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# HOW THE BIBLE HAS COME DOWN TO US

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## HOW THE BIBLE HAS COME DOWN TO US

How has the Bible come down to us? Many have never asked themselves that question. But surely it is an important question; and the moment we try to answer it we shall find ourselves engaged in a fascinating enquiry, which will take us into the distant past, long before our English Bible was in existence. We shall become acquainted with the rubbish heaps of Egypt, with ancient libraries and monasteries and strange ways of writing. We shall be reading a story every page of which teems with interest.

### *The English Bible of 1611*

The English Bible with which the greater number of people are most familiar is what is called the *Authorised Version*, published in 1611. The work of translating the Bible into English had been going on continuously for some eighty years or more, but when the Authorised Version appeared it was accepted universally as the standard translation. Its literary style was perfect, representing the English language at its best and purest. It very quickly made its way into the homes and hearts of our people, and its phrases passed into common speech, so that today, often without knowing it, we are constantly using Biblical expressions, such as "a labour of love," "coals of fire," "in the sweat of his face," "clear as crystal." William Tyndale (1490-1536) and Miles Coverdale (1488-1569)



were the greatest of the men who helped to translate the Bible, and the Bible of 1611 is throughout based upon their work.

### *Why a New Translation was Needed*

In 1881 the *Revised Version* of the New Testament appeared, followed in 1885 by the *Revised Version* of the Old Testament. Why was such a revision necessary? The answer is that in the interval a mass of new knowledge had come to light about the manuscripts of the Bible. Many new manuscripts in Greek, Latin and other languages had been discovered, which were not known to the translators of the Authorised Version. When these manuscripts were found it was seen that the text of the Scriptures was not uniform. One group of manuscripts differed in its readings from another group. This fact of variation was of course known to the translators of the Authorised Version, who did their best to arrive at what they considered to be the true text; but since their day so many fresh manuscripts had been found that it was decided that a new translation was necessary.

Have we now reached the final translation? The answer is "No," because in the last fifty years some most important discoveries of yet more manuscripts have been made, and of manuscripts older than any known before; so that scholars today have much fresh material for deciding what is the true text of the Bible. And at any minute some new discovery of an ancient manuscript may be made which will still further help to solve the problem.

Some people, who have never thought about the question how the Bible has come down to us, may ask

why there are all these variations in the manuscripts. The explanation is that before the invention of printing all books had to be written by hand. If a hundred people today were set to copy out *The Times* of January 1 they would not produce a hundred similar copies. Some would have missed out a word, or even a sentence, here and there; and this though they had print before them, and not a written document without stops or any divisions between the words, as is the case with most of the early manuscripts of the Bible. There is another explanation also of the variation. The Scriptures were originally copied for a religious reason, to help people to live a God-fearing life; and a busy scribe, so long as he did not omit the main facts or the main religious lessons of any passage which he was copying, would sometimes not bother about a tiny detail in the text. Indeed he might, and apparently sometimes did, slightly alter a passage so as to help the readers to understand it better.

If anyone says that he can no longer trust the Bible if there is all this uncertainty about its text, let him cease to be anxious, because the variations in the text for the most part are over matters of detail. The main tradition is secure. There is no uncertainty, for example, over the main events of our Lord's life, or over His teaching, and we have a number of undoubted letters of St. Paul. And surely the very fact that there is variation in detail, while there is agreement in the central story, is proof that the copyists of the different manuscripts were not out to invent but to transmit as faithfully as they could.

In this pamphlet an attempt is made to sketch in barest outline the story of the manuscripts of the Bible.

All technical questions are avoided. Only the scholar can decide which manuscripts, or group of such (for they fall into groups or families which have a common likeness), is most likely to represent the original text. But those who are not scholars cannot fail to be interested in the history of the handing down through the centuries of the Book which records the revelation of God to mankind.

### *Writing and Book-making in Ancient Times*

But, before dealing with the story of the manuscripts, a word must be said about the method of writing and making books in ancient times. Writing is very old, as one would expect it to be, seeing how important it is to human progress. It was known more than two thousand years before Christ. The earliest writing was pictorial; picture-signs were used for words, each word having its own sign. When the alphabet was formed pictorial writing became unnecessary, as words could be built up out of a few letters in different combinations. Books were a much later discovery. The manuscripts of the Bible exist in two forms—rolls and books. The roll form was much the earlier. They are written on two kinds of material, *papyrus* and parchment, but parchment did not come into use till the second century A.D. Up to that time all the manuscripts of the Bible were written on papyrus, or the pith of the papyrus plant, which grew profusely in the river Nile. This pith was cut into thin layers, which were glued together in strips and pressed so as to form a sheet with a smooth surface. By joining the sheets together a roll was formed like a roll of our modern wallpaper. The length and width of the rolls varied; but no very long roll was used be-

cause of the inconvenience of having such a cumbersome article. Hence if a person desired to possess the whole of the Old Testament he would have to have several rolls. Papyrus is brittle and perishable, and very susceptible to damp. It was only on dry soil that an ancient papyrus roll had any chance of surviving. That is why the sands of Egypt and its tombs and ancient refuse heaps are the hunting ground of the researcher.

