

How the Bible Came to Us - #4
Writing and Copying Biblical Books by Hand

1. In our day of electronic information handling, it is difficult for us to remember that before A.D. 1454 when Gutenberg invented the printing press, all written material had to be copied or written by hand. Even the material to write on was a problem. There were different types of writing material. Probably all the Old Testament books were originally written on scrolls which were made of skins of animals. New Testament books were written on papyrus codices (singular, codex).
2. It is really not correct to speak of the Bible as a single book until the 4th century A.D. Although Christians and Jews had a general idea which books (“Old Testament” for both groups and “New Testament” for Christians) they considered authoritative, they were never put together into a single volume before the 4th century A.D. They were found as individual, handwritten copies or loose collections. For example, the writings of Paul might be put together. Thus, having a list of what was considered authoritative was very important.
3. We must remember that we do not have any original handwritten documents from any of the original authors of the books of the Bible. We only have copies of copies of copies.
4. In very ancient times in the Near East, writing was originally done by chiseling on stone. Almost always, it was done at the special request of the King or Pharaoh and was thus regarded as being rare and expensive, and it was only done with great authority.
5. The cuneiform documents of ancient Babylon and the hieroglyphs of Egypt were usually initially written to deliver public messages from the government.
6. Because it was so time-consuming and difficult, writing on stone was only done when something very important—such as royal inscriptions, contracts, or public letters—needed to be communicated.
7. Thus, the law of God as given to Moses, was written down on tables of stone. (Ex. 32:16)
8. Over the centuries in each of the ancient governments of the Near East, a special group of scribes grew up to record the important events of government and to make decrees from the government available to the public. Once again, remember, such writing was very rare and very expensive to produce.
9. Most communication was done orally and depended on the authority of the one speaking. But what was written down carried a special weight.
10. By writing something down it became more consistent and could be read again and again. Thus, words could be fixed as to content—giving consistency to tradition and resisting change—further establishing authority.
11. The development of various forms of writing materials made it gradually easier to use writing among ordinary people.
12. What were the major challenges of making copies of important documents? Parchment was made from the skins of animals. These skins had to be cleaned very carefully. In order to have a longer document, parchment had to be carefully stitched together. Very rare and expensive types of parchment were made from the skins of newborn or unborn animals and were called vellum.
13. Later, papyrus reeds had to be split, then laid down in a special pattern, and pressed together until dried. When treated in that way, one side was relatively smooth and could be written upon, while the other side was quite rough.

14. The “alphabet” and even the formation of letters and their distinctive appearances changed over time.
15. The Hebrew language was made more difficult to read or copy because there were no vowels. There was almost no punctuation. Many of the earlier Greek manuscripts were written in capital letters. It was a very slow process. The Greek language was often written with no spaces between words. That meant that scribes often had to decide the meaning of a long series of letters by already being familiar with what it was supposed to say.
16. Changes crept into the copies made by hand by Hebrew scribes in the following ways:
 - a. **Unintentional errors** included: a) substituting one letter for another that sounded or looked similar; b) repeating, or in some cases skipping, words because they looked the same in a sentence; c) writing a certain sequence of words that was familiar to the scribe from a different source instead of copying what was actually on the text in front of him; or d) occasionally including notes of previous scribes—notes which had been written in the margin—directly into the text.
 - b. **Intentional changes** came about because scribes sometimes believed that what was on the page in front of them was an error and needed to be corrected. Very occasionally, that happened because of their personal doctrinal convictions but in other cases because they remembered hearing it in a different way from another source.
17. Selected scholars within Judaism, known as Masoretes, sought to standardize the Hebrew text from very early on (probably in the 1st or 2nd century A.D.) by regulating the spelling of words and by providing special vowel markings and accents to the consonants to indicate the proper way to read them since vowels were not included in the original Hebrew manuscripts.
18. This process of careful copying of the Hebrew manuscripts became a very precise science between A.D. 500 and 700.
19. Finally, in A.D. 915, the Aleppo codex of Rabbi Aharon ben Asher became the official Masoretic text. Thus, most Hebrew manuscripts available to us today are known as *MT* or Masoretic Texts.
20. Because these Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts were so carefully copied and standardized, it was, and is, exciting for scholars to find ancient manuscripts with variations. The Dead Sea Scrolls were particularly exciting for that reason.
21. The copying of manuscripts was much more chaotic among the Christian community than it was in Judaism.
22. Among Christians, a variety of factors led to a more diverse manuscript tradition. Because the languages that Christians were dealing with were familiar to many people, many of them felt comfortable copying and translating the Christian documents for themselves. And the rapid spread of Christianity necessitated many copies being made.
23. Eventually, one more or less common type of Greek text, known as the *Byzantine* or *Koine* Greek, became accepted as the standard language for the New Testament.
24. When we find papyrus fragments of early New Testament manuscripts, they give us some hints into the complex process through which we have received our New Testament.

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