The Dead Sea Scrolls Shed Light on the Accuracy of our Bible

Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews the discovery of and important historical findings from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The texts discovered provide clear evidence as to the accuracy of our version of the Old Testament and the care with which it was preserved.

The Story of the Scrolls

Worship at the sacred Jerusalem Temple had become corrupt, with seemingly little hope for reform. A group of devoted Jews removed themselves from the mainstream and began a monastic life in the Judean desert. Their studies of the Old Testament Scriptures led them to believe that God's judgment upon Jerusalem was imminent and that the anointed one would return to restore the nation of Israel and purify their worship. Anticipating this moment, the Essenes retreated into the Qumran desert to await the return of their Messiah. This community, which began in the third century B.C., devoted their days to the study and copying of sacred Scripture as well as theological and sectarian works.

As tensions between the Jews and Romans increased, the community hid their valuable scrolls in caves along the Dead Sea to protect them from the invading armies. Their hope was that one day the scrolls would be retrieved and restored to the nation of Israel. In A.D. 70, the Roman general Titus invaded Israel and destroyed the city of Jerusalem along with its treasured Temple. It is at this time that the Qumran community was overrun and occupied by the Roman army. The scrolls remained hidden for the next two thousand years.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammad (Ahmed el-Dhib) was searching for his lost goat and came upon a small opening of a cave. Thinking that his goat may have fallen into the cave, he threw rocks into the opening. Instead of hearing a startled goat, he heard the shattering of clay pottery. Lowering himself into the cave, he discovered several sealed jars. He opened them hoping to find treasure. To his disappointment, he found them to contain leather scrolls. He collected seven of the best scrolls and left the other fragments scattered on the ground.

Muhammad eventually brought some of the scrolls to a cobbler and antiquities dealer in Bethlehem named Khando. Khando, thinking the scrolls were written in Syriac, brought them to a Syrian Orthodox Archbishop named Mar (Athanasius) Samuel. Mar Samuel recognized that the scrolls were written in Hebrew and suspected they may be very ancient and valuable. He eventually had the scrolls examined by John Trevor at the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR). Trevor contacted the world's foremost Middle East archaeologist, Dr. William Albright, and together these men confirmed the antiquity of the scrolls and dated them to sometime between the first and second century B.C.

After the initial discovery, archaeologists searched other nearby caves between 1952 and 1956. They found ten other caves that contained thousands of ancient documents as well. One of the greatest treasures of ancient manuscripts had been discovered: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Date and Contents of the Scrolls

Scholars were anxious to confirm that these Dead Sea Scrolls were the most ancient of all Old Testament manuscripts in the Hebrew language. Three types of dating tools were used: tools from archaeology, from the study of ancient languages, called paleography and orthography, and the carbon-14 dating method. Each can derive accurate results. When all the methods arrive

at the same conclusion, there is an increased reliability in the dating.

Archaeologists studied the pottery, coins, graves, and garments at Khirbet Qumran, where the Essenes lived. They arrived at a date ranging from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. Paleographers studied the style of writing and arrived at dates raging from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. Scientists, using the radiocarbon dating method, dated the scrolls to range from the fourth century B.C. to the first century A.D. Since all the methods came to a similar conclusion, scholars are very confident in their assigned date for the texts. The scrolls date as early as the third century B.C. to the first century A.D.{1}

Eleven caves were discovered containing nearly 1,100 ancient documents which included several scrolls and more than 100,000 fragments.{2} Fragments from every Old Testament book except for the book of Esther were discovered. Other works included apocryphal books, commentaries, manuals of discipline for the Qumran community, and theological texts. The majority of the texts were written in the Hebrew language, but there were also manuscripts written in Aramaic and Greek.{3}

Among the eleven caves, Cave 1, which was excavated in 1949, and Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be the most productive caves. One of the most significant discoveries was a well-preserved scroll of the entire book of Isaiah.

The famous Copper Scrolls were discovered in Cave 3 in 1952. Unlike most of the scrolls that were written on leather or parchment, these were written on copper and provided directions to sixty-four sites around Jerusalem that were said to contain hidden treasure. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites that have been investigated.

The oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew is a fragment from the book of Samuel discovered in Cave 4, and is dated from the

third century B.C.{4} The War Scroll found in Caves 1 and 4 is an eschatological text describing a forty-year war between the Sons of Light and the evil Sons of Darkness. The Temple Scroll discovered in Cave 11 is the largest and describes a future Temple in Jerusalem that will be built at the end of the age.

Indeed, these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found, and their contents would yield valuable insights to our understanding of Judaism and early Christianity.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text

The Dead Sea Scrolls play a crucial role in assessing the accurate preservation of the Old Testament. With its hundreds of manuscripts from every book except Esther, detailed comparisons can be made with more recent texts.

The Old Testament that we use today is translated from what is called the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who between A.D. 500 and 950 gave the Old Testament the form that we use today. Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947, the oldest Hebrew text of the Old Testament was the Masoretic Aleppo Codex which dates to A.D. 935.{5}

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now had manuscripts that predated the Masoretic Text by about one thousand years. Scholars were anxious to see how the Dead Sea documents would match up with the Masoretic Text. If a significant amount of differences were found, we could conclude that our Old Testament Text had not been well preserved. Critics, along with religious groups such as Muslims and Mormons, often make the claim that the present day Old Testament has been corrupted and is not well preserved. According to these religious groups, this would explain the contradictions between the Old Testament and their religious teachings.

After years of careful study, it has been concluded that the Dead Sea Scrolls give substantial confirmation that our Old Testament has been accurately preserved. The scrolls were found to be almost identical with the Masoretic text. Hebrew Scholar Millar Burrows writes, “It is a matter of wonder that through something like one thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. As I said in my first article on the scroll, ‘Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.'”{6}

A significant comparison study was conducted with the Isaiah Scroll written around 100 B.C. that was found among the Dead Sea documents and the book of Isaiah found in the Masoretic text. After much research, scholars found that the two texts were practically identical. Most variants were minor spelling differences, and none affected the meaning of the text.

One of the most respected Old Testament scholars, the late Gleason Archer, examined the two Isaiah scrolls found in Cave 1 and wrote, “Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.”{7}

Despite the thousand year gap, scholars found the Masoretic Text and Dead Sea Scrolls to be nearly identical. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide valuable evidence that the Old Testament had been accurately and carefully preserved.

The Messianic Prophecies and the Scrolls

One of the evidences used in defending the deity of the Christ is the testimony of prophecy. There are over one hundred prophecies regarding Christ in the Old Testament.{8} These prophecies were made centuries before the birth of Christ and

were quite specific in their detail. Skeptics questioned the date of the prophecies and some even charged that they were not recorded until after or at the time of Jesus, and therefore discounted their prophetic nature.

There is strong evidence that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, is dated about two hundred fifty years before Christ. The translation process occurred during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus who ruled from 285 to 246 B.C.{9} It can be argued that a complete Hebrew text from which this Greek translation would be derived must have existed prior to the third century B.C.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provided further proof that the Old Testament canon existed prior to the third century B.C. Thousands of manuscript fragments from all the Old Testament books except Esther were found predating Christ's birth, and some date as early as the third century B.C. For example, portions from the book of Samuel date that early, and fragments from Daniel date to the second century B.C.{10} Portions from the twelve Minor Prophets date from 150 B.C to 25 B.C.{11} Since the documents were found to be identical with our Masoretic Text, we can be reasonably sure that our Old Testament is the same one that the Essenes were studying and working from.

One of the most important Dead Sea documents is the Isaiah Scroll. This twenty-four foot long scroll is well preserved and contains the complete book of Isaiah. The scroll is dated 100 B.C. and contains one of the clearest and most detailed prophecies of the Messiah in chapter fifty-three, called the "Suffering Servant." Although some Jewish scholars teach that this refers to Israel, a careful reading shows that this prophecy can only refer to Christ.

Here are just a few reasons. The suffering servant is called sinless (53:9), he dies and rises from the dead (53:8-10), and

he suffers and dies for the sins of the people (53:4-6). These characteristics are not true of the nation of Israel. The Isaiah Scroll gives us a manuscript that predates the birth of Christ by a century and contains many of the most important messianic prophecies about Jesus. Skeptics could no longer contend that portions of the book were written after Christ or that first century insertions were added to the text.

Thus, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide further proof that the Old Testament canon was completed by the third century B.C., and that the prophecies foretold of Christ in the Old Testament predated the birth of Christ.

The Messiah and the Scrolls

What kind of Messiah was expected by first century Jews? Critical scholars allege that the idea of a personal Messiah was a later interpretation made by Christians. Instead, they believe that the Messiah was to be the nation of Israel and represented Jewish nationalism.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, written by Old Testament Jews, reveal the messianic expectations of Jews during the time of Christ. Studies have uncovered several parallels to the messianic hope revealed in the New Testament as well as some significant differences. First, they were expecting a personal Messiah rather than a nation or a sense of nationalism. Second, the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Third, the Messiah would confirm His claims by performing miracles including the resurrection of the dead. Finally, He would be human and yet possess divine attributes.

A manuscript found in Cave 4 entitled the *Messianic Apocalypse*, copied in the first century B.C., describes the anticipated ministry of the Messiah:

> For He will honor the pious upon the throne of His eternal kingdom, release the captives, open the eyes of the blind,

> lifting up those who are oppressed… For He shall heal the critically wounded, He shall raise the dead, He shall bring good news to the poor.

This passage sounds very similar to the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In Luke chapter 7:21-22, John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus and ask him if He is the Messiah. Jesus responds, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them."

But, with the similarities there are also differences. Christians have always taught that there is one Messiah while the Essene community believed in two, one an Aaronic or priestly Messiah and the other a Davidic or royal Messiah who leads a war to end the evil age.{12}

The Essenes were also strict on matters of ceremonial purity while Jesus criticized these laws. He socialized with tax collectors and lepers which was considered defiling by the Jews. Jesus taught us to love one's enemies while the Essenes taught hatred towards theirs. They were strict Sabbatarians, and Jesus often violated this important aspect of the law. The Qumran community rejected the inclusion of women, Gentiles, and sinners, while Christ reached out to these very groups.

The many differences show that the Essenes were not the source of early Christianity as some scholars propose. Rather, Christianity derived its teachings from the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have proven to be a significant discovery, confirming the accurate preservation of our Old Testament text, the messianic prophecies of Christ, and valuable insight into first century Judaism.

Two Major Prophets and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been an asset in the debate regarding two major and well disputed books of the Old Testament, Daniel and Isaiah. Conservative scholars maintained that Daniel was written in the sixth century B.C. as the author declares in the first chapter. The New Testament writers treated Daniel as a prophetic book with predictive prophecies. Liberal scholars began teaching in the eighteenth century that it was written in the Maccabean Period or the second century B.C. If they are correct, Daniel would not be a prophetic book that predicted the rise of Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Before the discovery of the scrolls, critical scholars argued that the Aramaic language used in Daniel was from a time no earlier than 167 B.C. during the Maccabean period. Other scholars, such as well-respected archaeologist Kenneth Kitchen, studied Daniel and found that ninety percent of Daniel's Aramaic vocabulary was used in documents from the fifth century B.C. or earlier.{13} The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that Kitchen's conclusion was well founded. The Aramaic language used in the Dead Sea Scrolls proved to be very different from that found in the book of Daniel. Old Testament scholars have concluded that the Aramaic in Daniel is closer to the form used in the fourth and fifth century B.C. than to the second century B.C.

Critical scholars challenged the view that Isaiah was written by a single author. Many contended that the first thirty-nine chapters were written by one author in the eighth century B.C., and the final twenty-six chapters were written in the post-Exilic period. The reason for this is that there are some significant differences in the style and content between the two sections. If this were true, Isaiah's prophecies of Babylon in the later chapters would not have been predictive

prophecies but written after the events occurred.

With the discovery of the Isaiah Scroll at Qumran, scholars on both sides were eager to see if the evidence would favor their position. The Isaiah Scroll revealed no break or demarcation between the two major sections of Isaiah. The scribe was not aware of any change in authorship or division of the book.{14} Ben Sira (second century B.C.), Josephus, and the New Testament writers regarded Isaiah as written by a single author and containing predictive prophecy.{15} The Dead Sea Scrolls added to the case for the unity and prophetic character of Isaiah.

Inventory of the Scrolls

The following is a brief inventory provided by Dr. Gleason Archer of the discoveries made in each of the Dead Sea caves.{16}

Cave 1 was the first cave discovered and excavated in 1949. Among the discoveries was found the Isaiah Scroll containing a well-preserved scroll of the entire book of Isaiah. Fragments were found from the other Old Testament books which included Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Ezekiel, and Psalms. Non-biblical books included the Book of Enoch, Sayings of Moses, Book of Jubilee, Book of Noah, Testament of Levi and the Wisdom of Solomon. Fragments from commentaries on Psalms, Micah, and Zephaniah were also discovered.

Cave 2 was excavated in 1952. Hundreds of fragments were discovered, including remains from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Job, Psalms and Ruth.

Cave 3 was excavated in 1952. Here archaeologists found the famous Copper Scrolls. These scrolls contained directions to sixty-four sites containing hidden treasures located around Jerusalem. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites

investigated.

Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be one of the most productive. Thousands of fragments were recovered from nearly four hundred manuscripts. Hundreds of fragments from every Old Testament book were discovered with the exception of the Book of Esther. The fragment from Samuel labeled 4Qsam{17} is believed to be the oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew, dating from the third century B.C. Also found were fragments of commentaries on the Psalms, Isaiah, and Nahum. The entire collection of Cave 4 is believed to represent the scope of the Essene library.

Cave 5 was excavated in 1952 and fragments from some Old Testament books along with the book of Tobit were found.

Cave 6 excavated in 1952 uncovered papyrus fragments of Daniel, 1 and 2 Kings and some other Essene literature.

Caves 7-10 yielded finds of interest for archaeologists but had little relevance for biblical studies.

Cave 11 was excavated in 1956. It exposed well-preserved copies from some of the Psalms, including the apocryphal Psalm 151. In addition, a well-preserved scroll of part of Leviticus was found, and fragments of an Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem, an Aramaic Targum or paraphrase of Job, was also discovered.

Indeed these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found, and their contents would soon reveal insights that would impact Judaism and Christianity.

Notes

1. James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 20-32.
2. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest

House Publishers, 1997), 278.
3. Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1985), 513-517.
4. Vanderkam and Flint, 115.
5. Price, 280.
6. Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 304, quoted in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 367.
7. Archer, 25.
8. J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1984), 665-670.
9. Geisler and Nix, 503-504.
10. Ibid., 137.
11. Ibid., 138-139.
12. Vanderkam and Flint, 265-266.
13. Randall Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1996), 162.
14. Ibid., 154-155.
15. Ibid., 156-157.
16. Archer, 513-517.
17. Price, 162.

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

Dear Mr. Williams,

I read your article, "Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?" and I have a question about the Massoretic tribes. If the Massoretes 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 Massoretes 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 Tiberius, 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 main-stream 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 Massoretes 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 Massoretes 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 Massoretes 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 Massoretes 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 Massoretes 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.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries