

Lecture Six

Writing and Copying Manuscripts

Scope: Before the invention of printing, the production of books was literally a matter of writing and copying by hand. This presentation takes up the technology of manuscript production: the materials used, the techniques of writing, and the habits of scribes. It discusses the formation of letters and words and the presence or absence of punctuation and how that can make a difference in meaning. It considers some of the earliest known biblical manuscripts and discusses the ways in which scribes inevitably changed texts even as they sought to be nothing more than faithful copyists. Finally, the lecture discusses the nature of the codex and what happens when writings become a book.

Outline

- I. Speaking of the Bible as a “book” is anachronistic during the period before the 4th century C.E.
 - A. Before the 4th century, there is little or no evidence of all the biblical books (*ta biblia*) appearing together in a single form, whether in scrolls or codex.
 - B. Instead, *ta biblia* are found either individually or in loose collections (e.g., Paul’s Letters), making the importance of a canonical list more obvious.
 - C. Before the invention of printing in the 15th century, indeed, all productions of biblical compositions are by human handwriting.
 - D. We are in possession of no “autographs” (original manuscripts) of any biblical books; it is important, therefore, to consider the technology of writing and copying manuscripts if we are to appreciate the actual experience of “Scripture” within much of the history of Judaism and Christianity.
- II. The technology of writing in antiquity becomes increasingly democratized but never loses entirely the aura of authority with which it began.
 - A. In the ancient Near East, writing began as a royal prerogative and was, therefore, rare, arduous, expensive, and vested with authority.

1. The cuneiform of ancient Babylon and the hieroglyphs of Egypt delivered public messages from on high in the form of letters or pictographs chiseled on stone.
2. Writing on stone remained a constant medium both in the public (royal inscriptions) and private spheres (contracts and letters) throughout much of antiquity.
3. The Law revealed to the people by Moses was “the writing of God, graven on the tables [of stone]” (Exodus 32:16).

B. A scribal culture grew up in the royal courts of the ancient Near East (including Israel) that drew its prestige from the rarity, expense, and importance of writing.

1. Oral performance had its own authority, but the writing of wisdom or prophecy added to its seriousness.
2. Writing enabled greater control and consistency than was possible with oral delivery: Writing fixes content, controls tradition, and resists change.
3. The use of papyrus (as early as 2600 B.C.E.) and parchment as writing materials made it possible to spread literacy even further.

III. The production and copying of manuscripts continued to be an expensive, arduous, and fallible process.

A. The materials for writing themselves offered resistance to speed and efficiency.

1. Because of the way it was produced (by the overlaying of split reeds), papyrus offered one smooth surface (the *recto*) and one rough surface (the *verso*), more resistant to the formation of letters.
2. Parchment made from animal skins required careful cleaning and preparation, as well as stitching together to form scrolls. Because it was rarer (made from the skin of calves), vellum was even more expensive.
3. The formation of letters by means of a stylus and ink was slow (the development of a *cursive* style of writing came late), especially when the scribe wrote in *majuscules* (capital letters) rather than *minuscules* (non-capital letters).

B. The copying of manuscripts was made more difficult because of the lack of separation between words and sparse indicators of

punctuation. Often, scribes were faced with blocks of letters decipherable as words because of oral acquaintance.

- C. The process of manuscript copying was fallible because of the practices of scribes, whether unintentional or intentional, that altered manuscripts in transmission.
 - 1. Among unintentional errors made by scribes are altering letters that sound alike, repeating or skipping words because of similarity in appearance, harmonizing with a similar text, or adding a previous scribe's explanatory gloss into the body of the text.
 - 2. Intentional changes take the form of alterations to the text undertaken by scribes out of the conviction that the text *should* say something that the copy in front of them does not, sometimes because of doctrinal convictions or because of the memory of an alternative version.

IV. The transmission of biblical manuscripts was much more chaotic in Christianity than in Judaism.

- A. Within Judaism, scholars known as the *Masorettes* sought to standardize the Hebrew text from very early on (perhaps late 1st or mid-2nd century), by regulating the spelling of words and providing vowel markings (*matres lectiones*) and accents to the consonantal text to indicate the proper reading.
 - 1. The regulation of the written text through such signs probably developed most fully between 500 and 700 C.E., though it began earlier.
 - 2. With the Aleppo Codex of Rabbi Aharon ben Asher (c. 915), the Masoretic text is fully realized, providing the common abbreviation used by scholars for the Hebrew Bible (MT).
 - 3. Precisely this degree of standardization of the Hebrew Bible makes the discovery of earlier manuscripts with a wider degree of variation (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) exciting to scholars.
- B. Within early Christianity, a variety of factors led to a more diverse manuscript tradition.
 - 1. The lack of a distinct scribal tradition in the Jewish manner and the rapid spread of the religion—necessitating the production of many manuscripts for a variety of populations—meant a proliferation of textual variants.

2. The production of multiple versions (translations) from the beginning also complicated the textual situation.
3. Eventually, one form of the Greek text in the east (known as the *Byzantine* or *Koine*) became standard for medieval Greek manuscripts.
4. The discovery of papyri fragments of early New Testament manuscripts serves as a window into a complex history.

Supplementary Reading:

E. J. Revell, "Masorettes, Masoretic Accents, Masoretic Studies, and Masoretic Text," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4: 593–599.

J. R. Royse, "Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, edited by B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes, pp. 239–252.

Questions to Consider:

1. Discuss the intricate connections between oral and written culture in antiquity as they pertain to the writing and reading of Scripture.
2. What social factors help account for the greater control over manuscript production in the Jewish tradition?