

Is Our Bible Reliable? #2

In our previous article, we examined the production of the New Testament and the incredible number of attestations that we possess via manuscripts. It is essential to stress the importance of the Greek text, for without these manuscripts we are left without a foundation upon which our English translations rest. There can be no reliable English version unless there is an accurate Greek text. We also started a discussion of variants which we will resume now.

Unintentional alterations in the manuscripts are frequent, but the vast majority of them are of little consequence. What presents a more serious problem is the variant or different readings which have been purposefully inserted by the scribe. I do not believe that these insertions were made by a dishonest scribe who simply wanted to tamper with the text. The intention of the scribe is almost always good. They usually only wanted to "correct" what appeared to be an error in the text. This was often the case when a scribe was copying the gospels. If he found a statement of Jesus in one gospel similar to a statement in another, he would modify one in order that it be in perfect agreement with the other.

Differences in manuscripts are called variations. People seeking to disprove the Bible claim that there is an enormous amount of them. A large number of variations do exist in the manuscripts, but this number is ascertained by counting all the variants in all the manuscripts. When this is understood the large figure of textual differences do not seem nearly as frightening. Most variations are made up of minute details, either obvious scribal blunders or slight changes in spelling, grammar and word order. These are of no consequence to our text. There are really three major types: trivial variations which are of no consequence to the text, significant variations which are of no consequence and substantial variations which have bearing on the text. Because of space limitations, we will only consider the substantial variations to the biblical text.

One prime example of a substantial variation is Mark 16:9-20. The two main manuscripts that we rely upon the most (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) do not have these closing verses. These two uncials of the fourth century are our very best manuscripts, and as textual witnesses are acknowledged as being in a class by themselves. Nevertheless, there are a host of witnesses in favor of Mark 16:9-20: the Alexandrian Manuscript, the Ephraem Manuscript, Codex Bezae, other early uncials, all late uncials and cursives, five old Latin authorities plus the Vulgate, one Old Syriac manuscript, the Syriac Peshitta version and many other versions. Although I believe this passage does be-

long in Mark, it is important to note that the truthfulness of this passage is not in dispute. The teaching of Mark 16:9-20 is recorded elsewhere, so we would not lose a precious section of scripture even if it were disregarded.

Another example is found in Acts 8:37. This verse represents a part of the conversation between Philip and the eunuch at the time of the eunuch's baptism. Although these are familiar words which stress the importance of confession of Christ, all versions, with the exception of the KJV, indicate that this passage is not in the original text. It is true that a seventh century uncial, some good cursive manuscripts and the Old Latin Version support this verse, but practically all the other manuscripts and versions oppose it. Therefore, it was probably not a part of the original account of Acts.

The variant readings in the manuscripts are not of such a nature that threaten to overthrow our faith in the scriptures. F. J. A. Hort, a leading textual critic, said, "The amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variations, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text." It would be easy to ignore issues like alterations and variations, but facts are facts, and our ignorance of them does not solve any problems. Many skeptics try to convince us that the New Testament is not accurate or credible, but it has stood the test of time. No one has ever brought a claim against the New Testament that has shaken its dependability.

We now we want to focus attention upon the text of the Old Testament. It will not be necessary to go at length into the question of the Old Testament text, for the principles followed in the restoration of the New Testament text, which we examined last time, largely apply to that of the Old Testament.

The textual witnesses for the Old Testament are not as vast as compared with the multitude of witnesses on the Greek text. However, the number of manuscripts available today is quite remarkable, including several important collections such as those of Benjamin Kennicott, Giovanni de Rossi, the Cairo Geniza Collection and the Second Ferkowitch Collection. Ironically, the earliest evidence available for the Old Testament is also the most recently discovered. Since 1947, thousands of fragments of manuscripts, both biblical and nonbiblical, have come to light. The biblical manuscripts found at Qumran range in date from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. The manuscripts have had an enormous impact on Old Testament textual studies.

Before the discoveries, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts were known as the Cairo Codex and the Leningrad Codex of the Prophets. The Cairo Codex includes the Former and Latter Prophets and is dated at A.D. 895. The Lenin-

grad Codex of the Prophets is slightly later, dating from A.D. 916. Another early Hebrew manuscript is the British Museum Codex of the Pentateuch. It has proven to be an important witness for the Old Testament text, even though it dates in the tenth or eleventh century. The oldest known manuscript of the entire Old Testament is the Babylonicus Petropolitanus Codex which was completed in A.D. 1008 and is also located in Leningrad.

Although many other manuscripts are in existence, these are the basic witnesses to the Old Testament text. The latest edition of the current Hebrew Bible (Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*) is based on these four Hebrew manuscripts, in particular the Babylonicus Codex of the complete Old Testament. The importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls is seen when one considers that without the discovery, the time between the autographs and our earliest manuscripts would have been at least 1,400 years.

After reviewing this material, one may wonder why, prior to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we did not have any copies of the Hebrew Bible before A.D. 895. This is very late in comparison with the New Testament materials, especially when one considers that the Old Testament was completed centuries before the first New Testament book was written. The answer is relatively simple. Scribes looked upon their copies of the scriptures with an almost superstitious respect, which led them to give a ceremonial burial to any copy which was old or worn. Their motive was to prevent the improper use of the material on which the sacred name of God had been inscribed. This was a very noble endeavor; however, this ancient custom has deprived us of the early manuscripts which we might otherwise have, and thus lengthened the gap between the available copies of the text and the Old Testament autographs.

The most famous and best publicized discoveries have come from the caves associated with the ruins of ancient Khirbet Qumran on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. Altogether, eleven caves have yielded manuscript material, including a complete scroll of the Hebrew text of Isaiah which is the earliest known copy of any complete book of the Bible, but most of it consisting of thousands of small fragments.

Every book of the Old Testament was represented at Qumran except Esther. The greatest number of the manuscripts come from the Pentateuch (15 of Genesis, 15 of Exodus, 9 of Leviticus, 6 of Numbers and 25 of Deuteronomy), the Latter Prophets (18 of Isaiah, 4 of Jeremiah, 6 of Ezekiel and 8 of the Minor Prophets), and the Psalms (27 manuscripts). Some of the best known manuscripts are the two Isaiah scrolls from Cave 1 (Isaiah A and B), extensive fragments of a Samuel scroll from Cave 4, a scroll of the Psalms from Cave 11 and a commentary on Habakkuk also from Cave 1. The earliest manuscript is probably that of Samuel, originating in the late 3rd century

B.C. To date, approximately 200 biblical manuscripts have been identified among this material, over 100 from Cave 4 alone.

In the final article, we will continue our examination of the Old Testament with particular attention on the Massoretic text and additional textual materials which help confirm the Old Testament.

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