

The Text of the Old Testament

Today we're going to talk about the text of the Old Testament. That comes first before we can talk about historical accuracy or anything like that...we need to make sure the text we have before us is a reliable reflection of what was originally written. We'll talk in future lessons in a lot more detail about the text of the New Testament, so today we're just focusing on a quick overview of the Old Testament text: how we got it, what are some important things to know about its history, and how sure can we be that the text is close to the original, or has it been changed over the years. We're going to start with the Bible we have today and kind of work our way backwards.

So here's the deal...the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament) that we have today is based on the so-called Masoretic texts. They are called that because they were copied and preserved by a group of Jewish scribes called the Masoretes, who were active approximately AD 500-900. Actually, the Masoretes not only copied the Scriptures but invented and added vowel markings to the text, because previously the Hebrew texts were written with only consonants. They wanted to preserve the pronunciation and clear meaning of the text as well.

So the oldest complete manuscript we have of the Hebrew Bible dates from about AD 900. Do you see why that could be a problem? We said before that the originals of the books of the Hebrew Bible were written between about 1500 BC and 500 BC, give or take. So that puts our oldest manuscript at about 1400 years after the last original Old Testament book was written. A lot could happen in 1400 years, right? How do we know that the text of the Hebrew Bible wasn't totally changed around in that time?

A discovery of a large number of Hebrew Bible manuscripts near the area of the Dead Sea in Israel in 1947 was really a game-changer. We're going to watch a video on this, but let me just tell you briefly what they found. In a bunch of caves they found a complete manuscript of the book of Isaiah and portions and fragments of every other book in the Hebrew Bible except Esther. These were important because they were about 1000 years older than the oldest Masoretic manuscript we had had until that point. Remember the oldest Masoretic text is about AD 900, but these so-called Dead Sea Scrolls were from about 1000 years before that, even before the time of Christ. And comparing them with our current Bible, scholars found that they were nearly identical; the differences were little things like spelling differences, word order. The text had been preserved quite faithfully over that 1000 year period.

Another document that's important to know about when you're talking about the preservation of the Old Testament text is the Septuagint. Remember we mentioned that before? That was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek which was done about 200 BC, and was the main Bible used by Jesus and the early Church. So in doing textual criticism on the Old Testament, scholars sometimes look at the Septuagint to help them understand things better.

So what about the time before the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint? How do we know the Old Testament was preserved accurately from the originals to the time of the manuscripts we have? Well for this time we know that there was a brotherhood of Jewish scribes called the Sopherim; they began around the time of Ezra. Accuracy, for them, was hugely important, and they had elaborate systems in place to ensure accurate copying of the text.

Basically, guys, there's a lot of evidence that the text of the Old Testament has been accurately preserved. As Christians of course we believe that God is supernaturally controlling all this, preserving His Word, controlling what manuscript evidence there is, providing us with the insights of textual criticism, etc. And like everything else there is not foolproof, scientific proof of this, but the evidence is overwhelming and while we take it on faith that this is His Word and He's brought it to us accurately, there's also a lot of textual evidence to back up that belief.