

# DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

## The Preservation and Dramas of Ancient Biblical Texts

### Lesson #4

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The Bible has weathered the ravages of time like no other ancient writing. God has obviously had his hand in its preservation. We would expect this since God wants us to know Him, His plan for the future, and what He wants us to do. If the Bible was lost, then God's Word, which gives us everything we need for life and godliness, would be lost. It is nothing less than miraculous to realize that the Bible has always been a Number One best seller and that we are more certain of the reliability of the Bible than any other ancient text. In this lesson we will explore some of the ways God has used to preserve the ancient text of the Bible and some of the dramas associated with the discoveries of ancient manuscripts.

#### I. PRESERVATION OF THE BIBLE

##### A. God has Promised to Preserve His Word

1. Numb. 23:19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"
2. Josh. 23:14 "Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the Lord your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed."
3. Isa. 40:8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.
4. Mt. 5:18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."
5. Mk. 13:31 (also Mt. 24:35 & Lk. 21:33) "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."

##### B. God Used Scribes Who Were Extremely Meticulous in Copying the Old Testament

From 300 B.C. (100 years after the last book of the Old Testament was written) to A.D. 500, there are two general types of Old Testament manuscripts i.e., *Synagogue rolls* and *private copies*. The private copies were copies prepared by scribes for individuals wanting their own copy of the Scriptures. These handwritten scrolls were very costly because the scribes took great care in copying them. They usually contained decorative borders, colored lettering,

marginal notes, and commentary. They were never used in the synagogue because they didn't meet the special criteria of the synagogue scrolls.

The synagogue scrolls were meticulously copied. The Talmud states that certain scribes were responsible for counting every letter in every line to see if the copy matched up with the original.<sup>1</sup> Samuel Davidson describes the criteria used by the scribes in his work, *The Hebrew Test of the Old Testament*:

[1] A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, [2] prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. [3] These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. [4] Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. [5] The length of each column must not extend over less than 48 nor more than 60 lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. [6] The whole copy must be first-lined; and if three words should be written without a line, it is worthless. [7] The ink should be black, neither red, green, or any other color, and be prepared according to a definite recipe. [8] An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate. [9] No word or letter, not even a *yod*, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him. . . . [10] Between every consonant the space of a hair or a thread must intervene; [11] between every new *parashah*, or section, the breadth of nine consonants; [12] between every book, three lines. [13] The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line; but the rest need not do so. [14] Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, [15] wash his whole body, [16] not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, [17] and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.<sup>2</sup>

All of these specific copying procedures should give us comfort knowing that those who were in charge of copying the Bible had extremely high standards. We should keep this in mind when people attack the accuracy of the Bible. There is no other ancient manuscript copied with such exacting detail.

### C. Old Testament Manuscripts

The most reliable and standardized text of the Old Testament is from the tradition of the Masoretes. The Masoretes were medieval scribes who worked to preserve the text of the Old Testament and make one authoritative version (A.D. 500-900). The outcome of their many years of labor produced what is called the Masoretic Text or "MT" as it is usually abbreviated.

The history of the Masoretic text is fascinating. The Masoretes had an ancient version of a modern day Seminary by the Sea of Galilee at Tiberias which flourished from A.D. 500 to 1000. One of the main families at the school of the Masoretes was the Ben Asher Family. From five to six generations (A.D. 750 to 950) this family was instrumental in producing the most reliable text of the Old Testament in existence. The oldest dated manuscript from this family is

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<sup>1</sup> *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, pg. 1537.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geisler, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pgs. 348-349.

*Codex Cairensis* (A.D. 895), which is thought to be written by Moses Ben Asher. It contained most of the major and minor prophets.

Another manuscript, prepared by the Ben Asher family, is the *Aleppo Codex* (A.D. 900 to 950). The manuscript contains all the Old Testament and it has a concluding note at the end which indicates that the scribe who prepared it was Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. He not only prepared the text but added the vowel pointing. It is stored at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

Before the Masoretic text was completed, the ancient Hebrew language didn't have any vowel pointing. It was all consonants. Context is what helped the reader understand what was being said. The Masoretes, however, feared that the original meaning would be lost since many Jews had quit speaking their native tongue. So in order to preserve the ancient text, a system of vowel pointings were invented to help preserve the meaning. The vowel pointings are dots, dashes and small symbols above, below, and inside the letters. They represent different vowels, sounds, and accents which help preserve the original meaning and pronunciation. Below is the first verse in Genesis. It reads from right to left. Notice the vowel points.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא: אֱלֹהֵי אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

[Elohim] אֱלֹהֵי: [ he created] בְּרָא [in beginning] בְּרֵאשִׁית  
 אֶת (direct object indicator)

הַשָּׁמַיִם [the heavens] וְאֶת [and (direct object indicator)] הָאָרֶץ [the earth]

Another important Hebrew manuscript is *Codex Leningradensis*. This is being kept at the Leningrad Public Library. According to a note at the end of this manuscript, it was copied in A.D. 1008 from Texts written by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. Because *Aleppo Codex* was not revealed until recently, *Codex Leningradensis* is the principle ancient manuscript used in our modern Hebrew Bibles (e.g. *Biblica Hebraica* and *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*).

