



## 2

# From Then to Now

## The Transmission of the Bible

### IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT

- ▶ Textual criticism—how scholars determine what the ancient authors actually wrote
- ▶ Types of translations
  - ▷ Formal correspondence
  - ▷ Dynamic equivalence

If the church designated the books in the Bible as those through which God speaks most clearly and authoritatively, how do we know we are reading the same books they selected? That is, what sort of assurance do we have that they have not been changed over the centuries? How did these texts get from the first century to the present day? Before the invention of the printing press, the only way to distribute or preserve a text was to copy it by hand. Sometimes a copyist had a manuscript on his desk and copied it. When a document was slated for wider distribution, a room full of copyists would listen to someone read the text and each would make a copy—with the result that both of these methods of copying created problems with accuracy.

The academic field of biblical studies includes the discipline of **textual criticism**, whose primary purpose is to establish the most accurate form of the biblical text. In this chapter we will look at some of this discipline's techniques and results as a way of examining how closely today's biblical texts match those that the early church selected or that the authors first composed.

### ▶ Textual Criticism

#### The Transmission of the Text of the Hebrew Bible

We do not know much about the earliest transmission of the sources that eventually came together to make up the Hebrew Bible. We can

see that various stories and texts were written, edited, and reedited over the course of centuries. At some point, some of these texts came to be preserved as the word of God. They include some very early material, as early as 1000 B.C.E. It is even possible that some of the psalms were written by David (at least they are attributed to him). The story in 2 Kings 22 of Josiah's workers finding the book in the temple points to some written texts (however much they were ignored) being preserved as early as the sixth century B.C.E. Once the Israelites began to select and preserve certain texts as the word of God in a special sense, and so began to view them as authoritative, it became important to maintain the precise wording of those texts. Some texts continued to be edited into the first century B.C.E. (as noted in chapter 1, one version of the text of Jeremiah is significantly longer in the Dead Sea Scrolls than in other manuscripts). But other texts took a stable form at an earlier time. After the canon of the Hebrew Bible was selected, Judaism granted a great deal of sanctity to these texts and developed significant means to preserve their exact form. The success of this effort is clear from the congruence of the Masoretic text (c. 1000 C.E.) and the Dead Sea Scrolls for most books.

### The Transmission of the Text of the Christian Bible

**Papyrus manuscripts.** We know more about the transmission and preservation of the Bible in Greek than we know about the way the Hebrew Bible was passed on. The books of the New Testament were often joined with a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Our earliest copies of parts of the New Testament are written on papyrus, a type of paper made of reeds. The earliest copy of part of the New

