Manuscript Transmission, Preparation, and Preservation
(Lesson 7)

I. It is important, in determining the reliability of the Biblical text, to consider how it has been preserved through the ages.

II. A corrupt text is an unreliable text and an unreliable text is an unbelievable text.

III. In studying the transmission, preparation and preservation of the Biblical text we can have great confidence in it being the revelation of God’s will to man.

1. The Process of Transmission
   A. Genuineness and Authenticity Distinguished
      1. To begin, there is some confusion about the meaning of these terms, as their usage is somewhat interchangeable in theological circles.

      2. Genuineness. As used here, genuineness refers to the truth of the origin of a document, that is, its authorship. It answers the question, Is this document really from its alleged source or author? Is it genuinely the work of the stated writer? Genuineness deals with such things as the authorship, date, and destiny of the biblical books.

      3. Authenticity. This refers to the truth of the facts and content of the documents of the Bible. Authenticity deals with the integrity (trustworthiness) and credibility (truthfulness) of the record.

      4. A book may be genuine without being authentic, if the professed writer is the real one, even if the content is untrue. Then, again, a book may be authentic without being genuine, if the content is true but the professed writer is not the actual one. In such a case, the book would be called forged or spurious, regardless of the truthfulness or falsity of its content.

      5. Biblical books of course must be both genuine and authentic or they cannot be inspired, because in either case there would be a falsehood.

      6. It is assumed that a biblical book, which has divine authority, and hence credibility, and has been transmitted with integrity, will automatically have genuineness. If there be a lie in the book regarding its origin and / or authorship, how can its content be believed? This is why studying the transmission of the text is so important. It helps us establish both its credibility and authority.

1 Following notes from: A General Introduction to The Bible, Norman L. Geisler, William E. Nix, Moody Press, 1986
B. Guarantee of Authenticity (and Genuineness)

1. The whole chain of revelation must be examined in order to demonstrate with certainty that the fact and route of revelation are found in the history of the Bible known to Christians today.

2. A complete chain “from God to us” will consist of the following necessary “links.”
   a. Deity. This is the first link in the chain of revelation. The existence of a God who desires to communicate Himself to man is the one irreducible axiom of this entire study. If not already established, evidence that there is such a God is assumed for this discussion.
   
   b. Apostolicity. The fact that God accredited and directed a group of men known as prophets and apostles to speak authoritatively for Him is to be the repeated claim of the biblical writers. We would not consider the Bibles author to be God if the claim is never made.)

   c. Canonicity. A somewhat parenthetic but necessary link is canonicity. It answers the historical question, Which are the inspired prophetic and apostolic books and how are they known? They are those books that were written by men of God, confirmed by acts of God, that came with the authority and power of God, that told the truth about God, man, and so on, and that were accepted and collected by the people of God.

   d. Authority. The direct result of Apostolicity is authority, as circumscribed by the limits of canonicity. The teaching of men who were divinely accredited for that purpose is divinely authoritative teaching. In that sense, authority is just a logical link, consequent upon Apostolicity as Apostolicity is, in turn, dependent upon deity, or, rather, upon God’s desire to communicate to men.

   e. Authenticity. Likewise, authenticity is the necessary result of authority, which is derived from Apostolicity, deity, and so on. Whatever is spoken of God must be true, because God is the very standard of truth itself (cf. Heb. 6:18). The Scriptures are authentic (true in content) if they are the prophetic voice of God.

   f. Integrity. This is the historic evidence that links authenticity and credibility. Anything authentic or true is of course credible. The question is, Does the twentieth-century Bible possess integrity?
To put it another way, Does it adequately and accurately reproduce the original apostolic writings known as the autographs?

1. **Autographs.** The authentic apostolic writings produced under the direction and/or authorization of a prophet or apostle are the autographs.
   a. An autograph would not necessarily have to be written by an apostle’s own hand. (cf. Rom. 16:22, Jer. 36:27).
   b. The autograph does not necessarily have to be the “first edition” of a book. (Jer. 36:28)

2. **Ancient Versions.** The autographs are not extant. So they must be reconstructed from early manuscripts and versions. The earliest Old Testament translation into Greek is the Septuagint (LXX) begun in Alexandria, Egypt, during the third century B.C. The earliest versions, or translations of the New Testament into other languages, for example, the Syriac and Latin, extend back to the threshold of the second century. They began to appear just over a generation from the time the New Testament was completed.

3. **Citations of the Fathers.** The corroborative quotations of the church fathers from the first few centuries, totaling over 36,000, include almost every verse in the New Testament. Some of these citations begin in the first century, and they continue in an unbroken succession from that time.

