

A brief history of the text of the Bible*

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The Old Testament

What Christians in the West call the Old Testament is a particular collection of scriptures created by Jewish scholars between 700 and 1,000AD. This collection consists of three main sections:

1. the Torah or the first five books of the Bible,
2. the Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets, and
3. the Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles.

But Jesus would have known many other books like Judith and Sirach which we know in the West as Ecclesiasticus. The Eastern churches accept all these books as part of the Old Testament today because they are the books which the Jews of Jesus' day would have used.

So how did we end up in this situation?

Until about 800 years before Jesus, all scripture was passed down by word of mouth. We do not know what script was used for the Ten Commandments which were inscribed on tablets of stone around 500 years before there was a Hebrew script. One possibility is Egyptian hieroglyphics since Moses was brought up in the Egyptian court and any educated person of the time could read hieroglyphics. The other is Proto-Canaanite which has been found on inscriptions in Canaan and Northern Egypt, where the Jews were living under the Pharaohs.

Hebrew got its own separate script just under 900 years before Jesus when the Phoenicians, who lived in the area of modern Lebanon, developed an alphabetic script possibly inspired by Proto-Canaanite. This then spread across Europe and the middle east, though each country adapted the script in its own way. Once the Hebrew script began to be used widely, scribes began to commit the word of mouth versions of scripture to parchment but often found there were different versions of the same event. For example, in Genesis there are two different accounts of creation and two different accounts of how Joseph was sold into slavery. This is not unusual when things are handed down by word of mouth but it is important not to

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overestimate these variations; most of the events handed down by word of mouth have been shown to have historical substance.

However, within 200 years of the scriptures first being committed to parchment, 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 also developed as scribes made mistakes or altered what they were copying to improve it or because they did not think that what they were copying made sense.

Some would replace old place names with their modern ones just as we talk about the Roman towns of York and Lincoln rather than *Eboracum* and *Lindum colonia*; some scribes were considerate enough to include both the old name and the new name.

About 300 years before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great conquered Judaea and his Greek speaking troops settled all over the middle east making Greek the most widely spoken language at the time. Apart from the Jews who had been taken into captivity before the time of Alexander and never returned to Judaea, many left Judaea and settled in other parts of Alexander's former empire. For example, Paul was born in Turkey and Barnabas in Cyprus. For them, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek about 200 years before the birth of Christ and this version is frequently quoted in the New Testament. All Christians initially used this version and the Eastern churches continue to use it. Only Western protestants use the shorter version of the Hebrew scriptures compiled by Jewish scholars just over 1,000 years ago.

We know from the 'mistakes' which crept into later copies of the Greek text made over the next 1,000 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 over 1,000 years after the most recent part of it was originally written.

How were these versions transmitted?

While the originals of most of the Old Testament were probably written on parchment and stored relatively carefully because copying was an expensive process at the time, by the time of Jesus, the Old Testament had not only been translated into everyday Greek, it had become widely available on papyrus as well as parchment and the Jews who lived in North Africa would probably have had papyrus copies while those, like Paul, who lived in Turkey would have had parchment copies because papyrus only survives in dry conditions.

The story of the originals of the New Testament is almost the opposite of the story of the originals of the Old Testament; copies of the various books of the New Testament, all written in everyday Greek, circulated in cheap papyrus or parchment copies for the first 300 hundred years and it was only after then that people started putting them together into complete bibles.

So, while the early Christians obviously valued their copies of various parts of the New Testament, they certainly didn't have any bibles in scroll or book form or in a language with religious overtones like Hebrew or any fancy, presentation copies. Their personal scriptures were copies of parts of the New Testament on everyday writing materials.

Bad news

So the bad news for those who want to take all the text of the Word of God which we use today literally is that we certainly don't know for sure how much of the Old Testament is a reliable copy of the Word of God; what western Protestants call the Old Testament today comes from a version of the Hebrew Scriptures which differs from the version used by the scholars who created the Greek version and from what is in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Things should, in theory, be better for the New Testament as the Bible Societies have collaborated to provide the most accurate version of what the original authors of the New Testament wrote in Greek. Sadly English translators in particular appear to be very reluctant to use this version.

So even for the New Testament the bad news for those who want to take all the text of English translations of the New Testament literally is that none of the English translations translate all of what God originally said or intended accurately.

So what about the good news?

However, there is some good news. The first is that those who passed down the early books of the Old Testament did a pretty good job in spite of the inconsistencies between versions. Most people and events mentioned in the early books can be corroborated by historical research even though the historical research may put a slightly different spin on what was happening from the one presented in the Old Testament. We should not be too concerned about this; the same events in India in 1857 are known as the Mutiny in British history books and as the War of Independence in Indian history books.

Because the purpose of the Old Testament is to describe the development of a relationship between God and the Jewish people over many centuries, many people used to believe that it had no more historical value than the myths and legends that many cultures have. But we now know from historical research that many of the events which people passed down by word of mouth over thousands of years had really happened years before they were written down by the Jews. In some cases, other peoples recorded the same events from their point of view.

The second bit of good news is that much of Jesus' teaching has been supported by scientific research, often done, as the research into the historical basis of the Old Testament has been, by non-Christians who were not in the least interested in making religious points.

