

Chapter 2

The Transmission of the Old Testament

The Most Important Find of All Time

In the spring of 1947 Bedouin goat-herds were searching the cliffs along the Dead Sea for a lost goat (or for treasure, depending on who is telling the story). While searching, they inadvertently discovered a cave in the cleft of a steep rocky hillside. A young boy threw a stone into the dark cave to scare the sheep out and instead heard something shatter. Intrigued, he later returned with a companion and found a collection of large clay jars, some of which were intact with lids in place. Thinking they had found some lost treasure, they opened the jars with great excitement.

However, most of the jars were empty, and the remaining few concealed nothing but old scrolls wrapped in linen and blackened with age. So unapparent was the great value of this find that, as the story goes, the Bedouins first considered using the scrolls as fuel for fire.



The discovery was made in an area known as Qumran, about thirteen miles east of Jerusalem and 1300 feet below sea level. The first discoveries came to the attention of scholars in 1948, when seven of the scrolls were sold by the Bedouin shepherd to a cobbler and antiquities dealer called Kando for about \$250.¹ He in turn sold three of the scrolls to Eleazar L. Sukenik of Hebrew University.

The Bedouins also sold four to Athanasius Yeshue Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox monastery of St. Mark. On February 18, 1948, the librarian of the monastery called a specialist² and had him come to inspect the manuscripts that had “been in the monastery for forty years.” It was only after they were deemed authentic and ancient that the monastery admitted to the true story of their acquisition. The four manuscripts included a complete Isaiah scroll, a commentary on Habakkuk, a Manual of Discipline of the Essenes, and the *Genesis Apocryphon* (an Aramaic paraphrase of Genesis). Samuel in turn brought his four to the American School of Oriental Research, where they came to the attention of American and European scholars.³

It was not until 1949 that the site of the find was identified as the cave now known as Qumran Cave 1. It was that identification that led to further explorations and excavations

¹ They were later purchased for \$250,000 on behalf of the brand-new nation of Israel and returned to Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

² John C. Trevor, acting director of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR).

³ Marilyn J. Lundberg, “The Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/wsrp/educational_site/dead_sea Scrolls/discovery.shtml, accessed March 11, 2008.

of the area. Further search of Cave 1 revealed archaeological finds of pottery, cloth and wood, as well as a number of additional manuscript fragments. It was these discoveries that proved decisively that the scrolls were indeed ancient and authentic.

Between 1949 and 1956, in what became a race between the Bedouin and the archaeologists, ten additional caves were found in the hills around Qumran, caves that yielded several more scrolls, as well as thousands of fragments of scrolls: the remnants of approximately 800 manuscripts dating from approximately 200 B.C. to 68 B.C. Only about 200 of these manuscripts are biblical. Only Caves 1 and 11 have produced relatively intact manuscripts. Discovered in 1952, Cave 4 produced the largest find of between 400 and 600 manuscripts (though almost all were small fragments and many are unreadable). In all, between 50,000-60,000 fragments were found.

A unique discovery was made in Cave 3 in 1952 – a long scroll of copper measuring about eight feet long and one foot wide. It was not opened for fourteen years due to the brittle nature of the metal. The scroll contains cryptic details of about sixty separate locations where vast treasures of gold, silver, and incense are buried. This treasure is thought to be from the amazing Temple of Jerusalem. However, archaeologists have not been able to find any of the treasure.

The manuscripts of the Qumran caves include early copies of every Old Testament book except Esther in Hebrew and Aramaic,⁴ hymns, prayers, Jewish writings known as pseudepigrapha (because they are attributed to ancient biblical characters such as Enoch or the patriarchs), and texts that seem to represent the beliefs of a particular Jewish group that may have lived at the site of Qumran.

