

What manuscript was used to write the Pentateuch

It's important to clarify that there isn't a single "manuscript used to write the Pentateuch" in the sense of one original, complete autograph that scholars consult today. The Pentateuch, like the rest of the Hebrew Bible, was written and transmitted over a very long period, and the process involved multiple stages and types of documents.

Here's a breakdown of what scholars understand about the transmission and the oldest extant manuscripts related to the Pentateuch:

1. Original Composition (Hypothetical "Autographs"):

- **No original manuscripts (autographs) exist.** This is true for virtually all ancient texts, not just the Bible. The materials used (papyrus, leather, etc.) were perishable.¹
- **Early writing materials:** As discussed previously, if Moses or early scribes wrote parts of the Pentateuch in the Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age, they would have used materials like:
 - **Stone tablets:** For short, important inscriptions (like the Ten Commandments).
 - **Papyrus scrolls:** Common in Egypt, relatively fragile.
 - **Leather/Parchment scrolls:** Animal skins, more durable, likely the primary material for longer texts that needed to be preserved.²
 - **Ostraca (pottery shards):** Used for notes, letters, or short records, but not for entire books.³

2. Transmission and Early Versions:

- **Copying:** Texts were meticulously copied by scribes over centuries.⁴ This process was highly precise in Jewish tradition, with strict rules to minimize errors.⁵
- **Oral Tradition:** Before and alongside written transmission, oral traditions played a significant role in preserving and transmitting the stories and laws.
- **Different Textual Families:** Over time, regional variations in the text developed. The most prominent "textual families" or traditions that inform our understanding of the Pentateuch include:
 - **Proto-Masoretic Text (MT):** This lineage eventually became the standard Hebrew text for Judaism.
 - **Samaritan Pentateuch (SP):** The sacred text of the Samaritans, written in their own script. It has differences from the Masoretic Text, some minor, some more substantial.⁶ It represents an ancient textual tradition.
 - **Proto-Septuagint (LXX):** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, begun in Alexandria, Egypt, around the 3rd century BCE. It was translated from Hebrew texts that sometimes differed from the proto-Masoretic tradition.

3. Oldest Extant Manuscripts:

While no "original" manuscript exists, we have ancient copies and fragments that allow scholars to reconstruct the text:

- **Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran, 3rd Century BCE - 1st Century CE):** These are the most significant discovery for understanding the early text of the Hebrew Bible. Found in caves near the Dead Sea, they include fragments of almost every book of the Old Testament, including many from the Pentateuch. They show that the text was remarkably stable even over a millennium. Some Dead Sea Scrolls fragments align with the Proto-Masoretic text, others with the Proto-Samaritan, and some with the Proto-Septuagint, and some are "independent."⁷ This collection provides our earliest direct evidence of the Hebrew text.
 - **Ketef Hinnom Scrolls (late 7th or early 6th century BCE):** These are tiny silver amulets found in Jerusalem containing a portion of the Priestly Blessing from Numbers 6.⁸ While not a Pentateuch manuscript in the full sense, they are the *oldest surviving biblical texts* discovered to date.

- **Samaritan Pentateuch Manuscripts:** While the tradition of the Samaritan Pentateuch is ancient, the oldest *extant complete manuscripts* of the Samaritan Pentateuch generally date to the Middle Ages (11th century CE onward), though some Dead Sea Scrolls fragments bear a "pre-Samaritan" text type.
- **Codex Leningradensis (c. 1008 CE):** This is the **oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible** (including the entire Pentateuch) that exists today.⁹ It is a Masoretic Text and serves as the base text for most modern critical editions of the Hebrew Bible (like the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia).
- **Other Masoretic Manuscripts (from the Cairo Geniza, etc.):** Thousands of fragments and manuscripts found in places like the Cairo Geniza (dating from around the 4th century CE onwards) provide further evidence for the Masoretic textual tradition.
- **Greek Septuagint Codices (4th-5th Century CE):**
 - **Codex Vaticanus (4th century CE):** One of the earliest and most important complete manuscripts of the Greek Bible (including the Septuagint Old Testament).¹⁰
 - **Codex Sinaiticus (4th century CE):** Another extremely important complete Greek Bible.
 - **Codex Alexandrinus (5th century CE):** Another major Greek Bible manuscript.

In summary: There wasn't one "manuscript" used to write the Pentateuch. Instead, the text developed over time, being copied and transmitted, leading to various textual traditions.¹¹ Our understanding of the Pentateuch's text relies on analyzing and comparing the various ancient manuscripts we do possess, with the Dead Sea Scrolls providing the earliest direct Hebrew evidence, and the Masoretic Text (exemplified by Codex Leningradensis) representing the standard Jewish tradition that has been meticulously preserved.