

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Discovery of New Testament Manuscripts

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1. Introduction

The manuscripts of the New Testament have survived millennia under God's sovereignty and for the edification of our faith in the accuracy and authority of the Word of God. How they have been discovered is a collection of stories ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. Of these, probably the most intriguing account comes from the discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus.

2. Constantin Von Tischendorf

- Born in Saxony in 1815
- Tischendorf ... was famous for his superior eyesight, which he got, as legend has it, because his pregnant mother made a plea to God that her child not be born blind after she encountered a blind man on the street—a request that was apparently granted with exuberance.
- Studied at Leipzig (1834-1838) under J. G. B. Winer, a noted Greek grammarian
 - Winer believed the purest copy of the NT would come through comparison of as many manuscripts as possible
 - Tischendorf also carried this conviction thus leading him to search for these manuscripts
 - While a student gaining his academic degree in the 1840s, he earned international recognition when he deciphered the *Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus*, a 5th-century Greek manuscript of the New Testament.
 - Motivated to prove scientifically that the words of the Bible were trustfully transmitted over centuries
- Most well-known for his discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus

3. Codex Sinaiticus

- One of the four great uncials
- Contained both Old and New Testaments
 - OT was the Septuagint and only half of it survives
 - Also contains the "Epistle of Barnabas" and the "Shepherd of Hermas"
- 360 animal skins to make it
- Material costs and labor costs add up to a person's life wages back then (\$2.6 million in America today)
- Probably written between AD 325 and AD 380
 - Eusebius sectioned the bible in AD 325
 - CS reflects those divisions
- Historical Context
 - Christian emperor Constantine of Byzantium decreed the manufacture of bibles for the churches of Constantinople. There were fifty total. The Codex Sinaiticus is most likely one of these "Imperial Bibles".

- He made the Roman Empire Christian. His mother sought funded the building of the three most venerated churches in early Christian history commemorating where Christ was born, where he was buried and raised, and where he ascended into heaven.
- However, while some say it was produced in Rome, others say Caesarea, while others suggest Egypt.
- Significance
 - The CS, a few hundred fragments of other ancient texts, and another Bible known as the *Codex Vaticanus* make up a tradition of scholarship characteristic of the early church.
 - “The preparation of the *Sinaiticus* is an example of the care that was continuously expended upon the Bible until the invention of printing made standardization of the text convenient and quick.” (*Testament*, 228)
 - It is the only manuscript that is complete from the first millennia.

4. St. Catherine's Monastery

- Greek Orthodox monastery built at the alleged location of Mt. Sinai
- It is allegedly built around the burning bush
 - Built by order of Emperor Justinian I (reigned 527-565), enclosing the Chapel of the Burning Bush (also known as “Saint Helen’s Chapel”) which was ordered to be built by Empress Consort Helena, mother of Constantine the Great
 - The burning bush had been considered a type of the Virgin Mary and the incarnation
 - Older name for the monastery was “The Monastery of the Holy Virgin”
- Called St. Catherine's Monastery due to the fact that her relics are housed there along with her shrine
 - Her skull and her left hand
 - A Christian saint and virgin, who was martyred in the early 4th century at the hands of the pagan emperor Maxentius
 - According to tradition, she was sentenced to death on the wheel. When this failed to kill her, she was beheaded.
 - Angels then took her remains to Mount Sinai and in the year 800, monks from the Sinai Monastery found her remains.
- Inhabited and undestroyed for 1,700 years making it the oldest continuously inhabited monastery

5. The Discovery of the CS

- 1761, may be mentioned in Vitaliano Donati’s journal: He saw “a Bible comprising leaves of handsome, large, delicate, and square-shaped parchment, written in a round and handsome script”
- 1844, Constantin Von Tischendorf visited and claimed to have found some of its pages in the trash.
 - He asked for them tipping the monks off to its importance.
 - He was able to take 43 pages (1 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Esther) to Leipzig, Germany where they remain to this day.
 - He then copied and published them in honor of King Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, who had supported Tischendorf’s journeys in 1843.