In the second century A.D. a new material, *vellum*, came into use. This is made from animal skins, and is much more durable; but it does not appear to have generally taken the place of papyrus till the beginning of the fourth century. The advantages of vellum or parchment were: (1) that it was a material which lasted; (2) that it now became possible to make a book like our modern books. Vellum sheets could be bound together between covers, and the book could be of a thickness to contain the whole Bible in one volume. The name *codex* is given to these vellum manuscripts; though it is also used in a more specialised way to refer to old *uncial* manuscripts. There seems to have been an intermediate stage when papyrus was used in book form instead of in roll form. This is shown by the recent discovery of the Chester-Beatty papyri, to which reference is made later.

The word “uncial” used just above needs explanation. Uncial manuscripts are those written in large capital letters, as in Illustration A. This form of writing was employed on vellum and from the fourth to the ninth century the manuscripts of the Bible were written in uncials. In the latter century a new form of writing like our modern writing was invented.



The letters were smaller and linked together. This is called *cursive* or *minuscule* writing. Almost all manuscripts after the ninth century are cursive. Illustration B gives a specimen of a cursive manuscript. Illustration C is of an early papyrus manuscript, where the letters are small. They were usually formed separately, but sometimes had links between them. It will be noticed that there are no spaces between the words in any of the styles of writing. This must have added to the difficulty of reading aloud, and must also have puzzled an illiterate copyist. The separation of words came in, but only gradually, in the Middle Ages; and the regular use of punctuation was one of the results of the invention of printing.

A. ΚΑΙ ΕΛΑΒΕΝ ΠΑΝΤΑ ΤΑ  
ΘΗΣΑΥΡΟΥΣ ΟΙΚΟΥ ΚΥ.

Part of 1 Kings xiv. 26 in the Greek version: καὶ ἔλαβεν πάντας τοὺς θησαυροὺς οἴκου Κυ. "And he took away (all) the treasures of the house of the Lord."

B. Οὐαὶ αὐτοῖς ὅτι τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ καὶν  
ἐπορεύθησαν

Part of Jude, v. 11: οὐαὶ αὐτοῖς ὅτι τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ Καὶν ἐπορεύθησαν. "Woe unto them! for they went in the way of Cain."

C. ΓΡΑΨΑΤΕ ΤΑ ΕΝ ΤΑΙΣ ΕΞΕΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΑΣ

Fragment of Anaximenes, written about 270 B.C.: πολιτείας μετέχουσιν τούτων. "To those who belong to their State."

## I. THE OLD TESTAMENT

### Hebrew Manuscripts

We should naturally expect that the manuscripts of the Old Testament which are still in existence would be much older than those of the New. This, however, is not the case. Apart from a very important quite recent discovery, of which more will be said, the oldest Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament which we possess dates from the ninth century after Christ. It is generally agreed among scholars that the books of the Old Testament were composed between 800 and 200 B.C. This means that there is an interval of a thousand years between the latest book of the Old Testament and the earliest existing Hebrew manuscript. There is an explanation of this strange fact.

The Jew had a profound veneration for his Scriptures. They were "the sacred writings," enshrining a revelation from God to His race. About the year 100 A.D., when the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. had no longer a national home and were scattered over the face of the earth, it was decided by their religious leaders, in order to preserve the purity of their faith, to draw up a list of their official scriptures and to lay down minute rules for copying them. The Jews had other sacred writings beside those in the Old Testament, among them, for example, the books which form what is known as the Apocrypha, parts of which are read as lessons in church. But in 100 A.D. they excluded from the list of the official scriptures all books save those in the existing Old Testament; and took care that when these were copied there should be no mistakes, by drawing up the most

elaborate regulations for future copyists. Orders were given that copies with mistakes should be destroyed. In this way all the earlier Hebrew manuscripts perished; but those of the ninth century A.D. which survive can be regarded as true copies of the manuscripts transcribed after 100 A.D.; and the same is the case with the later manuscripts.

### *Greek Manuscripts*

So much for the Hebrew manuscripts. But there are *Greek manuscripts* of the Old Testament. In many of the countries where the Jews settled Greek was spoken, and there grew up large colonies of Greek-speaking Jews, who were unfamiliar with the Hebrew language. They needed their scriptures; and to meet their need in the third century before Christ a Greek translation of the Old Testament was made at Alexandria in Egypt, where many Jews had settled. This is called the Septuagint (denoted by LXX) from the tradition that it was composed by seventy scholars. Of this we have many copies, which are centuries older than the Hebrew manuscripts of the ninth century A.D. Three of the greatest manuscripts, the Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century A.D.), the Codex Vaticanus (fourth century A.D.) and the Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century A.D.), contain in whole or part this Septuagint translation. Now the LXX often differs from the Hebrew text, and not only in points of detail; and the problem for the scholars is to determine by comparing the Hebrew and the Greek text what is the original form. It is not an easy task, for the text of the LXX itself has undergone alterations.

