7

The Transmission of the New Testament

In the age of classical antiquity, scribes served a crucial function in the production of literary and nonliterary works. They were employed within Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, and the Greco-Roman Empire. Professional scribes, who were trained craftsman, were commonly employed in the commercial book trade or for a library or government post. Many of these professional copyists had expertise in fine bookhand or calligraphy. Still other scribes were amateur copyists or even educated slaves. Customarily, scribes were paid not only by the length of the text, but also by the type of hand used, which affected the quality of the product. Thus, the work of professional scribes commanded higher pay but also produced higher-quality work, which became very important in the explicability of historical texts.

Scribes were responsible for copying such items as books, petitions, receipts, letters, and deeds. Nevertheless their greatest achievement of the last 2,000 years is seen in the craftsmanship of the reproduction of the New Testament manuscripts.

Scribal Function and Practices

A scribe was a skilled copyist. Scribes were responsible for hand-writing both a new copy or first draft of a manuscript, and also a *fair copy*. A new copy was produced from direct oral dictation by an author or lector. As the lector spoke clearly and at a moderate pace, the scribe, sometimes called a secretary, would copy every word until the piece was completed. After that point, communication between the author and the scribe was critical. The author would examine the text and make revisions as needed, and then the scribe would create a new copy called a fair copy, or final draft. In the case of a New Testament manuscript, a fair copy would be made for the author, such as Paul, and also for the congregation to which the letter or book would be read aloud. Finally, a copy would be made available for others to copy; in this way the manuscript was published. The work of scribes would continue as additional copies would be made by various copyists. Since there was no notion of copyright in the ancient world, scribes could even make a copy for themselves.

The practice of the scribe was to sit on the ground or upon a small bench or stool with legs crossed, with the bottom of his tunic extended across his knees. This provided a flat surface on which to lay his scroll, which was held in position with his left hand. These scrolls were most commonly made of papyrus, which was utilized from about 2100 BC, or parchment made from animal skin, which began to be used later in the fourth century AD. Parchment was popular for the creation of codices (ancient books, as opposed to scrolls) and is referenced in Revelation 5:1, 2 John 12, and 2 Timothy 4:13.

After taking up position, the scribe would then take a pen and penknife (3 John 13), dip the pen in ink contained in an inkhorn, and commence writing. The ink used for papyrus was black, carbon-based, and made from soot, water, and gum. The ink used for parchment could be made from nut galls, water, iron, and gum arabic. As the ink on the text aged, it became a brownish-rust color. At the ending of the fourth century AD this kind of ink was also used on papyrus. Other materials employed by scribes included a ruler, a straight edge, a thin lead disk, compasses, a sponge, and a piece of pumice stone. With pen and scroll in hand, the scribe would sit ready under the guiding voice of the lector.

Papyrus stalks are a familiar sight to Egyptians on the Nile River. Manuscripts written on papyrus are rare. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The papyrus would be lined (much like our standard notebook paper) by using the horizontal fibers of the sheet as a guide. On parchment, scribes would mark the sheet and then draw both horizontal and two or more vertical lines to signify the margins. One of two types of handwriting, bookhand and ruling hand, was employed. These and many other styles of handwriting can factor in significantly to the dating of a document (see below). Bookhand was a more reformed style, consisting of carefully written upright letters separate from each other, penned in a more fastidious fashion. Ruling hand, or "documentary hand," was executed more quickly and less conscientiously. It was a cursive script and a type of shorthand used mainly for everyday purposes. In this form the use of *ligatures* (joins between letters) was possible, which enabled the scribe to keep his pen to the scroll between letters. Even with ruling hand, the careful penmanship of the scribe allowed for the greater preservation of the text.

In order for a document to be committed to print adequately, the process of dictation to pen had to be done purposefully and slowly. A literary work might have taken a number of days to dictate and then weeks to complete. The time actually used in copying the script might have been between five to six hours a day. In addition to the time

spent writing the script, more time was needed to mix the ink, make ready the papyrus, rest the hand, and sharpen the pen nib from time to time. Then editing and writing of the fair copy (or copies) completed the laborious task. The careful writing of Paul's letter to the Roman church by Tertius (Romans 16:22) may have taken two or three weeks or more from the time of dictation to the completion of the final draft (fair copy).

Practical Adjustments

New Testament manuscripts were mostly transcribed by Christians themselves. Due to the value they themselves placed upon the Scriptures they were committed to this craft and became faithful stewards of furthering the gospel to the "ends of the earth." In early times, these manuscripts were not commercially produced but rather copied and shared among small Christian communities and congregations. It is conjectured that many of these scribes actually were not professionals because clear bookhand is found infrequently in documents prior to AD 400; small churches may have not had the means to afford professionals.

Although fine bookhand is not evidenced in early Christian texts, Christians were still found to be fastidious in hand. Warnings from the authors, such as Paul himself, encouraged the faithful and accurate hand of the scribe. Galatians 1:6-9 is only one of the examples of such a warning. Here Paul declares accursed by God anyone who would alter his gospel. In fact Christian scribes made their mark upon paleographic history by developing what has been called a type of "reformed documentary" hand of writing. It was a more reformed ruling hand script because it used fewer ligatures and more precise letter formation than a regular documentary hand.

Christian manuscripts were written primarily for practical use and less for aesthetic purposes. They were orally shared and circulated among Christian congregations, in which a limited number of people enjoyed literacy. In fact, to facilitate public reading, copyists of Christian manuscripts would write fewer lines and letters to the line than was normal in practice.

Another practice distinct to Christian scribes was the scribal convention of the *nomina sacra*. The *nomina sacra* convention created a form of contraction out of a religious word. It abated the written form of these words by contracting the letters or syllables found in the middle of the word and connecting the first and last letters or syllables with a line. It is evident that the mostly illiterate audience to which these Christian manuscripts were addressed was considered by the scribes. One common *nomina sacra* was to use the Greek *chi* (which looks like our English *X*), the first letter of the name *Christ* in Greek, with one of the following letters (for example, the Greek letter for *s* or *r*) and placing a line over the top. For example, "X-mas" means *Christmas*, and this form is most likely how the earliest Christians would have written it! They liked to abbreviate, which saved space and costly writing materials.

The Scriptorium and Other Later Developments

As the church attained sanction from the state in the fourth century AD, the use of the scriptorium became more frequent. The scriptorium was a place used for the

production of documents. Rather than dictating a literary work to one scribe, in a scriptorium a lector could dictate the work from the exemplar text to several scribes simultaneously, thus producing many copies. Scribes would sit around the lector, and each would copy the same text as the author read aloud.

Although the scriptorium satisfied the desire for multiple copies in a short amount of time, it also opened the door to more distractions, which sometimes resulted in technical mistakes. A simple cough or sneeze by one of the scribes could interfere with the dictation of the script. Thus, the *corrector* held the invaluable position of examining the scripts for error. After the work was copied, the corrector of the scriptorium would inspect the finished work. The corrector would then correct these mistakes with different ink or secondary placing as needed. Also, during this time (fourth century) commercial book manufacturers were more commonly used to copy New Testament scripts and would use scriptoria to do so. In the scriptorium, scribes were paid by the number of lines written. In AD 301, scribes could receive between 20 and 25 denarii per 100 lines, depending upon the speed and quality of their handiwork.

The dawning of the Byzantine period brought even greater development in the transcribing of the New Testament manuscripts. It was in this time period that monks became beneficiaries of the scribal practice. Unlike copyists of the earlier days of classical antiquity, these scribes did not need the role of the lector in transcribing documents. Although the scriptoria were still in existence, many monks preferred to work privately in their own cells using the exemplar text as their master copy and archetype. Monks closely adhered to the ideology of Jewish scribes found in Deuteronomy 12:32; they were purposefully diligent not to "add" or "take away" from the text.

Scribal practices among monks included several tasks. They would engage in reading, memorizing, and repeating small portions of the text before actually committing the words to its written form. Colophons were notes written by scribes and found at the end of books, which expressed among other things relief from the laborious task. Sometimes colophons would even attest to the physical discomfort of hand or body experienced by the scribe himself.