Prior to these discoveries, there were hardly any known Old Testament texts found in the Holy Land. Origen (third century A.D.) and Timothy I (ninth century A.D.) both mention using Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that had been stored in jars in caves near Jericho. However, no other mention is made.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls ranks as the most important manuscript find of all time. Some of the texts in the caves were at least one thousand years older than the previously known oldest manuscript. These scrolls revolutionized the field of Old Testament textual criticism.

However, most of the oldest manuscripts found in those caves are still a significant distance from the original writing of Moses and Samuel and David. In fact, since Moses wrote in the fifteenth century before Christ, some Old Testament texts have been copied for nearly three thousand years.⁵ The oldest copy of any part of the Old Testament is of two verses from the book of Numbers (6:22-27) inscribed on two silver amulets (see

⁴ Including 21 copies of the Book of Isaiah, 25 copies of Deuteronomy and 30 copies of the Psalms. These numbers differ according to the source.

⁵ Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 4. Factoring in the copying done by the Masoretes (explained later in this chapter).

right). These two silver strips date to the middle of the seventh century B.C. The larger is about one inch wide and four inches long and the other is about a half inch wide and less than two inches wide.⁶ The next earliest documents we have are from the above-mentioned Dead Sea Scrolls.



So, where did these manuscripts come from? How were they recorded? How were they preserved? How were they copied and how made the copies? Do these old copies that we have found match up with what Moses and Samuel and other biblical authors actually wrote? We must gain some understanding of the “transmission” of the Bible before we begin our study of trying to determine what the original documents actually said.

The Old Testament Text

Oral Tradition

Men spoke long before they began to write. Adam told his sons of the incident in the Garden and those sons told their sons. Moses later commanded the people of Israel to teach their children the laws of God and to make them known to their sons and grandsons (Deut 4:9). It is not known how long these traditions were handed down orally but at some point they were committed to writing.

In written form, the entire book of Genesis spans from Creation to the death of Joseph. The Bible tells us that “Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen 50:26, the final verse in Genesis). This death occurred around 1800 B.C. in the opinion of conservative scholars. Who wrote this? Again, conservative scholars tell us that Moses wrote Genesis along with the remainder of the first four books of the Bible (the Pentateuch).

However, Moses was not born for another 300 years. How did this information get to him? Obviously, as evangelical Christians believing in the inspiration of Scripture, we believe that God somehow worked in the life of Moses to record these events. At the same time, we do not believe that Moses simply dictated the words of God or fell into a trance to record from a vision he saw in his mind. Instead, we believe that God worked supernaturally in the natural order of things. The stories of Adam, Enoch, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were handed down through the generations until Moses (and others) recorded them.

God gave His words to these men in many different ways. Some received messages directly from God (Moses, Ex 4:22; Isaiah, Is 10:24, etc.). Sometimes God communicated through visions and dreams and the men recorded what they saw (whether they understood it or not).

⁶ Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods, and Results* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 27.

We do believe that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible but did he write all of them? In the final chapter of the last of the five books, we read:

⁵ So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, ⁶ and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. ⁷ Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated (Deut 34:5-7).

The remaining five verses in this final chapter tell of the nation of Israel mourning the death of their great leader. However, it seems obvious that Moses did not write this portion of the book. Indeed, the Bible tells us that his burial site remained unknown even “to this day”? It makes you wonder how much time had passed from Moses’ burial until “this day.” So, it seems another individual (Joshua?) penned the final few verses of Deuteronomy. From there, we know most of the Old Testament authors. How did they write?

Writing Materials

There was a great variety of writing materials. Generally, writers chose the cheapest, most durable, and easiest-to-use materials. Those materials are listed below.

Stone

Stone was plentiful in the Middle East (it still is, of course). Stone was the earliest writing material and is mentioned early in the Bible. Moses received the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments (Ex 24:12). Even the book of Job refers to some type of rock engraving made with an iron stylus, writing “Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever!” (Job 19:23-24). In Deuteronomy, we read that stones were covered with lime and the words of the Law were then written on them: “And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this law” (Deut 27:2-3).

