

How Were the Original Biblical Manuscripts Written and Copied?

The books of the Bible were originally written by hand over a period of approximately 1,500 years, from the time of Moses around 1400 B.C. to the writings of the Apostle John near the end of the first century A.D.

God used more than forty human authors from many different walks of life. These included kings, prophets, priests, shepherds, fishermen, a physician, a tax collector, and others. Although these men had different backgrounds and lived in different time periods, Christians believe they were guided by the Holy Spirit as they wrote Scripture.

The Bible was written in several countries and regions, including Israel, Egypt, Babylon, and parts of the Roman Empire. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with a few portions in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek, the common language of the eastern Roman Empire.

The original writings, known as **autographs**, were written on materials available at the time, such as:

- Papyrus, made from reeds that grew along the Nile River
- Parchment, made from specially prepared animal skins
- Scrolls, which were rolled for storage and reading
- Later, bound books called codices

Because printing presses did not exist, every copy had to be reproduced by hand. Skilled scribes carefully copied the text letter by letter and word by word. This process required great attention to detail and often took many hours or even days to complete.

As the Scriptures spread throughout the ancient world, thousands of handwritten copies were made. While occasional copying mistakes occurred, the large number of manuscripts allows scholars to compare copies and identify most differences with a high degree of confidence.

The original manuscripts no longer exist, but the Bible has been preserved through thousands of ancient manuscripts and copies. Through this process, God's Word has been passed down from generation to generation and remains available to people around the world today.

What materials did they write on?

Different materials were used during different periods of Bible history.

1. Papyrus

This was one of the most common materials in the ancient world.

Papyrus was made from a reed plant that grew in Egypt.

Workers would:

- cut thin strips from the plant,
- press them together,
- dry them,
- and form writing sheets.

These sheets were often glued together into long scrolls.

Most New Testament writings were probably first copied onto papyrus.

Papyrus was:

- lightweight,
- relatively inexpensive,
- but not extremely durable.

That is why many ancient papyrus manuscripts survive only in fragments today.

2. Parchment or vellum

Parchment was made from animal skins.

Vellum was a finer quality parchment.

This material was:

- stronger,
- longer lasting,
- and more expensive.

Many later biblical manuscripts were copied onto parchment.

Some of the great ancient Bible manuscripts, like Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, were written on parchment.

3. Stone, clay, and metal

Some early writings were engraved onto:

- stone tablets,
- clay tablets,
- or metal plates.

For example:

- the Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets.

These materials were durable but impractical for long books.

What Did the Biblical Writers Write With?

Ancient writers did not have pencils, pens, typewriters, or computers. Everything was written by hand using the tools available at the time.

Common writing instruments included:

- Reed pens made from hollow reeds that were cut and shaped into a writing point
- Quill-like pens made from feathers or other materials in later periods
- Styluses used for writing on clay tablets or wax surfaces

The ink was typically made from a mixture of:

- Soot or charcoal
- Gum or resin as a binding agent
- Water

This produced a durable black ink that could last for centuries under the right conditions.

Most biblical manuscripts were written in black ink. However, colored inks, especially red, were sometimes used for headings, titles, decorations, or important markings in later manuscripts.

Writing was a skilled task that required patience and precision. Scribes often spent long hours carefully copying manuscripts by hand. A single mistake could require scraping ink from parchment or rewriting an entire section.

Because every manuscript had to be copied by hand, producing a complete copy of Scripture was both time-consuming and expensive. Yet through the dedication of countless scribes and copyists, the biblical text was preserved and passed from one generation to the next.

When we hold a Bible today, it is easy to forget the enormous amount of labor that went into writing, copying, preserving, and transmitting God's Word throughout history.

What Did the Bible Originally Look Like?

The earliest biblical writings did not look like the Bibles we use today. They were not printed books with covers, chapters, verse numbers, footnotes, and page numbers.

Most of the earliest biblical books were written on **scrolls**. A scroll was a long piece of papyrus or parchment that was rolled up for storage and unrolled when it was read.

