

Lesson 4

THE RELIABILITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Since we do not have the original manuscripts of the Bible, how do we know that the Bible we have today is not perverted and filled with corruptions? Can we be sure that, through the many translations and versions over the centuries, the Bible we have today is not just a pale reflection of the original? Has transmission of the text obscured the original message of the Bible? Can we be sure we have the words of the original so we can trust our Bibles? NOTE: Often rank infidels and prejudiced liberals will make statements to make the common man believe that there are thousands of errors in the Bible, and it is a totally unreliable book. However all genuine scholars agree, whether liberal or conservative, that the Bible is a well-preserved book. The Bible is the best documented ancient book in history.
- B. The science of determining the original text of the Bible is called lower criticism, and it should not be confused with the science of higher criticism. Higher criticism is the Biblical science that concerns itself with the problem of the age of Biblical books, the sources used in the writing of the Bible, the historicity of the Bible, etc. This is a legitimate field of study but the liberals have taken it to great excesses. Lower criticism deals only with the text of scripture, seeking to find the original words of the original manuscripts. NOTE: If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, verbally inspired, the job of establishing the text accurately is an extremely important one.

II. THE PROBLEMS OF COPYISTS

- A. Copyists: Those who were copyists in the Jewish religion were called scribes. The scribes were learned and religious men who gave meticulous attention in their copying of the Old Testament. They were professionals and were convinced that they were copying inspired scripture. Therefore, they were very accurate in the transmission of the Hebrew text. NOTE: We have no original manuscripts of the Old Testament. In fact, there are no complete copies of the Hebrew Old Testament earlier than AD 900, but it seems evident that the text was preserved very carefully and faithfully since AD 100 or 200. The preservation of the Hebrew text is a phenomenon in itself and must fall under the heading of the providence of God.
- B. Copyist Error: In the transmission of the sacred text of the Old Testament, we find that the same types of scribal slip have crept into the copies of Bible books as appear in secular works. Evangelicals do acknowledge there are errors in transmission of the text but not in the original writings themselves. It would take nothing short of a miracle to make possible an infallible copy of an infallible original. God has not seen fit to perform such miracles as the scriptures have been handed down from copy to copy between the time of the original composition and the invention of the printing press. NOTE: Most of these errors in transmission can be eliminated by accurate lower criticism, and the copyist errors that remain in no way affect any doctrine of the Old Testament.
- C. Types of Copyist Error
1. Substitution of a word of similar sound for the one used in the original (e.g., “whole” for “hole” or “there” for “their.”).
 2. Writing the same letter twice (e.g., “and and”).
 3. Switch the order of letters (e.g., “seige” instead of “siege”).
 4. Writing of a letter, syllable or word only once, when it should have been written more than once (e.g., “caling” instead of “calling.”).
 5. Combining two separate words into one.
 6. Dividing up of a single word into two words.

7. NOTE: The types of error which could be listed in this connection are very numerous. They are usually detected by the context itself, and the intelligent reader can easily tell what the copyist really meant to write.

III. THE MASSORETIC TEXT

- A. Introduction: The present Hebrew Bibles that we now possess are from the Massoretic Text. This text dates back as far as AD 900 and is called the Massoratic Text because it was a product of the Jewish scribes known as the “Massorettes.” All the present copies of the Hebrew text which come from this period are in remarkable agreement, attesting to the skill of the scribes in proofreading.
- B. The Sopherim: The Sopherim represented an order of scribes which first had their rise under Ezra, the great scribe of them all. These scribes formed a recognized guild of Bible-text custodians in Jesus’ day. The Sopherim’s activity extended from 400 BC to AD 200 and their great achievement was to standardize a pure text of the Hebrew scriptures. NOTE: The Sopherim worked only with the consonantal text, they had nothing to do with the vowel points. Vowel points were not even invented until after AD 500. NOTE: Accuracy was essential to the Sopherim so they devised a system of counting all the verses, words and letters of each book of the Old Testament. appending these figures at the end of the book concerned. This would enable any checker to tell whether he had a perfect copy before him, for he had only to count the verses, words and letters, and if they did not number to the right total, he would know there was an error.
- C. The Massorettes: The Massorettes were Hebrew scholars who between AD 500 and 950 gave the final form to the text of the Old Testament. The massorettes received the unpainted, consonantal text of the Sopherim and inserted vowel points, which gave to each word its exact pronunciation and grammatical form. They even engaged in a limited amount of textual criticism. The Massoretic Text is the modern day Hebrew Bible.