Firstly, we often hear about 'repentance' in English but that is not what Jesus, or John the Baptist, said; what they said was, 'Change the way you think.' The word 'repent' came into English because Jerome used the Latin word '*repentete*' in his Latin translation of the Bible to try and convey what Jesus and John were saying. But it is not a very good translation.

We all change the way we think as we grow older; it is something which most people do naturally as young children, as young adults and later as older adults. Indeed, one key to a happy old age, assuming all other things go reasonably well for us, is continually changing the way we think throughout our adult lives. Adults who get stuck in a rut in their thinking are much more likely to be unhappy and dissatisfied in old age.

The key change we need to make as Christians is in the way in which we think about God. My old tutor, James Bolton (1973), wrote a very interesting book in which he said that the key difference between Christianity and all other religions was that, in all other religions, you are expected to honour God. In Christianity God honours us by, among other things, allowing us to become His children. This was such a mind-blowing idea that, as Paul says:

... we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness (1 Cor 1:23).

To think about the Messiah as being crucified and through that as the Saviour of the world required a fundamental change in the way religious people and non-religious people thought about God.

Yet what science teaches us is that, if we are not prepared to change the way we think; if we insist on thinking in the same way all our lives, we will ultimately suffer, whether we are

religious or non-religious people.

Secondly, in what we call the Lord's Prayer Jesus advises us to forgive those who fail in their responsibilities towards us and in his advice to Peter about forgiving his brother, Andrew, Jesus says, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven' (Mt 18:22).

Over the last 25 years scientific research has concluded that forgiveness is the best way for a victim to recover from the harm they have suffered. Those who refuse to forgive continue to suffer. So, when Jesus was advising Peter to forgive Andrew, He was not doing it for Andrew's benefit but for Peter's and, though Esau often gets a bad press, his forgiveness of Jacob demonstrates a generosity of spirit which should be a shining example to us all (Gn 33:8-9).

Thirdly, Jesus focused on Leviticus 19:18 'You will love your neighbour as yourself' to which He added, 'Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt 5:44). We now know that love is essential for the full development of a person — those who never experience love never fully develop — and that a five year period of intense love will fully heal every form of abuse — those who carry the scars of abuse are those who have not experienced sufficiently intense love for long enough. The disciple John added another benefit of love: 'There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear' (1 Jn 4:18). We can see through this why Jesus said, 'Love your enemies.' If we love our enemies, we stop fearing them. We gain the capacity to relate to them as fellow human beings, as our neighbours. This is powerful stuff which has been proved right time and time again in real life.

These three examples — changing the way we think, forgiving and loving — from the Word of God predate by two thousand years what scientists have found to be true. There are a great many other examples where the Word of God has predated modern understanding from Jethro's advice to Moses to 'delegate' through David's understanding that you cannot just say 'sorry' — there must be a genuine change of heart — to Jesus' advice that those want to be 'first must be the slave to all' (Mk 10:44).

The third bit of good news is that the Word of God is just as much the key to understanding our relationship with God and with our neighbour as it was 2,000 and more years ago. The story of Joseph's imprisonment as a result of a false accusation is as relevant today as it has ever been and Joseph's struggle to deal with his emotions at meeting the brothers who had sold him into slavery has been echoed many times down the centuries by those who have been betrayed by their nearest and dearest.

The Word of God also tells us that God does not always call those who have behaved impeccably in the face of temptation — he called Jacob, the swindler, to become father of a nation and Moses, the murderer, to lead the children of Israel out of captivity. Nor does He give up on those who have failed to behave well. He did not give up on Abraham, the liar, and David wrote Psalm 51 after he had seduced Bathsheba and arranged for her husband to die so that he could conceal what he had done.

So in thinking about our relationship with God we need to remember that God associates with the most unlikely people in the Old Testament just as Jesus did in the New Testament. We may think that we are unlikely people for God to associate with or we may think that some Christians are unlikely people for God to associate with but God does not see us or them in that way.

That is part of changing the way we think about God and our neighbour which is at the heart of having a relationship with God; if we do not change the way we think and then act on that new way of thinking about God, we cannot be 'born again' and have a meaningful relationship with God or with our neighbour.

But perhaps the most difficult message of the Word of God is that we have to trust God. In the Old Testament, Noah, Abraham, Moses' parents, Moses himself, David and many others had to trust God; in the New Testament Jesus calls us to trust Him and who He is. Time and again, the message is repeated in the Old Testament so that, when Jesus asks us to trust Him, we have plenty of examples of those who have trusted God in the past and who have been rewarded for the their trust.

It does not matter that human beings have not reliably handed down everything by word of mouth; it does not matter that scribes have made mistakes or have thought that they could improve on what they were copying; it does not matter that translators continue to think that they know better and translate what they think should be in the Word of God rather than what is actually in the Word of God.

The power of the Word of God is in the message which it proclaims of the relationship which God wants us to have with Him and with our neighbour. It is a relationship in which:

- the most unlikely people are chosen to serve Him,
- even when we fail to serve Him, we can always change the way we think and find out how to serve Him better, and
- we can only serve Him effectively if we trust Him.

The key message of the Word of God about the relationship which God wants us to have with Him and with our neighbour has survived thousands of years in spite of the foibles and failings of those who have transmitted it to successive generations.

References

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