

# Chapter Thirteen

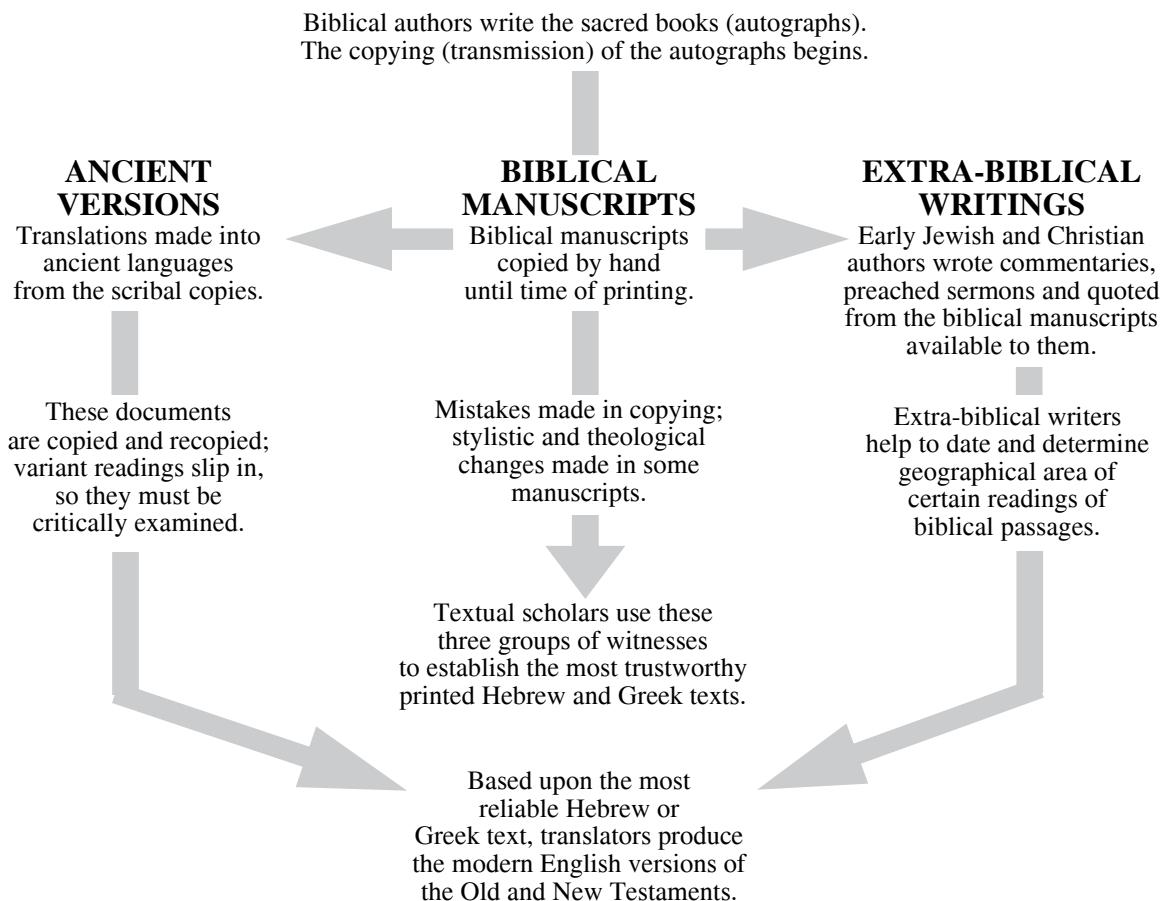
## Where Are the Witnesses?

It is a well-known fact that the original documents penned by the prophets, apostles and their scribes no longer exist. Most likely they were worn out through extensive use early on. For many Bible believers, this truth can be disconcerting. Yet, there is hope. Thousands of handwritten scribal copies (i.e., manuscripts) exist today that testify to the original text of the God-breathed Sacred Writings. **The dispute over the biblical texts centers on how well these copies and their texts have been preserved.** In order to come to an understanding on this issue, we must follow the trail of witnesses to the Sacred Writings.

### Witnesses to the Sacred Writings

Text editors use three major groups of witnesses to produce what they believe to be the most trustworthy Hebrew and Greek texts for translating: 1) biblical manuscripts, 2) ancient versions and 3) extra-biblical writings (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Witnesses to the Biblical Texts**



## **Where Are the Witnesses?**

These witnesses are very important in evaluating the reliability of the printed texts used today for translating. A review of each group follows.

### **Biblical Manuscripts**

Before the invention of movable type printing in the mid-1400s AD, all biblical manuscripts were copied by hand. The process of transmission began the very first time scribes made copies (apographs) of the God-breathed writings (known as autographs or the original text depending on the context). For more than 2,800 years, priests and Levitical scribes copied portions of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible). Early believers, monks and professional scribes transcribed manuscripts of the Greek Scriptures (i.e., New Testament) for almost 1,500 years. The process of copying and recopying over centuries has produced thousands of manuscripts of the biblical books. These surviving documents form the **primary** witnesses to the original text of the Old and New Testaments.

Each manuscript has its own history and character. Some are more reliable witnesses than others, depending on the scribes who copied them. These scribes operated under very different circumstances from one another.

The word “manuscript” traditionally refers to any handwritten or printed document that contains some part of Scripture on it. This term could include anything from papyrus fragments of any book of the Bible to a lectionary (liturgical work). For our purposes and for clarity, we have confined the use of the word “manuscript(s)” to the original biblical writings or their handwritten scribal copies, whether Hebrew or Greek. For example, an early papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John has been classified as a manuscript. All other evidence, such as lectionaries or ancient versions, has been referred to by its specific descriptive term. We have used the word “text(s)” to refer to the handwritten or printed letters, syllables, words and sentences that appear on the page of a manuscript of any book of the Bible.

Over the last two centuries, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of manuscripts that can be dated closer in age to the autographs. These newly discovered papyrus or vellum manuscripts have often consisted of fragments of books of the Bible.

Many modern textual theories are linked to manuscript age. One theory held by many scholars, albeit wrongly, is that the “oldest” manuscripts offer a more trustworthy witness to the text of the autographs. The scholarly-designated term “older” used to describe manuscripts is a misnomer. Most of the early Greek manuscripts, for instance, contain a text that was copied at least 150-400 years after the text of the New Testament autographs were written. More appropriate terms for these manuscripts would be “earliest” or “oldest surviving” or some variation thereof. We have adopted these labels except in direct quotes.

Scholars use the material that a manuscript is written on to determine its age. Radiocarbon (carbon-14) testing and paleography (study of ancient writings) are also employed to determine a relative dating if the condition of the manuscript permits.

The Bible reveals that stone, wooden tablets and other materials were used to record a limited number of words for specific short-term purposes (e.g., Ex. 34:1; Isa. 30:8; Luke 1:63). It is the long-term, widespread preservation of the Word of God that concerns our study; hence, we have confined our review to the usage of papyrus, leather and paper to preserve the books of the Bible in the scroll and codex formats (see Figure 2).

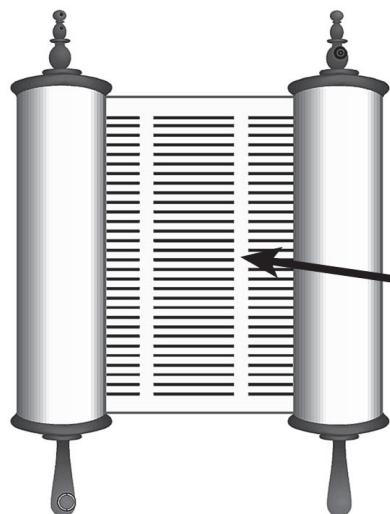
### **Three General Transmission Periods**

**Papyrus (antiquity to ca. 800 AD):** Papyrus was produced from the fibrous pith of a water plant that grew in Egypt or northern Galilee. It was widely used in Egypt from 2000-3000 BC, about a thousand years before Moses’ time (Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, p. 5).

The pith of the papyrus plant was cut into thin strips, and the strips were placed side-by-side vertically, overlapping slightly. More strips were laid across this first layer horizontally. The two layers were then glued together. After the assembled sheet dried, manufacturers polished it to produce a white smooth surface, giving it the consistency of paper. Scribes normally wrote on the side with the horizontal strips (known as *recto*), but sometimes on the other side (*verso*) as well (Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible*, p. 15).