4. **Manuscript copies.** These were in Greek and extended practically to the first century in fragmentary form and to the third and fourth century in completed copies. The earliest manuscripts, known as uncialis, were written in capital letters throughout. Later manuscripts, known as minuscules, were written in lower case letters or on flowing letters, cursive. Some manuscripts were written on scrolls and others as books, codex form, from which they are known as codices.

5. **Modern Versions.** The ancient manuscripts are the most important witnesses to the autographs and, by the method of textual criticism, they form the basis for the modern versions of the Bible. Some early modern versions were based on medieval versions; however, since the discoveries of the great manuscripts of the New Testament and other miscellaneous items, most recent versions and translations are based on the latter. These discoveries form the basis of the critical Greek text rather than the so-called
Received Text used as the authority of the earlier modern versions. In the minds of most modern textual scholars, that so-called “critical” text represents an objective attempt to reconstruct the autographs. It is a scientific approach to the question of integrity, and it concludes that the present Greek text is probably over 99 percent accurate in reproducing the exact words of the autographs.

g. Credibility. The right to be believed - credibility - is based on the authenticity of the text. This, in turn, is founded upon divine authority, which is guaranteed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the integrity of the text.

1. Objective Credibility. This is based on (1) the integrity of the text via the science of textual criticism, which yields a Bible that is probably over 99 percent trustworthy, or credible. (2) There is the objective evidence supplied by apologetics, which likewise confirms the Bible to be the Word of God, prima facie evidence, transforming ability, unity, historicity, sciences, prophecy, influence, indestructibility, and recorded miracles (3) The providence of God as the witness of the Holy Spirit provide assurance to the believer that the chain is unbroken. They are “welds” for what may seem to be “cracks” in the chain for critics who stress the weakness of the link of integrity that is “probably” some “99 percent” sure, and not actually a full “100 percent” certain.

2. Subjective assurance. Before discussing the subjective assurance that welds together any potential cracks in the chain of the Bible’s transmission, it should be emphasized that a 99 percent probability is as good as can be obtained by the historical method. Similar textual methods applied to other ancient documents yield a much lower percent of certitude. (1) In fact, human beings do not require any more assurance for credibility. The game of life is played, and must be, quite often on much lower odds. (2) The providence of God, a characteristic that is consonant with a self-revealing God, is the force that welds together the entire chain of communication. (3) Finally, there is, transcending the entire chain, the verification of the children of God by the Spirit of God that the Bible is the Word of God. The Spirit of God speaks through the Word of God, and the Word of God has been transmitted by a historical process superintended by the providence of God. That truth is based upon the best objective evidence and provides the best subjective certitude.
2. The Preparation, Age, and Preservation of Manuscript Copies

Another factor that enhances confidence in the fidelity of the transmitted text is derived from a consideration of the copying and subsequent care of manuscripts.

A. The Preparation of Manuscripts:

1. The Old Testament. Although it is impossible to fix with certainty the beginning of Hebrew writing, it was pre-Mosaic. Thus, from an early date the Scriptures were copied. These copies were made according to different criteria, depending on the purpose of the manuscript being copied. There are no manuscripts in existence dating before the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.), but there was a great flood of copies of the Scriptures dating from the Talmudic period (c. 300 B.C. - A.D. 500). During that period there were two general classes of manuscript copies.

   a. The synagogue rolls were regarded as “sacred copies” of the Old Testament text and were used in public meeting places. Separate rolls contained the Torah (Law) on one roll, portions of the Nevi’im (Prophets) on another, the Kethuvim (Writings) on two others, and Megilloth (“five rolls”) on five separate rolls. The Megilloth were no doubt produced on separate rolls to facilitate their being read at the annual feasts. Strict rules were employed so these rolls would be copied scrupulously. Samuel Davidson related these rules rather meticulously when he wrote,

[1] A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, [2] prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. [3] These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. [4] Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. [5] The length of each column must not extend over less than 48 nor more than 60 lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. [6] The whole copy must be first-lined; and if three words should be written without a line, it is worthless. [7] The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any other color, and be prepared according to a definite recipe. [8] An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate. [9] No word or letter, not even a yod, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him.... [10] Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread must intervene; [11] between every new parashah, or section, the breadth of nine consonants; [12] between every book, three lines. [13] The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line; but the rest need not do so. [14] Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, [15] wash his whole body, [16] not begin to write the name of God with
a pen newly dipped in ink, [17] and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.²

b. The private copies were regarded as “common copies” of the Old Testament text and were not used in public meetings. These rolls, although not governed by such strict rules as the synagogue rolls, were prepared with great care. They were frequently ornamented, often took a codex form, sometimes included marginal notes and commentaries. Because they were private copies, the desires of the purchaser were paramount in choosing such things as size, material, form, and ink color. Seldom did an individual have a collection of scrolls that contained the entire Old Testament.

