

“If the Biblical Documents Are So Reliable, How Do You Explain the Differences?”

Jimmy Williams

Dear Mr. Williams,

I read your article, [“Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?”](#) and I have a question about the Massoretic tribes. If the Massorettes counted the characters (letters) in each text as you stated to verify the total number of alephs, beths, gimels, etc., in the original document, and if they also counted to be sure that the middle character was the same in the copy as in the original, how is it that the Qumran scroll of Isaiah 53 had 17 additional characters that are different from the Massoretic text? Did they just forget how to count?

The accuracy of the Massoretic documents is given by your article as evidence for the bibliographic authenticity of the Old Testament. This accuracy is based upon your description of their methods in copying documents. Finally, the scrolls found at Qumran are compared to available and historically more recent copies, on the assumption that the same methods were used in copying both sets.

If the Qumran scrolls are practically identical with the previously available documents, or so the argument goes, then we can rest assured that the Massoretic tradition of impeccable copying has been carried on faithfully throughout the millenia, and that-by implication-our own Bibles have been translated from accurate texts.

In fact, the details of exactly how the Massorettes maintained accuracy by counting characters, finding the middle character of the copy and the original,

etc., tell us that either the Massoretes did not make create the Qumran scrolls, or their method changed over the years; or they never used the character-counting method in the first place.

Without the original insistence that we know how the Massoretes kept accurate copies, the strong similarity between the previously available and more recent documents, and the Qumran scrolls which were more ancient documents, would have been a convincing argument for the accurate translation or “Bibliographical authenticity” of Scripture.

With that detail of Massoretic method, however, your argument falls apart. This bothers me all the more, as I realize I have used the same argument in the past myself. Can't we do better than this?

Thank you for your e-mail. First of all, I must point out an error in your analysis. You ask, “How is it that the Qumran scroll of Isaiah 53 had 17 additional characters that are different from the Massoretic text?” You misread what I said in my essay on the Reliability of the Biblical Documents about the variants. The 17 additional characters were not in the Qumran text; they are in the Massoretic text. In other words, over the thousand years between the two texts, these 17 additional characters were added by scribes. But I refer you back to my essay and my comments about how inconsequential they really are with regard to the text and its meaning. Does that change anything for you? I will come back to this, but a larger question you pose has to do with the transmission of the text over 3,000+ years.

The answer to your concern has to do with the historical development of copying the Hebrew text. Let me begin with some info about the Massoretes.

They flourished in the tenth century A.D. We don't have to guess that this procedure of “counting characters” was being practiced at that time—we know that it was. And in order for the Massoretes to have such a remarkable agreement with the Qumran scrolls (we use the term “scrolls”—there are a few, but the bulk

of the material are fragments) tells us that there must have been a similar rabbinic tradition stretching back a thousand years to the time of Christ and Qumran. We know this counting method was in operation in the tenth century, but we do not know how far this practice goes back, or when it was first implemented. But for there to be such close agreement in tenth century A.D., care for the preservation and accuracy of text had to be practiced by scribes from the first to the tenth century A.D. So this answers part of your question.

Preservation of Hebrew life and religious practice really got going after the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) when Titus destroyed it. The major center of rabbinic tradition after 70 A.D. developed at Tiberias, a city on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. It was here, after the temple was destroyed and the Jews were dispersed from Jerusalem, that the Rabbis began to rethink and preserve Jewish life and religion. Many areas of Jewish thought and religious practice developed over that time, and it was here that the later Massoretes would live.

You need to read a little bit more on what was actually going on at Qumran. This group of Jews is identified by most scholars with the "Essenes." The basis of this acceptance among most scholars comes from extant testimony of three contemporary writers, Josephus (A.D. 37-c.100), Pliny (A.D. 61-113), and Philo (c. 20 B.C.-50 A.D.). The information from these writers about the Essenes fits very well with what we know about the Qumran Community.

