

Old Testament History, Literature, and Theology

The Transmission of the Bible from God to Us

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Ted Hildebrandt examines the historical transmission of the Old Testament text from divine revelation to contemporary Bibles. He outlines the core criteria used to establish canonical scripture and explains why five specific books, known as the Antilegomena, faced initial questioning by ancient Jewish scholars. The discussion then transitions to textual criticism, categorizing common scribal copyist errors such as letter confusions, omitted lines, and harmonizations across centuries of manual copying. Finally, Hildebrandt demonstrates the overall historical reliability of the Biblical text through textual comparisons, manuscript families, and monumental archaeological discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Ketef Hinnom silver amulets.

Outline

I. Course Logistics and Overview

A. Upcoming Reading & Assignments

1. Primary biblical reading: Genesis chapters 26 through 50
2. Secondary articles: John Sailhamer's article on 'Cosmic Maps'
3. Textbook reading: Select pages from 'Our Father Abraham'
4. Memory work and Bible-robics exercises for Genesis

B. Course Administration & Examination Structure

1. Weekly ten-question quizzes administered every Thursday
2. Make-up policy and turnaround timeframe for graded quizzes
3. Major examinations scheduled every five quizzes
4. Honors option prerequisites requiring minimum exam scores

II. Introduction: The Transmission of the Bible from God to Us

A. Purpose of Addressing Textual Transmission at the Freshman Level

1. Providing foundational knowledge before exposure to university-level biblical skepticism
2. Bridging the historical gap between ancient authors (Moses, Isaiah) and modern readers
3. Distinguishing between objective manuscript facts and subjective theological opinions

B. Scope and Complexity of the Material

1. Condensing semester-long courses on canonization and textual criticism into a concise survey
2. Commitment to transparent historical reporting despite instructional challenges

III. Canonization: Principles and Criteria

A. Definition and Historical Context of Canonicity

1. Definition of canonization as the process of recognizing authoritative sacred scripture
2. Mutual recognition among ancient biblical writers
 - a. Peter's recognition of Paul's epistles as scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16)
 - b. Daniel's citation and immediate acceptance of Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy (Daniel 9:2)
3. Gradual circulation and collection of manuscripts in antiquity

B. Five Core Criteria for Canonicity

1. Divine Inspiration: Does the book explicitly claim to speak for God ('Thus saith the Lord')?
2. Prophetic Authorship: Was it written by an accredited prophet or servant of God (Moses, Isaiah, David)?
3. Doctrinal Consistency: Does it agree with prior divine revelation without contradiction?
4. Spiritual Power: Does the text demonstrate transformative, life-changing power?
5. Communal Acceptance: Was it received and affirmed by the historical community of faith (the Jewish nation for the Old Testament)?

IV. The Antilegomena: 'Books Spoken Against'

A. Definition and Historical Significance

1. Greek etymology: 'Anti' (against) + 'Lego' (to speak)
2. Reflects the rigorous scrutiny applied by ancient Jewish scholars prior to canonization
3. Full acceptance achieved despite early debates

B. The Five Questioned Books and Their Resolutions

1. Proverbs
 - a. Objection: Apparent internal contradiction between Proverbs 26:4 ('Answer not a fool') and 26:5 ('Answer a fool')
 - b. Resolution: Contextual wisdom requires discernment to determine when each principle applies
2. Ezekiel
 - a. Objection: Dimensions of the vision temple in chapters 40-48 exceed the physical Temple Mount
 - b. Resolution: Refers to an eschatological future temple following apocalyptic geographical changes
3. Esther
 - a. Objection: Total absence of the explicit divine name (Yahweh)
 - b. Resolution: Providential divine action is evident throughout; established the historical Feast of Purim

4. Ecclesiastes

- a. Objection: Apparent philosophical pessimism and declarations that 'all is vanity'
- b. Resolution: Honest engagement with human suffering and existential reality, balanced by covenantal duty (Ecclesiastes 12)

