

# Know the Scriptures - Part Two

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## Preserved For Us

For the sake of clarification, we should expand upon three terms already mentioned: Autograph, manuscript and version. These words are the ones used commonly by those scholars who have undertaken the task of cataloging the materials relating to the Holy Scriptures. In order that we may know the Scriptures better, we do well to acquaint ourselves with these terms.

Every high school senior should know the meaning of the word autograph. Near the close of the year, schoolmates seek some memento from their friends, written in their own hand in a book designed for that purpose or in the school yearbook. Usually, this is more than a mere signature; often it is quite unphilosophical, but whatever the friend has written is his autograph.

## The Unprinted Word

Now let us assume that a teacher who lived 1000 years ago had written such an autograph. He has some students who appreciated the value of their teacher's wisdom. In order to preserve his writing for themselves and future generations, they each made a handwritten copy of it; and then the original was lost. The next generation made hand written copies of the copies of the original and so on and on. These all, written in the same language as the autograph, are called "manuscripts", and, no doubt, many of these are also lost.

Over the years, the language of the people changed from that of the original autograph. Gradually, scholars, instead of making additional copies of existing manuscripts, translated one or more of them into the language of the day. These translations are called "versions". The version that is derived from a faulty or incomplete manuscript, of course, will also be faulty. The more reliable the source manuscripts, the more valid the resulting version.

The "autographs" of the prophets, apostles and evangelists

have all been lost, probably, as one writer states, for the best, since otherwise men would be tempted to revere the paper and ink rather than the contents. But there are in existence almost 5000 manuscripts of various ages and types – some good and some not so good – and the number increases as new discoveries are made. The Word of God has been preserved over the centuries; He has seen to that. Of the ancient "versions" there are about 20. Modern translations number nearly 100 times that amount. English versions alone number more than twice that amount.

## Writing Materials

The earliest writing material mentioned in the Bible, as most readers know, was stone. "*The two tablets of the Testimony*", the Ten Commandments, were "*written with the finger of God*" on "*tablets of stone*" (*Exodus 31:18*). Clay, wood, leather, and, in later years, paper were also used. The majority of manuscripts, however, were prepared on papyrus (2 John 12) and parchment (2 Timothy 4:13), or vellum.

Papyrus sheets were made by cutting the pith of the plant into very thin strips which were laid side by side and fastened together. This was then overlaid with another set of strips running crosswise to the first. The two were hammered thin and polished with stone, yielding a writing surface whose area could vary from 18 to 144 square inches and costing from 5 to 17 cents per sheet, as we reckon cost today. It was a fragile material, subject to decay. Parchment was more durable than papyrus sheets, being made from the skins of sheep and goats, dried, treated and polished to produce a beautiful writing material. The skins of younger animals yielded finer parchment; the finest, called vellum was sometimes taken from unborn animals.

## Copy Errors

Remembering that all manuscripts are hand-written copies, it is easy to see how errors could creep into them. Groups of scribes receiving dictation could commit "errors of hearing". The words, "to" and "too" and "two" all sound the same but have different meanings. The original languages of the Bible have similar

peculiarities. “Errors of seeing” happened, too. This is understandable when you realize that the oldest Hebrew manuscripts were written in block letters without vowels, punctuation, or spaces between words. To illustrate, Genesis 1:1, using our alphabet, would have looked like this: NTHBGNNNGGDCRTDTH HVNSNDTHRTH. The Greek of the New Testament was similar, except that this language contained vowels. Even so, the eyes could be deceived. How, for example, would you read this:

GODISNOWHERE

One might see GOD IS NOW HERE, while another might see GOD IS NO WHERE.

Such errors of the eye, ear and hand were certainly unintentional, as were most of the errors of omission and addition. Sometimes, a scribe would copy a word twice, sometimes he would skip a few lines because of similar words at the end of two lines. Occasionally, a scribe would insert marginal notes from a previous copy into the body of the text, thinking undoubtedly that they belonged there. Some errors, it seems, were intentional, although not dishonestly so. Almost always the scribe simply wanted to “correct” what seemed to him to be an error in the text. This happened quite often in connection with copying the Gospels. For example, two similar statements of Jesus from different accounts were modified in order to bring them into perfect agreement with each other.

So errors were made and they were copied. The number of errors increased proportionately with the number of manuscripts that appeared. This is understandable when we consider the amount of errors that have crept into publications only since the inventing of printing. The first edition of the King James Version contained more than 300 misprints which were corrected two years later. The task of culling and sifting out these errors to the point where we are left with essentially what the inspired writers put down on papyrus and parchment is another topic to be discussed later.

### **No Cause for Alarm**

For the present, if this happens to be the first time you were made aware of these copyist’s errors, do not become alarmed. The

Lord did not inspire the copyists; He did inspire the holy writers. What they have written has been reconstructed for us by dedicated scholars from many manuscripts, numerous versions, and quotations from the Scriptures found in the writings of the church fathers. Wescott and Hort, two scholars who worked with those materials for over 30 years, were led to conclude that, in their opinion, the words still subject to doubt could hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the New Testament. It is comforting to know, furthermore, that no great doctrinal truth is in question because of errors in the Greek text. You may “search the Scriptures” with confidence.

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GARDENINORDERTO  
PLANTSOMESEEDSHEHAD  
TOPLOWTHEGARDENFIRS  
THEHADDETERMINEDHOW  
MUCHSPACEHEWOULD  
NEEDBEFOREHEASKEDTHE  
BANKERFORTHEMONEYTO  
CARRYOUTTHEPROJECTTHE  
HADPLANNEDWELLINAD  
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MANDEDTHEIRRESPECT