The Reliability of Bible Manuscripts - ESV Study Bible

The Reliability of the Old Testament Manuscripts

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, textual criticism of the OT was in its infancy, with few extant early Hebrew manuscripts. However, with the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls beginning in A.D. 1947, scholars found themselves in a better position than ever before to evaluate whether the OT texts are reliable.

At present there exist over 3,000 Hebrew manuscripts of the OT, 8,000 manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate, over 1,500 manuscripts of the Septuagint, and over 65 copies of the Syriac Peshitta.

This article examines the reliability of the OT manuscripts in respect to three main areas: (1) transmission of the OT; (2) OT textual criticism; and (3) primary OT sources.

Transmission of the OT

Jewish tradition maintains that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. If so, then portions of the OT were passed down through scribes for more than 3,000 years before becoming part of modern translations. This naturally gives rise to questions like: How did the OT text come about? How were the books copied and by whom? Are the texts available today an accurate reproduction of the originals?

How did the OT text come about? While some divine revelation may originally have been handed down from generation to generation orally, at some point it was committed to writing to ensure its accuracy. Several biblical passages indicate that from an early period parts of Scripture were held in honor and were considered authoritative (e.g., Ex. 17:14–16; 24:3–4, 7). The stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were to be stored in the ark of the covenant (e.g., Ex. 25:16, 21; Heb. 9:4), and the Book of the Law was to be kept in the tabernacle next to the ark.
Moses commanded the Israelites to teach God’s laws and statutes to their children and grandchildren (Deut. 4:9). The Law of Moses was entrusted to the priests, who were to teach it to the people (Deut. 33:10) and read it aloud publicly every seven years to ensure that the Israelites would remember it (Deut. 31:9–11). They were also commanded not to add to or delete from it at all (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). Both the OT (Josh. 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3; 1 Chron. 22:13) and NT (e.g., Mark 10:5; 12:26; Luke 2:22; 16:29, 31) refer to the Law of Moses as a distinct, authoritative source.

OT passages also refer to written forms of prophetic oracles (Isa. 30:8; Jer. 25:13; 29:1; Ezek. 43:11; Dan. 7:1; Hab. 2:2) and histories recorded by prophets (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34). However, the first mention of a collection of biblical books is in Daniel 9:2, which suggests that by the time of Daniel, the book of Jeremiah was part of a larger collection of authoritative works that he calls “the books.”

Later biblical writers make reference to earlier biblical books (2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Neh. 8:1), and the prophets commonly rebuke the people for not obeying the words of previous prophets (Jer. 7:25; 25:4; Ezek. 38:17; Dan. 9:6, 10; Hos. 6:5; 12:10).

There is good evidence from Jewish tradition and other sources that the Jewish people believed that the prophetic voice ceased following the deaths of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Tosefta, Sotah 13.2; Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 48b, Sanhedrin 11a, and Baba Bathra 12a; Seder Olam Rabbah 30; Jerusalem Talmud, Taanith 2.1; 1 Macc. 9:27; 2 Baruch 85.3). Therefore, it is likely that by about 300 B.C., the canon of the OT was set in all its essentials. (See The Canon of the Old Testament.) While minor discussions about certain books continued well into the Christian era, they had little effect on the form of the Canon.

Jesus accepted the authority of the Hebrew canon and taught his disciples to reverence it (Matt. 5:17–18). The Christian church, which had its roots in the Jewish nation, maintained the same Hebrew canon (Matt. 23:34–35; Luke 11:50–51) and added the NT works to it.

How were the books copied, and by whom? There are no remaining original manuscripts (commonly called “autographs”) of the OT, but there do exist an abundance of copies made by
scribes whose only job was to preserve God’s revelation. The autographs were probably written on scrolls made from papyrus or leather (see Jeremiah 36) that deteriorated from everyday use. When scrolls showed signs of wear, they were copied and reverently buried (since they contained the sacred name of God). Sometimes worn copies were placed in a genizah (“hidden” place) until enough were gathered for a ritual burial ceremony. One of these genizahs was found in an old synagogue in Cairo around 1890.