Other people groups were using stone as the primary medium in writing. One important find was the Code of Hammurabi, an eight-foot tall stone column with 282 laws inscribed on the sides (see right). This object dates back to 1800 B.C. and is currently housed in the Louvre in Paris.⁷

The Rosetta Stone is another slab of black basalt. An officer in Napoleon’s army found the stone in Rosetta, Egypt in 1799. The stone measures 3’9” long by 2’4” wide and 11 inches thick. The stone bears three versions of the same text in different languages: hieroglyphics (Egyptian), Demotic (cursive Egyptian), and Greek. Because scholars knew Greek, this find enabled them to



⁷ Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 91.

decode the mysterious Egyptian writings. The Rosetta Stone is housed in the British Museum on London.

Clay Tablets



If stone was unavailable or too difficult to work, authors turned to clay tablets. These tablets could easily be inscribed when wet but were virtually indestructible once dried or fired. A multitude of clay tablets (on the left) have been found throughout the Tigris and Euphrates river valley. For instance, over ten thousand have been found in Turkey and twenty thousand in Iraq and twenty-two thousand in Syria.⁸

Clay tablets were not reserved for religious inscriptions. In 1887, a peasant woman in Egypt kicked something hard on the ground and found small clay tablets that were later proved to have come from the ancient Egyptian Foreign Office. Written on these clay tablets were the official records of that society.

While cheap and durable, clay tablets were also heavy and bulky. This means that larger works were not commonly produced on clay tablets. However, we have found some larger works on clay barrels or cylinders. This cylinders often had a hole through the center where a dowel could be inserted in order to turn the cylinder as you read it (like a typewriter platen). The most famous clay cylinder is the Cyrus cylinder (above), dated to about 539 B.C. This clay cylinder records the victory of Cyrus over the Babylonians and is currently housed in the British Museum.



Papyrus

Papyrus is a long-stemmed reed plant with an umbrella-like top that grows in swamps and marsh lands along the Nile River (see left). The blade of the reed was cut into strips about twelve to fifteen inches long and laid parallel to one another. Then, a second layer of reeds were laid perpendicular to the first layer. The sheets were left to dry in the sun with a large press on top of them, causing the natural sugar in the plant to bond the two layers of strips together.⁹ The strips on the front (*recto*) ran side to side and the strips on the back (*verso*) ran from top to bottom. Usually, the front was used for writing because of the ridges in the reed.

⁸ Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 92.

⁹ Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 92.

This plant is probably referred to in Exodus 2:3 (Moses in the basket among the bulrushes) and Job 8:11. Papyrus is found in ancient Egyptian records from as long ago as 3000 B.C. Papyrus was much more convenient than stone or clay tablets since it was easy to make, easy to write upon, and easy to roll up and carry with you. Several pages of papyri sheets were often laced or glued together along their edges to make a scroll. Some scrolls found in Egypt are forty-six feet long and the great Harris papyrus in the British Museum is 141 feet long! Later, these papyri sheets were bound along one common edge to make a book (or *codex*).

The use of papyrus also had its drawbacks. It was not nearly as durable as stone or clay tablets (of course, neither is today's paper). Papyrus was not readily available outside of Egypt, which made it relatively expensive. In 407 B.C., a roll of twenty pages was worth twenty-six drachmas (or about \$5.00). Its surface was rough. It was susceptible to damage from too much light or moisture. Also, it quickly became brittle with age. Therefore, any papyri documents that still exist today are found in dry locations such as Egypt, the Sinai desert, and the Dead Sea area. It is commonly understood that most of the original authors of the Old Testament would have used papyri, which explains their disappearance.

In fact, the first papyrus manuscript found in modern times was discovered around 1750. A major discovery was made in Egypt in 1778 and soon finds were being made almost weekly.