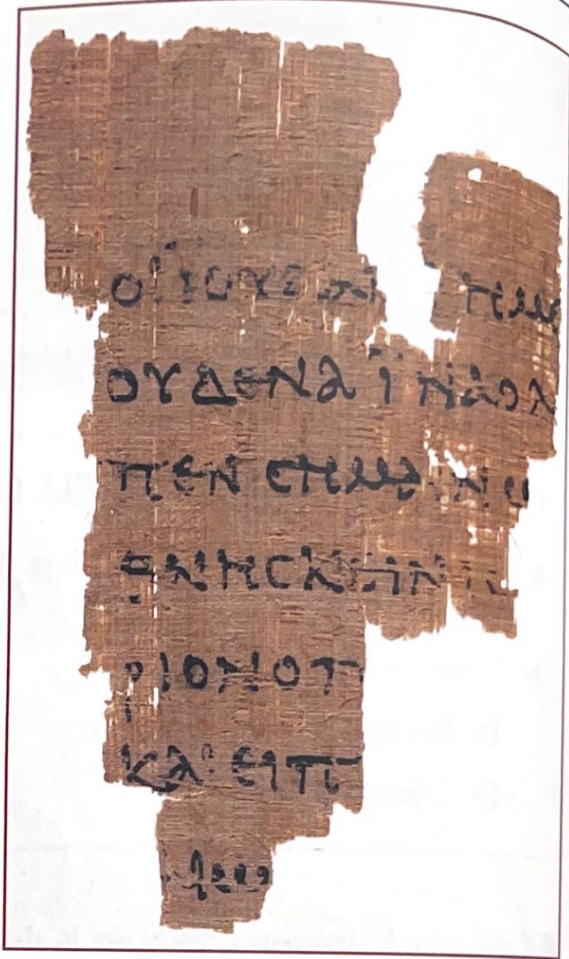


FIGURE 2.1 GOSPEL OF JOHN FRAGMENT

P<sup>52</sup>, a fragment of the Gospel of John dated about 125. About the size of a credit card, this fragment has John 18:31-33 on the front and 18:37-38 on the back. John Rylands University

Testament is on a credit-card-size piece of papyrus that was written in about 125. It contains part of the Gospel of John on each side, and so is probably what remains of an early copy of that book.\* The twelve volumes of the Chester Beatty Papyri come from about the year 200

\*The technical designation of this fragment is P<sup>52</sup>. All the papyri are designated with an uppercase P followed by a superscripted number.

and contain most of the New Testament. These papyrus sheets are among the most important as scholars try to determine what the authors of the New Testament books actually wrote.

**Uncials.** The other extremely important early evidence for the text of the New Testament comes from **uncials**. Uncials are copies of the New Testament that are written all in uppercase letters and on vellum (writing material made of leather). The two most important witnesses (manuscripts that give the best evidence for the text) in this category come from the **fourth century**. These two **codexes** (manuscripts in the form of books rather than scrolls or loose leaves) are **Codex Vaticanus** and **Codex**



FIGURE 2.2 CODEX VATICANUS

Page from the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus. This codex (early form of book that replaced scrolls) is one of the earliest and most complete copies of the biblical books. Vatican Library

BOX 2.1

THE CODEX

The transition from unwieldy scrolls to the codex—manuscripts in book form—took place in the early Christian period.

**Sinaiticus.** Both belong to a family of manuscripts that seem to have remained fairly close to the originals. Other groups of manuscripts clearly added material for clarification or even (in their view) correction. We will look at that issue below.

**Quotations.** Other important but more limited evidence for what the New Testament authors originally wrote includes those places where first-, second-, and third-century writers quote books that would eventually become part of the New Testament. Sometimes these authors simply allude to biblical texts, but at other times they directly quote them, even noting that they are quoting the words of a particular apostle or book. These **brief quotations give us important information about the text of the earliest copies of the New Testament books that were circulating among churches.** But some of these quotations also contain errors because the writers would often quote them from memory.

**Copyists' errors.** From the relative wealth of manuscripts of the New Testament that we have from the first few centuries, we can detect the kinds of changes that crept into the text as it was repeatedly copied. We know many of these kinds of mistakes from personal experience. **When we copy from a book, we are not always accurate.** Students often have quotations



**FIGURE 2.3 ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SCRIBES AT WORK**

From the tomb of Ti (c. 2465–2325 B.C.E.). Art Resource

in papers that are just a word or even a letter off. You can tell the copied material does not quite read as it should, or the change may even significantly alter the quotation's meaning (e.g., if the word *not* were left out). Sometimes copyists of the New Testament would accidentally leave out a word or whole line when the previous word or line had the same ending—their eye just skipped from one line (or word) to the next. Sometimes the opposite happened: they wrote a word once that should have been

written twice. Think of the sentence: "I saw that tabby cat cross the road." This sentence also makes good sense if it reads: "I saw that that tabby cat crossed the road." If the second "that" is inserted, the other change ("ed" added to "cross") is likely to follow. The meaning of the sentence may change little, but the change does allow different nuances. Of course, if the sentence originally contained the word twice, it still reads relatively well if the copyist leaves out the second "that" (providing he also changes

the verb). Copyists might also mistake one letter for another—remember that they are each reading another person’s handwriting.