In addition to the manuscripts listed above, many other manuscripts have played a key role in our modern Hebrew texts. Some of them no longer exist but are mentioned frequently in the writings of the Masoretes. Often mentioned and cited is *Codex Hillel* which was thought to be a very accurate text of the Old Testament and was attributed to Rabbi Hillel ben Moses ben Hillel about A.D.

<sup>3</sup>Mark R. Norton, *How We Got Our Bible*, Gen. Ed. Philip Wesley Comfort, pgs. 153-154.

600. Other texts such as *Codex Muga*, *Codex Jericho*, and *Codex Jerushalmi* no longer exist, but were used by the Masoretes.<sup>4</sup>

#### D. **The Major Problem with the Manuscripts of the Old Testament**

The greatest problem of the Old Testament manuscripts is that the oldest ones are dated in the middle of the ninth century A.D. Liberal critics were constantly pointing to the unreliability of the Old Testament because there were no major manuscripts from the first part of the century or before. They theorized that the Old Testament was surely corrupted and that it was no longer accurate nor represented the original writings. Some earlier text was needed to verify the veracity of the Masoretic text. Until earlier manuscripts were found, the liberals could not be silenced, and the preservation of the original Hebrew text was in question. Yet God, in His providence, silenced the liberals in the late 1940's and early 1950's with the greatest manuscript discovery of all time referred to as "The Dead Sea Scrolls."

#### E. **Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls**

The Discovery of the dead sea scrolls reads like a novel. I have tried to condense the story here but it is worth reading in its entirety.

It all began in 1948 when Butrus Sowmy called John Trever of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) because he had discovered some very ancient Hebrew manuscripts while cataloging ancient manuscripts at Saint Mark's Monastery in the Armenian quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Butrus asked for information on where the manuscripts came from and discovered they had been in the monastery since 1908.

The next day Sowmy brought a suitcase to Trever which contained five scrolls written in very ancient Hebrew script. Trever carefully copied several lines off one of the scrolls. After Sowmy left, Trever told the story to William H. Brownlee, also of ASOR. Trever noticed that the Hebrew from the scrolls used a very interesting and rare construction and believed they were more ancient than anything he had ever seen.

Trever then decided to visit Saint Mark's Monastery and was given permission to photograph the scrolls. Trever and Brownlee then compared the photographs to the Nash Papyrus, one of the oldest existing Old Testament manuscripts (written about 200 BC) which contained the ten commandments and Deut. 6:4. Both men concluded that the two manuscripts belonged to the same period. The two men, along with another ASOR scholar, continued their investigation of the scrolls. After questioning the Syrians at Saint Mark's Monastery further, they discovered that the scrolls had not been in the

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<sup>4</sup>Mark R. Norton, *How We Got Our Bible*, Gen. Ed. Philip Wesley Comfort, pgs. 154-155.

Monastery for forty years but were purchased the winter before from three Bedouins who found the scrolls in a cave at Qumran. They were tending their sheep and one of them threw a rock into the cave and heard a strange sound. Upon investigation they discovered an earthen jar with the scrolls inside of it.

Another one of the Bedouins lowered himself into another cave where ten tall jars were lined up against the walls and removed several manuscripts from them. The manuscripts were taken to Bethlehem and sold to an antiquities dealer. Several months later the Bedouins took four more scrolls and sold them to another dealer in Bethlehem. During Holy Week in 1947, Saint Mark's Monastery was informed about the four scrolls and eventually purchased the scrolls. The scrolls included a complete copy of Isaiah, a commentary of Habakkuk, and several other religious works.

Later in December of 1947, an Armenian antiquities dealer in Jerusalem told E. L. Sukenik, Professor of Archeology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, about the first three scrolls found in the cave by the Bedouins. Sukenik purchased the scrolls and the jars they came in, which contained a partial scroll of Isaiah and several other religious documents.

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, the first news release of the scrolls appeared in newspapers around the world. The Bedouins continued their search for more manuscripts, but it wasn't until 1949 that an archeological team set out to excavate the cave the first scrolls were found in and search other caves in the area.

