

The Transmission of the Old and New Testaments

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Date: 26 April 2026

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[0 : 00] Well, now that we've considered the inspiration and canonization of Scripture, let's look at its transmission throughout history.! Obviously, the prophets and the apostles wrote the various books of the Bible a long time ago, and it was all well before there was a printing press or a copy machine.

So, how exactly did the various books of the Bible written so long ago get into our hands today?

Well, once again, this is very much the story of God's providence.

I don't know about you, but I can somehow lose documents that I have saved in multiple places on a computer, backed up to a cloud service like Dropbox, and yet we have parts of the Bible that may have been written more than 3,000 years ago, and here it is, widely available to anyone who wants to read it today.

So, how is this possible? Well, let me begin by stating the obvious. We do not have the original writings of Scripture. These are what scholars call the autographs.

Not a single autograph, originally penned by the human authors of the Bible, still exists today. And I believe it's worth asking, or at least taking a moment to think about, why not?

[1 : 28] Obviously, Almighty God could have preserved the autographs. But He didn't. Instead, He chose to deliver His Word in a time when it had to be written by hand on very fragile, degradable material like papyrus.

At the very least, He could have moved men to write it into stone or some sort of metal, but that's not what happened. And I believe this is significant because over the course of this particular lesson and the next, I'm going to talk about mistakes that scribes made as they copied the Bible throughout history.

And as I've said before, there are some who refuse to accept this reality. They would rather assume that God preserved at least one perfect line of manuscripts all the way through history that were untouched by human error or human fallibility.

And for others who weren't previously aware of it, to learn of these scribal errors has the potential to shake their confidence in the Bible. But evidently, this messy process was all part of God's plan. God could have made a way for the autographs to be perfectly preserved, but instead He allowed them to vanish from history.

[2 : 54] And He chose to rely on fallible human beings to hand-copy the text for centuries. Mistakes and all. And I hope to show you this more clearly as we go along, but in short, just as God displayed His incredible providence through the inspiration and through the canonization of Scripture, working through imperfect man and very ordinary means, His providence is even more remarkable, I think, as we consider the transmission of Scripture.

And of course, this was by His design. He allowed the autographs to be lost, and He chose to rely on fallible men to transmit His word throughout history. Now, when it comes to the transmission of Scripture, almost out of necessity, we have to deal with the Old and New Testaments separately. And this is because the copying process for each was very different. The Old Testament was first transmitted primarily in Israel, a very specific geographical location with a single people group. The entire process was essentially contained under a centralized authority in Jerusalem. But the copying of the New Testament, that was very decentralized.

The church was made up of all kinds of ethnic groups from all over the world. They were not in one location. They had no centralized authority. They didn't even all speak the same language.

[4 : 25] Plus, between persecution and technological limitations, it's not as though they could readily organize with one another worldwide. So, the transmission of the New Testament was something of a Wild West compared to the Old Testament.

So, we're going to look at these separately. So, in ancient Israel, the vast majority of Old Testament manuscripts, and when I talk about manuscripts, I'm talking about the handwritten copies in Hebrew, they were created by trained, professional scribes for the most part.

Now, that will not be the case when we come to the New Testament, which is why far less has been written about the transmission of the Old Testament than the New Testament. Frankly, there's not as much to say about it, in a way, because it was so structured.

It was so uniform. It was remarkably consistent from one manuscript to the next because, I guess, most copies were done by professionals in only certain locations under very strict guidelines.

Now, that's not to say every manuscript was always perfect. Old Testament scribes, they generally underwent a rigorous education that involved learning the alphabet, of course, copying vocabulary lists, even memorizing the Bible, and so on.

[5 : 53] But these men were also human, of course. They made very natural, unintentional mistakes along the way. Sometimes they would switch letters around in a word.

Sometimes they would mistakenly repeat a word or phrase. Sometimes they would skip words or entire lines of text. In other words, they made all of the kinds of mistakes you would expect from men hand-copying the Bible.

And prior to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, there were two types of production methods or reproduction methods, I should say. There was what was called conservative copying and what we call free copying.