In addition to these and similar errors that occur when copying from a written text, other mistakes arise from situations where the text was being read to a group of copyists. Think of the word “there.” If you are listening to someone reading a text and you are transcribing their words, you must be very careful with such words. If your attention wanes just a bit and the reader comes to the word “there,” you may end up writing “their” or “they’re” instead of “there.” The only way to know which of these words you should write is to be aware of the context.

**Intentional changes.** All of the changes we have talked about so far are mistakes, but there were also intentional changes to the text. Sometimes scribes inserted their own spellings of words. There were no completely standardized dictionaries, so regional or even personal differences appear in the spelling of some words. Sometimes copyists changed the grammar of a passage so that a sentence read more smoothly. Other times they changed the text to eliminate historical problems or to harmonize the Gospels. They also changed the text to support their own theological positions. When doctrinal disputes raged about **Christology** or the Spirit or some other issue, copyists sometimes changed the biblical text to be sure it could be read only one way—their way. This happened more often where a text was ambiguous enough that readers could find support for various positions in a controversy. But in other places, a word (or more) was simply changed to support a particular theological position. John 1:18 suffered

such a change. When third- and fourth-century Christians were engaged in the controversy over whether Christians should confess that Jesus is divine, a scribe changed John 1:18 so that it read: “the only begotten god,” rather than the original “the only begotten son.”\*

### Weighing and Sifting the Variant Readings

In addition to comparing the dates of manuscripts and grouping them into families that seem to come from the same or similar earlier manuscripts, textual critics have guidelines that help them determine which reading was earlier and so closer to the wording of the original author. Among these rules are the following:

1. The more difficult reading is probably earlier. Copyists are less likely to change a text so that it is harder to read. On the other hand, they often change the wording so it is easier to read, perhaps by accident or perhaps assuming they are correcting an earlier mistake.
2. The shorter reading is usually preferred. Copyists are more likely to add explanatory remarks than they are to delete parts of the text.
3. The reading that is more different from similar texts is preferred. Copyists are more likely to harmonize (sometimes accidentally) than to make texts contradict or stand in tension with one another.

\*This example is cited by Bart Ehrman in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 78–82. See that book for an accounting of many such changes.

4. An unusual use of a word or phrase is preferred over the common or proper use. Scribes are less likely to introduce a peculiar use of a word or phrase than they are to change or delete one.

None of these or any other rules textual critics use is always correct. The rules are often balanced against one another, and all in conjunction with the dates of manuscripts in which a reading is found and the families (or groupings) to which the manuscripts belong. But a careful use of these rules and procedures has led to the recovery of most of the original text of the New Testament. Most textual critics would say that the text of the New Testament is at least 90 percent secure; that is, 90 percent of the wording in the Greek New Testament is what the earliest church was reading. Much of what remains uncertain is of little importance. Sometimes it is a question of whether “the” or “a” was originally in the text. But there are also places where the difference is important. Fortunately, those places are not as numerous as they might be if it were not for the enormous amount of evidence that we have about the text from early centuries.

### A Striking Variant

There are some surprising results of textual criticism. A quick look at the end of the Gospel of Mark in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) or other recent translations that include notes about variations in the Greek texts provides an example. Earlier translations (including the King James Version) end Mark at chapter 16 verse 16 (16:16). But the NRSV and other recent translations give multiple endings. While it is still being discussed, most textual

critics think Mark originally ended at verse 8. The best fourth-century manuscripts end Mark at verse 8 (though the longer ending was known before then). So all of verses 9-16 were probably a later addition to the original. The existence of several different endings of Mark supports this conclusion. Some ancient manuscripts add an ending of only a few lines, others an ending about a fourth the length of the conclusion that extends through verse 16. Scholars think that copyists added all of these endings because if Mark concludes at the end of verse 8, its conclusion reads: “and they [the three women who find the empty tomb] said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Many have found this a difficult, even unacceptable, ending for Mark. So some scribes composed endings that have the women tell others and some have Jesus appear to them and the disciples. The copyists thought they had good reason to supplement the original ending, but Mark’s ending can be meaningful if read in the context of the whole book and in the context of what its original audience faced.\*

Only a few other well-known passages have so little claim to be part of the original text of the New Testament. (See chapter 12 and textbox

BOX 2.2

#### THE MEANING OF AN ENDING

Read Mark 16:1-8. Scholars think this was the original ending of the Gospel. What do you think an author might intend to convey by ending a story in this way?

