



## The History of the Bible Session 12: Topic 3.1.1 Copying the Bible

Study by  
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### Overview of Session

#### 3.1 Copying the Bible: How were copies of the Bible made before the printing press?

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- 3.1.3 Who did the copying of the documents of the Old Testament and how?

### Detailed Study

After examining how both testaments of the Christian Bible came into being, we need now to take a look at how they came together as a Bible comprised of the Old Testament and the New Testament. That history should give attention first to how copies of sacred documents were made. This will be foundational to these documents being distributed and thus sought to gain credibility in the eyes of various ancient Christian communities. The result of this copying process was to produce thousands of manuscripts that were distributed either as individual documents or mostly as a collection of documents. The hand copying process had numerous weaknesses built into it. The result was to produce manuscripts that contained large numbers of variations in wording in the texts.

The immediate question that comes is “Where does the content of our English Bible come from?” Since the beginning of the modern era of the printing press, those who print a Greek New Testament and a Hebrew Old Testament are forced by necessity to make decisions about the exact wording of a biblical language text. How are such decisions made? On what basis, since the copied manuscripts differ so much in their wording? The answer to these questions lies in a brief overview of a technical process of analyzing the now existing manuscripts of the biblical texts. The goal is to seek the most accurate wording possible. The standard for measuring accuracy is the exact wording of each document when it was first written. But why not just go back to the original documents themselves? Unfortunately, these documents no longer exist. And further complicating the process is that for the New Testament, existing manuscripts, that cover the full content of the New Testament, reach back no earlier than three hundred years after the original writing of each document. The situation is more challenging for the Hebrew test of the Old Testament. This process of analysis of available manuscripts is a highly technical discipline called Textual Criticism. We will take a quick look at it, both in its New Testament application, and also in its very different Old Testament application.

Finally, we will give consideration to the central role that the Latin Vulgate has played in Christian history. By the fifth century it had become the Bible for western Christianity. And it remained so for all Christians in the west until the Protestant Reformation. For Roman Catholics it still remains the Bible. Additionally, it has impacted the English Bible in many, many ways from the very beginning, and remains an influence on the English Bible used by most Protestants today. Modern English Roman Catholic translations must pay close attention to the Vulgate, if these are to gain the approval of the Vatican.

#### 3.1 Copying the Bible: How were copies of the Bible made before the printing press?

In the ancient world, no typewriters or computers existed. So how did people put their ideas in written expression? The answer: very laboriously, using very primitive writing tools. This tended to push writing toward the experts who were especially trained for this. By the beginning of the Christian era, most writing outside of very short personal letters -- less than one page -- was done by professional scribes.

##### 3.1.1 How did people write in the ancient world?

In the world at the beginning of the Christian era a variety of writing materials were used. Each tended to have specific purposes and situations. The graphics below illustrate the variety of materials and instruments used in writing. The picture to the right is of a young Roman school boy doing his ‘homework’ on a wax tablet much like the illustration below. This is a photo of a fresco wall painting from the time of the Roman Empire in the ancient world. The stylus, or pen, in his right hand was used to make the indentations in the softened wax in the hollowed out portion of the wooden tablet. Multiple tablets could be bound together with leather straps laced through the holes in the vertical holes



in the tablet. The use of candles kept the wax soft and pliable for writing. Once the writing was complete the wax would be cooled and thus become firm. Re-writing on the same tablet was simple and frequent.

Wax Tablet	Ostraca	Paper
		
Papyrus	Parchment	Writing Instruments
		

Of the five types of writing materials illustrated above, the wax tablet was the main writing material for school boys, although it was used for other things. A fine layer of wax was spread over a flat piece of wood. The wax could be heated to erase the writing that had been placed on it using a stylus while the wax was warm. Ostraca was pottery with inscriptions etc. on it. Most of what we have available today are broken pieces of pottery. "Paper" was not produced until after the 8th century AD, and does not figure prominently with the copying of the Bible until the middle ages. Papyrus was the most common writing material in the ancient world, and was widely used. Parchment -- Vellum -- was tanned leather and was widely used in copying the Bible from the fourth through the fourteenth centuries. The writing instruments ranged from hollowed out reeds to bone or wooden styli.

### 3.1.2 Who did the copying of the documents of the New Testament and how?



A dramatic dividing line in the copying process exists. Up to the fourth century, those who copied the texts of the New Testament were not professional scribes who did this for a living. Most were what we would call “laymen.” They spent enormous amounts of time making copies as a part of their Christian faith, and without pay for doing it. But with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, making it a *religio licita*. Although other religions were tolerated, Christianity increasingly became the dominant religion of the empire. One of the by-products of that action was to make the enormous financial support of the Roman government available to Christian churches. This shifted the copying of manuscripts of the Bible from volunteer scribes to professionally trained scribes. The quality and way of copying noticeably changed as evidenced by the use of much more expensive materials and a much more decorative style of manuscript production.



The methods of copying usually followed one of two patterns. First, a scribe would have a copy of the biblical text (= exemplar) in front of him. Using the appropriate writing materials (papyrus until the fourth century AD, and mostly parchment after that), he would visually copy by hand each word onto the new manuscript. The result of such a long, laborious effort over several months would be one more copy of the New Testament. Second, a group of scribes would gather each with appropriate writing materials. The number would vary according to the circumstance. Another scribe would orally read aloud the exemplar text to the group of copyists, who would carefully write down what they heard being read. The result of such a long, grueling period of copying would be several new Bibles, depending on the number of the group of scribes. Both methods took months and months of hard work to produce each new copy. But the second method was much more efficient in that multiple copies resulted from the process. The advantage of the first method was that fewer mistakes would be made in the copying process. From every indication, the second, group method was the most common way of copying the New Testament.

Such a process is naturally going to produce numerous variations of wording in the copied manuscripts. Rich Elliott has a very helpful summary of the core challenges to the scholar analyzing these manuscripts in order to determine the text of the Greek New Testament:

Chances are that you’ve played the game “Telephone” some time in your life. “Telephone” is the game in which a group of people gather around in a circle. One person thinks up a message, and whispers it to the next person, who whispers it to the next person, and so on around the circle, until you reach the end and the final person repeats the message aloud. The first person then states the original message.

The two sentences often cannot be recognized as related.

Even if you haven’t played “Telephone,” you must have read a book or a magazine which was filled with typographical errors. And that’s in a case where the typesetter has the author’s original manuscript before him, and professional proofreaders were engaged to correct errors.

Now imagine what happens when a document is copied, by hand, tens of thousands of times, long after the original manuscript has been destroyed. Imagine it being copied by barely literate scribes standing (not sitting, standing) at cold desks in bad light for hours on end, trying to read some other scribe’s barely legible handwriting.

Imagine trying to do that when the words are written in all upper-case letters, with no spaces between words, and you’re writing on poor quality paper with a scratchy reed pen using ink you made yourself.

Because that’s what happened with all ancient books, and with the New Testament in particular. Not all scribes were as bad as the secretary Chaucer poked such fun at in the quote above, but none were perfect -- and few had the New Testament authors looking over their shoulders to make corrections.

After a few centuries of that, it’s easy to imagine that the text of the New Testament would no longer bear any relationship to the original. Human beings just aren’t equipped to be exact copyists. And the more human beings involved in the process, the worse the situation becomes.

Fortunately, the situation is not as grim as the above picture would suggest. Despite all those incompetent scribes making all those incompetent copies, the text of the New Testament is in relatively good shape. The fact that copies were being made constantly, by intent scribes under the supervision of careful proofreaders, meant that the text stayed fairly fixed. It is estimated that seven-eighths of the New Testament text is certain -- all the major manuscripts agree, and scholars are satisfied that their agreement is correct. Most of the rest is tolerably certain -- we probably know the original reading, and even if we aren’t sure, the variation does not significantly affect the sense of the passage. For a work so old, and existing in so many copies, this fact is at once amazing and comforting.

Still, there are variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament, and some of them are important. It is rare for such variants to affect a fundamental Christian doctrine, but they certainly can affect the course of our theological arguments. And in any case, we would like the most accurate text of the New Testament possible.

That is the purpose of textual criticism: Working with the materials available, to reconstruct the original text of an ancient document with as much accuracy as possible. It's not always an easy job, and scholars do sometimes disagree. But we will try to outline some of the methods of New Testament textual criticism in this article, so that you too can understand the differences between Bibles, and all those odd little footnotes that read something like "Other ancient authorities read..."

