

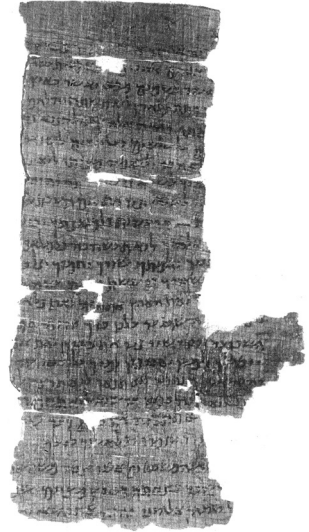
THE TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT—SUMMARY

The transmission of the Hebrew Bible has been regarded as a holy tradition by Jewish rabbis for hundreds of years. In the rabbinical tradition, two key principles have been conveyed: first, to use the Hebrew Scriptures to their fullest spiritual potential; and second, to faithfully preserve the text. According to one of the world's leading experts on transmission of rabbinic traditions, Birger Gerhardsson, the dominant attitude was the desire to faithfully reproduce the sacred biblical text in its untouched traditional state.

The Process of Textual Preservation

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has given us much insight into the origins of textual preservation. As already mentioned above, the lines of the pre-Masoretic Text had already existed, meaning that much care has already been given to a system in which the biblical text was well preserved centuries prior to the work of later Masoretes. Rabbinic material has been consulted to resolve the issue of how this textual preservation came about.

Private copying of the Hebrew Scriptures, primitive as it may have been, may have occurred around the beginning of the life of Christ. However, the scrolls that were used for the purposes of public worship, teaching, and other Jewish functions were copied by professional copyists.



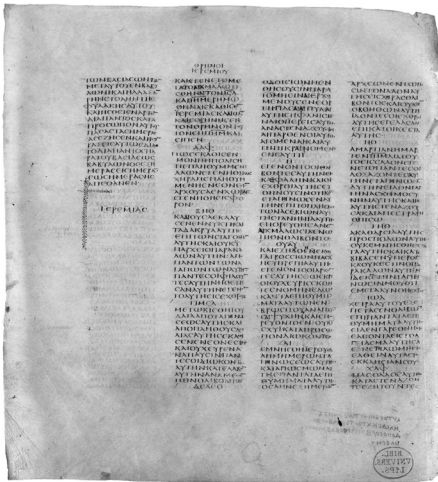
Though not part of the Dead Sea Scroll collection, the Nash Papyrus (dated to c. 150 BC) contains a portion of the Decalogue: Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5:6-21; and the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The term *sopher* (plural: *sopherim*—see chapter 1), or “Scripture specialist,” can connote two main senses: it could refer to one who was a skilled writer or copyist. On the other hand it could refer to someone who “knows the Scriptures” or “one who is schooled in the Scriptures.” The meaning of the term had changed somewhat by the time of the exile to Babylon (sixth century BC). It still meant someone who specialized in the writing of the Torah and who taught and worked with the Scriptures.

Those who were responsible for the normal transmission of the sacred documents were ones who knew the Scriptures by heart due to either their education, or the frequency of writing the same book repeatedly. There were some who were capable of writing out the whole of Scripture from memory, which was not an uncommon thing during this ancient time period.

Regardless of their ability to memorize the Hebrew texts, rabbinic Judaism unwaveringly employed the rule that the Torah was not to be copied from memory. The written Torah was to be transmitted in written form and therefore must be copied down from a written source (known today as a *Vorlage*). This rule was emphatically enforced and was never to be breached. The copyist was not permitted to create a manuscript without a *Vorlage* in front of him. This rule made it possible to avoid any problems that could arise with corruption of the system used to check the reading of a text and the written form of the text (later established as the Kethib-Qere system in the Masoretic tradition, as described in chapter 1).

There was much more involved in the transmission of the biblical texts than merely copying what was seen on a piece of paper. According to rabbinical texts, copyists were required to read the Hebrew texts out loud as they wrote them down. The copyist needed to give attention to how the Scriptures were read because it was also required that the copyist possess sufficient knowledge of both a tradition of *kethib* as well as of *qere*. They were also equipped with the tradition that would enable them to check their works in various areas. This tradition was employed well before the time of Christ, and it grew more precise over the centuries until it was standardized in the Masoretic system.



The Codex Sinaiticus at one time contained the entire Old and New Testament in Greek. Today the codex contains the entire New Testament and most of the Old Testament. The pictured section of the manuscript contains the ending of the book of Jeremiah and the beginning of Lamentations. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures involved more than merely supplying the demand for more books in the Jewish religious culture. This preservation tradition springs from a reverence of the Pentateuch and a desire to aid in the effort to supply Israel with copies of these sacred texts.