Now, conservative copying is exactly what you would think it is. It was a much stricter method where scribes would pay very meticulous attention to preserve exact spellings, precise wording, and even the specific layouts and line breaks of the original document.

So it wasn't enough to copy the words precisely. They had to make sure that each line started with the same word and each line ended with the same word as the original did.

[7 : 11] And when it came to songs or poetry in text, they always used a format described in the Jewish Talmud as a half brick over a whole brick and a whole brick over a half brick.

So like bricks in a brick wall, they would stagger the lines of poetry in the exact same way every time. And I'll show you what that looked like. So under the conservative method, scribes would need to copy songs and poetry in the exact same way as the original.

And this was just one more way to prevent mistakes. You could just glance at the page and know whether something had been missed. But as I said, there was also a method called free copying.

And this is one that probably isn't what it sounds like. This is where scribes, rather than meticulously copy the text word for word, would very intentionally update the text for modern readers.

So they weren't being careless, but they did change the text when they thought it would be helpful to modern readers. So for example, Genesis 14, 14.

[8 : 24] It refers to the city of Dan. That's how our English Bibles say it. However, that's not what the city was called when the original copy of Genesis was written.

It was Laish. It wouldn't become known as Dan until I think the book of Judges. But what the scribe did was update the name of the city to its contemporary name so modern readers would understand which place is being talked about.

Many people would not have known that it used to be called Laish. So when you combine these two methods of copying and you compare the manuscripts they produced, the conservative method preserved the precise wording of the original while the free method preserved what we might call a living comprehension of the text.

You see, we today might think of ancient Israel as having always been the same. But we're talking about a span of 13 or 1400 years between the time of Moses and the time of Christ.

Culture changed. Geography changed. Even the Hebrew language changed. So the free copying method was not used to corrupt the text or change it significantly.

[9 : 49] The idea was to ensure that contemporary readers and even future generations could understand the text. I mean, that's why we're not using a Hebrew and Greek Bible today.

We don't speak those languages. Most of us aren't even using an older English version of the Bible, say the King James Version. We never want to change the Word of God, but it doesn't do as much good to copy it and read it if we can't understand it.

So that was where the free copying method came in. Well, as I alluded to, the conservative method became the primary method of copying the Old Testament, especially following the destruction of

the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70.

But let me jump ahead in the timeline for a moment and talk about a group of Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages called the Masoretes. So these are men that operated between roughly the 6th century and the 10th century.

They were extremely conservative. They were extremely careful in their copying of the Old Testament. And they produced a standardized text that is still the text of Hebrew Bibles today.

[11:09] And more than that, it's the foundational text for virtually every translation of the Old Testament today in English or otherwise. Now, when I say these men were careful, that's probably putting it mildly.

If a manuscript contained even a single mistake, it was disqualified from public use. If someone mistakenly skipped a line, they could not just write that line in between two other lines, squeezing it in.

They had to erase one adjacent line and they had to write two in its place. If they were copying the name of God, Yahweh, in the Old Testament, and let's say a king walked in the room, they were not permitted to stop writing the name of God until they had finished.

They might lose their head over it for not acknowledging the king when he entered the room, but there was nothing more sacred than writing the name of God while copying the word of God.

Suffice it to say, these men took their job very seriously. And beyond that, the Masoretes gave us a tremendous gift by developing what's called vowel points.

[12:27] You see, originally, the Hebrew of the Old Testament did not include vowels. It was all consonants. So imagine it were English and you saw the letters BT.

BT. Well, that could mean bat, bet, bit, bot, or butt. Now, this wasn't a problem in ancient Israel. They could read the text that way. But over time, and especially after the Romans conquered Jerusalem, even people who could read Hebrew were losing the ability to read ancient Hebrew of the Old Testament.

So the Masoretes developed a system of vowel points, which were dots and dashes below and above the words. And what these would do is indicate exactly how the word was to be pronounced. They basically ensured that the Old form of Hebrew could not be lost completely and that modern readers would still be able to read the text. And because they were so conservative in their approach to copying the Bible, they did not want to simply add vowels to the text because that would be changing the text.

