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Question 32 - How accurate is our present-day Canon?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

32. How accurate is our present-day Canon?

A. The bad news

As every Christian knows, none of the actual 66 books has been preserved. Our Bible today is thus a translation of a copy (or copies) of a copy, etc., of the original writings. Often it is asked why God did not preserve the original books. Only the Holy Spirit knows the ultimate and complete answer to this. However, at least three possible reasons have been suggested.

1. To prevent the text from being tampered with – To illustrate this, let us suppose there existed only one single account of the American Civil War, and that one record was totally controlled by a man or perhaps a small group of men. No other copies from this original account were in existence. If this were true, it can be readily seen how easy it would be for the actual story of the War Between the States to be altered in any manner desired by the custodians of the one single record. Thus, through a stroke of the pen (or eraser), lost battles could be turned into victories, villains could suddenly appear as heroes, etc.

However, imagine the original record did not exist but there was in circulation literally thousands of copies of copies taken from the first Civil War story account. Now it can be seen no man or small group of individuals could corrupt the true record. This is exactly the Bible situation today, for there are literally thousands of manuscript copies covering both the Old Testament and New Testament books in circulation worldwide.

2. To guard against a misguided worship

The very nature of man demands he worship something, be it power, money, sex, a pagan idol, or the true God. Had God preserved any or all of the 66 original manuscripts, they undoubtedly would have become the objects of superstition and worship. There are at least two biblical examples where even well-intentioned individuals were guilty of worshipping the wrong thing.

- a. Israel's sin in worshipping Moses' serpent of brass (2 Kings 18:4).
 - b. John the apostle's sin in (attempting) to worship an angel
This occurred not once but twice. (See Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9.)
3. To stimulate intense Bible study

Only eternity itself will reveal the multiplied millions of hours invested by devout scholars examining the manuscript copies to determine the exact contents of the original scriptural text.

B. The good news – Even though the original books are lost, there is overwhelming evidence our translated Bibles today represent amazingly accurate copies of the first manuscripts themselves. Consider the following:

1. The number of existing both Old Testament and New Testament Hebrew and Greek manuscript fragments runs literally into the thousands. There are some 5,300 New Testament Greek manuscripts alone.

2. The favorable comparison of all these manuscripts

Note the testimony of the scholars regarding the text of the New Testament.

a. Westcott and Hort estimated it is 98.33% pure.

b. Ezra Abbott raises it to 99.75% pure.

c. A. T. Robertson gives the number at 99.9% pure.

3. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Prior to the discovery of the scrolls at Qumran the oldest extant manuscripts were dated from approximately A.D. 900. Some manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which included copies of Isaiah, Habakkuk, and others, were dated back to 125 B.C., providing manuscripts 1,000 years older than previously available. The major conclusion was that there was no significant difference between the Isaiah scroll at Qumran and the Masoretic Hebrew text dated one thousand years later. This confirmed the reliability of our present Hebrew text. (Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 173)

4. The biblical quotations from the early church fathers

During the second and third centuries important church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Eusebius quoted from the New Testament in their writings for a total of over 36,000 occasions.

With the possible exception of 11 verses, every single New Testament passage is to be found in these 36,000 quotations. Thus, had Satan succeeded in destroying every copy of the Greek manuscripts, the entire New Testament could have been almost totally reconstructed from the writings of the church fathers.

Edward Goodrick offers the following concerning the amazing accuracy of the Old Testament canon.

“Do we have hard evidence that copies of the Old Testament autographs were called ‘Scripture’ (*graphe*) in the New Testament? A search of the 50

appearances of *graphe* in the New Testament reveals that Jesus read from the Scripture (*graphe*) in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4:21) and Paul from the Scripture (*graphe*) in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). The Ethiopian eunuch riding in his chariot on his way home from Jerusalem was reading a portion of Scripture (*graphe*, Acts 8:32-33). These were not autographs; they were copies. And copies contain scribal errors. Yet the Bible calls them *graphe*, and every *graphe* is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16). Yes, copies of the autographs are inspired." (*Is My Bible the Inspired Word of God?* p. 62)