

Reliably Transmitted

It has been estimated that the Bible was written over a period of approximately 1500 years. Since none of the original writings exist (as far as we know), how can we be sure that the text we have today is the same as that penned by the writers?

The answer is to compare the manuscripts that are available. Fortunately, there are thousands of them with more being discovered all the time. For the Old Testament, there are over 10,000 early manuscripts including the Cairo Geniza manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Perhaps the most recent figures for the New Testament are those published in 2014 where it was reported that there are 5,838 Greek New Testament manuscripts and 18,524 manuscripts containing translations of the New Testament. When you compare these numbers to the number of manuscripts of other ancient writings such as Plato's Tetralogies (210), or Caesar's Gallic Wars (251), or Homer's The Iliad (1800+) you find that the text of the Bible has been remarkably well preserved.

For more information on these manuscript numbers, see:

- List of Hebrew Bible Manuscripts. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hebrew_Bible_manuscripts
- The Bibliographical Test. <https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Bibliographical-Test-Update-08.13.14.pdf>

Earlier manuscripts generally contain small portions of Old or New Testament text. One early manuscript worth noting is the Chester Beatty papyrus which contains two chapters of 1 Thessalonians, eight chapters of Romans, almost all of 1st and 2nd Corinthians, and all of Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews. It is dated to the 3rd century AD (200s).

For more information on the Chester Beatty papyrus, see:

- Papyrus 46. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/papy46.html>
- About P46. <https://www.lib.umich.edu/reading/Paul/about.html>

The oldest virtually-complete copies of the Old Testament are found in the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, each dating to around 350 AD. The oldest complete copy of the Old Testament is found in the Leningrad Codex which is dated around 1008 AD. The oldest virtually-complete New Testament is the contained in the Codex Sinaiticus dated around 350 AD.

More information on the above may be found at:

- What is the Oldest Hebrew Bible? <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/what-is-the-oldest-hebrew-bible/>
- Codex Sinaiticus. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/codex-sinaiticus>

With so many hand-written manuscripts available to compare, you might expect there would be variations in the text. Do scholars find variations? Yes. Are they doctrinally significant? No.

When scholars compare manuscripts and count the variations in the text, five different manuscripts could, theoretically, contain five variations of the same word; perhaps five misspellings involving misplaced or left-out letters: Jesus, Jsus, Jseus, Jessus, Jeus). That would be counted as five variations, not one. So when one hears the assertion that there are 400,000 variations in the New Testament manuscripts, one should not be alarmed. One could ask: “How many of these variations are differences in spelling?” “How many of these are differences in word order?” “How many of these variations are due to the omission of a word?” More importantly: “How many of these variations affect the meaning of the text?” and “How many have significance for what Christians believe?”

It has been estimated that 70-75% of the variations are simply changes in spelling. A large number of the remainder have to do with differences in word order. Perhaps 1% of the variations change the meaning of the text. But NONE have anything to do with Christian doctrine. With a large number of hand-written manuscripts comes a large number of variations, but no variations affecting Christian beliefs.

For more information regarding textual variations in Bible manuscripts, see:

- What is a Textual Variant? <https://carm.org/KJVO/what-is-a-textual-variant>
- Textual Variants: It’s the Nature, Not the Number, that Matters. <https://www.str.org/articles/textual-variants-it%E2%80%99s-the-nature-not-the-number-that-matters>
- An Interview with Daniel B. Wallace on the New Testament Manuscripts. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/an-interview-with-daniel-b-wallace-on-the-new-testament-manuscripts/>

A final way to confirm the Bible text would be to find out what ancient Hebrew and Christian teachers said on spiritual matters and compare that to what is contained in the ancient manuscripts. For the New Testament, we have the writings of Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and others. It has been said that, except for 11 verses, the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from the writings of these early church leaders.

For more information, see:

- Can We Construct the Entire New Testament from the Writings of the Church Fathers? <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/can-we-construct-the-entire-new-testament-from-the-writings-of-the-church-fathers/>

When all is said and done, it can be said that the Old and New Testament books we have today are reliable renditions of the originals. While the manuscripts are far removed in time from the creation of the original documents, comparison with earlier manuscripts find that the text has been remarkably well preserved in its transmission over time and that variations in the text are inconsequential when it comes to basic Christian beliefs.

Again, remember that variants do not affect Christian beliefs about God, salvation, Christ, or any other basic doctrine. The Bibles we have are meant to be translations of what scholars have concluded were contained in the original writings. Would you have scholars create a basic text in which the passages always agree with each other? Or would you rather have the variants exposed

and accept them for what they are: disagreements in copies of original documents?
disagreements that have no bearing on Christian beliefs? disagreements that have no bearing on
the contents of the original writings?

For a more complete information regarding the transmission of the Biblical texts over time, see:

- The Bibliographical Test.
<https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Bibliographical-Test-Update-08.13.14.pdf>
- When it Comes to Ancient Texts, the More Copies We Have, the More Confidence We Have. <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/when-it-comes-to-ancient-texts-the-more-copies-we-have-the-more-confidence-we-have/>
- Manuscript Evidence for the Bible's Reliability.
<http://ronrhodes.org/articles/manuscript-evidence-for-the.html>
- Why You Can Trust Your English Bible.
<https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-you-can-trust-your-english-bible/>
- Did Scribes Faithfully Transmit Old Testament Manuscripts?
<https://www.josh.org/faithful-transmit-old-testament/>
- Bible Text Transmitted Accurately Over Millennia.
<https://creation.com/biblical-text-transmitted-accurately-over-millennia>