Papyrus was common in Palestine until about 300 AD. Scribes frequently used it when copying Old Testament synagogue scrolls (cf. Mark 12:26 as a possible example). The apostles and their amanuenses (scribes) apparently wrote the Gospels, Acts, General Epistles and Revelation with ink and a split reed on papyrus scrolls, the accepted publication form of the first century AD (Bromiley, *International*

**Figure 2**  
**Biblical Manuscripts**



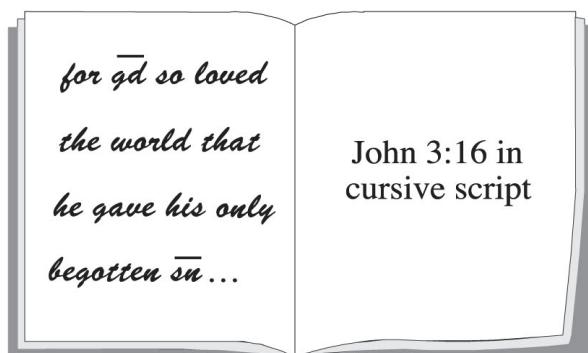
**Scrolls (Rolls)**

Old and New Testament books were copied on papyrus and leather scrolls averaging 30 feet in length and 9-10 inches in height. The book of Luke was this size and the book of Isaiah was 24 feet in length.

Scribes wrote scrolls in columns like this.

**Codex**

Developed in the first century AD, the codex or modern book form made it possible to gather the New Testament books into one or two volumes. Old Testament books were not copied in codex form until the 700s AD.



**Papyrus Codex**  
50-300 AD

**Vellum Codex**  
300-1100 AD

**Paper Codex**  
1100 AD-present

(*Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 815). John used the Greek word *chártou*, meaning papyrus, to describe the material upon which he composed his Second Epistle (II John 12).

The earliest biblical papyrus manuscripts found by archaeologists are the Dead Sea Scrolls, comprising the earliest remains of the Old Testament text. The earliest New Testament manuscripts from this period include fragments of papyrus codices (modern book form) written in uncial script (capital letters). Because papyrus is very perishable, only about 100 papyri (mostly fragments) exist today. Archaeologists have discovered all of these papyri in Egypt, which alone offers the climatic conditions favoring the preservation of early manuscripts (Aland, “The Text of the Church,” *The Trinity Journal*, p. 138). The most important of these early manuscripts is Papyrus 66 (containing most of John’s Gospel) and Papyrus 75 (containing portions of Luke and John), copied about 150 years after the Gospels were first written.

**Leather (Parchment and Vellum, 300-1100 AD):** Scribes wrote on treated animal skins from ancient times. Processors tanned leather from sheep, goat and any clean animal skin to preserve it from decay and make it pliable for writing.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains that “[s]hortly before the Christian era a method was discovered of treating animal skins with lime and drying them in such a way as to produce an exceedingly fine, smooth, and firm writing surface. In precise definitions, vellum is calfskin or similar fine skin treated as described above, while parchment (named for the city of Pergamum, which produced much of it) is made from the more ordinary types of skins [i.e., sheep, goats]. At present, however, the two terms are used interchangeably” (Bromiley, p. 815). Vellum was mostly white in color, enduring in quality, and formed a good background for black ink and for decoration in color (Kenyon, p. 20).

Leather was the accepted material for official Hebrew Old Testament scrolls. Ernest Würthwein, professor emeritus at Germany’s Philipps-Universität and a well-known expert in the text of the Old Testament, explains, “Jewish regulations still require that a copy of the Torah intended for liturgical use be written on leather made from a clean animal … this surely represents ancient usage” (Würthwein, p. 6). In his study of sacred books and scrolls of ancient Israel before the Babylonian exile and during the Second Temple period (539 BC-70 AD), scholar Menahem Haran found that the transition to leather from papyrus was a normal progression for the Scriptures and was associated with their canonization (*Ibid.*).

An increased use of leather (vellum) for writing New Testament manuscripts was the result of a copying revolution that occurred shortly after Roman Emperor Constantine legalized mainstream Christianity in the *Edict of Milan* (313 AD). Dr. Maurice Robinson, a well-trained textual critic and professor of New Testament Greek, explains the significance of this event to the production of the New Testament manuscripts: “The church of the early fourth century [300s AD] moved from a persecuted minority to an approved entity with governmental sponsorship. It is no coincidence that a change in writing material (from cheap and fragile papyrus to costly and durable vellum) occurred at this time. The earliest extant vellum MSS [manuscripts] … and many later uncials would have been copied directly from papyrus exemplars [model manuscripts]” (Robinson, “New Testament Textual Criticism: The Case for the Byzantine Priority,” *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*, par. 60).

Early uncial and later minuscule codices comprise the manuscripts of this period. (See section titled “Greek New Testament Manuscripts.”) Parchment and vellum eventually superseded papyrus for Greek New Testament manuscripts. The change to parchment was limited at first, perhaps due to economics. An average New Testament manuscript of 250 pages required the hides of about 50-60 goats or sheep (Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 77). Larger collections of books required more hides.

There have been differing opinions about the meaning of the word “parchments” in II Timothy 4:13. In this passage, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, requesting him to “bring the chest that I left in Troas with Carpus, and the books—especially the **parchments**.” Is there any evidence for a literal interpretation of this passage? Yes, there is.

Eighty-five percent of the biblical and religious writings found at Qumran, a monastic community northwest of the Dead Sea, were written on leather (Comfort, *The Origin of the Bible*, p. 159). Researchers believe a hide processing center at Ein Feshka, a satellite location two miles south of the main Qumran facility, likely supported this widespread use of leather by the Qumran scribes. Historically, Ein Feshka has supported sheep and goat herding (Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scroll*, pp. 57-60). The scribal use of leather and parchment by the Qumran society before and during the time of Paul likely reflects a general Jewish scribal pattern of that era for sacred or precious books. Therefore, the apostle Paul and his scribes would have used these materials.

This conclusion is supported in II Timothy 4:13 by the presence of the Greek word *membránas*, traditionally used for parchments produced from animal skins. Paul’s use of this word suggests that the autographs of his books were initially written on parchment. Paul’s scribes would have made and sent certified papyrus scrolls (and probably codices) from these masters to their intended destinations (cf. Gal. 6:11; II Thes. 3:17). Paul obviously knew that only parchment could provide the needed durability the Sacred Scriptures demanded.

**Paper (1100 AD to the present):** Paper first appeared in the 800s AD and gained popularity in the 1100s AD. It was adapted from China, where it was first produced. Paper was used regularly after 1100 AD in copying and later in printing the biblical texts, including whole books. Nearly 25 percent of the surviving New Testament manuscripts and lectionaries are written on paper (Aland, p. 77).

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### Text Storage Formats

**Scroll Format:** Papyrus and parchment were ideally suited for the roll or scroll format of early published books. Papyrus sheets were glued (and parchment segments sewn) together to form scrolls of varying dimensions. Common scroll sizes were 30 feet or more in length and nine to ten inches in height. Scribes normally wrote on one side of a scroll in columns about three inches wide arranged across the sheet from right to left for Old Testament books and from left to right for Greek New Testament books. Margins between the columns were small (about one-half of an inch), allowing some space for notes. Space was left at the beginning and end of scrolls to protect the text and give the reader something on which to hold or to insert a wooden shaft (roller) for turning. Titles were usually given at the end of the manuscript (Kenyon, p. 16).

Mark used the Greek word *biblo* to refer to Exodus, a “book of Moses,” written in a papyrus scroll format (Mark 12:26). Scrolls written in Hebrew without the vowel points and accent marks are still employed today for liturgical purposes in synagogues. Jesus also read from a scroll of Isaiah, which was probably about 23-25 feet in length (Luke 4:17-20). Most New Testament books were written initially in a papyrus scroll format of about 30 feet in length. A copy of the book of Luke would have needed a scroll of this length (Moorman, *Forever Settled*, p. 65). The book of Ephesians would have been four feet in length, and the Acts of the Apostles might have formed a scroll about 30 feet in length (Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 1898 ed., p. 94).

Sir Frederic Kenyon, the late director and principal librarian of the British Museum, explained the effect of the papyrus scroll on the early transmission of the New Testament books: “... so long as the papyrus roll [scroll] was the normal vehicle for literature, each of the Gospels and the Acts must have circulated separately. It was not possible to possess in a single volume all the four Gospels or all the Epistles of St. Paul, still less a complete New Testament. In the earliest days each book had its own separate history, and not every Christian community would have had a complete collection [initially] of all that we now know as the canonical books” (Kenyon, *The Text*, p. 16).