Initially, priests (or a special group of priests) maintained the sacred traditions. Then, from about 500 B.C. to A.D. 100, an influential group of teachers and interpreters of the law arose, called the soperim (“scribes”), who meticulously copied and preserved the most accurate form of the Hebrew text that they could determine. The Babylonian Talmud states: “The older men were called soperim because they counted [Hb. soper may also mean “one who counts”] all the letters in the Torah” (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30a). There has been significant discussion as to what their early text looked like and how closely it corresponded to the modern Masoretic text (MT), the common form of today’s Hebrew Bible, but it is not an easy question to answer.

Evidence from about the mid-third century B.C. and following indicates that a variety of OT texts coexisted for several centuries (e.g., proto-MT [an early form of the Hebrew Masoretic text]; Greek Septuagint, a sometimes loose translation; Samaritan Pentateuch). Manuscripts copied before the first century A.D. show two tendencies on the part of the scribes: they preserved the accuracy of the text and, at the same time, they were willing to revise or update the specific words of the text. These tendencies are not contradictory—scribes assigned to the Scriptures a high degree of authority and upheld them with great reverence, but their desire was that readers understand them. Sometimes scribes intentionally changed texts because of things they felt were inappropriate or objectionable. Still, they carefully noted changes out of reverence for the text (e.g., in Judg. 18:30 scribes added the Hebrew letter nun above the line so that it read “Manasseh” instead of “Moses” because Jonathan was acting more like a son of wicked Manasseh than of Moses).

A group of scribes called the tannaim (repeaters) maintained the sacred traditions from about A.D. 100 to 300 and developed meticulous rules to follow when copying synagogue scrolls (e.g.,
no word or letter was to be written from memory; if more than three mistakes were made on any page, it was destroyed and redone). While the text was reverenced and carefully maintained, it could be updated within specific, limited parameters: (1) By about 350 B.C., texts had begun to be written in Assyrian (square) script instead of paleo-Hebrew. (2) Even before this, *matres lectionis* (Hebrew consonants added to a word to indicate how it should be pronounced—these were precursors to vowel points) were starting to be added and archaic spellings were modernized. (3) Some corrections were made (see 4QIsaa). It was common practice throughout the ancient Near East to update and revise texts.

Following the first century A.D., however, the priority of scribes narrowed to preserving the accuracy of Scripture, which they did with amazing precision. Manuscripts dated to the first and second centuries A.D. (e.g., from Masada, Nahal Hever, Wadi Murabba’at, and Nahal Se’elim) reflect the proto-MT in orthography and content with very little variation. Debate continues over how and why the text became so unified following the first century A.D. Some argue that the group who maintained the proto-MT was the only one to survive the destruction of the second temple. Others suggest there was a purposeful standardization of the text. The latter seems more likely for two reasons: (1) There was a desire to provide a consistent standard for debates between Christians and Jews in the first century A.D. (cf. Justin Martyr, Dialogue 68). (2) Hillel the Elder needed a standardized text on which to base his seven rules of biblical hermeneutics (Aboth of Rabbi Nathan 37A).

The sheer number of manuscripts, as well as quotations in rabbinic literature, suggest that the proto-MT was the primary text maintained by the authoritative center of Judaism. At the same time, other textual traditions were also circulated (e.g., Septuagint; Samaritan Pentateuch). However, sometime during the first century A.D. the proto-MT apparently became the dominant textual tradition.

*Are the texts available today an accurate reflection of the originals?* To adequately answer this question requires some understanding of OT textual criticism, which we will now briefly explore.

**OT Textual Criticism**
Scholars agree that no single witness perfectly reproduces the original Hebrew text (generally called “Urtext”) of the entire OT, and therefore textual criticism is necessary. Textual criticism is the science and art that seeks to determine the most reliable original wording of a text. It is a science because specific rules govern the evaluation of various types of copyist errors and readings, but it is also an art because these rules cannot be rigidly applied in every situation. The goal of OT textual criticism is to work back as closely as possible to the final form of the text as it was canonized and maintained by the scribes. Since the texts were transmitted over such a long period, one could expect that minor errors might have crept in. Comparison of various forms of the OT text helps determine the most plausible reading of the original texts. Intuition and common sense must guide this process. Informed judgments about a text depend upon one’s familiarity with copyist errors, manuscripts, versions, and their authors.

