

1 **Can We Trust the Text?** **(Do we even have the Bible?)**

- Module: Authority
- Lesson 32

2 **The Old Testament Text**

- We possess literally tens of thousands of manuscripts of the Old Testament.
- Manuscripts of the Masoretic Text (dated from 9-10th centuries).
- Earlier manuscripts of the Septuagint (Grk. translation of the Hebrew.)
- The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947) (The manuscripts are variously dated from app. 200 B.C. to 100 A. D.)
 - The DSS represent all or portions of every book of the O. T. excluding Esther in Hebrew.
 - The DSS confirm the later Masoretic text 95%. (Meaning the text was preserved with 95% accuracy over a period of 1000 years.)
 - The remaining variants are mostly minor slips of the pen, spelling mistakes, etc.
- The Ancient Temple Text was a standard for copying and preservation.

3 **The New Testament Text:** **Some Prevalent Misconceptions**

- Many decades of oral transmission occurred before the New Testament text was written.
- The analogy of the “telephone game” is used—
 - As representative of the oral transmission of the teachings and history of Jesus before they were written down.
 - As representative of the transmission of the written text of the New Testament (especially the Gospels).
- The New Testament was highly susceptible to tampering and suppression of conflicting views.

4 **The Reality**

- The entire New Testament was written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses and the Apostles.
- The fallacy of the “telephone game” analogy.
 - The rules of the telephone game are designed specifically to corrupt the message. That’s what makes the game
 - The practice of the early Christians, both orally and literarily, was designed to guard and preserve the message.
- The “tenacity” of the text prevented undetected tampering.
- How would it have been possible to suppress books?
 - By what mechanism could the church have suppressed and eradicated dissenting “gospels?”
 - No apocryphal gospel was ever seriously considered in the discussion of what was canonical.

5 **Early Christianity and Books**

- General literacy rate in the Greco-Roman world was around 10-15%.

- Early Christianity as an “oral culture.”
 - Devotion to the public reading of Scripture (O. T. and then N. T. texts)
 - The early church employed mechanisms designed to preserve knowledge in an oral community (e. g. creeds, parables, hymns, mnemonic aids, etc.)
 - Oral cultures typically distinguish between critical portions of their tradition and less crucial ones. They attach much greater care in transmitting the critical portions, usually restricting who can tell (orally) those stories, and subjecting those individuals to close supervision by an authoritative elder or official “historian.”

6 Early Christianity and Books

- Early Christianity as a “textual community.”
 - Very early there was an apparent commitment to getting the histories and teachings written down, and to the reading of Scripture in the churches. (As had been done in the synagogues.)
 - There is evidence that disciples of first century Jewish rabbis were in the practice of taking notes (possibly on wax tablets) of the rabbi’s teachings.
 - Commitment to an authoritative body of literature.
 - Christianity as a textual community has been characteristic throughout its history. Among Christians there has been, throughout much of its history, a strong incentive to literacy in order for individuals to be able to read the Bible for themselves.

7 Scribal Infrastructure of Christianity

- What we know about Christian scribes in the early church.
 - Greco-Roman scribes used various “hands” (writing styles).
 - “Book hand” was used by ancient scribes for literary texts.
 - “Documentary hand” was used for general documents (e. g. contracts, letters, etc.).
 - Much of the N. T. was written in “informal uncial”, which was a mixture of the two.
 - Christian scribes frequently employed a mixture of hands, reflecting a professional familiarity with both hands.
 - Christian scribes were more often private, rather than commercial. Private scribes tended to show more attention to care and professionalism.

8 Scribal Infrastructure of Christianity

- An author’s own copy.
 - We know that it was common for ancient authors to retain a copy of what they had written for their own uses and as a safeguard against loss or tampering.
 - It appears that Paul and other N. T. writers likely did the same. (consider 2 Tim. 4:13)

- Can we seriously imagine that after Paul wrote Romans, a lengthy masterpiece of Christian theology, that he sent it on a perilous overland journey to a church in a hostile pagan city, with a community of Jews hostile to Christianity and Paul, without taking care to retain a copy for himself?
- The immediate existence over a wide geographical area of identical copies would make tampering or suppression nearly impossible.

9 **Scribal Infrastructure of Christianity**

- A couple of significant features of the church's literary history:
 - The use of the Nomina Sacra
 - An established and uniform pattern of abbreviation of words considered particularly sacred. (The Nomina Sacra implies the establishment of a certain level of quality standardization within the Christian scribal community.)
 - Development of the codex.
 - The codex (book form as opposed to scroll form) lent itself to the collection of writings together, such as the four Gospels or the letters of Paul.
 - The concept of a canon of official texts would be an impetus to the development of the codex.
 - The codex was widely used by Christians by the 2nd century, and may have been invented by them. It was not used generally in the wider literary world until two centuries later.