Leather

Leather is obtained from the hides of sheep, goats, antelope, and other similar animals. The skins are dried, shaved, and scraped clean by tanners (an amazingly disgusting job). Leather was more durable than papyrus and yet it still dries out and cracks and eventually crumbles away into nothing. References to leather writing surfaces have been found as late as 2900 B.C. in Egypt. A good number of the scrolls found at Qumran are leather, most notably the famous Isaiah scroll (1QIsa^a, see right).



Parchment

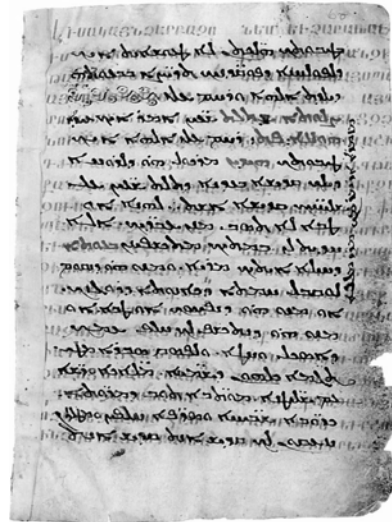
Parchment is also made from the skin of animals, particularly sheep, calves, goats, and antelope. The skins were soaked in lime water to make them white. The quality of the parchment depended on the age of the animal: the younger the animal, the better the parchment. A particular kind of parchment, vellum, was the finest quality of extra-thin parchment, sometimes obtained from animals not yet even born.

Parchment was more expensive than leather or papyrus but it had multiple advantages. It was smoother and more durable. The writer could utilize both sides of the parchment.

The light color added to the clarity of the writing and greatly aided the reader. Finally, the parchment could be reused by scraping the original writing off.¹⁰ As parchment became rare during the Middle Ages, it was customary to scratch or wash (in effect, to erase) the old text in order to write something new. These erased/rewritten parchments are called *palimpsests*.

The only disadvantages to this writing material is the cost, the quickly growing weight of larger books, and the shiny surface of the skin, which lead to strain on the eyes of the writer and reader.

The word parchment came from the name *Pergamum*, a city of Asian Minor that became famous for its production of parchments. The use of parchment became a very profitable and common in the second century B.C. It soon became the preferred medium for the Scriptures because of its durability. In his letter to Timothy, Paul asked his young associate to “bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13).



MS 575
Codex Americanus: Reception, Palimpsest
Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai, 6th c. and 1st half of 10th c.

Paper

Paper is said to have been invented in China in A.D. 105 by Tsai-Louen. It was introduced to the Middle East through Arabs in about A.D. 800. Paper became known in Europe near A.D. 1100. Paper is made by dipping a screen into a mixture of cotton fibers and water, which would be trapped on the screen, then pressed to expunge the water, and left to dry for a few days.

Writing Styles and Skills

The earliest writing was not writing at all but drawing. Pictures are well known and developed over time into certain recognizable shapes. At first, the images were realistic representations of objects (a man, a bear, the sun). However, over time, the pictures gradually became more stylized and even more difficult to decipher.¹¹

As cities grew, the need for more efficient communication increased – especially in business activities and official governmental records. Furthermore, the limitations of picture writing are obvious. Abstract concepts such as love, hate, fear, or sorrow are hard to portray. Also, the “alphabet” would soon become cumbersome with multiplied thousands of symbols needed for everyday communication (note the modern Chinese alphabet).

¹⁰ Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 95.

¹¹ Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 76.

Pictograms

As pictures became more stylized, a new form emerged: pictograms. These pictograms slowly became standardized. This allowed the scribes to stop focusing on being a great artist.

Logograms

A logogram is a picture that represents a concept and each picture may have several different meanings. For instance, a picture of a bee might simply signify a bee or it may be the first unit in the word “business.”¹² A picture could stand for the sun or time, day, bright, light, and many more possibilities. Certain symbols acquired so many meanings that it became very difficult to determine meaning, even in context.

Syllabic Writing (alphabet)

The next stage of writing moved from symbols representing a concept to representing a sound. This set the stage for the invention of the alphabet – where each symbol (letter) represents a sound and words are formed by stringing symbols (letters) together.

