

# Searching for the “Original” Bible

*Do the Dead Sea Scrolls Help?*

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**WHEN ANCIENT BIBLICAL TEXTS DIFFER** from one another, which one should we believe?

More specifically, in answering this question how helpful are those ancient scrolls of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Prior to their discovery, scholars looked mainly to two texts to answer the question posed at the beginning of this article—the traditional Hebrew text known as the Masoretic Text (or MT) which was finalized by Jewish scholars in about 1000 C.E. and a Greek translation of the Hebrew text called the Septuagint (or LXX). This Greek translation of the Pentateuch (Torah) was made for the Jews of Alexandria in the beginning of the third century B.C.E. According to tradition, 72 or 70 wise men translated the Torah into Greek in 72 days, seated in 36 separate cells, and lo and behold, they

produced identical Greek translations, supposedly testifying to the accuracy of their translation. The other books were translated in the course of the next century.

Then, almost 70 years ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves near the ancient site of Qumran. Some of these Hebrew texts have more in common with the Greek Septuagint (LXX) than with the traditional Hebrew text (MT). This shows that the Greek translators must have held in their hands some Hebrew scrolls that resembled the Hebrew texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The main question I wish to raise here is how important are the Hebrew texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls for elucidating the text of the Hebrew Bible. Are they equally as trustworthy as the other two sources that we use all the time, that is, the

**HOME OF THE SCROLLS.** Many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves adjacent to the isolated settlement of Qumran near the Dead Sea. Other scroll caves were further away. Several inkwells found at Qumran suggest that many of the scrolls were penned in what has been called Qumran’s scriptorium. The scrolls were originally rolled and closed with leather thongs and tabs; some of these fasteners, not yet used, were found in a cave adjacent to the site, further connecting the scrolls to the site.

Masoretic Text and the Septuagint?

I believe that the answer to this question will inevitably be subjective. In asking which among two or more readings (that is, differences in manuscripts) reflect an original or more acceptable text than the others we are embarking on a subjective search that can be crowned only by an equally

subjective answer that may be contested by other scholars. In the end, it is subjective. Sometimes there does seem to be a “correct” answer, but often there is no “right” answer.

Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

**On which day did God rest after the creation? (Genesis 2:4)**

The statement in Genesis 2:4 is clear: Upon finishing the creation activity in six days, God rested on the seventh day. Most translations like the New Revised Standard Version and English Standard Version render the Hebrew text literally: “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done (and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done”). This has been the usual translation in English ever since the King

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