

How the Bible Came to Us Hebrew Transmission

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew with roughly ten chapters written in Aramaic. Aramaic is closely related to Hebrew and was introduced to the Bible when the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon. After telling Moses the first five books of the Bible (Pentateuch), God instructed the nation of Israel:

"Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." (Deut 4:1-2)

Repeated use of Moses' writings caused his scroll to be degraded with use, and the nation of Israel developed a sacred tradition of copying the word of God. A group of Jewish scribes (Hebrew: Sopherim) developed with a high regard for the Scriptures. Nothing is known about how this group developed, and what is known today is based on a later group of scribes - scholars called the Masoretes (500-900 A.D.). For their accurate scribal traditions and manuscript prominence in widespread acceptance and usage, their text is largely the basis of the English translation of the Old Testament.

Many of the Jewish regulations were designed to catch copying errors at the level of the scribe; safeguards were put into place to catch errors that may have been missed by the scribe and erroneously authenticated. According to Jewish tradition:

"Before his death, Moses wrote 13 Torah Scrolls. Twelve of these were distributed to each of the 12 Tribes. The 13th was placed in the Ark of the Covenant (with the Tablets). If anyone would come and attempt to rewrite or falsify the Torah, the one in the Ark would "testify" against him. (likewise, if he had access to the scroll in the Ark and tried to falsify it, the distributed copies would "testify" against him.)" Midrash (Devarim Rabba 9:4).

To give you an idea of their scribal traditions of copying the Old Testament, we'll go through an English modified example. First of all, the early manuscripts were written on animal skins (parchment), calf skin (vellum) and later plant reeds (papyrus). Each sheet was of a set dimension and then sewn together to form a long continuous sheet which was rolled up into a large scroll.

1. Hebrew is written from right to left, without any vowels, and without any punctuation. Here is an example of a two column manuscript of a biblical passage:

nht tnnvc yM pk dn cv yM t ntsl ddn llw y f nht ht ll fr slpp ht ll gnm nssssp drsrt yM b llhs y ylh dn stsrp f mdgnk M t b llhs y dn nM s htr lrl f sns ht t kps llhs y tht sdrw ht r shT ntn	ht mrf mh t dlhc hwhY dn d Got p tnw ssM wN ht llt dn bcJ f sh ht t ys llhs y shT gnys ntnm dn sntpyg ht t dd l thw ns vh svlsry Y lrsI f sns flsyM t y thgrb dn sgnw slg n p y dtfl l wh wn S
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How would you ensure the accuracy of the next copy? What standard would you develop for copying? What standard would you set for the scribe?

2. Try your hand at translating by inserting vowels and punctuation. What is the English translation of the above passage? Gain a sense in what it took for translators to provide the Bible today.

The Masorah can be seen in the oldest and best Masoretic texts. On every page, the Hebrew Bible is arranged in two or more columns and distributed between the upper and lower margins are a varying number of lines of smaller writing.

Masorah Magna or Great Masorah is often the small writings in the side margins.

Masorah Parva or Small Masorah is the small writings between the columns.

The illustration given to the right is a reduced facsimile of a three column Masoretic Manuscript (16.25" x 12.375"), written in a German hand, about the year A.D. 1120.

The Masorah Magna is the small writing in the upper (four lines) and lower margins (seven lines) of the manuscript.

The Masorah Para is the small writing in the outer margins and between the three columns.

This information contains the necessary details to insure correct transcription of the manuscript and maintain its fidelity.



The Teacher Note for this lesson is at:

<http://Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/25Curriculum/Class9-12/print/Bible.Transmission.Masorete.9-12.pdf>

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How would you ensure the accuracy of the next copy? What standard would you develop for copying? What standard would you set for the scribe?

This exercise is to cause the student some understanding of the serious endeavor of copying and passing down God's word. Allow time for exploration and discussion of what the student thinks are important factors one must consider to ensure an error free copy of God's word. A list of Masorete regulations follows which can be used for comparison.

The Masoretes considered the Word of God as sacred and regarded the introduction or copying of any error as a sin. No imperfection, no matter how small, was tolerated.

Each page was rigorously checked (in addition to counting, finding the beginning, mid-point, and ending letter, etc.) There was a specific way to prepare and dedicate the manuscript material so that it would be pure to receive God's Word.

There was special and dedicated black ink for copying Scripture.

Each word was read alone and aloud from an authentic copy before it was written. Often there would be a second person reading as the scribe writes.

When the word GOD was encountered, the scribe's pen had to be wiped clean. When YHWY was encountered, the scribe had to wash his body before he could write it.

Each letter and word had a certain distance from each other and could not touch.

Each letter and word were counted.

Each column of text could only permit 48-60 lines.

Each page could only permit a certain number of letters and words.

Any mistake on a page, the page was condemned.

3 mistakes on one page condemned the whole manuscript.

The manuscript could only be stored in sacred places like a synagogue.

Because no document containing the Word of God could be destroyed, old manuscripts were removed from circulation by burial or hidden away never to be found.

The Masoretes created a system of vowel points (dots and dashes) above and below the consonants so that future generations would understand the proper pronunciation of word. In addition, the Masoretes were notable for the **Masorah**, a collection of notes and comments on the margins of the manuscript including all spelling changes, because they did not want to alter the original text.

The Masorah records details about the Hebrew Bible designed to prevent the loss or misplacement of a single letter or word during the process of copying.

It records the number of times that each letters occur in the various books of the Bible so that nothing is added or lost.

It records the number of words, number of verses and the middle word and the middle verse of the unit passage.

It records the number of expressions and combinations of words of each unit passage.

In 930 A.D., Aaron ben Asher produced the first complete Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) known as the Aleppo Codex.

2. Try your hand at translating by inserting vowels and punctuation. What is the English translation of the above passage? Gain a sense in what it took for translators to provide the Bible today.

This is a very challenging task with a very low probability of success. The steps the student must consider is: 1) take text that is written from right to left and convert it to left to right, 2) insert the correct vowels, and 3) add English punctuation. While this is not the real process of translation, this question is intended for the student to experience a glimpse into the laborious task of translating the Bible. How the Bible came to us and maintain its textual fidelity over thousands of years is phenomenal but taken for granted.

The translation is:

Now Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. So now then, if you will indeed listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (Ex 19:3-6, LSB)

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