

# Why trust the Old Testament text?

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:11, ESV

## **Why is the development of the Old Testament text very different than the New Testament text?**

One major difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the Old Testament is much older. We encounter a very different situation than the New Testament. Until quite recently the best physical manuscripts of the complete Old Testament were from about a thousand years ago.<sup>11</sup> A few fragments, or partial copies, can be dated to the time period between AD 500's and AD 700's. This meant there was a huge gap between the time of composition and the time period of the oldest copies. Yet even though these copies were written many years after the time of composition there were many reasons to trust in their reliability.

Jesus and Paul trusted the reliability of the Old Testament as God's Word. In fact, virtually all the New Testament writers accepted the Old Testament as God's Word. Although there may be no need for more reasons to accept the Old Testament as God's Word, many more good reasons do exist. If we dig deeply into the "nuts and bolts" of how the Old Testament was written and preserved, we find strong evidence for the reliability of the Old Testament.

## **When was the canon of the Old Testament closed?**

The canon of the Old Testament recognized by Protestant Christians was closed around the year AD 100. That means nothing more could be added to it. Jewish scholars and scribes established one version of the Hebrew text they believed should be considered to be the correct text. Even though there is a long gap between the time that the Old Testament books were written and the earliest manuscripts, we can still have a high degree of trust in the Old Testament's reliability. Jewish scribes were very careful to avoid errors. We can have confidence that few mistakes were made. This can be confirmed by comparing quotations of the Hebrew Scriptures in the *Mishnah* (a Jewish commentary on the scripture) from AD 200 and another group of books, called the Gemaras of Palestine, from AD 360. These ancient documents quote the Hebrew Scriptures and confirm that what we have today matches what was quoted in those ancient writings.<sup>12</sup>

## **Why should we be impressed with the care taken to copy the Old Testament?**

About 500 years after the text of the Old Testament was established, a group of Jewish scholars worked diligently to make sure all copies were 100 percent accurate. They set up safeguards for correct interpretation and pronunciation. Until this point it was considered inappropriate to write out the vowels. All words in Hebrew were written down without the use of vowels. This group of scholars took a different approach and added vowels to the text. Punctuation marks and accents for the syllables were also added. Notes were added to the text to provide information to check the accuracy of the text. The group of Hebrew texts produced by this group of scholars is called, collectively, the "Masoretic Text." The word "Masorettes" comes from a Hebrew word "masorah," which means "tradition."<sup>13</sup> This name refers to the group of scribes who identified themselves as being from "Ben Ashur," or "sons of Asher." They were from Tiberias, a city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The Masorettes continued to use the same version of the text for the Old Testament that had been established in AD 100. They worked diligently to copy the text from AD 600 – 950.<sup>14</sup> "They counted ... the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurs in each book; they pointed out the middle letter of the ... whole Hebrew Bible, and made even more detailed calculations than these."<sup>15</sup> If something could be counted, they counted it, and used that number to verify the accuracy of their work. Because of these practices the Masoretic text is regarded as very accurate. This is a major reason for confidence.

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<sup>11</sup> Wurthwein, Ernst (1981). *The Text of the Old Testament* (p. 12) Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, F. F. (1963). *The Books and the Parchments* (p. 121). Fleming H. Revell Company: Old Tappan, NJ

<sup>13</sup> Bruce. (pp. 116-117).

<sup>14</sup> Longacre, Drew. "Masorettes". *Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce, p. 117.

### Why were most of the old manuscripts of the Old Testament destroyed by believers?

Another practice of the Jewish scholars was to destroy damaged manuscripts of the scripture. This explains why few ancient copies of the Old Testament exist today. Rabbis held the Old Testament scripture in such high regard that they would not allow worn-out copies to be used. For a period of time worn copies were kept in a special room in a synagogue called the *genizah*. After a longer period of time, a ceremony was conducted, and the worn-out copies were buried in what was considered to be sacred ground. Surprisingly, this practice unintentionally produced one of the oldest copies of the Hebrew Old Testament that exists today. A *genizah* in a synagogue in Cairo was walled off from the rest of the synagogue when renovations to the synagogue were made. The worn copies of the scripture kept in a *genizah* were forgotten. This room was later rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century. As a result, copies of the Old Testament dating from before the year 900 were found.<sup>16</sup>

### How does the Greek Septuagint strengthen the case to trust the Old Testament text?

A careful translation of the Old Testament into Greek, called the Septuagint, also provides another reason for confidence in the reliability of the Old Testament. Many copies of the Septuagint exist. It was incredibly important to the Greek-speaking world at the time of the New Testament. In fact, when the New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament, they quoted from the Septuagint more often than from Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> The Septuagint has close agreement with the Masoretic Text. It provides strong evidence that the Old Testament we have is reliable.

### What major discovery in the twentieth century further strengthened trust in the Old Testament text?

In addition to the evidence of the Septuagint, much older manuscripts were discovered in the mid-twentieth century at Qumran. Qumran was a community of Jewish believers who isolated themselves from the rest of the world. An entire copy of the book of Isaiah was found, and one copy found there is almost identical to what we have in our Bibles. The manuscripts from Qumran are often called the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>18</sup> Portions of other Old Testament books were also found, from all other books of the Old Testament, with the exception of the book of Esther.<sup>19</sup>

Here is a small sample of the words from Qumran text and the King James version of the same passage. The scroll from Qumran was not written in King James English, but it has been translated into King James English here so that English speakers can readily see the comparison of the two texts. Bold type indicates a difference in wording.<sup>20</sup>

<u>King James Version (Isaiah 53:10-11)</u>	<u>Similarly Translated DSS 1QIsa<sup>a</sup></u>
Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. <b>He shall see the travail of his soul</b> , and shall be satisfied. By his knowledge shall <b>my</b> righteous servant justify many; For he shall bear their iniquities.	Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. <b>Of the travail of his soul he shall see light</b> , and shall be satisfied. By his knowledge shall <b>his</b> righteous servant justify many; For he shall bear their iniquities.

At the beginning of this lesson, I quoted Psalm 119:11. The Old Testament tells us about God's plans and instructions. As our next lesson will show, the revelation of God's plans and instructions continue to be further revealed in the New Testament. Because He is the King of all creation, every word that comes from God is His Sovereign Word. When we hold the Bible in our hands and read it, or when we hear it read out loud, we are receiving words that our Creator is giving directly to us. He is giving us information we need to know in order to believe in Him. These words are unlike any other words we will read or hear because they come from God.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce (p. 116).

<sup>17</sup> Wurthwein (p. 49).

<sup>18</sup> Wurthwein, (p. 16).

<sup>19</sup> Wurthwein (pp. 12-13).

<sup>20</sup> Bulldock, Hunter (January/February 2022), *Bible Study Magazine* "How different Are the Dead Sea Scrolls from Modern Bibles?" (pp. 40-43) Faithlife.