At the present, 200 caves in the area have been searched and eleven have produced ancient manuscripts. There are 600 partial or complete manuscripts, 200 of which contain Biblical material. Approximately 60,000 fragments have been recovered most of which are leather but a few are papyrus. One cave produced 40,000 fragments and 400 different manuscripts, 100 of which were Biblical material. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, every book in the Old Testament has been accounted for, except the book of Esther. Also, there were many apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books and books governing the religious life of the Qumran community.

One of the most unique discoveries was a copper scroll about 8 feet long that contained the directions to find hidden treasure at over sixty locations. Archeologists have claimed that they have found none of it. During the Six-Day War, Sukenik's son, Yigael Yadin of the Hebrew University purchased a scroll from one of the Qumran caves that measured 28 feet in length and to date is the longest scroll found in the Qumran area.<sup>5</sup>

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been used by God to silence the majority of critics. It provided us with many Biblical manuscripts that were one thousand years older than the Masoretic text. When one compares the Biblical texts found at Qumran with the Masoretic text they find there are almost no differences at all. Thus the reliability of the Masoretic text is sure. It also helps to prove that God has been faithful to preserve the Old Testament Scriptures.

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<sup>5</sup>Summarized from Mark R. Norton in, *The Origin of the Bible*, Gen. Ed. Philip Wesley Comfort, pgs. 156-161.

## II. HOW GOD HAS PRESERVED HIS WORD

### A. The Three Great Greek Texts

There are three manuscripts often referred to as “The Three Great Manuscripts.” They are *Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Alexandrinus*, and *Codex Vaticanus*. These three manuscripts are written in all capital letters (unicals) with no spaces in between words and with hardly any punctuation.

#### 1. **Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲭ)**

This codex was discovered at Saint Catherine’s Monastery on Mt. Sinai by German scholar Constantin Tischendorf and was first in the Imperial Library at Saint Petersburg, Russia but now rests in the British Museum. It dates from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century and contains the entire New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

The story of this text like that of the Dead Sea Scrolls is an interesting one. Tischendorf was looking for old manuscripts and came to the remote monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai in 1844. When he was inside the monastery he noticed a waste paper basket full of ancient manuscripts that the monks had been using to build fires with. He gave them his best poker face and asked if he could have the “rubbish.” They could tell he was very interested and only let him have a third of the ancient pages of “fire starter.” He came away with 43 pages of ancient Greek text.

Later in 1853 Tischendorf came again, but they gave him nothing but a few fragments. Finally, after raising enough funds, he decided to go back and in 1859 talked to the monastery steward about everything but ancient manuscripts. On the last night of his stay, the subject of old Greek Bibles came up and the steward, wanting to show off his importance, said he had an old Greek Bible. He then brought out *Codex Sinaiticus* wrapped in red cloth. Tischendorf then asked if he could study it for the night and was allowed. That night he copied by hand the Epistle of Barnabus which before then had only partial manuscript evidence.

Later Tischendorf persuaded the monks to send the codex to another branch of their monastery in Cairo so he could study it, but he still had limited access. Finally he persuaded them to donate it to the tsar of Russia, who had been a supporter of the Eastern Orthodox churches. After long negotiations, in 1867, the monks presented *Codex Sinaiticus* to the tsar. Tischendorf published a facsimile version in 1862.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Dennis McCallum, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, [www.theology.edu/script02.htm](http://www.theology.edu/script02.htm), pg. 4.

<sup>7</sup>H. G. G. Herklots, “Christian History Magazine,” issue 43, vol. 8, #3, pg. 37.

## 2. **Codex Alexandrinus (A)**

This codex is thought to have come from Alexandria Egypt where it was given to Cyril of Lucar, one time Patriarch of Constantinople. It was later given to King Charles I of England, then the English ambassador at the Turkish court in 1627, and in 1757 presented to the Royal Library. It is now in the British Museum. It was written in the fifth century A.D. and has almost all the New Testament except parts of Matthew, John, and I Corinthians. The writing style indicates it was copied by several persons.<sup>8</sup>

## 3. **Codex Vaticanus (B)**

Of the three great manuscripts, *Codex Vaticanus* is most likely the earliest. It is kept at the Vatican Library in Rome. It was written early in the fourth century probably around A.D. 325. There is a lengthy story of scholars who tried to get permission from the Vatican Library to study it, but to no avail.

A friend of Erasmus (a famous scholar who published a Greek Bible in the 1500's) gave him a few lines which were copied out of *Codex Vaticanus* to help him with his Greek version. Napoleon, after conquering Rome, carried the codex to Paris as booty and it remained there until 1815. While in Paris, its age and importance became known and it was studied by Hug.

After it was returned to Rome, it was kept from the public until 1843 when German Scholar Constantin Tischendorf was allowed to see it after waiting several months. Yet, Tischendorf was only able to see it for six hours. The next year another scholar, De Maralt was permitted to study it for nine hours. Also in 1845 the great English scholar Tregellas was allowed to see it but was not allowed to copy a single word.