[13:42] They didn't want to change the text in any way. So they simply added vowel points above and below the words. They even went as far as including margin notes below the page to the side of the page.

Some of these margin notes actually calculated how many times each word was used in the text. They would even calculate what was the exact center word of a book.

I mean, they went above and beyond to ensure that the text was always copied accurately. That way you could go back, you could count the words, and if you didn't have the right number, something was wrong.

But this actually raises a pretty big question. Remember, I jumped ahead in the timeline. How do we know what the Masoretes were copying so carefully was from accurate manuscripts?

We might be extremely impressed by their methodology, but the Masoretic text is a thousand years removed from the time of the apostles. That's a pretty big gap, and when we're talking about Hebrew manuscripts, we have almost none.

[14:59] following the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, until we get to the Masoretic text. And the best, most complete version of that dates to roughly 1008 AD.

Well, let's jump ahead again to 1947. In 1947, some shepherds in the West Bank were searching for a lost sheep. This is basically the same area where David once hid when he fled from Saul. And one of the shepherds throws a rock into a small opening in the cliff, essentially a cave, and he hears the sound of pottery breaking. So they get curious, and they go down into the cave to investigate.

And what they find is a bunch of old clay pots containing a bunch of ancient scrolls. These are what we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Now, to make a long story short, it was eventually discovered that these scrolls contained fragments or copies of every single book of the Hebrew Old Testament, with the exception of

Esther.

[16:11] Now, there were a few other things in there, including a verse-by-verse commentary on the book of Habakkuk, but the most significant scrolls were certainly the Hebrew Old Testament.

And what made them so significant? Well, these scrolls were dated to approximately between 200 and 100 B.C.

So, we're talking about Hebrew copies of the Old Testament that predate the advent of Christ. They predate the Masoretic text by more than a thousand years.

So, now, we essentially have a time machine. We can go back more than a thousand years and see what the Hebrew text of the Old Testament look like.

We can hold the Masoretic text in one hand and the Dead Sea Scrolls in the other hand and we can compare them and we can see exactly how much of the text changed over a millennium of men hand-copying the Old Testament.

[17:22] And what did we learn? Well, the Hebrew Old Testament has approximately 305,000 words. And of those 305,000 words, only 1% of the entire text had changed over a thousand years.

And if that weren't amazing enough, of that 1%, the vast, vast majority of differences were simple errors that were easily detectable even before we compared the Masoretic text to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

These were things like spelling mistakes. For example, let's say I'm writing and I intend to write T-H-E, but instead I write T-E-H. well, it would be pretty obvious what I meant in the context of the sentence.

Not too many people would be confused by that. So not only was the Masoretic text identical to the Dead Sea Scrolls 99% of the time, but that remaining 1% was mostly simple spelling errors or obvious mistakes that had no real bearing on the text.

You knew exactly what was meant to be said. And not only that, but the remaining differences, as few as they were, do not change one fundamental Christian doctrine in the least.

[18:48] The changes do not affect how we view God or Christ or salvation or anything else that is foundational to the Christian faith. After 1,000 years of hand-copying the Bible, not one substantial mistake was made.

So what were some of the differences? Well, let me give you just a couple of examples starting with perhaps the most famous textual variant in the entirety of the Old Testament.

And when I use the term textual variant, I mean those differences between the biblical manuscripts when they're compared to one another. So in 1 Samuel 17, we have the story of David and Goliath. And between the Masoretic text and the Dead Sea Scrolls, we have a textual variant in verse 4.

This is concerning Goliath's height. How tall was Goliath?

Well, according to the NIV, he was over nine feet tall. And if you are using the NIV, you may see a footnote that shows what the Hebrew actually said, which was six cubits in a span.

[20:02] span. Obviously, these are not units of measurement we use today, so they updated it to say over nine feet tall. A cubit was the approximate length between a man's elbow and the tip of his finger, and a span was basically the distance between his thumb and his pinky when his hand is spread out.

So a cubit was approximately 18 inches, and a span was approximately nine inches. So if Goliath was six cubits in a span, that would make him roughly nine feet and nine inches.

