

## *Proto-Xerox®*

In our study of the original writing of the Bible and its transmission through time to us today, we last discussed the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. God wrote the first five books of the Bible through Moses. Similarly, God spoke through other prophets, and He inspired some of them to write during the 1500 years before Jesus Christ came.

The original manuscripts of all 39 Old Testament books have long since been lost. This presents a crucial concern: With no original documents, not even fragments, we must reconstruct the text from the oldest manuscripts available. Extensive research and close analysis of many ancient manuscript discoveries have yielded much information about the reliability of the repeatedly copied Old Testament.

The ancient scholars very carefully copied the Scriptures onto papyrus — a grass paper that was attached and rolled into scrolls. In later times, animal skins called parchment were used. And, some manuscript copies have even been found written on very thin sheets of copper. The average scroll was 20-30 feet long, with some over 100 feet. Usually writing was limited to one side of the sheet only. It was not until the Middle Ages that advances in paper came to replace parchment.

To preserve the integrity of the Bible it had to be copied onto new scrolls again and again through the centuries. When a copy would get worn or damaged, it would be destroyed and a new one made. The undertaking was assigned to devout workmen known as scribes. In the absence of any form of printing press, scribes were highly trained professionals who were absolutely committed to accuracy and quality in their copying work. The religious scribes who copied the Scriptures reverently believed these scrolls were the very Word of God, so they went to extreme measures to ensure the accuracy of their work. If even the slightest error was

made, the entire piece would be destroyed and they would begin again. The scribes would stand at their desks in the scriptorium, or copy room, and work long hours with dedicated focus. It often took several years to complete one new copy of the Hebrew Bible.

For centuries, until well after the time of Christ, the Hebrew Bible was written with an alphabet made up of 22 consonants and no vowels. The texts were all in capital letters, with no punctuation or paragraphs. Vowels were only implied through the spoken use of the language. In the later centuries, when Hebrew became an archaic and no-longer-spoken language, the scribes developed a system of marking, called vowel points, to help with exact pronunciation and precise grammatical form.

In modern times, when old copies of the Hebrew Bible were compared to their Latin copies and the Greek Septuagint there was always overwhelming agreement. The Jews and the Christians have always had great confidence that the copies of the O.T. are consistent with what Moses and the other prophets wrote so long ago.

But, there's been a problem. Skeptics have questioned the accuracy of the Old Testament copies because of its great antiquity. Their questions had some weight due the fact that we had New Testament copies that were 1000 years older than the oldest Old Testament copies we had. This lack of older Hebrew texts persistently challenged some people's confidence in the accuracy of the copying process. That all changed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**One last point—a very important point!** In 1947, a shepherd boy found a large collection of old jars filled with ancient scrolls in a group of caves near the Dead Sea. In the years since the discovery of this vast assortment of ancient Hebrew texts, much research has gone into analyzing them.

For one thing, it's been determined that they date from around the time of Christ. This makes them 1000 years older than any other Hebrew copies we had before. Second, when they were compared to the manuscripts we did have, we discovered that they agreed to 99+%. Astounding! Two sets of copies, one thousand years apart, total agreement.

The scribes did it! 3500 years after Moses wrote, we still have the Word of God as delivered to him. We can have absolute confidence that when we read the Bible today, we have the very words that God inspired the original authors to write.

*Scott*