

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Session 3, Scribal Copying of the Old Testament Text

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, deep divers. Get ready, because today we're taking a trip back in time, way back, to uncover how the Bible came to be. It really is an incredible journey, isn't it? Think about it.

From the original writers to the book we hold today. Yeah, from ancient scrolls to, well, you know, apps on our phones. I mean, how did they even decide what made it in? Like, what was the rulebook for building this collection? Well, that process, that's what we call canonization.

Figuring out which books were, like, divinely inspired, you know, the ones worthy of being part of the Bible. And trust me, it was anything but simple. I bet.

I mean, even, like, big names back then, like Peter and Paul, they didn't have a complete Bible as we do now. You got it. It was a gradual thing, you know, recognizing these texts and then figuring out the whole canon.

It took time. Lots of discussions, debates about certain books. It's pretty fascinating to see how they decided which ones made the cut.

OK, so what were they looking for? What made a book, like, Bible-worthy? Well, the first thing they looked at was, did it claim to be from God? Phrases like, thus saith the Lord. Those were like a big green light. Yeah, had to have that divine stamp of approval.

Right. What else? Authorship was huge. Was it written by a prophet or someone, you know, close to God like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, those guys? And they look for consistency, too, right? Did it line up with what they already believed? Did it fit with the core teachings? So no contradicting the greatest hits.

Exactly. And then did it have impact? You know, did it have this power to change lives? And finally, probably most important, did the people of God accept it? In the Old Testament, that meant the Jewish people. So the Jewish people, they had a major role in shaping the Old Testament.

Right. Like it wasn't just some top-down decree. Absolutely.

And this is where it gets even more interesting. You see, even with the books that made it in, there were still some, you know, disagreements. Wait, hold on.

Disagreements about the chosen books. OK, now you got me hooked. Yeah.

We're talking about the Antilogomena. It literally means spoken against. These were the books that even the Jewish community had questions about.

Some wondered about the author, some about the theology, some about how it fit with other scriptures. Wow. So even with these sacred texts, there was room for like different opinions.

That's pretty amazing. So tell me, what were some of these books that caused all this debate and why? Well, take Proverbs, for example. It's full of wisdom, but some verses, well, they seem to contradict each other.

And that led to some lively discussions, you know. Can you give me an example? Like what kind of contradiction? Sure. So there's Proverbs 26.4 to 5. One verse says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly.

But then the very next verse says, answer a fool according to his folly. Whoa. That's a pretty big contradiction.

So how do they deal with that? It's not so much about a hard-and-fast rule, but more like recognizing that wisdom needs, you know, discernment. Sometimes you've got to engage, prevent a fool from getting, you know, more arrogant. Other times it's better to just walk away and not get pulled into a pointless argument.

It's like choosing your battles, right? Even in the Bible, it's encouraging us to think critically and consider the context. Exactly. It reminds us that even these ancient texts, as revered as they are, invite interpretation and debate.

Understanding and applying scripture is not meant to be passive. OK, so Proverbs, got it. What other books were, like, debated? Well, Ezekiel caused a stir, too.

You see, in chapters 40 through 48, it describes this huge temple, like massive. But the dimensions, well, they just wouldn't fit on the actual temple mount in Jerusalem. So some Jewish scholars were like, wait a minute.

Is Ezekiel's vision even accurate? So was he, like, exaggerating or what? Maybe he wasn't giving a literal blueprint, but describing a future temple, one that would exist after, you know, some big changes. Remember, the Bible talks about a transformed earth in the end times, right? OK, so maybe a symbolic vision, not a literal floor plan. Got it.

Any other controversial books? You bet. Esther is another interesting one. Believe it or not, God's name, Yahweh or Jehovah, is never actually mentioned, even though it's pretty clear he's working behind the scenes.

Whoa, that's wild. So even the absence of something could spark a debate. What about Ecclesiastes? That one always seemed a little different to me.

Yeah, Ecclesiastes definitely ruffled some feathers. It talks about, you know, vanity and the meaninglessness of life. That's heavy stuff, especially if you're looking for, like, a feel-good faith.

It grapples with those big questions, you know, existence, purpose, all that. Yeah, I can see why that might make some people squirm. So did they try to, like, soften the message? Some did.

But Dr. Hildebrandt suggests we shouldn't shy away from these parts of the Bible. They reflect the truth. You know, life isn't always sunshine and roses.

We all struggle with meaning, and Ecclesiastes acknowledges that. It's like the Bible saying it's OK to not be OK. Facing those tough questions that can actually lead to, you know, growth.

Exactly. And finally, there's Song of Songs, which raised eyebrows because of, well, its language. It's pretty sensual, allegorical.

And some wondered if it belonged in, you know, sacred scripture. Oh, that one I got to hear more about. What was so scandalous? Thanks to some ancient texts, scholars have been able to figure out a lot of the imagery in Song of Songs.

And it turns out it's pretty explicit. It celebrates romantic love, physical intimacy in very vivid terms. Wow.

So the Bible doesn't shy away from, you know, human experience. Yeah. Even the passionate parts.

But I bet that made some people back then blush. For sure. And it shows us that choosing the canon was complex.

It involved a lot of thought, debate, and, in the end, accepting a variety of texts. This really makes me think about how those ancient debates shaped the Bible we have today. It wasn't just like collecting books.

It was wrestling with ideas, challenging assumptions. You got it. And it wasn't a one-time thing either.

The canon continued to evolve for centuries. So what happened to the books that didn't make it? The ones left out? Now, that's a great question. It takes us into the world of the books that almost made it, raising even more questions, adding another layer to this incredible journey.

Oh, you've definitely piqued my interest. Let's explore that uncharted territory. So we've been talking about the books that are in the Bible, the official canon.

But what about the ones that didn't make it? That's where we get into the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. They give us a peek into, like, the wider world of Jewish and early Christian writings. OK, color me intrigued.

Break it down for me. What are these categories all about? All right. So the Apocrypha are books that are in some Bibles, mostly Catholic and Orthodox ones, but you won't find them in most Protestant Bibles.

They're like extra background info, historical stuff, religious context. They help fill in some gaps between the Old and New Testaments. So like bonus chapters.

Yeah. Giving us a fuller picture. Exactly.

Think of it like this. They give us insight into the Second Temple period. That's the time between the Old and New Testaments.

A lot was happening then. Big changes for the Jewish people. That's a period we don't hear much about in the Protestant Bible.

What kind of insights are we talking about? Well, take the books of Maccabees. They tell the story of the Maccabean Revolt. That was a Jewish uprising against the Seleucid rulers back in the second century B.C. And that's actually the background for Hanukkah.

You know, the Festival of Lights. It celebrates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem after those Seleucid guys desecrated it. So these books, they shed light on events and traditions that are important to Jewish history.

Precisely. They give us a window into what those Jewish communities believed, how they lived, and what they struggled with during that time. And, you know, even though most Protestants don't see them as, like, equal to the official scriptures, they still have value historically and from a literary standpoint.

It's like getting a backstage pass, seeing what led up to the world Jesus was born into. Now, the pseudepigrapha, those are a whole different ballgame. These are writings that claim to be by, like, biblical figures.

But most scholars agree they're not authentic. They were written later. So, like ancient fan fiction, but with biblical characters.

You got it. They often have these wild stories, visions, teachings that go way beyond what's in the actual Bible. I have to admit, I kind of find those interesting.

They appeal to that, you know, that fascination with the unknown. Right. What if? I get it.

They show us how creative those ancient writers were, how they took those religious traditions and, you know, spun them in new directions. But. Got to be careful, right? We can't take them as fact.

They don't give us the real deal on the historical Jesus or those biblical events. Enjoy the ride, but don't believe everything you read. Exactly.

Fun to read, but not the same as the Bible's teachings. OK, so we've got the canon, the debated books, the ones that were left out. But how did these ancient texts, written on what- papyrus, scrolls- actually survive, and how did they get to us? That seems like a whole adventure in itself.

Oh, it is. And it's an adventure that involves lots of people, lots of careful copying and, you know, the occasional mistake along the way. That's what makes me nervous.

Copying by hand for centuries before printing presses and computers. There had to be some slip-ups, right? You're right to think that getting the biblical texts from there to here was a long process. It relied on scribes, you know, diligently copying those texts over generations.

And yeah, as you might guess, humans make mistakes. OK, spill the tea. Give me an example of one of those scribal oopsies.

OK, here's a good one. In 1 Samuel 13.1, it talks about King Saul, his age, and how long he reigned. But in the original Hebrew, the numbers are missing.

Wait, really? So how do different Bibles handle that? Well, that's what's so interesting. Some translations, like the ESV, just leave a blank space, you know, acknowledging that something's missing. Others, like the NIV, make an educated guess based on other parts of the Bible.

So, missing puzzle pieces and translators trying to fill them in. Exactly. And here's another head-scratcher.

Mark 16, the ending of that gospel, is actually disputed. The earliest manuscripts just stop at verse 8. They don't have some of the more famous resurrection appearances that we see in later versions. Whoa.

So some of the stories we've always known, they might not even have been in the original. How do Bibles today deal with that? Most modern translations, they'll put in a footnote or they'll set those verses apart somehow to show that, hey, not everyone agrees on these. You know, that makes me think of another passage.

First John 5.7. It's about the Trinity. What's the deal with that one? Ah, yeah. Classic example of something added later.

Most early manuscripts don't have it. It was probably added centuries after the New Testament was written. It makes you wonder how that happened, right? Why would someone add something like that intentionally? Yeah.

Or just a mistake? Hard to say for sure, but it shows how Christian beliefs developed over time. You know, as new ideas came up, some scribes might have felt the need to like tweak the text, make it fit with those newer interpretations. So even though we have these variations, these errors, does that mean we can't trust the Bible? How can we be sure what we have today is accurate? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Scholars have been wrestling with that for ages.

But think about this. The number of biblical manuscripts we have is mind-blowing. Over 5,000 for the New Testament alone.

That makes it the most well-documented ancient text, period. Really? More than Plato? Aristotle? That's amazing. Yep.

We even have pieces of John's gospel from just a few decades after he died. That kind of evidence is unheard of in ancient literature. It gives us a lot of confidence that the text we have is reliable.

OK, that's reassuring. But I got to ask, what about those scribal errors? What were they doing? Like falling asleep mid-copy? Or were there like specific types of mistakes they made? Well, picture this. Copying these long texts by hand, dim lighting, no spell check.

It's no surprise that certain errors popped up more than others. I can relate. I make typos all the time, even with spell check.

Right. Now, remember, some of these texts were first passed down orally before anyone wrote them down. So you could get words that sound alike but have different meanings.

And that could cause mix-ups. Like those pesky homophones, the ones spell check misses. I bet that led to some interesting variations.

You bet. They also had, you know, switched letters, skipped lines because of repeated phrases, wrote a word twice by accident, or left out a repetition. It's wild.

They had names for all these errors. They're really trying to understand these variations, get as close to the original as they could. Oh, yeah.

Super meticulous. And when they had different manuscript versions, they came up with rules for figuring out the most reliable one. Textual criticism, they call it.

Comparing manuscripts, you know, detective work, basically. So it wasn't just random. They had a system.

Exactly. One big thing was the age of the manuscript. Older was usually better because it was closer to the original.

Makes sense. The closer to the source, the better. Anything else? Shorter readings were often preferred because, you know, scribes sometimes added stuff over time, and they liked manuscripts from different places.

If a certain reading popped up in texts from all over, it was probably more authentic. Like cross-checking to weed out those regional differences or mistakes. It's fascinating how much thought went into all of this.

