

Copying the Old and New Testament manuscripts (K. Barker)

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. More than four centuries before the time of Jesus, Judaism already had developed a venerable tradition of carefully copying, maintaining and preserving its written texts. The Jewish sopherim, or scribes, held such a high regard for the Scriptures as the Word of God that they regarded the copying of any error as a sin. No imperfection, no matter how small, was tolerated.

The successors to this meticulous scribal tradition were Jewish biblical scholars known as the *Masoretes*. They produced a collection notes and comments on the Hebrew text called the *Masorah*. In the process they also gave us a fixed and satisfactory text of the Old Testament in Hebrew. The Masoretes developed a system of checks to ensure that every copy was as nearly perfect as humanly possible. To make certain they had not added or left out even a single letter, they counted the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurred in each book. They noted and recorded the middle letter of the entire Old Testament. They recorded the middle letter on each page and the number of letters and words in each column. They examined every copy of the Old Testament and withdrew from circulation all copies in which any error was discovered. These carefully copied Hebrew texts have remained virtually unchanged since about 600 to 700 AD. In 1947 the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls yielded copies from all the major sections of the Old Testament, except Ruth, dating back more than a century before Christ. When compared to these ancient copies, the Masoretic texts were found to be virtually identical.

In addition to this careful written tradition, the Masoretes provided another invaluable service. As it was originally written, Hebrew was a language of consonants. There were no written vowels. Of course, the vowel sounds were spoken, but they were not written down. Imagine trying to read English if it were written without vowels:

Il scrptr s gvn b nsprtn f Gd, nd s prftble fr dctrn,
fr rprf, fr crctn, fr nstrctn n rghtsnss.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (2 Tim 3:16)

It's possible, but not particularly easy. And there is room for errors. But for centuries the Masoretes passed the proper vowel pronunciation orally, from generation to generation, as carefully as they maintained the written record. Around 700 AD, they developed a set of vowel points, tiny markings above and below the Hebrew characters, to show how each word should be pronounced.

Because of the Masoretes' painstaking transmission of the combined oral and written tradition, Bible students of today can be confident that the text available to us is not significantly different from the texts which Jesus and his disciples read twenty centuries ago. Generally speaking, because of the care of the Masoretes, the Old Testament text is freer from corruption and variant readings than the New Testament text.

Young Christianity did not develop such a tradition for carefully copying the Scriptures for several centuries.

The Gospels and letters, which make up the New Testament, were written in Koine Greek. Like the Hebrew Scriptures, all copies had to be made by hand. However, without the tradition of Masoretic diligence, these handmade copies often contained errors. If an early Christian wanted a copy of one of the New Testament Gospels or epistles, he borrowed a copy from his church. And what he borrowed was, almost certainly, already a copy. He then had three options. First, he could hire a respected, professional scribe. This option greatly reduced the chance of any copying errors, but it was expensive. Most of the early Christians were from the poorer classes. Second, he could hire a not-so-professional scribe. This route lowered the price, but it also lowered the quality of the copy. And even this route was financially out of reach for many poor believers.

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But there was a third option. He could copy the document himself. This was the least expensive option, but the one most likely to produce errors.

Eventually the duty of producing copies of the New Testament fell more and more to professional scriptoria, often located in monasteries or major churches. Each scriptorium was staffed by monks or clergymen who spent large portions of time copying the Scriptures. Normally, one of the monks would sit in the front of the hall and read from the Scriptures at dictation speed. As many as several dozen copyists sat at special tables and wrote as the reader read. Quality control was high. Copyists and editors checked one another. Of course, errors were still possible. However, the checking process meant fewer errors actually found their way into circulation.

Within a few generations all the original manuscripts were lost, probably used and reused by the early Christians until they literally fell apart. All that remained were copies. Most of these copies were actually copies of copies of copies. As the copies wore out, they were usually discarded or lost. Some were destroyed during times of persecution. And, of course, each time a new copy was made, there was the potential for new errors. Overall, however, these copyists did an admirable job. There were relatively few errors considering the length of the Bible.

As Christianity spread during the four centuries after Christ, the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments were translated into a number of other languages, and eventually into Latin. Latin remained the principal language of the European church for more than one thousand years. For this reason, copies of the Greek New Testament became more and more rare in Europe. Fewer and fewer copies remained, and most of these were, quite literally, forgotten in the dusty libraries of monasteries where they remained unknown and unused for century after century.

Ultimately, about one hundred years before the translators of the *King James Version* began their work, the monk and Greek scholar Erasmus, prepared the first printed Greek New Testament. It was hastily prepared, and Erasmus worked from only six or seven manuscripts. However, considering the limits of his resources, the quality was quite good. With a few revisions, it became the standard Greek text for the next four hundred years.

Sometimes the discussion of the copying process leads to the conclusion that all the biblical manuscripts are fraught with errors. This simply isn't true. One study compared ten random chapters from Revelation in 125 different manuscripts and found a very low occurrence of singular readings. A singular reading is a copying error that appears in only one manuscript. A singular reading can be something as insignificant as forgetting to dot an "i" or cross a "t" in English. Of course, some singular readings are more significant. Still, more than half of the manuscripts compared had ten or less singular readings. A third had fewer than five. About one in four had no errors at all. Interestingly, as a general pattern the earlier manuscripts showed a greater number of mistakes. For example, the Codex Sinaiticus, which is one of our oldest complete manuscripts showed 183 singular readings in those same ten chapters. This shouldn't be surprising, as we have seen that the copying process improved over the years.

Throughout this discussion we should keep in mind that all of our major manuscripts – and the texts which scholars have compiled from those manuscripts – agree with one another approximately ninety-eight percent of the time. All of the copyists' errors combined affect only about two percent of the text. And nowhere does a major article of the Christian faith hinge on a disputed passage. However, since evangelical Christians regard the Bible divinely inspired, even the possibility of a two percent error is significant and worthy of our attention. Bible – believing Christians want to know what God's Word says – as nearly as humanly possible – one hundred percent of the time.

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Most of the errors introduced into both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament were innocent mistakes. Sometimes the copyist simply left out a letter. He may have transposed two letters, or even inserted an unnecessary one. Sometimes, if he wasn't paying close attention, he may have seen one word but written down another. Sometimes he misspelled a word. The science of wading through these potential errors and finding the correct text is called textual criticism.

Since the days of Erasmus, archeology and improved research in monastery libraries have yielded a treasure trove of New Testament manuscripts: from fewer than a dozen in the days of Erasmus to more than five thousand today. In addition to these manuscripts, scholars have also increased our understanding of the quotations from Scriptures and references to the Scriptures which appear in the works of early Christian writers. Together these manuscripts, quotations and references are known as witnesses. And with the recovery of so many witnesses, the science of textual criticism has grown in importance and influence. Textual criticism attempts to arrive at the best and most reliable text by comparing the various copies and testing both external and internal evidence. Textual critics, through years of careful study and comparison, have given us a text of the Holy Scriptures that is virtually the same as the original copies.