

## Session 3

### Can We Trust the Text We Have?

A biblical and historically grounded answer

#### A. The Bible's Own Claim About God Preserving His Word

Christians do not believe in the New Testament merely because of textual criticism, manuscript counts, or academic arguments—though those are helpful. We believe in a God who **speaks, guides, and preserves**:

- **Isaiah 40:8** – “The word of our God endures forever.”
- **Psalm 119:89** – “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.”
- **Matthew 5:18** – Not even “the smallest letter” will pass away until all is fulfilled.

Historically, Christians copied Scripture because they believed **God entrusted it to them** (Romans 3:2). So, preservation is not an accident of history; it is part of God’s redemptive plan.

#### B. Manuscript Evidence: Broad, Early, Abundant

Three simple points anyone can grasp:

##### 1. The New Testament is the best-attested text in the entire ancient world.

- Over **5,500+ Greek manuscripts**, plus **10,000+ Latin**, and thousands more in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, Ethiopic, Arabic, and others.
- No other ancient text comes close.

##### 2. The manuscripts are early.

- Some fragments date to within **40–60 years** of the originals (e.g., P52, P90).
- Complete New Testament codices appear by the mid-300s (Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus).

##### 3. Variants exist, but they do not change Christian doctrine.

Textual variants are:

- Mostly spelling differences
- Word-order shifts
- Minor copyist slips
- A few longer additions (Mark 16:9–20; John 7:53–8:11), openly discussed in modern translations

**No core Christian belief—Trinity, Deity of Christ, Resurrection, Salvation—depends on a disputed text. This is a huge difference from the Qur’anic textual history your Muslim friends may bring up.**

**Bottom line:** We do not have a corrupt Bible. We have an **embarrassment of riches**.

## C. Consistency Across Geography

Even before Christianity became legal, manuscripts across:

- Egypt
- Syria
- Asia Minor
- Italy
- North Africa

...all show the *same* New Testament writings. No “region” produced a different Christianity. This argues for **early, stable preservation** rather than later invention.

## D. Early Church Quotations Confirm the Text

Between 95 AD and 325 AD:

- Clement of Rome
- Ignatius
- Polycarp
- Justin Martyr
- Irenaeus
- Tertullian
- Origen

Quote so much of the New Testament that **we can reproduce the entire text from their citations** (except for a few verses). This shows that the same books were used widely and consistently.

## Question: Why Were Some NT Books Questioned? Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, Revelation?

Answer: **The early church did not accept books quickly or blindly.**

The fact that some were slower to be recognized **shows careful testing**, not confusion.

Here's the biblical and historical reasoning for each:

### A. Hebrews

**Why questioned?** Because the author's name is not given.

**Why accepted?**

- Deeply rooted in Old Testament theology
- Used widely in the East from early times
- Quoted as Scripture by Clement (c. 95 AD) and others
- The church recognized **apostolic authority in its teaching**, even if authorship was debated (Paul? Barnabas? Apollos?).

**It was the message in the Hebrews, not the signature, that convinced believers.**

## B. James

### Why questioned?

- Slow spread from Jerusalem after AD 62
- Misunderstanding of “faith without works” by some communities
- Brief letter, not circulated widely at first

### Why accepted?

- Rooted in Jesus’ teaching (echoes of the Sermon on the Mount everywhere)
- Used early by Christians in the East
- Recognized as the teaching of **James, the Lord’s brother**, a key leader (Acts 15)

## C. 2 Peter

### Why questioned?

- Stylistic difference from 1 Peter
- Late widespread circulation
- Counterfeit “Petrine” writings existed, so the church was cautious

### Why accepted?

- Strong internal claims to Peter’s authorship (1:14–16)
- Eyewitness testimony to the Transfiguration
- Affirmed in major early lists (e.g., Origen, Athanasius)

Most scholars today see stylistic differences as explainable: Peter used different secretaries for the two letters.

## D. 2 and 3 John

### Why questioned?

- Very short
- Written to small house churches
- Some communities hadn’t seen them early

### Why accepted?

- Clear Johannine style
- Early usage in Asia Minor
- Affirmed by the same churches that preserved the Gospel of John

## E. Jude

### Why questioned?

- Quotes 1 Enoch—some worried this implied Enoch was Scripture
- Short letter

### Why accepted?

- Jude identifies himself as the brother of James
- Strong apostolic teaching line
- The fact that Jude quotes Enoch does not make Enoch inspired; Paul quotes pagan poets (Acts 17:28), but that does not canonize them.