\*See Morna Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003).

12.8 for another well-known example: the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53—8:11.) While such additions to the biblical text may be surprising, even shocking, Christians may take comfort in the fact that we know about them. Textual critics have succeeded in finding the major alterations and developing a more reliable text. It may have been more comfortable for believers in earlier centuries not to know about these textual problems, but we now possess a biblical text closer to the original writings than those more comfortable readers had. So if we want to understand what the biblical writers hoped to convey to their readers, we have the good fortune of possessing a text very close to what they actually wrote. This provides a more secure place from which to begin our work of interpreting their words, and thus for Christians to find the texts' message about God, Christ, and humanity.

## ► Translations

Once text critics establish a fairly secure text of the Bible in Hebrew (the Hebrew Bible; Christianity's Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament), that content is still not available for most people until it is translated into their native language. The many translations available in English vary according to their translators' philosophy of translation and views about the results of textual criticism.

### Formal Correspondence and Dynamic Equivalence

Translators must adopt a way to approach their work of bringing a text out of one language and into another. We may track approaches

to translations on a spectrum that has formal correspondence on one end and dynamic equivalence on the other. A purely **formal correspondence** translation would be as much a word-for-word rendering as possible. Those with experience of another language know that one cannot simply give a direct word-for-word translation of a paragraph or even a sentence because languages are structured differently. For example, languages differ in word order. Some languages, like English, usually have the subject come before the verb in a sentence that states a fact. Other languages, like Greek, depend on changes of the words' endings and beginnings to signal what function they have rather than relying primarily on their order in the sentence. So if a translation of the New Testament into English were to follow Greek word order, it would make no sense in English.

Languages also have very different idioms and figurative expressions that do not transfer from one language to another. For example, translating "hit the hay" literally into any language would probably not convey the idea that the person was going to bed. In such cases, translators must try to find equivalent expressions or give the meaning without using an idiom.

✦ **The American Standard Version.** The English translation that adheres most closely to the formal correspondence ideal is the American Standard Version of 1901. Its translators worked hard to maintain even the sentence structure and word order in Greek, a strategy that produces a translation that closely adheres to the individual words of the text. It is, however, very difficult to read and sometimes distorts the meanings of sentences by retaining elements of

Greek style and syntax. Few other translations have adopted such a rigorous attempt at formal correspondence because of the inherent difficulty in reading and failing to provide a clear guide to the text's meaning.

**Paraphrastic translations.** At the other end of the spectrum of translations, dynamic equivalence, we find works such as *The Message*, the *Living Bible*, and the *Good News Bible*. These are really paraphrases rather than straightforward translations. That is, they take the ideas the translators think the biblical texts convey and put them into their own words. These can be much easier to read than other sorts of translations because they employ more modern metaphors and ways of speaking. They can be valuable as introductions to reading the Bible and to devotional reading, but are (not) the translations one should use when doing more detailed reading and study of the Bible.

These translations do not serve well for more in-depth study because they incorporate so much of their translator's interpretations that they deny the reader the opportunity to see the multiple meanings a text might have. That is, paraphrases and other dominantly dynamic equivalence translations give the reader more the translator's interpretation of the text and less what the text actually says.

**Balance.** Most translations fall somewhere between these two extremes. Some lean more toward dynamic equivalence, others toward formal correspondence. You can decide which kind of translation is most helpful by identifying the purpose of your reading. If you want easy reading for devotion and encouragement, dynamic equivalence translations may be more

helpful. If you want to study a passage in depth to understand its meaning in its own context or to determine what it would tell Christians to believe or how to live, you need a translation that leans more toward formal correspondence.

