

Historical Bible Texts

The text of the Bible is the best attested of any ancient writings, so we can be confident we have the original words of Scripture. While other ancient works are known in a single manuscript; a few manuscripts; or rarely, a few hundred, ancient copies of the Bible number in the tens of thousands. Although no original documents survive, the great volume of manuscripts confirms the accuracy of the text. About 5,700 Greek New Testament manuscripts (as early as the second century A.D.) exist. Thousands of the Hebrew Old Testament (as early as the second or third century B.C.) exist, some copied within two hundred years of the final editing. Manuscripts of other ancient works are separated from their originals by much longer periods of time.

Old Testament Texts

No document before the printing press was more carefully copied than the Old Testament. Manuscripts were written on various materials. Papyrus, made from a reed abundant in Egypt, was used from the earliest times. Parchment was made of sheep, goat, and other animal hides. Paper, a Chinese invention (A.D. 105), began to be used in Egypt around A.D. 700 and in Europe around A.D. 1000. Old Testament manuscripts were in scrolls until A.D. 600; the codex, a book form, became popular thereafter.

Masoretic. The most important witness to the Old Testament text is called the Masoretic text. Scribes, called Masoretes, were active A.D. 500–1000. They were not innovators but careful preservers of the consonantal text, vowels, and accents of the Hebrew text. The most famous family was the ben Asher, especially Moses and his son Aaron, the most important Masorete.

Leningrad Codex. Dated A.D. 1008, the Leningrad Codex was a direct copy of the text of Aaron ben Asher and is the basis of the current Hebrew Bible and most modern Old Testament translations.

Aleppo Codex. The Aleppo Codex (A.D. 925) is perhaps the best Old Testament manuscript, but it is missing most of the Pentateuch because of a fire during the late 1940s. Solomon ben Buya copied the text (consonants), and Aaron ben Asher supplied the vowels. This codex is the basis of a new critical Hebrew Old Testament being produced by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Codex Cairensis. Codex Cairensis (A.D. 896), copied by Moses ben Asher, contains the Former and Latter Prophets. Taken from the Karaite Jews of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, it was later returned to the Karaites in Cairo, Egypt.

Dead Sea Scrolls. Discovered 1947–61 in caves near the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea Scrolls (c. 250 B.C.–A.D. 70) are about 40,000 fragments from six hundred to one thousand scrolls (two hundred are Old Testament). They predate the next oldest extant manuscripts by eight hundred

to one thousand years. Most are close to the Masoretic text, but some follow the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) or Samaritan Pentateuch. The Dead Sea Scrolls testify to the careful transmission of the Old Testament text and the reliability of the Masoretic text.

Samaritan Pentateuch. The Samaritan Pentateuch originated about the fifth century B.C. and was transmitted independently of the Masoretic text, differing in about six thousand places. It provides some added details, harmonizations, and sectarian theology. The oldest extant manuscripts date to the 11th century.

New Testament Texts

The more than six thousand manuscripts of all or part of the Greek New Testament are written on papyrus, parchment, and paper. The categories of manuscripts are the papyri, the uncials (script similar to capital letters), the minuscules (lowercase, cursive script), and the lectionaries (cursive texts designed for readings in worship). The text was transmitted in several types. Most scholars believe the Alexandrian is oldest and closest to the original, followed by the Western; Caesarean; and the latest form, the Byzantine or Koine.

Papyri. Only 4 papyri of 115 are from scrolls; the rest are from the codexes. None cover the entire New Testament. The papyri preserve a very early and accurate text, many dating to the second and third centuries. Some important papyrus manuscripts include the following.

- P52. The oldest fragment of the Greek New Testament (A.D. 110–125), P52 contains John 18:31–33, 37–38. Because John wrote his Gospel A.D. 90–95, P52 may reflect the original text of John.
- P45, P46, P47: the Chester Beatty Papyri (acquired 1930–31). Having 30 leaves (early third century), P45 contains sections of the Gospels and Acts. P46, c. A.D. 200, with 86 leaves, has the Paulines and Hebrews (placed after Romans). P47, (mid-third century) has 10 leaves, Revelation 9:10–17:2.
- P66, P72, P74, P75: the M. Martin Bodmer Papyri, published 1956–62. P66, c. A.D. 200, contains most of John. P72, c. A.D. 250, contains 1–2 Peter and Jude. P74, c. A.D. 750, contains portions of Acts, James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. Dating around A.D. 200, P75 contains extensive portions of John 1–15 and Luke 3–24. This is the earliest copy of Luke and one of the earliest of John.