It was really a simple matter to assign phonetic values to their hieroglyphs. The pictograms already represented whole words. Therefore, each one could just as easily stand for the sound of the *first letter* of its word. For instance, the Semitic name for an ox was *Aleph*- and so the hieroglyph for *Aleph* became the character for the sound of A. The Semitic name for a tent or dwelling was *Beth*- and so the hieroglyph for *Beth* became the character for the sound of B. This process continued until a series of 22 pictograms had been chosen to represent 22 essential sounds in the spoken language.

The word *alphabet* comes from the first two letters of the Greek language, *alpha* and *beta*. Similarly, the first two letters in Hebrew and Phoenician language are *aleph* and *bet*. With the reduction of a language into 20-30 symbols instead of the multiplied hundreds, communication was revolutionized.

The Hebrew Language and Alphabet

Hebrew is a Semitic language. The word *Semitic* comes from the name Shem, named in Genesis as the son of Noah. Shem’s descendants now live in the Middle East. Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, and (eventually) Arabic are examples of Semitic languages. Many of these Canaanite languages were present in the land before Israel conquered it. All of these alphabets have certain similarities.

The earliest Hebrew writing is similar to cuneiform and is called *paleo-Hebrew script*. The word *paleo* simply means “early” or “ancient.” These “letters” borrowed heavily from surrounding Semitic cultures.

Of course, the Israelites made the alphabet their own over time. In about 400 B.C., scribes writing in Aramaic (a Mesopotamian language adopted by the Israelites during the Captivity in Babylon) abandoned the clay tablet method in favor of the more Egyptian

¹² Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 79.

practice of painting the letters on papyrus and parchment. When the Hebrew language was painted in this way, it created the "brush-stroke" style with which we are most familiar today- called "Aramaic" or "Square-Script" Hebrew. It is also commonly referred to as "Biblical Hebrew"- so called because this was the alphabet used to scribe the Old Testament and other ancient Biblical texts. This change in writing style is now known as *square script* and is still used today.

The conversion from Hebrew to Aramaic happened so quickly that Nehemiah was enraged to see that few people could read or speak Hebrew after their return from exile, recording, “And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God . . .” (Neh 13:24-25). Eventually, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Aramaic paraphrases called *Targums*.

The Hebrew language was considered sacred and was kept alive by the rabbis. The vast majority of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. It was a widespread language at its height of popularity in the eighth century B.C.¹³ The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. The order of these letters is found in several acrostic Psalms – most famously Psalm 119.¹⁴

The Aramaic Language and Alphabet

The Aramaic language takes its name from the Arameans (people of Aram). This people group is mentioned in old Akkadian writings from as early as 3000 B.C. Aramaic was the most popular language of the entire Middle East.

Five Old Testament passages are actually written in Aramaic and these passages represent the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets:

- Genesis 31:47
- Jeremiah 10:11
- Daniel 2:4-7:28
- Ezra 4:8-6:128
- Ezra 7:12-26.

Aramaic almost died out with the rapid expansion of Greek culture but it was still spoken during the life of Jesus. In fact, Jesus and the apostles all spoke Aramaic. Several of the more famous statements of Christ are recorded in Aramaic:

- *Talitha kourai* – “Little girl, arise” in Mark 5:41
- *Ephphatha* – “Be opened” in Mark 7:34

¹³ Note that Isaiah calls it the “language of Canaan” in Isaiah 19:18.

¹⁴ The Psalm is divided into 22 sections of 8 verses. Each verse within a particular section begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The total number of verses is 172 (22 sections with eight verses in each section).

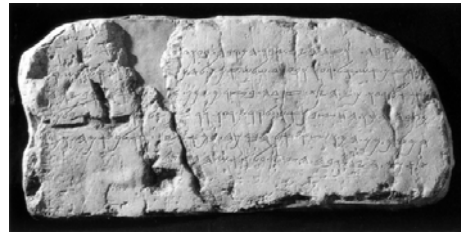
- *Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani* – “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” in Mark 15:34

Several other familiar words in the Bible come from the Aramaic tongue:

- *Abba* – “Father” in Mark 14:36
- *Marana tha* – “Come, O Lord” in 1 Cor 16:22
- *Golgotha* – “skull” in Mark 15:22

The Old Testament Text Prior to 400 B.C.

There is little evidence concerning the early period. Therefore, we are left with significant questions. Bruce Waltke believes that the Moses wrote in some form of ancient Hebrew but several languages of the period were very similar.¹⁵ However, there are no actual extant (still existing) Hebrew texts that predate about 800 B.C. We do have the inscription from Hezekiah’s tunnel (c. 701 B.C., see right) and the silver amulets (c. mid-seventh century).



We are not sure of the alphabet that Moses used or the materials he used to write. We also are not entirely sure who maintained the biblical texts in this very early stage. A particular group of individuals were raised up to do this job: priests, Levites, and scribes. We have a hint of the authority of the Old Testament books because other books mentioned in the Bible no longer exist. For example, we do not have the Book of Yashar (mentioned in 2 Samuel 1:18) or the Diaries of the Kings (2 Chronicles 16:11). The scribes seem more determined to keep the biblical books alive.

From the earliest times, there is evidence that some books were treated with reverence and thought to be authoritative. In Exodus, we read that “Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven’” (Ex 17:13-14). Later, we read that

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. . . . Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:3-4, 7).

The stone tablets on which the Lord inscribed the Ten Commandments were stored in the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:16). The Law of Moses was to be taught to the priests and read publicly every seven years so the Jews would not forget God’s laws (Deut 31:9-11).

¹⁵ Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 3, 8.

There were prohibitions for adding or deleting any part of the words (Deut 4:2, 12:32). In Daniel 9:2, the prophet refers to the writings of Jeremiah, indicating that even in Daniel's time the book of Jeremiah was part of a larger collection of books he considered to be authoritative.

The Work of Scribes

In Old Testament times, professional scribes were employed in Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia and all over the Greek world. The position of scribe was often one of social prestige and political influence. Scribes were the intelligentsia of the day. A scribe underwent long periods of training – starting as a young child - to become the expert that he was.

The Jewish scribe handled a wide range of tasks. They often sat in the gate of the city and wrote whatever their illiterate fellow citizens needed – correspondence, receipts, contracts, etc. On an official level, scribes kept records and wrote annals and copied the Scriptures. Several such Scripture copyists are named in the Old Testament:

- Shebna (2 Kings 18:18, 37)
- Shaphan (2 Kings 22:8-12)
- Ezra (Ezra 7:6, 11)
- Baruch (Jer 36:26, 32)
- Jonathan (Jer 37:15, 20)

Two of the scribes mentioned above deserve special mention. Baruch was the scribe for the prophet Jeremiah. During the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah (c. 605 B.C.), Baruch recorded Jeremiah's prophecy of the judgment of God upon Judah unless the nation repented (Jer 36:1-4). Baruch then read those words to the people (36:9-19) and the message finally reached the king, who destroyed Baruch's work and demanded the arrest of both the prophet and the scribe (36:21-26). Now a fugitive, the faithful scribe wrote down Jeremiah's next prediction of Judah's destruction (36:27-32).

Ezra was a priest and a scribe (see Ezra 7:11-12 and Neb 8:9; 12:26). However, he was no mere copyist. He was a profound student of God's Law and it was he who began the tradition of the scribe being a religious leader and a scholar, as seen in the New Testament.

Old Testament Authorship

Several Old Testament writers considered Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch (see 2 Kings 14:6; Ezra 3:2; Daniel 9:11), as did Jesus (see Luke 24:44) and Paul (1 Cor 9:9).

Traditionally, Joshua is thought to be the author of the book that bears his name, although there is no record of that in the book itself.

