

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Manuscript Evidence For The Old Testament

It might surprise you, but we do not have any of the original manuscripts of Shakespeare's thirty seven plays. We have to rely on copies of his work. Yet, do we doubt we have substantially his work as he wrote it?

If we do not have “originals” of Shakespeare's works penned in the 1600's, it should not surprise us to have only copies of the original manuscripts of the Old Testament, which were completed in 400 B.C. How confident can we be that we have what God originally revealed through those He inspired to write His Word?

The earliest complete manuscript of the Old Testament is the *Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus*, dated A.D. 1008. It was the work of Rabbi Moses ben Asher before A.D. 1000. From the same Asher family, there is the *Cairo Codex* dated A.D. 895. This manuscript contains both the latter and former prophets. The *British Museum Codex* contains portions of Genesis through Deuteronomy and is dated A.D. 950. So, the actual manuscript evidence we have for the Old Testament is well over a 1,000 years removed from the time they were originally penned.

By observing how the Jews copied their works, we can be confident that copies were accurate. For example, Moses ben Ashur was a “massorete.” The term is from massora meaning “tradition”. During the years 500-900 A.D., these copyists and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures did their work in Tiberias. They were very careful in how they copied the text. They pointed out the middle letter of not only the Pentateuch, but the entire Hebrew Bible. They numbered the verses, letters and words of each book. Such calculations helped guard them from copyist's errors. Their conscientious work provided the Massoretic Text which has been the standard Hebrew text for our English translations.

For years this text, many years removed from the originals, was the main manuscript evidence for our Old Testament. But with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, a new comparison could be made. In one of the caves of the ancient Qumran community, a complete scroll of the Book of Isaiah was discovered. It was written in 100-125 B.C., and is remarkably identical to the Massoretic Text.

Comparing Isaiah 53 of the scroll with the Massoretic text,

authorities have found a difference in only 17 letters. Ten of these are differences in spelling. Four are differences in the use of a conjunction (and). The other three differences are the three letters for “light” in the Hebrew. It was added by someone in verse 11.

Josh McDowell, in his book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, quotes Gleason Archer in his response to the comparisons between the Massoretic Text and the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls: *‘Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were as thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with the standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.’*

Adding the Septuagint Translation of the Hebrew text (280-250 B.C) for comparison, we move closer to the time of the originals. Meticulous Massorettes, ancient translations and modern discoveries around The Dead Sea help assure us that we have the Old Testament as God revealed it.