**Codex Format:** This situation changed dramatically in the latter half of the first century AD with the creation of the codex or modern book form (a document with leaves attached at the spine with writing on both sides). The codex made it possible to gather the New Testament books into a single volume. Kenyon described its effect on the production of the biblical books: “The advantage of the codex was that it could include much more matter than the roll, without becoming unduly cumbersome [clumsy]. The earliest papyrus codex known contained the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, which would have required three rolls. Another, of the early third century, contained all four Gospels and the Acts, which would previously have occupied five separate rolls. Another, of the same date, contained all the Epistles of St. Paul, except (apparently) the Pastorals [epistles to the ministry or pastors]” (Kenyon, p. 19).

Archaeological evidence indicates that all but four of the oldest surviving New Testament papyri were written in codex form (Aland, p. 102). The earliest codex, dated 100-150 AD, is the Rylands papyrus fragment of John 18 (Papyrus 52). This historical evidence implies that the use of the codex by Christians for their writings extends back into the first century. By contrast, pagan and Jewish literature is found in the scroll format for a period of time afterwards.

This evidence supports Paul’s use of the word “codex” in II Timothy 4:13 to compile, seal and preserve his books. The possible redating of an early papyrus codex of his Epistles (Papyrus 46), from 200 to 85 AD, certainly adds credibility to a literal reading of this passage (Holland, *Crowned with Glory*, p. 246). Nonetheless, Paul’s use of the word parchments in this verse in connection with the words *tá biblia*, translated “the books,” indicates at the very least that Paul was “canonizing” his books. Paul would have closely followed the practice of using leather for the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures. The fact that parchment is specifically mentioned in this passage suggests that Paul’s books were composed on this material. It also indicates that his books were bound and sealed in codex form for long-term preservation after they had been fully edited. Writings on parchment awaiting minor edits were not placed in the codex form.

The vellum codex was favored by scribes for copying the New Testament beginning in the fourth century AD. Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are two of the most famous Greek codices (plural of codex) of the Old and New Testaments.

Masoretic scribes began to adopt the codex form around 700 AD for copying and preserving the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Würthwein, p. 8). The larger writing area of the codex undoubtedly offered more space to accommodate the marginal scribal notes (Masora) for correct copying and reading of the Old Testament text.

### Ancient Versions

Ancient translations directly from the sacred apographs play a key role in modern textual criticism. “Translation of literature was not common in ancient times, and the translation of the Hebrew OT [Old Testament] into Greek before the time of Christ occupies a unique place in ancient literature. In contrast, the NT [New Testament] was translated into other languages [e.g., Old Latin and Syriac] as early as the 2nd century” (Bromiley, p. 817).

The *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* explains why Christian missionaries of the early centuries translated the Scriptures into local languages. “When the first Christian missionaries began to carry the gospel message beyond the bounds of Judea and Samaria, the Greek language was known and spoken almost everywhere they went throughout the Roman empire. Even Latin, the official language of the Roman conquerors, was less the common language of the empire than was Greek.

“This means that many people of the lands around the Mediterranean were bilingual or even trilingual, speaking their own language as well as Greek and often Latin. To many, of course, either Greek or Latin was their native tongue; but in many areas their own language was neither of these.... Although a missionary could have preached in Greek in many areas, in order to be lastingly effective the Gospel needed to be translated into the language which the people used in their homes and in intimate conversation. An indication of this fact is seen in Paul’s experience at Lystra (Acts 14:8-18), where, even though the people evidently understood Paul when he spoke in Greek, when they themselves wanted to speak of religious matters they used their own Lycaonian speech.

“The ancient versions of the New Testament, in common with virtually all subsequent versions, were missionary in origin and purpose. They were made so that the people to whom the Christian message was being taken could read it in their own language rather than in a language which they may have known, if at all, only as a language of trade and commerce [i.e., Greek]” (Tenney, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 871).

Scholars have historically used the ancient versions to reconstruct obscure passages or correct alleged errors that exist in the biblical texts. They have also utilized them to identify the source text (*Vorlage*) used by ancient translators. This information is used to date and determine the geographical area in which a text circulated. However, there are limitations in using ancient versions for these purposes.

Ernest Würthwein describes the shortcomings of early versions in textual studies, especially for reconstructing the Hebrew Old Testament text: “... each of the versions comes with its own peculiar range of problems. For a long period the versions were approached rather naively and used directly for textual criticism on the uncritical assumption that the base from which they were translated could be readily determined. But the matter is not that simple. Anyone who translates also interprets: the translation is not simply a rendering of the underlying text but also an expression of the translator’s understanding of it. And every translator is a child of a particular time and of a particular culture. Consequently, every translation, and especially a translation of the Bible produced to meet the practical needs of a community, must be understood and appreciated independently in its own right.

“Translations reflect the intellectual assumptions of their translators ... and most translations of the Bible are the work of a number of anonymous translators. Therefore we must distinguish between what is derived from the original text and what is contributed by the translator. This is a formidable task to be accomplished before we can proceed to use the versions for purposes of textual criticism.

“The history of most of the versions is beset by many problems which are yet unsolved and are perhaps insoluble [incapable of being solved], especially for the early period [e.g., the Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta]....of all the problems of literary criticism, that of the biblical versions is encumbered with such a variety of diverse factors that any hope for a scientifically conclusive solution is very slight” (Würthwein, pp. 48-49).

These potential weaknesses have not deterred scholars from using ancient versions to try to establish the original wording of the biblical texts in places where manuscripts differ (variant readings). Many scholars still emphasize the contributions of ancient versions to textual criticism and the translation process, especially in identifying the presence or absence of phrases or passages in the underlying text and in determining the wording where passages appear obscure.

As noted, the original documents of many of these versions are fragmentary or lost; thus their real value to textual criticism is limited in many respects. The process of recovering an original reading from an ancient version is complicated because many were subsequently copied and recopied or even

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revised (e.g., the Septuagint, Old Latin and Syriac Peshitta). During this process, alternate readings (letters and words) have crept into their texts. Another factor limiting the usefulness of certain versions to textual criticism is that many were translated from other versions, not the original biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. For example, the Septuagint has served as the basis for the Old Testament in many early Christian versions because the Hebrew language was virtually unknown to early translators in comparison to Greek.

There are also other difficulties related to grammar and translation quality. Certain ancient versions cannot confirm the presence or absence of the Greek article in the New Testament text since some languages, like Latin for instance, have no definite article (adapted from Bromiley, p. 817 and Tenney, p. 872). Other languages cannot translate the Greek verb tenses (e.g., aorist, perfect and imperfect tenses) (Tenney, p. 872). An interpretative translation (targum) will not often reflect the word order, style and characteristics of the original biblical texts in comparison to one that is more literal.

(A comprehensive description of the origins, transmission and limitations of ancient versions for use in New Testament textual criticism is available in the book titled *The Early Versions of the New Testament* by Bruce M. Metzger. The most important ancient versions for use in Old Testament criticism are evaluated by Ernst Würthwein in his book *The Text of the Old Testament*, pp. 50-104.)

### **Extra-Biblical Writings**

Scholars often consult the citations of Jewish and Christian writers to recover the wording of the original biblical text at places where manuscripts disagree or passages seem obscure. Extra-biblical writings include those of Jewish medieval rabbis, historians such as Josephus and early Greek, Latin and Syriac Christian writers. These individuals authored commentaries and theological treatises, preached sermons and presumably quoted directly from the biblical texts.

Like translations, the original documents written by these authors have been lost. The fact that some of these writings have been translated into and preserved in a secondary language often limits their use for textual criticism. Therefore, citations must be treated judiciously. Serious questions must be answered: Did a writer carefully and directly quote from the biblical manuscripts before them, from a translation or from memory? Did scribes alter later quotations within these writings to harmonize with the text known to them? Was the author influenced in his writing by the prevailing philosophical climate of his time (i.e., Gnostic or Hellenistic Christianity)? These are some of the issues that scholars contend with when dealing with these writings (adapted from Bromiley, pp. 803, 818).

### **Witnesses to the Hebrew Scriptures**

Figure 3 on pages 96-97 traces some of the various witnesses to the Hebrew Old Testament text. What follows is a brief overview (cf. Würthwein, pp. 10-104).