## F. Revelation

### Why questioned?

- Highly symbolic
- Misused by fringe groups
- Some difficulty in early interpretation

**Why accepted?**

- Strong early testimony (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus)
- Explicit claim to be a prophetic revelation from Jesus
- Deeply rooted in Old Testament imagery

**Takeaway:**

**These books were recognized because of their apostolic authority, early use, orthodox message, and the Holy Spirit's witness in the churches.**

**The slow recognition shows care, not corruption.**

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**What About the Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary, and Other Apocryphal Works?**

**A. They were written later — long after the apostles.**

- Gospel of Thomas: c. 150 AD
- Gospel of Peter: mid–2nd century
- Gospel of Mary: late 2nd century
- Gospel of Judas: mid–2nd century

These are **not first-century eyewitness accounts**. They appeared after the New Testament was already established.

**B. They come from fringe groups, not the mainstream church.**

Most of these writings come from:

- Gnostic teachers
- Docetists
- Sectarian groups with secret or mystical teachings

They do not reflect Jewish background, first-century culture, or apostolic doctrine.

**C. Their picture of Jesus contradicts Scripture.**

Gnostic writings teach a Jesus who:

- Does not truly die
- Does not truly rise bodily
- Brings secret knowledge, not salvation
- Treats the material world as evil
- Rejects the Old Testament God

This is the opposite of biblical faith.

**D. The early church rejected them immediately — not centuries later.**

Church fathers from the 2nd century onward:

- Irenaeus
- Origen
- Tertullian
- Hippolytus
- Eusebius

... all identified these writings as **false, late, and inconsistent with apostolic teaching.**  
They were never candidates for the canon.

#### **E. Even secular academics agree**

Scholars such as:

- Bart Ehrman (non-Christian)
- Elaine Pagels
- Helmut Koester
- John Dominic Crossan

... note that these works reflect later theology, not what the first Christians believed.

**This is not only the Christian view — it is the academic consensus.**

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#### **Let's be reminded:**

- **Examination and Questions are a good way to learn:**
  - Luke invites examination (Luke 1:1–4).
  - Paul welcomes scrutiny (Acts 17:11).
  - John appeals to eyewitness evidence (1 John 1:1–3).
- **Show that the process was careful, not chaotic**  
“Early Christians tested everything — authorship, message, consistency with the Old Testament, apostolic connection, widespread acceptance.”

#### **The three pillars**

- (1) God preserved His Word**
- (2) The historical evidence supports that confidence**
- (3) Alternative writings are later and do not match apostolic teaching**

“The same Lord who preserved His Word invites us to listen to it, test it, and trust it. The evidence is strong, but the Spirit is the One who opens our hearts.”



## Response to a Comment:

**'Someone led me to think that the Masoretic Text was altered in a way to deny the divinity of Jesus.'**

We are living in a strange time, so it is essential to check. Let's check whether such a view is based on facts. (Those who are only interested in having the Bottom Line should check Numbers 5 on pages 2 and 3).

### 1. What is the Masoretic Text — and what was its purpose?

The Masoretic Text (MT) is the **standardized Hebrew text of the Jewish Scriptures**, carefully preserved by Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes (c. 6th–10th centuries CE). Their work **did not involve rewriting theology** but **preserving an already-received consonantal text** by:

- Adding vowel points
- Adding accent marks
- Recording marginal notes to prevent scribal errors

**Crucial point:** The **consonantal Hebrew text** (the letters themselves) **already existed centuries before Christianity**. The Masoretes **did not invent or rewrite it**, nor could they “remove Jesus,” whose name does **not appear explicitly** in the Hebrew Scriptures to begin with.

### 2. The decisive evidence: the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls (3rd century BCE – 1st century CE) **predate both Christianity and the Masoretes**. Among them is the **Great Isaiah Scroll**, dated around 125 BCE.

#### What do they show?

When the Isaiah Scroll is compared with the Masoretic Text:

- **Over 95% agreement**
- Differences are:
  - spelling variants
  - word order
  - minor grammatical forms
- **No doctrinal deletions**
- **No removal of messianic or divine themes**

Most importantly:

**Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6, Isaiah 53**, and other passages Christians associate with Jesus **are already present** in the Isaiah Scroll — centuries before the Masoretic tradition.

This **completely disproves** the claim that Jews later edited the Hebrew Bible to “remove Jesus or his divinity.”

### 3. A key misunderstanding: prophecy vs. explicit naming

Christians do **not** claim that the Hebrew Bible explicitly names Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, we affirm that:

- The Old Testament contains **messianic prophecies**
- These prophecies are **fulfilled** in Jesus
- This fulfillment is recognized **retrospectively**, not by altering the text

Jewish readers interpret these passages differently, but the **differences in interpretation are not due to textual corruption**.

#### 4. Why the accusation itself collapses historically

If Jews had altered the text to remove Jesus:

- Why do **pre-Christian manuscripts** already match the Masoretic Text?
- Why do **Greek Jewish translations** like the Septuagint (3rd–2nd century BCE) preserve the same messianic passages?
- Why would Jews preserve texts Christians use *against them* (e.g., Isaiah 53)?