Types of errors. Even given a strong desire to maintain an authoritative, standardized text, common copyist errors can creep in, including: confusion of similar letters, homophony (substitution of similar sounding letters or words), haplography (omission of a letter or word), dittography (doubling a letter or word), metathesis (reversal in the order of two letters or words), fusion (two words being joined as one), and fission (one word separated into two).

The process. Modern critical editions of the MT include the BHS (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia) and the BHQ (Biblia Hebraica Quinta), which follow the Codex Leningradensis (A.D. 1008), and the Hebrew University Bible Project, which follows the Aleppo Codex (c. 930). They derive from the longest and, to date, most reliable textual tradition overall. This tradition was maintained by the Masoretes, and when compared to the Qumran manuscripts dated about 1,000 years earlier, was found to be very accurate. These critical editions also provide a summary of pertinent information from other sources in their textual apparatus. The process of OT textual criticism includes examining the external evidence from various Hebrew sources (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls, Samaritan Pentateuch, medieval manuscripts) and versions (e.g., Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, etc.) to determine which is the most plausible original reading of the text.
When weighing evidence, scholars generally agree that the Hebrew sources take precedence over the versions, though versions sometimes contain what appears as a plausible original reading. Internal evidence is then examined to see if there are any hints to help determine the original reading (e.g., grammatical structures, common spelling). At times, discoveries from other ancient Semitic languages have shed light on previously unintelligible texts. Guidelines to use in determining the most plausible original readings include: (1) Which reading could most likely give rise to the others? (2) Which reading is most appropriate in its context? (3) The weight of the manuscript evidence is then evaluated to determine whether it may contain a secondary reading or gloss. Only a very small percentage of the Hebrew text has any questionable readings, and of these only a small portion make any significant difference in the meaning of the text.

**Primary OT Sources**

The following are the primary sources for present-day knowledge of the original OT text:

*Codex Leningradensis*: The oldest complete copy of the MT, dated to A.D. 1008. Both the BHS and the BHQ follow this text.

*Aleppo Codex*: The oldest, incomplete copy of the MT, dated to about A.D. 930. About one-quarter of this manuscript was burned by fire, but its text is very similar to the Codex Leningradensis. The Hebrew University Bible Project uses this text as a base.

*Dead Sea Scrolls*: More than 200 biblical manuscripts dated from about 250 B.C. to A.D. 135 from the area around the Dead Sea. The largest number of these texts agree closely with the readings of the proto-MT (35 percent of manuscripts) and help confirm the accuracy of the MT.

**Conclusion**
Although some textual puzzles remain, and though scholars still differ among themselves in how they weigh some of the evidence, careful application of these principles allows a high level of confidence that close access to the original texts does indeed exist. Moreover, ordinary English readers should not suppose that there are hundreds of significant textual variants whose existence is known only to specialized scholars, for all the variants that translation teams thought to be significant for interpreting the text have been indicated in the footnotes of the *ESV* and other modern English translations. Looking through those footnotes will show a reader that the significant variants affect far less than 1 percent of the words of the *ESV* text, and even among that 1 percent, there are no variants that would change any point of doctrine. Therefore, while some places remain where it is hard to be sure of the original reading (see *ESV* footnotes and the notes on specific verses in this Study Bible), as a general assessment it is safe to say that the OT text that is the basis of modern English translations is remarkably trustworthy.

**The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts**

Today, any group of Christians gathered together can all read exactly the same words in their Bibles. That luxury is made possible by the invention of the movable-type printing press over five centuries ago. But such a luxury can also breed a false sense of confidence that the precise original wording of the Bible can be known. When it comes to the NT, the original 27 books disappeared long ago, probably within decades of their composition. Handwritten copies, or manuscripts, must be relied on to determine the wording of the original text. Yet no two manuscripts are exactly alike, and even the closest two early manuscripts have at least half a dozen differences per chapter (most of them inconsequential variations, however, as will be seen). The discipline known as NT textual criticism is thus needed because of these two facts: disappearance of the originals, and disagreements among the manuscripts.