Although monks primarily copied only for themselves or a benefactor to the monastery, pressure for quality was not only inward—from the importance they themselves bestowed upon the texts—but also from the outside, with rules and punishments enforced within the monastery. Monks were chastised with various penances for making mistakes in the text or showing even simple signs of negligence, such as not handling writing tools responsibly. Although the task of transcribing could prove to be a laborious one, the work of scribes has proved to be invaluable in the preserving of the New Testament manuscripts.

Dating Scribal Handwriting

The dating of New Testament manuscripts has yielded astonishing results due to the collection of paleographic evidence. Although no original manuscripts (*autographa*) have been preserved, New Testament texts have been dated to within 30 to 300 hundred years of the time the autographs were written. Paleographers are specialized historians

who study ancient texts, including the over 5,800 manuscripts that make up the New Testament. According to these historians, surviving manuscripts of the New Testament date between the early second and the fifteenth centuries AD. This is remarkably close in time to the autographs, considering that the original documents of the New Testament were most likely written between about 50 AD and 95 AD. Some whole Gospels and epistles are preserved in manuscripts that were written within 100 to 150 years from the time of their composition. And the vast majority of the New Testament text was preserved within documents dating less than 200 years from the original.

This find is remarkable when compared to the situation of most other ancient books, which date to from 500 to 1500 years after the autograph (for example, the copies of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, or Livy). Only a very limited number of manuscripts of these secular works actually exist, and only a few date from the second century AD. In a word, the New Testament manuscripts are the most well-attested and well-supported texts from the ancient world, based on their quantity, quality, and early dates.

How have these documents been dated? A closer look at dating methods leads us to a further understanding not only of the reliability of the New Testament documents, but also of the methods themselves.

Several methods are employed by historians to date the handwriting of a script. They include comparing the handwriting in a text with the handwriting in scripts that are already dated. In fact, within the lamentations of various scribes within their colophons at the end of texts, we find actual dates noting the completion of the transcription. Various archaeological finds of both religious and nonreligious works may also include dating that can be used as a reference point for paleographers.

But for many scholars, the examination of the development of script hands is used to clearly distinguish dating. Since scribes for the most part were consistent in their writing style while alive, we can assume that a script in their hand would date to within their working life period of approximately fifty years. As paleographers examine the development of hands, they compare the handwriting style in the text, including how the letters are formed and the angle of the writing. They also analyze the nuances in the handwriting of the edits found abutting the text and their correlations to each other. Organizing the information gained from these observations can denote the handiwork of scribes and allow for a simple chronology.

One can even learn the specificities of individual scribes and their work. This information becomes invaluable; scholars have used the handwriting, theology, and vocabulary of scribes to discern variants in texts. Thus, the dating of the hands of the scribe can prove to be very useful in laying a foundation for the sequencing of scribal trademarks. Historians can attribute common practices of the hands to distinct time periods and places of origin. Perhaps one of the greatest areas of study in early manuscripts exists within the handiwork of the Alexandrian scribes. Alexandrian scriptoral training marks the diligent hand of a scribe who was careful to copy word by word accurately, holding to his belief in the holy inspiration of the text.

The progression of handwriting practices and styles has over time become its own subject of study. Distinguishing time period, skill, and author, it has proved to be a

fundamental tool for dating literary compositions. Since different periods of history bore their own chirographic (handwriting) trademarks, examination of these trademarks within the manuscript assists in determining its chronology. Evolution of handwriting can prove to be gradual in nature, but significant changes within the shapes of letters and the script as a whole are found within general ranges of time. An examination of these changes within their posited periods aids paleographers in matching the handwriting on the manuscript to the appropriate time period.

Progression of Styles

Among the earliest manuscripts are the ancient texts dated within the first and second century AD. These writings show evidence of a style of handwriting used within the second and first centuries BC to the third century AD. This was a decorated style using a book-hand script. In particular, it commanded the use of small details on the ends of lettering, known as serifs. The style of writing in the early centuries of the church was somewhat cumbersome.

Then, extending as far as the fifth century AD, we find a particular style of handwriting known for its emphatic form. This form is referred to as the *biblical majuscule* (or *biblical uncial*) style. It employed the use of elongated letters that were written separate from each other and in capitalized form. Additionally, the horizontal sloping strokes of letters were periodically accompanied by thick dots or completed with serifs. Scribes also employed the use of *scriptio continua*. This script was a connected form that did not provide spaces between words or sentences. Although the name can be deceiving, the biblical uncial style of writing is prevalent in both religious and nonreligious literature.

As the uncial bookhand thrived, an introduction of larger and annular ("forming a ring") letters is found in the sixth and seventh centuries. It is in this time period that one can see the lengthening of the central shaft in the Greek letter *omega* as well. As time went on, circular letters changed to become more oval and narrow, setting the stage for the next succession of forms.

In the ninth century a significant change marked paleographic history. Scribal work acquired a drastically new form and changed over its hand from the *majuscule* (uncial) to the cursive *minuscule* script. Its special form of cursive, as seen in its name, was smaller and more compact. It was a style of book hand that allowed scribes to transcribe more speedily while using letters that were well-formed. There was a brief overlapping of majuscule and minuscule writing. Majuscule writing continued on into the tenth and eleventh centuries AD but was primarily used for liturgical books. Minuscule handwriting was so useful that it continued well into the fifteenth century, until it was eventually replaced in the Reformation age by the introduction of the movable-type printing press.

It was also during this time period (900 to 1300) that a greater number and variety of ligatures were employed. (As mentioned, ligatures allowed the scribe to connect letters without lifting the pen, by a simple stroke.) Other noteworthy considerations include the differences in *breathing marks* (dashes used to aid in reading and pronunciation) according to time periods. For example, the breathing marks used prior to the

eleventh century are squarer than the annular breathing marks applied after the fourteenth century AD.

Paleographic Categorization of Manuscripts

A broader and more general categorization of manuscripts according to chronology is made by paleographers as follows:

1. papyri (documents written on material made from papyrus plant)
2. uncial (majuscule) script
3. minuscule script
4. lectionaries

Note that within these broadly accepted time frames, two of the four categories are distinguished entirely by the style of handwriting found in texts. The diligent craftsmanship of the copyists has certainly made its mark in the history of New Testament manuscripts.[1]

New Testament Manuscript Distribution by Century and Manuscript Type

Cent.	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	Totals
Papyri	1	31	20	5	9	13	3												85
Uncial		3	16	44	60	29	27	47	18	1									245
Min.			1	1	3	4	22	13	125	436	586	569	535	248	138	44	16	4	2745
Lect.								116	143	241	490	298	313	168	194	73	11		2147

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press. This arrangement is an adaptation by Darrell L. Bock of material from Kurt and Barbara Aland, *Der Text des Neuen Testaments: Einführung in die wissenschaftlichen Ausgaben sowie in Theorie und Praxis der modernen Textcritik* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1982), 90.*

Evaluating Variations in Greek Manuscripts

The gathering of New Testament manuscripts has resulted in a quantity of over 5,800 Greek manuscripts that contain part or all of the New Testament. By their numbers alone, copies of the New Testament stand apart from other ancient writings by a

* There is an apparent contradiction in the totals summarized in the Aland list (5,222 items) and the evidence presented by Bruce Metzger (5,366 items). Aland and Aland seem to have excluded from their list manuscripts whose century is uncertain, whereas Metzger, UBS, and Nestle (26th ed.) include all catalogued papyri and uncials but incorporate selected minuscule and lectionary evidence into their lists. More recently, Dr. Daniel Wallace, head of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM), who is the leading evangelical scholar on the topic, has discovered a number of new manuscripts. According to Dr. Wallace, the total Greek New Testament manuscript count is approximately 5,805; of these about 5,600 can be located and identified.

significant proportion. If it weren't for the rapid multiplication of the New Testament writings within the first century AD, it is highly unlikely that we would have our New Testament today. As discussed, many of these scribes were not only manual laborers but Christians devoted to the proclamation of the gospel message. Though these scribes seem to have been quite devoted to their craft, it is no surprise that mistakes were sometimes made, producing *variants*, or deviations, from the original or accepted text in the manuscripts themselves. Consequently, the more scribes committed themselves to the task of copying the New Testament, the more variants crept into the texts.