A scroll might contain:

- One complete book of the Bible
- Part of a longer book
- Several shorter writings together

For example, a scroll might contain Isaiah, Jeremiah, or one of the books of Moses. Smaller books could sometimes be copied together on one scroll.

Later, Christians became early users of the **codex**. A codex was more like a modern book, with pages bound together on one side. This made it easier to carry, easier to read, and easier to find a certain passage.

The codex was especially useful for Christians because they valued many writings together, such as the Gospels, Paul's letters, and other New Testament books.

So, the Bible did not begin as one large bound book. It began as individual writings, copied by hand, passed along, read in homes and gatherings, and eventually collected together into the Bible we know today.

Did the Biblical Authors Write Everything Themselves?

Sometimes yes, and sometimes no.

In the ancient world, it was common for an author to dictate his words to a trained scribe, also called an amanuensis. The author provided the message, while the scribe wrote it down. This was a normal and accepted practice.

The Apostle Paul appears to have dictated many of his letters. One clear example is found in Romans 16:22, where the scribe identifies himself:

"I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord."

This indicates that Tertius physically wrote the letter to the Romans while Paul dictated its contents.

Even when a scribe was used, the letter was still considered Paul's because the words, teaching, and authority came from him. The scribe simply assisted in the writing process.

Paul often added a handwritten greeting or closing at the end of his letters as a mark of authenticity. For example, he wrote:

“The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand.”

(1 Corinthians 16:21)

Similar statements appear in several of his epistles. These personal signatures helped verify that the letter genuinely came from Paul and had not been forged.

Other biblical authors may also have used scribes, although Scripture does not always tell us when this happened. Whether written directly by the author or recorded by a trusted scribe, Christians believe the Holy Spirit guided the writing of Scripture.

This means that while God used human methods, such as dictation and scribes, He still preserved His message through the biblical authors and those who assisted them.

What Happened When Copyists Made Mistakes?

Yes, human copyists absolutely made mistakes.

This should not surprise us because, for many centuries, every copy of Scripture had to be reproduced by hand. Before the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, there was no other way to make copies.

As scribes copied manuscripts, mistakes naturally occurred. Common errors included:

- Accidentally skipping a word or line
- Repeating a word or phrase twice
- Misspelling a word
- Writing a similar-looking word by mistake
- Transposing letters or words

Most of these mistakes were small and unintentional. In the vast majority of cases, they did not affect the meaning of the text.

Because thousands of manuscripts were copied and preserved, scholars can compare them and identify where copyist mistakes occurred. This process is known as **textual criticism**.

Textual criticism is not an attempt to change the Bible. Rather, it is the study of ancient manuscripts to determine, as accurately as possible, what the original biblical authors wrote.

For example, if 99 manuscripts read one way and a single manuscript contains a spelling error, the mistake is usually easy to identify. The large number of surviving manuscripts actually helps scholars detect and correct copying mistakes.

The existence of copyist errors does not mean God's Word was lost. In fact, the enormous number of biblical manuscripts gives us a remarkable ability to compare copies and recover the original text with a very high degree of confidence.

God inspired the original writings of Scripture, but He used ordinary human beings to copy and preserve those writings. As a result, copyist mistakes occurred, yet God's Word has been faithfully preserved through the thousands of manuscripts that have survived to our day.

1. Spelling Mistakes

One of the most common copying errors was simple spelling mistakes.

Just as people make spelling errors today, ancient scribes occasionally misspelled words while copying manuscripts by hand. This was especially easy to do when copying long texts for many hours at a time.

For example, a scribe might:

- Leave out a letter
- Add an extra letter
- Reverse the order of letters
- Misspell a familiar word

In most cases, these mistakes were obvious and did not change the meaning of the text. When scholars compare multiple manuscripts, spelling errors are usually easy to identify and correct.

It is also important to remember that spelling standards were not always as strict as they are today. In many ancient languages, the same word could sometimes be spelled in slightly different ways and still be understood by readers.