Originating in Syria around 200 B.C., this monastic community was really a "splinter" group which rejected some of the teachings of the main Jewish tradition which were in force from c. 200 B.C. to the wars fought against the Romans (A.D. 68-73). Around 75-50 B.C. they moved to Qumran. Archaeology seems to indicate that the Romans destroyed the Qumran community after the fall of Jerusalem, and probably during the two years they were trying to take Masada. No further archeological evidence appears there after the first century, and Josephus says all of the inhabitants—men, women, children—were killed by the Romans.

I don't know how familiar you are with the Dead Sea Scroll materials, but I will focus on the actual copies and fragments which relate only to the biblical text. A study of this material includes both biblical and the non-biblical texts (which are made up mostly of either commentaries on the 39 OT books in the Protestant Bible, and commentaries on the Apocryphal books, or of texts about the history and governance of the Qumran Community).

As a protest movement, Qumran did many things differently from those mainstream Jews practicing their religion in Jerusalem/Palestine prior to 70 A.D. I would strongly suggest that you read *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* by Geza Vermes (Penguin Press). I have read them all. Without going into detail, Vermes points out that, while the Essenes highly prized the Hebrew scriptures, and studied and copied them diligently, their process for doing so was much more fluid than what we find in the Massoretic tradition. There are different textual traditions at work in a number of O.T. books, but perhaps the most interesting is the Book of Jeremiah. These are not major, but some sections are placed in a different order, and by this time the tradition of the Septuagint (the Greek Translation of the O.T.) also provides another and somewhat different text which was also translated back into Hebrew!

The major value of the Qumran texts is that they allow us to get 1000 years closer to the originals than the Massoretic text allowed before 1947 (when the scrolls were first discovered). As far as the Hebrew Text is concerned, from c. 1000 AD to our time, changes in the Hebrew text are literally non-existent. The Hebrew texts as we know them have changed little since the Massorettes wrote them down a thousand years ago. We actually have copies of the Hebrew text which date to the 10th Century.

Now I go back to your question concerning the variants in Isaiah 53. Perhaps my correction of your interpretive error above has solved this problem. You seem to be outraged that there were 17 variables which crept in to Isaiah 53 over a thousand years. I would ask you to look again at my essay on the Biblical

Documents and study the nature of those variants! They are insignificant! In light of what I have said above about the Qumran community and the more fluid nature of their handling of Scriptural material, the amazing thing to me is how clean and void the Massoretic text still is of variants when compared with the Qumran texts!

In order for the Massorettes to have possessed such manuscripts in their day with only slight variations from the Qumran text, we can be sure of one thing: I say again the major rabbinic tradition of the first century (after the Temple was destroyed) must have already been treating the copying of Scripture with great care. Otherwise, the Massorettes ten centuries later would not have had access to such a text so pure that only seventeen little non-essential variants had crept into Isaiah 53 over a thousand years! And remember, the Qumran texts were not available to these Massoretic Rabbis. The Qumran texts were still buried in the caves by the Dead Sea, waiting to be discovered a thousand years later!

To sum up, not only do we have two Hebrew texts a thousand years apart, we also have two traditions, the Massoretic tradition/text and the Qumran tradition/text. Both of these Jewish traditions developed out of the same era: c.200 B.C.-73 A.D. While these two flourishing Jewish communities had many things in common, they were, at the time, pretty much estranged, if not outright enemies. Their differences are fairly well-defined from the data that we have available.

Obviously, the biblical texts at Qumran came from the other community, because there was no Qumran sect until c.200-150 B.C. The fact that the biblical textual material at Qumran contains an Isaiah text (for example) of such quality would also be an indication, or a "pointer" that the Hebrew texts were being carefully copied at the time when the Qumran group acquired their copies of the Old Testament scriptures! So you have to ask the question, "From what text (manuscript, copy) of Isaiah, for example, did the Qumran scribes have to copy?" We don't know. But what we do know is what their copy looked like, because we can go to Jerusalem and into the Shrine of the Book and see it!

