

Is Our Bible Reliable? #1

Sometimes when you talk to someone concerning the Bible, a common question which surfaces is, "How do we know the Bible is reliable?" In all honesty, that is an excellent question which far too many Christians cannot answer. To the world, one of the greatest "leaps of faith" a Christian can take is believing in the Bible. To some, it seems ludicrous to trust in a book that was written so long ago. As we will see later, one cannot go into the Library of Congress and view the original letters that Paul wrote, the book of Acts that Luke wrote or the psalms that David authored. However, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that faith in what the Bible teaches is not a blind "leap" into the unknown.

The Bible took several centuries to complete. There were approximately 1500-1600 years between the Pentateuch and the final books of the New Testament. Also, about 40 people contributed to the writing of the Bible. Most people would agree that, within that period of time as well as the time since its completion, there is a great possibility of error. This erects a considerable "wall" with many who would believe the Bible. The answer is to examine the transmission of our Bible text to evaluate how strong a correlation there is between the true word of God and what we read in our homes every night.

The Bible is a very old book. However, it is by no means the oldest book in the world. The earliest known examples of writing carry us into the ancient land of Egypt where inscriptions have been found which date as far back as 4000-5000 B.C. This is very important because it was formerly held by skeptical Bible critics that writing was unknown in the days of Moses (approximately 1500 B.C.) and therefore Moses could not have been the author of the first five books of the Bible. We now know that writing was generally practiced many centuries before Moses.

Several materials were used as writing medium. Stone is probably the oldest material on which writing has been found. After stone came clay, wood, leather, papyrus, vellum or parchment and finally paper. The most prevalent writing materials indigenous to the Bible were leather for the Old Testament and papyrus for the New Testament. Although leather is not specified in the Old Testament, it was unquestionably the main material employed for literary purposes by the Hebrews. Many extrabiblical sources indicate that the Old Testament scriptures were written on leather. The Jewish Talmud, a code of traditional laws, required explicitly that the scriptures be copied on animal skins, and this regulation undoubtedly embodied an ancient tradition.

The significant role of leather for the Old Testament is duplicated by papyrus in the New Testament. Papyrus was the most important writing material which could be found in the ancient world and was so widely used that it is practically certain that the original New Testament letters were written on papyrus sheets. Papyrus plants grew along the Nile River and were cut into thin strips which were laced together and joined by moisture and pressure. The first pieces of writing material were bound into a roll or scroll. The average scroll was 30 feet long and 9 to 10 inches wide. Usually all the writing was done on one side. About the time of the first or second century A.D., however, the papyrus scroll began to give way to what is known as the papyrus codex. A codex manuscript is simply what we know today as a book.

The New Testament writers undoubtedly used scrolls. As we have noted, papyrus was widely used, but it was a very fragile writing material. So very soon after the New Testament letters were written, the original autographs perished. This should not make us doubt the word of God. The different New Testament letters had been received with the authority of heaven behind them, which prompted early Christians to make many copies of God's word. These copies of the New Testament in Greek are known simply as manuscripts. The word "manuscript" basically means anything written by hand, but in connection with the Bible it is restricted to the documents of the original language.

The New Testament is without doubt the best-attested book from the ancient world. It is really quite striking to compare the quantities of manuscripts of the New Testament with the foremost extant (or existing) Greek and Roman writings. No other book of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. For instance, there are 643 copies of Homer's Iliad (c. 800 B.C.) and the first preserved text is from the thirteenth century. The History of Thucydides, written about 400 B.C., only has eight surviving manuscripts. The few books that remain of the Roman historian Tacitus, written about A.D. 100, only have two surviving manuscripts.

On the other hand, the number of our New Testament manuscripts is vast, around 5,686 in all. All of these, however, are not complete New Testaments. Actually, only a few contain anything like what we might consider a complete New Testament. In fact, the oldest fragment of the New Testament is the John Rylands fragment. The fragment contains John 18:31-33, 37-38 and is dated in the first half of the second century. This is an extraordinary find because it means that this fragment was penned about 50 years after the gospel was written. As of the last count 109 of these "fragments" of various passages exist.

New Testament manuscripts are of two major types. The form of the letters supply the key in determining the difference between these types. The manuscripts of one group, the earliest and certainly the most important, are written in capital letters and are known as uncials. My most recent information indicates that there are 307 of these in existence. The handwriting found in the larger group is smaller and in a running hand-style, so these manuscripts are known as cursives. There are 2,860 of these in existence. The cursives did not appear until the ninth century and are of less value because of their later dates.

There is one more group that forms a number of New Testament manuscripts. Lectionaries are compilations of selected passages designed to be read in the public worship services. Most lectionaries are of the gospels, but some are of Acts and the epistles. Lectionaries cannot be classified as uncials or cursives because there are copies of both types. Studies have shown that lectionaries, being designed especially for public worship, were copied a little more carefully than ordinary manuscripts. More than 2,410 lectionaries are known to exist.

Most of the manuscripts do not contain the entire New Testament for the simple reason that a hand-produced copy of the whole was too bulky for practical use. The present manuscripts indicate that four categories were generally followed when making copies of the New Testament: (1) the four gospels, (2) Acts and general epistles, (3) the epistles of Paul and (4) the book of Revelation. The New Testament was often broken down into separate volumes and this is why most of the extant manuscripts do not contain all of the twenty-seven books.

Another aspect of the biblical text are mistakes in transmission. Even with the invention of the printing press, there are occasional mistakes in modern books. If errors appear in modern printed copies of the Bible (the first edition of the King James Bible had over 300 errors), it is not difficult to see how mistakes slipped unnoticed into the New Testament manuscripts long ago. All ancient books had to be produced by hand, and no human hand is so exact or eye so sharp as to preclude the possibility of error. Manuscript faults come about in two ways: either the alterations made by the scribe are unintentional slips of the pen, or else the alterations were made deliberately.

Unintentional slips or errors are mistakes of the hand, eye and/or ear. Usually, these pose no problem because they are easy to detect. Often a scribe with a copy before him mistakes one word for another, and by chance copies down the wrong word. Sometimes a scribe confuses words of similar sound, as in English we often confuse "affect" and "effect." Also, a scribe can misunderstand a passage due to improper division of the words. Errors of omis-

sion and addition are common in all the manuscripts. Omissions and additions normally are due to a simple appearance of similar words. By comparing the many manuscripts a textual critic can detect and explain these errors without problem.

In the next article, we will continue to discuss variants in manuscripts and begin an examination of the Old Testament text.

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