

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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The Jewish Blessing

of God's Message to the World

**Why all people
should have
a great
appreciation
for the Bible**

by Galen Peterson

Approximately thirty-four centuries ago, Moses recorded for the very first time a written message from God. Over the next fourteen centuries, other writers received and recorded additional contributions, thus completing God's message to humanity.

Some people are skeptical that such a message could remain intact all of this time. After all, 3400 years is a really long period of time in which considerable error could be introduced, as the content had to be copied time and time again.

How can we know that those copies were made accurately? For the answer to that question, we have to go back to the beginning of recorded history and connect the dots to the present.

The book of Genesis is not an eyewitness account. Starting with

Adam and Eve, those stories were passed down from one generation to the next in an oral manner. It wasn't until Moses that they were compiled in written form. But we can count on their validity because the content was given to Moses under the inspiration of God.

Moses continued to write the next four books as an eyewitness and as a direct recipient of God's spoken words. Some of those words were etched by God on stone tablets. The rest of the words were written on sheets of parchment, then stitched together as a scroll that we now call the Pentateuch, meaning "five books" and also the Torah, meaning "instruction or Law."

At the end of his life, Moses directed the Israelites to "take this book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of

Adonai your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you" (Deut 31:26).

For a very long time, that was the only written record of God's foundational message. There is no record of other copies being made initially. The primary means of learning the content was still oral in nature, whenever the Torah was read aloud.

When Israel began having kings lead the nation, those rulers were required to make a copy of the original scroll of Moses and to retain their copy (Deut 17:18). The faithfulness of the kings of Israel to that commandment was not very good. In fact there were periods of Israel's history when the Torah was forgotten completely.

One such period of time spanned 67 years, mainly under

the reign of an idolatrous king name Manasseh. During that time when idol worship was the norm, no Torah could be found in the kingdom of Judah, and thus the temple in Jerusalem.

However, when Josiah became king, he restored the first temple that had been corrupted by Manasseh (2 Chr 34). After the idols and objects of pagan worship were removed, workers rediscovered the original Torah scroll of Moses that had been stored somewhere inside the temple and forgotten. The likelihood is that the practice of kings making personal copies of the Torah had been lost altogether, which means the original scroll of Moses was the only one left in existence. So when it was discovered and read for the first time in a long time, Josiah led a revival in the land.

But it was short-lived. Twenty-one years later, the people were taken into captivity in Babylon. With the reign of the kings of Israel and Judah coming to an end during the Babylonian captivity, a new era began in regard to the preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures. During that time, two key developments occurred while in Babylon.

1. The adoption of the square Assyrian script for writing

Hebrew, which has carried over until today.

2. The establishment of *soferim*—scribes who reproduced and taught the Torah.

The original Torah had been written by Moses using what is called the Canaanite script, which was an alphabet that was more pictorial in nature. The later books of the prophets and other historical writings and Psalms were written using a modified form of that script called Paleo Hebrew. And the post-exile books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi were written in the square Assyrian or modern Hebrew script.

The first scribe was Ezra. He transcribed the original Canaanite script of Moses into a new copy of the Torah using the square Assyrian Hebrew script. His scroll became the standard-bearer for all subsequent scrolls. As such, he established a tradition of careful and exact replication of the text.

Since the task of scribes was copying scrolls by hand, and human beings are prone to make mistakes, even with the best intentions, there was risk of error in their work. So, in reverence for God's holy book, the scribes derived a series of safeguards for preserving the accuracy of the copies of the original texts.

- A scribe could not write words from memory. Even if he had memorized the words of Scripture, as was very common in ancient times, he still had to look at each individual letter on the current scroll and copy it on the new one.
- Every word of the original must be pronounced out loud before copying it.
- Letters could not touch each other, and precise space was required between words, so that two words would not look like a single word.
- Each letter had to be sufficiently legible so that even an ordinary schoolchild could distinguish it from other similar letters.
- The scribe could not be distracted. If a king spoke to a scribe while he was writing the name of God he must take no notice of the king, which would normally be a grave mistake.
- The scroll was cross-checked by counting all of the letters. That is why scribes were called *soferim*, which literally means "counters." They knew that there was a total of 304,805 letters in the Torah. And they knew the count for each of the individual letters of the alphabet, beginning with

The Progression of the Hebrew Alphabet in the Old Testament

1st—Canaanite Script used by Moses

2nd—Paleo Hebrew Script used in the historical books and pre-exile prophets

3rd—Assyrian/Modern Hebrew Script used by the post-exile prophets

[reads right to left]

†	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋	𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒	𐤓	𐤔	𐤕	𐤖	𐤗	𐤘	𐤙	Canaanite
X	W	A	φ	h	7	O	‡	g	g	L	7	Z	⊕	⊖	I	γ	ϑ	A	7	g	‡						Paleo
ש	ת	ר	ק	צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ	ל	מ	כ	ף	ט	ח	ץ	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א					Assyrian/ Modern

27,057 *Alephs*, all the way to the end of the alphabet with 17,949 uses of the letter *Tav*. They counted 152,403 letters from the beginning and 152,403 letters from the end in order to check the middle letter of the Torah, which they knew to be the *vav* in the word *gachon*, meaning “belly” in Leviticus 11:42. They would indicate this by writing it as a larger letter:



These procedures proved to be effective in maintaining the integrity of the text. A Torah scroll with an error could not be used. If the error could not be corrected, or if the error involved the name of God, the scroll had to be buried.

For that reason, many of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran had some minor transcription errors and were placed in clay jars in a dry environment as a form of burial. Those scrolls are the oldest manuscripts of various books of the Bible, dating from the second temple period around 2300 years ago.

It has been shown that in the five books of the Torah discovered at Qumran, only twelve characters out of 304,805 are uncertain. The same is true regarding the Dead Sea scrolls of other books of the Bible. In fact, if you go to the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, you can see the Great Isaiah Scroll on display that was dated from before the days of Yeshua (Jesus). And if you compare the text to a modern Hebrew Bible, the only differences are some variant spellings of words, similar to the practice in English, like spelling the word “Saviour” with a U in England or “Savior” without the U according to the American preference.

All this to say that we can be very confident that the content of the Hebrew Bible is the same today as it was in the original. So, when someone asks, “How could texts written so long ago be accurate today after so many generations of copying?” The answer is, to use a modern term, quality control.

When it comes to the Bible, we ought to be grateful for the dedicated Jewish men who served as God’s communicators of His message to humanity. That includes both the original authors and those who faithfully preserved and replicated the words. For without them, the spoken word and the events that occurred would either be limited to oral recollections passed on from generation to generation or lost altogether. And that truly is a Jewish blessing to the world.

The extent of inspiration of the Bible

What is the nature of the words of the Bible? According to 2 Tim 3:16-17,

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The Greek word translated as inspired is *theopneustos*. It literally means “God-breathed.” It has the sense of the Holy Spirit coming upon people and breathing in spiritually life-giving words in the same way that breathing in oxygen allows us to live physically. The result is that prophets and other writers chosen by God as His messengers are able to communicate His message perfectly as intended, while also

allowing the author’s personality and style to come through.

We have to ask, what did “all Scripture” mean to Paul when he wrote the above words? In this letter, he speaks about “the sacred writings” that Timothy learned “from childhood” (v. 15). At that time, those writings could only be the *Torah* (Moses), *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings), which, expressed as an acronym, is the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew term for the Old Testament.

When Paul recorded those words to Timothy, it was around the year 65-66 A.D. At that point in time, most New Testament books had not been written, and those that were written were not widely distributed. Clearly, Paul’s specific use of the phrase “all Scripture” is a reference to the Old Testament. That does not mean the New Testament lacks inspiration. Without question, the principle of inspiration *does* apply to every book of the Bible, including those written after this epistle until the final revelation given to John.

The point is that Scripture itself affirms that every book of the Bible (“all Scripture”) is inspired by God equally and completely. Because of that full inspiration, every book has relevance in terms of teaching, reproof, correction, training and equipping people for service. And because God does not ascribe inspiration to any other book, only the Bible is inspired by God. No other writings are truly God-breathed.

The extent of inspiration in Judaism

In rabbinical Judaism, the concept of inspiration is viewed differently. It teaches that there are degrees of inspiration in writings.

In this way of thinking, the highest degree of inspiration is present in the Torah (Pentateuch). It is said that there is a divine origin for every letter of the Torah, and that it was dictated to Moses on Sinai.

Closely associated with the inspiration of the written Law of Moses is the Oral Law that is claimed to have been given to Moses at the same time on Mt Sinai. These oral teachings were compiled seventeen centuries later in written form in the *Mishnah*. Rabbinical Judaism teaches that it has equal inspiration and thus equal authority to the written Law of Moses.

Then, over the next three centuries, generations of rabbis added their views regarding the Oral Law. Their words are recorded in the *Gemara*, which, together with the *Mishnah*, makes up the text of the *Talmud*. The *Gemara* is said to be inspired, but to a slightly lesser extent.

The next degree of inspiration is found in the writings of the Prophets. It is said that God *did* give them their messages, but they were always lesser prophets than Moses, so their words always had to be judged in accordance with the Torah, and thus also had a lower degree of inspiration.

Lower still in terms of inspiration are the *Ketuvim* or the other writings of the Old

Testament. Since those writings have no direct statement like “The LORD said to Moses” or “The word of the LORD to the prophet,” they are considered to be more like words of wisdom that were only influenced by God.

So you can see that there is a considerable distinction between the Christian understanding of inspiration and that of rabbinical Judaism. There is a common understanding of inspiration being the breath of God. But the extent is very different because the rabbinical understanding affirms degrees of inspiration that extends to the writings of the Talmud, while excluding the New Testament completely. Those degrees of inspiration are in the following order from high to low:

1. Written Torah plus oral law (*Mishnah*)
2. *Gemara* (rabbinical commentary)
3. *Nevi'im* (Prophets of the Bible)
4. *Ketuvim* (Writings of the Bible)

The implications of the Bible as a gift to humanity

If inspiration comes in degrees, it means that God has communicated in diminished ways over time, which is contrary to His unchanging nature (Num 23:19). A more consistent view is that we have been given a thoroughly inspired and complete message in

the Bible that is consistent with His nature. All other writings outside the Bible only contain the opinions of men.

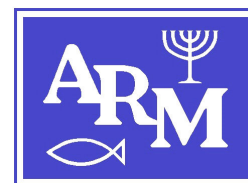
The Bible is the greatest literary gift to the world. It describes God’s love for humanity and His plan that continually points to a Redeemer who restores our broken fellowship with Him. At the same time, it is a diverse message in the sense of a rich tapestry of stories and teachings that bring out elements of what it means to live in a godly fashion. And when you realize that it was written by Jewish authors in partnership with the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit, it should give us a great appreciation for what has been preserved until this day.

The Bible is truly God’s full and complete, inspired message to us. And just like any gift, it is up to us to do something with it when we receive it. It can be one of those gifts that you receive in your life that you really aren’t enthused about, and then you put it on a shelf, only to gather dust. On the other hand, it can be that great gift that makes you excited to use in life-changing ways.

Does the latter describe you? We truly have been blessed by the great gift of the Word of God. But you can’t just take my word for it. You have to read it for yourself.

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**American Remnant Mission
Post Office Box 2321
Pleasant Hill, California 94523
[925] 943-6061
E-mail: arm@remnant.net
Internet: www.remnant.net**



Dr. Galen Peterson, Executive Director