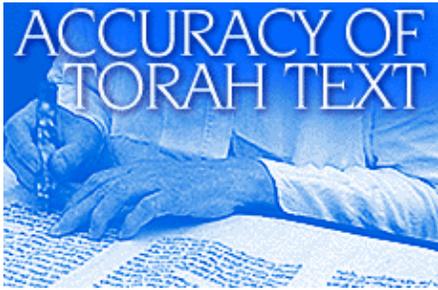


Accuracy of The Torah Text



The great success of Jewish tradition is the meticulous transmission of the Torah text. But actually how accurate is it?

How do we know that the Torah we have today is the same text given on Mount Sinai?

The Torah was originally dictated from God to Moses, letter for letter. From there, the Midrash (Devarim Rabba 9:4) tells us:

Before his death, Moses wrote 13 Torah Scrolls. Twelve of these were distributed to each of the 12 Tribes. The 13th was placed in the Ark of the Covenant (with the Tablets). If anyone would come and attempt to rewrite or falsify the Torah, the one in the Ark would "testify" against him. (Likewise, if he had access to the scroll in the Ark and tried to falsify it, the distributed copies would "testify" against him.)

How were the new scrolls verified? An authentic "proof text" was always kept in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, against which all other scrolls would be checked. Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Sages would periodically perform global checks to weed out any scribal errors.

WRITING A TORAH SCROLL

To eliminate any chance of human error, the Talmud enumerates more than 20 factors mandatory for a Torah scroll to be considered "kosher." This is the Torah's built-in security system. Should any one of these factors be lacking, it does not possess the sanctity of a Torah scroll, and is not to be used for a public Torah reading.

The meticulous process of hand-copying a scroll takes about 2,000 hours (a full-time job for one year). Throughout the centuries, Jewish scribes have adhered to the following guidelines:

- A Torah Scroll is disqualified if even a single letter is added.
- A Torah Scroll is disqualified if even a single letter is deleted.
- The scribe must be a learned, pious Jew, who has undergone special training and certification.
- All materials (parchment, ink, quill) must conform to strict specifications, and be prepared specifically for the purpose of writing a Torah Scroll.
- The scribe may not write even one letter into a Torah Scroll by heart. Rather, he must have a second, kosher scroll opened before him at all times.
- The scribe must pronounce every word out loud before copying it from the correct text.
- Every letter must have sufficient white space surrounding it. If one letter touched another in any spot, it invalidates the entire scroll.
- If a single letter was so marred that it cannot be read at all, or resembles another letter (whether the defect is in the writing, or is due to a hole, tear or smudge), this invalidates the entire scroll. Each letter must be sufficiently

legible so that even an ordinary schoolchild could distinguish it from other, similar letters.

- The scribe must put precise space between words, so that one word will not look like two words, or two words look like one word.
- The scribe must not alter the design of the sections, and must conform to particular line-lengths and paragraph configurations.
- A Torah Scroll in which any mistake has been found cannot be used, and a decision regarding its restoration must be made within 30 days, or it must be buried.

SUCCESS OF THE SYSTEM

Maintaining the accuracy of any document as ancient and as large as the Torah is very challenging even under the best of circumstances.

But consider that throughout history, Jewish communities were subject to widespread persecutions and exile. Over the last 2,000 years, Jews have been spread to the four corners of the world, from Yemen to Poland, from Australia to Alaska.

Other historical factors make the accurate transmission of the Torah all the more difficult. For example, the destruction of the Temple 1,900 years ago saw the dissolution of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish central authority which traditionally would unify the Jewish people in case of any disagreements.

Let's investigate the facts as we have them today. If we collect the oldest Torah scrolls and compare them, we can see if any garbling exists, and if so, how much.

How many letters are there in the Torah? 304,805 letters (or approximately 79,000 words).

If you were to guess, how many letters of these 304,805 do you think are in question? (Most people guess anywhere from 25 to 1,000 letters.)

The fact is, that after all the trials and tribulations, communal dislocations and persecutions, only the Yemenite Torah scrolls contain any difference from the rest of world Jewry. For hundreds of years, the Yemenite community was not part of the global checking system, and a total of nine letter-differences are found in their scrolls.

These are all spelling differences. In no case do they change the meaning of the word. For example, how would you spell the word "color?" In America, it spelled C-O-L-O-R. But in England, it's spelled with a "u," C-O-L-O-U-R.

Such is the nature of the few spelling differences between Torah scrolls today. The results over thousands of years are remarkable!

TORAH COMPARED TO OTHER TEXTS

But how impressive is this compared to other similar documents, such as the Christian Bible? (Both books contain approximately the same number of words.)

First of all, which would you expect to be more successful in preserving the accuracy of a text?

The Christian Bible. For several reasons.

First, the Christian Bible is about 1,700 years younger than the Torah. Second, the Christians haven't gone through nearly as much exile and dislocation as the Jews. Third, Christianity has always had a central authority (the Vatican) to ensure the accuracy of their text.

What are the results? The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, a book written to prove the validity of the New Testament, says: "A study of 150 Greek [manuscripts] of the Gospel of Luke has revealed more than 30,000 different readings... It is safe to say that there is not one sentence in the New Testament in which the [manuscript] is wholly uniform."

Other scholars report there are some 200,000 variants in the existing manuscripts of the New Testament, representing about 400 variant readings which cause doubt about textual meaning; 50 of these are of great significance.

The Torah has nine spelling variants—with absolutely no effect on the meaning of the words. The Christian Bible has over 200,000 variants and in 400 instances the variants change the meaning of the text.

The point of course is not to denigrate Christianity. Rather, this comparison demonstrates the remarkable accuracy of the Jewish transmission of Torah.

THE TORAH AND THE UNIVERSE

There is a famous story in the Talmud (Eruvin 13a):

When Rabbi Meir came to Rabbi Yishmael to learn Torah, he was asked:

“What is your profession, my son?”

“I am a scribe,” was the reply.

He said to me: “My son, be careful with your work, for it is the work of Heaven. Should you perhaps omit one letter or add one letter—it could result that you destroy the entire world

Rebbe Meir remarked: “Needless to say, I do not err by omitting or adding (letters)... but I am even concerned for a fly—lest it come and alight upon the right-hand corner of a dalet and erase it, thereby rendering it a reish

The famed commentator Rashi (11th century France) offers examples of how the addition or deletion of a single letter can lead to a blasphemous or heretical reading of the Torah—i.e. a mistake that could destroy the entire world.

Maharsha (16th century Poland) explains there is a danger even if the error does not affect the meaning of the word. This is because of a Kabbalistic tradition that the letters of the Torah form the sacred Names of God written as “black fire upon white fire.” These letters were employed by God in creating the world, and it is through them that He sustains it. The deletion of even one letter of this sustaining force therefore threatens the existence of the world.

Carefully guarding the words of the Torah has been a Jewish priority throughout the centuries.

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