

NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

What Does This Topic Have To Do With Me?

Over 1,900 years have passed since the original apostolic authors committed their testimonies into writing. Their original documents (or '*autographs*') have long since disappeared - perhaps damaged by accident or destroyed on purpose - but mostly they have simply disintegrated into dust through centuries of constant use.

Passed from hand to hand and church to church, the message contained in these books and letters was far too important to consider withdrawing them from circulation, and placing them into storage for preservation. Instead they were read until they fell apart, and then replaced by copies that had been painstakingly made by hand.

The point to be made here, is that the texts which biblical translators rely on today are not the original documents, but COPIES. And it is the standard of these copies (i.e. how faithfully they reproduce the details of the originals) that is the legitimate concern of anyone who relies on their Bible to contain the real Word of God.

There are actually 2 main 'families' of biblical texts in existence at this time. The first is the Traditional or Received Text, which is also known as the Syrian or Byzantine Text. This group of manuscripts forms the linguistic basis or foundation of the Authorised or King James Version of 1611.

The second is the Critical or Alexandrian Text, which is currently represented by the Nestle-Aland or United Bible Societies III Text. It is this much smaller group of manuscripts that underlies most of the numerous 'modern' versions of the 20th century.

What Manuscript Evidence Does Exist?

The original Gospels, Acts, Letters, and Revelation, were first written in the common language of most of the Roman Empire, which was Greek (or the *Koine*). Greek was an international tongue, crossing all racial and social boundaries, and familiar to a wider range of people than the more formal Latin.

It was also a dynamic and complex language, particularly suited to expressing difficult concepts and drawing out different shades of

meaning. So it is those manuscripts actually written in Greek that are of most value to us in determining how closely our modern Bibles reflect the original texts.

According to one recent list published in 1989, the total number of surviving Greek manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament is **5,488**. These documents can be placed in 4 main categories, according to how and when they were made:

PAPYRI

There are 96 of these catalogued. They are called *papyri* because they were written on material made from an Egyptian reed-like plant known as ‘papyrus.’ They are the oldest of our documentary evidence, and are mostly fragments of the original letters or books; for example the Rylands fragment dated approximately 125 AD measures only 63x83mm and contains just 5 verses from the 18th chapter of John’s Gospel. While many of these fragments indicate variant or alternative readings, some 150 Received or Traditional Text readings have early papyri support.

UNCIALS

There are 299 known *uncials*. Written from the beginning of the 4th century (ie 300 AD onwards) on parchment, which is made from animal skins. Their name comes from the fact that they are all written in uncial script, which means they were all written in capital letters without punctuation. The most famous are *codex Sinaiticus* and *codex Vaticanus*, which provide the basis for the Variant or Critical Texts. However more than 90% of these parchments support the Received Text.

MINISCULES

There are 2,812 of these. They are called *miniscules* because they are written in small letters rather than capitals. They were written from the 9th century (ie 800 AD onwards) and had the advantage of taking less time to write and using up less space on the parchment. Nearly all support the Received Text.

LECTIONARIES

Totalling 2,281, these *lectionaries* contained the Gospels and Epistles appointed to be read throughout the year in early Christian churches. Dated from the 6th century (ie 500 AD onwards), most of them use uncial letters while some later copies use miniscules. These are very important manuscripts because of the care that would have been taken to authenticate what were in effect official church documents. The lectionaries agree almost without exception to the Received Text.

What Other Documentary Evidence Is There?

If we were to consider the more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament alone, then we would be forced to conclude that over 90% represent the Received Text.

In other words, the overwhelming majority of manuscript evidence supports the Traditional Text, as used by the translators of the Authorised or King James Version. And only a very small selection of divergent manuscripts support the Critical Text, which provides the textual basis for most modern versions such as NIV, NAS, RSV, NEB, NCV, TLB, GNB, CEV, etc.

However there is also considerable additional evidence to support the integrity of the Received Text, which we will look at under 3 main headings.

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

Many of the teachers of the early church quote directly from the Traditional Text - Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), Irenaeus of Lyons (130-200 AD), Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), Tertullian (160-220 AD), Hippolytus (170-236 AD), Methodius (260-312 AD), Athanasius (296-373 AD), Hilary of Poitiers (315-367 AD), and Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386 AD) are examples.

EARLY BIBLE VERSIONS

While most of the early churches were established in Greek speaking parts of the Roman world, many were not. Therefore several translations were made of the New Testament into different languages, and these reflected their origins in the Received Text. They include the Syriac (or Aramaic) Version in the Middle East and the Latin (or Waldensian) Version in Northern Italy, which were both produced in the middle of the 2nd century, as well as the Gothic Version for the conquering German tribesmen of the 4th century.

FIRST PRINTED TEXTS

A revolution in publishing the written word occurred with the invention of the printing press in the late 15th century. This revolution coincided with an influx of Greek manuscripts into Europe, following the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks. This provided scholars like Desiderius Erasmus with a wonderful opportunity to ‘begin again’ with Bible translations, by removing all the errors that had crept in over the centuries through clerical error or ecclesiastical bias. While Erasmus clearly knew of variant texts, he chose to discard them in favour of a number of manuscripts that faithfully reproduced the Received Text. His printed Greek Texts in 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535, had an enormous influence throughout the Protestant Reformation, as did subsequent editions by Estienne (Stephanus) in 1546, 1549, 1550, and 1551, Beza between 1565 and 1604, and Elzevir in 1624 and 1633. The preface to the Elzevir’s second edition declared "Therefore you have a text now received by all [hence ‘textus receptus’ or the Received Text], in which we give no alteration or corruption."

This statement remained true until the publication of the Revised Version of the English New Testament in 1881, which was based on the Critical Text of Westcott and Hort.

What Caused The Change Of Heart?

Deception has its real origin in pride. The first example we have of humans being deceived is given in the Book of Genesis. First Eve and then Adam swallow Satan's line, which was essentially "Why shouldn't we have the knowledge of good and evil and be just like God?"

In this case, a few prominent theological scholars of the 19th century (Lachmann 1831-50, Tischendorf 1840-72, Tregelles 1857-72, Westcott and Hort 1881-1903) decided that everyone else had got it all wrong, and proceeded to formulate their own Greek Texts. They based their compositions on a small number of variant manuscripts, of which the most significant are Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus.

Both of these manuscripts are very old (approximately 4th century) and relatively complete (ie containing most of the 27 NT books). However both of them are also of very poor quality, roughly penned and with numerous corrections and copying errors. The likelihood is therefore that they were both rejected as faulty or unreliable manuscripts by early transcribers. There are in fact very few copies of either of these documents in existence, compared to the many thousands supporting the Received Text.

This is supported by the circumstances of their discovery. Vaticanus was exhumed from dusty shelves deep in the Catholic archives of Rome in 1481, having been lying forgotten there for centuries, and only limited access to it has been allowed ever since. Sinaiticus was found by Count von Tischendorf in an abandoned monk's cell in St Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai in 1844, with part of it already burnt as rubbish.

However the final and most conclusive test of their unreliability as Greek manuscripts, comes from their own incompatibility. Not only do they disagree with the Received Text, but *they are also in **substantial disagreement with one another*** (over 3,000 times in the Gospels alone).