For this reason, spelling mistakes make up a large percentage of the differences found among ancient biblical manuscripts, but they rarely affect the meaning of the passage.

2. Skipping Lines

Another common copying mistake occurred when a scribe's eye accidentally jumped from one word, phrase, or sentence ending to another similar ending farther down the page.

As a result, the scribe could unintentionally skip a section of text and continue copying from the wrong place. This would cause a phrase, sentence, or even an entire line to be omitted.

For example, imagine two consecutive lines ending with the same words. A tired scribe might copy the first line, look back at the manuscript, and accidentally resume at the second matching ending instead of the first. Everything in between would be left out.

This type of error is known as **parablepsis** ("looking past"), and it was one of the most common mistakes made by ancient copyists.

These omissions were usually unintentional and often become visible when multiple manuscripts are compared. If ninety-nine manuscripts contain a phrase and one manuscript omits it because of a skipped line, scholars can often identify what happened.

The existence of such mistakes is one reason textual criticism is valuable. By comparing thousands of manuscripts, scholars can detect many of these accidental omissions and determine with a high degree of confidence what the original text said.

Far from weakening confidence in Scripture, the large number of surviving manuscripts helps reveal where these copying errors occurred and allows the biblical text to be examined and preserved with remarkable accuracy.

3. Repeating Words or Lines

Sometimes copyists made the opposite mistake of skipping text. Instead of leaving something out, they accidentally copied a word, phrase, sentence, or line twice.

This could happen when a scribe looked away from the manuscript and then returned to the wrong place. Thinking he had not yet copied a particular section, he would write it again.

For example, a phrase such as:

“And Jesus said unto them...”

might accidentally be copied twice in succession.

Most of these repetitions were obvious and easy to detect because they disrupted the flow of the sentence or appeared only in a small number of manuscripts.

This type of mistake is known as **dittography**, which means “double writing.” It was a natural human error that occurred when texts were copied by hand.

As with other copying mistakes, repeated words or lines can often be identified by comparing multiple manuscripts. If one manuscript contains a duplicated phrase while dozens of others do not, scholars can usually determine that the repetition was accidental.

These kinds of errors remind us that copyists were human. Yet they also demonstrate the value of having thousands of manuscripts available for comparison. The abundance of manuscript evidence helps scholars recognize and correct many of these accidental mistakes, preserving the biblical text with a high degree of accuracy.

4. Margin Notes Becoming Part of the Text

Another type of copying error occurred when notes written in the margin of a manuscript were mistakenly incorporated into the main text by a later copyist.

Readers, teachers, and scribes sometimes wrote notes in the margins to explain a difficult word, clarify a passage, provide a cross-reference, or add a comment. These notes were not originally part of Scripture, but were intended to help readers understand the text.

Occasionally, a later scribe copying the manuscript would see a marginal note and assume it had accidentally been left out of the text. As a result, he might copy the note directly into the body of the manuscript.

For example, a scribe might encounter a note explaining a verse and mistakenly believe it belonged in the original text. When the manuscript was copied again, the note would then appear as part of the passage itself.

This type of error was relatively uncommon, but it is one of the reasons scholars compare many manuscripts when studying the biblical text.

By examining thousands of manuscripts from different places and time periods, textual scholars can often identify when a reading appears to have originated as a marginal note rather than as part of the original writing.

The existence of these occasional additions does not mean the Bible is unreliable. In fact, because so many manuscripts survive, scholars can often trace where and when such changes entered the manuscript tradition. The large amount of manuscript evidence helps make these variations visible rather than hidden.

This is another example of how textual criticism seeks to recover the original wording of Scripture by carefully comparing the available evidence.

How Did Scribes Correct Mistakes?

How scribes corrected mistakes depended on the writing material and the time period.

On Papyrus

Papyrus was made from reeds and was more delicate than parchment. Because of that, corrections had to be made carefully.

