

Old Testament Manuscripts

There exist over 25,000 New Testament manuscripts. We have a better, more reliable Greek text for the NT than we have for Shakespeare's 37 plays written in the 17th century **after** the advent of printing. In every one of Shakespeare's plays, there are textual gaps which have been filled in by guesswork. No such difficulty exists with the New Testament. However, comparatively speaking, we do not have near the arsenal of manuscripts for the Old Testament that we do for the New. Geisler and Nix give several reasons for this dearth of manuscripts:

- Jewish manuscripts were made on animal skins, which would not last near as long as literature written on clay tablets, which accounts for the existence of the Mari Letters, which date back to 1700 BC.
- The Jews were conquered and exiled many times, making it quite difficult to preserve the manuscripts which they had. Jerusalem was conquered 47 times between 1800 BC and 1948 AD. The preserved Masoretic manuscripts come from outside of the land of Palestine.
- Manuscripts which contained an error or were aged beyond use were destroyed.
- When the Masoretes (successors to the Scribes) standardized the Hebrew text, it is quite likely that they destroyed all the deviating manuscripts (the evidence of this is circumstantial).

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest complete Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament was made about 900 AD, which is 1300 years after the OT canon had been completed. This is known as the Masoretic text.

The Masoretic Text:

The Masoretes (literally, transmitters) were a group of Hebrew scholars followed the Scribes as the custodians of the Old Testament Hebrew text. They functioned between 500 and 1000 AD. The original Hebrew was written without vowels up until that time, and this was acceptable, as it was a spoken language, and speaking God's Word preserved the meaning of the text. However, by the 7th century, they recognized that something would have to be done about the lack of vowels, as Hebrew, as a language, could die out (as it did with many Jews). They developed several systems of vowel points and punctuation and settled on the Tiberian system. The consonance remained unchanged, vowel points were added, and they made what they believed were corrections or improvements and possibly variant readings in the margin of the texts. They used some very unusual safeguards to insure the accuracy of the text which they copied; for any book, they knew the middle letter and the middle word, for instance. They compiled lists, listing the number of times a particular word or phrase occurred (not too unlike our concordances) and even had a list of all words which occurred exactly twice in the OT. They analyzed textual differences and offered their opinions in their notes, which accompanied the text, citing two lost codices, the Mugah and the Hilleli.

The Masoretic tradition has provided us with several manuscripts:

1. The oldest Masoretic manuscript is called the Cairo Codex (895 AD) and it contains the former and the latter prophets.
2. The latter prophets are found in the Leningrad Codex (916 AD) and it was written with a Babylonian punctuation.
3. At one point in time, 1948, we had a complete version of the OT (the Aleppo Codex, dated 930 AD), but in its rescue from a burning synagogue in 1948 and subsequent smuggling from Syria to Israel, portions of it were lost.
4. The largest and only complete Hebrew text of the OT is the Leningrad Codex (1008 AD).
5. In addition to these manuscripts, we have pieces of the Old Testament in the British Museum Codex (950 AD, most of the Pentateuch), the Reuchlin Codex (1105 AD, the prophets) and the Cairo Geniza fragments (6th-9th centuries AD)

The Greek Texts:

1. The most famous, of course, is the Septuagint, to be covered in more detail below.
2. A Jew or Jewish convert, Aquila, translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek in approximately 126 AD, with an attempt to provide a literal translation, word for word and particle for particle, into the Greek. Grammar and meaning were thereby lost. He also was opposed to the Septuagint Scriptures which were used by Christians to apply to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that prejudice must be noted. Unfortunately, we only possess fragments of his translation.
3. Symmachus, an Ebionite, made an attempt at translating the Hebrew Scriptures during the second century AD, into a more accurate and pure Greek than did Aquila.
4. Theodotion, also an Ebionite translating in the second century, was weaker in Greek than his two predecessors and depended heavily upon the Septuagint in his own translation.
5. We unfortunately have only bits and pieces of the first parallel Old Testament. Origen prepared the Hexapla (lit., six columns). The first column contained the Hebrew text, the second the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek; the third Aquila's version; the fourth Symmachus' version; the fifth, the Septuagint, and the sixth, the translation of Theodotion. He also used three lost and anonymous Greek versions of the Old Testament. His other book, the Tetrapla, contained the last four columns.

