

# How We Got Our Bible

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Because of the modern attacks on the integrity of the text of the Old and New Testaments, Christians should have a basic understanding of the historical process which began with the original manuscripts and ends with the Bible in the English language.

## I. The Original Manuscripts

- A. These refer to the actual animal skins or papyri which the authors of the various books of the Bible used.
- B. Theologians refer to the original manuscripts when they speak of the infallible, inerrant, verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible. These original manuscripts were perfect because the authors were inspired of God.
- C. As far as we know, all the original manuscripts have been lost.
  1. Some have argued that these original manuscripts still exist because: (1) Would God inspire them and then lose them? (2) God's sovereignty guaranteed their preservation. (3) Do not such verses as [Psalm 119:89](#); [Isa. 40:8](#); [Matt. 5:17-18](#); [John 10:34](#) prove that these inspired manuscripts would be preserved for us?
  2. The only problem with the above arguments is that there are no original manuscripts which exist today. All these arguments mean nothing if you cannot produce an original manuscript.
  3. There is a good reason why God would purposely see to the destruction of these original manuscripts: to prevent us from worshiping them as idols. Remember what happened to the brazen serpent pole which Moses made? It was destroyed because it had become an idol ([2 Kings 18:1-4](#)). The idolatrous heart of man would have enshrined the originals long ago.
  4. The importance of these manuscripts lies in what was written on them and not the manuscripts themselves. Through textual criticism we are about **99 percent** sure of what was written on these originals.

## II. The Copies of the Original Manuscripts

- A. While the originals were perfect because the authors were inspired, we must state that no copy is perfect because no copyist was inspired. While there are no errors in the originals, there are errors in the copies.
- B. The errors in the copies are generally easily detected and are the result of honest mistakes such as:
  1. Wrong division of letters. Early copies do not have any word divisions.  
Example: "GODISNOWHERE." How should we divide the words in this sentence?

God is now here.

God is no where.

2. Mistakes during dictation. Some words are pronounced the same but are spelled differently.

Example: [Rom. 5:1: ομεν](#) or [ωμεν](#)?

Example: English: blue or blew?

3. Skipping lines because a word begins or ends several sentences.

K A I .....  
Skipped -----> K A I .....  
D I A .....

K A I .....  
Skipped -----> D A I .....  
K A I .....

4. Dropping a word  
Example: The “wicked Bible,” which dropped the word not out of the seventh commandment.
5. Misinterpreting a copyist’s comment as being part of the text.  
Example: [1 John 5:7](#)
- C. There are deliberate insertions or deletions in some copies.  
Example: [1 John 5:7](#)

### III. Old Testament Manuscripts

- A. Only 1,700 exist.
- B. Nearly all are quite late and date from the Middle Ages (A.D. 1000).
- C. The Jews were very meticulous in their copying of the manuscripts.
  1. Only the scribes were allowed to do this as an occupation.
  2. They counted words, destroyed any defective manuscripts, etc.
- D. The accuracy of the Masoretic text has been verified by a comparison between the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah with the Masoretic text of Isaiah. After 1,200 years of copying and recopying, only 13 errors happened. These were simply errors like the switching of letters.
- E. When we have a conflict, we can compare the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Masoretic text and other versions.
- F. The only controversy in O.T. textual criticism is the questions of the priority of the Masoretic text or the Septuagint. The N.T. quotations of the Septuagint in passages where the Hebrews is different are problematic to this day.

### IV. New Testament Manuscripts

- A. There are 5,000 Greek manuscripts, 8,000 Latin and 1,000 ancient versions of the N.T. or parts of the N.T.
- B. Nearly all are quite late and date from the Middle Ages (A.D. 1000).
- C. The N.T. copyists were not meticulous.
  1. Lay people did the copying.
  2. No strict rules were followed.

- D. More than 200,000 variant readings have resulted from the “lay” copying. Out of them all, only about 50 readings are problematic and all of them would fit on one page. The other mistakes are obvious and are easily corrected.
- E. When in doubt about a text, we have a wealth of resources to consult.
1. Greek manuscripts (skins, papyri)
  2. Latin manuscripts
  3. Ancient versions
  4. Early Fathers
  5. Early Heretics
- F. How do we decide what variant reading is correct?
1. Are the majority of manuscripts always right? Not necessarily. What if the majority are copies of a poor ancestral manuscript? And they are the majority because they were geographically, politically, culturally or ecclesiastically favored? A simple majority may be wrong in manuscripts as well as in politics.
  2. Are the oldest manuscripts always right? Not necessarily. There are too few of them to compare. What do we do when they disagree? Could an early manuscript come from a poor ancestral copy?
  3. Do we exalt one particular manuscript as being perfect? We should not. There is not a perfect one around. This is an easy way out and appeals only to those who want a “simple” and quick answer.  
Example: Lamsda and the Peshitta (Fifth Century)
  4. We should take all the evidence into account and make an eclectic choice.
    - a. Internal evidence: the literary context, the author’s vocabulary and style, parallel passages, etc.
    - b. External evidence: papyri, uncials, Fathers, ancient versions, minuscules, Latin, etc.
- G. Constructed Greek texts of the New Testament
1. A Catholic Cardinal, Ximenes, decided to put out a Greek text of the N.T. which he would construct by examining several Greek manuscripts and making a compromise text.
  2. When the humanist scholar Erasmus heard of the Cardinal’s plans, he rushed into print a constructed Greek text of his own. He only took six to 10 months to produce this text! He used only six very late and quite poor manuscripts. His four editions are filled with a multitude of corrections. Since none of his manuscripts had the last of [Rev. 22](#), he translated the ending from the Latin into the Greek. Although none of his manuscripts had [1 John 5:7](#), he put it into his later editions because of the Pope’s dogmatism. His work is marked by hastiness and a multitude of mistakes, some of which he tried to correct with each new edition.