Now the ESV retains the old Hebrew measurement, saying his height was six cubits in a span. And it does the opposite of the NIV. In the text, it gives the Hebrew measurement, and in the footnote, it gives the approximate measurement in inches.

But the ESV also provides a second footnote. And here's what it says. Hebrew, semicolon, Septuagint, comma, Dead Sea Scrolls, comma, and Josephus, four.

What in the world does that mean? Well, this is where we enter into the realm of what is called textual criticism. Textual criticism is where scholars and translators compare existing manuscripts of the Bible to identify the textual variants or the differences in the text, and they attempt to reconstruct as closely as possible the original wording of the autographs.

[21:41] So the goal of someone engaged in textual criticism is to take as many manuscripts of a text as they can, they compare the differences, they evaluate, say, when they were written, they weigh the evidence, and they try to determine what the original most likely said.

Now, manuscripts in the original languages, such as Hebrew for the Old Testament, will often be prioritized because they could be precisely copied word for word rather than translated, but they'll also consider manuscripts!

that were translated into other languages, especially if they're older translations. generally speaking, those engaged in textual criticism will prioritize the oldest manuscripts, not always, but often because they were copied closer to the time of the autographs, and they will prioritize those manuscripts in the original language of the autographs.

So let's go back to that footnote in the ESV. When it uses the word Hebrew, it is referring to the fact that the ESV has translated Goliath's height from the Hebrew Masoretic text.

However, the footnote also lets us know that this is a textual variant. According to three other significant sources as you see up here, Goliath's height was not six cubits in a span, but four cubits in a span, or approximately six feet and nine inches.

[23 : 15] And what are these other sources? First, they named the Greek Septuagint. Now, the Septuagint was a Greek translation of the Old Testament that was produced in roughly the third or second century B.C.

In a time when Jews were dispersed throughout the world and many of them no longer spoke Hebrew fluently, they needed a Greek translation of the Bible. Now, even though I just said that scholars will often prioritize manuscripts in the original language, in the case of 1 Samuel, that would be Hebrew, we don't want to undermine the significance of the Septuagint.

It was a very old translation, it was a widely used translation, and it was a translation used by Christ and the apostles.

It's hard to know the exact number, but when Christ and the apostles quote from the Old Testament, in the New Testament, it's been estimated that they were quoting from the Septuagint possibly 80% of the time.

In fact, I know of at least four occasions when they actually quote the Septuagint where a verse contains a small textual variance when compared to the Hebrew text.

[24 : 38] Again, these are not truly meaningful differences, but either they favored the reading in the Septuagint, or the difference was so small that they didn't believe it ultimately mattered.

Regardless, the Septuagint is a significant source for our understanding of the original wording of the Old Testament. Well, the Septuagint doesn't say that Goliath was nearly 10 feet tall.

It says he was just shy of 7 feet tall. And, as you see up here, that's not the only source that says that. Looking again at the footnote in the ESV, it also cites the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So now, we have both a Greek text and a Hebrew text from before the time of Christ that puts Goliath at 6 feet and 9 inches tall. But wait, there's more.

The footnote also refers to the first century Jewish historian, Josephus. Now, you might be wondering, why are we considering extra-biblical sources here?

[25 : 45] Why are we going outside of the Bible? Well, this will become a lot more relevant when we talk about the transmission of the New Testament, but sources outside of the Bible can actually be very helpful.

For example, let's say there's a verse that appears in much later manuscripts that we just don't see in earlier manuscripts. Well, that means one of two things happen.

either the older manuscripts that contain the verse are now lost to us, or that verse got added somewhere along the way for some reason or another.

So now we can look at all of the sermons and the Bible commentaries and the writings of Christians throughout the centuries to see whether or not they ever quote that verse. If they do, obviously, they had manuscripts that contained that verse.

But if they don't, that might indicate that that verse actually got added later. You see. Well, when Josephus refers to the height of Goliath in his writings, he says Goliath was only four cubits in a span.

[26 : 51] Now, that's still really tall, especially when you consider that the average Jewish male was maybe five and a half feet tall. But still, we're talking about a three-foot difference here. So how tall was Goliath?

