

Preservation & Transmission

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of inspiration and canonicity naturally leads the careful student to another pressing question—one which, perhaps even more than the others, carries direct implications for the Christian faith. If inspiration ensures that the original documents are truly inerrant, truthful, authoritative, and divinely powerful, and if canonicity sets these documents apart from other documents as those which carry divine inspiration, then is there any reason to believe that these qualities apply to subsequent copies of the original documents? This is especially important when we consider the fact that we do not possess any original OT or NT manuscripts.

For all these reasons, an important aspect of understanding Scripture is investigating the process of scriptural preservation and textual transmission. In this section, we'll answer the following questions:

- Are there Scriptural promises regarding its own preservation?
- How were the Scriptures preserved?
- To what extent were the Scriptures preserved?
- What was the process of textual transmission throughout OT and NT history?
- Do we have a perfectly preserved text?

In addition to these questions, we'll also briefly explore the discipline known as textual criticism. We'll look at the role of a textual critic, explain the process he uses to determine the original reading, and look at examples of such issues in the OT and NT texts.

2 PRESERVATION

Immediately obvious in any discussion of Scriptural preservation is the fact that we *have* an OT and NT Bible. So there's no question that the Bible has been preserved in *some* form or fashion throughout the centuries. Nevertheless, certain questions remain: Does the Scripture guarantee its own preservation? To what extent has it been preserved? By what means and mode was it preserved?

2.1 MEANS OF PRESERVATION

The first question we must answer concerns the means by which the Bible has been preserved throughout the millennia. There is a small yet vocal segment of Christianity which insists that God has promised to miraculously preserve the text of Scripture, ensuring that to this day it is free from textual errors and corruptions in transmission. Most often we find this argument made in connection with the King James Only movement. As the argument goes, God has miraculously preserved the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the *Textus Receptus* (or "received text"). Often, proof texts are offered to close any discussion:

Psalm 12:6-7 *The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. Thou, O Lord, wilt keep them; Thou wilt preserve him from*

this generation forever.

Psalm 119:89 *Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven.*

Isaiah 40:8 *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.*

Matthew 5:18 *“For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.”*

To this list may be added a host of other texts (e.g., Ps 119:152; Matt 24:35; Luke 16:17; 1 Pet 1:23) which appear at first blush to promise a miraculous preservation of the biblical text. Yet in each of these texts, when studied in their context according to proper hermeneutics, we find they do not teach that the Bible will be miraculously preserved by God throughout history.

There is, in fact, no promise made that God would preserve his Word in the same manner by which he originally wrote it—that is to say, through *inspiration*. For this very reason, we were careful to define inspiration within the context of the “original autographs.” That is to say, the process of inspiration did not extend to the copies made of those originals.

However, we do find in Scripture the reality that God has preserved his word—however, in a means other than through miraculous preservation. Rather, we find that God preserve his word through the providential guidance of history as well as individuals. Evidence of this is seen as early as Deuteronomy 17:18, wherein each new king of Israel is commanded to write a copy of the law for himself. Historically, we even see the preservation of the text in the rewriting of Jeremiah’s prophecies after Jehoiakim burned up the originals (Jer 36:1-32).

Thus, the Scriptures have been providentially preserved rather than miraculously preserved.

2.2 EXTENT OF PRESERVATION

Having established the means of Scripture’s preservation through providence, it leads us to consider the extent of Scripture’s preservation. Has the Scripture been preserved in its entirety? Have the details of the Scriptures been preserved perfectly?

If God had preserved his word miraculously, we would expect, then, that this would necessitate—or at the very least imply—a perfect preservation. But such an assumption is not required through a providential means of preservation, and this is confirmed by the textual variations that exist in the extant biblical manuscripts (e.g., 1 Sam 13:1; 2 Sam 8:4 vs. 1 Chron 18:4; 2 Kgs 24:8 vs. 2 Chron 36:9).

Such manuscript variants can seem alarming, but in reality, the Bible has been preserved with *astounding* purity throughout an incredibly long period of time. The earliest of the biblical books were penned over 3000 years ago, and yet we possess thousands of copies of the OT and NT texts, some of which date back to within a few centuries of the time of the original writing. Our OT texts exhibit >90% agreement, and the vast majority of manuscript variants are easy to observe and simple to resolve. Similarly, we possess 5,600+ NT manuscripts, including some fragments which date from the 2nd century A.D. Like their OT

counterparts, these NT documents boast 95% agreement, with mostly insignificant variations comprised of spelling and word order differences.

This kind of manuscript witness and agreement is astounding, especially when considered alongside other ancient works. Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, for instance, only has 10 extant manuscripts, the oldest of which was made 900 years after Caesar. Likewise, only 8 manuscripts of Herodotus' *Histories* exist, and the oldest one dates to 1,300 years after the original composition. The comparison with the preservation of the biblical text is striking.