3. Robert Stephanus (1546) put out his own text. It was basically Erasmus' text. He continued the tradition of putting such verses as [1 John 5:7](#) into the text. He was the first to separate the text into chapters and verses.
4. The Elzevirs put out a text in 1633. In their second edition they claimed that their text was "the text received by all." It has been called the Textus Receptus since that time.
5. Bengel (1687-1752) was "the father of textual criticism." He taught that the manuscripts should be "weighed" instead of just being counted.
6. The period from 1831-1881 was filled with a host of men who spent their lifetime studying the manuscripts. Much progress was made by Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Alford, etc.
7. The climax was reached by Westcott and Hort (1825). They did the following:
  - a. Designated "families" in manuscripts
  - b. Proclaimed the superiority of the Vaticanus manuscript and the Neutral Family
  - c. Codified the general rules for textual criticism
  - d. Dismissed the Textus Receptus as unimportant and mistaken
  - e. Became the position on the N.T. for the next 50 years
8. A radical reaction rose up to defend the Textus Receptus. Such scholars as Burgon refuted the exaltation of the Vaticanus and the superiority of the Neutral Family. Others went to the extreme of exalting the Textus Receptus and the Byzantine family.
9. These two positions took the same approach but violently disagreed with the end result.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Westcott &amp; Hort</b>	<b>Scrivner</b>
One Family	Neutral	Byzantine
One Text	Vaticanus	Textus Receptus

Both assumed that we needed one family and one text to act as the ultimate standard to decide all variant readings. Both positions have gradually given way to a more balanced approach.

10. The present eclectic position:
  - a. No one family, text or manuscript is to be viewed as perfect.
  - b. All the internal and external evidence should be consulted.
  - c. There will be a few readings where we will never know for sure with 100 percent certainty.
  - d. Variant readings should be rated in terms of degrees of certainty.

A-B-C-D

- V. The English Bible
- A. Various partial translations were made by such men as Bede (A.D. 674-735).
  - B. Wycliffe's Bible (A.D. 1382) was the first complete translation. It was translated from the Latin, not from the Hebrew or Greek.
  - C. Tyndale's Bible (1534) was the first printed English Bible. Although it was incomplete, he went from the Hebrew and Greek.
  - D. Coverdale's Bible (1535) was the first complete printed English Bible.
  - E. The Geneva Bible (1560) was translated by the Calvinist Reformers in exile in Geneva. It was the Bible of the Puritans and Pilgrims. It contained Clavin's notes on various verses. It was the Bible of the English people for almost 100 years.
  - F. The King James Version (1611).
    1. One of England's most wicked kings, King James, had a particular hatred of the Geneva Bible because of its Calvinistic footnotes. He disliked the Puritans and supported the Anglo-Catholic religion instead.
    2. At the Hampton Court, 1604, the King was presented with a Puritan petition that the Geneva Bible become the Bible of the English Church. He chose to have a new translation issued which would not have the Calvinism of the Geneva Bible in it.
    3. The Puritans did not appreciate the new translation but continued to use the Geneva Bible. One of the reasons the Pilgrims left England was to get away from the KJV and to freely use the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of early Colonial America.
  - G. Ultimately the KJV became the most widely used Bible by English-speaking people. Its beauty has never been surpassed.
  - H. Major revisions began to appear as the study of the manuscripts uncovered the mistakes that Erasmus and other early scholars had made. The KJV was based basically on Erasmus via Stephanus' Greek text and not on the Textus Receptus. The KJV was translated in 1611 and the Textus Receptus did not come out until 1633. The Textus Receptus and the text of Stephanus disagree in 287 places. They are not the same text.

### **Conclusion**

To decide which translation you should use, the following things should be taken into account:

1. Faithfulness to the Hebrew and Greek.
2. Clarity in vocabulary and sentence structure.
3. Readability, i.e., it can be read without labor or difficulty.
4. Beauty in style.
5. Purpose of reading it: casual, study, etc.

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