century AD. The script that developed was more cursive in character representing small case letters. The writing was easier as well as smaller allowing a larger amount of material to be written in less space in less time. This made miniscule documents more economical and thus widespread. For this reason, Miniscule manuscripts of the NT out-number Uncial manuscripts by around 10 to 1. There are around 2800 such manuscripts. Among them, about 30 to 40 are the most important for NT textual criticism. They date from the 9th to the 16th century AD.



Codex Sinaiticus –
Luke 11:2 (using uncial script)

Left: P⁵² – John 18:31-33
(1 of the earliest NT mss.)



Codex Ebnarianus – John 1:5-10 (using miniscule script)

Greek Script Comparison for John 1:1

Uncial Script

ΕΝΑΡΧΗΗΝΟΛΟΓΟΣΚΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΣΗΝΠΡΟΣΤΟΝΘΕΟΝΚΑΙΘΕΟΣΕΝΟΛΟΓΟΣ

Uncial Script Separated

ΕΝ ΑΡΧΗ ΗΝ Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΙ Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΗΝ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΝ ΘΕΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΣ ΕΝ Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ

Miniscule Script

εν αρχη ην ο λογος και ο λογος ην προς το θεον και θεος ην ο λογος

Transliteration

en arche en logos kai o logos en pros to theon kai theos en o logos

Translation

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God

Lectionaries

Lectionaries are books written for early church liturgies that contain portions of the Greek NT for public reading in worship services (similar to the readings found in the back of many modern hymn books). Thus, the passages found in such books are incomplete (i.e. only small portions) and not in any specific canonical order. Over 2400 such manuscripts exist.

Translations

Other important sources for reconstructing the original NT are translations of the original Greek into other languages. Some of the languages the NT was translated into very early on in church history include Old Latin, Coptic, Old Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, Persian, Gothic, Georgian, Old Slavonic and Arabic. Translations are most useful when there are disputed readings for a passage between the various Greek manuscripts. The most important translations are in Latin of which we have over 10,000 copies. These date from the 3rd to the 16th century AD. Many of these manuscripts are copies of the Vulgate, the most important Latin translation of the Bible made by Jerome in the late 4th century. Other important translations include Coptic, an old Egyptian language. We have around 1000 such manuscripts that date from the 3rd to the 5th centuries. Syriac copies are also important including the famous Syriac Peshitta which includes both the OT and NT. Although not catalogued completely, there are believed to be thousands of Syriac copies of the NT. Overall, there are over 18,000 copies of early NT translations.

Patristic Quotations

Patristic quotations refer to quotes of scripture contained in the writings of the early church fathers, the most important of which are fathers from the 2nd to 6th century. These include sermons, commentaries, letters and books. So extensive are such citations that if we had no other source for our knowledge of the NT it could be reconstructed almost in its entirety by such quotations. The number of NT quotations in the early church fathers has not been fully documented, but it numbers well over 1 million. The copies of these writings (we have no original documents) date as early as the 2nd century through the 13th century. One of the important things about these quotations is that sometimes a father will discuss a disputed reading of a NT passage that helps textual scholars determine what the original reading was. However, one of the problems of using these documents is that they themselves must undergo textual criticism to determine if the copies reflect the original. Furthermore, it is not always clear if a father is citing a NT text loosely from memory or copying the text from a NT document itself in which case he may have cited the text incorrectly.

Accuracy of the New Testament

As has been seen, we have an abundance of witnesses to the original NT. We have over 5800 Greek manuscripts of various portions of the NT. Some of these date as early as the late first century, just decades after the originally penned books (John and Mark). We have over 18,000 manuscripts of at least 10 different translations dating as early as the 2nd century. And we have over 1 million quotations of the NT from the church fathers. One scholar has said we have “an embarrassment of riches” when it comes to ancient witnesses to the NT. The NT has the most and the earliest manuscript evidence for any piece of ancient literature. No other important ancient piece of literature even comes close to evidence for the NT. Homer’s *Iliad* is the closest as the chart below indicates.

Manuscript Evidence for Important Ancient Writings (Updated 2017, per McDowell, EDV)

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	No. of manuscripts
Caesar (<i>Gallic Wars</i>)	100-44 BC	900 AD	1000 yrs	251
Livy (<i>History of Rome</i>)	59 BC – 17 AD	350 AD	400 yrs	473
Plato (<i>Tetralogies</i>)	424-347 BC	300 BC	100 yrs	238
Thucydides (<i>Wars</i>)	460-400 BC	50 AD*	475 yrs	188
Tacitus (<i>Annals</i>)	56-120 AD	850 AD	750 yrs	36
Seutonius (<i>Caesars</i>)	70-140 AD	950 AD	800 yrs	200+
Herodotus (<i>Histories</i>)	484-425 BC	150-50 BC	300 yrs	106
Homer (<i>Iliad</i>)	850 BC	415 BC	425 yrs	1900+
New Testament	45-95 BC	100-150 AD	25-50 yrs	5856 (Greek only)**

* There are 2 small fragments of Thucydides from the 1st century AD, but most complete copy is from 10th century

** Doesn't include early NT translations (18,130) or Patristic quotations. OT scrolls/ codices are around 42,000+

Variants in the New Testament Text

When the various Greek manuscripts of the NT are compared the following variants occur:

- 75% of variant readings are mistakes or differences in spelling.
- 24% of variant readings may be meaningful (affect the sense of a given passage), but they are not viable. In other words, they are unlikely to reflect the original wording because they come from manuscripts that have a poor reputation as good witnesses.
- 1% of variant readings are meaningful and viable (may reflect the original wording). These variants change the meaning of the text in some way and have good support from reliable manuscripts. However, no crucial doctrine is affected by these variant readings.
- Overall, the NT manuscripts agree with one another in 99.5% of cases (the next most accurate piece of ancient literature is Homer’s *Iliad* which has about 95% accuracy). To put this in perspective, in a given set of 2000 words (about the size of Philippians) 10 of those words have a variant reading in the manuscript evidence. Out of 2000 words 7.5 of those words are differences in spelling and therefore not meaningful. 2.4 of the words are meaningful but not viable (unlikely) readings, and 1 of those words are viable (possible reading) and affect the meaning of the text in some way or another.
- However, there are virtually no gaps in the manuscript evidence where we need to conjecture (guess) what might have been said. Out of 138,000 words in the NT only 1 or 2 words have no manuscript evidence. Thus, we have all the available evidence to reconstruct the entire NT as it was originally written due to the plethora of NT manuscripts.