The Septuagint:

The first translation of any kind of which we are fully aware is the Septuagint (also called LXX, meaning 70). At some point in time, it was decided that there needed to be a translation of the Holy Scripture, which was in Hebrew, into the more used Greek. There are many false stories surrounding this translation, that it is difficult distilling the truth. Unlike most books written today, whether they be translations, expository, fiction, etc., possess a preface which gives enough background material to satiate one concerning the author, the purpose of writing, etc. This was not so with early writings.

Alexander the Great established in Egypt in 332 BC the city Alexandria. It was a truly cosmopolitan city with Greeks, Jews and certainly Egyptians. The Greek of Alexander was the verbal and written medium which allowed intercourse amongst the various races and nationalities. From its inception, there was a Jewish population and their sacred books became known to the Greek population.

Aristobulus, who lived during the beginning of the second century BC, was the first to mention the translation the Septuagint, and presents perhaps the only information which is not liberally mixed with fiction. He wrote that the Law had been translated into Greek during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus. We do not know if this was but the first phase of the translation or if this was the entire Old Testament, due to his wording. However, this places us at 285 BC for at least the completion of the Pentateuch and perhaps the entire OT. Some feel that the prophets were completed perhaps a century after the Law. Since the Septuagint also translated the Apocrypha, it is clear that (1) the translation was not all done at once and that there was likely almost two centuries between the translation of the Law and of the Apocrypha (since the Apocrypha was barely complete by the first century AD), and (2) the commission of this translation and the continued demand for this transmission was not originated by a Jewish believer or unbeliever as they would not have included the Apocrypha with the Holy Scriptures.

Another less dependable writer, Aristaeus, claims that Demetrius Phalereus advised Ptolemy Philadelphus to obtain a translation of the sacred writings of the Jews for the Alexandrian library which he was organizing. This might be the kernel of truth in a narrative of vivid imagination.

The number of translators is unknown, although it is frequently given as 70 or 72. There was more than one translator, that is certain by the varieties of translations and the inconsistencies found in the Septuagint. In regards to the translation itself, there were obviously varied degrees of expertise in the Greek and Hebrew, so that the

Pentateuch was translated relatively well, whereas Isaiah was perhaps the poorest of all the books which was translated. There were inherent problems with this translation.. The Jews had preconceived notions concerning the Scriptures and they translated as they felt was correct, rather than in an effort to obscure the meaning. The tense system was entirely different between the languages; there were theological concepts for which the Greek had no words, so some had to be borrowed from pagan religion. Jesus of Sirach translated his grandfather's book into Greek and in the prologue (which he was considerate enough to provide) stated that there is not word-for-word rendering of Hebrew in the Greek and gave the example that even the Holy Scriptures differed *not a little* from their original Hebrew. Some of the Greek was very correct koine Greek, as in parts of Isaiah; some translations were paraphrases rather than translations, like Esther, Job, and Proverbs. Speaking of Proverbs, some verses were engineered to reflect popular Greek thought rather than Hebrew thought. It appears as though different translators would work on the same book, so that the quality of book's translation would vary. There were times when the meaning of the Hebrew was so unclear or there was no Greek word to translate a particular Hebrew word that the translator(s) just chose a word which *sounded* similar (this occurred several times in Jeremiah).

What is the importance and the significance of the Septuagint? Personally, I believe the most important aspect of the Septuagint is that it shows without a doubt that the entire Old Testament was in existence prior to the birth of Jesus Christ, Who fulfilled innumerable prophecies from the Old Testament. Secondly, the Septuagint was made from manuscripts which were doubtless superior to the Masoretic text, so it is helpful in textual criticism when it comes to variant readings. Along the same lines, it shows us that the Masoretic text has suffered very little corruption, despite the length of time which has transpired between the original transmission and the copies that we employ. Fourthly, if the Apostles were able to wield the Scriptures in the Septuagint form, then this should give us confidence in our English translations, which were made with greater care and consistency.