IV. THE TRANSMISSION OF THE HEBREW TEXT IN PRE-MASSORETIC TIMES

- A. Manuscripts: While the Massoretic Text can show the accuracy of the Old Testament as far back as AD 900, what about the transmission of the text before this time? To determine the answer to this question, the pre-Massoretic Hebrew manuscripts and the early versions of the Old Testament must be studied.
 1. Dead Sea Scrolls: Up until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, there were practically no ancient Hebrew documents to make comparisons with the Massoretic Text. NOTE: The Dead Sea Scrolls as a whole have proven the amazing accuracy of the Massoretic Text.
 2. Samaritan Pentateuch: This version is in many ways a perversion, for it is very biased towards the Samaritans as being the true people of God rather than the Jews. This is only natural for Samaritanism was set up as a rival religion to Judaism. The Samaritan Pentateuch tries to show that Jehovah chose Gerizin rather than Zion, and Shechem rather than Jerusalem. The oldest existing manuscript is around AD 1000 and there are about 6000 variants with the Massoretic Text.
- B. Versions
 1. Greek: The most prominent Greek version of the Hebrew text is the Septuagint (LXX) and received this name because it was done by 70 Jewish scholars in Alexandria. The LXX was completed around 200 BC and was translated for Greek-speaking Jews who knew no Hebrew, NOTE: In places the LXX seems to be very accurate and in other places it is almost a paraphrase. The Greek scribes did not bind themselves to the same stringent rules of literal and meticulous accuracy, as did the Sopherim.
 2. Aramaic: During the Babylonian Exile the Jewish people began to forsake their ancestral Hebrew for the Aramaic tongue of the Persian people. While the Hebrew never stopped being spoken by the learned in Palestine, the common Jews became less and less certain of the Hebrew. Hebrew sayings and scripture were repeated in Aramaic during religious services for those who were not skilled in the Hebrew language. Around AD 200, these oral teachings in Aramaic were put into writing in what is called the Aramaic Targums. Much in these targums are paraphrases and are difficult to use for textual criticism.

3. Latin: There was the Itala Version which was a translation from the LXX and not the Hebrew. However, around AD 400 Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate from the original Hebrew. These versions are not too much help in textual criticism.
4. Other Versions: There is the Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Arabic and Armenian versions but these were translated from the LXX rather than the Hebrew. They are of little value in textual criticism.

C. The Dead Sea Scrolls

1. Background: Probably the greatest archeological discovery of the 20th century was the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947, a Bedouin goat herdsman made the accidental discovery of some scrolls in caves in the valley of the Dead Sea. This find of ancient Hebrew manuscripts was followed by careful exploration and several other caves containing scrolls have been located. These scrolls were stuffed in jars and the dry climate preserved them. NOTE: It was God who actually preserved these scrolls for us. Archeological discoveries are proving the validity of the Bible as a reliable historical and doctrinal source.

The scrolls were put in these caves by a group of Jews who lived at a place called Qumran from about 150 BC to AD 70. They had a communal society operated very much like a monastery. In addition to tilling the fields, they spent much time studying and copying the Old Testament. They were persuaded that the Roman armies were going to invade the land. To preserve the Old Testament for future generations, they put the leather scrolls in jars and hid them in the caves.

2. Manuscripts: The find included a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah and another almost complete copy of Isaiah 36-66. There are thousands of fragments from almost every book in the Old Testament. The books of Samuel and two complete chapters of Habakkuk were discovered. This is an historic find, for now we have manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that are almost 1000 years earlier than any previous Hebrew manuscripts. NOTE: By comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Massoretic Text, we would get a clear indication of the accuracy, or lack of it, of transmission over this one thousand years. Laird Harris says,

The text (of Isaiah 38-66) is extremely close to our Massoretic text. A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Massoretic text. Ten of these are mere differences of spelling, like our "honor" or "honour," and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of the conjunction, which is often a matter of style. The rather three letters are the Hebrew word for "light" which is added after "they shall see" in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the sense of the passage. This is typical of the whole manuscript. (*How Reliable is the Old Testament Text?*)

Gleason Archer also makes an interesting observation and says,

Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (AD 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. Even those Dead Sea fragments of Deuteronomy and Samuel which point to a different manuscript family from that which underlies our received Hebrew text do not indicate any differences in doctrine or teaching. They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest. (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*)

3. Quotes from Reputable Scholars: W.F. Albright, who is anything but an evangelical, said,

We may rest assured that the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, though not infallible, has been preserved with an accuracy perhaps unparalleled in any other Near Eastern literature.

Laird Harris, an evangelical, says,

We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 BC. At that time, there were two or three types of text available for copying. These types differed among themselves so little, however, that we can infer that still earlier copyists had also faithfully and carefully transmitted the Old Testament text. Indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the Law to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity.

V. CONCLUSIONS

- A. There are still many things we do not know about the transmission of the Old Testament but we can now see that it is reasonable to believe that our present manuscripts are very close to the originals. By faith, we accept some things that we do not yet understand. However, our faith is placed in the reliability of the Old Testament which is substantiated by solid facts.

The problem is not with the text but with man's willingness to believe what God has said in the inspired Old Testament.