Well, the fact is we don't have a definitive answer in this case. Two things could have happened here regarding the transmission of the text.

First, it's possible that the text was changed either from six cubits to four cubits or four cubits to six cubits sometime before the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Greek Septuagint were created.

So what would happen then is you now have two streams of transmission, two different versions of the story, one claiming that Goliath was ten feet, one claiming that he was seven feet, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Greek Septuagint, and evidently whatever manuscripts Josephus was reading from followed one stream, while the Hebrew Masoretic text actually picked up the other stream later on. Second, it's also possible that the text was changed from four cubits to six cubits sometime after the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Greek Septuagint came into existence.

[28 : 14] That's certainly possible. I know when fishermen brag about their big catch, they repeat the story over and over again and that fish gets a little bigger each time. Maybe that's what happened with Goliath.

As people continued to tell the story, Goliath got taller and taller. We really don't know for sure. Now, most English translations of the Bible, you will notice, have decided to prioritize the Masoretic text in this case.

They say Goliath was nearly 10 feet. Well, despite relatively trivial differences, such as Goliath's height, the Masoretic manuscripts have proven themselves to be incredibly reliable and accurate. after all of those years. In fact, even though it's the Dead Sea Scrolls that cast some of the doubt on Goliath being nine feet tall, it's also the Dead Sea Scrolls that have proven how reliable the Masoretic text actually is.

So, I believe we can trust the translator's decision here to favor the Masoretic text in this case. Well, let me give you one more example of a textual variant in the Old Testament.

[29 : 28] and this one comes from Psalm 145. So, Psalm 145 is written as an acrostic, which means each line corresponds to a letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

However, if you were reading from the Masoretic text, one letter, that is, one line, is missing from the middle of it. Well, everyone with OCD rejoiced on the day that the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Why? It's because the missing verse was there, which says, the Lord is faithful in all his words and kind in all his words.

Now, a missing verse, again, might sound substantial, but keep in mind, this exact same verse or what is taught in this verse is taught elsewhere in the Old Testament.

So, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain that verse. The Greek Septuagint contains that verse and one Masoretic manuscript contains that verse, but the majority of Masoretic manuscripts do not.

[30 : 41] So, while most English Bibles today, again, they prioritize the Masoretic text for the Old Testament, they have restored this verse. The ESV actually puts it in brackets. Perhaps that one Masoretic manuscript that included it tipped the scales for them and they said, this probably belongs.

Now, to be clear, modern Bibles prioritize the Masoretic text because of how accurate it has proven to be and how careful the Masoretes were in their transmission of the Old Testament, but that's not to say they are Masoretic only.

they prioritize that text, but they do not use it exclusively. They weigh all of the evidence, and when in doubt, they typically favor the Masoretic text.

But again, let me remind you, we don't want to get lost in the weeds of these little textual variants. We are talking about a 1% difference in the entirety of the Hebrew Old Testament, and again, the vast majority of those differences are little more than spelling mistakes.

I can assure you that if I attempted to hand copy the entire Old Testament even once, the result would be more than a 1% difference. And if you ask me to do it over and over and over again, there's no telling how many mistakes I would make.

[32 : 10] So while even the mention of mistakes in the Bible sounds alarming, maybe even terrifying, we need to keep this in perspective. Though God worked through fallible men to reproduce His Word throughout the centuries, He did not allow the text to be utterly corrupted in any remotely significant way.

And that's why I'll say again that the story of the Bible is really the story of God's providence. And with that, let's turn our attention to the New Testament, of course, we'll only get so far today and we'll pick up where we left off next week.

As I said, compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament was very much a Wild West. Still within the sphere of God's providence, of course, but from a natural standpoint, from an earthly

perspective, wow.

Within the very first century, the church spread out across the known world. It's made up of virtually every ethnic group. There is no centralized body tying them all together.

And, of course, every church in every place wants a copy of the New Testament. So, no longer are professional scribes working in a scriptorium following a strict set of rules where most manuscripts are coming from the same place and the same people.

