

Welcome to the Church at Bethel, where the *gospel* brings us together: Jesus in our place. To everyone joining us online, to our guests, and to our church family—welcome!

We're continuing "Asking for a Friend," one of our favorite teaching series of the year. It's where we take your honest questions about faith and bring them to Scripture—not looking for easy answers, but for faithful ones.

Today's question is foundational: Is the Bible reliable, or is it just ancient myth? But there is an even more personal question beneath it: *If the Bible is reliable—if it truly is the Word of God—what does that mean for your life?*

Before we answer, let's define two words.

Scripture comes from the Latin *scriptura*, meaning "writings." For Christians, Scripture is more than something written; it is sacred and authoritative—"All scripture is inspired by God," according to 2 Timothy 3:16.

Bible comes from the Greek *biblia*, meaning "the books." The Bible is a library of sixty-six books—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New—written across generations yet telling one unified story of one God pursuing and redeeming his people.

So today, we're not merely asking whether an ancient book can be trusted. We're asking whether the God who speaks through it can be trusted—and what we will do if the answer is yes.

Asking for a Friend: Is the Bible reliable—or just ancient myth?

Historicity – Can we trust it then? A better question is not whether ancient writers recorded history exactly as we do, but whether their testimony is credible.

Most knowledge of the past comes through testimony—written records, oral traditions, inscriptions, and eyewitness accounts. Historians do not dismiss testimony simply because it is ancient or religious; they weigh it against other evidence.

The Bible has repeatedly faced skepticism. Some scholars questioned whether the Davidic dynasty existed, yet the Tel Dan Stele, discovered in 1993, contains an ancient reference to the "House of David." Widespread flood traditions across ancient cultures also preserve memories of a catastrophic flood.

This is not simply an OT issue, many deny the historical account of the Messiah; but existence and execution of Jesus have historical documentation. Around AD 93–94, Josephus mentioned "**James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ.**" Later Tacitus (AD 116) explains that Nero blamed Rome's fire (AD 64) on, "**a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had**

undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius (Annals 15.44).” History confirms what the Bible says is true.

Takeaway: Then? The Bible is not historically isolated. You have enough historical evidence to trust the Scriptures.

Reliability – Can we trust it when? Some say, “I trust the Scriptures as originally written—but how do we know they were faithfully handed down?”

The evidence is overwhelming. We possess hundreds of Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament and roughly 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Old Testament scribes (Masoretes) treated copying Scripture as a sacred responsibility, *carefully counting letters, words, verses, and sections to guard against error*. The New Testament, meanwhile, is the **best-attested work of the ancient world**. Although minor textual variations remain, the original wording can be established with remarkable confidence (99.99 %)— and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine.

Consider the comparison: *Beowulf* survives in only one medieval manuscript, and **no complete** original manuscript of a **Shakespearean** play survives. Why don’t we challenge the historicity of Beowulf or Shakespeare? Why, then, is the Bible subjected to greater suspicion? Because its claims matter infinitely more. Scripture does not merely entertain us; it confronts us with a holy God and proclaims salvation through Jesus Christ.

Take-Home: Can you trust the Scriptures as they have been handed down? Yes. The abundance and agreement of the manuscripts give overwhelming evidence that God has faithfully preserved His Word—and that we possess the message He intended us to hear.

Canonicity: Can We Trust the Books We Have Now? Some might ask, “What about the books not included in our modern Bible? How do we know these sixty-six books belong?”

The early church wrestled seriously with this question. The word **canon** comes from the Greek *kanōn*, meaning “measuring stick” or “rule.” A canonical book was recognized as an authoritative standard for the church’s faith and life. How was a book recognized as Scripture?

First was the test of **orthodoxy**: Was its teaching consistent with the faith handed down by the apostles—especially the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Second was **apostolicity**: Was it written by an apostle or someone closely associated with one? Mark was connected with Peter, and Luke with Paul. Merely attaching an apostle’s

name was not enough. The early Christians rejected writings such as the *Gospel of Thoms, Peter and the Acts of Paul* when they concluded that their apostolic claims were false or that they had been written too late.

Third was **universality** (catholicity): Was the book widely received and used among Christian churches? Books regularly read aloud in worship were already functioning as Scripture, trusted to instruct the whole church.

Take-Home: No council or king created the Bible or gave these books their authority. Through a providential process within the early Christian communities, the church recognized the books God had given.

What Does the Bible Make of Me?

But what if the burden of proof is not only on the Bible? What if it is also on the reader? Perhaps the most important question is not, “What do I make of the Bible?” but “**What does the Bible make of me?**”

The Bible preserves and proclaims the central message of Christianity—the gospel:

“For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared (1 Cor. 15:3–5).”

This is of first importance: Christ died. Christ was buried. Christ was raised. Christ appeared.

Take-Home: So, what do you make of the gospel? Do you believe your sins require payment? Do you trust that Christ died for the ungodly? Have you anchored your hope in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead?

If the Bible Is True, Jesus Is the Only Way

Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).”

The cross makes an exclusive claim: there is no other way of salvation. Yet the cross extends an inclusive invitation: everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved.

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).”

You cannot believe that many roads lead to heaven while also believing the Bible. Pluralism says, “**Choose your own way.**” The gospel says, “**Jesus is the way.**”

Take-Home: Will you take your stand on Jesus alone—the way, the truth, and the life?

If the Bible Is True, God’s Word Is Necessary

Jesus said: “[Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God \(Matthew 4:4\).](#)”

Just as your body cannot live without food, your soul cannot flourish without God’s Word. Paul writes, “[Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ](#)” (Romans 10:17).

Take-Home: God’s Word is vital to your spiritual life. Are you in the Word? Get into the Word until the Word gets into you ([Read plans](#)).

If the Bible Is True, God’s Word Has Authority

The Bible does not merely inform us; it directs us. Scripture has complete authority over the Christian’s beliefs, desires, decisions, and behavior. James warns: “[But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves \(James 1:22\).](#)”

The word *deceive* originally carried the idea of trapping, ensnaring, or cheating. James is warning that if you hear God’s Word but refuse to obey it, [you are not outsmarting God—you are only cheating yourself](#).

Take-Home: The question is not simply, “Did I hear the Word?” but “Will I obey the Word?”

If the Bible Is True, God’s Word Is Powerful

Hebrews declares that God’s Word is “[living and effective](#)” (Hebrews 4:12). Isaiah promises [that it never returns to God empty—it always accomplishes what He intends \(Isaiah 55:11\)](#).

The Bible is not a dead book containing ancient words. It is the living Word of the living God. It exposes sin, awakens faith, renews the mind, directs the path, and transforms the life.

