

Is Our Bible Reliable? #3

In our previous article, we examined variants in the New Testament and began a discussion of the Old Testament text and the findings at Qumran which we will resume now.

The most astounding fact of all is realized when the manuscripts from Qumran are compared to the ninth and tenth century copies. Within a time frame so large, many discrepancies could have crept in which would cast doubt on the Old Testament text. Yet the overwhelming majority of variations were nothing more than differences in spelling. Even when there was an indisputable variation in the text, it was very trivial in nature.

The background of the Old Testament text transmission is very intriguing. Until the invention of printing, the Old Testament scriptures were handed down by copying. This process makes it inevitable for scribal variation to appear. This is especially true with the Hebrew manuscripts because the language is very difficult. Several letters of the Hebrew alphabet look very much alike. Since scribal mistakes were inevitable, various circles of Jewish scholars sprang up at a very early date who were dedicated to the preservation of the Old Testament text.

The most well known of these groups, the Massoretes, came into being around A.D. 500. The Massoretes got their name because of their acknowledged dependence on the authoritative traditions (Massorah) concerning the text. Their work is spread out over a period of four or five centuries and they contributed greatly to the Old Testament text transmission.

The Massoretes are perhaps best known for their system of vowels and accents which they devised for the Hebrew text. All letters in the Hebrew alphabet are consonants. Therefore, the Old Testament was first written without vowels. Although this may seem unusual to us, it was sufficient for the many centuries in which Hebrew continued as a spoken language. When Hebrew was no longer a spoken language, there was an eminent danger that the proper pronunciation of the words in the text would likewise disappear. To meet this danger the Massoretes, on the basis of their well-kept traditions, inserted vowel points above and below the lines of the text. It must be emphasized, however, that they did not bother the text itself -- they only added a means by which to insure the correct pronunciation of the text.

The Massoretes were not only concerned with such details as proper pronunciation. They also sought ways and methods by which they could eliminate scribal slips of addition or omission. They achieved this through intricate

procedures of counting. They numbered the verses, words and letters of each book. They counted the number of times each letter was used in each book. They noted verses which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them, etc. They calculated the middle verse, the middle word, and the middle letter of each book (the middle verse of the Pentateuch is Leviticus 8:7, while the middle verse of the Hebrew Bible is Jeremiah 6:7). Someone has said that everything countable was counted. Some of these notations can still be found in our printed Hebrew Bibles. With these complicated safeguards, and others, when a scribe finished making a copy of a book he could then check the accuracy of his work before using it.

The Massoretes were first class textual critics. They carefully examined and appraised all the textual evidence available to them. On the basis of the abundant evidence, they reproduced the form of the text which had been received at least several centuries before their time. Indeed, their labors were so productive and their contributions so large that our Hebrew text today is often referred to as "the Massoretic text." The extant Hebrew manuscripts noted in the previous article are outstanding examples of the Massoretic text.

The fruits of this level of detail can be shown by comparing the Old Testament texts to secular texts. We do not possess as many different manuscripts of secular origin in the Old Testament era as we do in the New Testament era. Nevertheless, where we do, for example, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the variations are of a far more extensive and serious nature. Whole clauses are inserted or left out, and the sense in corresponding columns of text is in some cases completely different. Apart from meticulous attention to detail, there is no reason why the same occurrence of divergence and change would not appear between Hebrew manuscripts produced centuries apart. For example, even though the two scrolls of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known, they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted mainly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.

Although the Old Testament manuscripts are the primary source of evidence, additional materials can corroborate the traditional text. These additional materials, when used with discretion, can supply missing words of the Massoretic text when it is obviously defective. Also, these materials, with their parallel readings, most often substantiate the Massoretic text and give it an increased credibility. The following is a brief description of these additional textual materials.

Samaritan Pentateuch. The Samaritan Pentateuch is not a translation per se; it is a form of the Hebrew text itself. Its beginning is traced back to about 400 B.C. when the Samaritans separated themselves from the Jews and built their sanctuary on Mt. Gerazim, near Shechem (John 4:1-42). As a result, the Samaritans adopted their own form of the Hebrew scriptures and only counted the five books of Moses as authoritative.

Septuagint. The word "Septuagint" is derived from the Latin *Septuaginta*, meaning "Seventy," and is the common name given to the Greek translation of the Old Testament. According to an unfounded tradition, seventy-two men (six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel) took part in this translation which was completed around 280-250 B.C. The number was rounded off to seventy or LXX. It was the text most often quoted by the apostles and inspired writers of the New Testament. In fact, one half of the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament come from the Septuagint. While the Samaritan Pentateuch only recognized the first five books of Moses, the Septuagint covered the remainder of the Old Testament.

Aramaic Targums. After the period of the Babylonian captivity, the Jews began the shift to Aramaic as their spoken language. Evidence of this change can be found in the book of Daniel, which contains sections of Aramaic writing. In order for the people to understand the reading of the scriptures in public worship, it was necessary that they be translated or paraphrased in Aramaic. The translations were called targums and began to appear in the fifth century A.D.

Syriac Peshitta. The Syriac translation was begun very early, perhaps as early as the middle of the first century A.D. In its earliest form the Peshitta is in close agreement with the Massoretic text. However, there is considerable evidence where it has been unduly influenced by readings of the Septuagint. Nevertheless, the Peshitta is an important tool in the textual criticism of the Old Testament.

Latin Versions. There are two main types of the Latin translations, the Old Latin and the Vulgate. The Old Latin dates back to A.D. 150, but it has definite limitations because it is a translation based on the Septuagint. The Latin Vulgate, on the other hand, even though later (A.D. 405), is a valuable textual authority. This unique and extraordinary work was done by Jerome, who spent fifteen years translating directly from the Hebrew into the Latin. This translation has had an enormous impact on textual study.

Even though our Old Testament is not as well-documented as the New Testament, there is still overwhelming evidence to accept the Old Testament as completely accurate. This information is invaluable in a world of skeptics who

want to discredit God's word as unreliable and inaccurate. We can study our Bibles with the greatest confidence that these are the words which the Holy Spirit communicated to man (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Much more could be said about the evidence for the Bible, but Peter summed it up well when he wrote, *"For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you"* (1 Peter 1:24-25).

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