

## Is the Bible Today What Was Originally Written?

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic (the Old Testament [OT]), and Greek (the New Testament [NT]). The Bibles we use today are translations from the original languages into English (or other languages). Jesus most likely taught in Aramaic (though he probably also knew Hebrew and Greek), so that the Greek NT itself represents a translation of Jesus' teaching from the Aramaic into Greek.

The question, "Is the Bible Today What Was Originally Written?" involves two important questions: (1) Are the available manuscripts (mss.) of the Bible accurate representations of the original mss. of the respective books of the Bible (the autographs of Scripture)? This is an issue of textual *transmission*. (2) Are the available translations faithful renderings of the Bible in the original languages? This is an issue of *translation*.

With regard to the first question, no original autographs exist of any biblical text; only copies are available. The word "manuscript" is used to denote anything written by hand, rather than copies produced from the printing press.<sup>1</sup> Textual evidence constitutes anything written on clay tablets, stone, bone, wood, various metals, potsherds (ostraca), but most notably papyrus and parchment (vellum).<sup>2</sup>

Most ancient books were compiled and then rolled into a scroll.<sup>3</sup> Since a papyrus roll rarely exceeded 35 feet in length, ancient authors divided a long literary work into several "books" (e.g., the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles consisted of a two-volume set composed by Luke).<sup>4</sup>

Later, sometime during the first or second century A.D., the codex came into use.<sup>5</sup> The codex consisted of bound sheets of papyrus and constitutes the prototype for the modern book format.<sup>6</sup> Thus early Christians began to collect and collate individual books into what is now the canonical NT. The term "Bible" derives from the Greek word *biblion* (book); the earliest use of *ta biblia* (the books) in the sense of "Bible" is found in 2 Clement 2:14 (c. A.D. 150).<sup>7</sup>

Even though the original autographs are lost, the extant ms. evidence allows a high degree of confidence in the text of the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments are attested by a large number of mss. in a variety of forms spanning many centuries.

The primary witnesses to the OT come from the Masoretic texts (the Masoretes were Jewish scribes) including the Cairo Geniza (A.D. 895), the Leningrad Codex (A.D. 916), the Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus (A.D. 1008), the Aleppo Codex (c. A.D. 900), the British Museum Codex (A.D. 950), and the Reuchlin Codex (A.D. 1105).<sup>8</sup> The Leningrad Codex remains the oldest complete ms. and serves as the main source for the Hebrew text.<sup>9</sup> However, since the earliest of these mss. date from the ninth century A.D., they are removed from the original autographs by a considerable period of time.

Other witnesses include the Talmud (Aramaic translations and commentaries), the Septuagint (LXX; the Greek translation of the OT), the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). The latter, discovered during the 1940s and 50s, provide scholars with witnesses to the OT text that can be dated between 250–100 B.C. Cave four (4Q), e.g., has yielded about 40,000 fragments of 400 different mss., 100 of which are biblical, representing every OT book except Esther.<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, a comparison of the DSS and the Masoretic text reveals a fairly small number of discrepancies.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the ms. evidence for the OT firmly demonstrates that the original OT texts were carefully preserved and are accurately represented in our modern Bible.

The NT text remains the best attested document in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup> The witnesses to the NT fall into three broad categories: the Greek mss.; ancient translations (versions) into other languages; and quotations from the NT found in early ecclesiastical writers (the Church Fathers).<sup>13</sup> The Greek mss., over 6,000 in number, include papyrus fragments, uncials (written in all capitals without spaces and punctuation), and minuscules (small cursive-like script).<sup>14</sup>

The papyri form the most significant group due to the fact that their early date implies that they are chronologically the closest to the original autographs. For example, both p<sup>52</sup> (containing a few verses of John 18) and p<sup>46</sup> (containing all of Paul's epistles except the Pastorals) are most likely dated within thirty years of the original writings.<sup>15</sup>

The uncials follow the papyri in chronological importance. Codex Sinaiticus, an uncial written about A.D. 350, is the earliest extant copy of the entire NT.<sup>16</sup> Other uncials, such as the Codex Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi, and Bezae, constitute significant witnesses as well.