So, what if this year you stopped treating the Bible as an [accessory](#) and began receiving it as a necessity? What if you read it, trusted it, obeyed it, and built your life upon it?

What might God’s Word make of you?

Overview: Three Organizing Themes

This approach to biblical theology centers on three interrelated themes:

1. **Canon** — The Scriptures were composed, gathered, and circulated so that God’s saving revelation could be communicated to future generations. Readers therefore encounter each biblical document as part of a larger, received collection.
2. **Covenant** — The biblical covenants provide a central framework for understanding the Bible’s narrative.
3. **Christ** — The Christian canon and its covenantal storyline point to Jesus as the Christ.

The task of biblical theology is to study these themes—canon, covenant, and Christ—and explain how they relate to one another.

1. Canon as a Tool for Biblical Theology

The two-testament canon of the Old and New Testaments guides Christian interpretation in several ways:

- Individual writings are read as parts of a developed whole.
- The canon shapes the church’s reading of Scripture.
- Canonical context provides a foundation for biblical interpretation and theology.

Key Terms

Canon

The English word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanōn*, meaning “measuring stick” or “rule.” It has two related senses:

- **A rule, norm, or standard** used to evaluate something, as in “rule of faith.”
- **An authoritative list or collection**, such as a recognized body of literature.

The biblical canon may therefore be described as an authoritative collection of highly regarded sacred writings.

Scripture

Scripture comes from the Latin *scriptura*, meaning “writings.” In a religious context, it refers to writings regarded by a community as sacred and authoritative. The New Testament uses the Greek word *graphē* in this sense.

In [2 Timothy 3:15–16](#), Paul refers to the “sacred writings” and states that “all Scripture is God-breathed.” The passage presents Scripture as both:

- **Literary:** written documents produced by human authors.
- **Theological:** writings whose ultimate origin and authority are attributed to God.

Canon of Scripture

The phrase *canon of Scripture* refers to the received collection of authoritative sacred writings. In Christian theology, both the individual books and the collection as a whole are treated as authoritative.

Fourth-century regional councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) affirmed lists corresponding to the 27-book New Testament. These councils did not suddenly create the canon; they reflect a longer process of use, debate, and recognition within Christian communities.

Bible

The word *Bible* derives from a term meaning “books.” The name captures two features of the collection:

- **Unity:** many Christians receive the Bible as a coherent work and as God’s special revelation.
 - **Diversity:** it contains many books, genres, authors, settings, and historical periods.
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2. Why Were Biblical Books Written and Preserved?

Biblical writings served several practical and theological purposes:

- To preserve teaching when human memory could fail.
- To retain testimony as eyewitnesses died.
- To support worship and instruction.
- To answer objections and defend the faith (an apologetic purpose).
- To meet the needs of growing and geographically dispersed communities.
- To address particular situations. Many New Testament epistles, for example, respond to the needs and questions of specific churches or individuals.

The Role of the Believing Community

The existence of a received canon shows that communities consciously preserved, copied, circulated, and gathered writings they regarded as authoritative. Although later believers could no longer be instructed directly by prophets and apostles, they could continue to be guided by their writings.

This observation describes the community’s role in receiving and transmitting Scripture. Different Christian traditions explain the theological relationship among divine inspiration, ecclesial recognition, and canonical authority in different ways.

3. Recognition of the New Testament Canon

Three commonly discussed criteria for recognizing canonical books are:

1. **Orthodoxy** — Was the teaching consistent with the church’s received “rule of faith”?
2. **Apostolicity** — Was the work written by an apostle or closely connected to apostolic testimony?

3. **Universality (catholicity)** — Was the work widely received and used among Christian communities?

Some books were accepted less uniformly or were debated for longer periods, including Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

The historical process was gradual and varied by region. “Criteria” are best understood as a summary of recurring considerations rather than a single formal test applied everywhere in the same way.

4. The Old Testament Canon: Hebrew and Christian Arrangements

The Jewish Tanakh and the Protestant Old Testament contain substantially the same books but count and arrange them differently. Catholic and Orthodox Old Testament canons also include additional deuterocanonical books, so “the Christian canon” is not identical across all Christian traditions.

Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)

The name *Tanakh* is formed from the initials of its three major divisions:

Division	Hebrew name	Meaning
Torah	<i>Torah</i>	Law or Instruction
Prophets	<i>Nevi'im</i>	Prophets
Writings	<i>Ketuvim</i>	Writings

The arrangement communicates a particular literary and theological understanding of the collection.

Protestant Old Testament

The Protestant ordering is largely organized by genre:

1. Law (Pentateuch)
 2. Historical books
 3. Poetry and Wisdom
 4. Prophets
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5. Languages and Major Textual Traditions of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew, with portions in Aramaic, including [Daniel 2:4b–7:28](#), [Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26](#), and [Jeremiah 10:11](#).

No original authorial manuscripts (“autographs”) of the Old or New Testament are known to survive. Scholars therefore compare surviving manuscripts and ancient translations to study the history of the text and evaluate variant readings.

Major Ancient Witnesses and Versions

Text or version	Approximate date	Description and significance
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Samaritan Pentateuch	Ancient textual tradition; surviving manuscripts are later	A form of the Torah preserved by the Samaritan community, with distinctive spellings and readings.
Septuagint (LXX)	Translation began in the 3rd century BCE and continued over time	Ancient Greek translations of Jewish Scriptures; important witnesses to earlier Hebrew forms and commonly used by many early Greek-speaking Christians.
Targums	Developed over centuries; many surviving forms are from the early centuries CE and later	Aramaic translations and interpretive paraphrases of biblical texts.
Latin Vulgate	Late 4th–early 5th century CE	Jerome’s Latin translation and revision, which became the dominant Bible of the Western church.
Masoretic Text	Preserved especially ca. 6th–10th centuries CE	The principal medieval Hebrew textual tradition underlying most modern translations of the Hebrew Bible.

The Septuagint (LXX)

Many early Christians used Greek translations of Jewish Scripture collectively known as the Septuagint. New Testament authors frequently quote wording close to the Septuagint, though their citations are not uniform: some align more closely with known Hebrew forms, while others are adapted or cited in distinctive ways.

Alongside the Masoretic Text and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint is a major source for studying the textual history of the Old Testament. Some books differ substantially in length or arrangement; for example, the Greek form of Jeremiah is shorter and differently ordered than the Masoretic form.