#### **Hebrew Old Testament Manuscripts**

The most important Hebrew witnesses of the Old Testament books include manuscripts of the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch.

**Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT):** The chief and most reliable witness of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Masoretic Text. It has been the authoritative Old Testament text of Judaism since the second century AD. Protestants adopted it at the beginning of the Reformation when they largely forsook the *Latin Vulgate* and Greek *Septuagint* as the basis for their translations of the Old Testament. The Roman Church has historically relied on Jerome's *Latin Vulgate* for its English versions of the Old Testament. Catholics have employed the *MT* as well, following the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943 and the translation of the *New American Bible* in 1970. The Greek Orthodox Church has traditionally used a *Septuagint* translation as its official Old Testament text.

The Hebrew Bible was initially transmitted through the meticulous care of Aaronic priests and Levites who copied portions of the original text in consecutive generations from the time of Moses until the time of Ezra (cf. Deut. 17:18, 31:9, 24-26). The *MT* acquired its name from the Hebrew word *masora*, meaning tradition. The text in its present form is based on the Masora, the textual tradition and marginal notes of the Levitical scholars known as Masoretes. The Masoretes were active from about 500-950 AD and continued the work of earlier Aaronic priests and Levitical scribes known as Sopherim, who

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were appointed by Ezra as the official guardians of the Hebrew text following its revision and official “canonization” by Ezra and the Great Assembly (500s-400s BC). The Masoretes developed a system of vowel points and accent marks superimposed on the fixed consonantal text. Their goal was to preserve the proper pronunciation of the Old Testament text after Hebrew ceased to be a commonly spoken language. (Hebrew scrolls used for worship purposes do not contain the Masora, accent marks and vowel points.)

There were originally three different Masoretic vowel and accent systems: the Palestinian, Babylonian and Tiberian. By the 900s AD, the Masoretes from Tiberias in Palestine had developed a more elaborate system that represented the pronunciation and intonation of the Hebrew text in minute detail (Würthwein, pp. 21-24). Their system eventually superseded all others. The Tiberian Masoretes, led by the family of ben Asher, played a leading role in standardizing the Old Testament text for five generations (700s-900s AD). Aaron ben Moses ben Asher is credited with sealing the first codex of the complete Hebrew Bible with full Masoretic notes about 930 AD. The ben Asher text, contained in the Aleppo Codex, eventually became the accepted form of the Hebrew Old Testament text by the Jewish community in the 1100s AD after an endorsement by acclaimed Jewish scholar and theologian Maimonides. Another important manuscript reflecting the tradition of ben Asher is the Leningrad Codex.

The oldest surviving MT manuscripts date from 800-1000 AD. Twentieth-century archaeologists and scholars have discovered numerous Hebrew fragments in Egypt. One significant find was the Nash Papyrus (a liturgical text of the Decalogue and Shema of Deut. 6:4), which dates from 100-200 BC. A second group includes the Cairo Genizah fragments, consisting of thousands of parchment fragments preserved and uncovered in a storeroom (genizah) for old books and documents at Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo. These fragments date from 500-800 AD and hold value in determining the historical development of the Masoretic vocalization system.

**Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS):** In 1947, two shepherd boys discovered some scrolls in a cave at Qumran, eight miles south of Jericho in Palestine, northwest of the Dead Sea. These were the first of hundreds of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek scrolls found in 11 caves between 1947 and 1956. The biblical manuscripts found near the Dead Sea number 223 and form the earliest surviving witnesses to the Hebrew Scriptures (Schiffman, pp. 34-35). These manuscripts pre-date the MT by nearly 1,000 years. Every Old Testament book is presumed to be represented among the Dead Sea documents except Esther, including two nearly complete copies of the book of Isaiah and the first two chapters of Habakkuk (Ibid., p. 163).

Manuscripts relating to the religious life of the Qumran community, the *Septuagint*, the Samaritan Pentateuch and various apocryphal works were also located among the archaeological remains. In addition, sets of Hebrew texts were found in the Judean Desert near Masada (ca. 73 AD), Wadi Murabba'at and Nahal Hever (copied before 135 AD). The entire collection, now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, dates from 250 BC to about 70 AD. The scrolls comprise the most ancient documents written in the Hebrew language and have added a new dimension to Old Testament textual criticism and Hebrew philology (study and science of language). They hold value in determining the development of Judaism from the Second Temple period following the close of the Hebrew canon (400s BC) to the editing of the Mishnah (ca. 200 AD).

**Samaritan Pentateuch:** The first five books of the Bible (Genesis to Deuteronomy) form the official text of the renegade Levites who settled in the area of southern Samaria during postexilic Judaism (ca. 539 BC-70 AD). These books were preserved in the old Hebrew script rather than in the square script of the MT. Scholars traditionally had assumed that the Samaritan Pentateuch contained a text earlier than the MT. However, modern paleographic research dates the text to about 128 BC (Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, p. 83). It contains numerous alternate readings introduced by the Samaritan sect to preserve its cultic practices. Its only real value to textual criticism is the few out of 1,900 cases where its wording closely agrees with the *Septuagint* or a text supposedly quoted by some of the New Testament writers in contrast to the MT (Würthwein, p. 46).

## **Ancient Versions**

The translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek before the time of Christ holds a unique place in the history of ancient Bible versions. Since Biblical Hebrew ceased to be the common language spoken among the Jews in Palestine and elsewhere by the time of Christ, the Greek *Septuagint* (later Origen's *Hexapla*) served as the logical source for translations of the Old Testament books. The *Old Latin*, *Coptic*, *Ethiopic* and *Armenian* versions were made from the *Septuagint* beginning in

**Figure 3**  
**A Summary of the Transmission of the**  
**Aaronic/Levitical Old Testament Text and Other Versions**

**Aaronic/Levitical Text of Ezra and Great Assembly prior to 300 BC**

Scholars label this text pre- or proto-Masoretic; it was the common Sacred Text from which various editions originated. It is represented by the thicker line below. The Masoretic Text is based upon this text.

**The Hebrew Masoretic Text underlies the Old Testament translation of almost all English versions.**

The key is which Masoretic Text and to what degree it was amended by other witnesses.