For a very helpful and not overly technical discussion of the types of variations that show up as a result of this copying process see Tony Sied's, "Manuscript Transmission," in Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts web site. Numerous illustrations are presented as well.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.1.3 Who did the copying of the documents of the Old Testament and how?

When one comes to the copying of the Old Testament documents, the situation and the dynamics are very different from that with the New Testament.

#### **<sup>1</sup>Manuscript Replication**

The task of writing, while a part of Hellenistic education, was primarily the occupation of professional writers generally known as "scribes." In order to preserve an aging and deteriorating document or to make an additional copy, a scribe was employed to copy the contents of the original onto a new surface. The scribe was paid according to the quality of the work and by the number of lines. A single scribe most likely read aloud to himself as he copied from the exemplar (the original) to the new document. In a scriptorium, the ancient "copy center," there could be a group of scribes who make multiple copies as a lector (reader) reads the exemplar for them to duplicate.

The ancient manuscript was a dynamic text in that it could be corrected and added to. Only under extreme scrutiny can the textual layers be distinguished as attributable to the original scribe or a later corrector.

#### **Transmission Errors**

While the study of transmission errors can be fascinating in itself, it is more than an object of curiosity. The identification of transmission errors may help determine the relationship of one manuscript to another or, even more importantly, determine the textual variant which most likely represents the reading of the original manuscript.

It may be said that a discussion of the transmission errors is not a criticism against the trustworthiness of the documents.

... in spite of the very real possibilities for corruption of the text in the course of its transmission, and the actual existence of many differences among the various manuscripts of the NT, the work of the copyists of the NT was, on the whole, done with great care and fidelity. It has, in fact, been seriously estimated that there are substantial variations in hardly more than a thousandth part of the entire text (an estimate by Fenton J. A. Hort, quoted with approval by Caspar Rene Gregory, Canon and Text of the New Testament [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907], p. 528).

Finegan, *Encountering the New Testament Manuscripts*, p. 55.

#### **Unintentional Variants**

Scribal errors create variants in the textual tradition. One type is referred to as unintentional variants and have several causes.

##### **Errors Caused by Sight**

Some errors seem to have been caused by a visual difficulty during the copy process.

Permutation

Parablepsis

Parablepsis ("looking by the side") refers to errors that occur when looking at the left or right margins of text.

Haplography

Dittography

##### **Errors Caused by Faulty Hearing**

##### **Errors Caused by Memory Lapse**

During the process of reading from the exemplar and beginning to write it on the copy, a scribe could make mistakes as he repeats the line.

Substitution of Synonyms

Variations in Sequence

Transposition of Letters

Assimilation of Wording

Errors Caused by Poor Judgment

#### **Intentional Variants**

"They write down not what they find but what they think is the meaning; and while they attempt to rectify the errors of others, they merely expose their own." (Jerome, Epist. lxxi.5, Ad Lucinum concerning scribes copying his own works.).

These are some of the main causes of variants that can be described as intentional.

Spelling and Grammar Changes

Harmonistic Alterations

Corrections

Conflations

Doctrinal Alterations



In **Judaism** the biblical texts in Hebrew were being copied at the beginning of the Christian era to some extent. The preference for oral transmission was still dominant. But more importantly, they were gradually being incorporated into larger writings that by the fourth century AD would become known as the Talmud. This is defined as:

The Talmud is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs and history. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah, which is the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the Gemara, a discussion of the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings that often ventures onto other subjects and expounds broadly on the Tanakh. The terms Talmud and Gemara are often used interchangeably. The Gemara is the basis for all codes of rabbinic law and is much quoted in other rabbinic literature. The whole Talmud is traditionally also referred to as Shas (a Hebrew abbreviation of shishah sedarim, the "six orders" of the Mishnah).