But even though the original wording of the NT cannot be known, that fact is not necessarily cause for alarm. It is true that the NT manuscripts contain thousands of wording differences. It is also true that a few favorite passages are of dubious authenticity. But this is not the whole
picture. Christians can, in fact, have a very high degree of confidence that what they have in their hands today is the Word of God.

This article’s specific task is to (1) compare the number and antiquity of NT manuscripts with those of other ancient literature, (2) note the number and nature of the wording differences in the NT (including a discussion of a few of the more notable places in which the wording is in doubt), and (3) identify what is, and what is not, at stake in this discussion.

The Number and Antiquity of NT Manuscripts Compared with Other Ancient Literature

In comparison with the remaining manuscripts of any other ancient Greek or Latin literature, the NT suffers from an embarrassment of riches. It is almost incomprehensible to think about the disparity. When it comes to quantity of copies, the NT has no peer. More than 5,700 Greek NT manuscripts are still in existence, ranging in date from the early second century to the sixteenth century. To be sure, the earliest ones (i.e., through the 3rd century) are all fragmentary, but they cover a substantial amount of the NT. And Greek manuscripts do not tell the whole story. The NT was translated early on into a variety of languages, including Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, and Arabic. All told, there are between 20,000 and 25,000 handwritten copies of the NT in various languages. Yet if all of these were destroyed, the NT text could be reproduced almost in its entirety by quotations of it in sermons, tracts, and commentaries written by ancient teachers of the church (known as church fathers or Patristic writers). To date, over a million quotations from the NT by the church fathers have been cataloged.

How does this compare with the average classical author? The copies of the average ancient Greek or Latin author’s writings number fewer than 20 manuscripts! Thus, the NT has well over 1,000 times as many manuscripts as the works of the average classical author.

When it comes to the temporal distance of the earliest copies of the NT from the original, NT textual critics again enjoy an abundance of materials. From 10 to 15 NT manuscripts were written within the first 100 years of the completion of the NT. To be sure, they are all
fragmentary, but some of them are fairly sizable fragments, covering large portions of the Gospels or Paul’s letters, for example. Within two centuries, the numbers increase to at least four dozen manuscripts. Of manuscripts produced before A.D. 400, an astounding 99 still exist—including the oldest complete NT, Codex Sinaiticus.

The gap, then, between the originals and the early manuscripts is relatively slim. By comparison, the average classical author has no copies for more than half a millennium.

Comparing the NT text to some better-known ancient authors, it still has no equal. The chart below illustrates this by comparing the copies of five Greco-Roman historians’ works with the NT. If one is skeptical about what the original NT text said, that skepticism needs to be multiplied many times over when it comes to the writings of all other ancient Greek and Latin authors. Although it is true that there are some doubts about the precise wording of the original in some places, NT textual criticism has an unparalleled abundance of materials to work with, in terms of both quantity and age of manuscripts. Nothing else comes close.

Comparison of Extant Historical Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Histories</th>
<th>Oldest Manuscripts</th>
<th>Number Surviving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livy 59 B.C.–A.D. 17</td>
<td>4th century A.D.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacitus A.D. 56–120</td>
<td>9th century A.D.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suetonius A.D. 69–140</td>
<td>9th century A.D.</td>
<td>200+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Number and Nature of the Wording Differences

The Greek NT, as it is known today, has approximately 138,000 words. The best estimate is that there are as many as 400,000 textual variants among the manuscripts. That means that, on average, for every word in the Greek NT there are almost three variants. If this were the only piece of data available, it might discourage anyone from attempting to recover the wording of the original. But the large number of variants is due to the large number of manuscripts. Hundreds of thousands of differences among the Greek manuscripts, ancient translations, and patristic commentaries exist only because tens of thousands of such documents exist. Further, the vast majority of textual alterations are accidental and trivial, and hence easy for textual critics to spot.

These textual differences can be broken down into four categories. The largest group involves spelling and nonsense errors. The single most common textual variant involves what is known as a movable “nu.” This is an “n” that is placed at the end of certain words when the next word begins with a vowel. The same principle is seen in English: a book, an apple. Nonsense errors occur when a scribe wrote a word that makes no sense in its context, usually because of fatigue, inattentiveness, or misunderstanding of the text in front of him. Some of these errors are quite
comical, such as “we were horses among you” (Gk. hippoi, “horses,” instead of ēpioi, “gentle,” or nēpioi, “little children”) in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 in one late manuscript.