2.3 MODE OF PRESERVATION

A final question we must consider is the mode by which God has preserved the text of Scripture. Did he preserve the actual manuscripts themselves? Did he preserve the one particular version? Or did he use some other mode?

The answer to the first question is obvious. We possess no original OT or NT documents. The entirety of our current Bibles is derived from *copies* of the original, the purity of which we have already seen was not completely sustained. Nevertheless, we affirm that the same qualities of authority, inerrancy, infallibility, etc., which were given the original manuscripts through the process of inspiration can still be applied to these copies to the extent that they accurately represent the originals.

Even within Scripture, we see that copies of Scripture were seen as equally as much the Word of God as the originals (Deut 17:18; Ezra 7:14; Matt 22:29; John 5:39; Acts 17:2; 2 Tim 3:15).

2.4 SUMMARY

In summary, we see that God preserved his word through a providential process whereby the original manuscripts were copied throughout the centuries. As the *Westminster Confession* states it, "The Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, being immediately inspired by God and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in ages, are therefore authentic; so in all controversies of religion, the church is to finally appeal to them."

3 TRANSMISSION

The history of the transmission of the Bible is a long and rather unclear process. Nowhere do we have one, fully formed explanation of how the OT and NT texts were copied and preserved throughout the centuries. Any understanding we have is the result of collating a myriad of smaller pieces together, some from the biblical text, and some from the manuscript evidence we have today.

3.1 TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

We have little information on the history of the OT text from the time of its composition to the period of the exile. The OT was composed over a 1,000+ year period, during which time there were changes in language, alphabet, script, socio-politics, etc. Even after the final book was written, the text then underwent 2000+ years of transmission and preservation. Suffice it to say, the transmission of the OT is a difficult and complicated topic requiring great care and cautious reflection.

The initial composition of the OT occurred from 1440-440 B.C. Unfortunately, no textual evidence exists from this timeframe, and we have little information on how the text was preserved. We see directives for copies of the law to be made (Deut 17:18; 31:9ff) and we see that “the book of the law” was discovered in the temple in 621 B.C., indicating that preservation was occurring (2 Kgs 22:8). At this times, scribes as early as the time of David and Solomon became involved in preserving these texts through copying (2 Sam 8:16-18; 1 Kgs 4:1-6; 2 Kgs 18:18, 37; 2 Chron 24:11). Scribal activity was common throughout the ANE, and Israelite scribes most commonly copied scrolls by hand, though at times they may have utilized dictation. Of course, this process naturally produced scribal errors, which if caught, were noted in the margins of the scroll. “Their main task was to preserve the text by faithfully copying the Hebrew manuscripts.”¹

Most of the earlier books were written in proto-Hebrew script, but at some time during the exile, the Aramaic square script was adopted and most of the later OT books were likely written in this script, perhaps including part of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and most definitely Ezra, Nehemiah, and perhaps Esther. By the 3rd century B.C., all the OT books began to be copied into the Aramaic script, written either on animal hide or papyrus.

A key source of information on the transmission the OT comes from the manuscript library unearthed at Khirbet Qumran—the oldest collection of OT textual evidence we have. In fact, up to 1947, all of our understanding of the history of the OT text was based on *translations* of the OT (LXX, Syriac, Targums, etc.). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls uncovered a rich new history to the OT text that challenged long-held assumptions about the inaccuracy of the *Masoretic Text* (MT).

Qumran was a community that had broken away from Judaism in Jerusalem and had formed a sectarian community near the Dead Sea. Like those in Jerusalem, these Jews were heavily involved in the transmission and preservation of the biblical text. One of the current theories is that the Dead Sea community was focused on making all biblical manuscripts conform to a textual standard—what we now know as the *Masoretic Text* (MT). It is thought that the caves in which these manuscripts were found could perhaps be a manuscript graveyard where they deposited discarded texts or those texts which could not be used in corporate worship.²

As was just mentioned, it was around this time that a standardized Hebrew OT text developed—a proto version of the MT. It was also during this time that Alexandrian Jews produced a Greek translation of the OT—the Septuagint (LXX)—which was outright rejected by normative Judaism from the start as a corrupted textual tradition that did not align with the official text (the MT). The proto-MT evidenced by the Qumran scrolls eventually developed into what we now have as the MT of the Hebrew Bible.

Following the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and the scattering of the Jewish people, preserving Hebrew manuscripts became a critical priority, and synagogues factored heavily into this process. It was during the period from A.D. 135-500 when the text was standardized and divided into chapters, verses, and paragraphs. Then, during the medieval period (A.D. 500-1000), a group of dedicated scribes known

¹ Mark F. Rooster, “The Transmission and Textual Criticism of the Old Testament,” in *The World and Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), 115.