**King James Version, New King James Version, Revised Standard Version.** Various translations adopt similar balances in translation strategies. The **King James Version (KJV)**, **New King James Version (NKJV)**, and **Revised Standard Version (RSV)** have similar translation strategies. All three try to express the meaning of the text in ways that remain fairly close to the original wording and structure, while also producing fairly good English prose. These translations generally allow the ambiguity of texts to remain, and so permit the reader to wrestle with the meaning(s) of such texts. These translations provide clear English, but often include complicated sentences and even unusual syntax, if

## BOX 2.3

### THE DANGER OF MORE INTERPRETIVE TRANSLATING

The NRSV does a good job of choosing to render *adelphoi* (literally "brothers") as "brothers and sisters" because it captures the meaning, as a good dynamic equivalence translation does. Some of the NRSV's other translations of this term are much less successful. When the NRSV translates it with the word "friends" (or similar alternatives), it sacrifices too much of the term's familial connotation and so provides a less adequate translation.



that best reflects the range of meanings possible for the text.

**New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New International Version Inclusive Language Edition.** One step closer to the dynamic equivalence model are the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV), and the NIV Inclusive Language Edition (NIVI). These all strive to produce a more easily readable text that remains faithful to some of the language and structure of the original. But they are more interpretive than the translations in the previous group. The interpretive renderings make the text clearer, but sometimes thereby close off possible understandings. The NRSV and NIVI clarify the meanings of some texts by translating terms that are male in the original with more inclusive language. For example, both translations often translate the plural Greek term *adelphoi* (brothers) with “brothers and sisters.” This correctly captures the meaning of the expression in the greetings of Paul’s letters, even as it changes the wording found in the Greek text. This example shows how these translations lean toward expressing the text’s meaning in the vernacular rather than adhering as closely to the original wording as translations such as the RSV. Again, this aids some readings, but hinders others. The more detailed your study of a biblical text, the more you need to work from a translation on the formal correspondence side of the spectrum. If you were studying the importance of the term *brother* or the idea of familial language in the New Testament, the NRSV and NIVI would not be the most helpful translations. But if you want to understand the flow of thought in Romans,

BOX 2.4

### A TRANSLATION FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

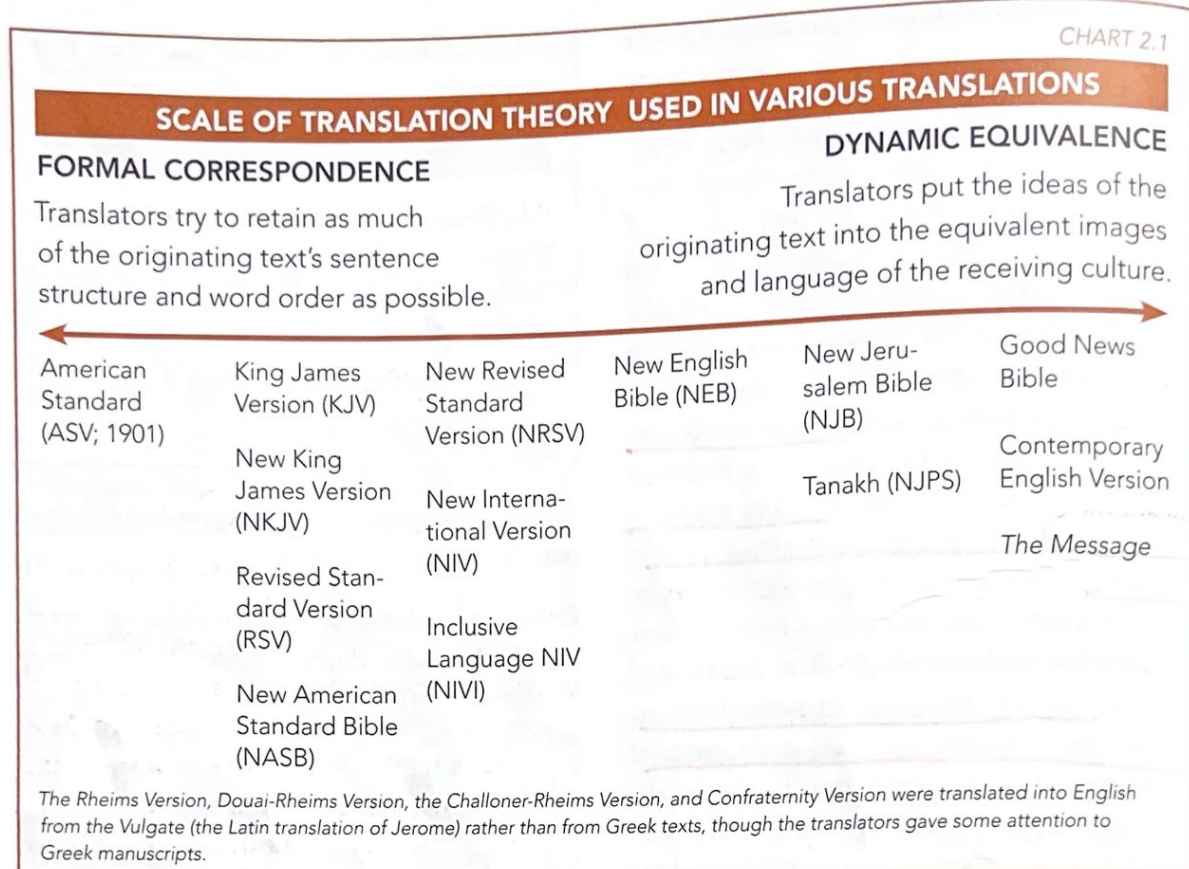
The *Tanakh* (an acronym for *Torah*, *Nebi'im* [Prophets], and *Ketubim* [Writings]) is the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the Hebrew Bible. Jews have used “Tanakh” as the name for their Bible since ancient times.

