

A brief history of the text of the bible*

John R Hudson

The Old Testament

Though the Hebrew language evolved over two thousand years before Christ, for over half that time it did not have its own script. All the early books of the bible were handed down by word of mouth and only written down in a form similar to the one we know now from about 800 years before the birth of Christ.

If you look carefully in Genesis, you will find two slightly different accounts of the creation of human beings and two different accounts of how Joseph was sold into slavery. These came about because of slight variations in the oral tradition. It is important not to overestimate these variations; nearly all the events handed down in the oral tradition have been shown to have historical substance.

So what script was used for the Ten Commandments which were written down about 1400 years before the birth of Christ? The most likely answer is hieroglyphics since Moses was brought up in the Egyptian court and any educated person of the time could read hieroglyphics, which did not finally go out of use until around 400 years after the death of Christ.

Hebrew got its own separate script sometime after 900 BC when the Phoenicians, who lived in the area of modern Lebanon, drew on earlier attempts at an alphabetic script to develop the modern alphabet which then spread across Europe and the middle east, though each country adapted the script in its own way.

But within 200 years the Jews began to be overrun by invaders mostly from Turkey and Iraq and Jews ended up living all over the middle east. At this time every copy of the scriptures had to be made by hand and variations may have developed in the versions that were available.

The Septuagint

About 200 years before the birth of Christ partly to place a record in the library in Alexandria — for 600 years the greatest library in the world — and partly to help Jews who no longer spoke Hebrew regularly, the Jewish sacred books began to be translated into Greek and many of the quotations in the New Testament are clearly made by people familiar with this translation, known as the Septuagint or LXX after the 72 people who were supposed to have translated it.

In 70 AD, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed after the Jews revolted against the Romans and the Jewish documents salvaged from the temple were taken away by the Jewish historian, Josephus, who used them to write his *Antiquities of the Jewish people*.

*Originally written June 2002; revised April 2008, September 2011 and January 2014

Though the Hebrew text continued to be copied among Jewish groups spread around the middle east, and later by Christian monks, nearly all the extracts of the Hebrew text which we have date from around 1000 AD and the first complete text which we have dates from around 1400 AD and it differs in several respects from the Septuagint. We do not know how many of these differences were already there when the Septuagint was translated or how many crept in later on. But analysis of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, probably written around the time of the Septuagint, that contains the Book of Isaiah suggests that some differences were already there and some crept in later (http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/31_masorite.html).

Between the Greek translation of the Septuagint and the most recent Hebrew texts, we have the Vulgate, or ‘vulgar’ Latin translation, of the Bible from just after 400 AD for which Jerome used an original Hebrew source (now lost) for the Old Testament rather than the Septuagint which had been used by the eastern Christian churches.

The New Testament

Unlike the Jewish sacred texts which were, like every serious piece of writing, written on scrolls, the New Testament was initially written on (much cheaper) notepads and the first complete texts of the New Testament are in modern book form rather than scrolls. The early Christians adopted the notepad form not only because it was cheaper and easier to obtain but also because they wanted the good news to spread in a form which made it look like the ancient world’s version of the ‘paperback’ rather than a ‘hardback.’ Twenty six of these notepads were eventually agreed to be the most inspired texts and brought together into what we call the New Testament.

Jesus spoke Greek as well as Hebrew — well enough to be able to crack jokes in it — and the widespread use of Greek in the eastern Mediterranean helped to spread the good news. But it was soon translated into Coptic, the ‘modern’ version of hieroglyphics, Syriac, the language of Antioch and the traders who went to India, Armenian and Latin. Jerome’s translation into ‘vulgar’ Latin around 400 AD was in part undertaken because people were put off by the educated Latin of the earlier versions.

Though there were occasional new translations, for example into English and Russian, interest in new translations dropped until around 1400 AD when, just as Jerome had argued 1000 years earlier, people realised they needed the bible in their own language. Luther made a German translation, Wycliff an English one and de la Casas a Mayan one. Gradually most of the main European languages received their own translation and in 1800 William Carey and his assistant William Ward began mass production of bibles in Indian languages.

The impetus to new translations developed in the 19th century partly as a result of missionary work in many countries and partly as a result of research which had shown that the earlier translations of the bible were based on less accurate versions of the Greek and Hebrew texts.

The Bible today

In 1931 the British Museum purchased the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the oldest complete copy of the New Testament, from the Russian communist authorities who no longer felt they needed it and the papyrus documents found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt in the 19th century, which included extracts from the New Testament copied at various times during the period 100–700 AD, gradually began to be published.

Together with *Codex Sinaiticus* and renewed study of the Coptic, Syriac and Armenian versions which had been translated from the Greek very early in the history of the church, these enabled scholars to piece together the most accurate version of the original Greek available to date. This was published in 1966 and has been updated since — there are so many papyri to read that it may be the next century before they can all be read and identified.

So the bible we use today consists of oral traditions some of which were written down for the first time over 1000 years after the events to which they relate occurred and documents produced not long after the time of the events they describe.

We have no ‘original’ copies of any part of the bible; the nearest thing we have to an ‘original’ is fragments of papyrus which are close copies of the originals of the New Testament some of which were made within 100 years of the originals; the first complete copy of the New Testament which we have was made about 400 years after the death of Christ.

The next nearest ‘copies’ are the translations into Coptic, Syriac and Armenian which were all made from early copies of the Greek text. Like the Greek translation of the Old Testament, these are useful because the translator often gives us clues in the translation as to how exactly people understood the original text they were using.

We know from the ‘mistakes’ that crept into later copies of the Greek text made over the next 1000 years how easy it is for little mistakes to change the whole meaning of a passage.

The problem is magnified with the Hebrew text since most of the Hebrew text we have was copied 1,700 years after the most recent part of it was written. So there is much longer for copying mistakes to get into the text. It also appears from the Septuagint, the Book of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and other evidence that there may have been slightly different versions of the Hebrew scriptures in existence for a long time.

For example, the Hebrew text and some of the apostles in the New Testament refer to the Jews staying in Egypt for 400 years but the Septuagint says it was 400 years from Abram to the exodus which happens to fit the latest historical evidence as well as Josephus’ account which, though long discounted, was, after all, based on documents salvaged from the Temple.

None of what I have said need undermine the view that the text of the bible is inspired by God but it is important to recognise that we no longer have an ‘original’ of what God inspired and that, though new research is constantly bringing us closer to the original, there are some areas in which we can never be certain of the exact words that God inspired.

