

# Transmission of the Bible

## Background

### Language of the Bible

- OT - Hebrew, with some late sections (e.g. Daniel, Ezra) in Aramaic which later became the common language of the Middle east until superseded by Greek.
- NT - Greek, i.e. *koine* or common Greek, not classical Greek.

### Printing

- Invented in 1454, so 3/4 of the Bible's history is dependent upon hand written copies.
- OT first printed in 1488; NT in 1516.
- Chapters added to versions in 1284 by Cardinal Hugo de Santo Caro.
- Verses added to the OT in 1508 by Rabbi Nathan; to the NT in 1551 by Robert Stephen's. The first Bible with both was the Geneva Bible.

### Tablets

- The earliest known writing for was on tablets of wood covered in a layer of wax.

### Papyri

- Used in Greece at least as early as 5thc BC. Made from strips of the papyrus reed glued together in opposite directions and pounded. The sheets were from 6 x 9 inches to 12 x 15 inches. They were sold in rolls of 20 pasted together sheets; a book in roll form was called a biblos (see scroll).
- Very perishable, few survived, the NT was probably originally written on papyrus.

### Parchment or Vellum

- Used from after the 3rd century, till late Middle Ages. It was very expensive.
- Made from fine scraped and rolled leather, making strong, durable rolls.
- The term '*parchment*' comes from the name of Pergamum.
- Most of the surviving Bible manuscripts (MSS) are written on parchment.

### Paper

- Was invented by the Chinese in the 1stc. but was not used in Europe until the 12thc.

### Writing

- The idea that writing is recent and not known before Abraham is now proven to be false. A library has been found at Assyria and Ur; papyri have been located from Egypt dated 2000 BC; and the *ancient Tell el Amarna* tablets were also discovered. The earliest known Hebrew writing is earlier than 1000 BC. The books of the OT were written between the 8th - 2nd century BC.
- Manuscripts were originally written in *Uncials*, a sort of capital letter.
- In the 9th century a *miniscule* script was developed.

## The Canon of Scripture

*Canon* simply means the complete collection of books regarded as being of divine authority. *Kanon* is a Greek word meaning 'a straight rod, rule, or measure' (c.f. *cane* or *canal*). There was a long process whereby the church gradually agreed which books were scripture. This was formally ratified by the third council of Carthage in 397 AD.

## The problem - Copying

Before the age of printing, duplication was dependent upon copying. This leads to the possibility of errors. If one scribe copies from an original he could copy a line twice, miss a line or word, add a word etc. If one reader dictates to many scribes, he could misread the original or they could misunderstand what he speaks. For example, in 2 Cor 8:7 we have variants in translations of 'your love for us' and 'our love for you'. This is probably because the Greek words *your, us, our, you* all sounded the same.

Generally copyists were familiar with the Bible and consciously or unconsciously tended to 'harmonise' one passage with another similar one. In Mark 1:14, the original text '*the Gospel of God*' has had the '*kingdom*' inserted in some MSS, probably from Matthew. Other examples of 'harmonising' are in the Lord's prayer, Lk 11:2 fills out with material from Mk 6:10; Col 1:14 '*through his blood*' is added from Eph 1:7; 1 Cor 11:29 '*unworthily*' is added from 11:27; Acts 9:5-6 with 26:14. Sometimes scribes tended to 'improve' an awkward passage for readability.

If we are dependent on copies for hundreds of years how do we know that our Bibles are not full of mistakes? Translators have many MSS to examine, more than any other ancient book. They compare all the copies available and assess what the original is likely to have been. The many copies ensure an accurate assessment.

## Old Testament Text

### Old Testament Documents/translations

- The oldest extant OT document is a MSS of the Pentateuch dated 950 AD (The *British Museum Codex*).
- The oldest MSS of the whole OT is dated 10th century (in Oxford).
- The *Dead Sea Scrolls* (a translation found at Qumran) contain Isaiah and Habbakuk dated 125 BC. They are 95% word for word in agreement; the 5% variation is due to minor spelling etc.
- The *Septuagint translation* was commissioned between 285 and 247 by Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) for his famous library in Alexandria as an academic world centre. This translation was made into Greek for Greek speaking Jews (the common language in Egypt for Jews). It was called the *Septuagint* (or LXX, 70) since 70 elders were supposed to have done the work. We have very early MSS of the LXX. It has many varieties when compared to the Hebrew OT, but few are important. This helps us to check the OT text. The LXX was accepted by Paul and the early church. Most of the quotes from the OT in the NT are from the LXX and the order of our OT books follows the LXX (The Hebrew order is: The Law, The Prophets - which includes the historical books, and The Writings, e.g. poetry).
- *The Targums* (lit. *interpretation*) were Aramaic paraphrases of the OT written early in the 1st century to be read in synagogues. They are of some help in checking the text.

The foundation of the OT is the **Masoretic Text** made in the 9th century.

### Problem 1

there are no spaces between words so it is possible to translate with alternative divisions where it is unclear e.g.: In English we can see the problem like this:

GODISNOWHERE could be either -  
*God is now here* or *God is nowhere*.

## Problem 2

The text has no vowels so alternative vowels can be imagined e.g.:

Jer 49:1 - *Molech* (GNB), *Milcom* (RSV) both names of Ammonite gods, or 'their king' (KJV).

### Resolution of the problems

- Scholars carefully examine the context to ensure that the correct vowels are utilised.
- Ancient translations of the Hebrew into other languages are compared, especially the *Septuagint*, the *Syriac* (2-3 century AD); the *Old Latin* (2-4 century AD). Examples:
  - Gen 4:8 *Let us go out into the field* is added to the Hebrew original on the strength of several ancient translations. The RSV translates 1 Sam 8:16 as *cattle* not *young men* on the basis of the LXX.
- *The Dead Sea Scrolls* shed light on the Hebrew original and are a thousand years older than the Masoretic text. E.g.: Hab 1:17 *Are they going to use their swords forever* (GNB) is used instead of *Shall they therefore empty their net* (KJV). Usually, they confirm the Masoretic text.

Conjecture is, therefore, much reduced.

## Problem 3

a gap of 1000 years between the earliest Hebrew MSS and the latest OT books.

- This is common in other classical documents:

➤ Virgil	<i>Aeniad</i>	earliest MSS is 350 years after his death.
➤ Plato	<i>Works</i>	earliest MSS is 1300 years after his death.
➤ Euripedes	<i>works</i>	earliest MSS is 1600 years after his death.
➤ Julius Caesar	<i>The Gallic War</i>	Composed about 50-58 BC, there are about 10 MSS from about 900 AD.
➤ Livy	<i>Roman History</i>	Composed 59 BC -17 AD, one copy survives from 350 AD.
➤ Tacitus	<i>The Histories</i>	Composed about 100 AD. The two earliest MSS are from 850 and 1050 AD.
➤ Thucydides	<i>Histories</i>	Composed 400-460 BC. There are 8 MSS from about 900 AD.
➤ Herodotus	<i>Histories</i>	Composed 428-488 BC. There are 8 MSS from about 900 AD.

### Problem resolved - Why can we trust the OT text?

- Usually the older the MSS the more accurate it is likely to be, but this is not always true.
- God is sovereign and he oversaw the transmission of the text.
- Jesus and the apostles accepted the OT text without question.
- By the time of Jesus the OT canon was complete, but it was not formalised until the council of Jamnia in 90 AD.
- Jewish scribes, responsible for accurately copying scripture, were fanatical in their rigorous attention to detail. It was their way of life not just a profession. Every word was counted to check against known texts. One mistake meant that the MS was destroyed.
- A Samaritan translation of the Pentateuch, older than 100 AD has very few differences to our translation.

- The LXX confirms our translation.
- After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, the centre of the Jewish religion was taken away. Consequently there was a need to make scripture the centre of Judaism. Most Jews thought more highly of the scriptures than their own lives.
- In the 6th to 10th centuries Jewish scholars, called the Masoretes, prescribed precise rules for accurate copying. Minute attention was paid to detail. Faulty copies were destroyed. After a new copy was made, the old one was destroyed. This both guarantees the accuracy and reliability of new copies and explains why we have no old ones.

### **New Testament Text**

This is a very complicated subject and is covered elsewhere. We will only stick to basics here.

Essentially, there are two streams of MSS used by modern translations. The KJV and NKJV are based upon the *Textus Receptus* ('Received Text'). This arises from the Byzantine family of manuscripts. Most modern translations are based upon new critical versions of the Greek text (*e.g.*: *Nestle-Aland*) which keep changing as new ideas on textual criticism form. These arise from Alexandrian texts. The differences affect 3% of the Greek text.

The difficulty is that the oldest MSS are not necessarily the best. The two oldest ones, used by modern translations, disagree with one another hundreds of times. Later MSS can be better; the best early MSS were used a lot and gradually were destroyed. MSS that were considered faulty were thrown away and later discovered in good condition because they were not used.

### **How did the NT take shape?**

- The earliest books written were Galatians in about 49 AD, 1 and 2 Thessalonians about 53 AD, Luke in about 58 AD and Mark in about 60 AD.
- The apostles made provisions for the letters to be widely circulated (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; 2 Thess 2:15; 2 Pt 1:15, 3:1-2).
- Note that Paul quotes Matt 10:10 (or Lk 10:7) as scripture in 1 Tim 5:18.
- Peter equates Paul's writings with scripture in 2 Pt 3:15-16.

In other words, long before the end of the first century, the apostolic writings were being witnessed to as scripture - God's word.

### **Canon of the New Testament**

- The NT was completed by the end of the first century. Books were copied and disseminated.
- By the early second century, the various books became more widely known, read in churches and referred to in other theological writings (i.e. the early church Fathers).
- By the end of the second century, the books of the NT were equated with the OT as scripture. Translations were made into other languages and commentaries were written on them.

- In the third century, they were gradually collected into a whole, and first called the New Testament by Tertullian in about 200 AD. They were separated from the apochryphal books and credited as scripture by consensus of church opinion, based upon the evidence of apostolic authority.
- In the fourth century, the Fathers state that the NT was universally accepted, e.g. first by the church historian Eusebius (writing under the authority of Constantine) then by Athanasius. At the third council of Carthage in 397 AD. the NT was formally accredited.

## Manuscripts

- The Bible has more supporting ancient manuscripts than any 10 pieces of ancient literature combined.
- Like the OT, the earliest extant MSS were written some time after the originals, now lost.
- Classical books (as we have seen) have much bigger gaps. Also classical books have very few MSS compared to the NT. There are thousands of extant MSS backing up the NT documents.
- The NT also has several other *versions* based upon the original text which are extant (these are different translations into Syrian, Coptic or Egyptian, and Latin). These were made as Christians spread throughout the empire and translations were made into local languages where Greek was not so familiar. The earliest (e.g. Syrian) were made between the 2-3rd century.
- There are also *lectionaries* (church reading books containing the scriptures for months of the year) available.

### Extant Greek MSS at 1958

Number of papyri	67
Number of vellum codices	
uncial script	241
miniscule script	2533
Lectionaries	1838

### Why can we trust the NT text?

- Throughout history very wise scholars have trusted the text from the beginning.
- Witnesses of the events recorded in the NT, who were still alive, did not criticise the writings, but many became Christians at a time of persecution which meant that many died for this trust.
- There is ample testimony, from contemporary writings, that the NT is true in connection with the subject matter of these writings.
- The internal evidence (style, accuracy etc.) endorses the NT.
- The NT has stood up to all sorts of vehement criticism over hundreds of years. All critics have failed to discredit its veracity, in fact many have been converted.
- The NT contains prophecy that has been fulfilled.
- The internal witness of the Holy Spirit convinces Christians that it is God's word.

## Appendix One

# Papyrus and Vellum

## Papyrus

This word is the origin of our English word *paper*. Papyrus was made from the pith of an Egyptian reed cut into thin strips and joined by glue, water and pressure into sheets which were then fastened together to form rolls (scrolls). These were usually no more than 30-35 feet long for practical purposes; as such it would contain a single Gospel. The height was between 5 and 15 inches, though usually about 10 inches, with writing arranged in columns normally 2½ to 3½ inches wide and intervals of ½ inch between the columns. Unlike vellum, there was no ornamentation, separation of words and very little punctuation. At some point books (called codices) were formed from papyrus (e.g. the *Chester Beatty Papyri*).

## Vellum

Vellum was made from animal skins (e.g. goats). These were soaked in water for 24 hours and then washed. They were then washed in lime water, being left in it for a week. After this, the hair was removed and they were left in lime water for another week, prodded every day. They were then washed in clean water, soaking for 2 days, before being stretched on frames to dry. After drying out they were scraped with a sharp knife, moistened, dried again then rubbed with powdered pumice and stretched again. The skin was then cut into rectangles of various sizes depending upon the work. These rectangles were folded into eight sheets.

This process was invented in the early 2nd century by King Eumenes of Pergamum. He wanted to form a library but was hindered by his rival, Ptolemy of Egypt, who refused to export papyrus. The new material was called *pergame* (later called *parchment*), from the word for Pergamum. Papyrus was still dominant till the end of the 3rd century, but vellum superseded it because it was more durable, had a better writing surface and could effectively be bound into codices holding more writing. This meant that a whole Bible could be bound in one codex.

Writing, using a quill pen (often from a swan's left wing), was initially in uncial script, but a miniscule script was developed in the 9th century. Uncial MSS were often illuminated with colourful designs for the capital letters of each chapter. When the writing and illumination was finished, the sheets were sewn together with twine onto thong or tape and then fastened to wooden boards.

The timing of the development of vellum coincides with Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the state religion in 325 AD. Earlier, Christian books had been burned in various persecutions, but Constantine ordered 50 vellum Bibles in Greek for his capital city, Constantinople. Similar demand must have been common throughout the empire. The great codices now available (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) belong to this time.

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