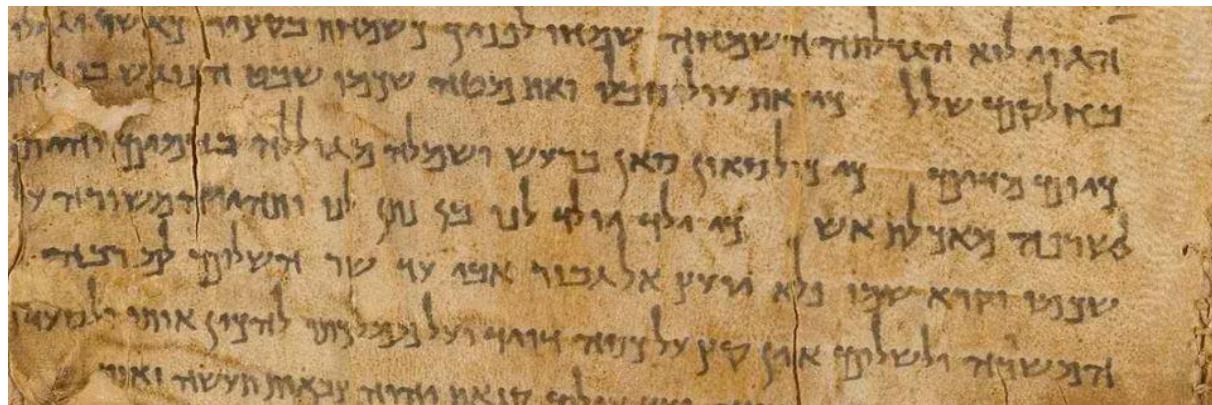
There is **no manuscript trail, no historical record, and no textual evidence** for such an alteration.

#### 5. Bottom Line

The Masoretic Text was not edited to remove Jesus or his divinity. The Hebrew Bible text already existed centuries before Christianity. The Dead Sea Scrolls — especially the Isaiah Scroll — prove that the text we have today is essentially the same as the text before Jesus. Christians see Jesus as the fulfillment of these texts, not as someone whose name was removed from them. The corruption claim is **not supported by manuscript evidence, textual criticism, or history**. It is a **theological accusation**, not a scholarly one.

#### What does Isaiah 9:6 actually say in the Masoretic Text?

The Hebrew text of Isaiah 9:6 (9:5 in Hebrew verse numbering) reads: **אל גבּור** ('El Gibbōr). This phrase appears **explicitly** in the Masoretic Text and is translated literally as: "Mighty God"



This is **not a Christian translation** — it is a direct lexical rendering from standard Hebrew:

- **אל** ('El) = God (used of Yahweh throughout the Hebrew Bible)
- **גבּור** (gibbōr) = mighty, warrior, powerful

There is **no variant reading in the Masoretic Text that removes or weakens this phrase**.

#### 2. The decisive cross-check: the Dead Sea Scrolls

The **Great Isaiah Scroll** (c. 125 BCE) contains **Isaiah 9:6**, and it reads **the same key titles** found in the Masoretic Text, including **'El Gibbōr**.

- This manuscript predates Christianity by over a century
- It predates the Masoretes by nearly a millennium
- It confirms the MT wording

So if someone claims the Masoretic Text removed “Mighty God,” the response is simple: **The phrase already existed centuries before the Masoretic tradition began.**

### **3. An internal biblical check most critics overlook**

The phrase **'El Gibbōr** appears again in **Isaiah 10:21**, where it refers **unambiguously to Yahweh Himself**: “A remnant will return... to **El Gibbōr**.”

No Jewish translator disputes that **Isaiah 10:21 refers to God**. Therefore:

- If **'El Gibbōr = God** in **Isaiah 10:21**
- It **cannot suddenly mean “mere hero”** in **Isaiah 9:6** without special pleading

This is **internal evidence from the Hebrew Bible**, not Christian theology.

### **4. Where the confusion actually comes from**

Some Jewish and Muslim polemical sources argue that **Isaiah 9:6** should be read as “God is mighty” rather than “Mighty God”. But this is interpretive re-punctuation, not a different text.

Important clarification:

- **Ancient Hebrew had no punctuation**
- Word order alone does **not erase meaning**
- The consonantal text remains unchanged

This is **a disagreement over interpretation**, not corruption.

### **5. Summary**

**Isaiah 9:6** in the Masoretic Text explicitly calls the child ‘El Gibbor,’ which means ‘Mighty God.’ This wording is confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls more than a century before Jesus. The text was not changed. Jews and Christians interpret the verse differently, but the Hebrew wording itself is not in dispute.”

### **The Bottom Line**

- The Masoretic Text **does include “Mighty God.”**
- The Dead Sea Scrolls **confirm it**
- No manuscript evidence supports the claim of removal or corruption
- The issue is **interpretation**, not **textual alteration**