The minuscules compose the largest group of Greek mss., but they are dated considerably later.

Finally, the versions and Church Fathers provide helpful early attestation that can aid scholars in reconstructing the most plausible original readings. The total tally of more than 6,000 Greek mss., more than 10,000 Latin Vulgate mss., and more than 9,300 early versions results in over 25,000 witnesses to the text of the NT.<sup>17</sup>

This sheer multiplicity of mss. does not, however, result in absolute uniformity of the texts.<sup>18</sup> Thousands of variant readings (most of them minor) exist between the mss. While scribes exhibited great care in their effort to reproduce an exact copy,<sup>19</sup> they were not immune from human error. Scribal errors can take on the form of unintentional and intentional errors.<sup>20</sup> Unintentional errors are the cause of the majority of textual variants.<sup>21</sup> These typically include errors of the eyes (e.g., skipping words or losing one's place); hands (slips of the pen or writing notes in the margins); and ears (confusing similar sounding words or misunderstanding a word).<sup>22</sup> Intentional errors resulted when scribes attempted to correct a perceived error in the text or altered the text in the interest of doctrine and harmonization.<sup>23</sup> These errors often became standardized through subsequent copies made from the defective copy.

All Greek mss. exhibit traits that enable scholars to classify them into text families (Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine) based on geographic origin, Greek style, and date. Through comparative analysis performed by the practitioners of a science called "textual criticism," scholars sift through all the mss. in order to reproduce the most plausible reading of the original autographs in each individual case.<sup>24</sup>

Textual critics adjudicate between readings through exacting criteria such as dating, text type, attested readings (i.e., how many mss. have a certain reading), and possible reasons for variants (e.g., smoothing out a theologically difficult reading). In addition to examining the Greek mss. textual critics also consider all other relevant witnesses (i.e., versions and the Church Fathers).

Although textual criticism is a very complex and at times controversial science, it has provided us with at least two assured results. First, none of the variant readings (including omissions) affect the central message or theological content of the Scriptures. Second, it can confidently be asserted that the text of the Bible today is an accurate and faithful representation of the original autographs.

The second issue, namely that of *translation*, follows as a natural corollary once the question of the textual *transmission* is settled. To assess the fidelity and accuracy of the Bible today compared to the original texts one must investigate the issues of translation theory and the history of the English Bible. The task of translating the Bible from its source languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into a receptor language (English) involves a plethora of issues related to the nature of language and communication. Is word meaning found in some fixed form of inherent meaning, or is meaning determined by contextual usage? Is meaning located in the formal features of the original grammar, or in the function of words within the grammar? These are just a few of the questions pertaining to translation theory.

Some translators maintain that accurate translation requires a word-for-word approach of formal equivalence (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV).<sup>25</sup> Others contend that construing a straightforward one-to-one correlation between two languages actually distorts meaning.<sup>26</sup> These translators employ a phrase-for-phrase approach<sup>27</sup> of dynamic or functional equivalence (NRSV, NIV, CEV, NLT, TNIV).<sup>28</sup> In light of linguistic, exegetical, and stylistic considerations translations produced in accord with dynamic or functional equivalency tend to reflect the original meaning more closely.<sup>29</sup> The goal of all translators, no matter what translation theory they employ, is the production of an English version that is an accurate rendering of the text written in such a way that the Bible retains its literary beauty, theological grandeur, and, most importantly, its message.<sup>30</sup>

The history of the English Bible satisfactorily demonstrates that the Bible of today does indeed faithfully represent the Scriptures in their original languages. For centuries the only Bible available to Western people was the Latin Vulgate prepared by Jerome, who was commissioned by Pope Damasus toward the end of the fourth century A.D.<sup>31</sup> The Vulgate served as the official version of the Bible throughout Medieval Europe and was restricted to the clergy, monastic orders, and scholars.<sup>32</sup>