The second-largest group of variant readings consists of minor changes, including synonyms and alterations, that do not affect translation. A common variation is the use of the definite article with proper names. Greek can say, “the Barnabas,” while English translations will drop the article. The manuscripts vary in having the article or not. Word-order differences account for many of the variants. But since Greek is a highly inflected language, word order does not affect meaning nearly as much as it does in English. These two phenomena can be illustrated in a sentence such as “Jesus loves John.” In Greek, that sentence can be expressed in at least 16 different ways without affecting the basic sense. Factoring in spelling variations and other nontranslatable differences, “Jesus loves John” could, in fact, be a translation of hundreds of different Greek constructions. In this light, the fact that there are only three variants for every word in the NT, when the potential is seemingly infinitely greater, seems almost trivial.

The third-largest category of textual variants involves meaningful changes that are not “viable.” “Viable” means that a variant has some plausibility of reflecting the wording of the original text. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:9, instead of “the gospel of God” (the reading of almost all the manuscripts), a late medieval copy has “the gospel of Christ.” This is meaningful but not viable. There is little chance that one late manuscript could contain the original wording when the textual tradition is uniformly on the side of another reading.

The smallest category of textual changes involves those that are both meaningful and viable. These comprise less than one percent of all textual variants. “Meaningful” means that the variant changes the meaning of the text to some degree. It may not be terribly significant, but if the variant affects one’s understanding of the passage, then it is meaningful. Most of these meaningful and viable differences involve just a word or a phrase. For example, in Romans 5:1, some manuscripts read “we have (Gk. echomen) peace,” while others have “let us have (Gk. echōmen) peace.” The difference in Greek is but a single letter, but the meaning is changed. If “we have peace” is authentic, Paul is speaking about believers’ status with God; if “let us have
peace” is authentic, the apostle is urging Christians to enjoy the experience of this harmony with God in their lives. As important as this textual problem is, neither variant contradicts any of the teachings of Scripture elsewhere, and both readings state something that is theologically sound.

There are two large textual variants in the entire NT, each involving 12 verses: Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11. The earliest and best manuscripts lack these verses. In addition, these passages do not fit well with the authors’ style. Although much emotional baggage is attached to these two texts for many Christians, no essential truths are lost if these verses are not authentic.

Should the presence of textual variants, then, undermine the confidence of ordinary laypersons as they read the Bible in their own language? No—actually, the opposite is the case. The abundance of variants is the result of the very large number of remaining NT manuscripts, which itself gives a stronger, not weaker, foundation for knowing what the original manuscripts said.

In addition, modern Bible translation teams have not kept the location of major variants a secret but have indicated the ones they think to be most important in the footnotes of all “essentially literal” modern English translations, so that laypersons who read these footnotes can see where these variants are and what they say. (Textual variants are noted in the ESV with a footnote that begins, “Some manuscripts…”). The absence of any such footnote (which is the case with far more than 99 percent of the words in the English NT) indicates that these translation teams have a high degree of confidence that the words in their English translation accurately represent the words of the NT as they were originally written.

**What Is at Stake?**

The most significant textual variants certainly alter the meaning of various verses. And where the meaning of verses is changed, paragraphs and even larger units of thought are also affected to some degree. At times, a particular doctrine may not, after all, be affirmed in a given passage, depending on the textual variant. But this is not the same thing as saying that such a doctrine is denied. Just because a particular verse may not affirm a cherished doctrine does not mean that that doctrine cannot be found in the NT. In the final analysis, no cardinal doctrine, no essential
truth, is affected by any viable variant in the surviving NT manuscripts. For example, the deity of Christ, his resurrection, his virginal conception, justification by faith, and the Trinity are not put in jeopardy because of any textual variation. Confidence can therefore be placed in the providence of God in preserving the Scriptures.

In sum, although scholars may not be certain of the NT wording in a number of verses, for the vast majority of the words in the NT the modern English translations accurately represent what the original authors wrote, and therefore these translations can be trusted as reproducing the very words of God.