- 1853, Tischendorf returned to St. Catherine's, but is unable to acquire the rest of the pages of this old text.
- 1859, Russia finances a trip for Tischendorf to return to St. Catherine's.
 - Alexander II was the Tsar of Russia at the time
 - The monks again refused to give him any manuscripts on this third trip.
 - However, on the last day of his trip Tischendorf gave a copy of the Septuagint to the steward of the monastery he had recently published in Leipzig. The steward then showed him the Codex Sinaiticus that was in the closet of his cell wrapped in red cloth. This was the first time he saw the 347 pages.
 - Trying to keep calm, Tischendorf asked to borrow the manuscript to study it later that night. He was permitted to and proceeded to spend the entire night studying the manuscript, too excited to sleep. ("It really seemed a sacrilege to sleep.")
 - The next morning Tischendorf offered to buy the manuscript, but his offer was rejected. Then he asked if he could take the manuscript to Cairo to study it. This request was also rejected, so returned on camel to Cairo.

6. The “Acquisition” of the CS

- While in Cairo, Tischendorf visited a small monasteries run by the same order of monks as those at St. Catherine's. The abbot of St. Catherine's happened to be there, and Tischendorf succeeded in convincing him to send Bedouin to fetch the Codex Sinaiticus.
- He was only allowed to examine and copy eight leaves at a time. He finished after two months.
- Two different stories exist regarding how Tischendorf acquired the Codex Sinaiticus.
 - #1 - Tischendorf signed a receipt stating that he was going to take the CS to St. Petersburg to compare it to other earlier transcriptions he had made, and then return it as soon as possible.
 - #2 - The top monk's position at the Monastery in Sinai was vacant and Tischendorf made the suggestion to gift the CS to the Russian tsar since he was the protector of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This might help them gain a connection in electing the new abbot of St. Catherine's monastery. Tischendorf was allowed to take the CS to Leipzig for publication and then to gift the CS to the tsar on behalf of the monks. In return for the manuscript the tsar gave to the monastery a silver shrine for St. Catherine, a gift of 7,000 rubles for the library at Sinai, a gift of 2,000 rubles for the monastery in Cairo, and several Russian decorations.
- Whichever story is right, the bottom line is that St. Catherine's did not ever get the CS back in full. Recent scholarly work has exonerated Tischendorf because it was common to take, sell, or gift manuscripts like these at that time.

7. The Travels of the CS

- 1862, on the thousandth anniversary of the founding of the Russian empire, a facsimile edition of the CS was published.
- The Codex Sinaiticus was kept in the Russian national library until the economic downturn of the empire and its transition to communism.
- 1933, Joseph Stalin sold the CS to Britain through the London booksellers Maggs Brothers for £100,000, the most anyone had ever paid for a book.
 - This makes sense when one considers the state-sanctioned atheism of the USSR

- 1934, Archbishop Porphyrios of Sinai asserted the Monastery's claim to be the 'sole rightful owner' of the CS. The British referred him to the USSR to solve the issue. This investigation yielded no evidence requiring the British to return the CS to St. Catherine's.
- 1975, St. Catherine's Monastery revealed that they had discovered more parts of the CS. In total today, there are eighteen leaves whether in part or in whole.
- Hence, today the a Codex Sinaiticus resides in Britain, Germany, Egypt, and Russia.
 - The British Library - 347 leaves
 - The Library of the University of Leipzig - 43 leaves
 - The Holy Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai (Saint Catherine's) - 12 leaves, 14 fragments
 - The National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg - fragments of 3 leaves

8. Conclusion

- Most manuscripts that have been found are from caches in monasteries because they have been rejected and then neglected.
- They are preserved longer because they are not undergoing constant use.
- Manuscripts are stored in caches in monasteries because they may contain errors or are simply incomplete. Occasionally, monasteries acquire too many manuscripts to know what to do with, so there ends up being a back-loading of manuscripts.