A word about the oral transmission of the Old Testament should be mentioned. Oral tradition was very important in the Jewish culture and served as one of the main ways to transfer information, among many other things. The Torah, being a central part of Judaism, was transmitted orally as well as in written form. Birger Gerhardsson provides locations of the most important centers for the preservation of this tradition, with texts such as the oral Torah. The home was seen as the foundation where the Torah could be preserved faithfully in deed and in discussion within the family. The children in the home were raised in an environment in which all actions and behavior were affected by the teachings found in the Torah. It was not uncommon to expect Jewish children to memorize vast quantities of Scripture. These kinds of customs continued on in the community from private family devotional life into the public domains. The Scriptures of the Torah were used in public Jewish ceremonies as well, such as during feast days in the Temple. Rituals that were done during these gatherings were aimed at making the people familiar with the text in the Torah. Another area where a young person could be exposed to the oral Torah was in a qualified school. These schools were often held in the synagogue, where scholars could be trained in fields dedicated to the scribal transmission of the text.¹

Summary and Conclusions

The Old Testament is the most accurately documented book from before the time of Christ. There are literally tens of thousands of manuscripts, and some of the fragments that date as early as 600 BC. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide the best test of how accurately the Old Testament was copied over the centuries since they provide a comparison of what the text was like about a thousand years earlier than the one we had before the scrolls were discovered. Millar Burrows wrote, “It is a matter of wonder that through something like a thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. . . . Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.”² F.F. Bruce added, “It may now be more confidently asserted than ever before that the Dead Sea discoveries have enabled us to answer this question [of the reliability of the Old Testament text] in the affirmative with much greater assurance than was possible before 1948.”³ Old Testament expert Gleason Archer concluded that the Isaiah text “proved to be word for word identical with our 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.”⁴ A sample typical of the whole Hebrew text was taken from the famous Isaiah 53 passage. In a thousand years of copying it, there was only one word difference (“light” in v. 11), and it made no difference in the meaning of the text!

Old Testament Manuscripts			
Name	Date Original Was Written	Earliest Copy or Copies	Biblical Books
Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS)	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	250 BC–AD 68	Includes 223-plus biblical manuscripts from every book of the Old Testament except Esther
DSS Isaiah Scroll A	8th century BC	150–100 BC	Complete copy of the book of Isaiah
DSS Habakkuk Commentary	7th century BC	64 BC	Portions of Habakkuk
Rylands Papyrus 458	15th or 13th century BC	150 BC	Contains Greek portions of Deuteronomy 23–28
Nash Papyrus	15th or 13th century BC	150 BC–AD 68	Portion of the Decalogue (Exodus 20); Deuteronomy 5:6–21; Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)
Peshitta	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 100–200	Entire Old Testament in Syriac
Chester Beatty Papyri	15th or 13th to 8th century BC	AD 150	Large portions of Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther, and Ecclesiastes
Targum of Onkelos	15th or 13th century BC	AD 200	Torah
Codex Vaticanus (B)	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 325	Entire Greek Old Testament and Apocrypha in uncials except portions of Genesis, 2 Kings, Psalms, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh
Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus	13th–10th centuries BC	AD 345	Contains Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
Codex Sinaiticus (aleph)	13th–4th centuries BC	AD 350	Half the Old Testament in Greek uncial
Latin Vulgate	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 390–405	Entire Old Testament in Latin

Name	Date Original Was Written	Earliest Copy or Copies	Biblical Books
Codex Alexandrinus (A)	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 450	Entire Old Testament in Greek uncial
British Museum Oriental 4445	15th or 13th century BC	AD 850	Pentateuch
Codex Cairensis (C)	13th–4th centuries BC	AD 895	Former and Latter Prophets
Aleppo Codex	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 900	Oldest complete Hebrew text of the Old Testament
Babylonian Codex of the Latter Prophets	7th–4th centuries BC	AD 916	Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the 12 Minor Prophets
Codex Lenin-gradensis B19A (L)	15th or 13th to 4th century BC	AD 1008	Complete Hebrew text of the Old Testament
Samaritan Pentateuch (SP)	15th or 13th century BC	10th–11th century AD	Written in Samaritan characters

Chart from H. Wayne House and Joseph M. Holden, *Charts of Apologetics and Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), chart 43. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Note: Whether the books of Moses were composed in the fifteenth or thirteenth century BC depends on how one views the date of the Exodus. Most conservative scholars embrace the earlier date of around 1440 BC for the composition of the Pentateuch, while some conservative scholars and liberal scholars prefer the later date of thirteenth century BC for its composition.