New Testament critic Bart Ehrman says,

> Scholars differ significantly in their estimates—some say there are 200,000 variants known, some say 300,000, some say 400,000 or more! We do not know for sure because, despite impressive developments in computer technology, no one has yet been able to count them all…. There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament. [2]

But even Ehrman admits that "far and away the most changes are results of mistakes, pure and simple—slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another."[3]

Unintentional Errors

Variants are typically categorized into two groups: intentional and unintentional errors. Textual critics (those who analyze the text in a scholarly manner) argue that most variants found in the New Testament manuscripts are the result of the latter. We will review these kinds of variants first but only in accordance with the contextual manner to which they were made.

Errors of the ear. Historians are careful to recognize that in the early church era, the scribe or scribes would sit, or sometimes stand, at the feet of the lector and copy down word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase an orally delivered message. Obviously, in this process, simple *errors of the ear* will inevitably result. These simple and unintentional errors can be seen in passages like Matthew 19:24 where some manuscripts read *kamilos*—"a rope"—rather than the logical meaning found in other manuscripts: *kamelos*—"a camel."

Much of the confusion is inherent in the similarities in Greek vowels. For example the Greek vowels iota, eta, and epsilon sounded the same or similar when pronounced, as did the vowels omicron and omega. Over time, confusion arose between the long vowel omega and the short vowel omicron, leading to such variants as *echomen* and *echōmen.* A similar mistake in English can be seen in the accidental interchanging of "their" for "there" and "here" for "hear." Many of these errors could have been easily overlooked by a simple scanning of the Greek text, but they become obvious with a closer reading of the script.

Scribal fatigue. As mentioned earlier, the ancient scribe worked rather uneasily, hunched over with scroll stretched out between his knees, one hand holding the script in place and the other used for the various tools surrounding him (pen, inkhorn, sponge, and so on). The laborious process combined with the demanding body posture allowed for mental and physical fatigue that could eventually affect the craftsmanship of the copyist. Due to such conditions, *errors of eye*, *writing, memory,* and *judgment* were introduced into the text.

Errors of the eye. Variants betraying *errors of the eye* can be seen in the omission of text, repetition of text, transposition (reversing the order of words or letters), and simple misspelling. Sometimes the astigmatic eye would lose its bearings in the text and mistake one group of letters or words for another. This error of the eye would then cause the scribe to skip over the reading and then the writing of text on the manuscript. This mistake is known as *homoeoteleuton*. The repeating of the same word or letter was also a common error of the eye, known as *dittography*. An example of this can be seen in some minuscule scripts that say, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus, Barabbas or Jesus?" In this passage, the word *Jesus* is repeated twice. The technical term for this is *metathesis*. In addition, there are mistakes of transposition. For example, some occurrences within a manuscript will read "Jesus" and others read "Jeuss." Understanding the context of the passages easily solves this problem. Lastly, simple misspellings, abbreviations, or scribal insertions also make up errors of the eye. Such a mistake is seen when the scribe joins words together that should be separated. For example, in English the phrase "Jesus is now here" can easily be written as "Jesus is nowhere."

Errors of writing. When the Christian church was being persecuted, attempts may have been made to duplicate the Scriptures more speedily. Simple *errors of writing* occurred as hasty and unintelligible handwriting met the scroll. If a copyist wrote imprecisely, he would lay the foundation for future error of sight or judgment when a future scribe discerned the text. Then, as exhaustion set in upon the mind, *errors of memory* would most often arise. When considering the multistep process of scribal monks, it is surprising that these errors are not more numerous. Occasionally a copyist might forget the exact word in a passage and substitute a synonym. This is exemplified in passages like Ephesians 5:9. Here the Byzantine manuscripts read "the fruit of the Spirit," but P^{46} (from the Chester Beatty papyri) reads "fruit of light."

Errors of judgment make up the remainder of the unintentional causes of the variants found in New Testament manuscripts. Marginal notes sometimes made their way into the scriptural text as the scribe misjudged them to be part of the text itself. This could very well have been the case in Romans 8:1 where manuscripts vary in adding or omitting the last part of the verse. Critics conjecture as to whether this ending was actually a marginal annotation. Most of the errors of judgment can be attributed simply to poor eyesight or dim lighting—body posture obstructing the light and weakened vision of

the fatigued eye. Note that such unintentional errors are not necessarily the result of a scribe's lackadaisical approach to his work, but rather stem from the physical and mental frailties of the human faculties. Such errors are common to man, but are especially obvious within their contextual frame. To the textual critic, these simple errors may easily "pop off the page" and take little effort to correct.

Intentional Errors

Finally, we come to the second category of variants: errors committed intentionally or knowingly by the scribe. Intentional errors demand greater effort upon the part of the textual critic. These errors make up the minority of the variant readings. Although natural to do so, it is wrong to assume such errors are the product of bad intentions. Taking into account that most of the New Testament scribes were Christians who valued the Scriptures as of supreme importance, it is more likely to assume that many intentional variants are the result of a scribe trying to emphasize the meaning of a word or words rather than its syntax (grammatical structure). The intentional changes can be categorized into 1) harmonizational, 2) historical or factual, 3) grammatical or linguistical, 4) doctrinal, 5) conflational, and 6) liturgical.

Harmonizational changes were made by scribes who sought to bring "harmony" to various scriptures by "correcting" them to match each other. It is possible that such harmonization could often be a result of the scribe mistakenly assuming the text to be in error when actually it was not. Many of the harmonizational changes made can be observed in the synoptic Gospels, as scribes attempted to harmonize accounts that were portrayed differently by each author. For example, the Luke 11:2-4 version of the Lord's Prayer was transcribed to the more accepted version found in Matthew 6:9-13.

Historical or factual changes also make up some of the intentional changes. Scribes thought they were actually correcting the mistake of a previous copyist. It is obvious that this is the case in Revelation 1:5, where a copyist changed *lusanti* to *lousanti,* thus changing the word from "loosed" to "washed" in regards to our sins. Other scribes may have attempted to change a word to update a name of a city in order to eliminate confusion of history or geography. For example, variants of the geographical terms *Gergesenes, Gadarenes, Gerasenes* are found in three of the Gospels (Luke 8:26; Matthew 8:28; Mark 5:1) describing the place where Jesus healed the demoniac. These were altered to read "near the Sea of Galilee with tombs and a steep bank nearby" for fear of writing a wrong location.

Grammatical or linguistic changes. As time and tradition impeded upon the linguistic nuances or stylistic idiosyncrasies of the scribe or his culture, again, modifications were made. These grammatical and linguistic changes included the spelling of proper names, verb forms, and other syntactical "corrections." Similar examples can be seen in "old" English literature, where modern versions may replace "shall" with "will" or "which" with "whom."

Doctrinal changes. The most intentional of all changes have been the result of the scribes' pursuit of orthodoxy, which resulted in doctrinal changes. The interchanging of "son" and "God" in the variant readings of John 1:18 is an example of such. Here, there is "only begotten son" rather than "only begotten God." Mark 9:29 is an example of such a doctrinal change as well. The addition of "fasting" to "prayer" reflects a change on the part of the scribe that may not have been so intentionally influenced by orthodoxy. It must be emphasized here, though, that making doctrinal changes was a very rare practice by a small group of scribes and was no way mainstream. In discerning the motivation or cause of a change, *intentional* doctrinal alterations of the text should only be considered when nothing else makes sense.

Conflational changes. Christian scribes devoted to the task of copying the Scriptures in their entirety may have sometimes been too fastidious in their inclusion of material. Critics point out that, for fear of omission, sometimes they included too much. Conflational changes may be among the prime examples of this overzealousness. Conflation occurs when two or more variants are joined into one reading. A good example is seen in Mark 9:49, where some texts include "And every sacrifice will be salted with salt." It is quite probable that the words "salted with salt" are the result of a conflational error, but they do not actually change the meaning of the text.

