



## Did God speak all these Words?

Every Sunday morning we hear the Ten Commandments introduced with the words, "God spoke all these words." We trust, then, that the words which follow are exactly what God said on Mount Sinai. But can we be sure? How do we know? We no longer have the two tablets of stone that were placed in the ark of the covenant. The first copies of Exodus and Deuteronomy have vanished in the sands of time. So have the first copies of the rest of the books of the Old Testament. The oldest known manuscripts are centuries – sometimes many centuries – newer than the books themselves.

Although the words of God do not perish, his words were written down on perishable materials that eventually wore out and crumbled. God's people depended on the diligent efforts of scribes to make accurate copies, but these scribes had weaknesses and shortcomings. They had the highest respect for God's holy Word, and they knew it well, but they were not inspired or divinely kept from error. As a result, there are many differences among the surviving manuscripts, some small and some big. Anyone who has ever tried to copy a page out of a book will tell you that it's very hard not to make single mistake.

Copying errors could occur in a variety of ways. Some Hebrew consonants look quite similar, so scribes could misread a word. As a copyist's eye went back and forth from what he was reading to what he was writing, he might copy a word or phrase twice by mistake, or skip a word or a line or more. Often words were clearly separated from each other, but sometimes not, so it was not always easy for a scribe to tell where one word ended and the next began. Hebrew does not begin a sentence with a capital letter, break it up with commas, or end it with a period, the way English does. True, books were divided into chapters, paragraphs and verses, but the oldest copies did not have punctuation, so it was not always easy to tell where one sentence ended and another began, or even what kind of sentence it was. Sometimes a scribe would write an explanatory note in the margin of his text, and the next scribe would copy that note into the text itself.

Besides these kinds of accidental errors, learned scribes occasionally made deliberate changes to the text in places where they thought a mistake had been made. Furthermore, as Jewish communities – and later, Christian churches – spread beyond the borders of Israel and adopted other languages, they also made translations of the Old Testament Scriptures, for example in Greek (the Septuagint), Aramaic (the Targums), Syriac (the Peshitta), and Latin (the Vulgate). Translation always involves interpretation.

For instance, since the Hebrew alphabet has only consonants, no vowels, a translator could sometimes read a Hebrew word in several different ways. We no longer have the original copies of these translations, but copies of copies of copies, etc., and these manuscripts, too, have mistakes. In short, trusting that the Old Testament is reliable does not mean trusting that individual manuscripts are free from error – they aren't. Rather, it means trusting that the original text can be recovered from a multitude of faulty manuscripts. Can it? Yes, it can, and it has been, for the most part. Let me unpack that statement.

### **It can be recovered...**

Imagine that a teacher projected a dictionary page up on a screen and told her students to copy it out. She then collected all their copies, took the best ones, and brought one to each of the other classes in the school, and told them to copy the copies. She also took a copy to the French immersion class, and they didn't copy it but translated it into French. Some of the brighter students

noticed that the copies they were copying from had spelling mistakes, and some phrases that didn't quite make sense, so as they copied they also fixed them up a bit. Some used American spelling, while others used British.

At the end of the day the teacher collected all the copies, put them in a laundry basket in no particular order, brought them to your doorstep and said to you, "I'd like you to look at all these copies and tell me what the original dictionary page said." Could you do it? It would be a lot of work, but you probably could. After all, you know the crucial fact that despite their disagreements, all your copies go back to a single original. Even without the original page in front of you, you'd be able to compare your copies to each other, figure out where the mistakes took place, and work out what the original text must have said.

