

# THE TRANSMISSION OF THE BIBLE

By Randolph Roper, Sr.

One often hears the remark that the Bible has been so corrupted by copyists down through the centuries that it can no longer be reliable. At first this seems to be obviously true to most people, so much so that the remark is rarely even challenged. This idea leads naturally to the conclusion that the Bible could not possibly be God's Word, for why would He give His Word to mankind without taking proper steps to preserve it? This is a logical conclusion, but it is faulty if the premise is erroneous. This discussion concerns the transmission of the Bible, not its inspiration, but if it were proven that the copy we have is an accurate one, it would be a considerable miracle to the minds of most people.

The Science of Textual Criticism is employed by scholars who spend their lives studying ancient manuscripts. Through this science, scholars decide if the copies we possess of classical, or any other ancient literature, are valid reproductions of original works. The method is a logical one—the reliability of a copy is directly proportional to: (1) the number of identical copies we possess (usually through different centuries); (2) the time interval between the earliest copy and the original. Thus, scholars will compare all the copies of a particular verse or paragraph, and if there are differences, they will have difficulty knowing what the original said. But if they substantially agree, they will be more certain that the copies are giving an accurate rendition of the author's own words. If some of the copies are translations in other languages, it provides greater attestation for determining the original, as does a shorter time interval from original to earliest existing copy (500 years being considered a short time interval).

Using these methods, scientists are certain that we possess accurate copies of Aristotle's original works from 350 B.C., even though we only have 49 copies, and the earliest one is 1,400 years after the original. The textual scholars also agree that we have accurate copies of Homer's *Iliad* from 900 B.C. (643 copies and a time interval of 500 years). Of Caesar, we have 10 copies with a time interval of 1,000 years (see chart for others). One must remember that prior to the invention of the printing press, books were copied by hand and carried throughout the ancient world. They were cherished as valuable commodities, and copyists treated them as such. Of course, Homer was copied and memorized more than most ancient works, and even treated religiously. His works were also translated into numerous foreign languages, and carried throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if scholars are studying a particular Homeric verse, and 100 manuscripts agree but one differs, the scholars are confident as to what the original verse actually said.

Now, you may be wondering, what do the textual critics say about the New Testament? It may surprise you to learn that the textual critics, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Atheist all agree that the reliability of the New Testament is certain.<sup>2</sup> No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. There are 24,000 copies of portions of the New Testament alone in existence today (time intervals of only 150 to 200 years for many). In comparison, the *Iliad* is second with 643 copies. Moreover, the Bible, both Old and New Testament, was translated into more foreign languages than any other ancient work, giving scholars such a wealth of textual comparison that no other work of ancient literature even comes close.<sup>3</sup>

The early church Fathers of the second and third centuries (some were disciples of the Apostles)

provide further attestation.<sup>4</sup> So extensive are the quotations from such writers as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, etc., that most of the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from their quotes (see chart of early Patristic writings).<sup>5</sup> For example, Origen has 9,231 quotes from the Gospels alone.

But even if some continue to believe, against the evidence, that the Gospels have been corrupted, they are usually very surprised to learn that Paul's letters to the first century churches comprise approximately 30% (29.4%) of the New Testament, and in these letters Paul confirms all that Christ said about Himself in the Gospels, including His divinity—that He was the Son of God; that He lived a perfect life without sin; that He died on the cross for our sins; that He rose from the dead on the third day; that all who receive Him as Savior receive a free pardon for sins, etc. These letters were copied and circulated throughout the Roman world by the numerous Christian churches, and textual critics attest to the accurateness of the copies. Therefore, even if we did not have the Gospels, a person could become a believer simply by reading Paul's letters.

In addition to Paul's letters, the majority of the Book of Acts about the acts of the Apostles is about Paul and his four missionary journeys (20 out of 28 chapters). Luke, who traveled with Paul and very carefully chronicled his activities, speeches, debates with Jewish and Gentile adversaries, defense of the Faith, imprisonments, trials, etc., is characterized by scholars as a highly educated and articulate writer due to his usage of the Greek language. Again, it will probably surprise most skeptics, that one could easily become a Christian simply by reading Paul's defense of Jesus being the Messiah in the Book of Acts. If we total Paul's writings (his letters) with Luke's history of his apologetics (defense of the Christian faith)—nearly 40% of the New Testament—it is readily apparent that one need not have the Gospels to become a believer in Christ. In fact, many thousands of Jews and Gentiles converted to Christianity before the first Gospel was written—at least a decade after Jesus' death and Resurrection.

