

How the Bible Came to Us - #19
The Changing Role of Manuscripts

1. With the invention of printing, scholars of the Bible in various languages set forth the “promise” of a standardized text that everyone could read and study for themselves. But, it was not long before people discovered that printers made mistakes—just as copyists had earlier!
2. Furthermore, different scholars—putting together different texts that were available to them—translated the Bible in different ways, giving different versions!
3. Even the famous *King James Version* came out with differences in printings and copies that required many corrections.
4. As manuscripts and versions began to compete for people’s attention, the question was raised: Which one is the most reliable? That, in turn led to the question: On what are the versions based? From what documents were they translated?
5. It was not long before people began to understand that the older manuscripts would be closer to the original text as written by the original authors.
6. A subtle but important progression was taking place:
 - 1) Manuscripts were originally the only “Bibles” which people had available to read.
 - 2) As printing became more widespread and people began to compare different versions, manuscripts were regarded as the “basis” for the Bible.
 - 3) When people realized how late the manuscripts were on which most of the translations and versions were based, they sought older manuscripts. Those older manuscripts actually proved to be a challenge to the “Bible.”
7. Then in the 19th and 20th centuries, the science of archaeology began to blossom. Rising with it were “romantics” such as Constantin van Tischendorf, a Russian count, who traveled around the world searching for manuscripts in remote places.
8. As older and older manuscripts were found, it was recognized that the very late manuscripts on which the King James Version—and others like it—were based were probably not the most reliable sources.
9. It should be recognized that the search for ancient manuscripts was a distinctly Protestant effort. The Roman Catholic Church had already declared that the Vulgate as translated by Jerome and as preserved in Rome was “the official Bible”! But Protestants were searching for Greek and Hebrew manuscripts that went back to the days before Jerome!
10. In 1844, Constantin von Tischendorf traveled around the Middle East looking for monasteries and ancient churches that might have ancient documents hidden away. He went to the monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was called St. Catherine’s monastery, having been established by Constantine’s mother back in the 4th century.
11. In those days that remote monastery had very few visitors. The monks prepared a room for Tischendorf and since it was cold, one of the monks went in to light a fire for him in his room. Tischendorf realized he was using the pages of an ancient codex to help start the fire!
12. He begged the monk not to burn any more pages. Then the monk told him that he had burned two basketfuls already! Tischendorf managed on that occasion to save about 43 “pages” of that ancient papyrus and persuaded them to use something else for kindling.
13. Nine years later, in 1853, when he was able to go back to Sinai, he could not convince them to give or sell any of the manuscripts. After his previous visit, they realized that those documents

might be worth something!

14. Finally, six years later in 1859, he went back as an official representative of Czar Alexander II and negotiated with the monks at Mount Sinai to recover a codex—which came to be known as the *Codex Sinaiticus*—containing a large portion of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the entire New Testament, as well as a couple books that were not previously available in Greek, the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *the Shepherd of Hermes*. That entire manuscript was written in uncial Greek capital letters. It is referred to as the *Aleph* document. Tischendorf managed to convince the monks to give the document to the Russian czar as a gift. After the communist revolution when the Russians had no more use for such a document, they sold it to the British Museum where it is at the present time.
15. Thus, biblical scholars had a document of the New Testament in the original Greek, probably one of the 50 that were copied for Constantine’s benefit and probably very close to the Greek which Jerome himself used for translating to the Latin Vulgate. Scholars had “moved back” six centuries from what was previously available!
16. At least one other very important document similar to the *Codex Sinaiticus* was found at the Vatican. It was first “discovered” at the Vatican during a library inventory taken in 1475. It is also a 4th century Greek uncial. The *Codex Vaticanus* includes the Old Testament in Greek (*LXX*), the New Testament in Greek, and the Apocrypha; but it is missing Genesis 46, 30 chapters out of the Psalms, and the entire portion of the New Testament after Hebrews 9:14. It is officially named the “B” Manuscript.
17. Several other famous manuscripts were also discovered about that same time and should be mentioned. The *Codex Alexandrinus* is designated “A.” It comes from the 5th century. It was donated to Charles I, King of England, by the patriarch of Constantinople in 1627 and is now on display in the British Museum. Like the two previous manuscripts mentioned, it is entirely in Greek. It contains the entire Old Testament and substantial portions of the New Testament.
18. But, the *Codex Alexandrinus* illustrates something that became troublesome to scholars. In some places, the translation seems to be excellent but in other places it is very “slipshod,” almost as if the translator(s) was/were drunk when doing the work!
19. Another famous manuscript which came to light is named the *Codex Ephraemi* (Latin spelling; Codex Ephraim, English spelling). It was also written in the 5th century but it has a very interesting history. In the 12th century, someone scraped off the writing of the biblical text and over it wrote sermons and treatises from a 4th century Syriac author by the name of Ephraim! It is therefore called the Codex Ephraim Rewritten (*Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus*). Fortunately, after finding this manuscript, Tischendorf spent a long time with it and through extraordinary work, he managed to scrape off the new writing and used various reagents to recover the text of the original Bible in fairly readable condition.
20. Another very interesting ancient document is called the *Codex Cantabrigiensis* (after Cambridge University) or *Codex Bezae* and designated by the letter “D.” It was given to the University of Cambridge by Theodore Beza, the reformer, in 1581. It is a bilingual manuscript in two columns, the Greek in one column and the Latin Vulgate in the other. It contains the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Another manuscript which seems to be related to it is called the *Codex Claromontanus*. It is also in bilingual columns but it contains the epistles of Paul including Hebrews.
21. Interestingly enough, the *Codex Bezae* has a 20% longer version of the Acts of the Apostles than the one which we have! Scholars have struggled to try to figure out where those additional verses and material came from. In the *Codex Bezae*, there is a great deal of emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church, but there is also a lot of intense anti-Semitism.