Liturgical changes make up the last group of intentional changes. These include minor changes that were made to follow ecclesiastical usage. An example may be seen in the doxology of the Lord's Prayer, found in Matthew 6:13. Liturgical changes are widely exemplified in the lectionaries. Such changes occurred in places like Luke 2:41, where the names "Joseph and Mary" were likely inserted in place of "his parents." These minor changes were made in order to establish or summarize the earlier context.

Considering the vast collection of New Testament manuscripts, one is overcome by the lofty credibility this mass of evidence demonstrates. The preservation of so great a mass of bibliographical material has ensured that even the book of Revelation is supported by over 300 Greek manuscripts. The greater the amount of documentation, the greater degree to which variants are exposed and errors expunged. Though most of the variants found within the New Testament documents comprise insignificant grammatical errors, textual critics have worked relentlessly over the centuries to correct all error and have successfully provided us with the Bible we possess today.

8

The Manuscripts of the New Testament

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament represented in our English translations is the result of examination of thousands of biblical manuscripts by translators. The process of decision-making resulted in what translators thought most likely represented the original documents. That is, by studying the multitude of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, textual critics are able to arrive at these original autographs with a high degree of certainty.

Witnesses to the New Testament text may also be contained in ancient translations of the New Testament, called "versions." The Church Fathers also include portions of the Greek New Testament in their numerous quotations in various documents.

Typically, textual critics of the New Testament distinguish manuscripts on the basis of the material out of which they are made. The two most common materials are papyrus, an ancient form of paper made from the papyrus plant; and vellum, a material prepared from cowhide, lambskin, or goatskin, which was usually used for the first codices—ancient books.

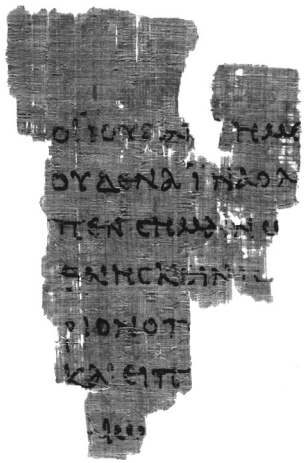
When approaching the New Testament documents, it is important to remember that textual critics group these various manuscripts into different types or families (a grouping of manuscripts based on geographical location and similar textual characteristics, such as having the same readings of particular verses in a given family). Most believe the *Alexandrian text-type* (associated with Alexandria, Egypt) to be the oldest and closest to the original autographs. But distinct textual families also emerged in Caesarea in Israel (the *Caesarean* text-type), Rome (the *Western* text-type), and Syria (the *Syrian* text-type, also known as the *Byzantine* text-type, the *Koine* text-type, or the *majority text*).

In the descriptions below, we mention in which family each papyrus or codex is categorized. Such an assessment actually helps to demonstrate the reliability of the New Testament because it shows that we have representations of the text of the New Testament that are geographically diverse at an early date in the history of the church. In other words, the manuscripts spread across the world so quickly that it is almost impossible that some kind of conspiracy to change the text occurred.

New Testament Papyri

The papyri are widely considered to be the earliest and by some the most significant of the documents of the Greek New Testament. This does not have to do as much with their being written on papyrus as it does their early date. Since papyrus is the earliest form of writing material on which we find the New Testament, scholars typically assume that if the text is written on papyrus it is an earlier text. While this is true the vast majority of the time, we do have New Testament documents written on papyrus as late as the seventh century AD.

The chart on pages 118–122 gives a list of significant New Testament papyri manuscripts and catalog designations, arranged by date. In addition, appendix A provides analysis and description of more than 60 of these manuscripts. Of special note in proving biblical reliability are the two famous papyri discussed below: the John Rylands Fragment and the Chester Beatty II papyri.



The John Rylands Fragment is the oldest New Testament manuscript in the world, dating between AD 117 and 138. The early date of this manuscript confirms that all the original Gospels were written in the first century AD, well within the life spans of eyewitnesses to the events they record. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The John Rylands Fragment

The Rylands fragment (P^{52}, Gr.P.457) has the distinct honor of being the oldest copy of any piece of the New Testament. The Alexandrian fragment is of John's Gospel, containing part of the five verses from John 18:31-33,37-38. It was discovered in Egypt among the Oxyrhynchus collection and dates back to the early days of the second century AD, most likely between 117 and 138 or even earlier. It is composed on papyrus and its origin is clearly from a codex, thus indicating to many paleographers that New Testament codices did indeed exist in the first century AD.

The uncovering of this fragment has been significant in supporting the earlier dating of the Gospel of John to within the first century AD. For centuries, the historical antiquity of John was questioned. After Bruno Bauer's influential scholarship on the Gospel of John in the eighteenth century, many (for example, C.K. Barrett and Rudolf Bultmann) located the origin of the Gospel in the second century AD, long after the apostle John had died. With the discovery of the John Rylands fragment, that position is no longer tenable and has been widely rejected.

This is a great example of how the discovery of a manuscript can influence critical views of the actual textual content and background of the documents of the New Testament themselves. There is actually a great deal of irony related to this discovery. A papyrus piece of the book of the New Testament said to have been written latest in history—John—is now the earliest fragment of the New

Testament we possess. This small piece of the Gospel of John is no insignificant fragment; it contains Jesus' discussion with Pilate on the nature of truth. It contains parts of both Pilate's question, "What is truth?" and Jesus' remark, "The truth shall set you free." It's almost as if this discovery is a partial answer to that question—at least in response to what used to be a prevailing critical view regarding John's Gospel.

The Chester Beatty II Papyri

The Chester Beatty II Papyri (P^{46}/P.Mich.Inv.6238) are dated to approximately AD 250. This is an excellent papyrus codex, demonstrating the duplication of an early-dated exemplar text. Although portions of this book have been lost (2 Thessalonians and parts of Romans and 1 Thessalonians), it still boasts Hebrews and the Pauline epistles of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians. All of these books are embraced within the surviving 86 leaves of 11 by 6.5 inches, which are gathered in a single quire (collection of leaves, or *signature* in modern terminology). The text is large, with some scribal nuances of style. The original, without its lost pieces, was 104 pages of mostly Alexandrian and some Western text-type. There are 71 agreements and in contrast only 17 disagreements that make up the 88 units of variation in the text. Overall the textual fidelity of the scribal hand is admirable.

This folio from the Chester Beatty Papyri (P^{46}) contains 2 Corinthians 11:33–12:9. (Photo PD-Art.)

This document is extremely important to proving biblical reliability because it provides us not only with one of the earliest copies of the Pauline letters, but also with evidence of a mini-canon of Paul's literature. This indicates that Paul's letters were extant and circulating from an early date, and also that they were being put together very early into a single collection.

As mentioned earlier, more than 60 New Testament papyri manuscripts are described and analyzed in appendix A.

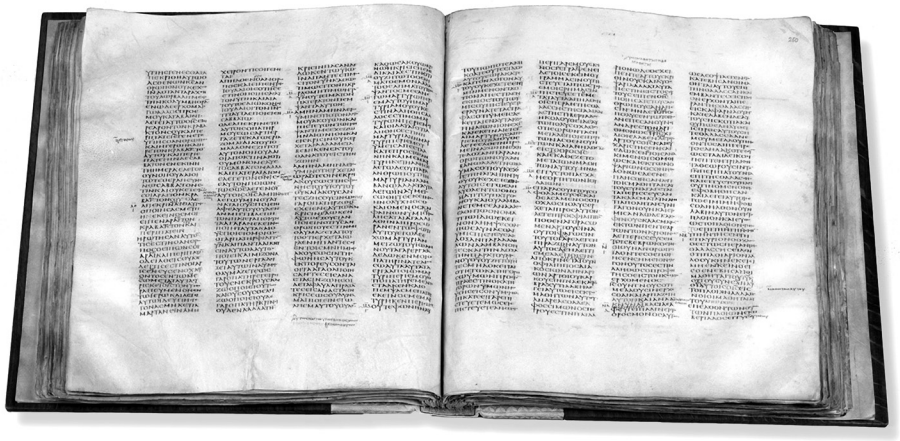
New Testament Codices

Despite the literary culture of their time, early Christians preferred the codex form over the scroll. In fact, it was a preference particular to Christian Scriptures and books. Almost the entire collection of Christian texts from the third and fourth century AD are in the codex form: parchment or vellum bound into a book or pamphlet form rather than a scroll. The codex, likely less expensive than the scroll, allowed for more text, easier reference and transport, and greater accessibility. It is no wonder that it became the preferred choice for the New Testament manuscripts. The codices certainly provide us with the most comprehensive collections of New Testament manuscripts.