The reliability of the Old Testament was greatly enhanced with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (found at Qumran in 1947), some of which date before the time of Christ. The scroll of Isaiah, which was legible throughout, caused tremendous excitement among textual critics the world over, when it agreed almost identically with the book of Isaiah in our present-day Bibles. In fact, it agreed with 95% word for word, and 5% variation consisted mainly in spelling.<sup>6</sup> In addition, although portions of the other 37 Old Testament scrolls are illegible due to corruption by the elements over time, the portions which are legible agree exactly with the corresponding portions in our Bible. The Qumran biblical documents cover the whole Hebrew Bible, except the book of Esther, and are 1000 years older than ancient manuscripts previously existing. Experts are now in a position to prove that the Hebrew Bible has remained unchanged for the last 2,000 years!<sup>7</sup>

The Jews considered themselves chosen by God to preserve the sacred scriptures. So carefully were copies duplicated that each copy carried the same authority as the original. If the scribe made a mistake in one letter, the entire scroll was transcribed again. The Jews had special classes of men (scribes, lawyers, massorettes) whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit the Word of God. They kept tabs on every letter, syllable, word, and paragraph. They even knew the middle letter of each book. Whoever counted the letters and syllables and words of Plato or Aristotle? Cicero or Seneca?<sup>8</sup> Flavius Josephus, the great first century secular historian renowned for his historical objectivity, writes that it is an instinct with every Jew from the day of his birth to regard scripture as the decree of God. Time and again, according to Josephus, prisoners were witnessed enduring torture and even death rather than utter a word against the scriptures. What Greek would endure as much in defense of the Greek classics? "...They are

mere stories improvised according to the fancy of their authors.”<sup>9</sup>

Further proof of the trustworthiness of the Old Testament, aside from the Dead Sea Scrolls, is the close agreement between the Hebrew Massoretic text and the Septuagint, the Greek version sponsored by Ptolemy II of Egypt in approximately 250 B.C. for his great library at Alexandria, one of the world’s cultural wonders for 650 years. The close agreement between the Greek Septuagint (completed 132 B.C.) and the Hebrew Massoretic text of 960 A.D., helps establish the reliability of its transmission through 1200 years!<sup>10</sup>

## THE TALMUDISTS

The Talmudists (Jewish scholars who wrote commentaries on the scriptures) had to employ strict discipline and observe minute regulations in regard to copying Old Testament scriptures. The ink was black and prepared according to a definite recipe. The codex (ancient manuscript) consisted of rolls of clean animal skins containing a certain number of equal columns and lined throughout. No word or letter was transcribed from memory as there could not be even the slightest deviation. Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread intervened, and between every section, the breadth of nine consonants intervened. There were many other such rules that had to be strictly observed—e.g., the fifth book of Moses had to terminate precisely at the end of a line, etc. The copyist sat in full Jewish dress after washing his whole body, and could not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink. Moreover, should a king address him while writing that name, the scribe could take no notice of him.<sup>12</sup>

## NEW TESTAMENT COMPARED TO OTHER ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS

Author	# Copies	When Written	Earliest Copy	Span (yrs.)
Caesar	10	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,000
Plato	7	427- 347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,200
Tacitus	20	100 A.D.	1,000 A.D.	1,000
Pliny	7	61-113 A.D.	850 A.D.	750
Thucydides	8	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300
Suetonius	8	75-160 A.D.	950 A.D.	800
Herodotus	8	480-425 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300
Sophocles	193	496-406 B.C.	1,000 A.D.	1,400
Euripides	9	480-406 B.C.	1,100 A.D.	1,500
Demosthenes	200	383-322 B.C.	1,100 A.D.	1,300
Aristotle	49	384-322 B.C.	1,100 A.D.	1,400
Aristophanes	10	450-385 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,200
Homer	643	960 B.C.	400 B.C.	500
New Testament	24,000 plus <sup>11</sup>	40-100 A.D.	200 A.D.*	150

\* First complete copies of New Testament books (most of the originals written before 65 A.D.). Since 1900, numerous large fragments of the New Testament have been discovered dating from 125 to 250 A.D.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_manuscript](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript).

## EARLY PATRISTIC QUOTATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Writer	Gospel	Acts	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Revelation	Total
Justin Martyr	268	10	43	6	3	330
Irenaeus	1,038	194	499	23	65	1,819
Clement	1,017	44	1,127	207	11	2,406
Origen	9,231	349	7,778	399	165	17,922
Tertullian	3,822	502	2,609	120	205	7,258
Hippolytus	734	42	387	27	188	1,378
Eusebius	3,258	211	1,592	88	27	5,176
TOTALS						
	19,368	1,352	14,035	870	664	36,289 <sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

Much information, including charts, came from *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, by Josh McDowell, supplemented by online research. I have included McDowell's source material below (referenced in the text by footnotes) for the reader who wishes to explore this subject further.

- 1 Bruce Metzger, *Chapters in the History of New Testament Textual Criticism*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1963, p.144.
- 2 Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, Harper & Brothers: New York, 1941, p.23.
- 3 F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, Flemming H. Revell Company: Grand Rapids, p.178.
- 4 Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.3, 1970, p.579
- 5 Charles Leach, *Our Bible, How We Got It*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1898, pp.35-36
- 6 Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1968, p.263.
- 7 G. Vernes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Great Britain, 1962, Introduction.
- 8 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1957, pp. 230-231.
- 9 Flavius Josephus, *Flavius Josephus Against Apion*, ("Josephus, Complete Works," translated by William Whiston), Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 1960, p.81.
10. Henry Morris, *The Bible and Modern Science*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1956, pp.146-147.
11. Samuel Davidson, *Hebrew Text of the Old Testament*, Samuel Bagster & Sons: London, 1859.
- 12 Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Here's Life Publishers: San Bernardino, 1979, pp. 40, 42, 52, 53. Charts as well as bibliography used for source material.