A scribe might correct a mistake by:

- Lightly scraping away the ink
- Crossing out a word
- Writing the correct word nearby
- Rewriting a small section if there was space

Since papyrus could tear or become damaged, heavy correction was difficult.

On Parchment

Parchment was made from prepared animal skins, so it was stronger and more durable than papyrus. Because of this, scribes could sometimes make cleaner corrections.

Ink could sometimes be:

- Scraped off
- Sanded down
- Smoothed out
- Written over again

Some old parchments were even reused. These are called **palimpsests**. A palimpsest is a manuscript where older writing was erased, and new writing was written over it.

Today, modern technology can sometimes reveal the older hidden writing underneath. This has helped scholars recover ancient biblical texts that had been covered up for centuries.

These corrections remind us that copying Scripture by hand was careful, difficult work. Scribes were human, and mistakes happened, but many of those mistakes were noticed and corrected as the manuscripts were copied and preserved.

Were Scribes Careful?

Yes. Most scribes took their work very seriously, especially Jewish scribes who copied the Old Testament Scriptures.

To them, copying God's Word was not merely a job. It was a sacred responsibility. Because they believed the Scriptures were God's Word, they developed detailed procedures to help ensure accuracy.

Some of their quality-control methods included:

- Counting the letters in a book

- Counting the words in a book
- Identifying and checking the middle word of a section
- Identifying and checking the middle letter of a section
- Comparing completed copies with trusted manuscripts
- Reviewing their work multiple times for errors

If a mistake was found, the manuscript might be corrected or, in some cases, set aside and replaced with a more accurate copy.

Jewish scribes were especially careful when writing the divine name of God. Some traditions required special preparation before writing it, reflecting the deep reverence they had for the Scriptures.

Of course, no human copying process was perfect, and occasional mistakes still occurred. However, the remarkable care exercised by generations of scribes helped preserve the biblical text with an extraordinary degree of accuracy.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the twentieth century demonstrated just how carefully the Old Testament had been transmitted. When manuscripts separated by more than a thousand years were compared, scholars found an astonishing level of agreement.

Copying Scripture was considered sacred work. Scribes understood that they were handling the Word of God, and many devoted their lives to preserving it faithfully for future generations.

Why Do We Still Have Differences Among Manuscripts?

If scribes were so careful, why do differences still exist among biblical manuscripts?

The answer is simple: the Bible was copied by hand for many centuries.

Over time:

- Thousands of manuscripts were produced
- Copies were made across many countries
- Different languages and regions were involved
- Manuscripts were copied over hundreds of years
- Many different scribes participated in the process

As a result, small differences naturally accumulated. Some manuscripts contain spelling differences, omitted words, repeated phrases, or other minor variations that arose during the copying process.

This is exactly what we would expect when thousands of handwritten copies are produced over a long period of time.

Ironically, the large number of manuscripts that contain these variations is also one of the greatest strengths of biblical scholarship. Because so many manuscripts survive, scholars can compare them with one another and identify where differences occurred.

For example, if hundreds of manuscripts contain one reading and a small number contain a different reading, the evidence can be weighed and studied. By comparing manuscripts from different regions and time periods, scholars can often determine which reading is most likely original.

If only one manuscript of the Bible existed, we would have no way to check it against other copies. Instead, we possess thousands of biblical manuscripts and manuscript fragments, allowing scholars to compare, evaluate, and verify the text in remarkable detail.

The existence of manuscript differences should not undermine confidence in Scripture. In many ways, it strengthens confidence because the variations are visible rather than hidden. The abundance of manuscript evidence allows scholars to study those differences and recover the original text with a very high degree of confidence.

The differences among manuscripts are evidence of the Bible's extensive copying history, not evidence that God's Word has been lost.

Chapters and Verses Were Added Much Later

The original biblical writings did not contain chapter numbers, verse numbers, punctuation marks, or even the spaces between words that we are accustomed to seeing in modern books.