6. The Dead Sea Scrolls

The first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. Finds from the Qumran caves include roughly 230 manuscripts classified as “biblical,” as well as interpretive, liturgical, legal, apocalyptic, and sectarian works. The scrolls date from approximately the third century BCE to the first century CE. ([Israel Antiquities Authority](#))

Significance for the Old Testament Text

- The scrolls include partial or complete copies of every book now in the Hebrew Bible except Esther.
- They contain the oldest known surviving manuscripts of many biblical books.
- Many readings closely resemble the later Masoretic Text, demonstrating the antiquity of that textual tradition.
- Other manuscripts contain meaningful differences, showing that more than one textual form circulated before later standardization.
- The discoveries include biblical manuscripts as well as community rules, commentaries, hymns, and other Jewish religious literature.

The scrolls therefore provide evidence for both **continuity** and **textual diversity**. Their presence at Qumran shows that these books were copied and valued, but it does not by itself prove that the community possessed a fully closed canon identical to a later Jewish or Christian collection. The Israel Antiquities Authority notes that evidence does not indicate a single, unified concept of a closed canon among all communities represented by the scrolls. ([IAA overview](#))

7. The Masoretic Text and the Work of the Masoretes

The Masoretes were Jewish scribes and scholars who worked especially between the sixth and tenth centuries CE. They sought to preserve the Hebrew consonantal text and its traditional reading.

Their contributions included:

- Adding vowel points and accent marks to preserve pronunciation and chanting traditions.
- Recording marginal notes about spelling, reading, and unusual textual features.
- Distinguishing between *ketiv* (“what is written”) and *qere* (“what is read”).
- Employing detailed copying and checking practices, including counts and textual notes.

The Leningrad Codex, dated to 1008/1009 CE, is the oldest complete surviving manuscript of the Masoretic Text and has served as the base text for major modern critical editions. ([Bible Odyssey](#))

Traditional Scribal Practices

Later descriptions of Jewish scribal practice emphasize profound care and reverence. Practices associated with copying Torah scrolls include using prescribed materials, ruling pages, writing from an exemplar rather than memory, maintaining spacing, and treating the divine name with special care. Specific rules varied by period and type of manuscript, so these traditions should not all be projected unchanged onto every ancient or medieval scribe.

8. Common Types of Scribal Variation

Hand-copying can introduce several recognizable kinds of variation:

1. **Dittography** — Accidentally writing a letter, word, or phrase twice.
2. **Haplography** — Accidentally omitting material because similar letters or words occur near one another.
3. **Word division** — Joining two words or dividing one word incorrectly. Ancient Hebrew manuscripts did not use modern spacing and vowel notation consistently; the string GODISNOWHERE illustrates how spacing can alter meaning (“God is now here” or “God is nowhere”).
4. **Letter confusion or transposition** — Reversing letters or confusing characters that look alike.
5. **Gloss incorporation** — Absorbing a marginal explanation or note into the main text during later copying.

6. **Errors from hearing** — Confusing words that sound alike when a text is copied from dictation.

Textual critics identify such patterns but do not decide readings from error categories alone. They consider manuscript age, geographical distribution, relationships among witnesses, the author's style, and the reading that best explains the rise of the others.

9. The Text of the New Testament

No original New Testament manuscripts are known to survive. Thousands of Greek manuscript witnesses remain, ranging from small fragments to complete or nearly complete copies; additional evidence comes from early translations and quotations in Christian writers. Because these manuscripts were copied by hand, they contain textual variants.

Most variants are minor—such as spelling differences, word order, or readings found in only one manuscript. A smaller number require sustained analysis, and some affect the wording of theologically significant passages. A careful formulation is therefore preferable to saying that no variant “affects doctrine”: no widely held Christian doctrine depends solely on one genuinely uncertain textual reading, but some variants do affect interpretation of particular verses. ([Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts](#))

Modern critical editions compare manuscript evidence and document significant variants so that readers and translators can evaluate them.

10. Can the Biblical Text Be Trusted?

The manuscript evidence supports a nuanced conclusion:

- The autographs are not extant.
- Surviving manuscripts contain differences, as is expected in a hand-copied tradition.
- The large body of evidence allows scholars to identify and compare those differences rather than leaving them hidden.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls show substantial continuity with the medieval Masoretic tradition while also preserving earlier textual diversity.
- New Testament textual criticism likewise finds a generally stable text alongside a limited number of difficult and meaningful variants.

Claims about “reliability” may refer to several distinct questions—accurate textual reconstruction, historical credibility, theological authority, or faithfulness of interpretation. These questions should be distinguished rather than answered with a single slogan.

11. History, Testimony, and Biblical Interpretation

What Is History?

History is not merely a list of events. It is the disciplined reconstruction, interpretation, and narration of the past using surviving evidence.

Helpful contrasts include:

- A modern historical presentation often moves chronologically from beginning to end.
- Ancient Near Eastern writings may organize events around patterns, cycles, theological meaning, or the character of rulers rather than modern expectations of exhaustive chronology.

These are broad tendencies, not absolute rules. Both ancient and modern historians select, arrange, and interpret evidence.

What Is Testimony?

Much of what is known about the past comes through the testimony of others. Testimony—including written records, oral reports, inscriptions, and remembered accounts—is therefore central to historical knowledge.

Because testimony must be interpreted, historical study requires both critical openness and careful evaluation. Useful questions include:

- How close is the witness to the event in time and place?
- Did the witness have access to relevant information?
- Are multiple sources independent, or do they depend on one another?
- What interests, assumptions, or rhetorical purposes shape the account?
- Is the testimony corroborated by documents, archaeology, material culture, or other witnesses?
- Does the explanation account for all the evidence, including evidence that resists the interpreter's expectations?

Eyewitness testimony can be valuable but is not automatically accurate. Likewise, ideological interest does not automatically make a source false; every account has a perspective. Historical inquiry weighs testimony rather than simply accepting sources that appear neutral or that fit modern expectations of what is “normal.”

Literary and Historical Understanding

Competent biblical interpretation requires both literary and historical attention:

- **Literary understanding** asks how genre, structure, rhetoric, characterization, and narrative shape meaning.
- **Historical understanding** asks about context, sources, events, institutions, and cultural conventions.

Neither approach is sufficient by itself. Literary form affects how a text presents the past, while historical context helps readers understand what its literary choices communicate.

References and Further Reading

- Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts. ["Myths and Mistakes—Peter J. Gurry."](#)
- Israel Antiquities Authority. ["Introduction: The Dead Sea Scrolls."](#)
- Israel Antiquities Authority. ["Featured Scrolls."](#)
- Society of Biblical Literature, Bible Odyssey. ["Why Does the Bible Look the Way It Does?"](#)

Manuscript Evidence

The New Testament is the best attested work from the ancient world. First, it has by far the greatest number of existing manuscripts. Ancient classical works are attested to by very few full or partial manuscripts—usually less than ten. In comparison, over five thousand full or partial Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist. Thousands of additional texts exist in other languages, especially Latin. This overwhelming number of copies yields a much stronger base for establishing the original text (Habermas, 162).