2. The New Testament. Although the autographs of the New Testament have long since disappeared, there is enough evidence to warrant the statement that those documents were written in rolls and books made of papyrus. The Old testament had been copied into the “books and the parchments,” but the New Testament was probably written on Papyrus³ between about A.D. 50 and 100. During this period, papyrus rolls were used, and papyrus survived long periods of time only when placed in rather unusual circumstances. By the early second century, codices were introduced but they were still generally made of papyrus. As a by-product of the persecutions, culminating with the Edict of Diocletian in 302/3, the Scriptures were jeopardized and not systematically copied. It was with the Letter of Constantine to Eusebius that systematic copying of the New Testament began in the West. From that time, vellum and parchment were used along with papyrus. It was not until the reformation era that printed copies of the Bible became available.

B. The Age of Manuscripts: Because there was no printing process available at the time of the manuscript copying of the Scriptures, the age of manuscripts must be determined by other means than a publisher’s date. The process of dating is not nearly so accurate as finding the publication date printed on the title page of a modern book, but it is relatively accurate.

1. Materials: The materials of a given manuscript copy may provide the basis for discovering its date. We will be discussing only those materials that could be utilized in making rolls and/or books.

a. Skins were possibly the earliest materials used, and they were at first of coarse texture and made rather heavy, bulky rolls. These materials were used early in Hebrew history and led to refinements in the postcaptivity period.

³ F.F. Bruce, The Books and the Parchments, rev. ed., pp.176-77
b. _Papyrus rolls_ were used in the New Testament period, largely because of their inexpensive character when compared with vellum and parchment.

c. _Papyrus codices_ were introduced when attempts at collecting the individual rolls revealed that there was a need to make them less cumbersome to handle. Formerly each book or group of books was written on a single roll, but this multiplicity of rolls was replaced by codices in the early second century.

d. _Vellum_ was prepared from animal skins, chiefly from lambs and young goats, and was rather costly. It was used for more expensive copies of manuscripts.

e. _Parchment_ was used as early as the days of the New Testament composition (cf. 2Tim. 4:13). Because there are various qualities of parchment and vellum writing material made from animal skins, they were often used during the same period of time. Codices of the two materials did not appear generally until after the Edict of Diocletian and were the primary materials used in manuscript copying in the Middle Ages.

f. _Redressed parchment_ was used for copying manuscripts after the original writing had become faded. Sometimes parchments were “erased” and “rewritten,” as in the base of the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C), also known as a *palimpsest* (Greek, “rubbed again”) *rescriptus* (Latin, “rewritten”). Needless to say, these manuscripts would be of a later date than the earlier text on the parchment.

g. _Paper_ was invented in China in the second century A.D.; it was introduced into Eastern Turkestan as early as the fourth century, manufactured in Arabia in the eighth century, introduced into Europe in the tenth century, manufactured in Europe in the twelfth century, and became common by the thirteenth century. There were, of course, developments in the manufacture of paper, for example, with hemp, flax, linen, and rag content. Thus, the materials used in the manufacture of writing material on which manuscripts were copied assist in determining their age.

2. _Letter size and form._ Evidence is also provided by letter size and form for the date of a given manuscript. The earliest form of Hebrew writing was in the prong-like letters of the old Phoenician alphabet. This style prevailed until the return from the Babylonian captivity in Nehemiah’s time (c. 444 B.C.).

4 Bruce, p.22; also see Merrill F. Unger, _Introductory Guide to the Old Testament_, pp. 123-25.
after Nehemiah the Jews apparently adopted the Aramaic script, as it became the vernacular language during the fifth century B.C. At that time, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Aramaic; then, after about 200 B.C., it was copied in the square letters of Aramaic script. The square characters of extant manuscripts are not identical to those of that early period, but they are direct descendants. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran in 1947 brought even more precision to the study of Hebrew paleography, as it has brought a large quantity of early biblical and nonbiblical manuscripts to light. These manuscripts have provided the first examples of Hebrew texts from pre-Christian times, a thousand years earlier than the oldest Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts previously available. The Qumran manuscripts reveal three main types of text and indicate differences in matters of spelling, grammatical forms and, to some extent, wording from the Masoretic text. By the time of the Masoretes (c. A.D. 500-1000), the principles of the late Talmudic period (c. A.D. 300-500) became rather stereotyped.

Greek manuscripts were written in two general styles during the New Testament period: literary and nonliterary. The New Testament was probably written in nonliterary style. In fact, for the first three centuries, the New Testament was undoubtedly circulated outside the channels of ordinary book trade. Whereas the literary hand was well-rounded, graceful, and handsome, the nonliterary was smaller, square lettered, sprinkled with variants, and exhibited a general lack of literary exactness.