² Ibid., 116.

as the *Masoretes* worked hard to preserve the ancient text tradition as it had been passed down to them. The term *Masorah* is a translation of the Hebrew word “tradition,” and refers to a comment made by Rabbi Akiva that the scribal tradition was a fence around the Law. Thus, the term used to refer to the preservation of the Hebrew scribal textual tradition is the *Masoretic Text*.

The main goal of the Masoretes was to preserve the Hebrew text tradition *as well as its pronunciation*. Since Hebrew was no longer spoken, and the text consisted only of consonants, the Masoretes created a system of pointings that preserved not only the pronunciation of the language, but also the rhythmic cantelization and traditional scribal interpretation of the text. These Masoretes were most concerned with preserving the most reliable witnesses they had, and they worked so hard to preserve these texts that they even preserved errors—errors they *knew* were there, opting to note these assumed errors in the margins rather than dare to change the textual tradition they were trying to preserve.³ They would check their copies using word and line counts to ensure that the tradition was preserved. The Masoretic Text we have today is represented by three medieval manuscripts:

Allepo Codex (925 A.D.)
Leningrad Codex (1008 A.D.)
Petersburg Codex (916 A.D.)

After A.D. 1450 and the invention of the printing press, the biblical text was made largely standardized, and print editions of the OT had replaced manuscript copies. Today, the most up-to-date complete critical edition of the OT is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), which is based on the text of the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete Hebrew text.

3.2 TRANSMISSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The textual history of the NT is clearer than that of the OT. The original Greek manuscripts were composed during a 50-year period during the 1st century A.D. Apart from individual books which may have been copied and dispersed by themselves, by the early 2nd century, collections of NT books such as the Gospels and the Pauline corpus were formed and transmitted as a collection. Later, Acts and the general epistles were collected into a single codex, and Revelation occupied its own slim book.

The period from A.D. 50-350 saw the widespread reduplication of the NT documents. Copies of the original manuscripts were being produced, yet not all were of the same quality. Thus, the majority of the errors we find today in the available manuscripts were actually introduced during the first 250 years of NT transmission! Manuscripts were being copied mostly by lay copyists with little professional training, and the high demand for NT writings, mixed with persecution and a desire for missionary literature led to hasty, unprofessional NT copies. Most of the errors introduced were unintentional and consisted of minor spelling and word order changes. Some changes were made intentionally, most likely based on the copyist's assumption that he was “fixing” an error when in fact he was actually introducing one. Naturally, these initial errors perpetuated as newly created manuscripts were used to make further copies.

³ They noted suspected errors using a Kethiv/Qere (“what it written”/“what is read”) notation. Thus, they would preserve the actual text, yet during readings of the text they would read the marginal “correction.”

The next 1200 years (A.D. 350-1514) were responsible for the freezing of certain **text types** in different geographical regions. In A.D. 313, Emperor Constantine moved the seat of the empire to Constantinople and instructed Eusebius of Caesarea to make 50 copies of the NT Greek text, which were carried to Constantinople by Chrysostom (c. A.D. 350). These NT manuscripts became the basis for the **Byzantine text**, which became the dominant NT manuscript text. The great popularity and demand for these texts led to a large proliferation of this text type over against the **Alexandrian text**. The latter text type fell in influence as the church in Alexandria declined and Islam spread in North Africa. As Latin began to displace Greek as the dominant language of the empire, the NT began to be translated into Latin. Eventually, an “authorized” Latin version was produced in A.D. 384 by Jerome (Latin Vulgate).

Because of this shift to Latin, and because of the increased popularity and dominance of the Byzantine text, the next 1100 years (A.D. 1514-1633) saw the proliferation of the Byzantine text-type. For this reason, the Byzantine text contains a far greater number of Greek manuscripts than the Alexandrian text, and so has come to be called the **Majority Text**. This is the Greek text behind the King James Version, and while it is represented by a majority of Greek manuscripts, most NT scholars agree that they are inferior in quality and are far younger than those of the Alexandrian text type—the Greek manuscripts behind most modern translations of the NT (e.g., NASB, ESV, NIV, etc.).

4 TEXTUAL CRITICISM

All of this leads us to the need for textual criticism. We can define broadly as “the careful study and comparison of all known manuscripts of a written work whose original autograph is not available in an effort to ascertain the original text.” This process is quite involved, and its complexity limits how much we can discuss in this context. Nevertheless, we will attempt to explore the factors that influence this process.