The resulting text is 99.99 percent accurate, and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine.

There are two startling facts that come together in the person of Jesus Christ: (1) his unique claims about himself, and (2) his unique life, particularly his purity and his miracles. He claimed to be God, and his life leaves no reasonable alternative but that he actually was who he claimed to be. Consequently—and this is not a point anyone can accept casually—Jesus Christ actually is God, who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth (Corduan, 200).

If the Bible is true, now what?

Is there information in the Bible that would logically exclude other scriptures in this way? Perhaps almost ironically, the Bible makes the answer to this question fairly easy (at least as long as a person accepts it for what it says and not for what he or she thinks it should say. The Bible makes exclusive claims concerning the God and the religion it advocates. "I am the LORD your God.... You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:2-3 NASB) is the first commandment (Corduan, 203).

Throughout the Old Testament, all worship of any other purported deity is reprov'd and oftentimes judged. The same thing is true for the New Testament. Jesus declares, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The apostle Peter declares before the council, "Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is just a small sampling of some of the best-known verses in the Bible that claim exclusive truth and salvation.

The early church and "normative" Christianity

Faith tradition can be traced back to the very beginnings of Christianity. Some, such as certain parables and wisdom sayings, can be attributed to Jesus. Even others, such as certain miracle

stories and conflict stories, can be traced back to the compositional activities of storytellers who remembered the deeds, words, and debates of the earthly Jesus-or received such remembrances

These traditions were incorporated into the Gospels, both canonical and extracanonical. Collections of Jesus' wisdom sayings and miracle stories-whether authentic or not-came to have a life of their own, as several apocryphal Gospels attest. But in the case of the canonical Gospels, such traditions, and still others, were incorporated within narratives that concluded with accounts of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

It is correct to say with Helmut Koester that the Gospel tradition portraying Jesus as crucified and raised "became the central criterion of faith for the 'canonical' writers"²¹—that is, those who represented normative Christianity. There are reasons why that should have been so. At least three can be cited here.

First, it was the tradition that was "of first importance" to major figures in early Christianity, such as Paul, Peter, and James (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3). The fact that that tradition was central to early apostolic proclamation and teaching gave it a rather "canonical" or "normative" role early on and in a number of communities.

Second, the account of Jesus' death and resurrection could be presented not only in kerygmatic creedal statements but also in story form. In this regard, this type of tradition had a decisive advantage over the others.

Collections of Jesus' teachings and stories about him could exist on their own, as certain apocryphal Gospels show, but they were unlikely to accommodate or absorb other traditions.

But finally, there is another reason, and that is of a different kind, why the tradition of Jesus as crucified and raised would become ascendant in the earliest communities of faith and then in normative Christianity. That is that this tradition carried with it the message that through these events an eschatological event with saving effect had occurred. Of the various types of tradition, this one alone finally addresses the human predicament, in which it is necessary not only to know something—of God, Jesus, the world, and the self—but to have something done to resolve it. The traditions of Jesus as teacher of wisdom (or of *gnōsis*) can lead one along the path of understanding, and that was the way of salvation for Gnostics. But for the normative Christian tradition there was a different interpretation of the significance of Jesus. For the earliest faith community, which included disciples of the earthly Jesus, Jesus death and resurrection would have been not only the most memorable event of his fate, but also the event that marked the turn of the ages, beginning a new era in which sin and death had been surpassed, and righteousness and life were gifts of God through (Hultgren, 112).

The Masoretic Text

The Masoretic Text, commonly abbreviated **MT**, is the traditional Hebrew and Aramaic form of the Jewish Bible—the Tanakh—preserved by generations of Jewish scribes and scholars. It includes more than the biblical consonants. In its developed medieval form, it consists of four interrelated elements:

1. The Hebrew and Aramaic consonantal text
2. Written vowel signs
3. Cantillation or accent signs
4. The *Masorah*: technical notes intended to regulate and preserve the text

The word *Masorah* is associated with the idea of something “transmitted” or received as tradition. In its broadest sense, it describes the entire system by which the Hebrew Bible’s wording, spelling, pronunciation, accentuation, and public reading were preserved.

([Brill, *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*](#))

Who were the Masoretes?

The Masoretes were not the original authors of the biblical books. They were medieval Jewish scholars who inherited an already ancient consonantal text and worked to preserve its exact written form and traditional pronunciation.

Masoretic activity flourished approximately from the seventh through tenth centuries CE.

Important centers included:

- **Tiberias**, in the land of Israel
- **Jerusalem**
- **Babylonia**

Different systems of pronunciation and notation developed, but the **Tiberian system**, especially the tradition associated with the Ben Asher family, eventually became dominant. The resulting combination of consonants, Tiberian vowel signs, accents, and Masoretic notes became the standard written form of the Hebrew Bible. ([Brill, “Tiberian Reading Tradition”](#))

The Masoretes should not be imagined as freely rewriting the Bible. Their work was principally conservative: they recorded and regulated a text and reading tradition they had received.

The Masoretic preservation process

1. Preserving the consonantal text

The Hebrew Bible was originally transmitted primarily as a consonantal text. Although certain Hebrew letters could help indicate vowels, the complete system of written vowel points familiar from printed Hebrew Bibles was a later development.

By the Masoretic period, the consonantal form of the text was treated as highly stable. The Masoretes generally refrained from changing it, even when they believed a different word or pronunciation should be used in public reading.

This distinction appears most clearly in the system called:

- **Ketiv** — “what is written”

- **Qere** — “what is read”

The consonants of the *ketiv* remained in the biblical text. A marginal note supplied the consonants of the traditional *qere*, while vowel signs placed with the written word frequently indicated how the alternative reading was to be pronounced.

This system allowed the Masoretes to preserve two forms of information simultaneously: the inherited sacred consonantal text and the received reading tradition. It demonstrates their reluctance to “correct” the text by simply replacing its consonants.

2. Recording vowels

Because consonants alone may permit more than one pronunciation or grammatical interpretation, the Masoretes developed systems of written vowel signs. The Tiberian signs were placed mainly above and below the letters so that they did not replace or interrupt the inherited consonantal text.

The vowel points recorded:

- Which vowels should be pronounced
- Vowel length or quality
- The distinction between vocal and silent *shewa*
- The pronunciation of ambiguous consonants
- Certain grammatical and morphological distinctions

The vowel system was not merely a medieval guess about how Hebrew ought to sound. It recorded a living tradition of reading that had been transmitted orally, although scholars recognize that pronunciation traditions could develop over time.

