



Answers for a Changing Culture

10 Can We Trust The Bible We Have?

God has preserved His Word through thousands of manuscript copies. Although those copies contain some differences, careful comparison enables us to know the biblical text with great confidence.

EMBARK

Open almost any modern Bible and eventually you will find a note like **"Some manuscripts..."**, **"Other manuscripts..."**, or **"The earliest manuscripts do not include..."** For some Christians, those words can be unsettling. If God inspired His Word, why do manuscripts differ? Who decides which reading belongs in our Bible? And can we really know what the biblical authors originally wrote?

Last time we considered **translation**—how the same Hebrew or Greek words can be expressed differently in English. This week we are asking an earlier question: **What happens when the handwritten copies themselves differ?**

1. What is your first reaction when you see a footnote saying that some manuscripts read differently?
2. Does the existence of manuscript differences necessarily mean that Scripture has been corrupted? Why or why not?
3. What would we need in order to determine which reading most likely represents what the biblical author originally wrote?

EXAMINE

READ Deuteronomy 17:18–20

4. What was Israel's king commanded to produce for himself?
5. What was he expected to do with that copy throughout his life?
6. What does this passage assume about a faithful copy of God's written Word?

READ Jeremiah 36:1–4, 20–32

7. What happened to the first scroll containing Jeremiah's words?
8. After the scroll was destroyed, what did God command Jeremiah to do?
9. According to verse 32, how did the replacement scroll compare with the first one?
10. What does this account teach us about the relationship between God's Word and the physical manuscript that contains it?

READ Luke 4:16–21

11. What did Jesus receive and read in the synagogue?
12. Was Jesus holding Isaiah's original manuscript?
13. How did Jesus treat the copy of Isaiah available to Him?
14. What does this suggest about whether a faithful copy can truly be called and treated as Scripture?



EXPOSE

We confuse inspiration with perfect copying

God inspired the original writings of Scripture. Those original documents are sometimes called the **autographs**. We no longer possess them. What we possess are **manuscripts**—handwritten copies of biblical books, often copies of other copies. Because manuscripts were copied by hand, differences arose: spelling changes, reversed word order, repeated or skipped words, explanatory additions, and other variations. **A manuscript difference is not the same thing as a different Bible.** Most differences are minor and easily recognized.

We misunderstand textual criticism

Textual criticism is not criticizing the Bible. It is the careful comparison of surviving manuscripts in order to determine as closely as possible the wording of the original text. When manuscripts disagree, scholars consider questions such as:

- How old is the manuscript?
- How widely is the reading represented?
- Which reading best explains how the others may have arisen?

The goal is not to create Scripture but to identify as carefully as possible what Scripture originally said.

We turn manuscript traditions into competing “Bibles”

New Testament manuscripts often show broad patterns of agreement. Two labels commonly encountered are:

Byzantine Tradition

Represented by the largest number of surviving Greek manuscripts
Especially common in the Greek-speaking Byzantine world
Strongly related to the textual tradition behind the KJV
Often later in date among surviving copies

Alexandrian Tradition

Represented by fewer surviving manuscripts, including many of the earliest
Many early examples survived in Egypt’s dry climate
Important evidence in modern critical editions
Includes early witnesses such as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus

Modern critical editions do not simply follow Sinaiticus and Vaticanus; they compare thousands of manuscripts and other ancient witnesses. These are not two completely different New Testaments. **They agree overwhelmingly.** The debate concerns a comparatively small number of places where the wording differs.

Nor does **“majority” automatically mean original**, and **“oldest” automatically mean original**. Both are evidence that must be evaluated.

We confuse the Textus Receptus with the entire Byzantine tradition

The **Textus Receptus** (“Received Text”) is not one ancient manuscript but a series of printed Greek New Testaments beginning with Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus worked from a small number of relatively late manuscripts, and later editors revised his work. The KJV New Testament was translated primarily from this textual tradition. **Textus Receptus and Majority Text are not the same thing.**

The Dead Sea Scrolls give us perspective

The **Dead Sea Scrolls** gave us Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts roughly a thousand years earlier than many previously known copies. They contain some differences but also remarkable agreement with the later Masoretic tradition, giving us earlier evidence with which to evaluate the text.

We mistake uncertainty in a few words for uncertainty about the Bible

Some passages require careful judgment, but that should produce humility, not panic. The abundance of manuscripts allows us to identify and compare variants, and **no central Christian doctrine depends upon a disputed textual reading.**

ENGAGE

Step 1: Distinguish inspiration from transmission.

God inspired the original text. Copies transmit that text. A copying difference does not undo inspiration.

Step 2: Do not fear the footnotes.

A textual note is evidence of transparency. Translators are showing us where manuscript evidence differs rather than hiding it.

Step 3: Avoid simplistic rules.

“Majority always wins” and “oldest is always best” are both too simple. Manuscript evidence has to be weighed, not merely counted or dated.

Step 4: Keep the categories straight.

Byzantine, Alexandrian, Majority Text, Textus Receptus, and modern critical text describe related but different things. Do not use the labels interchangeably.

Step 5: Refuse conspiracy thinking.

Differences between translations are not evidence that someone is trying to remove the deity of Christ, the resurrection, the blood, or other Christian doctrines. Those teachings are established repeatedly in undisputed passages throughout Scripture.

Step 6: Let difficult readings increase carefulness rather than destroy confidence.

Where a passage is textually uncertain, acknowledge the uncertainty honestly and interpret Scripture in light of what is clear elsewhere.

Step 7: Thank God for abundant evidence.

We do not possess the autographs, but we possess thousands of witnesses to the text. Their remarkable agreement gives us strong reason for confidence that the Bible in our hands faithfully communicates the Word God gave.

MEMORIZE

Isaiah 40:8 (CSB) “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever.”

Remember... *God has not preserved His Word by giving us one flawless handwritten copy or one exclusive printed edition. He has preserved it through an abundant manuscript tradition that allows differences to be identified, compared, and carefully evaluated. We should approach those differences with humility and honesty—but also with deep confidence that we possess the Word of God.*