New Testament Manuscript Codices

I (01). Codex Sinaiticus (aleph), discovered in the St. Catherine Monastery of Mount Sinai, is debatably the most critical and valuable manuscript of the New Testament. Dating to the middle of the fourth century AD, this vellum codex embodies all of the New Testament with the exception of a few verses (Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53–8:11) and the greater half of the Old Testament, as well as parts of the Apocrypha. The Alexandrian text is remarkably accurate, with limited misspellings and omissions. Large, dignified uncials take up 364½ double-sided pages, mostly in a four-column format. The story of its discovery is most captivating. It is said that 43 of its vellum leaves were rescued from the flames when they were recognized by scholar Constantin von Tischendorf among the waste for kindling the fire lying in a basket. It beautifully displays the hands of three scribes trained in the biblical uncial style.

Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest surviving Greek manuscript of the entire Bible. It is one of the most important texts used to study the Septuagint and the New Testament along with two other early Christian documents it contains, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. The highly revered artifact was produced in the southeastern Mediterranean region. Written on parchment, it originally contained 743 leaves, or 1,486 pages. It is the oldest surviving complete New Testament and is one of the two oldest manuscripts of the entire Bible.



The Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest complete New Testament written in Greek and dating to approximately AD 350. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The codex was written on animal skin in black and red metallic-based ink. Its text is Greek; several Arabic marginal notes were added later. Of its 1,486 original pages, only approximately 822 remain. As for the structure of the text, there are, as mentioned, four columns per page, though only two columns in the poetic and wisdom literature.

Codex Sinaiticus is currently located in four different locations, with the majority of

the text in London's British Library. The complete New Testament and portions of the Old Testament manuscripts are dispersed among Leipzig University Library, St. Petersburg National Library of Russia, and Sinai Monastery of St. Catherine. The fourth century AD was an important time period for Christianity in terms of its development, the preservation of the Scriptures, and the development of this codex, which serves as a witness to this period in Christianity's history.

The codex was copied, then revised and corrected, by a team of scribes who were very skilled. It is not exactly clear where it was written, but scholars believe it was most likely either Caesarea or Egypt. The Old Testament portion contains the 48 books of the Greek canon of the Septuagint. The New Testament contains the complete 27 books of the canon with the addition of the early Christian writings of the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. The size of the pages of the codex is the largest of any surviving Greek biblical manuscript, and they employ some of the thinnest parchment that was used.

The text of the Sinaiticus is unique in terms of the variations that are found in it, just as in any other manuscript. The changes found in the text are mostly accidentals, although a very few of them are intentional on the part of the scribes. Study of the manuscript has been very important for the field of textual criticism. Knowledge of the ancient traditions of scribal copying and transmission of ancient texts can be gained through thorough study of it. One can also examine this text in an effort to identify the oldest recoverable wording and gain understanding of how early Christians viewed and interpreted the Scriptures.

At the time Constantin von Tischendorf discovered the Codex Sinaiticus in the mid nineteenth century it was located at St. Catherine's Monastery at the base of Mount Sinai, Egypt. The codex is the oldest surviving Greek manuscript of the entire Bible dating to AD 350.

The codex underwent rigorous corrections for many years, until about AD 600. About 23,000 revisions were made, with the majority made by six correctors, who corrected things like faded letters, spelling, and inserting omitted texts and deleting texts, in addition to making modifications in how the text was broken across lines.

There is a gap in information about the history of Codex Sinaiticus down to the eighteenth century AD. It is not for certain exactly how much the manuscript was used and in what capacity. There is evidence, however, that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century its pages were used for bookbinding.

German scholar Constantin von Tischendorf took portions of the Old Testament home with him and used them for bookbinding in 1844. He eventually went on to publish a complete copy of the codex after obtaining the rest of the surviving manuscript.

One of the editions he published was an imitation of the page layout of the original, reproducing the appearance of the characters around 1844. Shortly after 1859, Tischendorf made a similar edition of the codex, which he presented in 1862 to Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra of Russia. In both of these editions notes are included on each of the corrections made, giving information on what was inserted, omitted, or replaced, and who corrected it. A photographic facsimile was produced years afterward and is considered a significant improvement. The New Testament portion of the codex was published in 1911, and the Old Testament was published shortly thereafter, in 1922.

B (03). The Codex Vaticanus is distinct in both its antiquity and composition. Dated between AD 325 and AD 350, this uncial codex contains books of the Old and New Testaments, as well as parts of the Apocrypha. In fact, this parchment/vellum contains all of the New Testament with the exception of the general epistles, Mark 16:9-20, John 7:53–8:11, 1 Timothy through Philemon, and Hebrews 9:14 through the end of Revelation. The 759-leaf codex was catalogued in the Vatican Library in 1475, where it is housed today. It is recognized as one of the greatest collections supporting the reliability of the New Testament.

This portion of Codex Vaticanus B contains the ending of 2 Thessalonians and the beginning of Hebrews. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

A (02). The Codex Alexandrinus contains virtually the entire Old Testament and most of the New Testament with few exceptions. From the original codex of about 820 leaves, 773 are still intact. The scribal work employed the use of two columns with large uncials on thin vellum. This manuscript is surprisingly well preserved in spite of its early date and multiple locations since it was first bestowed upon the Patriarch of Alexandria. It is dated to the mid fifth century AD, clearly revealing the handiwork of the Alexandrian scribes of Egypt. The number of scribes employed for its composition is arguable, as the text displays varying quality in handiwork, independent textual nuances, and multiple exemplars. It has the distinction of being the foremost validation to the original text of Revelation.

C (04). The Ephraemi Rescriptus has a most distinguished history, attesting to the great achievements made in recovering ancient text invisible to the human eye. Text of both the Old and New Testaments was discovered underneath the text of the sermons of Ephraem contained in this *palimpsest rescriptus* (that is, used, erased, and rewritten manuscript). Chemical reactivation revealed portions from every New Testament book

except 2 Thessalonians and 2 John, along with parts of the Old Testament. This text dates back to the fifth century AD and was most likely copied in Alexandria.

D (05). The Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis was discovered in 1562 by the French theologian Theodore de Beze. Most exceptional in its composition is the inclusion of both Greek and Latin texts, making it the oldest discovered bilingual manuscript of the New Testament. The 406 leaves contain the four Gospels, Acts, and 3 John 11-15, transcribed in Western and various other text-types, with Greek on the left page and Latin on the right. To attempt to date this codex is somewhat difficult, as D.C. Parker declares. He argues that way since this kind of text, because of its contextual setting in the oral period, has no fixed form; texts were constantly being reshaped within the churches' context.[1]

W (032). The Codex Washingtonianus is an uncial manuscript containing most of the Gospels (missing are 25 verses in Mark and, from John, a part of chapters 14 and 16 and all of 15) and portions of the epistles of Paul. It represents both Byzantine and Alexandrian text-types and is dated to the early fifth century AD or late fourth century AD. This clearly written codex is transcribed on 187 sheets of vellum and is formatted in one column.

The Codex Washingtonianus is an important majuscule manuscript from the fourth or fifth century AD. This image is of the black-and-white facsimile of the manuscript produced in 1912 by Henry A. Sanders and the University of Michigan. Currently, the manuscript is located at Freer Gallery, Sackler Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. (The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts [www.csntm.org] has granted permission for this image to be used.)