It is important to remember that textual criticism can be viewed as both a science and an art. Housman puts it this way: “Textual criticism is a science, and, since it comprises recension and emendation, it is also an art. It is the science of discovering errors in texts and the art of removing it.”⁴

Before we look more closely at the different considerations in OT and NT textual criticism, we need to look at some general factors that must be considered in this process.

4.1 GENERAL FACTORS IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The process of textual criticism has significant nuances as it relates to the OT and NT texts. However, there are certain common factors that all text critics must consider as they proceed, and scholars must possess a good knowledge of these factors and how they influence potential textual errors.

4.1.1 Material Considerations

First, we must consider the materials used in the production of ancient documents. The paper used in modern books is far different from the materials available to ancient writers. Papyrus was a common material used in the production of writing material. These were papyrus sheets which were glued together

⁴ A. E. Housman, “The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism,” *Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter (Cambridge, 1961), 1.

into a long strip and secured around a wooden roller. This mode of writing limited the length to around 35 feet, requiring longer works to be divided into several books. Occasionally, animal skins (i.e., leather) was used when papyrus was unavailable. The geographic climate proved favorable to one material over another, leading to rapid deterioration in one region while good preservation in another.

The text critic must take into considerations whether variant readings between different manuscripts were perhaps the result of material errors. Had the materials degraded to the point where certain words or letters had become illegible? Additionally, the text critic must frequently work with mere manuscript fragments, with only partial texts available.

4.1.2 Scribal Considerations

A second consideration is the scribal practices and the tendency these practices to incorporate certain errors into the text. Often times, variant readings can easily be explained by considering these factors.

Scribal copies in both OT and NT contexts were often done by hand, copying from official manuscripts onto new scrolls. Often times, the conditions in which this occurred were less than ideal, and low light and eye strain and fatigue may factor into scribal mistakes. This led to several common scribal errors which the text critic must look for as potential explanations for a variant reading. Common errors of sight (reading/writing) include the following:

- **Confusion of similar letters:** certain Hebrew letters lend themselves to confusion, both in the paleo-Hebrew as well as Aramaic square scripts.
- **Word separation:** The scribe had difficulty discerning where words broke or joined. This is more common in Greek manuscripts, where continuous writing was commonly used. Hebrew writing did not employ this type of writing and thus it was not as large a factor. However, in certain instances a scribe might carelessly crowd the text and thus unwittingly combining two or more words into one, leading to confusion later when that manuscript was used for copying.
- **Haplography:** the scribe's eyes jumped to a later line or word, leaving out text in between two similar or identical words or phrases
- **Dittography:** the scribe repeated a letter, word, or phrase that had already been written
- **Homoioartion:** the scribe confused identical words which began or ended a sentence
- **Metathesis:** the scribe transposed two letters. Most instances are readily detectable, although in some instances the mistake actually resulted in two different words.
- **Marginal notations:** on occasion, a scribe might mistakenly incorporate a scribal notation in the margin of a manuscript into the text itself. John 5:4 is a prime example of this, where the comment on the stirring of the waters appears in later manuscripts but is absent from the better, earlier manuscripts and thus most likely represents an accidental inclusion of a marginal scribal tradition into the actual text, which was then perpetuated in later copies.

In certain instances, where a text was read orally to other scribes, copied the text, certain errors of hearing could occur, especially where there were similar sounding terms employed. For instance, in Romans 5:1, is the verb "have" an indicative ("Therefore...we have peace with God") or a subjunctive ("Therefore...let us have peace with God")? Both forms of the verb sound the same, but are written differently, resulting in variant readings.

In other instances, a scribe might intentionally introduce a change in the text. The reasons for this vary, and most have no impact on translation or interpretation. Such reasons include spelling or grammar

changes, as well as attempts to harmonize, explain, or “sanctify” the text. In other instances, changes were made for theological readings, such as the changes made in the Samaritan Pentateuch or in Marcion’s gnostic version of the NT canon.

4.2 OLD TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The process of OT textual criticism is a completely different beast than that for the NT. The amount of time involved in the composition of the various OT books and the lack of manuscripts dating anywhere near the original time of composition add to this. On the other hand, while the NT is supported by a large number of manuscript witnesses, they also contain a much greater number of variants. Thus the OT scholar works with fewer yet far superior Hebrew manuscripts than his NT counterpart.

Most errors introduced into manuscript copies before 1st century A.D.⁵ “The same kind of variations we observe today existed in the first century, and yet Christ and the apostles did not waver in their clear affirmation of the authority of Scripture.”⁶ That should come as great encouragement to believers. Imperfect though the transmission process was, it was undoubtedly known to Jesus, who nevertheless recognized and affirmed its truthfulness and authority.