10 **The Preservation of the Text**

- Our reliance on manuscript copies.
 - There is no extant autograph (still existing original) of any New Testament text (or of any ancient text).
 - Contrary to popular misconception, this does not deter us from knowing with a high degree of certainty what those autographs said.

11 **The Volume of Manuscript Copies**

- There are several different kinds of manuscripts.
- We possess an "abundance of riches" of manuscripts of the various kinds.
 - 5000 Greek texts
 - Many thousands of copies of other versions (translations) from the early church.
 - Citations of the New Testament in the early writings of the church fathers.

12 **Comparison to Other Ancient Texts**

- There are exponentially more manuscript copies of the New Testament than of any other ancient text.
- The New Testament manuscripts are dated far closer to the time of the original than any other ancient text (by hundreds of years, in most cases).

- Historians show no reluctance to accept the reliability of manuscripts of those other ancient texts as fairly representing the original, in spite of the few copies we possess and their relatively late dates.

13 **Some Examples of Other Classical Historical Texts**

- Manuscripts of Tacitus — earliest manuscript, 9th century (800 years later).
- Josephus' Jewish War — earliest manuscript, Middle Ages (earliest is 10th century, 900 years later).
- Paterculus' History of Rome — one copy, 8th or 9th century (app. 800 years later) subsequently lost.
- Gaius' Institutes — earliest manuscript, 5th century, (300 years after publication)
- "As is well known, the interval between the author and the earliest extant manuscripts for most classical writings is commonly hundreds—sometimes many hundreds—of years, and a thousand-year interval is not uncommon."
—Elton Jay Epp, Harvard N. T. scholar—

14 **By Contrast, the New Testament Manuscripts**

- The New Testament was written over a period from 50 to 90 A. D.
- Gospel of John: Earliest manuscript app. 35 years after it was written.
- Matthew: Earliest copy from the first half of the 2nd century. (App. 75-100 years)
- Other New Testament portions within the 2nd century: (Revelation, Luke, Pauline Epistles, and others)

15 **Understanding Manuscript Families**

16 **What About the Variations in the Texts?**

- There are literally thousands of "variant readings" represented across the body of thousands of manuscripts.
- Two kinds of variant readings.
 - Those unintentionally introduced into the manuscript by the copiest. (e. g. spelling errors, misplaced word order, missing or repeated lines, etc.)
 - Those intentionally introduced by the copiest, normally with the mistakenly good intention of correcting a perceived error in the donor copy, to remove an ambiguity, or to make a passage agree with another passage or doctrine, etc.
- Scholars speak of the "tenacity" of the original text. Given the sheer volume of manuscripts, nearly all the variant readings can be resolved with a high degree of certainty through the science of textual criticism.

17 **The Error in Simply Counting Variants**

- Simply tallying the number of variants does not inform us as to whether we can know what the original text said, or the trustworthiness of our modern bibles.
- To some extent the number of variants is a side effect of the vast number of manuscripts we possess.
- More important than the number of variants are the significance of the variants.

- Insignificant variants: Spelling differences, word order, “nonsense” readings (e.g. duplicated lines), etc. These are overwhelmingly the vast majority of variants.
- Significant variants (e.g. 1 Jn. 5:7, 8; Mk. 16:9-13; Jn. 7:53-8:11)
 - Significance does not have to do with whether or not we can determine authenticity, but with whether the variant significantly impacts the content.
 - Significant variants can be evaluated via textual criticism to determine authenticity.
 - Only a tiny fraction of the significant variants are considered unresolved at this time, and none of them impact in any way the thrust of the biblical message or any crucial Christian doctrine.

18 The Science of Textual Criticism

- Textual criticism is a highly developed method of scientifically studying copies of ancient texts.
- Textual criticism examines things like —
 - The material a manuscript is written on.
 - The dating of the manuscript.
 - The style of hand in which a manuscript is written.
 - The content of the manuscript.
 - The manuscript “family” of a particular manuscript. (Its “parentage”)
 - How the manuscript compares to other manuscripts of the same textual family (type).
 - And many more factors.
- Given the sheer volume of New Testament manuscripts, textual criticism is remarkably effective in ascertaining with a high degree of confidence what the original autographs of the New Testament said.

19 Four Important Points to Remember

- The original text is preserved within the overall collection of manuscripts (“tenacity” of the text).
- The vast majority of variants are minor and insignificant. (e. g. word order, repeated lines or words, etc.)
- Of the variants that are significant, the textual-critical method can in almost all cases determine which almost certainly represents the original.
- The remaining unresolved variants are extremely few and not material to the story/teaching of the New Testament.

20 Next Week:

- The Science of Biblical Criticism:
The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly