

The Bible Versions Question

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Q. If God inspired the Bible in the first place why are there differences in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, and why do the common translations differ among themselves?

THE SHORT ANSWER

God has inspired his word so that every word as originally given was as he intended.

God has marvellously preserved the original manuscripts in an abundance of copies far more numerous than for other ancient writings. The more manuscripts we have the more we are satisfied that we have the original text in doctrinal purity and very near the exact wording of the autographs. Most copyist's errors do not even show up in translation, and the others do not make any Christian doctrine uncertain. There is no need for division in churches over the common Bible versions.

An honestly executed translation brings God's message to us even if we cannot read Hebrew or Greek. Translations vary in quality but where the meaning is faithfully conveyed verbal differences among them are not of great consequence. All translations must be tested by the Hebrew and Greek texts.

THE LONGER EXPLANATION

The Old Testament

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with some small sections in Aramaic). However, by about 200 BC the influence of Greek culture was such that a translation into Greek became necessary. It was made by Jewish scholars and is called the Septuagint or LXX for short because of the tradition that 70 scholars did the work. The translation was done over a period and is often free. The first five books (Genesis-Deuteronomy) are translated in quite a literal way, the rest much less so.

Many of the quotations in the New Testament come from the LXX and sometimes are different in detail from the standard Hebrew text. See this for example in Acts 15:16-18 (Amos 9:11-12) or Hebrews 1:6 (Deut 32:43). Another example is the use of 'tongue' for 'glory' in Acts 2:26 (Psalm 16:9) or 'angels' for 'God' in Hebrews 2:7 (Psalm 8:5). In quoting the LXX the NT writers do not endorse everything in it, but found it of practical utility for ordinary purposes.

In other cases the Greek translation is a very exact rendering of the Hebrew, while in still others the NT quotes the Hebrew in a way which brings out a particular idea inherent in the original without giving a literal rendering. A good example is Matthew 2:6 (Micah 5:2). In some cases these quotations probably represent a variant reading from the LXX (eg. Matthew 12:18-21 compare Isaiah 42:1-4).

It is clear therefore that the very earliest Christians believed that all Scripture was God-breathed, but also accepted that this did not mean the surviving manuscripts were in every respect flawless. They also recognised the difference between the Hebrew text and a translation, and used a translation that certainly departed from a literal type of translation to a greater extent than many modern English versions.

The rest of this article will concentrate on the New Testament although the basic principles apply to the Old Testament as well. Incidentally, the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the mid 20th century include copies of almost every OT book and are dated about 100BC, that is, 900 years earlier than the copies we had previously. They are for substance identical.

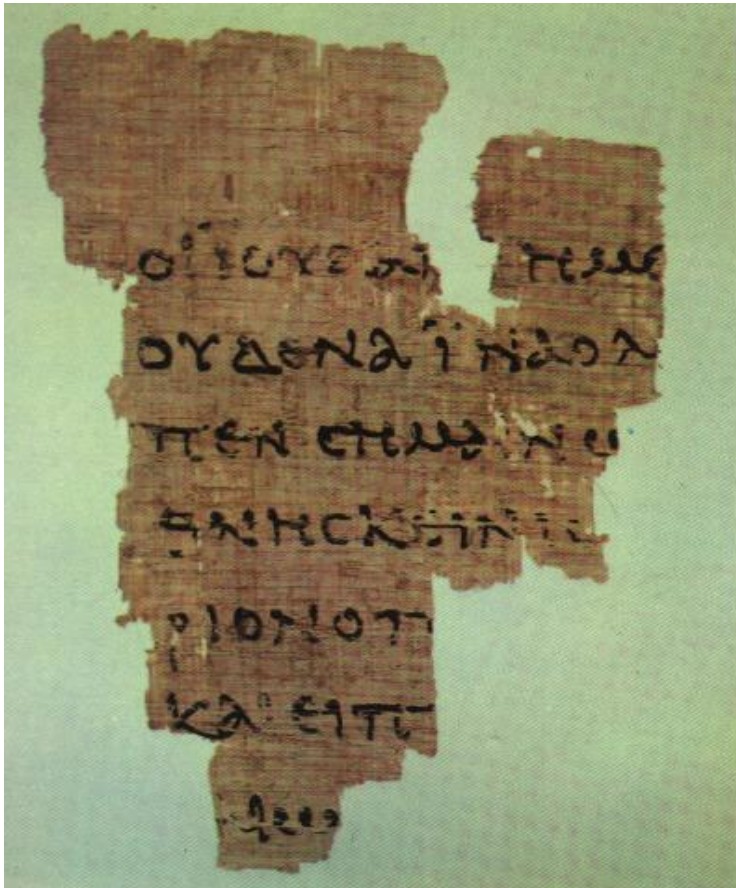
Greek manuscripts of the New Testament

While the Jews were quite fastidious in the copying of the OT text, Christians seem to have been less careful with the NT. In any case numerous copyists' mistakes occur in the manuscripts. The majority of variations are spelling errors, missing a word or a line, repetition of a word or line, or using a word which only sounds like the correct word, and in practice these variations are not significant. Other differences arise where explanatory words are inserted to make the meaning dear, readings are combined because of uncertainty as to which is correct, or the language of one Gospel is conformed to the parallel place in another. Few wilful changes exist. Communication was not easy and so standardisation was difficult to achieve before the rise of monarchical bishops and greater institutionalisation of the church. As copying continued, regions tended to perpetuate their own textual idiosyncrasies and so have Bibles with slight variations from those used in other more distant areas. From the numerous quotations in early Christian writers and from the early translations into other languages we are able to understand something of these local variations.

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