### *A Discovery in Egypt*

Up to a very recent date, then, our earliest text of the Old Testament was the Greek translation of the Hebrew dating from the third century B.C. But in 1930 an unexpected discovery was made in Egypt, which has given us manuscripts in Greek of the Old Testament, some of which may be dated as early as 150 A.D. In a Coptic graveyard near the ruins of the ancient city of Aphroditopolis were found some jars containing papyri, the bulk of which have been acquired by Mr. A. Chester-Beatty, an American collector living in England. The collection is now known by his name. The papyri are gradually being published as scholars complete their investigation of them. For the Old Testament we have in this collection two manuscripts of Genesis of the late third and early fourth centuries A.D.; a manuscript of Numbers and Deuteronomy of about 150 A.D.; Ezekiel, Daniel and Esther, about 250 A.D.; Isaiah, early third century; and fragments of Jeremiah and Ecclesiasticus. The papyrus of Numbers and Deuteronomy is the oldest manuscript of any part of the Bible. That of Genesis provides the oldest text of that book, and is particularly valuable, since the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus have large parts of this book missing. That of Daniel is of great importance, because it gives the original LXX version of a book which was re-translated from the Hebrew text of 100 A.D. in the latter half of the second century. That original version had survived only in a late Greek manuscript and in a Syriac translation. It is possible now to test the accuracy of these two last documents. The importance of this



recent discovery can hardly be over-estimated; and who knows whether other valuable finds may not be made?

## II. THE NEW TESTAMENT

### *How the New Testament Came to Be*

There is nothing to distinguish the manuscripts of the New Testament from those of the Old Testament in the matter of transmission. Copyists made mistakes in both; but there are certain features about the manuscripts of the New Testament which must be borne in mind. In the first place, they are far nearer to the events which they record than any of the Old Testament manuscripts. In the second place, the New Testament was never brought up to a standard edition as was the Old Testament in 100 A.D. Hence variations in the manuscripts are more numerous, and so present a more difficult problem to scholars. Thirdly, as will be seen, the conditions of Church life for the first three hundred years after Christ were such as to promote variations in the text of the Christian scriptures.

St. Luke begins his Gospel with these words, "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us." Evidently before he began to compose his Gospel there were in circulation documents dealing with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Scholars have been able to determine with fair accuracy what some of these documents were by disentangling them from the Gospels. The Gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke were all in existence by the year 75 A.D., St. Mark being the earliest, and providing material for the other two Gospels, which between them

incorporate almost the whole of it. The Book of Acts falls into the same period. St. John's Gospel dates from the end of the first century, as does the Book of Revelation. The Epistles of St. Paul were, of course, written during his lifetime, and so are contemporary documents.

But it must be remembered that the spread of Christianity in the early years of the Church was due, not to the circulation of literature, but to the witness of living men and women, who, like St. Paul, went about preaching the good news of the Kingdom. The story of Jesus Christ was at first passed on by word of mouth. What is called *oral* tradition played an important part in the early transmission of the Gospel. The literature followed later, when a Church had sprung up in some place and its members asked for a copy of the Scriptures, that they might hear them read in church, or read them at home. Now it cannot have been easy to supply that demand for literature. Books today are printed by thousands very cheaply. Then books had to be written out by hand and were expensive, and most of the Christian congregations were poor and could not afford to buy books. If they could collect enough money, they would buy, say, a copy of one Gospel, or one of the letters of St. Paul, or perhaps borrow a copy from a neighbouring church. And this precious manuscript would be copied locally, often by some unskilled person, who would make mistakes. It was in this kind of haphazard way that for three hundred years the Christian scriptures were circulated. No wonder there are variations in the text. During this period also translations were made of the books of the New Testament into Coptic, Syriac and Latin.

*Settling the Text of the New Testament*

In the fourth century a change comes over the scene. The Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians were no longer persecuted, and their Scriptures were no longer in danger of destruction, so that it became possible to meet the growing demand throughout the Empire for copies of the New Testament. Two things helped also to secure that in future manuscripts of the New Testament should not be in danger of serious perversion of the text. The first was that by this time there had grown up a body of Christian literature which was generally accepted by the various Churches as the official Scriptures. It was still in dispute whether some books could be so regarded; but the Gospels, the Epistles of St. Paul and some other of the New Testament writings had won for themselves an established position. This gave them an authority and sacredness which later copyists would respect. The other thing which helped to establish a generally accepted text was the discovery of the new writing material vellum. This made it possible to dispense with the awkward papyrus roll, which at its largest could only contain a small portion of the Scriptures, and to produce books in shape like our modern books which could contain the whole New Testament between the two covers. Uniformity of text was much more likely to be preserved where there was a single volume than where there were a series of rolls of a very perishable material.