those translations might be more helpful than many others.

**Other translations.** The translation strategy of the New English Bible (NEB) stands between the NRSV, NIV, and NIVI, on the one side, and the New American Standard Bible (NASB), New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), and Tanakh (NJPS), on the other. The latter translations introduce more interpretation into their renderings of the biblical texts; that is, they do more to direct (and limit) one’s interpretation of the texts than the translations in the previous groups. Such translations can enhance our reading of the text, but when reading them we must remember that many of the interpretations they assume are disputed. If you read only one of these translations, however, you will not know that its interpretation of a passage is open to question.

**Individuals and committees.** We should also note that some translations are done by committees of scholars, while others are produced by a single individual. Translations by single individuals include *The Message* and the J. B. Phillips translation. This kind of translation has the virtue of being expressive and possibly more

CHART 2.1



consistent in its presentation of particular concepts. The reader gets, however, a single person's understanding of the text's message. The advantage of a translation produced by a committee is that the various members of the translation team can balance one another's idiosyncrasies and theological inclinations. Committees also, however, often have theological or ideological inclinations. For example, the team that translated the NIV has more scholars with conservative leanings, while the translators of the NRSV include more scholars with liberal leanings. Still, there was enough breadth on both committees that some balance was maintained. The more limited the spectrum of translators on a team, the more likely that their theological and ideological perspectives will color the translation.

One can often determine much about the strategy used in a translation by reading its preface, which frequently includes not only how the translation was done but also the range of people involved in the work. So reading the preface can help you select the Bible that fits best the purpose you have in mind.

**A classic that needs translation.** Before leaving discussion of translations, a word about the King James Version may be helpful. This translation was a wonderful accomplishment in the seventeenth century. It remains a beautiful translation, perhaps the most beautiful translation of much of the Bible. But it has significant drawbacks. First, it translates the Bible into seventeenth-century English. The English

language has developed in significant ways over the last four hundred years, and some of those developments mean that words have changed meanings. Therefore, the older wording sometimes fails to convey what the text means or what the translators intended. The word *conversation* in 1 Peter 1:15 is a good example. The KJV reads: "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." It sounds here as if Peter is calling the readers to reflect holiness in the way they talk. But in the seventeenth century "conversation" meant the conduct of one's whole life.