D (06). The Codex Claromontanus was discovered in France and dated to the middle of the sixth century AD. In many ways it completes the New Testament work of Codex Bezae by embodying many of its missing texts. A Western work, it was transcribed on 533 pages of thin vellum. The bilingual manuscript includes Hebrews as well as the entire collection of Pauline epistles in either or both Greek and Latin. The single-column codex reveals an artistic hand; it resides at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

L (019). The Codex Regius, although poorly written, is significant in its overall agreement with the Vaticanus. It is composed of the Gospels, with a rather unusual addition making up two endings to Mark's Gospel. It is dated to the eighth century AD.

(044). The Codex Athous Laurae contains the Gospels of Luke, John, and part of Mark; as well as Acts, Hebrews, the Pauline epistles, and general epistles. Overall it

exemplifies a Byzantine text, but does include parts that are Alexandrian and Western. It dates to the eighth or ninth century AD.

F (010). The Codex Augiensis is a bilingual manuscript encompassing parts of the epistles of Paul and Hebrews. Written in a Western text-type, this ninth-century AD text includes both Greek and Latin.

G (012). The Codex Boernerianus, embodying Paul's epistles, may uniquely be of Irish origin. This ninth-century AD codex is bilingual, written in Greek with an interlinear addition of Latin. It is noted for its close affinity to F2, Codex Augiensis.

(038). The Codex Koridethi is a manuscript of the Gospels dating to the ninth century AD. Mark resembles the earlier text (third or fourth century AD) employed by Eusebius and Origen, whereas Matthew, Luke, and John clearly resemble the Byzantine text.

Papyrus and Codex Manuscripts of the New Testament: Summary Listing of Key Early Witnesses to the New Testament's Reliability

Name	Date of copy	Date of original	Biblical book(s)
John Rylands fragment (P^{52})	AD 117-138	1st century AD	John 18:31-33,37-38; considered the oldest New Testament fragment known
Chester Beatty II/ P.Mich.Inv.6238 (P^{46})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Hebrews and all of the Pauline epistles, except for the pastorals
P.Bodmer II/ Inv. Nr. 4274/ 4298 (P^{66})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Most of John
Inv. Nr. 12 (P^{87})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Philemon 13-15,24-25
Chester Beatty II (P^{4}; P^{64}/P^{67})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Luke 1–6 (P^{4}) and Matthew 3, 5, and 26 (P^{64}/P^{67})
P.IFAO Inv. 237[+a] (P^{98})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Revelation 1:13–2:1
P.Oxy. 3523 (P^{90})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	John 18:36–19:37
P.Oxy. 2683 + 4405 (P^{77})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 23:30-39
P.Oxy. 4403 (P^{103})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 13:55-57; 14:3-5
P.Rylands 5 (P^{32})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	Titus 1:11-15; 2:3-8

Name	Date of copy	Date of original	Biblical book(s)
P.Oxy. 4448 (P^{109})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	John 21:18-20,23-25
P.Oxy. 4447 (P^{108})	2nd century AD	1st century AD	John 17:23-24; 18:1-5
P.Oxy. 2 (P^{1})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 1:1-9,12,14-20
P.Oxy. 208+1781 (P^{5})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of John 1, 16, and 20
P.Oxy. 657 + PSI 1292 (P^{13})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Hebrews 2–5 and 10–12
P.Oxy. 1229 (P^{23})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	James 1:10-12,15-18
P.Oxy. 1228 (P^{22})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 15:25–16:2,21-32
P.Oxy. 1598 (P^{30})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of 1 Thessalonians 4–5 and 2 Thessalonians 1–2
P.Mich.Inv. 1571 (P^{38})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Acts 18:27–19:6,12-16
P.Chester Beatty 1 (P^{45})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Large portions of all four Gospels and Acts
P.Oxy. 4445 (P^{106})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 1:29-35,40-46
P.Oxy. 4446 (P^{107})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 17:1-2,11
P.Oxy. 1780 (P^{39})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 8:14-22
P.Oxy. 1597 (P^{29})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Acts 26:7-8,20
P.Oxy. 4495 (P^{111})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Luke 17:11-13,22-23
P.Mich.Inv. 1570 (P^{37})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 26:19-52
P.Yale 415 + 531 (P^{49})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Ephesians 4:16-29; 4:31–5:13
PSI XIV 1373 (P^{65})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	1 Thessalonians 1:3–2:1,6-13
P.Mich.Inv. 6652 (P^{53})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 26:29-40; Acts 9:33–10:1
P.Oxy. 2383 (P^{69})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Luke 22:40,45-48,58-61
P.Barcelona 83 (P^{80})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 3:34

Name	Date of copy	Date of original	Biblical book(s)
P.Mil. Vogl. Inv. 1224 + P.Macquarie Inv. 360 (P^{91})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Acts 2:30-37; 2:46–3:2
P.Oxy. 402 (P^{9})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	1 John 4:11-12,14-17
P.Oxy. 1171 (P^{20})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	James 2:19–3:9
P.Oxy. 1355 (P^{24})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Romans 8–9
PSI 1 (P^{35})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 25:12-15,20-23
P.Heidelberg G. 645 (P^{40})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Romans 1–4, 6, and 9
P.Oxy. 402 (P^{9})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	1 John 4:11-12,14-17
PSI 1165 (P^{48})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Acts 23:11-17,25-29
PL II/31 (P^{95})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 5:26-29,36-38
P.Oxy. 4401 (P^{101})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 3:10-12; 3:16–4:3
P.Oxy. 4497 (P^{113})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Romans 2:12-13,19
P.Oxy. 4498 (P^{114})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Hebrews 1:7-12
P. Antinoopolis 2.54	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 6:10-12
P.Oxy. 1079 (P^{18})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Revelation 1:4-7
P. Chester Beatty III (P^{47})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Revelation 9–17
P.Oxy. 4499 (P^{115})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Large portions of Revelation
P.Oxy. 108 +109 (P^{15}/P^{16})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	1 Corinthians 7:18–8:4 and Philippians 3:10-17; 4:2-8
P.Oxy. 1078 (P^{17})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Hebrews 9:12-19
P.Oxy. 1230 (P^{24})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Revelation 5:5-8; 6:5-8
P.Oxy. 1596 (P^{28})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	John 6:8-12,17-22
P.Yale 1543 (P^{50})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Acts 8:26-32; 10:26-31
P.Oxy. 2384 + PSI Inv. CNR 419, 420 (P^{70})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Luke 22:40,45-48,58-61
P.Oxy. 4494 (P^{110})	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 10:13-15,25-27

Name	Date of copy	Date of original	Biblical book(s)
MS 113 (0220)	3rd century AD	1st century AD	Romans 4:23–5:3,8-13
P.Bodmer VII and VIII (P^{72})	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	1 and 2 Peter and Jude
P.Oxy. 2684 (P^{78})	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	Jude 4-5,7-8
P.Narmuthis 69.39a + 69.229a (P^{92})	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	Ephesians 1:11-13,19-21; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5,11-12
P.Oxy. 4449 (P^{100})	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	Portions of James 3–5
P.Oxy. 4402 (P^{102})	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	Matthew 4:11-12,22-23
P.Oxy. 847 (0162)	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	John 2:11-22
PSI 2.124 (0171)	3rd-4th century AD	1st century AD	Portions of Matthew 10 and Luke 22
P.Amherst 3b (P^{12})	285-300 AD	1st century AD	Hebrews 1:1
Inv. Nr. 5516 (P^{86})	300 AD	1st century AD	Matthew 5:13-16,22-25
Codex Sinaiticus (aleph)	4th century AD	1st century AD	The entire New Testament
Codex Vaticanus B (03)	4th century AD	1st century AD	Most of the New Testament except Hebrews 9:14ff, the pastoral epistles, Philemon, Revelation
Codex Alexandrinus A (02)	5th century AD	1st century AD	Most of the New Testament
Ephraemi Rescriptus C (04)	5th century AD	1st century AD	Portions of every book except 2 Thessalonians and 2 John
Bezae Cantabrigiensis D (05)	5th century AD	1st century AD	The Gospels and Acts
Washingtonianus W (032)	5th century AD	1st century AD	The Gospels
Claromontanus D (06)	6th century AD	1st century AD	The Pauline epistles and Hebrews

Name	Date of copy	Date of original	Biblical book(s)
Regius L (019)	8th century AD	1st century AD	The Gospels
Athous Laurae PSI (044)	8th/ 9th century AD	1st century AD	The Gospels; Acts; Paul's epistles; general epistles
Augiensis F (010)	9th century AD	1st century AD	Pauline epistles
Boernerianus G (012)	9th century AD	1st century AD	Pauline epistles
Koridethi—THETA (038)	9th century AD	1st century AD	The Gospels

Early New Testament Translations in Various Languages

In addition to the nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts, there are over 19,000 manuscripts of early translations of the Bible into languages like Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Slavonic, Nestorian, and Gothic. That makes a total of some 25,000 manuscripts. Nothing like this exists for any other book in the ancient world.

