**3 -- The Accurate Transmission of Biblical Manuscripts**

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[1] The Accurate Transmission of Biblical Manuscripts

[2] The Bible claims to be a revelation from the one and only true God, who speaks and acts in human history. It claims to be true, reliable, and enduring.

[3] It was written in three languages…

[4] …over a period of fifteen hundred years. / The Old Testament was completed about 400 BC, / and the New Testament was substantially complete by about 100 AD

[5] Since then, it has become the most translated and widely circulated book ever.

[6] But how do we know if a book written in different languages several thousand years ago, which has been translated and copied so many times is still accurate?

[7] To answer this question, scholars look at various kinds of evidence, / including the number of manuscripts still available today / and the time interval between the original manuscript and the existing copies.

[8] Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, critical scholars had a very low estimate of the Bible’s accuracy. / This was because the oldest complete Hebrew manuscript dated to about 900 AD. / This is referred to as the Masoretic Text, because it was preserved and transmitted by a group called the Masoretes. / Since the original Hebrew Old Testament was completed about 400 BC, / there was a time gap of about 1,300 years between the original manuscript and our earliest copy. / Some scholars wondered if a document that had been copied for thirteen hundred years could be trusted to be accurate.

[9] With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls / (which contained manuscripts or fragments of every Old Testament book except Esther), their ideas about the accuracy of biblical manuscripts began to change.

[10] One of the manuscripts discovered was the complete Hebrew text of Isaiah, / which dated to around 125 BC. / This manuscript was more than 1,000 years older than any previously possessed, reducing the gap between it and the original manuscript to less than 300 years!

[11] Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now have a number of Old Testament manuscripts dating to before the time of Christ.

[12] The presence of a text among the Dead Sea Scrolls / which is identical with the Masoretic Text written over 1000 years later / gives testimony to the unbelievable achievement of some scribes in faithfully preserving the text.

[13] Scholars have compared both of the Isaiah manuscripts and found an amazing exactness. The manuscripts proved to be word-for-word identical more than 95% of the time!

[14] Here is just one example: / Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only 17 letters in question: / Ten are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the meaning. / Four are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. / The remaining three letters make up the word “light” which was added in verse 11 but does not greatly affect the meaning.

[15] In this chapter of 166 words, there is only one word in question after a thousand years of transmission – and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage. / Furthermore, the word “light” is supported by the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament / as well as an Isaiah scroll found in the first cave of Qumran.

[16] The Dead Sea Scrolls have demonstrated that the Old Testament texts have been preserved accurately and passed down “virtually without change.”

[17] We can summarize the textual evidence from the Old Testament this way: Although there is not an overabundance of manuscripts, the ones we do have been shown to be extremely accurate. And the time interval between the original manuscript and the oldest existing copy is less than 300 years.

[18] When we look at the New Testament manuscripts, the results are even more dramatic.

[19] We will look first at the number of manuscripts that are still available today

[20] “There are more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts of part or all of the New Testament text; / some 2,000 ancient Greek lectionaries (which are New Testament readings arranged in order of liturgical usage); / about 8,000 Latin manuscripts; / more than 1,000 manuscripts in other ancient versions such as Syriac and Coptic; / and thousands of quotations—virtually the whole New Testament—in citations by the various early church fathers.”

[21] There are more manuscripts of the New Testament than of any other ancient document.

[22] The runner up doesn’t even come close. The ancient work with the second largest number of surviving manuscripts is Homer’s Iliad, which has only 643 copies that still survive.

[23] Even fewer copies of other important ancient historical works exist, and yet no one questions their accuracy.

[24] No other document of antiquity even begins to approach the number of New Testament manuscripts still available. / Now let’s look at the time intervals between the original New Testament manuscripts and the oldest copies that still survive.

[25] We will compare them to the works of an ancient historian named Thucydides (thoo SID did dees.), who wrote a firsthand account about the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece. / There is a thirteen hundred year gap between his original manuscripts and the oldest manuscript that still exists. / As we have previously mentioned, the New Testament was completed near the end of the first century AD. / Two excellent 4th century manuscripts still exist—making a time gap of just two to three hundred years between them and the original manuscript.

[26] Other fragments exist from one to two hundred years earlier still—from the first half of 3rd century

[27] A manuscript of John, missing only 22 verses, exists from about 200 AD.

[28] And the earliest known New Testament fragment was circulating in Egypt only about 40 years after it was written!

[29] This short time gap…

[30] …or even this one is still small when compared with other ancient writings

[31] …or the seven plays by Sophocles which we know from a manuscript written more than 1400 years after the poet’s death.

[32] Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce suggests that “No classical scholar would listen to an argument that these ancient works are in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.”

[33] He points out that “The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning.”

[34] We can summarize the textual evidence from the New Testament this way: / Manuscript evidence is far more abundant than for any other ancient Near Eastern literature, and the amount of variation among these documents is very small.

[35] The variant readings about which any doubt remains…affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.”

[36] “The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed.”

[37] “Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

[38] After examining the evidence, Sir Frederic Kenyon stated confidently: “The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries.”

[39] The three main sources for this presentation are…

[40] In our next presentation, we will look at The Historical Reliability of the Bible