A British priest and Oxford scholar, John Wycliffe (1330–1384), was the first to make the entire Bible accessible to the common English-speaking people.<sup>33</sup> His translation, however, was based on the Vulgate and not on the Hebrew and Greek.<sup>34</sup> William Tyndale published the first English NT based on the Greek text in 1526.<sup>35</sup> Two close associates of Tyndale, Miles Coverdale and John Rogers, finished his work by publishing their own respective translations of the entire Bible: the Coverdale Bible (1535) and Matthew's Bible (1537).<sup>36</sup> The Geneva Bible of 1560 provided a translation of the Bible entirely from the original languages.<sup>37</sup> This paved the way for King James I to issue a translation that would correct the partisan nature of the Geneva Bible.<sup>38</sup> Thus in 1611, the much-celebrated Authorized Version (AV or KJV), largely based on Tyndale's work, became the unrivaled English translation for 270 years.<sup>39</sup>

The twentieth century has given rise to a number of new translations.<sup>40</sup> The updating and production of new translations were necessitated by new ms. discoveries, changes in the English language, and the advancement of linguistics. Today, when someone opens any English Bible (NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, TNIV, HCSB), he or she may know that generations of faithful scholarship have managed to preserve and protect that Bible as it was originally given.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd enlarged ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, "The Bible," in *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Mark R. Norton, "Texts and Manuscripts of the Old Testament," in *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), 154–55. Cf. Josh, McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1 (San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers, 1986), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origins and Developments of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 194.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>12</sup> For a quick reference to the quotations of various textual scholars see McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 41–42.

<sup>13</sup> Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Philip W. Comfort, "Textual Criticism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 1171.

<sup>15</sup> Philip W. Comfort, "Texts and Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), 179.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>17</sup> McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 39. The next closest ancient text to have this much manuscripts evidence is Homer's *Iliad* with only 800 manuscripts.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon D. Fee, "Textual Criticism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 828.

<sup>19</sup> Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 8–21. Cf. Comfort, "Textual Criticism," 1172.

<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> For helpful charts describing the types of scribal errors see Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, 225–36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Comfort, "Textual Criticism," 1172.

<sup>24</sup> Aland, Kurt, and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000). Cf. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 47–76. Cf. Moisés Silva, "Are Translators Traitors? Some Personal Reflections," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scrogie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 37–44.

<sup>27</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III, "Inclusive Language in Bible Translation," in *Perspectives on the TNIV from Leading Scholars and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

<sup>28</sup> D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—and other Limits, Too," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scrogie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 65–113; Kenneth L. Barker, "Bible Translation Philosophy with Special Reference to the New International Version," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, 51–63. Cf. Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

- <sup>29</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Translating John’s Gospel: Challenges and Opportunities,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 347–64. See also John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).
- <sup>30</sup> Glen G. Scorgie, “Introduction and Overview,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Stauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 25.
- <sup>31</sup> Dick France, “The Bible in English an Overview,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word To the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 177.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>33</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, A Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 19–23.
- <sup>34</sup> France, “The Bible in English an Overview,” 181. But see also *The Gospel of Saint John in West-Saxon*, ed. James Wilson Bright (Boston/London: D. C. Heath & Co., 1906), presenting the first English version of John’s Gospel, which precedes Wycliffe’s translation by four hundred years.
- <sup>35</sup> *Tyndale’s New Testament*, ed. David Daniell (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995 [1989]).
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 113–29.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–48.
- <sup>39</sup> France, “The Bible in English an Overview,” 184.
- <sup>40</sup> Beginning in 1885 with the complete Revised Version (AV) in England, this served as the basis for the American Standard Version (ASV) in 1901. In 1952 the Revised Standard Version (RSV) was introduced. The Catholics released the Jerusalem Bible in 1966. The New English Bible (NEB), The New American Bible (NAB), the New American Standard Bible (NASB) were all completed in 1970. The Good News Bible (GNB) or Today’s English Version (TEV) was produced in 1978. 1978 saw the publication of the monumental New International Version (NIV). With the 1980s came the New King James (1982), the New Century Version (1987), and the New Revised Standard Version (1989). The paced did not slow in the 1990s with the release of the Contemporary English Version (1995) and the New Living Translation (1996). The new millennium has witnessed additional significant translations with the English Standard Version (2001), the Holman Christian Standard (2004), and Today’s New International Version (2005).

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