

# How We Got the Bible

## Introduction

Duane Jenkins had presented a series of lessons on this subject and while he wasn't able to find the material again, the format I am presenting is based on his lessons. I have also taken some ideas from the book "How We Got the Bible" by Neil R Lightfoot of Abilene Christian University. His book is a good reference if you want a more detailed look than I provide in this lesson. The photographic images presented in the PowerPoint slides are largely taken from Wikipedia to avoid copyright issues. Quotations used in this lesson are taken from the World English Bible.

Why should we study this? In discussing the Bible with family and friends, the question may come up as to how we can trust that we have the unchanged Bible after almost 2000 years. You may also get the question of how can we know what we have is correct when there are thousands of variations in the manuscripts we have. This lesson is an overview, so that you are familiar with the background of the subject and be able to give a good answer.

## Inspired

**2 Timothy 3:16-17** 16 Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, 17 that each person who belongs to God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

**Mark 13:31** 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Even though inspired and preserved by God, we share in the responsibility, as Israel discovered by losing God's word for a while.

**2 Kings 22:8** 8 Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, "I have found the book of the law in Yahweh's house."

## Writing Materials

Many different materials for writing were used in ancient times.

- **Stone - Exodus 31:18** 18 When he finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, he gave Moses the two tablets of the covenant, stone tablets, written with God's finger.
- **Plaster - Deut 27:2-3** 2 It shall be on the day when you shall pass over the Jordan to the land which Yahweh your God gives you, that you shall set yourself up great stones, and coat them with plaster. 3 You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have passed over, that you may go in to the land which Yahweh your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as Yahweh, the God of your fathers, has promised you.
- **Clay - Ezekiel 4:1** "You also, son of man, take a tile, and lay it before yourself, and portray on it a city, even Jerusalem.
- **Wood/Wax - Numbers 17:2-3** 2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and take rods from them, one for each fathers' house, of all their princes according to their fathers' houses, twelve rods. Write each man's name on his rod. 3 You shall write Aaron's name on Levi's rod. There shall be one rod for each head of their fathers' houses.

- **Metal - Exodus 28:36** 36 “You shall make a plate of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engravings of a signet, ‘HOLY TO YAHWEH.’
- **Papyrus** - the inner fibrous pith of the papyrus plant was cut into strips. These strips were laid in an overlapping pattern and then hammered to produce a page. While not normally an archival media, papyrus was preserved in very dry environments.
- **Parchment** - Parchment was made by scraping and then drying animal skins while they were stretched. Sometimes also referred to as Vellum, although technically vellum would be limited to being made from calf skins. The writing was sometimes scraped off and the parchment reused resulting in a palimpsest. Parchment is a much more durable material than papyrus. **2 Tim 4:13** 13 Bring the cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus when you come, and the books, especially the parchments.

## Forms

- **Scrolls** - Scrolls were formed by gluing sheets end to end and could be written on one or both sides. Normal dimensions were about 35ft by 9” meaning one scroll could contain one work the size of Matthew, Luke or Acts. Some believe this is why Luke and Acts were separate documents
- **Codex** - A codex is a book with leaves, initially created by folding sheets together. They were much more convenient for carrying and finding specific texts. The early size of a codex was such that one codex could contain all four Gospels but later ones contained much more. History indicates that early Christians made the codex form popular.

## Languages

- **Hebrew** - Almost all of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. It reads right to left and was originally written without vowels, although sometimes vowel points were added later.
- **Aramaic** - Aramaic is similar to Hebrew and began to be used after the exile. **Nehemiah 8:8** 8 They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading.
- **Greek** - Almost all of the New Testament was written in Greek, a very precise language. It was universal, known widely throughout the world of the 1st century. The specific dialect is Koine Greek, which is also known as common greek.

## Evidences

- **Manuscripts** - Manuscripts are hand-written copies of the New Testament. In the next section we’ll discuss the types, dates, and counts of New Testament manuscripts. In total we have over 5,000 manuscripts.
- **Lectionaries** - Manuscripts created especially for public reading. We have over 2,000 of these.
- **References** - Many writings of early Christians quote specific scriptures. A surprising amount of the New Testament could be recovered from this alone, if we were missing the many manuscripts.
- **Translations** - Going into all the world, it was important that people had God’s word available to them. Very early, the New Testament was translated into Syriac, Latin (Vulgate), and Coptic (Egyptian) as well as Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Asian, Gothic, and Slavonic.