4.2.1 Manuscript Witnesses to the Old Testament

Since text criticism is the process of evaluating and comparing the manuscript witnesses to any one particular text, a major factor in this process is understanding the various witnesses available. These witnesses are divided into two categories: Hebrew witnesses and versional witnesses (i.e., translations into other languages).

4.2.1.1 Hebrew Witnesses

The first and most significant kind of witnesses to the OT are Hebrew manuscripts. As noted above, a variety of materials were used for writing, including stone, clay, wood, pottery, papyrus, metal, and leather. The primary materials upon which biblical manuscripts were composed was papyrus and leather, the former being the main material from before the exile. They were written on only one side, as they would be rolled up. Not until the invention of the codex in the 1st century A.D. were both sides of pages used.

The **Masoretic Text** represent the base Hebrew text of the OT, and they have proven to be very reliable, with a transmission lineage that can now be traced back to before the time of Christ. The critical editions of the Hebrew Bible (BHS, BHK, BHQ) are based upon these manuscripts.

In addition to the MT, the **Samaritan Pentateuch** provides another Hebrew witness, though as the name implies, it only covers the first five books of the OT. The Samaritans were the product of northern Israelites who intermarried with foreigners following the Assyrian exile (2 Kgs 17:14-24). They separated themselves from Judah and rejected the Davidic dynasty. Consequently, they also rejected the Prophets and the Writings, since these sections of the OT acknowledge Jerusalem as the holy and royal city of Israel. Additionally, they altered the Torah to fit their theological separation from Judah. As Rooker comments,

⁵ Rooker, 109.

⁶ Rooker, 110.

“The SP is an expansionistic text containing numerous additions that attempt to smooth-over some of the grammatical difficulties represented in the MT. It thus represents a popular or vulgar text (i.e., a text used by the public at large).”⁷ There are roughly 6,000 differences between the MT and the SP, though the vast majority amount to small and insignificant spelling variants.

A third group of Hebrew witnesses comprise those manuscripts discovered in 1947 at Qumran, known popularly as the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. Rooker writes, “To date, 221 texts and fragments from the Old Testament have been uncovered with sections of all OT books except Esther. These texts have been dated from 250 BC to AD 135.” Rooker goes on to explain the archaeological significance of these texts: “If the Qumran scrolls display a trustworthy picture, it appears that from the third century BC onward, the proto-Masoretic text was more abundant than any other type of text. The Qumran scribes displayed painstaking efforts to produce exact copies of the proto-Masoretic text. The predominance of the Masoretic text at Qumran also suggests that the Masoretic text type was considered to have an authoritative status.”⁸



Additionally, there are several other isolated Hebrew manuscripts available not part of a larger collection or codex. The oldest Hebrew manuscript we have is the silver roll found in **Ketef Hinnom**, dating to around the 7th century B.C., and containing a portion of the priestly prayer of Numbers 6:24-26, written in the proto-Hebrew script.

4.2.1.2 Greek Versions

A second source for OT textual witnesses are various early translations of the OT. Undoubtedly, the most significant version of the OT for textual criticism is the **Greek Septuagint** (LXX), produced around the 3rd century B.C. It was originally produced to provide a version of the OT for the Jewish community in Egypt that was losing its ability to read Hebrew. The translation quickly gained widespread popularity, so that by the 1st century A.D., it was well known to the NT writers and quoted more often than the Hebrew. Interestingly, the translational qualities and techniques of the LXX vary from book to book and even from

⁷ Rooker, 111.

⁸ Rooker, 111-12.

section to section. Some books employ a quite literal technique, while others are much more free and even paraphrastic. Numerous revisions of the LXX took place, even before the translation project was finished. This is significant for the text critic, in that invariably text criticism must first be performed on the LXX to establish the original reading before it can then be compared to the Hebrew manuscripts!

Significant differences between the MT and LXX include:

- Greek additions to Esther and Daniel (all deemed later additions employing theological embellishment)
- A shorter Greek text of Jeremiah and Job
- Several differences in Samuel-Kings
- Different sequence of chapters in Jeremiah
- LXX quotes from other OT passages for explanatory purposes

By the 1st century A.D., the Jews stopped using the LXX, which had been adopted by the early church and was being used to defend Jesus' messiahship, and produced several other Greek translations, all of which were more literal and closer to the MT. These include the translations of **Aquila**, **Symmachus**, and **Theodotian**. Rooker summarizes the significance and influence of the LXX on OT textual criticism:

In the nineteenth century it was common for Old Testament textual critics to amend the MT based on an alleged different reading in the LXX. This practice is well illustrated in the textual apparatus of BHK. In BHK there are a number of unwarranted cases where the MT was corrected by the process of retroversion based on the reading of the LXX. Scholars are now realizing that the text used as the Vorlage for the LXX translation was much closer to the proto-Masoretic text than was previously assumed. The alleged differences between the Greek texts and the Masoretic texts should be attributed more to translation issues than to an alleged non-Masoretic text as the basis for the Greek translation.⁹