That, essentially, is what Bible scholars have to do with the manuscripts of the Old Testament: organize them, compare them with each other, figure out where and how the mistakes were made, and – where they disagree – determine what the original text must have been. In one sense their task is much more difficult than yours: they have many thousands of manuscripts, from a wide variety of places, written in a foreign language over a long period of time. Yet in another sense their task is much easier. You see, if a teacher tells her class to copy a dictionary page, there is not a great deal of motivation for the students to do a careful job: it's boring work, and that dictionary page is not precious to them, and if they don't like the teacher they might make a mess of it on purpose. For Jews and Christians, on the other hand, the scrolls of the Old Testament contained the very oracles of holy God, so they had plenty of motivation to copy it as carefully as they possibly could, out of reverence for the Lord and his Word. They also took elaborate precautions to prevent errors from creeping into the text.

These precautions are especially evident in the Masoretic Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages. These manuscripts are pointed with vowel markings and punctuation symbols to ensure that the Hebrew words were read correctly. They also have notes in the margins which say things like: "This word only occurs three times." Scribes respected the text so much that they refused to change it: where they suspected that a mistake had taken place, they noted their opinion in the margin but left the text as it was. At the end of each book the scribe would write a postscript recording the number of words, the number of verses, and the middle word and middle verse of the book. Notes of this kind functioned as a form quality control and testify to the meticulous care with which the scribes did their work.

Scribes were highly trained professionals with vast portions of Scripture committed to memory. The writings of the rabbis are filled with intense debates about very fine details of the text. If a manuscript was found to contain too many mistakes it would be taken out of circulation. In short, the level of agreement and accuracy among these manuscripts is nothing less than astonishing. It was this legacy that the Reformed churches inherited during the time of the Reformation when they set aside the Latin Vulgate in favour of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

### **It has been recovered...**

During the Reformation, debates on the doctrines of Scripture often ran stuck because of differences in the text. Especially two factors made it possible for scholars to study those differences and to determine what the text originally said. The first was the invention of the printing press. Publishing firms could print Bibles with multiple versions of the Old Testament side by side on the same page. Hebrew manuscripts were no longer the private possession of Jewish communities but became widely available to Christian theologians who made it a priority to learn the languages of the Bible. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries scholars such as Charles Houbigant, Benjamin Kennicott, and Giovanni de Rossi collected and compared as many Hebrew manuscripts as they could and published books that made the different readings available to Bible scholars all over the world. Hebrew Bibles were published with variant readings printed in the footnotes.

During the nineteenth century, there was a growing distrust that the original text of Scripture could actually be found among the surviving manuscripts. For one thing, scholars came to believe that the stable text of the Masoretic tradition was quite late and that the older texts were actually much more fluid. It became fashionable for scholars to propose "corrections" to the Hebrew text without any support from the manuscripts. For another, they began to believe that many Old Testament books developed over a long period of time and went through many stages of revision, and that it would therefore be impossible to recover the original version of these books from the surviving copies. In this context, a second factor played a major role, namely the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-twentieth century.

These scrolls, which contain parts of nearly all of the books of the Old Testament, were about 1000 years older than the oldest manuscripts of the Masoretes. Yet scholars found to their surprise that the text of many of these scrolls was very much the same as the Masoretic text, which proved that the text of the Old Testament was stable already much earlier than they had thought. Thus the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm the precision of the scribes' work and testify to God's care for his church.

In practical terms, it means that newer translations of the Bible such as the NIV and ESV contain far fewer speculative "corrections" than do older translations such as the RSV. Much progress has been made in determining what the text originally said, and teams of scholars continue to publish the results of their studies. These will eventually find their way into new translations of the Bible.

### **...For the most part**

To be sure, not all of the problems have been solved. In some cases it is currently impossible to judge which reading of the text was original. Hence there are footnotes and there are disagreements among the translations. Thankfully, these differences rarely affect the overall meaning of a passage and even more seldom do they affect its message or the doctrines of Scripture. From that perspective, the problems and difficulties that remain make studying the text of the Old Testament fun and exciting. If you'd like to learn more, why not study it for yourself? Come on down to our Seminary, and sit in on a class or two. Or better yet, enroll in our program, enter the ministry, and spend a lifetime uncovering the nuggets of God's Word.

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