

A closer look into Jewish scribal customs...

1. Study Matt 5:18 and Luke 16:17. What does the word or term “smallest letter” or “stroke” mean? What significance does this have on your understanding of the Bible?

In the attempt to bridge the translation difficulties posed by historical distance, “smallest letter” was translated from *jot* and “stroke” was translated from *tittle*. These Hebrew words used by Christ were in reference to the only written texts of the time. In this case, the Jewish reference to “Law” referred to the Pentateuch, which were the first 5 books of the Old Testament. A *Jot* was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet (yodh). A *Tittle* was the smallest stroke or projection on the Hebrew letter (think of the dot in the letter “i”). Thus Christ was very clear that the Hebrew Law, not only down to the letter, but also to the smallest stroke was going to be fulfilled and not fail.

2. Study Deut 4:1-2, Deut 12:32, and Prov 30:5-6. What does this reveal about Jewish scribal customs?

Jewish scribes were held in high esteem because of the seriousness of copying God’s Word. Jewish tradition demanded a precise method of preparing themselves, preparing the materials, and the copying process; failure to adhere to God’s standard of copying without error had serious consequences. The copying of any error was considered a sin. In recognition of this, a process was developed and codified in the Hebrew Talmud. The following is just a sample of the regulations.

- 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.
- 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 was counted.
- Each column of text could only permit 48-60 lines.
- Each page could only permit a certain number of letters and words.
- Each page was rigorously checked (in addition to counting, finding the beginning, mid-point, and ending letter, etc.)
- Any mistake on a page, the page was condemned.
- 3 mistakes on one page condemned the whole manuscript.

In its original form, Hebrew was a language of consonants. There were no written vowels. Vowel sounds were spoken, but they were not written down. As the result, a verse would be written like this:

Il scrptr s nsprd by Gd nd prftbl fr tchnng, fr rprf, fr crctn, fr trnng n rghtsnss. [Translated: All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. (2 Tim 3:16)]

For centuries, a group of Jewish scribes, the Masoretes passed the proper vowel pronunciation orally, from generation to generation, as carefully as they maintained the written record. Around 700 AD, they developed a set of vowel points, tiny markings above and below the Hebrew characters, to show how each word should be pronounced.

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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).

Note: The Midrash, developed between the 2nd and 11th centuries, was an in depth rabbinical study of the interpretation of the Old Testament writings (analogous to a Bible Commentary).

After the ark disappeared, the authentic proof text was kept in Temple of Jerusalem. Upon destruction of the temple in 70 AD, Jewish scribes developed a system to periodically and globally check and eliminate scribal errors. The lack of errors of these scribal copies attest to the phenomenal integrity and tradition of preserving God's Word. This process still exists today. How do you handle the Word?

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