[33 : 37] Instead, you have professional scribes copying the Bible in some cases, and you also have amateur scribes copying the Bible. You have them making these copies all over the place.

Not only that, but they're making as many copies as quickly as possible because, first, they wanted to meet the high demand. And, second, they wanted to ensure that their persecutors, both Jews and Gentiles, could not destroy all the copies.

copies. And what this ultimately means is that, first, there is far less uniformity from one manuscript to the next.

In other words, there are more textual variants, more differences. And second, this means there are far more copies to compare. And the more copies we have to compare, the more certainty we can have when trying to discern what the original autographs said.

So, this is just fascinating to me. As I've said before, we would like to think that God preserved a perfect line of manuscripts that contained absolutely no errors.

[34 : 51] But, instead, he preserved the New Testament by providentially guiding the church to produce thousands upon thousands upon thousands of manuscripts in a very short time period, dispersing them all over the world so they could never be completely lost or destroyed.

Even when the Roman Empire sought to utterly crush the Christian movement, they could not destroy the New Testament because there were too many copies in too many places.

Praise God. Now, much like the Old Testament, when scholars attempt to practice textual criticism and compare the manuscripts to understand what the autographs originally said, since we no longer have those original writings, they utilized three primary sources.

First, they examined the manuscripts in the original Greek language. The Old Testament was primarily in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Second, they look at translations of the New Testament, especially early translations.

Since the New Testament was carried all over the world from the very beginning, it was quickly translated into multiple languages. So, scholars can glean a lot from those early translations.

[36 : 16] And third, scholars will look at Christian writings outside of the Bible. Letters, sermons, commentaries, because many of these writings contain passages of Scripture.

In fact, early church fathers cited the Bible so frequently that we have more than a million citations of the New Testament alone in their writings.

I mean, if we were to lose every copy of the New Testament, we could reconstruct almost all of it by simply pulling quotes from their writings.

And all of this combined is what we call manuscript evidence. And how much evidence do we really have? How much evidence do we have today, I should say?

Well, setting aside the writings of Christians throughout history, and we'll even set aside the manuscript evidence in other languages and translations, which is a lot.

[37 : 18] we have approximately 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. And the oldest manuscript we have is dated to the second century.

So it's actually less than a few decades after the original was written. Now, maybe that doesn't sound too impressive to you, but let me give you something to consider.

the New Testament is the best attested ancient Greek writing. The second best is Homer's Iliad. We have approximately 1,800 manuscripts of that. However, the oldest copy we have was written roughly 500 years after it was first written.

So, we have maybe 250 copies of Plato, but the earliest one is dated 500 years after he wrote it. We have fewer than 100 copies of Aristotle's writings, but the earliest manuscript dates more than 1,200 years after he originally wrote.

[38 : 28] Now, have you ever heard of anyone disputing the authenticity of Homer or Aristotle? Never. No, and that's because the historical evidence is substantial, and yet the historical evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament far surpasses those other writings.

Not only do we have far, far more manuscripts, but we also have a closer gap between the autograph and the earliest copy. And these are, again, copies that we still possess today. Now, to be fair, many of the earliest copies are only fragments of books, but by the second century, we have complete collections of Paul's letters in one codex or one book format.

By the fourth century, we have beautifully preserved copies of the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments bound together. But you might wonder, does having more copies really help us?

I mean, what if we just, what if there are just more copies of scribes, you know, making the same mistakes over and over again? How does having more copies really help us if that's the case?

[39 : 46] Well, the short answer is, it helps us tremendously. As I illustrated at the start of this series, if you had only one manuscript and it contained a mistake, you would have no way of knowing it was a mistake.

But if you have thousands of manuscripts copied in different places at different times by different people and you compare them, you start to see patterns emerge.

And you can actually detect what went wrong and where. And I'll give you several examples of this next time as we continue to look at the transmission of the New Testament as well as its translation into other languages, particularly English.

For now, let's pray. Father, we thank you for your faithful providence, for preserving your word through every generation.

Your truth stands firm. So deepen our trust in Scripture and stir us to treasure your word even more. Give us greater and greater confidence that your word does in fact endure forever.

[41 : 02] And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.