

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Scribal Copying of the Old Testament Text Session 3, 6-min. Video Overview

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So, you've got this book, the Bible, but have you ever stopped to think about how it actually got to us? I mean, we're talking about a collection of texts that survived for thousands of years. It's an absolutely incredible story, and that's exactly what we're going to unpack. Alright, let's just get right to the heart of it.

The big question. How can you really trust a book that was copied by hand for 3,000 years? Think about that. Before printers, before copy machines, it was just people with ink and scrolls copying every single letter.

So, how do we know they got it right? I mean, seriously, it's like the ultimate game of telephone, isn't it? Could you copy a massive book by hand without making a single mistake? I know I couldn't. Now imagine that process happening over and over and over again, for thousands of years. You'd think the original message would be completely lost by now.

So, how did they deal with this? Well, the first part of the puzzle is understanding that the books in the Bible weren't just thrown together randomly. Nope. They went through this really careful, really rigorous filtering process.

It's called canonization. Basically, the ancient communities had a checklist. They'd ask a bunch of questions to decide if a book really belonged.

Questions like: Does this book claim to be from God? Was it written by someone they knew and trusted, like a prophet or an apostle? And a big one: does it actually line up with what they already believed and accepted as scripture? And maybe most importantly, was it already being used and accepted by the community? It wasn't a rubber stamp process, you know? These books were seriously put to the test. Okay, but even with this careful selection process, you still have the human factor. The copying was still done by people.

And well, people mess up. We make mistakes. And actually, leaning into this messy reality is a huge part of why scholars are so confident in the text we have today.

Sounds weird, right? Let me explain. Just look at this. This is a perfect example of how easy it was to make a mistake.

In Hebrew, the letter for D and the letter for R, I mean, they look almost exactly the same. The only difference is that tiny little corner. Now, picture a scribe: it's late, the candlelight is flickering, and it would be so easy to mix those up and accidentally change a name from, say, Dodanin to Rodanin.

And here's another massive headache for the scribes. Early Greek manuscripts were written in all caps, with no spaces between words. At all.

So you get something like this. What does that say? Is it, Christ is now here? Or is it, Christ is nowhere? Totally different meanings. The scribe had to decide, and you can see how easily confusion could slip into the text.

So you've got these honest mistakes, you know, confusing letters, no spaces. It really makes you wonder, right? Is the text we have today just a hopelessly corrupted mess? Did that game of telephone totally fail? Well, the answer, and this might surprise you, is a definite no. And this is where a cool field of study called textual criticism saves the day.

See, instead of seeing all these little errors as a disaster, scholars see them as clues. They're data points. And the amount of data they have to work with, it's just, it's mind-blowing.

Get this. Just for the New Testament, scholars have found more than 5,000 early Greek manuscripts, or little pieces of manuscripts. Let that sink in.

Five thousand. We're not talking about a handful of copies here. This is a massive, enormous library of evidence from the ancient world.

And to put that number into perspective, just look at this comparison. For other really important ancient writers, like Plato, we have maybe ten surviving copies of his work. Ten.

For Aristotle, we've got about 120. And then you look at the New Testament, with over 5,000. It's not even in the same league.

No other ancient book comes remotely close. So here's the crazy part. Having all those thousands of copies is actually the solution to the game of telephone problem.

Think about it. If a scribe in, say, Egypt, makes a weird little mistake, it's going to stand out. Because it won't show up in the hundreds of other copies from Rome or Syria.

By comparing all these manuscripts, scholars can spot the errors, filter them out, and get back to what the original text almost certainly said. And then came the discovery that changed everything. I'm talking about the Dead Sea Scrolls, found back in the 40s.

This was a total game changer. Why? Because all of a sudden, scholars had copies of the Hebrew Bible that were a thousand years older than anything they'd had before. It was like a time machine.

They could finally check a whole millennium of scribal copying. And what did they find? The texts were almost identical. The scribes had been incredibly, remarkably faithful.

So you see, the evidence isn't just sitting in stuffy old libraries. It's literally being dug up from the dirt. Which brings me to the verdict.

And one last, just stunning piece of proof. You've probably heard this before. It's the Priestly Blessing from the Book of Numbers.

It's been a cornerstone for Jewish and Christian faiths for, well, forever, it seems. We see it in our Bibles today. But the real question is, just how far back does it go? Well, get this.

In the 1980s, archaeologists found a tomb near Jerusalem. It had been sealed shut since 700 BC. And inside, they found this tiny little silver scroll, all rolled up like an amulet.

It took them forever to carefully unroll it. And when they finally did, they found these exact words inscribed on it. This tiny piece of silver is the oldest piece of the Bible ever found.

It proves these words were being copied hundreds of years before the Dead Sea Scrolls. And they're basically identical to what we read in our Bibles right now. So let's wrap this up.

The journey of this book wasn't perfect. It was messy. It was handled by humans who, you know, made human mistakes.

But despite that, when you look at the mountain of evidence we have, the message has been preserved with just jaw-dropping accuracy. Which leaves us with one last question to think about. What does it mean that a process so full of human flaws could still produce a text that is so incredibly, unbelievably accurate across millennia?