Uncials. Only about a fifth of the 309 uncials have extensive sections of the New Testament. The uncials are second in importance only to the papyri. Important uncials include the following.

- Sinaiticus (a, 01). Discovered in 1859 at Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai by Constantin von Tischendorf, Sinaiticus (fourth century) is the only uncial containing the entire Greek New Testament. The text is early Alexandrian and in some places Western.
- Vaticanus (B, 03). Vaticanus (fourth century) contains most of the New Testament, except 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews 9:14–13:25, and Revelation. It is one of the most important witnesses to the New Testament text, reflecting a text very close to P75.

- Alexandrinus (A, 02). Alexandrinus (fifth century) contains most of the New Testament, except Matthew 1–24, portions of John 6–8, and 2 Corinthians 4–12. Alexandrinus is an important Alexandrian witness outside the Gospels, is Byzantine in the Gospels, and is one of the best texts of Revelation.

Minuscules. Written with lowercase letters in cursive script (9th–17th centuries), minuscules reflect the Byzantine text but preserve some early readings. Over 2,800 minuscules have been cataloged.

- Family 1. Consisting of four 12th- to 14th-century manuscripts (1, 118, 131, 209), family 1 represents a Caesarean text of the third or fourth centuries.
- Family 13. Composed of about 12 11th- to 15th-century manuscripts, family 13 has affinities with the Caesarean text type.
- Manuscript 33. Manuscript 33 (ninth century) contains the entire New Testament except Revelation. Generally Alexandrian, it shows the influence of the Byzantine in Acts and the Pauline Letters.
- Manuscript 81. Manuscript 81 (A.D. 1044) contains Acts and the Epistles; in Acts it often agrees with the Alexandrian text.
- Manuscript 1,739. Manuscript 1,739 (10th century), containing Acts and the Epistles, apparently followed a fourth-century manuscript, except in Acts, which the scribe attributed to Origen (c. 250 B.C.). Manuscript 1,739 preserves a relatively pure Alexandrian text.

Lectionaries. The lectionaries are minuscule manuscripts that arrange the text of the New Testament into readings for each Sunday of the liturgical year. More than 2,400 lectionaries have been cataloged. Though most are late, scholars are finding that lectionaries may preserve a form of the text from much earlier than the date the manuscript was copied.

Old and New Testament Versions

Because of their antiquity some ancient versions (translations) are important for establishing the original text of the Bible. Important versions include the following.

Septuagint (LXX). The first translation, from Hebrew to Greek (c. 280–100 B.C.), the LXX is the most important non-Hebrew witness to the Old Testament. Some books, such as Genesis and Psalms, are literal translations; others, such as, Isaiah are freer. The Septuagint generally represents the Masoretic text, but there are differences, at times significant (in Jeremiah and Ezekiel). Some books preserve a more accurate text than the Masoretic, especially Samuel and Kings.

Targums. Targums, Aramaic renderings of the Old Testament, according to tradition began with Ezra (see Neh. 8:8), and portions of Job and Leviticus are among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Targums are important for providing traditional synagogue interpretation, as well as witnessing to the Hebrew text.

Peshitta. Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) translation of the Old Testament and New Testament (fifth or sixth centuries A.D.), the Peshitta generally follows the Masoretic text in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the Peshitta follows various text types. The New Testament contains only 22 books, excluding 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

Vulgate. The Latin Vulgate (A.D. 383–405) was the work of Jerome, the premier linguist in the church of his era. It was the Bible of the Western church for more than one thousand years. Jerome translated the Masoretic Old Testament text into Latin, and more than eight thousand Latin manuscripts exist. He used Latin and several Greek manuscripts. His Greek manuscripts seem to have been a mixture of text types.

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