This broader meaning is what 1 Peter has in mind, because the Greek word behind the English "conversation" is *anastrophē*, a term that means "manner of life." The NRSV translates the term "conduct" to capture the meaning in twenty-first-century English the way "conversation" did in the seventeenth.

The same Greek word and translation in the KJV render another passage in 1 Peter almost nonsensical. In 3:15 the writer gives this instruction to women married to nonbelievers: "ye wives, *be* in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives." How can it be that the husband is won over by a conversation that has no words? Of course, when we know that "conversation" means conduct of life, not dialogue, the passage makes perfect sense. This is just a single example of many such changes in the meanings of words. The New King James Version (NKJV) updated the translation's language so that these problems appear less frequently. That also means, however, that the new translation loses some of the familiarity and beauty of the original.

Unfortunately, there is an important problem with the NKJV: it disregards much of the work of textual critics. Textual criticism, trying to discern the most ancient reading of the biblical texts, had not really been used in conjunction with biblical texts when the KJV was produced. So the KJV relied on the *Textus Receptus*\* or the received text as the basis for its translation. The *Textus Receptus* was produced by Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1561 and was the Greek text on which many translations since the Reformation had been based. This text is based on what is known as the Byzantine family of texts. There are many manuscripts in this family of Greek manuscripts and it served as the basis for the Latin Vulgate. But this family of manuscripts does not include our oldest witnesses for the text of the New Testament. Most text critics think other groups of manuscripts represent readings that are closer to the original compositions of the biblical writers. But the NKJV continues to rely on the *Textus Receptus*, so this translation does not represent what most scholars think is the closest we can get to the original text of the Bible. Sometimes the differences in the texts have little effect on the meaning, but at other times, there is a great deal of difference—particularly when large sections are involved. For example, the KJV and NKJV include Mark 16:9-16. But as we saw above, the best and most ancient copies of Mark indicate that those verses were not part of that Gospel when it was written or first began circulating to churches along with the other three canonical Gospels. Some segments of Christianity have based rather radical practices (e.g., these are the verses that mention believers handling snakes) on this passage, which was probably not part of Mark originally but was added over two

hundred years later. Such differences in the text can be important when believers use the Bible to help them make decisions about how to live and what to believe.

### ► Conclusion

The work of text critics provides a text of the Bible that is very close to what the original

collectors of those materials were reading. A good study Bible will have notes that indicate where there are some questions about what word appears in a text. When we exercise care in our use of translations, we can begin to see the richness of the biblical texts and begin to understand more clearly what they want to convey to believers about themselves, the world, and God.

### ► LET'S REVIEW ◀

In this chapter we learned about:

- Early transmission of the biblical texts
- Textual Criticism
  - Definition
  - Need for it
- Transmission of text of the Hebrew Bible
- Transmission of the text of the Christian Bible
  - Types of materials and manuscripts
  - Criteria for evaluating variant readings
  - Translations
    - Types of translations
    - Identifying specific translations by their type
    - The *Textus Receptus*

### ► KEY TERMS ◀

Chester Beatty Papyri	Copyist	Papyrus
Christology	Dynamic equivalence	Textual criticism
Codex	Formal correspondence	<i>Textus Receptus</i>
Codex Sinaiticus	King James Version	Uncials
Codex Vaticanus	Masoretic text	

### ► QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW ◀

- 2.1 How do we know that the text of the Hebrew Bible we have today is much like the text the Jewish community was reading in the first century?
- 2.2 What ancient manuscripts do scholars see as the most important evidence for what New Testament authors actually wrote? Why do they think these are so important?
- 2.3 What are some unintentional changes that came to be part of some copies of biblical texts? What are some intentional changes? Explain how each got into the text.

- 2.4 What are some criteria textual critics use to decide what the original text was?
- 2.5 Tell about translation strategies and give examples of translations that use various strategies.
- 2.6 Why is it important to know that the King James Version relies on the *Textus Receptus*?

► FOR FURTHER READING ◀

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Images of and links to more exploration of Codex Sinaiticus:  
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/codexsinai.html>