

Is the Bible's Text Trustworthy?

Intro: There is no doubt that the Bible is truly a unique book. But one question that people often ask is, “How can we know that the Bible hasn’t been changed or altered through the centuries?”

Some affirm this as a matter of fact—i.e. that we cannot know with relative certainty what the original text of Scripture said. And if we cannot know such, then we cannot know what the truth is! So tonight we raise the question, “Has the text of Scripture been accurately preserved?”

One might wonder if such a collection of writings could maintain their original integrity through the process from autograph to modern translation.

The Science of Textual Criticism

No one should be more concerned about an accurate text than those who base their lives on the Bible. Thus a science has grown up around the area of the Bible’s transmission called textual criticism or lower criticism. The attempt of textual critics is to examine the various “witnesses” of Scripture in the manuscripts that exist and to create an edited text that accurately represents the original.

Not all manuscripts of the Biblical documents exist in identical form.

Recognized textual scholar and translator Bruce Metzger writes in his “Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament” a brief history of the transmission process of the NT documents and acknowledges as he comments on the copying process: “It was inevitable that such handwritten copies would contain a greater or lesser number of differences in working from the original.”

Such does not force us to abandon the hope of a reliable text. Textual critics make clear that the variations that do exist among the manuscripts are truly minor in significance. None of them would alter a single Bible teaching.

However the evidence available has affirmed the integrity of the transmission of the Biblical documents.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls which date to the period of the first century before Christ have confirmed the reliability of the transmission process upon which textual editions of the OT Scriptures are based.

Prior to their discovery in 1947 the oldest existing manuscripts of the OT were dated around 900 AD. Some might have wondered whether this long period of copying might have produced many changes in the OT text. The Dead Sea Scrolls, however, were dated by manuscript scholars from the first century before Christ.

What they show is that the OT had indeed been copies with great accuracy, one that did not alter a single doctrine of OT teaching.

As to the reliability of the NT, the evidence is even more impressive.

There exist today 5656 Greek manuscripts of the NT documents for study along with translations into various languages constituting over 19,000 manuscripts. This wealth of evidence provides textual scholars with sufficient data to determine with relative certainty the original readings of the NT documents.

In addition, some of these manuscripts exist from the closest time proximity to the autographs themselves, assuring us that the text was not substantially altered in the course of time. Today there exists in museums around the world manuscripts of nearly the entire NT and much of the OT that date to the early fourth century BC.

Consider for example the manuscript of Codex Sinaiticus. Dating around 350 AD, this manuscript contains almost all the NT and half of the OT in Greek. It is one of several large manuscripts of this order in existence.

The oldest of these is a papyrus fragment commonly referred to as the John Rylands Manuscript preserves a short excerpt from the “Gospel of John” and is commonly dated by textual critics c. 125 AD. Its existence in Egypt at this early date, far from its supposed location of composition, not only strongly suggests that the gospel itself was a first century composition, but also adds its testimony to the accuracy of the transmission process.

Add to this body of evidence the writings of the church fathers who lived from the second century onward.

These men quoted profusely from the NT documents, again affirming their accuracy.

Bruce Metzger pointed out, “Besides textual evidence derived from NT Greek manuscripts and from early versions, the textual critic has available the numerous scriptural quotations included in the commentaries, sermons, and other treatises written by early church Fathers. Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for knowledge of the text of the NT were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.”
Josh McDowell produces a chart showing 36,289 quotations up to the time of Eusebius in the 4th century recorded in the writings of only seven early church writers.

The manuscripts as a whole support the substantial preservation of the ideas contained in the autographs.

Sir Frederick Kenyon, who was once the director and principal librarian of the British Museum and world-renowned expert in ancient manuscripts, affirms the reliability of the NT text: “The interval then between the date of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the

Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established" (The Bible and Archaeology).

Conclusion: The Bible is not only a unique book; it is a trustworthy book. We need not doubt that the books we possess differ from the original in any significant degree (if at all). We may reasonably believe that if God wanted to preserve for all mankind a revelation that He would providentially watch over the transmission process to assure a preservation of His word.