It is thought that Samuel wrote Judges as he was the last of the judges. It is not likely that Samuel wrote all of 1-2 Samuel since he died in 1 Samuel. There is another Samuel

whose writing is mentioned in 1 Chron 29:29 – *The Record of Samuel the Seer* – who most likely penned the biblical books, as well.

We do not know who wrote Ruth, Esther, or 1-2 Kings.

It is most likely that Ezra wrote the rest of the historical books (1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah).

It is thought that Job actually wrote Job but there is no way to be certain. The Psalms were composed by a number of individuals: Korah, Asaph, David, even Moses (Ps 90). Most of the Proverbs came from Solomon but some were written by Agur and Lemeuel. Solomon also wrote the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes (though some debate the latter).

There is little doubt of the authors of the prophetic books – the authors are identified in each of the books (usually in the first verse).

The Old Testament Text from 400 B.C. to A.D. 100

Some time before 400 B.C., the Old Testament canon was completed. However, not one of the original writings (called “autographs”) of any single book of the Old Testament still exists today (or “is extant”). From about 500 B.C. until about A.D. 100, an influential group of teachers of the Law called scribes arose to preserve Israel’s sacred traditions (as described above). The need for this was seen in the previous exiles of the Jewish race into Assyria and Babylon and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.

At the same time the scribes were preserving the ancient texts, they were also revising it in subtle ways. First, the scribes making copies changed from the paleo (early)-Hebrew to the more Aramaic “square” script. Second, the spelling of certain words changed over time and archaic forms were updated. Third, corrections were made as copies were compared with other copies.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were written within this time frame. Another significant manuscript written in this period is the Nash Papyrus, found in the early 1900s in Egypt. When compared with Aramaic papyri and ostraca (words written in ink on pottery), it was determined that this particular papyri was written about 100 B.C. The handwriting is very similar to the Dead Sea Scrolls. It contains the Ten Commandments and the Jewish *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5). The manuscript is not part of a larger scroll but a single leaf, probably used for teaching.

The Septuagint

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible – the very first translation of the Hebrew Bible into another language. It was created in the third century B.C. by Jewish scribes who knew both languages. This translation became very popular in the two centuries before Christ because many Jews in that day were not proficient in Hebrew. Language had changed since the captivity period and the rapid conquests of Alexander the Great had spread the Greek culture (*Hellenism*) to the Middle East.

It is somewhat likely that Jesus and the apostles accessed the Septuagint, although Jesus did refer to the ancient Hebrew texts in more formal dialogues with Jewish leaders. It appears that Jesus even utilized the Targum at times. Many of the apostles quoted from the Septuagint when they wrote the Gospels and many of the Epistles, although there is considerable debate over the extent.

The Old Testament Text from A.D. 100 to A.D. 500

During the first century, a strong movement emerged in Judaism to establish a unified, authoritative text of the Old Testament.¹⁶ This text was dependent on known traditions at that time and all differences were rectified. Once they possessed a unified and authoritative text, they were meticulous to ensure that the Hebrew text was copied exactly with no tolerance for error.

From A.D. 100 to 300, a second group of scribes arose called the *Tannaim*, or “repeaters.”¹⁷ This group of scribes began copying shortly after the beginning of the Christian era. Meticulous rules were developed:

- Only parchments made from clean animals were allowed and these were to be joined together with thread from clean animals.
- Each written column of the scroll was to have no fewer than 48 and no more than 60 lines whose breadth must consist of 30 letters.
- The page was first to be lined and the letters were then “suspended” from the line.
- The ink was to be black, prepared according to a specific recipe.
- No word or letter was to be written from memory.
- There was to be the space of a hair between each consonant and the space of a small consonant between each word.
- The scribe must wash himself entirely and be in full Jewish dress before beginning to copy the scroll.
- He could not write the name YAHWEH with a newly dipped brush, not take notice of anyone, even a king, while writing God’s sacred name.¹⁸

From A.D. 200 to 500, a third group of scribes emerged to preserve the Hebrew text. This group was called the *Amoraim*, or “expositors.”¹⁹ During this period, the Talmud²⁰ began to be formed. The Amoraim were centered in two geographical areas: Babylon and Palestine. Therefore, two separate Talmuds developed, the Babylonian and Palestinian.