One of the greatest authentications attesting to the trustworthiness of the New Testament manuscripts lies in the preservation of the scriptural translations of the early church. To produce a version, one must translate from an original language to another (for example, Greek to English or Hebrew to German). To accomplish such a task, one must not only have a clear knowledge of the languages addressed, but also an understanding of how to preserve both the form and the meaning of the texts. In response to the exhortation to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, the early church began translation of the Scriptures of the New Testament. Although Greek was a significant language of the day, it was not sufficient for the church's evangelistic calling.

Syriac versions. The bishop of Edessa, Rabbula, is undoubtedly noteworthy for his contribution to the standard Syriac edition of the New Testament we possess today. In the fifth century AD, he worked to revise previously rewritten Syriac versions according to the Byzantine textual character. His revision was dispersed throughout the churches in his diocese. This revised version of the New Testament and a Syriac version of the Old Testament was called the *Peshitta.* Other noteworthy versions come from the works of early Church Fathers such as Origen and Tatian. The Syro-Hexaplaric version is a Syriac rendering that makes up the fifth column of the six-language Hexapla of Origen. Perhaps unduly literal in its translation, it lacks adequate meaning for the language and thus was never fully accepted by Syrian churches. Also, Tatian's compilation of the Gospels into one literary work, the *Diatessaron*, was widely noticed among Syrians.

Latin versions. Remarkably, the Latin versions of the New Testament date back to the third century AD and quite possibly earlier. Within the Roman world, Latin found its place in the military vernacular and as the language of the people, specifically in the West. It was in the third century AD that this common language took its place among local Christians in North Africa and Europe, finding its way into local churches. Perhaps most significant to the history of the Latin version is its later revision, the Latin Vulgate. The Vulgate (meaning "common") is a Latin revision penned by Jerome, which took a seat of prominence for nearly a millennium, into the sixteenth century AD. In fact, there are more manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate than any other version. The Vulgate still proves its significance today, as many of the modern Bible translations are founded upon this distinct version.

Coptic versions. As the church carried the Scriptures into Egypt, the Coptic versions were birthed. Within this later form of Egyptian writing, several dialects were present, including Sahidic, Bohairic, and Middle Egyptian dialects. The Sahidic (Thebaic) dialect was found in Upper (southern) Egypt, and by the fourth century AD the spread of the Scriptures in Egypt began when the New Testament was translated into it. The Sahidic version greatly represents the Alexandrian text-type but also the Western type. The Bohairic or Memphic dialect was spoken in northern, or Lower Egypt. So widespread was this dialect that it became the common dialect of the Egyptian church at large. Fayumic, Akhmimic, and sub-Akhmimic represent the dialects of Middle Egypt; unfortunately, no book of the New Testament has been entirely preserved in any of these Middle Egyptian dialects.

Armenian versions. Although Armenia was the first kingdom to embrace Christianity, its scriptural translation is less assertive. It is argued that the Armenian version is foremost a secondary translation, meaning that the original text was itself a translation rather than the original Greek. The debatable language of origin is Syriac. Although the early Armenian versions stem from within the first half of the fifth century AD, later, more significant revisions of this text came around the time of the eighth century AD. In fact, it is a revised text from this time that has been preserved and accepted up until the present.

Georgian versions. Georgia had its first translation of the Bible by approximately the middle of the fifth century AD. Proceeding from Armenia, its southern neighbor, the gospel in the form of Scripture quickly took root. The Georgian version takes its basis from the Armenian translation, thus making it a secondary translation.

Ethiopian versions. Despite the hypothesis of earlier evangelism into Ethiopia, it is clear that the good news was brought to Ethiopia in the first half of the fourth century AD during the evangelization under Constantine the Great (AD 330). Nevertheless, it was not until the seventh century AD that both the Old Testament was finished and the New Testament was in process. It is likely that Syrian monks residing in Ethiopia

are responsible for the full and complete translation from Syriac during the time of the Monophysite Controversy (fifth century AD). Later, the Arabic and Coptic versions colored the Ethiopian version as well.

Arabic versions. The Arabic version is a secondary translation from a combination of Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Latin versions. The most ancient translation into Arabic likely originates from a Syriac translation made at the time of Islam's appearance. Unfortunately the author of the first Arabic version is unknown.

Slavonic versions. In the ninth century AD the monks and brothers Methodius and Constantine (Cyril) traveled to east-central Europe at the commission of Emperor Michael III in response to the Slavic leader Rostislav to translate the Scriptures and liturgy into the language of the people. They are respected for their development of the Cyrillic alphabet as a tool for their translation. This alphabet is used today in the Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian, and Russian languages. Starting in the mid ninth century AD, the Gospels were translated into the Old Church Slavonic version.

Nestorian versions. The Nestorian versions stem from traveling Persian Nestorians of the fifth century AD. Journeying into central and east Asia, they translated the Scriptures into various languages as they went along. These were all secondary translations, as they were based on the Syriac. The earliest preserved copies of the Nestorian versions date hundreds of years later, to the ninth and tenth centuries AD.

Gothic versions. The Gothic version dates back to the fourth century AD. This New Testament version was translated by archbishop and missionary Wulfila. Unfortunately only part of the version has been preserved.

The versions continue to witness to the Greek New Testament manuscripts in a significant and distinct fashion. Importantly, the versions themselves attest to the canonization of Scripture, as only the accepted books formed the basis for the work of translation.

New Testament Citations in the Early Church

In addition to the 25,000 manuscripts of the New Testament, the works of the early Church Fathers validate the dates, locations, and text-types used in the New Testament manuscripts. More importantly, these works provided quotations of the Scriptures themselves. In fact, one could reconstruct the entire New Testament based solely on the more than 36,200 Scripture quotations of the Fathers—with the exception of a few dozen verses!

The Fathers would openly compare the texts of early codices by quoting them. In addition, they would preface their quotations of Scripture with remarks such as "my codex here says," thus opening the door to the text of some of the earliest codices of the New Testament. All 27 books of the New Testament are addressed and validated by the writings of the early Fathers. Almost 36,000 quotations alone come from just five of the Fathers (see chart above). In fact, by AD 110 all the New Testament books, except for 2 John and

Jude, had been cited by either Ignatius, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, or more than one of them. There is no other book, religious or secular, that is validated by such a vast number of individual and selected quotations as the New Testament.

Early Citations of the New Testament						
Writer	**Gospels**	**Acts**	**Pauline epistles**	**General epistles**	**Revelation**	**Totals**
Justin Martyr	268	10	43	6	3 (266 allusions)	330
Irenaeus	1,038	194	499	23	65	1,819
Clement of Alexandria	1,017	44	1,127	207	11	2,406
Origen	9,231	349	7,778	399	165	17,922
Tertullian	3,822	502	2,609	120	205	7,258
Hippolytus	734	42	387	27	188	1,378
Eusebius	3,258	211	1,592	88	27	5,176
Grand totals	19,368	1,352	14,035	870	664	36,289

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press.

Notable Early Quotations

A direct link to the apostles themselves can be seen in the work of *Polycarp* from the early second century AD. Polycarp was actually a disciple of the apostle John. Significantly, he wrote his own "Epistle to the Philippians," where he referenced and quoted the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. His work frequently quoted Romans, Galatians, and Philippians and often referred to the books of 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, and 2 John.