**Septuagint Text (LXX)**  
ca. 278-100s BC

Old Latin  
150 AD

Peshitta (Syriac)  
40 AD

Theodotion  
190 AD

Official Targums  
1-100 AD

Origen's Hexapla  
240 AD

**Samaritan Text**  
ca. 128 BC-present

Symmachus  
170 AD

Aquila  
130 AD

**Qumran Text**  
ca. 250s BC-70 AD

Levites set consonants  
in Hebrew Text

300 BC

100 AD

**KEY**

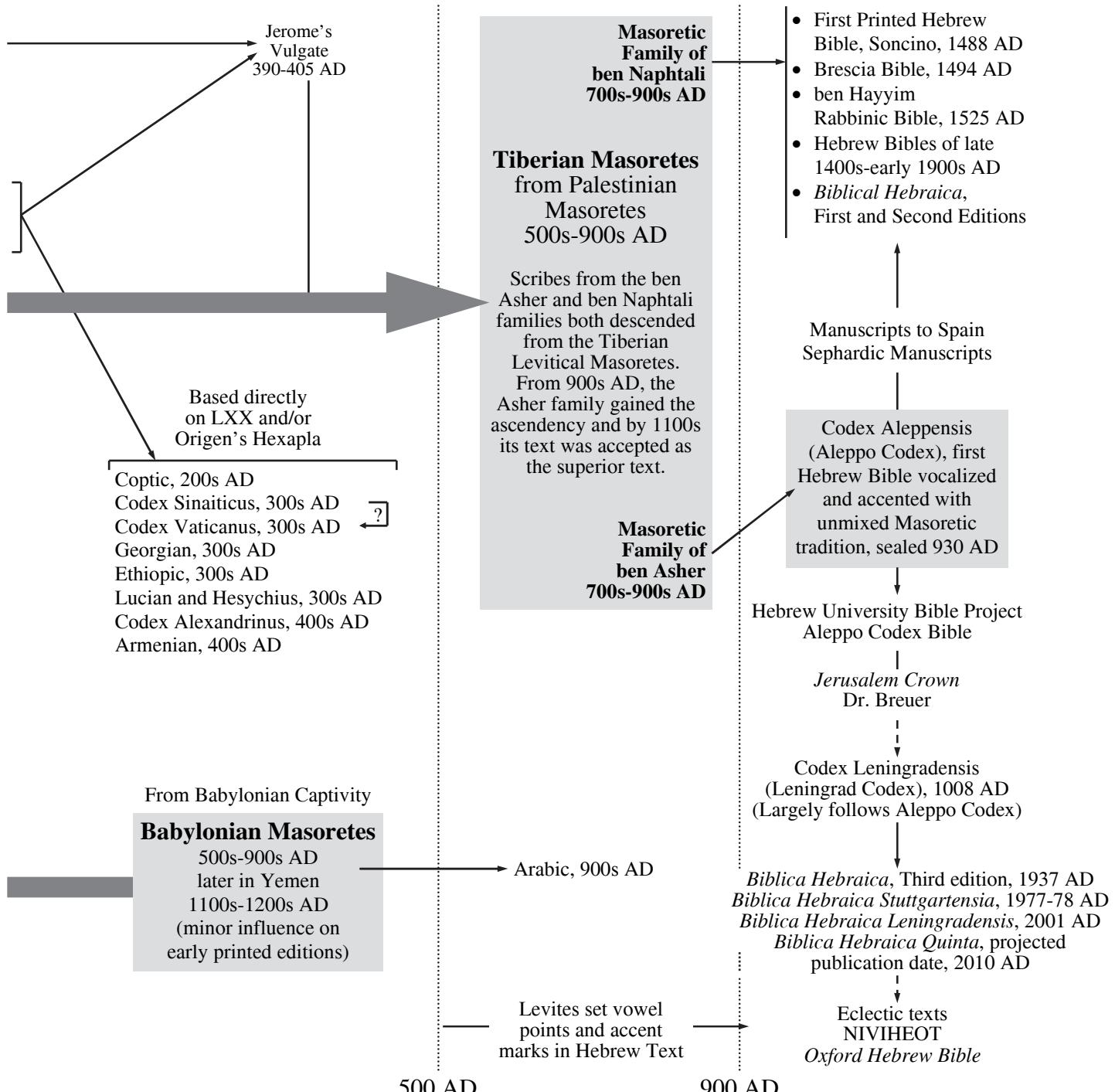
- = directly based on source text
- - - = indirectly influenced from source text
- = text based on various editions of pre- or proto-Masoretic Text\*

All dating is approximate unless specified.

Sources include Soulé, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, p. 191; Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, pp. 10-104.

\*Temple editions/unofficial texts circulating in Palestine and elsewhere before 100 AD are represented by the thicker line for clarity. After 100 AD, this line represents the accepted Jewish (Masoretic) Text.

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the mid-100s AD. This increases their value to *Septuagint* textual studies, while limiting their merits for textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible.

Translations made directly from the Hebrew Old Testament text consist of the Greek *Septuagint*, Aramaic *Targums*, Syriac *Peshitta* and Jerome's *Latin Vulgate*. These are the most important ancient versions for Hebrew Old Testament textual criticism because of their possible value as witnesses to the pre-Masoretic Hebrew consonantal text and its pronunciation.

**Aramaic Targums:** Since a portion of the Jewish community did not understand Hebrew after its return from captivity in Babylon, it became necessary to combine synagogue lessons with an Aramaic translation. The Jewish tradition of translating, called *targem*, is traced to Ezra (Neh. 8:8). Written targums for study and training of translators were in existence by the first century AD. These interpretative and paraphrased documents sometimes ignore the literal meaning and wording of the Hebrew text, making them more valuable for exegesis (technical interpretation of the text) than textual criticism (Würthwein, pp. 79-80).

**Syriac Peshitta:** The origins of the Peshitta Old Testament are largely unknown. Scholars believe that the Pentateuch was first translated about 40-70 AD to meet the needs of Jewish converts, namely the ruling house of Adiabene, a kingdom east of the Tigris River. The scholarly consensus is that the Pentateuch was faithfully translated from the Hebrew text into Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic spoken in Mesopotamia. The view that the Peshitta Old Testament is of Christian origins has been proven to have no merit. It is more probable that converts to Christianity in the region later adopted it for their own use. The remaining Old Testament books, except Isaiah, are of unknown origin. They reflect a departure away from the Hebrew text and toward the *Targum* and *Septuagint* versions. Scholars consider the Peshitta an important Old Testament witness because its language is closely related to Hebrew and the type of Aramaic spoken by Jesus and His disciples (cf. Würthwein, pp. 85-87; Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*, p. 222; Moorman, pp. 34-36).

**Greek Septuagint (LXX):** The *Septuagint* is the earliest and most influential ancient translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Its origins are shrouded in legend and contradiction. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the Pentateuch was translated into Greek for the royal library of the Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus II by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria about 278 BC. Whether this event actually occurred is debatable. It is reasonable to presume that Alexandrian Jews later adopted a Greek version for their own use after they could no longer understand Hebrew (Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, p. ii). It is commonly believed that different Jewish scholars translated the remaining Old Testament books over the next century or so. Clearly some form of Greek Old Testament translation was used among Diaspora Jews within the centuries prior to and during Jesus' time.

It is very probable that regional Greek versions of the Prophets and Writings sections of the Old Testament existed by Jesus' time. According to Würthwein, these versions would have provided Jews and non-Jews an opportunity to study the Old Testament in the common language of the day—Greek (Würthwein, p. 54; cf. Acts 8:26ff as a possible example).

Later revisions of the *LXX* or new Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament include those of Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion and Origen (182-251 AD). Origen's *Hexapla* (240 AD) contained six columns consisting of the four versions listed previously, along with the fixed Hebrew consonantal text and a Greek transliteration of it. Origen's disciples in Caesarea, Pamphilus and Eusebius, copied and circulated the *Hexapla* for more than half a century after his death. The Sinaitic manuscript (dated 300s AD), which contains the Old Testament, was corrected against a copy of Origen's *Hexapla*, (Kenyon, pp. 47-48). In the fourth century AD, Lucian, a scholarly theologian of Antioch, and Hesychius, a bishop in Alexandria, produced similar revisions of the *LXX* text as Origen had done earlier. These two texts became popular to some extent among the Eastern churches. An unknown form of the *Septuagint* text was adopted by the Greek Orthodox church by the end of the fourth century AD.

*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*, along with the *Hexapla*, were apparently the first texts to include the apocrypha among the canonical Old Testament books. *Vaticanus*, *Sinaiticus* and *Alexandrinus* (another Greek uncial) are the manuscripts primarily used by scholars in producing modern editions of the *LXX* because they contain complete or nearly complete texts of the Old Testament translated into Greek.

**Jerome's Latin Vulgate:** Pope Damasus I commissioned the Greek and Latin scholar Eusebius Hieronymus (also known as Jerome) in 383 AD to revise the Gospels of the Old Latin Bible. Jerome's major contribution to the Latin versions was his later translation of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew text. Scholars use Jerome's version for textual criticism, claiming it reflects the pronunciation and text of Biblical Hebrew of the late fourth century AD.

## **Where Are the Witnesses?**

Jerome made a first revision of the Psalms (Roman Psalter) based on the *LXX* while living in Rome in 383 AD. Some time after Damasus' death in 385 AD, Jerome completed a second revision of the Psalms titled the Gallican Psalter from Origen's *Hexapla*. It reflected his desire to bring the Psalms more in line with the Hebrew text. He allegedly revised the entire Old Testament from the *Hexapla*; only the text of Job and fragments of Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes have survived. He soon found working from the *Hexapla* unsatisfactory and realized the Hebrew text was vastly superior (cf. Sparks, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, pp. 513-515, 518-521, 531; Würthwein, p. 96).

Scholars believe that it was either at the request of friends or due to his own ambition that Jerome turned to the Hebrew text used in Palestine at the time to translate the Old Testament into Latin (Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, p. 1021). This translation was apparently made at Bethlehem ca. 390-405 AD. Despite his return to the Hebrew text and assistance from Jewish scholars in Tiberias, he was heavily dependent on the various Greek versions (*Origen*, *Aquila*, et al.) as translation aids because no Hebrew dictionaries or grammars existed to assist him in his work (Comfort, p. 168; Würthwein, p. 97).

Scholars are divided on whether Jerome translated the entire Old Testament from the Hebrew text or simply revised the existing Old Latin translation of the Old Testament according to the Hebrew. His Hebrew version of the Psalms is found in a number of manuscripts alongside the *Gallican* version, which is part of the official Roman Church edition of the *Vulgate*. The general distrust of Jerome's work by the majority of his fellow theologians, including Augustine, might have persuaded him to consider carefully how far to deviate from the Old Latin text. In contradiction to popular belief, Jerome did not revise several of the Old Testament apocryphal books (Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon, and Maccabees) because he believed them to be non-canonical (Würthwein, pp. 96-97, 99).

Over the centuries, Jerome's Latin version was revised numerous times. According to scholar Merrill F. Unger, it contains elements from every period, including his 1) unrevised apocryphal books; 2) Old Latin revised Psalter from the *LXX*; 3) free Latin translation of the apocryphal Judith and Tobit; 4) Old Testament translation from Hebrew, except the Psalter; 5) Old Latin revised Gospels; and 6) lightly revised remainder of the *Old Latin New Testament* (Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p. 1348). It was in this haphazard state that the *Vulgate* appeared in 1456 AD as the first printed book known as the *Gutenberg* or *Mazarin Bible*.

In the ensuing battle over the biblical texts with Protestant Reformers, the Council of Trent in 1546 AD declared the *Vulgate*, including twelve apocryphal works dispersed among the Old Testament books, as the standard text of the Roman church. The 1592 revision of the *Vulgate* by Pope Clement VIII finally became its official Bible. Over 8,000 Latin manuscripts of Jerome's *Vulgate* exist today.

### **Quotations from Jewish or Christian Authors**

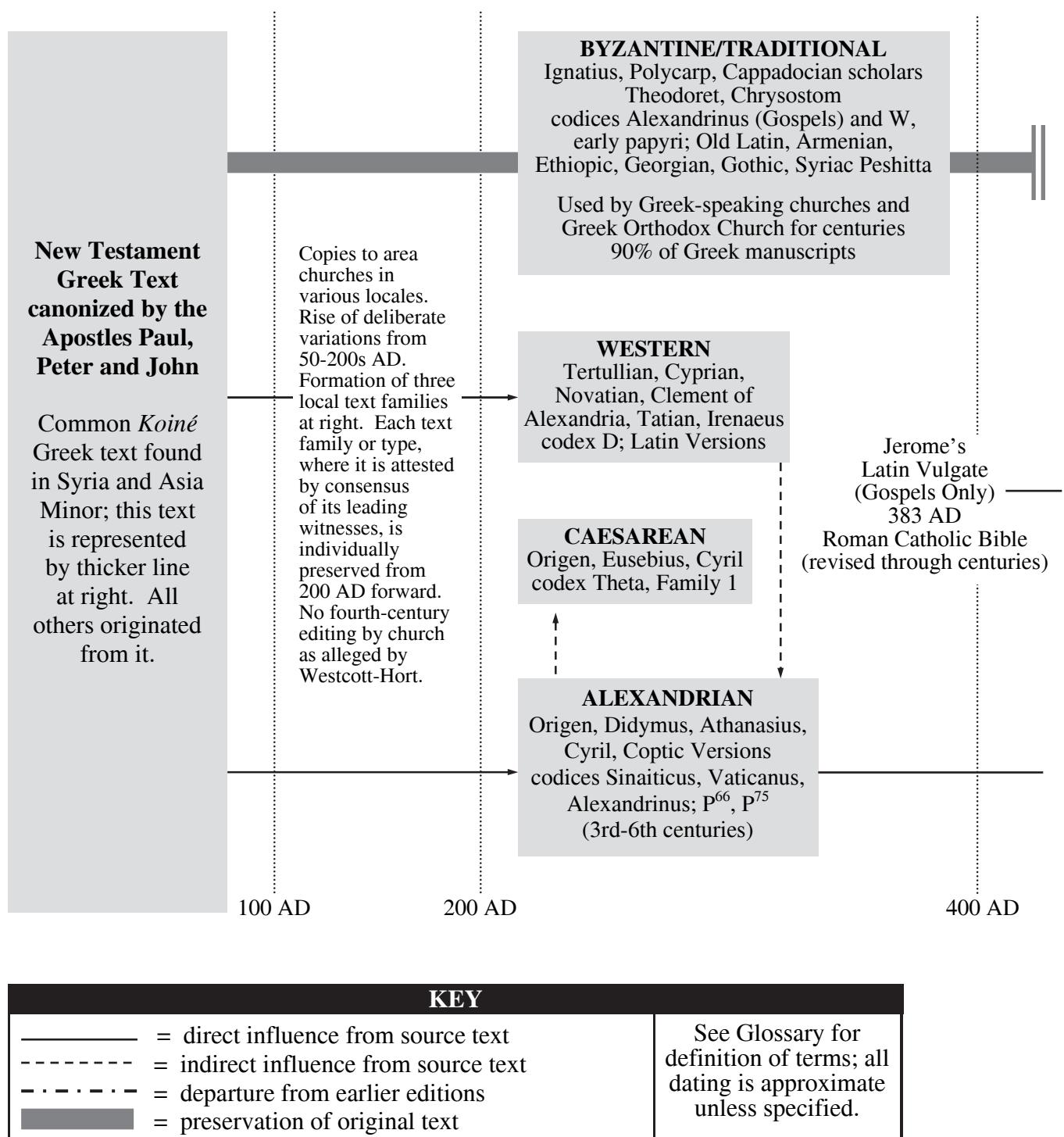
Testimony for an original text is drawn from citations from the Hebrew Scriptures, which are frequently found in Jewish literature beginning in the Second Temple period. These include references in non-canonical books and the works of Jewish theologian and Hellenistic philosopher Philo and Jewish historian Josephus. Testimony is also drawn from the Old Testament commentaries of so-called Christian writers such as Origen and Jerome. Moreover, quotations from Old Testament books found in the New Testament offer additional insight into what the original text of the Hebrew Bible might have been.

Many scholars believe that the literature of the Jewish rabbis offers a rich supply of data to verify the credibility of the *MT*. Rabbinic literature contains hundreds of deviations from the accepted, standard *Masoretic Text*, many from manuscripts with a supposedly different consonantal text. Rabbinic traditions often comment on scribal activities in transmitting the texts. "These tell of [alleged] 'scribal corrections' and of divergent readings in different scrolls....There are reports of the existence of an official Temple model scroll from which other scrolls were corrected" (Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 161).

### **Witnesses to the Greek Scriptures**

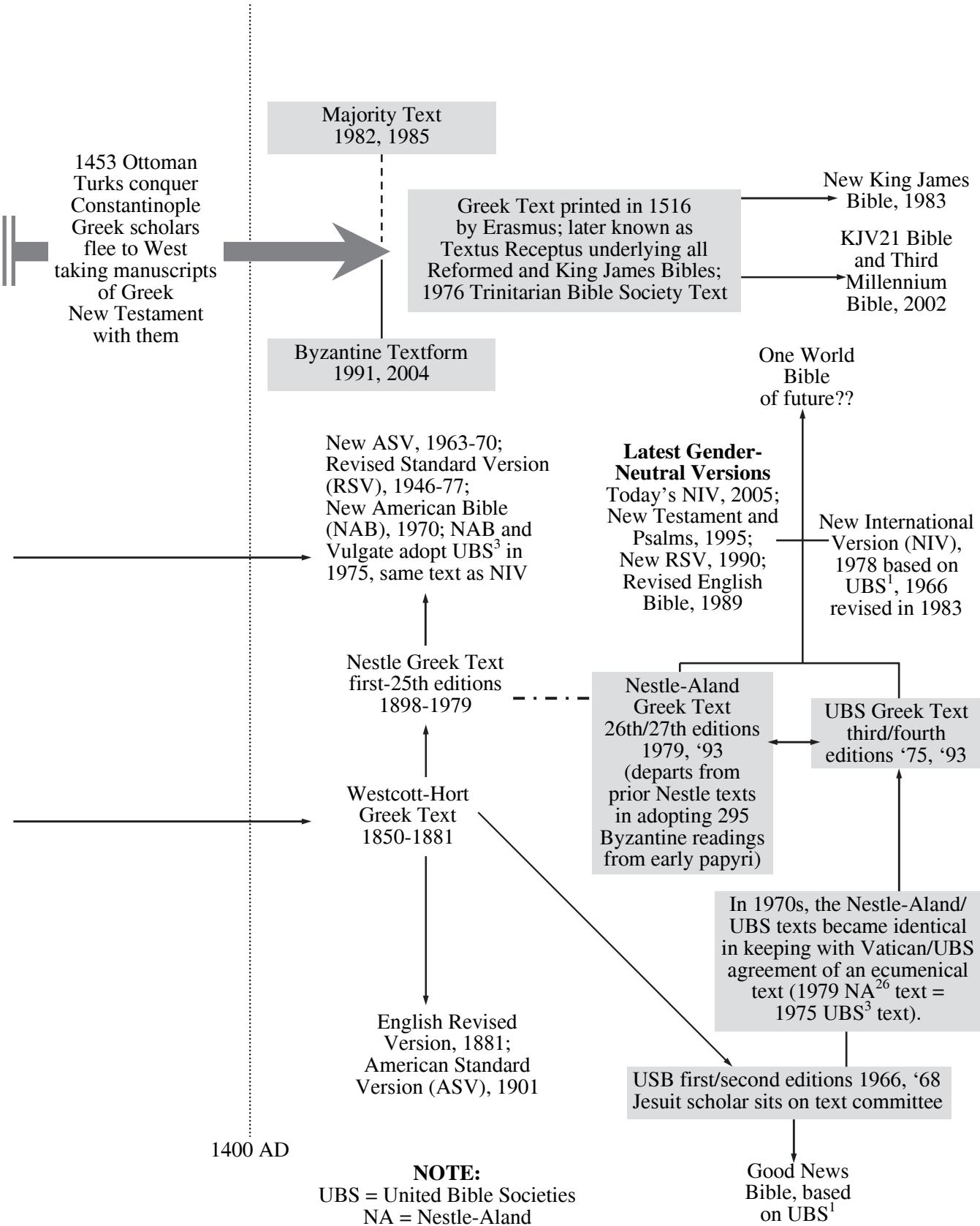
Figure 4 on pages 100-101 traces the various witnesses to the Greek New Testament text. A brief overview follows (cf. Holland, pp. 6-11 or Harrison, *Biblical Criticism: Historical, Literary and Textual*, pp. 125-138).

**Figure 4**  
**A Summary of the Transmission  
 of the Greek New Testament Text**



Sources include Harry Sturz, *The Byzantine Text-Type*, p. 131; Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 1984 ed., pp. 226-229; [www.bible-researcher.com](http://www.bible-researcher.com)

## Where Are the Witnesses?



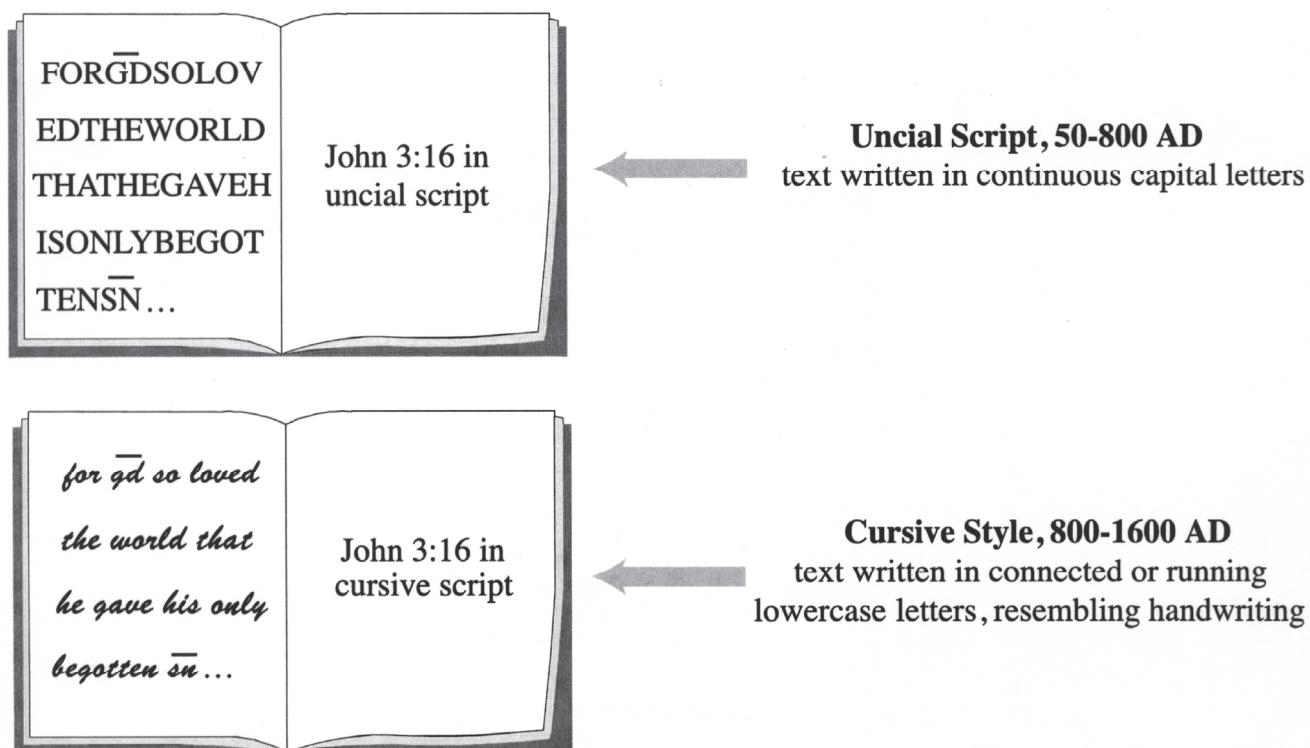
## Chapter Thirteen

### Greek New Testament Manuscripts

The Greek manuscripts form the chief witnesses to the original New Testament writings. At the time the apostles and their scribes wrote the New Testament, two styles of handwriting were commonly used: **uncial** (continuous capital letters) and **cursive** (connected or running lowercase letters). See Figure 5. The first style was used typically for literary works, while the second was used for private, commercial and legal purposes. It is possible that the apostle Paul wrote his Epistles in a cursive script, reflecting their epistolary nature as personal correspondence to the brethren. However, it is more probable that his Epistles were written in the uncial type since the earliest known manuscripts of all books of the New Testament appear only in uncial handwriting (Bromiley, p. 815). This might have been what Paul meant in Galatians 6:11 where he wrote, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my *own* hand."

Today there are about 100 papyri, 300 uncials and 2,800 minuscule Greek manuscripts that serve as primary witnesses to the New Testament text (Aland, pp. 87, 103, 128). Nearly 80 percent of all Greek scribal copies are kept on microfilm or otherwise stored at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, a manuscript center in Münster, Westfalia, Germany. Virtually all copies are in the codex or modern book form. Definitions of the primary witnesses follow:

**Figure 5**  
**Greek Handwriting Styles**  
in English



Abbreviations of Sacred Names (known as nomina sacra):

**GD/gd=God; Sn/sn=Son**

## *Where Are the Witnesses?*

**Papyri** (ca. 50-800 AD): Codices with papyrus pages written in an uncial style.

**Uncials** (ca. 300-1100 AD): Codices with vellum pages written in uncial style.

**Minuscules (Cursives)** (ca. 800-1600 AD): Codices with either vellum or paper pages written in a modified cursive style adapted after centuries of use for personal, commercial and legal purposes.

A copying revolution occurred in the 800s AD, which had a direct impact on the transmission of the Greek New Testament manuscripts. According to Dr. Robinson, the handwriting of codices switched rapidly from a uncial to a cursive script. He explains, this “change likely was initiated by Theodore of Studium [a Byzantine monastic reformer, 759-826 AD] and was swiftly accepted throughout the Greek-speaking world as a replacement for the more ponderous [i.e., clumsy] uncial script. Within a century and a half uncial script had ceased to exist among continuous-text NT MSS and soon after that disappeared even from the more traditional and conservative lectionaries. The upshot of this copying revolution was similar to what transpired following the papyrus-to-vellum conversion of the fourth century: uncial MSS of far earlier date were recopied in great quantity into the new and popular minuscule script and then destroyed” (Robinson, par. 61). This revolution plays a key role in the identification of the authentic Greek text of the New Testament.

During the centuries following the printing of the *Authorized Version* (known as the *King James Version* or *KJV*), scholars collected, compared and classified data on variant readings (differences) found in the Greek copies of the New Testament. One fact became apparent due to these efforts: No two Greek copies were exactly identical in all their particulars. Despite the differences, enough similarities existed between the handwritten copies for scholars to group them into four **artificial** manuscript families.

Johann Bengel, a German scholar and leading Lutheran minister, was the first to propose two manuscript families in 1725: Asiatic (i.e., Byzantine) and African. Johann Selmer theorized three families: Alexandrian, Eastern (Byzantine) and Western. Johann Griesbach refined the previous scholars’ classifications of the Greek manuscripts into three ancestral groups: Alexandrian, Byzantine and Western. He laid the foundation for all subsequent work on the Greek New Testament text. In the late 1800s, Dr. F.J.A. Hort classified the Greek New Testament manuscripts into four groups: Alexandrian, Neutral, Syrian (Byzantine) and Western.

Greek manuscripts are still grouped into four manuscript families, namely, Alexandrian, Byzantine, Caesarean and Western. Of these families, the Byzantine and Alexandrian are the most influential due to their extensive use in English Bible translation over the last 500 years.

**Alexandrian (Egyptian) Text:** This manuscript family generally circulated in the region of Alexandria, though elements are detected outside of Egypt in a few ancient versions and among the writings of the more scholarly Christians. Many scholars believe this text was a “refinement” of the Western text. The Alexandrian text essentially disappeared for centuries after 500 AD, only to be rediscovered again in the mid-1800s. The modern eclectic or critical Greek texts depend heavily on a minority of Alexandrian type manuscripts, due to their age. These include codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus and related papyri (66, 75, etc.). In spite of their years, these manuscripts often disagree with one another and show significant signs of grammatical revision and the influence and refinement of Egyptian scribes. The Alexandrian text has served as the basis of most contemporary English New Testament translations since 1881.

**Byzantine Text:** This manuscript family obtained its primary name because it was the dominant form of the text copied by hand and used by the Greek-speaking church throughout much of the Byzantine Empire. It is also known as the *Traditional Text* because it was used and preserved by the Greek church from the time of the apostles until the era of movable type printing. Even today the Greek Orthodox Church has resisted scholarly efforts to revise its version of it. Yet another name for this text is the *Majority Text* because it is found in 90 percent of the nearly 5,500 existing Greek New Testament manuscripts and lectionaries. It is “characterized by an overall unity despite the presence of numerous variations” (Aland, *The Trinity Journal*, p. 131). Readings of this manuscript family are found in many of the early papyri and most later uncials (Alexandrinus and W) and minuscules.

The texts of the early printed editions of the Greek New Testament (i.e., *Textus Receptus* texts) are nearly identical to the common text of this manuscript family. These early editions closely match the Greek text underlying the *King James Version* of the New Testament (1611).

Textual scholar Hermann von Soden conducted one of the most expansive studies of the *Byzantine Text* to date. According to his analysis of the textual evidence, the *Byzantine Text* remained “intact throughout the whole period of perhaps 1,200 years. Only very sporadically do readings found in other

## **Chapter Thirteen**

text-types appear in one or another of the varieties” (von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, 1. Teil, 2. Abt., p. 712).<sup>1</sup> The strongest period of Byzantine dominance ranged from 350-1516 AD. In addition, von Soden claimed that the *Byzantine Text* “is of the highest antiquity, and within transmission history was the dominant element among the steadily increasing mass [of manuscripts] from century to century” (*Ibid.*).

**Caesarean Text:** This text can be found primarily in the area of Caesarea in Palestine and most likely originated in Egypt (Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 1984 ed., p. 125). This family has close connections to the Alexandrian, Byzantine and Western texts. Codex Theta and a group of related minuscule manuscripts known as Family 1 are the prime witnesses of the Caesarean text (Bromiley, p. 819; Hills, p. 126).

**Western Text:** The evidence of the early papyri suggests that this manuscript family originated in the Eastern Roman Empire and was taken west to Rome (Sturz, *The Byzantine Text-Type & New Testament Textual Criticism*, pp. 70-76, 88). This text circulated primarily in North Africa, Italy, southern France and Egypt and was marked by additions, long paraphrases and omissions. Codex Beza is the prime manuscript witness to the Western text.

Many scholars today refer to the Caesarean and Western families as “phantom” texts because of their brief existence and close affiliation with the other manuscript families (Aland, *The Text*, pp. 54-55, 66-67, 172).

The presence of “mixed texts” among the early papyri has forced many scholars who follow the theory of genealogy to rethink the existence of strict manuscript families. It is only possible to have a “mixed text” after, and not before, a recension or systematic revision of the text (Aland, “The Significance of the Papyri for New Testament Research,” *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, pp. 335-337). This concession on the part of scholars means that the dominant forms of the text previously mentioned (Alexandrian and Byzantine) existed before 200 AD. This overturns Westcott and Hort’s theory that the Byzantine Text was created in the fourth century by church scholars and serves no useful purpose in the study of the New Testament text. The implication of this development is that the *Byzantine Text* possesses an equal, if not greater, claim to the original form of the New Testament text than other manuscript families. In spite of this evidence, we have used the previously listed manuscript names for convenience.

### **Ancient Versions**

Early translations from the Greek copies form an important source of evidence to the Greek New Testament text. Some of these versions include *Old Latin*, Jerome’s *Latin Vulgate*, *Syriac Peshitta*, *Coptic* (Egyptian), *Gothic* (German), *Armenian* and *Ethiopic*. Scholars use these translations in evaluating the text that non-Greek speaking readers used.

**Old Latin:** Old Latin is a collective term referring to a number of New Testament versions translated completely from the Greek, which circulated by 157 AD (Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 43). These versions served the practical worship needs of believers whose common language was Latin and who were generally unfamiliar with Greek, the dominant language of the second century. There are two general types of Old Latin manuscripts, reflecting the areas in which they circulated: African (North Africa) and European (Spain, France, Italy and Britain).

**Latin Vulgate:** As Latin began to replace the Greek language in the western portions of the Roman Empire in the third century AD, a need arose for a uniform Latin text for ecclesiastical purposes (Comfort, p. 168). To address this need, Damasus I authorized the famed scholar Jerome to revise the Gospels of the *Old Latin Bible*. The revision was completed about 383 AD. Oxford University scholar H.F.D. Sparks believed that in speaking of the New Testament, only the Gospels can be rightly called Jerome’s work. The remaining New Testament books were revised by “a person or persons unknown” over a period of years. Other historians contend that Jerome completed the entire New Testament before 390 AD (cf. Sparks, pp. 519-520, 522).

**Syriac Peshitta:** The Peshitta (meaning simple or plain) is the historic Bible of the Syrian church and one of the most ancient New Testament versions. The Syrian church had close contact with the apostles since Antioch was the center for Paul’s ministry (Acts 15:23). The Peshitta was probably translated from the Greek to serve the needs of the brethren in that region sometime in the second

<sup>1</sup> The English wording provided in both citations from von Soden’s work is a translation and a reasonable representation of the original German.

## **Where Are the Witnesses?**

century AD (Hills, p. 119). Scholarship has been divided on its dating since the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **Citations of Christian Writers**

The writings of scholars of normative Christianity, commonly called the “Church Fathers,” offer textual critics some of the earliest extra-biblical evidence as to what might have been the readings of certain passages during the first three centuries after the writing of the autographs.

Anglican scholar John Burgon collected the largest index of these citations (86,489 total with 4,383 citations from 76 Christian authors whose writings have relevance to what the text was like before 400 AD). This collection consists of sixteen thick volumes, housed in the British Museum. Burgon was a leading Anglican theologian and textual scholar of his time. He is most famous for his vigorous opposition to the Greek text and theory of Westcott and Hort published in 1881. He published over 50 works; the most famous are *The Revision Revised*, *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels* and *The Causes of Corruption of the Traditional Text*, which have been used extensively in our study of the Greek text.

### **Lectionaries**

There are approximately 2,300 lectionaries that exist today (Aland, *The Text*, p. 169). Lectionaries were collections of selected scriptural passages arranged according to particular days and seasons of the liturgical year. These books contain prescribed readings from the Gospels or Epistles. Scholars use these to reconstruct a text based on their wording and liturgical usage within the early and medieval Greek Church.

### **The Trail of Witnesses**

The Bible is the most researched and best documented ancient book. Thousands of witnesses attest to the transmission of its texts throughout history, in contrast to other ancient books and works of fiction. In this chapter, we have surveyed the witnesses to the original writings penned by the biblical authors and shown how the various witnesses relate to one another. Each witness offers direct or indirect evidence about the state of the biblical texts in antiquity and through time. Witnesses are useful in determining the most reliable manuscripts of the original writings of the Bible.