22. So, what do we learn from all those ancient manuscripts? We realize that there was much more variation in the early “readings” from those ancient manuscripts than was at first thought.
23. In the 19th and 20th centuries, people discovered various locations in the Middle East where entire libraries of documents were stored. A number of ancient papyri were found in Egypt. Two famous (and wealthy) document collectors have entire collections named after them. First, there is the Chester Beatty papyri including P⁴⁶, a manuscript which includes most of Paul’s letters and was written around A.D. 200. That is our earliest manuscript of Paul’s letters.
24. Beatty’s collection also includes P⁵², the oldest copy of any portion of the New Testament. It is a tiny scrap of the Gospel of John from some ancient codex, but it clearly comes from the first half of the 2nd century A.D. That tiny scrap forced scholars who had previously thought that the Gospel of John had not been written until the end of the 2nd century A.D. to reevaluate. Now, most of them agree that John was actually written at the end of the 1st century A.D.
25. The tiny fragment includes John 18:31-33 and on the other side of the fragment is John 18:37-38.
26. There is also a collection known as the Bodmer papyri. It includes P⁶⁶, another portion of John dating from around A.D. 200; P⁷², which is the earliest known text of Jude and 2 Peter, probably from the 3rd century; and P⁷⁵, our earliest manuscript of the Gospel of Luke, dating from somewhere around the end of the 2nd century.
27. But, it was not only ancient biblical manuscripts that were being found. A number of archaeological digs took place and entire libraries of manuscripts and other materials particularly from Egypt proved to be very helpful. At a site called Oxyrhynchus near the Nile River, they found what turned out to be a dump with tens of thousands of papyri containing a wide assortment of materials from the 1st century to the 7th century. Scholars have been working on those documents for the last 100 years. They include business transactions, letters, contracts, Greco-Roman philosophical materials, and also include scraps of scriptural texts and apocryphal writings, even a portion of the Gospel of Thomas.
28. Then, in 1945, a small library of documents was found in a place known as *Chenoboskion* in Egypt which was very quickly renamed *Nag Hammadi*. The documents included 49 Gnostic writings in Coptic that were written in the 3rd or 4th century. It was from among those documents that we get our oldest version of the Gospel of Thomas.
29. There have not been nearly as many ancient Hebrew documents found. Very few people were able to read, copy, and understand the ancient Hebrew. One important document known as the Nash papyrus was found in 1903 in Egypt. It is a tiny fragment but it contains the *Shema Yisrael*, the very famous passage from Deuteronomy 6:4.
30. But, of course, the most important modern find of all was the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were found in 1947 and came from the Essene community in the Wadi Qumran, near the Dead Sea. We now know that the Essene community had enough biblical material that one could put together portions of almost every book of the Old Testament. The crown jewel of the Qumran collection was an entire, beautifully-preserved scroll of the book of Isaiah.
31. As you can imagine, the discovery of all those documents over the years stimulated renewed interest in the ancient works and the question of which document is the most reliable.

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