3. Adding cantillation and accent signs

The Masoretes also supplied a highly developed system of accent signs, often called *te'amim*. These signs served several overlapping purposes:

- They guided the chanting of Scripture in public worship.
- They marked the stressed syllable of a word.
- They divided verses into clauses.
- They indicated the syntactic relationship between words and phrases.
- They helped interpreters determine how a sentence should be read.

Some accents are **conjunctive**, joining a word closely to what follows. Others are **disjunctive**, marking breaks of different strengths. The accents therefore function partly like punctuation, but they are considerably more complex than modern commas and periods.

Vocalization and accentuation preserved not only the letters of Scripture but also its traditional oral performance. A Masoretic manuscript was, in that sense, both a written text and a guide to how the text should sound.

4. Constructing the Masorah

The Masorah consists of specialized notes placed around the biblical text. These notes were usually written in abbreviated Hebrew or Aramaic.

They are commonly divided into:

Form	Location and function
Masorah parva or “small Masorah”	Brief notes beside the text, frequently identifying rare spellings, forms, or occurrences
Masorah magna or “large Masorah”	More extensive notes in the upper and lower margins, often expanding the abbreviated side notes
Masorah finalis	Lists or collections placed at the ends of biblical books or manuscripts

A Masoretic note might state that:

- A particular spelling appears only once.
- A word occurs a specific number of times.
- The same form occurs elsewhere with a different spelling.
- A word is written one way but traditionally read another.
- A letter is unusually large, small, suspended, or marked with dots.
- A passage forms the numerical or structural midpoint of a book.
- A section begins or ends at a particular location.

The Masorah was thus a kind of cross-referencing system, concordance, quality-control apparatus, and commentary on unusual textual features. The abbreviated *Masorah parva* and expanded *Masorah magna* frequently conveyed the same information at different levels of detail. ([David Marcus’s review of Yosef Ofer, *The Masora on Scripture and Its Methods*](#))

5. Counting and cross-checking

Jewish scribal tradition attached considerable importance to counting the letters, words, verses, and sections of Scripture. The Babylonian Talmud explains the term *soferim*—normally “scribes”—in relation to the practice of “counting” the letters and other units of the Torah. At the same time, the Talmud acknowledges uncertainty about some inherited counts, showing that this was an exacting human tradition rather than an infallible mechanical process. ([Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 30a](#))

Masoretic counts served several functions:

- Checking whether material had been omitted or duplicated
- Drawing attention to unusual forms
- Comparing one passage with its parallels
- Helping later scribes test the accuracy of a copy
- Preserving features that might otherwise be “normalized”

This did not mean that a scribe could detect every error merely by calculating a final letter total. Many Masoretic notes instead provided local checks: they identified a rare form and listed the other places where it occurred.

Producing a Masoretic Bible codex

A fully annotated Masoretic Bible was normally a **codex**—a bound book with leaves—not a synagogue Torah scroll. Its production could involve several specialized stages:

1. A scribe copied the consonantal biblical text onto prepared parchment.
2. The text was checked and corrected against a respected exemplar.
3. A specialist added vowel points.
4. Accent signs were supplied.
5. The small and large Masorah were copied into the margins.
6. Corrections, textual counts, and colophons were added.
7. The finished manuscript was rechecked.

These jobs were not necessarily performed by the same person. A consonantal scribe, vocalizer, accentuator, and Masoretic annotator could be different specialists. The work required both microscopic attention and extensive knowledge of grammar, pronunciation, biblical parallels, and Masoretic reference traditions.

One particularly important manuscript is the **Aleppo Codex**, produced in the tenth century and associated with Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. It was valued not only for its age but for the remarkable agreement among its consonantal text, vocalization, accentuation, and Masoretic notes. ([Israel Museum, “The Aleppo Codex”](#))

The **Leningrad Codex**, dated 1008/1009 CE, is the oldest complete dated codex of the Hebrew Bible. It forms the manuscript basis of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and the ongoing *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. ([Cambridge University Library](#))

Masoretic codices and ritual Torah scrolls

An important distinction must be maintained between a **Masoretic Bible codex** and a **Sefer Torah**; a Torah scroll prepared for synagogue use.

Masoretic codex	Ritual Torah scrolls
May contain all 24 books of the Tanakh	Contains the five books of the Torah
Written as a bound book	Written as a scroll
Includes vowels and cantillation signs	Normally contains consonants only
Includes marginal Masoretic notes	Does not include a Masoretic apparatus
Intended for study, reference, and reading instruction	Intended principally for public liturgical reading
Can contain decorative or scholarly marginal arrangements	Governed by specialized rules of ritual fitness
Many popular lists of “Masoretic copying rules”—prescribed parchment, black ink, ruled lines, ritual intention, and special treatment of the divine name—actually combine the work of the Masoretes with the later and broader halakhic tradition of producing sacred Torah scrolls . The two traditions overlap in their reverence for textual accuracy, but they should not be treated as identical.	

Ritual preparation and scribal sacredness

A ritual Torah scroll is handwritten by a trained scribe, a *Sofer*. Its preparation is governed by Jewish law concerning materials, letter formation, spacing, intention, correction, and the handling of divine names.

Materials

Traditionally, the scroll is written:

- On parchment prepared from the hide of an animal belonging to a permitted species
- With durable black ink prepared for sacred writing
- Using ruled guidelines
- In a recognized square Hebrew script
- In columns following established conventions

The parchment is prepared specifically for the sacred purpose of a Torah scroll. This reflects a broader principle that sacred objects should be produced with deliberate religious intention, not merely manufactured as ordinary books.

Writing from an exemplar

The scribe is expected to copy from an authorized exemplar rather than reproduce the text entirely from memory. Words may be pronounced before being written, and the scribe must maintain the correct order of letters.

Particular attention is given to:

- Exact letter shapes
- Crowns or ornamental strokes on designated letters
- Spaces between letters and words
- Open and closed paragraph divisions
- The special arrangement of poetic passages such as the Songs of the Sea and Moses

A malformed, missing, touching, or improperly separated letter may affect the ritual fitness of the scroll.

The divine name

The sacredness of the text becomes especially visible in the treatment of the divine name. Before writing a divine name, the scribe must act with specific intention. Once written, the name cannot simply be erased like an ordinary scribal mistake.

Some scribes adopted additional purity practices before writing the name. Scholarly treatment of the medieval laws cautions that these more stringent customs were admired but were not necessarily uniform requirements in every period or community. ([Hanna Liss, “Copying the Torah,” Brill](#))

Correction and invalidation

A completed Torah scroll must be examined carefully. Correctable mistakes may be repaired according to scribal law, but some errors can render a scroll temporarily or permanently unfit for public use. The object is not normally discarded as waste. Because it contains sacred writing and divine names, an unusable scroll is traditionally stored in a *genizah* or buried respectfully.

What “sacredness” meant in scribal practice

The sacredness of the biblical text did not mean that scribes believed parchment, ink, or handwriting magically prevented errors. The extensive systems of checking, correction, marginal notation, and scribal law presuppose that human error was possible.

Sacredness was expressed through disciplined restraint:

- The received consonantal text was not casually altered.
- Alternative readings were documented rather than silently substituted.
- Pronunciation was preserved alongside spelling.
- Unusual forms were retained rather than normalized.
- Divine names received special treatment.
- Damaged sacred manuscripts were not treated as ordinary refuse.
- Copying was understood as a religious vocation and an act of transmission.

The great accomplishment of the Masoretes was therefore not that they created the Hebrew Bible from nothing or produced manuscripts with no differences whatsoever. They constructed an extraordinarily detailed system for preserving the consonantal text, its oral reading, its musical and syntactical interpretation, and an accumulated body of observations about virtually every unusual feature.

The Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that textual forms closely related to the later Masoretic consonantal tradition existed more than a thousand years before the great medieval codices. They also preserve textual differences, showing that the earlier history of the Hebrew Bible was more diverse. The Masoretic achievement was the meticulous stabilization and documentation of one ancient textual tradition, not the elimination of all evidence that other forms had once circulated. ([Israel Antiquities Authority](#))

The New Testament canon

Another obvious test of authority for a book was its continuous acceptance and usage by the Church at large. This was, of course, based on the principle that a book that had enjoyed acceptance by many churches over a long period of time was in a stronger position than one accepted by only a few churches, and then only recently. Augustine's statement of this principle (see p. 237 above) was supplemented by Jerome who laid emphasis on the verdict of eminent and ancient authors. 'It does not matter', he declares in a letter written A.D. 414 to Dardanes, prefect of Gaul, 'who is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for in any case it is the work of a church-writer (*ecclesiastici viri*) and is constantly read in the Churches' (Epist. xxx). As the Latin Churches reject Hebrews, so the Greek Churches reject the Apocalypse, but Jerome himself accepts both on the ground that they are quoted by ancient writers as canonical (Metzger, 282).

How the New Testament collection developed

The New Testament emerged from several smaller collections:

- The four Gospels
- Acts
- Collections of Pauline letters
- Catholic or General Epistles
- Revelation

Paul's letters circulated in collections relatively early. The fourfold Gospel became established in the second century. The boundaries around books such as Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation remained disputed longer in some regions.

Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, distinguished among:

- **Recognized books**
- **Disputed but known books**
- **Rejected or spurious writings**
- Writings he considered heretical

That graded classification shows that books did not move immediately from “ordinary” to “canonical.” They could be widely valued, locally disputed, useful but noncanonical, or rejected.

Major criteria for New Testament canonicity

Criterion	Central question
Apostolicity	Was the writing connected to an apostle or the apostolic generation?
Antiquity	Did it originate near the formative period of Christianity?
Orthodoxy	Was its teaching consistent with the church's received rule of faith?

Criterion	Central question
Catholicity	Was it received broadly across geographically dispersed churches?
Liturgical use	Was it read publicly in Christian worship as Scripture?
Established authority	Was it consistently quoted, copied, taught, and interpreted as authoritative?
These criteria overlapped. No single criterion automatically guaranteed acceptance.	

1. Apostolicity

Apostolicity was one of the most important considerations. A book was more likely to be accepted if it was believed to have been written by:

- An apostle
- A close companion of an apostle
- Someone preserving reliable apostolic testimony

Thus, Mark was traditionally connected with Peter, and Luke–Acts with Paul’s circle. Apostolicity concerned a book’s relationship to authoritative testimony about Jesus, not merely whether an apostle’s name appeared in its title. Attribution alone was insufficient. Early Christians rejected writings bearing apostolic names when they judged the attribution false or the book late. The *Gospel of Peter*, *Acts of Paul*, and various apostolic apocalypses illustrate this problem. Modern historical conclusions about authorship do not always coincide with the judgments of ancient churches. The historical criterion concerns what early Christians believed about a work’s origins and connection with apostolic tradition.

Another test that was applied to a given book to determine whether it deserved to belong in the New Testament was apostolicity. When the writer of the Muratorian Fragment declares against the admission of the Shepherd of Hermas into the canon, he does so on the ground that it is too recent, and that it cannot find a place 'among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles'. In the case of Mark and Luke, the tradition of their association with the apostles Peter and Paul respectively was held to validate their writings (Metzger, 253).

2. Antiquity

A writing originating in or closely connected to the apostolic age had a stronger claim than one written generations later. Antiquity and apostolicity therefore reinforced each other. This helps explain why a book could be orthodox and spiritually valuable yet remain outside the New Testament. The *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, was read and respected by some Christians, but its relatively late date worked against apostolic status.

3. Orthodoxy or the “rule of faith”

A book’s teaching was compared with the basic faith Christians believed they had received from the apostles, including:

- One Creator God
- The identity and saving significance of Jesus Christ
- Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection
- Continuity between Israel's God and the God proclaimed by Jesus
- The expected resurrection and judgment
- Christian moral and communal teaching

A work that contradicted these convictions was unlikely to be received as Scripture by emerging catholic Christianity.

Orthodoxy was not simply imposed after the canon had formed. The relationship worked in both directions: received teaching helped communities assess books, while increasingly authoritative books helped define received teaching.

A basic prerequisite for canonicity was conformity to what was called the 'rule of faith' (ὁ κανὼν τῆς πίστεως, *regula fidei*), that is, the congruity of a given document with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative by the Church. Just as under the Old Testament the message of a prophet was to be tested not merely by the success of the predictions but by the agreement of the substance of the prophecy with the fundamentals of Israel's religion, so also under the New (Metzger, 252).

4. Catholicity or widespread reception

Catholicity means broad or universal reception, not specifically Roman Catholicism. A work read across many geographically separated churches had a stronger claim than one known only to a small sect or local community.

This criterion was flexible. Almost no book was literally used everywhere from the beginning. Revelation was strongly received in parts of the West but questioned in sections of the East. Hebrews was more readily accepted in the East than in parts of the West.

What mattered was developing, durable reception across the wider church. Cambridge's account cautions that catholicity was important but could not have meant immediate universal agreement. ([Cambridge University Press, "The New Testament Canon"](#))

Another obvious test of authority for a book was its continuous acceptance and usage by the Church at large. This was, of course, based on the principle that a book that had enjoyed acceptance by many churches over a long period of time was in a stronger position than one accepted by only a few churches, and then only recently. Augustine's statement of this principle (see p. 237 above) was supplemented by Jerome who laid emphasis on the verdict of eminent and ancient authors. 'It does not matter', he declares in a letter written A.D. 414 to Dardanes, prefect of Gaul, 'who is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for in any case it is the work of a church-writer (*ecclesiastici viri*) and is constantly read in the Churches' (Epist. xxx). As the Latin Churches reject Hebrews, so the Greek Churches reject the Apocalypse, but Jerome himself accepts both on the ground that they are quoted by ancient writers as canonical (Metzger, 253).

5. Liturgical reading

Books regularly read aloud in worship were effectively functioning as Scripture. Liturgical use demonstrated that a community trusted a writing to instruct the whole church. However, public reading did not automatically make a book canonical. Some churches read writings such as:

- 1 Clement
- The *Shepherd of Hermas*
- The *Didache*
- The *Apocalypse of Peter*

These could be considered edifying without being accorded the same authority as the Gospels or apostolic letters.

6. Continuous use and recognition

Frequency of copying, citation by respected teachers, translation, commentary, and inclusion in biblical manuscripts all contributed to a book's status.

No piece of evidence is decisive by itself:

- A quotation does not necessarily prove canonicity.
- Inclusion in a manuscript does not always mean equal authority.
- A church father's silence does not prove rejection.
- A disputed book could later become broadly accepted.

Canon formation is reconstructed from the cumulative evidence.

III. Why specific New Testament-era books were excluded

They were considered too late

Some writings originated too far from the apostolic generation to sustain a convincing apostolic claim.

Examples include:

- *Shepherd of Hermas*
- *Acts of Paul*
- Several later apostolic gospels and apocalypses

A late work might still be respected, but its date weakened its claim to preserve foundational apostolic testimony.

Their apostolic attribution was doubted

Numerous writings were composed under the names of apostles. Ancient readers did not accept all such claims at face value.

Serapion of Antioch, for example, initially permitted the *Gospel of Peter* to be read but reconsidered after examining its teaching and the community using it. The issue was not merely that the text carried Peter's name; the question was whether it genuinely represented apostolic teaching.

Their theology was judged inconsistent with received faith

Some writings presented views of creation, Christ, salvation, resurrection, or the human body that emerging catholic Christianity considered incompatible with apostolic teaching. Certain "Gnostic" or esoteric writings, for example, emphasized:

- Salvation through secret knowledge
- A sharp opposition between spirit and material creation
- Hierarchies of divine beings
- A Jesus who principally reveals hidden cosmological truths

The label "Gnostic" covers diverse movements and should not be applied indiscriminately. Nevertheless, theological incompatibility was an important reason some texts were rejected.

Their use was too local or sectarian

A work known only in a limited region or primarily used by a particular movement could not demonstrate broad ecclesial reception. Some noncanonical gospels may have been important to particular groups but never achieved the geographic and liturgical breadth of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

They were edifying but not foundational

A book could be theologically acceptable and useful without being treated as apostolic Scripture. This category included writings such as:

- The *Didache*
- 1 Clement
- The *Shepherd of Hermas*
- The letters of Ignatius
- The *Epistle of Barnabas*

Their exclusion was not necessarily condemnation. It often meant that churches distinguished later pastoral or devotional works from the foundational documents of the apostolic age. Scholarly introductions classify these as noncanonical writings while emphasizing that early Christians accorded them varying degrees of authority. ([Society of Biblical Literature, "Noncanonical Writings"](#))

Their genre or claims raised doubts

Apocalyptic writings were especially controversial because they claimed heavenly visions and could be used to support disputed teachings.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* was accepted or publicly read in some places but rejected in others. Eusebius notes that it lacked sufficient appeal in earlier ecclesiastical writers, while later evidence shows that certain Palestinian churches continued to read it. Its history illustrates how local use alone did not ensure eventual canonical status. ([Evidence collected in *Early Christian Writings*](#))

IV. Why some disputed books were eventually included

The same process that excluded some writings eventually favored books such as Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

Book	Principal historical difficulty
Hebrews	Anonymous authorship and uncertainty about Pauline connection
James	Limited early attestation in some regions and questions about apostolic identity
2 Peter	Questions about authorship, style, and limited early use
2–3 John	Brevity, limited circulation, and uncertain authorship
Jude	Use of traditions associated with 1 Enoch and the <i>Assumption of Moses</i>
Revelation	Disputes over interpretation, authorship, and use by controversial movements

They were ultimately included because their sustained use, perceived apostolic connections, doctrinal compatibility, and growing cross-regional reception outweighed the objections. Eusebius placed Jude and several other Catholic Epistles among books that were disputed but nevertheless known to many churches. This intermediate category shows that disagreement did not equal final rejection.

Extant Document Comparison

Comparison at a glance

Work or corpus	Approximate surviving witnesses	Earliest surviving witness	Approximate gap from composition
New Testament—Greek	Roughly 5,700–5,800 catalogued manuscripts	Small papyri from the 2nd century CE ; substantial papyri around 200 CE	Roughly 50–150 years for the earliest fragments
New Testament—ancient translations	More than 10,000 Latin , plus thousands of Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, etc.	Principally from the 4th century onward, though some versions originated earlier	Varies
Hebrew Bible/OT—Dead Sea Scrolls	About 200 biblical manuscripts among approximately 950 scroll manuscripts	3rd century BCE–1st century CE	Varies greatly by biblical book
Hebrew Bible—Masoretic tradition	Thousands of medieval manuscripts and fragments, but no single universally comparable count	Major codices from the 9th–11th centuries CE	Often more than 1,000 years from composition
Septuagint/Greek OT	Hundreds of substantial manuscripts and many additional fragments; totals depend heavily on what is counted	Fragments from the 2nd–1st centuries BCE ; major codices from the 4th–5th centuries CE	Varies by book
Homer's Iliad and Odyssey	About 300 medieval manuscripts of one or the other combined , plus numerous ancient papyrus fragments	Papyri from approximately the 3rd century BCE	Roughly 400–500 years from traditional composition
Plato	Approximately 200 medieval manuscripts , although coverage varies by dialogue	Principal manuscripts around the 9th century CE	Roughly 1,200 years
Tacitus, Annals and Histories	Different portions depend on a very small number of principal medieval manuscripts	Approximately the 9th–11th centuries CE	Roughly 800–1,000 years

Manuscript	Approximate date	Contents
P52	Commonly dated to the 2nd century	Small fragment of John 18
P46	Around 200 CE	Much of the Pauline collection
P66	Around 200 CE	Most of John
P75	Late 2nd or early 3rd century	Large portions of Luke and John
Codex Vaticanus	4th century	Most of the Greek Bible
Codex Sinaiticus	4th century	Earliest surviving complete New Testament

Work	Approximate surviving textual witnesses	Earliest surviving witness	Approximate chronological gap
Hebrew Bible/OT—Dead Sea Scrolls	About 200 biblical manuscripts , mostly fragmentary	3rd century BCE–1st century CE	Varies by book: approximately 50–1,000+ years
New Testament—Greek	About 5,700–5,800 catalogued manuscripts	2nd-century fragments; substantial manuscripts around 200 CE	Approximately 50–150 years for earliest fragments
New Testament—ancient versions	More than 10,000 Latin , plus thousands in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and other languages	Mostly 4th century and later	Approximately 200–350 years , though some translations originated earlier
Epic of Gilgamesh	Dozens of manuscripts represented by many tablets and fragments	Old Babylonian tablets from approximately the 18th century BCE	Some witnesses are only a few centuries after earlier forms; the textual tradition developed over more than 1,000 years
Egyptian Book of the Dead	Hundreds of papyri and other witnesses	From approximately the 16th century BCE onward	Essentially contemporary with the tradition's early development , though it evolved from earlier funerary texts
Homer, Iliad and Odyssey	About 300 medieval manuscripts combined , plus numerous ancient papyri	Papyri from approximately the 3rd century BCE	Approximately 400–500 years after conventional composition dates
Plato's works	Approximately 200–250 medieval manuscripts , unevenly distributed among dialogues	Principal complete witnesses from the 9th century CE; a few ancient fragments	Approximately 400–500 years to fragmentary evidence; 1,200 years to principal codices
Herodotus, Histories	Dozens of manuscripts; roughly eight especially important witnesses	Ancient papyrus fragments; principal codices from the 9th–10th centuries CE	Approximately 300–500 years to fragments; 1,300–1,400 years to principal codices
Thucydides, History	Roughly 100 medieval manuscripts , with a smaller group of principal witnesses	Ancient papyrus fragments; principal codices from the 9th–10th centuries	Approximately 300–500 years to fragments; 1,300 years to principal codices

Work	Approximate surviving textual witnesses	Earliest surviving witness	Approximate chronological gap
Caesar, Gallic War	More than 200 medieval manuscripts , depending on what is counted	Principal manuscripts from approximately the 9th–10th centuries CE	Approximately 900–1,000 years
Livy, History of Rome	Hundreds across different surviving portions	Fragmentary witness from the 4th century; most manuscripts are medieval	Approximately 300–400 years to the earliest fragment; longer for many books
Tacitus, Annals	Numerous later copies, but different sections depend heavily on two principal medieval manuscripts	9th and 11th centuries CE	Approximately 750–1,000 years
Tacitus, Histories	Later copies deriving mainly from one medieval textual tradition	Principal witness from the 11th century	Approximately 900–1,000 years
Lucretius, On the Nature of Things	More than 50 later manuscripts, principally reconstructed from two major codices	9th century CE	Approximately 900 years
Sophocles' plays	More than 100 medieval manuscripts containing some portion	Ancient papyri; principal codex from the 10th century CE	Several centuries to fragments; approximately 1,300–1,400 years to principal codex
Aeschylus' plays	Dozens of medieval manuscripts, with one especially important codex	Ancient fragments; principal codex around the 10th century	Several centuries to fragments; approximately 1,400 years to principal codex
Euripides' plays	Hundreds across different plays and textual groupings	Papyri beginning several centuries after composition; later medieval codices	Approximately 200–400 years to early fragments
Virgil's works	Hundreds of medieval manuscripts, plus important late-antique codices	Substantial codices and fragments from the 4th–5th centuries CE	Approximately 350–500 years

Work	Approximate surviving textual witnesses	Earliest surviving witness	Approximate chronological gap
Beowulf	One medieval manuscript	Around 1000 CE	Probably approximately 200–300 years , though the poem’s date is debated
Song of Roland	Approximately 10 manuscript witnesses in differing forms	Oxford manuscript, approximately 1100–1170 CE	Possibly 50–150 years , depending on the date assigned to composition
Chaucer, Canterbury Tales	Nearly 80–90 manuscripts , plus early printed editions	Manuscripts from the late 14th and early 15th centuries	Approximately 0–30 years
Dante, Divine Comedy	Nearly 800 manuscripts	Earliest surviving copies from the 1330s	Approximately 10–15 years
Shakespeare’s plays	No surviving authorial manuscript of an uncontested complete play; numerous early printed quartos and folios	Printed quartos beginning in 1594; First Folio in 1623	Some quartos appeared during Shakespeare’s lifetime ; First Folio 7 years after his death

God inspired

- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** — “All Scripture is inspired by God” and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training believers in righteousness. It equips God’s people for every good work.
- **2 Peter 1:20–21** — Prophecy did not originate from human will; men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** — The Thessalonians received the apostolic message “not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God.”

God’s Word is true and trustworthy

- **John 17:17** — “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”
- **Psalms 19:7** — “The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one’s life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy.”
- **Psalms 119:160** — “The entirety of your word is truth.”
- **Proverbs 30:5–6** — Every word of God is pure, and people are warned not to add to his words.
- **John 10:35** — Jesus declares that “the Scripture cannot be broken.”

God’s Word is necessary for spiritual life

- **Matthew 4:4** — “Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- **2 Timothy 3:15** — The sacred Scriptures give wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
- **Romans 10:17** — “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ.”
- **1 Peter 2:2** — Believers should desire the pure milk of the Word so that they may grow spiritually.

God’s Word is powerful

- **Hebrews 4:12** — “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword.”
- **Isaiah 55:10–11** — God’s Word does not return to him empty; it accomplishes what he intends.
- **Jeremiah 23:29** — God compares his Word to fire and to a hammer that pulverizes rock.
- **Psalms 119:11** — “I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you.”

God’s Word guides us

- **Psalms 119:105** — “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path.”
- **Psalms 119:130** — “The revelation of your words brings light and gives understanding to the inexperienced.”

- **Joshua 1:8** — God commands his people to meditate on his instruction continually and carefully obey it.
- **James 1:22** — “But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

God’s Word lasts forever

- **Isaiah 40:8** — “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever.”
- **Matthew 24:35** — “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”
- **Matthew 5:17–18** — Jesus affirms the continuing authority and fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures.
- **1 Peter 1:24–25** — Human life is temporary, “but the word of the Lord endures forever.”