3. **Punctuation.** Further light is added to the age of a given manuscript by its punctuation. At first, words were run together, and very little punctuation was used. “During the sixth and seventh centuries, scribes began to use punctuation marks more liberally.” The actual process of change proceeded from spaceless writings, to spaced writing, addition of end punctuation (periods), commas, colons, breath and accent marks (seventh-eighth centuries), interrogation marks, and so on. It was a long slow process that was rather complete by the tenth century, in time for the miniscules and the golden age of manuscript copying.

4. **Text divisions.** It was not until the thirteenth century that modern chapter divisions appeared, and not until the sixteenth century that modern verses were introduced. But this development occurred prior to the mass distribution of the printed Bible, and it augmented the influence of the Rheims-Douay and King James Version of the English Bible.

5. **Miscellaneous factors.** Also involved in the dating of a given manuscript were such miscellaneous factors as the size and shape of letters within the [uncial miniscule groupings of manuscripts].

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Hastings, 4:949
Ornamentation is another factor in dating of manuscripts; from the fourth to the late ninth centuries the ornamentation of manuscripts became more elaborate in the uncial manuscripts. After that time, they became less ornate and less carefully copied. These factors helped to increase the popularity of the miniscules, which went through a similar development. Spelling was modified during the centuries, just as it is in living languages, and that helps date manuscripts. The color of the ink used is another important factor. At first only black ink was used, but green, red, and other colors were added later. Finally, the texture and color of parchment help date a manuscript. The means of parchment production changed, quality and texture were modified, and the aging process added another cause for color change in the material.

C. The Preservation of Manuscripts: Although manuscripts give information as to their date, and their quality is governed by their preparation, the preservation of given manuscripts adds vital support to their relative value for the textual critic and student of the Bible. That may be illustrated by a cursory treatment of manuscript preservation in general.6

1. The Old Testament: These manuscripts generally fall into two general periods of evidence.

   A. Talmudic period (c. 300 B.C. - A.D. 500) produced a great flood of manuscripts that were used in the synagogues and for private study. In comparison to the later Masoretic period, for the Temple and synagogues there were very few, but they were careful “official” copies. By the time of the Maccabean revolt (168 B.C.), the Syrians had destroyed most of the existing manuscripts of the Old Testament. The Dead Sea Scrolls (c 167 B.C. - A.D. 133) have made an immense contribution to Old Testament critical study. There were many manuscript copies, confirming for the most part the textual tradition of the Masoretes.

   B. The Masoretic period (flourished c. A.D. 500-1000) of the old Testament manuscript copying indicates a complete review of established rules, a deep reverence for the Scriptures, and a systematic renovation of transmission techniques.


   A. The first three centuries witnessed a composite testimony as to the integrity of the New Testament Scriptures. Because of the illegal position of Christianity, it cannot be expected that many, if any, complete manuscripts from that period are to be found. Therefore, textual critics must be content to examine whatever evidence has survived,

that is, nonbiblical papyri, biblical papyri, ostraca, inscriptions, and lectionaries that bear witness to the manuscripts of the New Testament.

B. **The fourth and fifth centuries** brought a legalization of Christianity and a multiplication of manuscripts of the New Testament. These manuscripts, on vellum and parchment generally, were copies of earlier papyri and bear witness to this dependence.

C. **From the sixth century onward**, monks collected, copied, and cared for New Testament manuscripts in the monasteries. This was a period of rather uncritical production, and it brought about an increase in manuscript quantity, but with a corresponding decrease in quality.

D. **After the tenth century**, uncial gave way to miniscules, and copies of manuscripts multiplied rapidly.

3. *The Classical Writings of Greece and Rome:* These writings illustrate the character of biblical manuscript preservation in a candid fashion. In contrast to the total of 5,366 partial and complete New Testament manuscripts known today, the *Iliad* of Homer has only 643, *The Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides only eight, while Tacitus’s works rely on but two manuscripts. The abundance of biblical evidence would lead one to conclude with Sir Frederic Kenyon that “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 for generation to generation throughout the centuries.” Or as he goes on to say,

> The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or another of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world.

*Conclusion:* Between the autograph and the modern Bible extends an important link in the overall chain “from God to us” known as transmission. It provides a positive answer to the question: Do Bible scholars today possess an accurate copy of the autographs? Obviously, the authenticity and authority of the Bible cannot be established unless it be known that the present copies have integrity. In support of the integrity of the text, an overwhelming number of ancient documents may be presented. For the New Testament, beginning with the second century ancient versions and manuscript fragments and continuing with abundant quotations of the Fathers and thousands of manuscript copies from the time of the modern versions of the Bible, there is virtually an unbroken line of testimony.
Furthermore, there are not only countless manuscripts to support the integrity of the Bible (including the Old Testament since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls), but a study of the procedures of preparation and preservation of the biblical manuscript copies reveals the fidelity of the transmission process itself. In fact, it may be concluded that no major document from antiquity comes into the modern world with such evidence of its integrity as does the Bible.