The early Father *Ignatius of Antioch* loosely quoted the Scriptures on numerous occasions in his seven epistles. His place in early church history is established by his textual validation of the Scriptures and also his martyrdom in Rome. Among his works are citations from Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.

Clement of Rome is recognized for his early place in history and patristic work. He actually lived contemporaneously with the apostles and was influenced by Paul in his own epistle to the Corinthians, written in the late first century before his death in AD 101. In it he quotes not only the Gospels but also Romans. In addition, among other books he cited in his works were Ephesians, 1 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter.

One of the earliest significant works of the Church Fathers is the *Teaching of the Twelve*, or *Didache.* Dated between AD 100 and 120, this early work contains loose quotations of the New Testament Scriptures. In particular, 1 Corinthians is cited, as are 1 Thessalonians and Revelation.

One of the most powerful early-church witnesses to the New Testament is *Irenaeus*. He is recognized as the first Father who quoted almost every book of the New Testament. The only two books not found in his citations are the tiny one-chapter books of Philemon and 3 John, which he probably had no occasion to quote. He is recognized for his vast quotation of Scripture and has a prominent place in early church history (170 AD) as one who defended the Christian faith against Gnosticism with his work *Against Heresies*.

Clement of Alexandria, active at the beginning of the third century AD, is appreciated for his significant quoting of almost every book of the New Testament. As well as the two omitted by Irenaeus, Clement also omits 2 Timothy and 2 John.

One of the most notable works of the early Father *Tatian* exists only in the form of the words of secondhand witnesses. Tatian's *Diatessaron* was a favorite among early Christians, in particular Syrians; it weaved the four Gospels harmoniously into one single work. Unfortunately this work of the second century AD is completely lost, with no remaining copy. Nevertheless, because of its significance in the early church, several witnesses have preserved it in part by their own commentaries on it. These works include *The Commentary on the Diatessaron* by Ephraem and the Latin *Codex Fuldensis*.

Conclusion

The next closest book to the New Testament in terms of manuscript support is the *Iliad* of Homer, which is attested to by 643 manuscripts, the oldest of these made 500 years after the original. Other works fare even more poorly (see chart at the end of the next chapter). Clearly the New Testament is the most well-attested book from all of ancient history. If one denies the reliability of the New Testament based upon the number of manuscripts and the interval of time between its original composition and the nearest copy, then one also discredits the reliability of every work from ancient history!

9

The Accuracy of the New Testament Manuscripts

The New Testament is more accurately copied than any other book from ancient history. Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton conducted a research project comparing the accuracy of the copies of the New Testament to other ancient works. He concluded that the Hindu *Mahabharata* "was copied with about 90 percent accuracy and Homer's *Iliad* with 95 percent accuracy."[1] This is a more than sufficient degree of accuracy to convey the essential teaching of the originals.

By contrast, scholars have estimated that the New Testament was copied with up to 99 percent, or even greater, accuracy. Nineteenth-century British manuscript experts Westcott and Hort estimated that only about one-sixteenth of the variants rise above "trivialities," which would make copies 98.33 per cent accurate.[2] Ezra Abbot's figures yield an estimate that the text is 99.75 percent pure.[3] The great New Testament Greek scholar A.T. Robertson declared that "the real concern is with a 'thousandth part of the entire text.'" That statement would translate to 99.9 percent accuracy on anything of real concern.[4]

What is more, even Bart Ehrman, the renowned New Testament scholar who argues against the reliability of the New Testament, admits that the manuscript variants do not affect the central message of the New Testament:

> It would be a mistake…to assume that the only changes being made were by copyist with a personal stake in the wording of the text. In fact, *most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology*.[5]

Misleading Statistics

In view of the foregoing evidence, particularly that in the previous chapter, one can see how misleading statistics from critics such as Bart Ehrman really are. To speak of 200,000 to 400,000 errors in the Bible is completely misleading. First of all, most of

the differences are not errors, but simply variant readings. Second, these variants do not represent 200,000-plus places in the Bible. Rather, if one word is misspelled in 3,000 manuscripts, this is counted as 3,000 errors. By this same type of calculation, it has been shown that Ehrman has 1.6 million errors in the first edition of his own book. Mariano Grinbank discovered 16 errors in Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*.[6] Since the first edition is reported to have sold 100,000 copies in its first three months, this would mean (the way Ehrman counts errors in the Bible manuscripts) that there are 1.6 million errors in Ehrman's book! Yet no reasonable person would argue that because of this we cannot trust the copies to convey Ehrman's original thoughts on the matter.

Actually, the more so-called errors (really, variants) there are, the more certain we are of the original. For example, if one received a message like this, one would have no problem collecting the money:

Y#U HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

Why? Because, even with the error, 100 percent of the message comes through. And if one received a message like this it would remove all doubt:

Y#U HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

YO# HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS

And the more lines we have (with errors in a different spot), the more we would be sure of the message.

Ehrman also makes an issue over the so-called biases of the manuscript copiers. Yet, as it turns out, their bias does not affect the basic message of the Bible. Consider the following illustration:

1. YOU HAVE WON TEN MILLION DOLLARS

2. THOU **HA**ST **WON** TEN MILLION DOLLARS
   [Notice the King James bias here]

3. Y'ALL **HA**VE **WON** $10,000,000
   [Notice the Southern bias here]

Observe that of the 28 letters in line 2, only 5 of them [in bold] are the same in line 3. That is, about 19 percent of the letters are the same. Yet, despite the bias, the message is 100 percent identical! The lines are different in form but not in content. Likewise, even with the many differences in the New Testament variants, *100 percent of the message comes through.*

In the light of all the above evidence, it is fair to say that the New Testament is the most accurately copied book from the ancient world. For it survives in more copies, earlier copies, and more reliable copies than any other work from antiquity by comparison with other classic works from the ancient world, most of which survive on only 10 to 20 manuscripts. Compare the evidence in the following chart:

New Testament Manuscripts Compared to Other Ancient Sources					
Author	**Ancient title**	**Date of original**	**Date of earliest manuscript**	**Time gap from original**	**Manuscript copies extant**
Plato	*Dialogues*	4th century BC	AD 900	c. 1,250 years	20
Homer	*Iliad*	9th century BC	400 BC	c. 500 years	643
Herodotus	*The Histories*	484 to 425 BC	AD 900	c. 1,350 years	8
Aristotle	Assorted works	4th century BC	AD 1100	c. 1,400 years	5
Thucydides	*History of the Peloponnesian Wars*	460 to 400 BC	AD 900	c. 1,300 years	8
Aristophanes	Assorted works	448 to 385 BC	AD 900	c. 1,300 years	10
Sophocles	Assorted works	496 to 406? BC	AD 1000	c. 1,400 years	193
Julius Caesar	*The Gallic Wars*	58 to 44 BC	AD 900	c. 950 years	10
Tacitus	*Annals of Imperial Rome*	AD 58 to 120	AD 1100	c. 1,000 years	20
Pliny the Younger	*History of Rome*	AD 62 to 113	AD 850	c. 750 years	7
Suetonius	*The Twelve Caesars*	AD 70 to 140?	AD 950	c. 900 years	8
		Total manuscripts for ancient sources			**932**
Greek New Testament manuscripts		AD 45 to 100	AD 117 to 325	30 to 300 years	5,800-plus
Non-Greek New Testament manuscripts					19,200-plus
		Total New Testament manuscripts			**25,000-plus**

Chart adapted from Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 408, by H. Wayne House and Joseph M. Holden, *Charts of Apologetics and Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2006), chart 43. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Conclusion

In the light of all the available evidence, we can agree with the great Greek manuscript expert Sir Frederic Kenyon, who declared,

> The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. [Thus] both the *authenticity* and the general *integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established. [7]

In short, we can trust the Bible in our hands as an accurate copy of the original in all essentials. As the famous scholar Philip Schaff noted of the variant readings known in his day, only 50 were of real significance, and *there is no "article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching."*[8]