**INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE**

**Lecture Four**

**Texts and Translations**

Sceptics for so long have said, "Moses could not have written the first parts of the Bible because writing was unknown at that time" (1500 BC).

But recent discoveries in archaeology have shut the mouths of those sceptics by uncovering writings thousands of years before the time of Moses.

Sumerian writings dating as far back as 3500 BC (about 2000 years before Moses) ancient Hieroglyphs of Egypt, and the incredible writings of the Babylonians dating almost as far back, have been uncovered.

Writing was a hallmark of civilisation and progress even leading to the development of the alphabet. In this study we will be looking at Ancient Writing Materials, Writing Instruments, and Manuscripts.

**Ancient Writing Materials**

**Stone.**

Many famous inscriptions have been found in Egypt and Babylon inscribed on stone. The 10 commandments were written on two tables of stone (Ex 31:18). Two other examples are the Moabite Stone (850 BC), and the Siloam inscription found in Hezekiah's tunnel by the Pool of Siloam (700 BC).

**Clay**

The predominant writing material used in Assyria and Babylonia was clay, formed into small tablets and impressed with wedge-shaped symbols called cuneiform writing and then baked in an oven or dried in the sun. Thousands of clay writing-boards have been uncovered by archaeologists. (Ez4:1; Is 8:1).

**Wood.**

Wooden tablets were used extensively by the ancient writers. For many centuries, this was the common writing material in Greece and Rome. They were made of wood or ivory with a recess to hold a wax surface (Is30:8;).

Even Ancient Egypt made use of wood.

**Leather**.

The Jewish Talmud specifically required that the Scriptures should be copied on the skins of animals, on leather. It is most certain, that the Old Testament was written on leather. Rolls or Scrolls were made by sewing skins together that were from 3 to 100 feet or more in length. The text was written in columns perpendicular to the roll. The rolls were 18-27 inches high and rolled on one or two sticks.

**Papyrus.** It is almost certain that the New Testament was written on papyrus because it was the most important writing material at that time. Papyrus is made by having thin sections of the papyrus reed into strips, soaking them in several baths of water, and then overlapping them to form sheets. One layer of the strips was laid cross ways to the first. Then these were put in a press that they might adhere to each other. The sheets were made 6-15 inches high and 3-9 inches wide, pasted together, forming rolls that were usually 30 feet long, though one was found to be 144 feet in length. Our English word "paper" comes from the Greek word for papyrus.

**Vellum or Parchment**. Vellum was developed in Pergammum (180 BC) when the king was refused any more Papyrus from Egypt to build his library.

So he developed a new type of writing material through a new process for the treatment of skins. This was called vellum or parchment. From the skin of sheep or goats a fine quality of leather was specially and carefully prepared for writing on both sides. Most of the known manuscripts are on vellum.

Later they were glued into book form, this was called a Codex. The codex made it possible to have much more Scripture in one place.

**Writing Instruments**

Black ink was made from soot or lampblack and gum, diluted with water. The Essenes, who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, used burned lamb bones and oil. It is remarkable how well the writing has been preserved to this day. The ancient writing instruments were a chisel, for use on stone; a stylus made of metal or hard wood, for use on the clay tablets; and a pen, for use on papyrus or vellum. These pens were made from the hollow stalks of coarse grass or reeds. The dry reed was cut diagonally with a knife and shaved thin at the point, which was then split. In order to keep these in good condition, scribes carried a knife with them, a "penknife". We need to realise that, as far as we know, none of the original manuscripts are in existence. Some may very well be discovered, but who knows? No material Biblical object has yet been found.

**Ancient Texts and Versions**

A note needs to be made here concerning the difference between texts and versions.

This applies in particular to the Old Testament. A text or manuscript is an ancient copy in the original language. A version is an ancient translation.

For example, an ancient copy of the Old Testament in Hebrew would be a manuscript or text, whereas an ancient copy of the OT in Greek would be a version.

**The Old Testament Text**

The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language, with just a few short passages in Aramaic.

As mentioned previously, we do not have the hand-written originals, but we do have thousands of copies, many of them ancient, some in the original language, some in translations.

**The important ancient texts or manuscripts for the Old Testament are as follows:**

**The Massoretic Text.(865 AD)**

This is the "officially preserved" text and by far the best source. After the Jews returned from Babylon they formed communities of scribes to preserve and circulate the precious Scriptures.

These scribes, later called Massoretes, were so careful that they wouldn't write a word or even a letter from memory.

They would bathe and sit in full Jewish dress to do their copying, and nothing and no-one could distract them. When finished copying a book, they would check that the number of letters matched, that different letters of the alphabet appeared the same number of times in both the original and the copy, they would check the middle letter and so on. If any mistakes were found, they were not corrected, rather the copy was immediately burned.

These "transmitters" had one aim in life, to transmit the Scriptures from one generation to the next without flaw. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls proved how successful they had been.

**The Samaritan Pentateuch.**

Since the days of Ezra the scribe the Samaritans kept their own copies of the Pentateuch, although they weren't as successful as the Jews in maintaining Scriptural integrity (they had no Massoretes etc.). Yet this text provides good corroboration.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls. (100 BC)**

Already mentioned in the previous lecture, this remarkable discovery provided yet an ancient source text of vast significance.

**Other Ancient Texts.**

These include

The St Petersburg Codex (916 AD);

The Cairo Codex (895 AD);

The Aleppo Codex (930 AD)

British Museum Codex (950 AD).

**Important ancient versions (translations) for the Old Testament are as follows:**

**The Septuagint**.

This was an ancient translation of the Old Testament into the Greek language made between 250 and 150 BC.

The name Septuagint means "seventy" and is often referred to today by the Roman numerals "LXX".

Having been scattered from their homeland after the captivities, the Israelites needed the Scriptures to be available in the language common to their day and location. Greek was the "universal language" of those days.

The scholars Geisler and Nix listed four important contributions made by the Septuagint version:

**1.** It bridged the religious gap between Hebrew and Greek speaking peoples as it met the need of the Alexandrian Jews.

**2.** It bridged the historical gap between the Hebrew Old Testament of the Jews and the Greek speaking Christians who would use it with their New

Testament.

**3.** It provided a precedent for missionaries to make translations of the

Scriptures into various languages and dialects.

**4.** It bridges the textual criticism gap by its substantial agreement with the

Hebrew Old Testament text.

**The Syriac Translation**.

Syriac was the name given to Christian Aramaic. There are five different ancient Syriac versions, perhaps the most important being the Peshitta or "simple" version, produced about 150 to 250 AD. Some 350 copies originating from this version and dating to the 5th century AD are still in existence.

**The Targums**.

These are Aramaic translations or paraphrases of the Old Testament which arose after the Jews had been taken into captivity and the Chaldean language took over from Hebrew. These translations were made before the coming of Christ. One of the great values of the Targums is that once again they substantiate and corroborate the Hebrew text.

**The Vulgate.**

Jerome, Bishop of Rome in the 4th century, undertook a complete translation of the Bible into Latin. The Latin Vulgate became the "authorised" standard

text for the Roman Catholic Church and held sway in most of Europe for about a thousand years. Thousands of copies dating from the 5th to the 15th centuries are still in existence.

**Others**.

Other early versions of the Bible include the Coptic or Egyptian (3rd & 4th centuries); the Armenian (400 AD) which seems to have been translated from a Greek Bible obtained from Constantinople; the Gothic (4th Century); the Georgian (5th) and the Ethiopic and Nubian, both in the 6th.

When the wealth of these sources are put together and scientifically analysed, scholars are able to get very close indeed to the original text itself.

**The New Testament Text**

The New Testament was originally written almost entirely in the everyday Greek of the 1st century AD. This was known as Koine or Common Greek. There are just a couple of rare Aramaic phrases preserved in instances of reported speech, such as "Talitha cumi" (Mark 5:4). Many of the early copies of the New Testament were destroyed in the persecutions of the 2nd and 3rd centuries and many others deteriorated or were lost over the years. However things changed in 313 AD when the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity as the State religion.

Following the sudden elevation, scholars, from the best texts available, produced what is now known as the Byzantine Text, or the Received Text (Textus Receptus).

This was the basis of the English Authorised Version. At the time of writing the New Testament, parchment or vellum made from dried animal skins was the common "writing paper".

The vellum was cut into leaves and bound together in book form, known as a Codex. The most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament are in this form. Besides the Received Text, there are over 5,000 Greek texts of the New Testament, of which the following are the most important:

**Papyrus Bodmer II (200 AD).** These contain most of John and Luke, along with the books of Jude, and 1 & 2 Peter.

These manuscripts contain the earliest complete copies of New Testament books and are in substantial condition.

**Codex Sinaiticus (340 AD)**. It is considered one of the two most important manuscripts in existence.

In 1844 Dr. C. Tischendorf, a German Bible professor and scholar, while visiting the monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai, found monks lighting their fires with this manuscript. When he rescued it from a wastepaper basket, he found it contained the whole New Testament and half of the Old Testament in Greek. On Christmas Day 1933, the (USSR) sold it to the British Museum for L100,000 where it is today.

**Codex Vaticanus (325 to 350 AD)**. This manuscript as well as Sinaiticus were written on vellum.

It contains almost the entire Bible in Greek.

It was discovered in 1475 and was brought to the Vatican Library where it is today.

It is considered to be highly accurate and one of the two most important manuscripts in existence.

**The Revised Version of the Bible (1881)** is based upon these manuscripts, which are generally regarded as the oldest and best authorities for establishing the Greek text of the Bible.

**Codex Alexandrinus (400 AD).**

It contains much of the Old and New Testaments.

Although it is one of the three greatest uncial (large capital letters) manuscripts, it does not measure up to the high standard of the other two, the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts.

It is now in the British Museum in London.

**Codex Ephraemi (5th Century AD).**

Located in a Paris Museum, it provides important corroboration for portions of the New Testament.

**Papyrus Portions.** Besides the codices, numerous papyrus portions of the New Testament have come to light which are of great importance, so that there is now much pre-300 AD evidence for most of the text of the New Testament.

The John Rylands Fragment (125 AD) is a very small piece of papyrus only two and a half by three and a half inches in size.

It contains 5 verses' from the gospel of John and is one of the oldest manuscripts of any part of the New Testament.

It was obtained in 1920.

More recently we have seen the re-dating of the Jesus Papyrus (kept at Magdalene College Oxford) which traces the fragments of Matthew's Gospel back to 65 AD. Other portions of John's Gospel exist which date from not much more than 30 years from original writing.

The significance is that we have proof that the Gospels were eye-witness accounts from the time of Christ, not, as some have alleged, folklore written hundreds of years later.

Sir Frederic Kenyon wrote recently: "The net result of these discoveries is, in fact, to reduce the gap between the earlier manuscripts and the traditional dates of the New Testament books so far that it becomes negligible in any discussion of their authenticity. No other ancient book has anything like such early and plentiful testimony to its text, and no unbiased scholar would deny that the text that has come down to us is substantially sound".

**Other New Testament Sources**

**Versions (Ancient Translations)**:

We have many copies and remains of early versions in Syriac, Latin and Coptic, which also provide important evidence for the establishing of the New Testament text.

**Quotations.** Early Christian writers quoted extensively from the New Testament books.

Before 120 AD all the NT books except Philemon and 3 John had been referred to in letters by Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp - this is evidence that the books were in use and widely accepted by that time.

Other early church fathers included Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen. Geisler has said that five of them alone provide almost 36,000 quotations from the NT, all from the 2nd century AD.

In fact it is said that the entire New Testament could be reconstructed just from the writings and quotes from the early church fathers.

Although these men would sometimes paraphrase or quote from memory, nevertheless their writings are extremely useful in corroborating the New Testament text.

Once again, putting together all these sources means we can fully and confidently establish the text of the New Testament.

There are occasionally some small possible variations, none of which affect any doctrine - and certainly all the possibilities are before us.

For Christians, John 14:26 and 16:13 are the key. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth and we are sure this included supervising the writing of the New Testament, and watching over its transmission. Surely God has seen to the preservation of His Word!