

Sermon 9: The Bible: Part 6: Manuscripts of the Bible

OUTLINE

OT Manuscripts

NT Manuscripts

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago now I had an email exchange with a Muslim in Saudi Arabia. It ended badly with him phoning me from Saudi and swearing at me for blasphemy and wishing cancer on me and my family. But during the exchange it was very interesting to see the ways in which he tried to disprove Christianity, he attacked the manuscript reliability of the NT, and put a question mark over the Canon of the Bible. It amazed me to see how intimate his knowledge was of the early transmission of the various manuscripts and his familiarity with the various theories about how the Bible was copied. He did this in an attempt to show the superiority of the Quran to the Bible in terms of the reliableness of its transmission. This however was a false comparison, it was a case of comparing apples and pears. The Bible is an ancient manuscript and the Quran is a medieval document. There is over 500 years difference between them and to compare transmission techniques would be like us comparing our ways of copying with Shakespeare. That said, the Quran has a terrible history of control that shows a lot of centralised interference with the transmission process unlike the natural process of the Bible. Secondly, the modern Muslim apologist is very reliant upon Liberal theories for their critiques against the Bible. In other words, the Muslims use the scholarship of Liberal Christians against Christianity.

Today I would like to talk about the manuscripts that we have that make up our Bibles and the transmission process and their preservation. Contrary to popular belief the Bible has the best pedigree of all ancient manuscripts and is more reliably known than any other ancient document. I do have to stress the point of these manuscripts being ancient because we are quick to impose an anachronistic critique holding these documents which are thousands of years old to a standard we have perfected in the 21st century. I must stress as we begin that our acceptance of the Bible as the word of God does not rest on an evidentialist basis. We do not start with a neutral viewpoint and then objectively weigh the facts and then when something can be known with scientific certainty we take only those proven facts to be true. That whole approach is filled unproven assumptions to begin with. Nor do any of us live our lives in that way. And neither does this methodology fit with the way in which God gives us certainty about certain spiritual truths. We present this evidence to show that the various charges against the Bible's reliability are false. We present them in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of trusting the Bible as a historical document that has been well preserved. Our ultimate confidence is in God's character and the work of His Spirit but these investigations can further bolster our confidence though are not the bedrock of them.

This approach may sound illogical but think more deeply on it. Think of this attitude, 'I would change my beliefs if you could show me facts that overturn my present understanding.' No doubt this is a good attitude to have when it comes to dealing with natural things. However, to make it the rule for all truth including spiritual truths brings a contradiction to the discussion. Spiritual things are not known by investigation or reason. There are certain things we know innately like good and evil, the existence of God, love, truth, beauty, etc. also because of sin our ability to know things about God is hindered and we are even biased towards suppressing the truth that is before our faces. Added to that there is the necessity of the Spirit to bring light into the darkness of our sinful minds that

overcomes our natural bias. There is an inner witness to the truth that is not gained by a process of verification. There are things that we know because we know them, not because we have overseen the process of moving from neutrality to conviction prejudicing the scientific method as the only acceptable way to establish anything. But we get off track, let us look at the manuscripts.

OT Manuscripts

The OT is of course a much older library of books than the NT. And of course we do not have the originals as they would have come from the hands of Moses, Isaiah, David etc. Until the middle of the last century the earliest manuscript we had of the OT was AD 900. That is a very long gap between the originals and their earliest copies. Then in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Named this way because they were found in some caves North West of the Dead Sea. A young goat herder was looking for lost goats and threw a stone into a cave and heard the tinkle of shattering clay jars in which the scrolls had been preserved. 100 scrolls were discovered with 38 of the 39 OT books. I believe it was Esther that was the only book that wasn't there. These scrolls date to 200 BC which jumps back another 1100 years closing the gap to the last OT books to about 200 years. The question that arises is, are they any different, with 1100 years of transmission has there been a drift from the earlier copies? Are the truths the same? Did the scribes push their own agenda on the text? Is their evidence of a later controlling body radically adjusting the text to fit with their own agenda?

'The answer is that they are astonishingly similar. Geisler and Nix give a typical example, based on a particularly important chapter. 'Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only 17 letters in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word 'light', which is added in v11, and does not affect the meaning greatly... Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission—and this does not significantly alter the meaning of the passage.'¹

But what about those manuscripts before the Dead Sea Scrolls, were they reliable? There is no known dispute over the texts of the OT. In fact we have evidence from Jewish council held at Jamnia at the end of the first century that the text of the OT that they received as official was the one that had been received for the last 500 years.

The Jews were very committed to the Bible and its transmission. It is worth while considering their activities and dedication to the transmission of scripture. From 100-500 AD the work of copying the text fell to the Talmudists who had a very detailed set of rules governing the process. 'The text had to be copied on to the skins of ceremonially clean animals, and their skins had to be prepared and fastened together in a particular way. All the skins, throughout the whole text, had to contain a prescribed and equal number of columns. Each column had to be between forty-eight and sixty lines in length, and each line had to consist of exactly thirty letters. Only black ink, prepared to a definite recipe, could be used. No word or letter, not even a yod (the tenth and smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) could be written from memory and without reference to the document from which the scribe was copying. There had to be the breadth of a hair or thread between consonants, the breadth of nine consonants between sections, and three lines between books. The fifth book of Moses had to terminate exactly with a line. In addition, the copyist

1 Blanchard, p393.

had to sit in full Jewish dress, having washed his whole body before beginning his work. He was forbidden to write the name of God except with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should anyone, even a king, talk to him while writing that name, he was not permitted to take any notice.² But there is more any scrolls not written in this strict way were buried, burned, or set aside from formal use. And if any manuscript was damaged or defaced it was automatically ruled as unfit. Any new manuscript was seen as equal to a former one for these reasons.

From 500-900 the textual transmission was overtaken by a group called the Masoretes from which we get the Masoretic text. These are the ones who added the vowel points to the manuscripts. 'Like the Talmudists before them, the Masoretes submitted to a meticulous set of rules in order to ensure the accuracy of their work. They counted the number of words and letters in each book, noted the middle letter of each line, and the middle letter and word of each book, of the Pentateuch and of the whole Old Testament. They even counted the number which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them; as one scholar comments, 'Everything countable seems to have been counted!' As if this were not enough, they even made up mnemonics by which the various totals might be more easily remembered. This may seem to have been overdoing things but as Frederic Kenyon points out, it 'had...the effect of securing minute attention to the precise transmission of the text...Masoretes were anxious that not one jot or tittle, not one smallest letter, nor one tiny part of a letter, of the law should pass or be lost.'³

There is no other ancient literature tradition that can claim such a scrupulous attention to detail.

NT manuscripts

John Blanchard tells us that we have access to 25000 copies of part or all of the NT. In other words the NT is most quoted, most copied manuscript tradition in history. The next most copied document that we have copies of is Homer's Iliad which is numbered at 643 copies. About 5700 are Greek, 10,000 are copies of the Latin Vulgate, and add to that 9,300 other copies. Not to mention that all but a handful of the NT is found quoted in the early Church Fathers. The first question that concerns us as we approach the ancient manuscripts is the question which is the oldest and what is the gap between the oldest manuscripts we have and when the originals would have been written. The second question is what makes us think that the copies are accurate renderings of the originals.

Firstly, let us consider the gap between originals and copies. We can begin with this amazing statement, in all of the ancient world, the Bible takes first place for having copies closest to the time of the originals. Homer's Iliad with its 643 copies has a gap of 400 years between writing and the earliest copies. Herodotus' History of which there are only 8 copies has a gap of 1350 years. Thucydides History which also has only 8 copies has a gap of 1300 years. There are 7 copies of Plato, the earliest of which is 900 AD, and the gap is 1300 years. Demosthenes 200 copies of his writings has a gap of 1400 years. Caesar's Gallic Wars has a whopping 10 copies with a gap of 1000 years. The shortest gap in any ancient writing is 400 years. What about the NT? Fragments of NT can be dated to within 50 years of the originals. Larger pieces that include books and the complete NT have a gap of 100 years to 225. We do not have the originals but we have the earliest copies closest to

2 Blanchard, p394.

3 Ibid., p395.

them than any other ancient manuscript. In light of this one Archaeologist writes, 'The interval then between the dates of the 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.'⁴

Now, are those manuscripts reliable copies? Do these copies agree with each other? Let me make it worse before we make it better. There are 200 000 variants between the various manuscripts. But this number must not blind you, because if a word is misspelt in 3000 manuscripts that makes up 3000 variants. Those 200 000 variants are limited to 10 000 places in the text. 10 000 may still sound like a terrifying number. But listen to the words of a scholar who dedicated his life to studying this issue. 'The proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands as raised above doubt is very great, not less, on a rough computation, than seven-eighths of the whole. The remaining eighth, therefore, formed in great part by changes of order and other comparative trivialities, constitutes the whole area of criticism.' When we remove spelling differences and mere word order changes and other 'trivialities' one set of scholars gives us a better sounding number. They leave us with a text that is 98.33% reliable in terms of representing the originals. As we compare this to other ancient texts Homer's Iliad has twenty times as many words that are in doubt. Phillip Schaff limits those 200 000 variants to 400 texts that matter. And here is the wonderful truth, any verse that has any major doctrinal teaching has that truth affirmed in some other place in the NT. There is no single teaching that we hold that rests on an isolated reading in the variants.

At some future point I will enter into some specifics and look at the rules and methods of textual criticism to show you how scholars choose between the variants. But let me end with an insight gained from James White as he compared the manuscript tradition of the NT to the Quran. A long while after Muhammed died there were various version of the Quran in differing languages floating around. A decision was taken to collect them all up, make a choice about which one was accurate and then they burned the rest. Think of this as a controlled manuscript tradition. We do not have the opportunity to access alternate manuscripts to test to see if the best choices have been made. A completely different Quran could have been forced on Islam and no one would be the wiser. Now compare this with the way the NT manuscript tradition developed. When the various books of the NT were written, they were copied and spread far and wide. The as they were dispersed they got copied in the various places where they went creating stream of manuscript traditions. There was no centralised interference or control. Contrary to popular opinion the copies of the Bible that Constantine ordered made were not a controlled Constantinian empire friendly version that was completely different to earlier manuscripts. Constantine ordered the copying of these Greek NTs because many copies of the Bible had been destroyed and he was restoring them to the various churches that lost them. The NTs that these copies would have been copied from would have been the ones that martyrs had died to hide and protect and ensure did not fall into enemy hands for destruction. There would have been church leaders and other Christians who would have survived being tortured to protect the Bible, who would have been present for the gift of Constantine's copies. Do you think these martyrs who were willing to die to stop their Bible's from being burned under recent persecutions would allow another Caesar to undermine it by changing it in any way? Any how, back to this scattered and varied manuscript tradition. You can now go and compare manuscripts that were copied from different parts of the world, even on different continents

4 McDowell, p35.

and you will find that all the conspiracy theories are garbage. You will find manuscripts that substantially agree with the others though they were written hundreds of years apart in different places. Once you have seen the incredible way we have received our Bibles and the superior manuscript tradition that we have compared to any other ancient work, it becomes clear that prejudice and agendas must be driven because they are not derived from the data.