Rooker then goes on to comment on the task involved in using the LXX to correct the MT:

Yet even so the LXX is not a uniform translation. Appropriate use of the LXX for textual criticism of the OT first requires that the original text of the LXX be established—no small task. While the use of the LXX to correct the MT has been overdone, the LXX does contain more significant variants from the MT than all the other versions combined.¹⁰

4.2.1.3 Aramaic Targums

A "targum" is a translation, in this case, into Aramaic for use in synagogue worship, a practice which traces back to the time of Ezra (Neh 8:8). Originally, targums were strictly oral. The Law was read and a translation given after each verse, while for the Prophets the translation occurred after three verses. As knowledge of Hebrew waned in the post-exile community, these translations began to be written down.

These written targums were generally done in the context of training translators and were not necessarily meant to be read by the general public. Over time, however, their public valuation increased, especially

⁹ Rooker, 113

¹⁰ Rooker, 113

as they provided a translation of the Hebrew text for the synagogue even when there was no translator available to provide one orally.

Several important factors influence the value of the Aramaic Targums in OT text criticism. First, there was never an “official version,” which means that each targum is its own isolated witness of the OT. Second, they were produced with the goal of instruction and edification in the corporate context, which means that they often employed an expansive or explanatory style of translation.

4.2.1.4 *Syriac Peshitta*

As early as the 1st century A.D., the OT and NT were translated into Syriac, an Aramaic dialect. This version demonstrates the greatest variety of translational techniques, which suggest the participation of a number of translators. Evidence also suggests it occurred over several generations. Rooker writes, “The translators translated a text that was virtually identical to the MT type but also occasionally consulted early Aramaic translations that existed in a slightly different form than in their final crystallization. However, the further one goes from the Pentateuch in the Peshitta the more detectable is the influence of the LXX translation.”¹¹

4.2.1.5 *Latin Vulgate*

There was an earlier Latin version of the Bible that dates back to the 2nd century A.D. But in A.D. 382 Jerome was commissioned to translate the Bible into an official Latin version. Apparently Jerome translated from a text that was “essentially a Masoretic text type,” yet his translational method proves rather inconsistent, and there are portions where he was clearly influenced by the LXX.

4.2.2 Old Testament Text-Critical Process

The process for OT textual criticism involves a rather uniform method of evidence collection, evaluation, and consideration, with the ultimate goal of selecting a preferred reading which most likely represents the original text.

However, the process looks slightly different for OT scholars as it does for pastors. The latter have limited access to any kind of manuscript evidence. They must rely heavily on the work of text critical scholars, who can abbreviate and collate the manuscript data into its most significant forms. However, regardless of the context, the process is rather uniform.

4.2.2.1 *STEP 1: Collection of Evidence*

The text critic begins by consulting the textual apparatus of BHS, which compiles the list of textual variants and the manuscript witnesses which contain them. Since the base text for BHS is the MT, the apparatus lists all the witnesses (Hebrew or otherwise) with readings that differ from the MT.

4.2.2.2 *STEP 2: Consultation of Versions*

Versions of the OT, with LXX being a prime example, are not uniform witnesses to the OT. They underwent their own transmission process, with all the potential for introducing variant readings. Therefore, when the LXX or Aramaic Targums contain a variant reading from the MT, the text critic must first ascertain the original reading of the version.

¹¹ Rooker, 114.

Additionally, since OT versions are translations of the Hebrew, using them requires back-translating into Hebrew in order to discover the *vorlage*—the Hebrew text behind the translation. This back-translation is what is used to compare to the MT reading, and the process for creating one is quite involved and incorporates a fair amount of subjectivity into what should be as scientific a process as possible.

4.2.2.3 STEP 3: Evaluation of Readings

After the text critic has consulted the various readings, produced back-translations from which to compare to the MT, he must then evaluate all these readings. There are a number of factors involved in the evaluation process.

First, the text critic must consider all the relevant textual factors:

- Are the witnesses Hebrew texts or translations? The former will carry more weight than the latter.
- Are the witnesses contemporary to the MT or something which pre-dates the MT manuscripts? Witnesses which are older than the MT could be seen as more reliable, but not always.
- If the witness is a version, is the reading uncertain? Are there variants in the version itself? This introduces a level of doubt as to the reliability of the version against the MT reading.

Second, the text critic must consider several secondary factors:

- Are there suitable explanations for the variant based on something other than textual differences? Could a reading be explained based on a theological or ideological change (e.g., Samaritan Pentateuch), an orthographic error (e.g., a scribal error in reading or writing), or a particular translational characteristic of a version (e.g., the paraphrastic nature of the Aramaic Targums)?
- Are there witnesses that demonstrate more reliability than others, such as ruling out a reading based on the translational quality of a version in general?
- Above all, and in summary, is there good enough reason to favor a different reading than that found in the MT?

Third, the text critic must consider some external criteria:

- Do any witnesses have broader geographical attestation? This criteria is less influential in OT text criticism than NT, especially since the LXX had such a strong influence on virtually all other versions of the OT.
- Are any witnesses older than the others? Once again, this criteria does not provide as much help in valuing witnesses. Just because the LXX and Qumran manuscripts are older doesn't make them superior to the MT. However, in NT text criticism, age and geographical attestation become more important.

Fourth, the text critic must consider some internal criteria:

- Is one reading "harder" than the others (e.g., Zech 14:6, where the grammatical difficulty likely gave rise to readings which attempted to "clean up" the difficult grammar)?
- Is one reading shorter than the others (scribes were more likely to add explanatory comments than to remove material)?

- Is there any evidence that variant readings could have been influenced by a scribe's tendency to attempt to harmonize the text with parallel text in another chapter or book? Similarly, is there any evidence that the variant reading is the result of theological emendation?

4.2.2.4 STEP 4: Selection of Preferred Reading

After all these factors are taken into consideration, the student must now select the preferred reading and indicate its exegetical significance.

4.3 NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

We've already noted that NT textual criticism has some major differences in comparison to that of the OT. This is predominantly in the volume of available manuscript evidence—roughly 5,700—and the relative proximity of these manuscripts to the date of the original composition of the text. Nevertheless, just like with the OT, the NT text is evidenced by a variety of witnesses.

4.3.1 Manuscript Witnesses to the New Testament

The witnesses to the NT can be categorized into three broad categories: (1) Greek witnesses, (2) Versional witnesses, and (3) Patristic Witnesses. The Greek witnesses can be further subdivided into several categories, including papyri, majuscules, minuscules, and lectionaries.

4.3.1.1 Greek Witnesses

Greek Papyri There are around 116 papyri manuscripts and fragments of the NT. These are derived from codices rather than from scrolls. They are the oldest type of NT witness, written in uncial (large capital letters) script with no separation of words and little or no punctuation. They represent texts which pre-date any kind text-family development. Thus, readings from papyrus manuscripts can represent aspects of both Alexandrian and Byzantine text-types. Sadly, because the materials on which these documents were composed were so perishable, few papyrus manuscripts have survived. We have papyri for every NT book except 1 & 2 Timothy.

Perhaps the most intriguing of these is \mathfrak{P}^{52} , a small fragment roughly 2½ by 3½ inches and containing a few verses from the Gospel of John. It is the oldest known copy of the NT to exist, dating to somewhere in the first half of the 2nd century A.D. Metzger writes, "Although the extent of the verses preserved is so slight, in one respect this tiny scrap of papyrus possesses quite as much evidential value as would the complete codex. Just as Robinson



Crusoe, seeing but a single footprint in the sand, concluded that another human being, with two feet, was present on the island with him, so \mathfrak{P}^{52} proves the existence and use of the fourth Gospel during the first

half of the second century in a provincial town along the Nile, far removed from its traditional place of composition (Ephesus in Asia Minor)."¹²

Greek Majuscules There are 310 majuscule manuscripts, written mostly on parchment, and named after the capital letters that mark their writing style. The earliest Majuscule manuscript we have is Vaticanus (B), which dates to A.D. 325, and the latest of them date to the 9th century. Every NT book is represented in the Majuscule witnesses, but only one—Sinaiticus (Ξ)—preserves the entire NT. The significance of these witnesses are in the quality of their preservation relative to their age. Many of them are well preserved without blemish and serve as early witnesses to the entire NT.

Greek Minuscules There are 2,877 minuscule manuscripts, characterized by running, cursive ornately written Greek script. They are codices written on vellum and represent a type of writing developed for speed and economy in manuscript copying. Thus, they are later witnesses, dating from the 9th to the 14th centuries and represent all NT books. Because of the large number of minuscule manuscripts, these add quantitative attestation to the text-type it represents (i.e., Byzantine).

Lectionaries There are 2,432 known lectionary manuscripts and represent the second largest group of Greek manuscript witnesses. They are codices written with designated daily and weekly lessons from the Gospels and Epistles. They were used for worship and instruction in the church and date to between the 6th and 8th centuries. They represent mainly the Gospels and the Epistles, and quote from both Uncial and Minuscule manuscripts. Thus, some of them preserve very early witnesses to the NT.

4.3.1.2 Versions

Like the OT, there are also a number of early translations made of the NT which can be used to reconstruct the NT text. They were prepared by missionaries to assist in evangelistic work among communities whose native tongue was not Greek. These languages include Syriac, Latin, and Coptic (Egyptian). While they represent very early witnesses to the NT, they have their limitations, which must be considered when deciding on how much weight a versional witness should carry.

4.3.1.3 Patristic Quotations

A final witness to the NT text comes from quotations of the NT found in the writings of the early Church Fathers, including commentaries, sermons, and other treatises. Metzger writes, "So extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament."¹³ He goes on to write, "The importance of patristic quotations lies in the circumstances that they serve to localize and date readings and types of texts in Greek manuscripts and versions."¹⁴ However, these too have their limitations. Nevertheless, these quotations give us a datable and geographically identifiable witness to the NT available to that particular writer.

¹² Metzger, 56.

¹³ Metzger, 126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

4.3.1.4 Summary

The total number of available witnesses to the NT text is sum 5,735 Greek manuscripts. The majority of these are fragmentary, however, and only 50 contain the entire NT (and of these, only one is an uncial). Nevertheless, this textual evidence is staggering in comparison to other books of antiquity. Indeed, the NT is far better attested by surviving records than all other pieces of ancient literature.

This is both a problem and an advantage. The advantage is that the original text has been so well preserved that there is no need for a scholar to **ever** amend the text by guessing. Textual criticism works with roughly 105% of the text, not with 95%. Yet the problem is that, even with this abundance of manuscript evidence, no two manuscript copies agree in every detail. The greater the number of copies, the greater the number of variants there are.

4.3.2 New Testament Text-Critical Process

The process for NT text criticism looks similar to that of the OT. It involves collecting the various witnesses to the text in question and weighing the options based on certain external and internal factors. In NT studies, however, other factors must be considered, not the least of which is how best to “weight” manuscripts from various text types. In general, the “great debate” is over whether the Byzantine or the Alexandrian text type is the superior family of texts. In general, the consensus is that the latter represents a superior set of manuscripts, despite that fact that it is reflected in the minority of manuscript witnesses.

4.3.2.1 STEP 1: Collect Manuscript Evidence

Like the OT method, the first step a text critic makes is by getting a “bird’s eye view” of the text in question. This involves collecting all of the manuscript evidence for the text in question, including all Greek manuscripts, versions, and patristic quotations.

4.3.2.2 STEP 2: Assess the External Evidence

External evidence is concerned with determining the genuineness of readings on external grounds. This is considered the primary consideration in NT text criticism. What this entails, as a whole, is determining which manuscript witnesses belong to which text type. Some of the factors that are considered are the following:

- **The Date of the Witness:** early witnesses are generally superior to later ones
- **The Geographical Distribution of the Witnesses that Agree:** In general, witnesses that are distributed over a wider geographical area represent superior manuscripts, so long as one can be sure that they are truly independent of each other. Manuscripts that come from the same geographical area can very easily be copies of a similar parent manuscript.
- **The Genealogical Relationship of the Texts and Families of Witnesses:** In general, text critics weight manuscripts based on age, geographical distribution, and their relationship to text types, rather than simply count the number of texts that agree.

At the end of this step, the text critic has come to a tentative conclusion about the preferred reading on the basis of considerations bearing on the age of the manuscripts, the geographical spread of the witnesses, and the text type to which they belong.

4.3.2.3 STEP 3: Assess the Internal Evidences

Internal evidence is concerned with determining the genuineness of a reading on internal grounds apart from the “weight” given to the manuscripts which support it. Because of the intrinsic subjectivity involved

in this step, it is considered a confirmatory step—it acts to confirm the tentative conclusions reached in the previous step. We weigh manuscripts internally based on:

- **The Habits of the Scribes:** this involves evaluating the texts to determine the factors, either intentional or unintentional, that might have resulted in the variant readings. The text critic must consider whether material issues, scribal tendencies, or even intentional alternations may make the best sense of how one reading led to the others.
- **The Tendencies of the Authors of the Book:** In addition to the tendencies of scribes, we must also consider the tendencies of the NT authors. This includes an understanding of authorial style, themes, and context which may help tip the scale toward one reading or another.

Internal criticism is governed by a set of general rules, all of which attempt to identify the reading that best explains the origin of the other readings.

- **The More Difficult Reading is Preferred:** A reading which would seem more difficult to a scribe would lend itself to scribal editing.
- **The Shorter Reading is Preferred:** A reading which is longer than the others most likely represents a scribal expansion. However, some shorter readings can be explained based on scribal errors.
- **The Reading that Stands in Verbal Dissidence with the Others is Preferred:** A reading which differs considerably from others provides a scribal temptation to harmonize a passage.