_____, I don't see where my argument falls apart. Have I missed something here? Let me hear from you. . . .

Jimmy Williams
Founder, Probe Ministries

The question I am posing is, What do we know about the authenticity of the Bible, based on the written records. As far as I can see you are telling me that the Massoretic tradition does not extend backwards in history to the creation of the original documents. Therefore the accuracy with which the Massorettes worked is relevant if, and only if, we accept that between the original documents and the Massoretic tradition, which I believe you say spans something like ten centuries, somehow accuracy was maintained.

I believe you have information on the Massoretic tradition, and on the Qumran work also. I believe you do not have information on the period from the original creation of the manuscripts, up to the Massoretic time.

I am not trying to cast doubt on the authenticity of the Bible. I have my own reasons for believing that it is the word of God. However, the argument which you have put forward is false. We cannot believe that today's Bible is accurate just based on your argument; because it has nothing to do with the link between the original manuscripts and the stuff that the Massorettes had to work with.

There's no clear link between the original documents and the hands of the first Massoretic scribe, unless I'm missing something.

Dear _____,

I think you are missing something. Let me run through it again.

You conclude by saying “there is no clear link between the original documents and the hands of the first Massoretic scribe.” First, let’s get the chronology clearly in mind. There are many indications of “links,” and I will list them in reverse order:

Massoretic text	Tenth Century A.D	Hebrew
Syriac Peshitta	Third Century A.D.	Aramaic/Syriac: Very early.
Latin Vulgate	Fourth Century A.D.	Jerome Translation (386 A.D.)
Qumran Scrolls	First Century A.D.	Aramaic and Old Hebrew
Septuagint	Third Century B.C.	Greek
Ezra/Nehemiah	Fifth Century B.C.	
Era of the Prophets	Eighth to Fifth Century B.C.	
Kings & Chronicles	Eighth to Fifth Century B.C.	
Wisdom Literature	Tenth to Fifth Century B.C.	
Exodus/Judges	Twelfth to Tenth Century B.C.	

Now we have no extant material of any Old Testament text. None of the original, actual documents have survived. But we do have the above textual traditions in various languages, which all contain translations of the Hebrew text. This leads us to consider the possible elements, times, traditions, communities which were involved in the development and transmission of the Hebrew text from the original autographs to the present.

And you have to remember that the texts of the Old Testament (when the original documents were actually created) were a “work in progress” over many centuries. Within the Bible itself, we find numerous indications of both oral and written

documentation being preserved and passed on clear back to the Pentateuch, and throughout the historical books, the wisdom literature, and the prophets beginning with the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C.

We can go back to the fifth century B.C., for example, at that time when Ezra and Nehemiah brought the Jews back to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon and rebuilt the temple and the city walls. The Bible records there was a great revival at that time which included the rediscovery of written biblical documents which were read aloud to the people. This indicates an even earlier source which the Jews, the Qumran community and later the Massoretes would later benefit from in the preservation of the text. If these were written materials at that time, it suggests that there must have been even earlier textual material already present among the Jews.

Another source is available to us for comparison which comes from the third century B.C.—the very important source for comparison comes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Due to Hellenistic influences in the Middle East, many Jews now spoke Greek. The date of the Septuagint's creation may have been as early as 280 B.C. We can compare this translation with Qumran and the Massoretic texts and find that it agrees in all essentials with the Hebrew Manuscripts. Again, we must conclude that this Greek translation of the third century B.C. could only have been produced from the Hebrew texts that were available to them at the time these scholars set about to render the Hebrew text into the Greek language.

So I believe that your charge that there are no clear links from the original autographs to the Massoretic tradition is not defensible. No matter which text material we look at, the remarkable thing about all of these different translations when compared is the fact that agreement reaches about 95%, and none of the variants, interpolations, additions, etc., do anything to change the substance and meaning of the Hebrew text.



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Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries