

COPYING AND DISSEMINATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

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Introduction

A knowledge of the manner of the early copying and dissemination of the Scriptures will help to build the faith of the Christian. Conclusions must be drawn by an application of sound reasoning to the truths found in the Scriptures. These conclusions will aid in understanding the work of the Holy Spirit.

In both the Old and New Testaments scribes worked in several different areas. One area of particular concern for this study is in the copying of the Scriptures.

Definitions

??? “*enumerator, muster-officer ... secretary ... professional class of learned men, ‘scribes,’ able to read and write*” [BDBG, p. 708]

γραμματεὺς (pronounced *grammateus*) “*a clerk, scribe, esp. a public scribe, secretary, recorder, whose office and influence differed in different states.*” [Thayer, p. 121] “**1.** *secretary, clerk ... 2.* Among the Jews of the NT era, a term for *experts in the law, scholars versed in the law, scribes*” [BAG, p. 164]

Scribes in the Old Testament

Scribes are mentioned about 54 times in the Old Testament (with the Hebrew word being found over 150 times). Baruch was an inspired scribe for Jeremiah (Jer. 36:1-4). When Jehoiakim burned the book that Baruch had written, Baruch made another copy (exactly like the first with additional information –Jer. 36:32).

Scribes were used to make copies of all sorts of documents. First, they wrote secular letters and documents (Ezra 4:8). Second, they kept records of money and dispersed payments to workers (2 Kgs. 12:10-12). Third, the Old Testament prophets had scribes who made copies of the books they wrote. Baruch was a scribe for Jeremiah (Jer. 36:26-32). He wrote the copy of Jeremiah that we have today and if it is inspired of God (and it is), then Baruch must have been inspired so that he did not make errors. It is evident that under some conditions inspired scribes made copies of the Scriptures.

Inspired scribes would make perfect (without error) copies of the Scriptures when they copied them. It is likely that Ezra was just such a scribe. Whatever the case, God provided an accurate copy of the Scriptures for His people (cf. Isa. 40:6-8 – This passage is quoted in 1 Pet. 1:24-25 and Jas. 1:9-11). It is the gospel of God that is contrasted to the flesh (1 Pet. 1:24-25). The flesh (physical things) will pass away, but the word of God will never pass away. Even the glory of the rich will pass away but the word of God, in its glory, will not pass away (Jas. 1:9-11 and 1 Pet. 1:24-25).

Scribes in the New Testament

Scribes are mentioned about 66 times in the New Testament. The town clerk of Acts 19:35 was a scribe. It appears that the Scribes in the New Testament did the same things that the Scribes in the Old Testament did.

The Jewish scribes were frequently against the Lord (Mt. 20:18-19). Some of them were dishonest (Mt. 12:38-39). They did not teach with authority, as Jesus did (Mt. 7:29 and Mk. 1:22).

Some scribes became members of the Lord's church (Mt. 13:52). It is likely that their skills were used to make copies of the Scriptures. When Jesus sent forth Scribes (Mt. 23:34), they most likely did the work of a scribe. This is evident from the definition of the word translated "send" in Mt. 23:34. αποστελλω? (pronounced *apostello*) "prop. to send off, send away; 1. to order (one) to go to a place appointed ... 2. to send away i. e. to dismiss." [Thayer, pp. 67-68] "includes a reference to equipment, and suggests official or authoritative sending." [Thayer, p. 499] Jesus sent them with the equipment to accomplish their work. In this case He sent them as scribes. The prophets were given equipment, therefore the scribes were also. God would not allow His prophets to make mistakes in anything that related to teaching of His Word (cf. Baalam - Numbers 20-22). It is inconceivable that an inspired scribe would make a copyist error.

The Churches Made Copies of the Books of the New Testament

The church copied portions of the Scriptures (Acts 15:23 and 30). The church at Colossae made a copy for the church at Laodicea (Col. 4:16). In fact, it was common practice for the church to exchange their epistles (Col. 4:16, 2 Thess. 2:15, and 3:14). The work of a scribe (γραμματευς) was a (γραμμα) and the Scriptures are called γραμματα (Jn. 5:47 and 2 Tim. 3:15).

The New Testament Writers Had Scribes to Make Copies for Them

Silas served as the scribe for Peter (1 Pet. 5:12). Silas was a prophet (Acts 15:32). Silvanus is the longer name of Silas (Thayer, p. 575). Since Silas was a prophet, he was miraculously endowed.

Tertius served as the scribe for Paul (Rom. 16:22). It is ridiculous to think that Tertius would take dictation (write for Paul) by his human powers alone. If Tertius was not miraculously endowed, how can we know that the first copy of Paul's writing of Romans was without error? The following argument establishes this point:

First Premise: If the first copy of the book of Romans was inerrant, then Tertius was a miraculously guided scribe.

Second Premise: The first copy of the book of Romans was inerrant.

Conclusion: Tertius was a miraculously guided scribe.

If Jesus sent them as scribes, they must have done the work of a scribe (Mt. 23:34). The office of a prophet was certainly a miraculous office. Wisdom was a miraculous gift (1 Cor. 12:8). It is certainly possible that being a scribe was also a miraculous gift.

The Early Church had Large Numbers of Exact Copies of the New Testament Documents

First, the *a fortiori* principle supports the contention that large numbers of exact copies were made in the first century. If God provided food for the birds (Mt. 6:25-34) then He will provide spiritual food for people (1 Pet. 2:1-3). Surely John provided copies of the Book of Revelation to each of the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:4). Surely Paul provided copies of the book of Galatians to each of the churches in Galatia (Gal. 1:2). If the written word of God is superior to the spoken word of God and God provided

miraculous confirmation of the spoken word (1 Jn. 4:1 etc.), then God provided miraculous confirmation of the written word.

Second, the existence of miraculously guided men/women in the first century supports the contention that large numbers of exact copies existed in the first century. The church had miraculously guided teachers (1 Cor. 12:28) and the work of a teacher is to expound the Scriptures to those being taught. Miraculously guided teachers would expound the Scriptures infallibly. Miraculously guided teachers used inerrant copies of the Scriptures. If the work of a miraculously-guided teacher were to miraculously expound the Scriptures, the teacher would not teach error from a copy with textual errors in it. It was necessary for miraculously guided teachers to be able to discern (acknowledge) whether or not a document was accurate (1 Cor. 14:37). Since the whole is greater than the part, if the whole was not allowed to be used as Scripture, by spiritual men, then the part was not allowed to be used as Scripture by spiritual men (1 Cor. 14:37). [This follows from the *a fortiori* principle.]¹

Third, it is a sin to change the Scriptures, in any way (Rev. 22:18-19). A miraculously guided teacher would not change the Scriptures. Therefore a miraculously guided teacher would use only exact copies of the Scriptures. It is inconceivable that a miraculously guided teacher would teach from a copy of the Greek New Testament that was defective without correcting it! It is obvious that these miraculously guided men and women would not allow textual variants in the copies of the Scriptures they used. Therefore, it is evident that there were thousands of totally correct copies of the 27 New Testament books in the first century.

Conclusion

God provided copies of the Scriptures by means of inspired scribes who made copies without any textual variants during the age of miracles. These exact copies were used by miraculously guided teachers in the early church. There were, no doubt, thousands of exact copies of the 27 New Testament books during the first century.

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¹ What is not true of the greater is not true of the lesser.