¹⁶ Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 70.

¹⁷ Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 70.

¹⁸ Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper, 1958), 78-79, as found in Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 74.

¹⁹ Wegner, *Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism*, 70.

²⁰ The Talmud is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah (c. A.D. 200), the first written encyclopedia of Judaism’s Oral Law; and the Gemara (c. A.D. 500), a discussion of the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings that often ventures onto other subjects and expounds broadly on the Law, Writings, and Prophets.

The Old Testament Text from A.D. 500 to A.D. 1000

Around the end of the fifth century A.D., a fourth group of scribes emerged called the Masoretes.²¹ The word *masora* means “that which is transmitted” or “that which is handed down.” This group inherited the scribal traditions and carried on the work of preserving the text. Their dedicated labor helped to preserve the Hebrew text that we have today, commonly called the *Masoretic Text*. These scribes were extremely careful and treated the text with great reverence. From about A.D. 500 to 800, the Masoretes added vowel points and accents to the Hebrew text.

In the early half of the tenth century, two distinct groups of Masoretes flourished: the Ben Asher family and the Ben Naphtali family. It was once thought that the Bibles produced by these two groups differed significantly but that is no longer thought to be the case. There are primarily only differences in the vowel pointing and accents. Eventually, the Ben Asher family won out as the other faded away.

The oldest dated Masoretic text is *Codex Cairensis* (A.D. 895) and is attributed to Moses ben Asher. It contains the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets). The rest of the Old Testament is missing. It is preserved in the Karaite Synagogue of Cairo.



Another important Masoretic text is the *Aleppo Codex*, written in the first half of the tenth century A.D. (see left).²² It contains the entire Old Testament. It is one of the earliest known Hebrew manuscripts comprising the full text of the Bible.²³ It is also the most authoritative, accurate, and sacred source document. It is currently housed in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.²⁴ It is considered the most precise Bible manuscript in the world, according to the Masoretic text, and the closest to that which we possess today. The lower floor of the Shrine of the Book is dedicated to the Aleppo Codex and other exhibits connected to it.

The Old Testament Text after A.D. 1000

The Masoretes hand copied the Hebrew text for over one thousand years before the invention of the printing press. Yet it remained extremely accurate during that time span. This was confirmed with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls were 1000 years older than the oldest Masorete text and only about 300

²¹ Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 70.

²² A fascinating website has been developed with most of the pages on display. I encourage you to visit the following: <http://www.aleppocodex.org>.

²³ *The Firkowitsch Codex* is the oldest complete codex of the Old Testament, dated A.D. 1010.

²⁴ While the spectator may believe that the whole book is displayed before his or her eyes in the museum display window, this is not true. Only two (or four) pages are actually displayed, while behind them is cardboard modeled to look like the rest of the pages. Most of the pages of the Aleppo Codex are stored in a safe place in the museum

years removed from the completion of the Hebrew canon of Scripture. You would expect significant changes between the texts but this is not the case. If you compare the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Masoretic text created 1000 years later, you find remarkable similarity.

Every copy was a monumental task but the Masoretes prided themselves on their work and the accuracy of their finished products. Yet another important Masoretic manuscript is the *Leningrad Codex*. This document originally contained the entire Old Testament but now a quarter of it is missing. It is stored in the Leningrad Public Library and was copied in A.D. 1008 by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. The Aleppo Codex was not available earlier in the 1900s so this Codex was used as the textual basis for the popular Hebrew Bibles of our day, such as the *Biblia Hebraica* (1929-1937) and its revision, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1967-1977).