5. Song of Songs

- a. Objection: Explicit sexual and romantic imagery
- b. Resolution: Celebrates God-ordained romantic intimacy; historically allegorized by early church and Jewish interpreters

V. Non-Canonical Literature: Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

A. The Old Testament Apocrypha (Deuterocanonical Books)

- 1. Originates from the 400-year intertestamental period between Malachi and the New Testament
- 2. Includes major historical works like 1 & 2 Maccabees (origin of Hanukkah / Feast of Lights)
- 3. Canonical Status: Accepted in Roman Catholic tradition (Council of Trent, 1545) but excluded from the Hebrew and Protestant canons

B. The Pseudepigrapha ('False Writings')

- 1. Spurious works attributed falsely to ancient figures (e.g., Book of Enoch, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas)
- 2. Universal rejection by both Jewish and Christian canonical traditions
- 3. Recognized as late Gnostic or legendary texts lacking historical scriptural authority

VI. Textual Transmission and Scribal Copying

A. The Physical Process of Transmission over 3,000 Years

- 1. Manual hand-copying across generations without modern editorial tools or spellcheck
- 2. The presence of copyist variants and human errors in surviving manuscripts

B. Case Studies in Textual Variants

- 1. 1 Samuel 13:1: Missing numerical values for Saul's age and length of reign across Hebrew and Septuagint traditions
- 2. Mark 16:9-20: Textual uncertainty regarding the extended ending of Mark in early Greek uncials
- 3. 1 John 5:7 (Comma Johanneum): Late Latin insertion supporting the Trinity, absent in all early Greek manuscripts

C. Comparative Manuscript Evidence and Reliability

- 1. New Testament manuscript abundance (~5,000 Greek copies) compared to classical works (Plato: 7-13; Aristotle: ~120)
- 2. Papyrus P52 (Gospel of John fragment) dating within 30 years of original apostolic composition

D. Theological Perspective on Textual Imperfection

- 1. God's providential use of flawed human copyist processes

2. Rationale for non-preservation of physical original autographs: Preventing relic worship and idolatry

VII. Taxonomy of Scribal Errors

A. Visual Errors

1. Confusion of similar Hebrew graphic characters (e.g., Dalet [ד] vs. Resh [ר] in Dodanim/Rodanim)
2. Scriptio Continua: Continuous capital letters without word spaces creating ambiguous segmentations (e.g., CHRISTISNOWHERE)

B. Auditory and Phonetic Errors

1. Errors arising from oral dictation of manuscripts
2. Confusion of homophones (e.g., Psalm 100:3: lo' anaknu 'not we ourselves' vs. l'o anaknu 'we are His')

C. Mechanical and Structural Errors

1. Metathesis: Accidental swapping or transposition of adjacent letters
2. Homeoteleuton: Eye skipping lines of text due to identical phrase or clause endings
3. Dittography (accidental double writing) and Haplography (accidental single writing of doubled text)
4. Harmonizing Corruptions: Altering unsettling expressions to pious alternatives (e.g., Job 3: 'bless God' for 'curse God')
5. Conflation: Combining two distinct variant readings from separate manuscripts into an expanded reading

VIII. Principles of Textual Criticism and Manuscript Evidence

A. Methodological Rules for Weighing Textual Variants

1. Preference for older manuscripts (closer to original writing)
2. Preference for shorter readings (accounting for textual expansion through conflation)
3. Preference for wide geographical distribution of supporting manuscripts
4. Evaluation of manuscript families (Western, Alexandrian, Byzantine)

B. Old Testament Manuscript Traditions and Discoveries

1. Contrast between early Christian scribes (persecuted, non-professional) and Jewish scribal guilds (meticulous letter counting)
2. The Masoretic Text (MT): Primary medieval Hebrew tradition (c. 800-1000 AD)
3. The Dead Sea Scrolls (1948): Discovery at Qumran bridging a 1,000-year gap and validating the accuracy of the Masoretic Text
4. Ketef Hinnom Silver Amulets (Gabi Barkai discovery): 7th-century BC silver scroll containing the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26), the oldest surviving biblical text