## Ancient Manuscripts

- **Autographs** - original written by the inspired author. No original autographs have been preserved. It is possible they existed until at least 180 AD when Tertullian wrote about going to apostolic churches where their own authentic writings are read.

- New Testament Papyri - earliest New Testament manuscripts written on papyrus dating from the 2nd to the 7th century. We currently have around 140 of these. We believe the oldest is the John Rylands Papyrus (P52) of a section of the Gospel of John that dates from 125 to 150 AD. It indicates that the Gospel of John was being read in Egypt within 50 years of it being written.
- Uncials - manuscripts from the 3rd to the 10th century were written in all capital letters without spaces and minimal punctuation. We currently have over 320 uncials that vary in size from small portions to the nearly full New Testament.
- Minuscules - Minuscules were written in small cursive Greek scripts and date from the 9th to the 16th century. We have 1400 to over 2700 of these.

## Copying, and Variations

Masoretic Scribes had strict rules for copying the Hebrew Old Testament (such as written only on the skins of clean animals, written in black ink only, look at each word before writing, each and every word and letter counted, must be checked within 30 days or be considered unholy, a page with a single error must be replaced, any page with 3 errors caused the whole manuscript to be replaced). Because of their formal, strict rules the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts have few variations. This has been confirmed by the relatively recent finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Early Christians were generally not a favored, rich group. New Testament manuscripts were not as often professionally copied as the Old Testament, but were copied and circulated.

**1 Corinthians 1:26** 26 For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, and not many noble;

**Colossians 4:16** 16 When this letter has been read among you, cause it to be read also in the assembly of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

### Types of Variations

Some have reported over 200,000 scribal errors, but this number is misleading. Compared to other ancient documents we have orders of magnitude more manuscripts available to us. If you only had one manuscript, you would have zero variations. Any large count only reflects the overwhelming number of available manuscripts. The second reason it is misleading is that many don't understand that most of the variations are inconsequential, such as spellings or personal names. Such a simple spelling variation in 4000 of the over 5000 manuscripts would be counted as 4,000 errors. We'll next consider the types of variations.

- Simple Errors - what we would think of as typos, easiest to spot and correct
- Substitution of similar words that sound the same - also generally easy to correct
- Added/Omitted connecting words - such as "for" "and" "the" that in no way change the meaning
- Word Order - In Matthew 1:18 is it the birth of Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus?
- Eye Skipping - losing your place led to omissions and duplication
- Trivial and Spelling Variations - especially in names and words that have changed spelling over time
- More significant variations (such as added sections) that are only in one manuscript
- Margin notes copied into text
- Margin references of text from one of the other Synoptic Gospels.
- Attempted corrections to harmonize Gospel accounts
- More significant additions (such as 1 John 5:7), which while unfortunate, don't change that the same information is available from other verses.

## Textual Criticism

Textual Criticism is the study of how variations should be resolved. Scholars have studied the types of variations and came up with a framework for most accurately resolving them. An example is that the age and quality of manuscripts is more important than the number.

## Significant Manuscripts

I want to mention a few of the oldest, more significant manuscripts that have been found.

**Codex Vaticanus** - dates from the 1st half of the 4th century and is currently located in the Vatican library in Rome. Originally it was closely protected, but finally in 1867 Tischendorf was allowed to examine and publish a copy of it. A photographic facsimile was later made and released in 1889. It contains almost the entire Old and New Testaments (missing a small amount at the beginning and end). In format it is a vellum uncial codex of 759 leaves of about 10" square with 3 columns.

**Codex Sinaiticus** - dates from the mid 4th century and is currently mostly located in the British library in London, although a few separated pages have ended up in other locations. It was discovered by Tischendorf in 1844 in a monastery in Sinai Egypt. His story about finding it relates that he saw pages that were considered rubbish and ready to be burned, but recognized that they were old and investigated. It contains all of the New Testament and about half of the Old Testament (Septuigent in Greek). In format it is a parchment uncial codex with mostly 4 columns per page.

**Codex Alexandrinus** - dates from the 5th century and is currently located in the British library in London. It contains the majority of the Old and New Testaments. In 1621 it was brought from Alexandria to Constantinople. In format it is a vellum uncial published in 4 volumes. Each sheet has 2 columns and is approximately 12 by 10 inches.

## Canon

We must first remind ourselves that the Canon of the Bible was determined by God. Neither we nor any other man determine the Canon, we only discover it.

Just as our modern Bibles may contain other items (introductions, book introductions, maps, concordances, etc.), some of the old manuscripts contain other items. Some of these other items are writings, now called the Apocrypha.

The early church had to be on guard about what they accepted.

**1 John 4:1** Beloved, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

One easy consideration is when it was written. Does it even claim to be written by one apostles or prophets or by someone later. Even reports of it being read in the Church is not a determinant. Just as we have class books that we certainly recognize as not inspired, the early church also had non-inspired material that they used (and history shows they understood the difference).

## **Greek Texts**

The purpose of textual criticism mentioned earlier was to produce an accurate text of the Greek New Testament. We'll look briefly at various attempts in this path.

Chapter and Verse divisions did not exist in the original Bible. Although earlier divisions were made, In the early 1200's, Stephen Langton created the chapter divisions that match what we use today. It wasn't until 1551, that Robertus Stephenus created the familiar verse divisions. While these certainly are a convenience in locating scriptures, they are not inspired and in some cases break up thoughts that continue across the divisions.

### **Textus Receptus**

Due to the influence of the Catholic church, many Bibles of the time were in Latin and based on the Latin Vulgate written by Jerome. Going back to the Greek was feared as that would expose the authority of the scriptures over the Catholic church. In 1504 Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch scholar, dedicated his life to restoring the New Testament. In 1516, he published a Greek Manuscript based on his comparison of several later Greek Manuscripts available to him, along with a parallel Latin translation based on this Greek version.

In 1546 to 1551, Robertus Stephenus (mentioned earlier) put out several editions of the Greek text. His text is based largely on the text of Erasmus. His 1550 third edition was known as the Royal edition because of its beauty and came to be known as the "Received Text". This phrase was made more common when it was republished by the Elzevirs in 1633 which had the inscription, "You have the text now received by all", which originally in Latin included the phrase "Textus Receptus".

In the next lesson, we'll see that the King James Version is largely based on the "Received Text".

### **Westcott-Hort**

We earlier mentioned the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus ancient Greek manuscripts that became available in the mid 19th Century. In 1881 Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort published "The New Testament in the Original Greek" based not on the Textus Receptus, but on reconstruction based on the manuscripts now available. Their work included an introduction describing the principles underlying their text and also included extensive notes on any problem text they encountered in their reconstruction. This greatly strengthened the idea of objectively examining the manuscripts to come up with the best edition possible.

## Glossary

**Alexandrian Manuscript** - a vellum uncial manuscript from the mid 5th century published in 4 volumes

**Autograph** - original written by the inspired author

**Canon** - inspired writings that make up the Bible, God's word

**Codex** - a book with leaves, initially created by folding sheets together

**Lectionary** - manuscripts created especially for public reading

**Masoretic** - scribes who formalized a strict set of rules for copying the Old Testament

**Minuscule** - manuscripts written in small cursive Greek scripts usually dated from the 9th to the 16th century

**Palimpsest** - a manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain

**Papyrus** - writing surface created from strips of the fibrous pith of the papyrus plant arranged and pressed into pages

**Parchment** - writing surface created by scraping and then drying animal skins while they were stretched

**Scroll** - writing surfaces formed by gluing sheets end to end

**Septuigent** - a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament made in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC

**Sinaitic Manuscript** - a parchment uncial codex from the mid 4th century with mostly 4 columns per page

**Textus Receptus** - received text is the Greek text based on later manuscripts available in the 16th century

**Uncial** - manuscripts written in all capital letters without spaces and minimal punctuation - usually from the 3rd to 10th century

**Vatican Manuscript** - vellum uncial codex from the 1st half of the 4th century

**Vellum** - another term for parchment, although more specifically from calf skin

**Vulgate** - Latin translation of the Bible, prepared mainly by Jerome in the late 4th century