Later Tischendorf was given permission to look at the scroll again for fourteen days at three hours a day, but broke the rules and copied 20 pages and was restricted in the future from seeing it again. With the information he and the other scholars had retrieved he was able to produce the most accurate edition that had yet appeared in 1867.<sup>9</sup>

It wasn't until 1889-90 that a complete facsimile edition was published of the entire manuscript by Giuseppe Cazza-Luzi. It contained both the Old and New Testaments along with the Apocrypha except for the book of Maccabees, parts of Genesis, thirty of the Psalms, the end of Hebrews, along with I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Revelation are gone. The writing is small and delicate with no fancy adornment. The beauty of the original text has been spoiled because someone has written over the top of the original text which was fading badly. In the process of

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<sup>8</sup>Dennis McCallum, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, [www.theology.edu/script02.htm](http://www.theology.edu/script02.htm), pg. 4.

<sup>9</sup>H. G. G. Herklots, "Christian History Magazine," issue 43, vol. 8, #3, pg. 36.

copying over the original certain portions were neglected which the copier seemed to think were unimportant.<sup>10</sup>

**B. It Can Be Seen That The Bible Has Been Preserved by God When Compared With Other Ancient Manuscripts**

The chart below shows how the text of the Bible is ten times more reliable than any other ancient writing.<sup>11</sup> Other ancient works which are never brought into question are compared to the Bible which has been attacked consistently. This in itself is proof that the Bible is the Word of God and that Satan has done everything he could to try and discredit the Bible.

Author/Work	When Written	Earliest copy	Time from original	Number of ancient copies
Caesar Gallic War	58-50 B.C.	900 A.D.	1000 years	10
Plato <i>Tetralogies</i>	427-347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1200 years	7
Tacitus <i>Annals</i>	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1000 years	20
Pliny <i>History</i>	61-113 A.D.	1000 A.D.	900 years	1
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 years	8
Euripides	480-406 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1500 years	9
Aristotle	384-382 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1400 years	49
Homer <i>Illiad</i>	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 years	643
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	125 A.D.	25 years	24,000

**C. God Has Used the Volume of Copies Made from Ancient Manuscripts of the Bible to Preserve His Word**

There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 [copies of the] Latin Vulgate and at least 9,300

<sup>10</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pgs. 46-48.

<sup>11</sup>Information from chart adapted from Josh McDowell's, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pgs. 42-43.

other early versions or manuscripts (MSS) and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies or portions of the New Testament in existence today.<sup>12</sup> While one might argue that any one manuscript might have errors, it becomes ludicrous to doubt the veracity of the Biblical text with so many manuscripts from different places and different times that agree. Simply stated, there is no other ancient document that has anywhere near the manuscript support. Without question or contest, the Bible is the most reliable ancient text in existence.

**D. God Has Used the Quotations from the Early Church Fathers to Preserve His Word.**

We must keep in mind that the Bible is the most popular book ever written. Because of this, people frequently quoted the Bible in their works. The New Testament alone was quoted by the Early Church Fathers over 36,000 times. There are enough quotes in these ancient writings to reconstruct the entire New Testament.<sup>13</sup> Neil Lightfoot has said:

The Bible is the best attested book in the ancient world! This has prompted Sir Fredrick Kenyon to say: "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. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world."<sup>14</sup>

**E. It Is Obvious That God Has Preserved His Word When Comparing Textual Variants with the Best Supported Ancient Text of the *Illiad* by Homer**

The second best supported ancient work, apart from the Bible, is the *Illiad* by Homer which has 15,600 lines of text and 764 lines that are in question as to their reliability. The New Testament, on the other hand, has 20,000 lines and only 40 have any significant variation. This figures to the New Testament having less than **one half of one percent** of textual variants! This is more amazing when you consider that the manuscripts we have of the Bible number 24,000 as compared to 643 manuscripts of the *Illiad*, which means there is six times more possibility of contradiction among the manuscripts of the Bible than those of the *Illiad*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pg. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Josh McDowell's, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pg. 52.

<sup>14</sup>Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got Our Bible*, pg. 160.

<sup>15</sup>Josh McDowell's, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pg. 43.

F. **God has Preserved His Word By Having It Translated into Different Languages**

The Bible, being the most popular book ever written, was immediately translated into other languages. There are some 15,000 ancient translations of the Bible, some of which are within 50 years of the original text that verify the reliability of the Biblical text.<sup>16</sup>

These are just a few of the facts, proofs, and dramas that surround the ancient Biblical text of the Bible. The evidence is overwhelming — God has preserved His Word for the church today and we should have great confidence that the Bible has been preserved.

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<sup>16</sup>ibid. pg. 49.