There is a chain of manuscripts which forks several times and it is difficult to determine which proceeded from which. I will provide a chart from Geisler and Nix, but the qualification that this is not universally accepted and there are problems with the chart. However, it communicates better than words the path the Holy Scriptures have taken.

God's Word is alive and powerful and it shouts through the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. Believers in Jesus Christ quoted from it often when it adequately conveyed accurate content. However, it was in no way accepted as being God's Word, but just a translation of God's Word. This is clearly the case because New Testament writers, where the Septuagint was inaccurate, would invariably provide their own translation of a passage relevant to the topic that they taught. The Jews at first embraced this translation (Philo and Josephus are examples of this) but, as the Christians used it more and more to reveal God's truth, became contrary to it and we have reactions like the Greek translation of Symmachus, previously noted.

We have four principal Septuagint versions, dating from the early 1500's to the early 1800's AD.

The Dead Sea Scrolls:

Whereas we have always known about the elaborate ritual and painstaking steps that the Scribes and the Masoretes took in order to correctly and accurately copy the Scriptures, it has always been a concern that the Old Testament manuscripts were too far removed from the originals. Whereas we have some New Testament fragments written but decades after the original transmission, the Old Testament manuscripts were written 1300 years after the fact.

Shortly after the end of WW II, an Arab shepherd boy was searching for a lost goat, slightly south of Jericho and a mile west of the Dead Sea. He wandered into a cave and found some jars which contained leather scrolls. Between March 1947 and through 1956, this area was thoroughly explored and what was found was thought to be a hidden library of the Essenes, a Jewish religious sect which had broken away from the traditional Jewish religion.

(the Essenes can be dated a century before and after the Incarnation).¹ To date, we have found 40,000 fragments of books, from which 500 books have been reconstructed. From these eleven caves, there has been taken multiple portions of every book of the OT (except for Esther) which vary in date from 400 BC (some fragments of Samuel) to as late as 70 AD. We have a complete Hebrew manuscript of Isaiah, dating back to 125 BC, a manuscript over a millenium older than our best manuscripts. How do they compare? The famous prophetic Isaiah 53, which concerns the servant who would come and bear our griefs and our sicknesses, who would suffer on our behalf, is a chapter of 166 words, which would be over 400 letters. When comparing this to a manuscript dated over 1000 years later, there are 17 letters which are in question. Ten letters are merely a difference in spelling and do not affect the meaning of the text. Four letters are stylistic changes which do not affect the meaning of the text (a difference in conjunctions). The last three letters are the word *light*, which is found in the Masoretic text, but not in the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a diference which has very little bearing upon the interpretation of the verse, a certainly does not affect the overall chapter and its impact. A second mnaucript of Isaiah, also discovered, differs even less than than this one.²

Others have said that the two manuscripts of Isaiah from the the Dead Sea Scrolls differ only 5% of the time from the Masoretic Text, most of these variants being variations of spelling and obvious slips of the pen. The meaning of the book has remained intact.

Liberal scholars, dismissing the supernatural and the prophetical portions fo the Old Testament, had for a century denied the antiquity of the Old Testament, even dating portions of it long after the advent of our Lord. This discovery unequivocally places the date of the entirety of the Old Testament prior to the Maccabean period (as the copies were promulgated during the Maccabean era).

This discovery should give Christians great confidence in the age and accuracy of our present day Old Testament.

¹It has been later determined that this was not an Essene library, per se, but a Qumran brotherhood, who were similar to the Essenes in their monastic lifestyle, though not as severe

²I took this from Josh McDowell's *A Ready Defense*, which he took from *Mishna*, Third Tractate, B. Peachim, p. 263