

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Conclusion

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1. Why This Class?

- We do not have even the smallest fragment of the original writing of the Bible.
- There are critics of the Bible who use this lack of original text to oppose the Bible.
- There are supporters of the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy who confuse the facts.
- There are discrepancies between the existing handwritten copies of the original text.

2. Types of New Testament Manuscripts

a. Papyri

The oldest manuscripts are papyri, all of which have only a part of the New Testament, and usually just a small part. They date from 125-700 AD.

Papyri are designated by the letter P and followed by a number. Presently, the last catalogued New Testament papyrus is P134.

b. Uncials

Uncials are New Testament manuscripts written on parchment (animal skin).

Uncials are manuscripts in all capital letters, also called majuscules.

Uncials date from between 300 and 1000 AD. The oldest complete New Testament manuscript is an uncial from 325-360 AD.

There are presently about 322 NT uncials. Forty-five uncials are designated with a single letter code. The remaining uncials are fragmentary and designated with a number beginning with zero.

c. Minuscules

Most New Testament manuscripts are minuscules, written in cursive text in upper and lower case. What differentiates minuscules from uncials is only the text, not the writing material.

Most of these texts are on parchment (paper was not used for New Testament manuscripts until the twelfth century).

There are presently 2,911 New Testament minuscules. They are designated by a number, beginning with 1.

These minuscules date from 1000 AD until handwritten texts became obsolete with the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

d. Lectionaries

Lectionaries are New Testament text that was designed for public Bible reading, with appointed Scripture for each day of the church year.

Unlike continuous text New Testament manuscripts, lectionaries are not divided according to writing style or writing material.

Presently, 2453 lectionaries have been catalogued, with the majority of them being later than the 10th century. The earliest begin to appear by the 6th century.

These are likely copied from other lectionaries and not from continuous text manuscripts.

e. Total Greek manuscripts

- Papyri = 134
- Uncials = 322
- Minuscules = 2,911
- Lectionaries = 2,453
- Total = 5,820

These are approximate numbers. The manuscripts are scattered throughout the world, held by various organizations and even individuals. They may become lost or further damaged. Further study may reveal that two or more manuscripts are actually from the same original writing. New manuscripts are discovered. It is difficult to keep an accurate count of them all, much less to study the thousands of manuscripts.

3. Comparison with other texts

New Testament has 5,820 manuscripts. The writing that has the closest in terms of total manuscripts is the *Illiad* by Homer with 652 manuscripts.

The New Testament has manuscripts from within decades of the original and a complete copy less than 300 years. The earliest fragment from Homer is 500 years after his death.

No other ancient Greek or Roman text has any portion of any copies less than 300 years after the original writing. The New Testament not only has a complete text but has over 100 other partial copies within 300 years of the original text.

To say that the New Testament has far more manuscript evidence than any other comparative text would be a massive understatement.

4. Ancient Bible translations

In addition to the Greek manuscripts, there are thousands of New Testament manuscripts translated into other languages, known as versions. There are over 10,000 Latin NT manuscripts, including Old Latin dating as early as the second century and also the Vulgate.

In addition, there are roughly 9,300 more New Testament manuscripts in other languages such as Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, Georgian, Gothic, Arabic, etc.

5. Ancient church fathers

Early Christian leaders quoted the New Testament frequently. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107) quoted from 20 of the 27 New Testament books. Clement of Rome (d. 99) and Irenaeus (c. 110) quoted most New Testament books.

By 300 A.D. there are over 36,000 existing New Testament quotes from church leaders, including quotes from nearly every verse in the New Testament.

If every single copy of the Bible in every language disappeared, we would have enough quotes from the early church fathers (over 1 million by 450 A.D.) to confidently reproduce the entire New Testament.

6. Class outline

- a. The Manuscripts
 - i. Introduction – June 12
 - ii. Survey of NT Manuscripts – June 19
 - iii. Discovery of NT Manuscripts – June 26
 - iv. Kinds of NT Texts – July 3
- b. The Variants
 - i. Understanding Variants – July 10
 - ii. Understanding Text Types – July 17
 - iii. Understanding External Evidence – July 24
 - iv. Understanding Internal Evidence – July 31
- c. The Editions
 - i. The Greek Editions– August 7
 - ii. The Textus Receptus – August 14
- d. Specific Texts
 - i. John 7:53-8:11 – August 21
 - ii. Mark 16:9-20– August 28
 - iii. Other texts – September 4

7. Application

“Appreciate the sovereignty of God.”