Scholars at once got to work on the text of the New Testament, for it was realised how important it was to have, if possible, a standard text. The great scholar

Origen of Alexandria (185-253 A.D.) had been at work on it earlier. This study went on for some centuries, and in the eighth century a standard text was reached which is generally called the "Byzantine" text (Byzantium was the old name for Constantinople) or the "Received Text." The very great majority of the existing Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are based on this text. One of the most difficult and interesting problems for the scholars is to get behind this Byzantine text to the earlier texts. In the fourth and fifth centuries fresh translations of the Bible into other languages were made, of which the most important was the Latin translation by St. Jerome (382-404 A.D.) known as the Vulgate, which is still the official Bible of the Roman Church.

The story of our English Bible and its successive translators is given in a separate pamphlet. It remains, therefore, only to summarise what has happened in connection with the New Testament since the Revised Version was published in 1881. It has been a period of remarkable discoveries, the most important of which can only be briefly summarised here.

*A Find in a Monastery*

(a) Two ladies, Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson, visited the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, where Tischendorf had found the famous Codex Sinaiticus, recently bought for the British Museum from the Soviet Government. There they photographed a manuscript in Syriac which turned out on examination to be, not the ordinary Syriac version of the Gospels, known as the Peshitta (about 411 A.D.), but an earlier version, of which only one imperfect copy existed. This version



was probably made before the end of the second century, and as it was translated from Greek it threw light on Greek manuscripts of an earlier date than any we possessed. It was of importance for a further reason. The scholars who translated the Revised Version of the New Testament had, of course, carefully compared all the various manuscripts available in their endeavour to determine which was the most reliable text. This early Syriac version showed that there was some doubt as to whether they were entirely right in their conclusions.

#### *An Early Copy of the Gospels*

(b) In 1906 an American, Mr. C. L. Freer, discovered in the hands of a dealer in Cairo some vellum manuscripts, one of which proved to be one of the earliest copies in existence of the Gospels in Greek. This Codex is in good condition and contains all four Gospels, but in the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark, which is perhaps an indication of the order of their popularity. This "Washington Codex," as it is called, seems to have been copied from texts belonging to various groups, and is interesting as containing an addition, clearly not genuine, to the conclusion of St. Mark. The presence of this addition shows how in the early period, before any standard text was fixed, variations of a larger kind might occur.

#### *Yet Another Recent Discovery*

(c) But the most important recent addition to our knowledge is the discovery of the Chester-Beatty papyri, to which reference has already been made. Of those relating to the New Testament we have a copy of the Four Gospels and the Acts which belongs to the first half of the third century. This manuscript is in a

damaged condition and many leaves are missing, but what remains is of great importance. The second volume contains almost all of St. Paul's epistles, and can be dated with certainty as not later than the middle of the third century, while some scholars would put it as early as 200 A.D. The third manuscript contains about a third of the Book of Revelation and may be assigned to the same period, 200-250 A.D.

Thus these recent discoveries have given us evidence about the text of the Greek Bible which is a century or more earlier than the evidence provided by the great codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, which were our earliest authorities. And the evidence clearly points to the need for revising the estimate made by the translators of the New Testament in 1881 of the importance and value of the various families or groups of manuscripts upon which they worked. So the task of the Bible scholar ever goes forward. New problems arise as new discoveries are made. But all the while every discovery of fresh manuscripts only serves to confirm us in our opinion that the main tradition of the New Testament is trustworthy. It is a record of fact written by men who were concerned to preserve for the Church the story of Jesus Christ and of the Society of His followers. It has not pleased God to give us an absolutely inerrant narrative. God's way is to work through human beings who, because they are imperfect, make mistakes. But we cannot doubt that the Spirit of God has presided over the transmission of the story, so that it has come down to us true in its main outlines, and as something which having life in itself can give life to those who will reverently and prayerfully study it.

NOTE.—Since the above was written the John Rylands Library at Manchester has reported the discovery of four fragments of a papyrus roll of the Book of Deuteronomy in the Greek version of the Septuagint. They were written in the second century B.C. The fragments formed part of a piece of cartonnage—that is, papyrus torn up, glued and mixed with plaster to form a wrapping for a mummy.

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THIS pamphlet is indebted throughout to Sir Frederic Kenyon's delightful book *The Story of the Bible*. I wish to make the fullest acknowledgment of what I owe to him, and to express the hope that many who read the pamphlet will go on to study what he has written.

V. F. S.

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