Ancient manuscripts were often written in long, continuous lines of text. This style is sometimes called **scriptio continua**, meaning "continuous writing."

For example, an ancient manuscript might look something like this: **GODISNOWHERE**

A reader would have to determine from the context whether it meant:

- "God is now here"
- "God is nowhere"

In actual biblical manuscripts, the surrounding context usually made the intended meaning clear, but this example illustrates how differently ancient texts were written.

When Were Chapters Added?

The chapter divisions commonly used in our Bibles today were added in the 1200s.

A man named **Stephen Langton**, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, is usually credited with creating the chapter system around **A.D. 1227**.

These chapter divisions became widely accepted because they made the Bible much easier to use for:

- Teaching
- Studying
- Copying
- Quoting
- Finding specific passages

Before chapter divisions, locating a certain passage was much harder. Imagine trying to find one sentence in Isaiah or Romans without chapters, verses, page numbers, or section headings.

The chapter system was not part of the original inspired text, but it became a very helpful tool for Bible readers, teachers, and students.

When Were Verses Added?

The modern Old Testament verse system developed gradually within Jewish tradition. These divisions helped Jewish scribes, teachers, and readers keep track of the text.

The New Testament verse numbers commonly used today were added much later.

A French printer named **Robert Estienne**, also called **Stephanus**, added verse numbers to the Greek New Testament in the 1500s. His New Testament verse system appeared around **A.D. 1551** and later became common in full Bible editions.

The **Geneva Bible**, published in **1560**, was one of the first English Bibles to use both chapter divisions and numbered verses throughout the whole Bible.

The King James Version later followed this same chapter and verse system.

These verse numbers were not part of the original inspired writings. They were added as helpful tools so people could more easily teach, study, memorize, quote, and find specific passages.

Why Were Chapters and Verses Added?

Chapters and verses were added to make the Bible easier to read, study, teach, memorize, and reference.

Without them, it would be difficult to locate a passage quickly. Imagine trying to find John 3:16 or Romans 8:28 without chapter and verse numbers.

Today, chapter and verse divisions are so familiar that many people assume they were part of the original writings. In reality, they were added centuries later as helpful study tools.

While chapters and verses are extremely useful, they are not inspired Scripture. They are human additions designed to help readers navigate the biblical text more easily.

One Important Caution

While chapter and verse numbers are extremely helpful, it is important to remember that they are not part of the original inspired text. They were added centuries later as study and reference tools.

Because these divisions were created by humans, they are not always perfect.

Sometimes:

- A chapter break interrupts a continuing thought.
- A new chapter begins in the middle of a discussion.
- A verse division separates ideas that naturally belong together.
- Readers focus on a single verse while missing the larger context.

For example, some chapters begin where the author's argument is still continuing from the previous chapter. In other places, a verse break may occur in the middle of a sentence or thought.

This does not make the chapter and verse system bad. It simply reminds us that the divisions are study aids, not inspired parts of Scripture.

That is one reason good Bible study involves reading larger sections rather than isolated verses alone. Reading paragraphs, chapters, and entire books helps us understand the author's intended meaning and keeps individual verses in their proper context.

The chapter and verse system is one of the most useful tools ever added to the Bible, but it should always serve the text rather than control how we understand it.

Important Perspective

Even though copyist differences exist, the Bible is remarkably well preserved compared to other ancient writings.

For many ancient books, historians may only have:

- A few surviving manuscripts
- Copies made hundreds of years after the original
- Limited evidence to compare

The New Testament is different. For the New Testament alone, there are thousands of Greek manuscripts, along with ancient translations and quotations from early Christian writers.

This large amount of evidence allows scholars to compare manuscripts in great detail. When differences appear, they can study many copies from different places and time periods to help determine the original wording.

So the number of manuscript differences should not frighten us. In many ways, the large number of manuscripts is a strength. It gives us far more evidence to work with than we have for many other ancient writings.

The Bible has not been lost. God has preserved His Word through a vast and rich manuscript history.