

What manuscripts form the text of the Bible?

There is no serious argument about the text of the OT. The Masoretic Text is universally accepted as an accurate representation of the original autographs (the original inspired writings). The Masoretes (Jewish scribes) standardised the OT text between the 5th and 9th centuries using very strict rules to ensure accuracy. Text editions used for the OT include Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*, which is based on four manuscripts, and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

There is, however, considerable debate about the text of the NT. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts (mss) available for comparison, most of which differ in minor details from each other due to copying errors. The discipline of textual criticism is to determine methods for evaluating these, separating them into families and reconstructing the original inspired text. There are about 200,000 variant readings in the available mss (often just misspelling of a word repeated in many mss). None of these differences involve a moral or doctrinal teaching of the Bible; indeed only one in a thousand makes any difference to the sense of a verse. One thing is certain, there is no ancient book that is as well established for accuracy and authenticity as the Bible.

Textual criticism is very difficult and rules are hard to establish. Older documents are not necessarily the best while many similar documents may have the same repeated mistakes. Two modern schools work on two different principles; the traditional text has the greater number of mss in agreement; the modern critical text relies upon older documents, even though they disagree with each other repeatedly. This has resulted in two main families of text (though there are four identifiable families).

The Byzantine text-type: this was the Greek used in the Byzantine period (312-1453), also called the *Traditional Text* by Dean Burgon and the *Syrian Text* by Westcott and Hort. The *Textus Receptus* ('Received Text') is from this family. Between 80-90% of the extant mss contain a text which resembles the Byzantine Text, but none are earlier than the 5th century. This is the basis of the AV (KJV) and the NKJV alone.

The Alexandrian text-type: this has far fewer mss but represents the oldest; the dry climate of Egypt helped to preserve them. It is the basis of the modern 'Critical Text' of the Greek NT, as seen in the *Nestle-Aland Greek NT* or the 4th edition of the *Greek NT* published by the United Bible Societies. This text is based on the earlier work of Westcott and Hort and is the basis for nearly all modern English NT versions.

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