Isn't it? They also looked at manuscript families, like grouping texts that had a common ancestor, so they could trace those different versions back and figure out which lines were most reliable. Like a family tree for the Bible. Perfect analogy.

It's all about understanding how these texts were passed down and, you know, how humans played a part in preserving them. This makes me appreciate those scribes even more. What a huge responsibility, especially back then.

It shows their dedication. And speaking of dedication, Dr. Hildebrandt talks about how meticulous the Jewish scribes were, especially the ones who produced the Masoretic texts. Those are some of the most accurate Hebrew manuscripts, right? Exactly.

These scribes were super careful and went to great lengths to get those copies right. But even the Masoretic texts, they're from around 800- 1000 AD. So even with all that accuracy, we're still talking about a gap of centuries between those texts.

And, you know, when the Old Testament was originally written, how can we be sure that they got it right? That's where the Dead Sea Scrolls come in. Remember those? Discovered in 1948. Oh, yeah.

Those were a game changer. For sure. The Dead Sea Scrolls had biblical texts that were way older than the Masoretic texts.

They bridged that gap. Scholars could finally compare those ancient copies. That's so cool.

So did the Dead Sea Scrolls back up the Masoretic texts or were there any surprises? Mostly, yes. It was amazing confirmation that even with all that time and, you know, human error, the main message of the Bible had been preserved. Wow.

That's mind-blowing. It gives you a sense of awe, you know, how these texts survived, how they were passed down. But I got to ask, with all that care, why would God allow any imperfections at all? If you could make sure it was transmitted perfectly, why allow even tiny errors to sneak in? That's a deep question.

Gets at the heart of how God works in human history. Why would a God who can do anything allow us, you know, flawed humans, to be part of transmitting his word? It's a question that's been debated for centuries. What are your thoughts? What does Dr. Hildebrandt suggest? It's a real mystery, right? Dr. Hildebrandt has this interesting theory.

He thinks maybe those imperfections, they're there to keep us from, you know, worshipping the book itself instead of the God it's pointing to. Yeah. Like, I get it.

You can love a letter from someone you care about without, like, obsessing over the pen they used, right? Exactly. It's like if God had this one perfect copy and it was miraculously preserved, people might start worshipping that, you know, like it was a holy relic instead of focusing on the message, the truth inside. Right.

It's about what it says, not the paper it's written on. And those imperfections, they remind us it's a living word passed down through people, you know, with all their flaws. It shows God's willing to work through us even when we mess up.

And it puts the focus on, you know, interpretation. We're supposed to engage with the text, wrestle with it, figure out how it applies to our lives, not just treat it like, you know, a museum piece. So knowing all this, how do we approach the Bible today? Does this change how we see its authority? I mean, does it make it more relevant or less? That's the big question, right? And honestly, I think it's up to each person to decide.

For me, understanding all this- the whole transmission process- actually makes me appreciate the Bible even more. Think about all those people over centuries trying to preserve these writings through wars, persecutions, all kinds of challenges. It shows how much they revered these words.

And that's powerful. I agree. It also makes me appreciate the work those scholars and translators do.

Yeah. Digging into those texts, analyzing all the little variations, trying to get back to the original meaning. What a task.

It's amazing, isn't it? It shows you how powerful these scriptures are. People all over the world are still studying them, debating them, holding them dear. And it reminds us that our understanding of the Bible is always growing, always evolving.

Well, this has been a wild ride, that's for sure. I feel like I have a whole new perspective on the Bible, its history, all the twists and turns that brought it to us. Me too.

It's a treasure, you know, worth studying, cherishing, engaging with, even with those imperfections. And for those of you who want to go even deeper, definitely check out Dr. Hildebrandt's full lecture. He dives into even more detail about how both the Old and New Testaments were transmitted.

It's really fascinating. Yeah, you won't regret it. To all our fellow deep divers out there, keep asking questions, keep exploring, keep digging into the Bible and its incredible history.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.