ΣΙΝ ΕΤΩΝ ΕΒΔΟΜΗΚΗ  
 ΤΑ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΚΥΡΟΥ  
 ΠΕΡΣΩΝ ΕΤΟΥΣ ΠΡΩΤΟΥ  
 ΤΟΥ ΕΙΣ ΣΥΝΤΕΛΕΙΑΝ  
 ΡΗΜΑΤΟΣ ΚΥΡΕΝΟΣ ΤΟ ΜΑ  
 ΤΙ Η ΕΡΕΜΙΟΥ Η ΓΕΙΡΕΝ  
 ΚΣΤΟ ΠΗΕΥ ΜΑΚΥΛΟΥ  
 ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΠΕΡΣΩΝ ΚΑΙ  
 ΕΚ ΗΡΥΣ ΕΝ ΟΛΗ ΤΗ ΒΑ  
 ΛΕΙΑ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΑΜΑΔΙΑ  
 ΓΡΑΠΤΩΝ ΜΑΛΕΓΩΝ ΤΑ  
 ΔΕ ΛΕΓΕΙ Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΠΕΡ  
 ΣΩΝ ΚΥΡΟΣ ΕΜΕ ΑΝ ΕΔΗ  
 ΞΕΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΗ ΣΟΙΚΟΥ  
 ΜΕΝΗΣ Ο ΚΥΡΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΕΙ  
 ΡΑΝΑ ΚΣ ΟΥΡΟΣ ΤΟΣ ΚΑΙ  
 ΕΣΗ ΜΗΝ ΕΝ ΜΟΙ ΟΙΚΟ  
 ΔΟΜΗ ΣΑΙΑ ΤΩ ΟΙΚΟΝ  
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 ΜΕΤΑ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΑΝ ΕΔΗ  
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 ΟΙΚΟΥΣΙΝ ΕΒΟΗΘΩΣΑ  
 ΑΥΤΩ ΟΙ ΕΝ ΤΩ ΤΟ ΠΩ  
 ΑΥΤΟΥ ΕΝ ΧΡΥΣΙΩ ΚΑΙ  
 ΕΝ ΑΡΓΥΡΙΩ ΚΑΙ ΕΝ ΔΟ  
 ΣΕΣΙΝ ΜΕΘ' ΕΠΙΘΗΚΑΙ  
 ΚΤΗΝΩΝ ΣΥΝ ΤΟΙΣ ΔΑ  
 ΛΟΙΣ ΤΟΙΣ ΚΑΤΕΥΧΑΣ  
 ΠΡΟΣ ΤΕΘΕΙΜΕΝΟΙΣ ΕΙΣ  
 ΤΟΙΣ ΕΡΟΝΤΟΥ ΚΥΡΟΥ ΕΝΙ  
 ΕΡΟΥΣ ΑΛΗΜ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗ  
 ΣΑΝΤΕΣ ΟΙ ΑΡΧΙΦΥΛΑΟΙ  
 ΤΩΝ ΠΑΤΡΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΟΥΔΑ

The written Hebrew texts of the Old Testaments will come together in an organized and semi-official manner through the work of Jewish rabbis known as the Masoretes who worked between the seventh and eleventh centuries AD. The standardized Hebrew text they produced is called the Masoretic Text of the Old

Testament. This Hebrew text has become the foundation for all printed Hebrew texts used by Jewish and Protestant scholars in the modern era. Increasingly, Roman Catholic scholars are adopting it as well, especially after Vatican Council Two in the early 1960s.

In **Christianity**, however, the Old Testament pretty much meant the Septuagint until Jerome's Vulgate at the end of the fourth century. So most of the copying of the Old Testament during this period related to copying the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as well as the use of it for translation into Latin and other languages in the Eastern Mediterranean world. Although not a lot is known about the copying process at this early period, one would assume that the methods etc. of copying were similar to those used with the New Testament documents also in Greek.

When one comes to the rise of the influence of the Latin Vulgate in western Christianity from the fifth century onward, the process of copying either the Greek Old Testament or the Greek and/or Hebrew Old Testament diminishes dramatically because the concern now focuses on transmission of the Vulgate. It has become the Bible of Latin speaking Christianity universally. Even the study of these original biblical language texts drops significantly with the passing of time. So much so that only the monastics tucked away in isolated monasteries become the individuals who can read and study these texts.

What do we make of all this? Several things can be concluded. First, we need to be very grateful to the large number of anonymous scribes who labored long and hard to make copies of the biblical texts. Second, we can be confident in the providential supervision of God over this process of copying the biblical texts. The situation for biblical scholars is enormously better than for classical scholars who have to deal with a patchwork of late and very unreliable copies of the writings of the classical philosophers. Third, we have a continual history of preserving the divine revelation, for which we are thankful to God.