

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Kinds of Manuscripts

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1. Review of the survey of New Testament manuscripts

2. The age of the New Testament manuscripts

Generally speaking, older manuscripts are more significant to understanding the original text of the New Testament than more recent manuscripts are. However, determining the age of a manuscript is an involved science.

a. Carbon-14 dating

When an organism dies (plant or animal), the radioactive carbon decays at predictable rates over time. This means that by examining the remaining levels of carbon-14, age estimates can be made. These estimates from the time period of the text we are speaking of are considered reliable within 50 years. Therefore, if a laboratory dates a papyrus at c. 200 A.D. we can reliably consider the death of the plant to have occurred between 150-250 A.D.

Because the carbon-14 test requires the destruction of a very small part of the material, some libraries and collections will not allow this test to be conducted on their manuscripts. Also note that the carbon-14 test only dates the time the organism ceased to be alive, not the date of the writing of the manuscript.

b. Spectroscopy

Whereas carbon-14 deals with the analysis of the writing surface material, spectroscopy deals with the material that actually makes the text. Spectroscopy is a chemical analysis of the ink of the manuscript. Because certain inks were used during certain periods of time and in certain locations, there is an ability to ascertain information about the manuscript, including its date range, from the chemical analysis of the ink mixture. The biggest challenge with this analysis is that it is only as helpful as the breath of knowledge that we have about the usage of types of ink in history, which is a growing field of study.

c. Palaeography

Palaeography is the study of the writing of manuscripts. Palaeography is a primary means used for dating the New Testament manuscripts. This field of study includes looking at:


- The writing material
- The method of the writing
- The lines of the text

- The spelling of words
- The use of spacing
- The use of punctuation
- The style and formation of letters
- The angles and bluntness of the lines
- The use of art or other notations
- The use of abbreviations

Regarding abbreviations, certain holy names or words were abbreviated even in the very oldest copies. This practice of using abbreviations in place of certain “sacred names” is referred to as the Nomina Sacra.

Examples include:

English Meaning	Greek Word	Nominative (Subject)	Genitive (Possessive)
God	Θεός	ΘΣ	ΘΥ
Lord	Κύριος	ΚΣ	ΚΥ
Jesus	Ἰησοῦς	ΙΣ	ΙΥ
Christ/Messiah	Χριστός	ΧΣ	ΧΥ

Another abbreviation was the Staurogram, which was the monogram cross  used to abbreviate the word “cross.”

3. Other types of New Testament text

a. Amulets/talismans

Amulets (objects superstitiously used to protect a person from harm) and talismans (objects superstitiously used for good luck) have been found that have a portion of New Testament text written on them. For example, typical talisman contained a copy of the Lord's Prayer and was worn around the neck. At least twenty-four of these exist with New Testament text just from the fifth to seventh century.

b. Ostraca

Ostraca are broken pieces of objects of archeological value that were used as a writing surface. New Testament ostraca are items with New Testament text written on these objects rather than on papyri or parchment. This could be on walls or more typically, on pottery. There has been text found as large as Luke 22:40-72 on limestone and written in the seventh century.

Talismans and ostraca are not generally regarded as valuable in the consideration of what the original text said.

4. Forms of New Testament manuscripts

a. Diglots

Diglots are manuscripts with two languages. The most common New Testament diglot manuscript in the has Greek on one side of the page and Latin on the other. Codex Bezae (c. 400) is the most well known of these Greek/Latin diglots. Also, many early Greek/Coptic diglots exist, including five papyri and twenty-one uncials.

The additional value of diglot manuscripts is that they give us two texts in one, which helps to shed light on the dating of the other text.

b. Palimpsests

A palimpsest (from the Latin for “scraped again”) is a manuscript that has been reused by washing or scraping the original text. The most significant Palimpsest is Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, dated 450 A.D. and containing most of the New Testament.

There is obviously difficulty in reading the original text (known as the “lower text”), and it is common for the New Testament text that was written over to not even be noticed until many years or even centuries have passed. It was typical for palimpsests to not have the second text written directly over the original text but at a right angle. Present technology of ultra violet photography makes deciphering the original text much easier.

There are presently approximately 60 New Testament palimpsests. Fifth century uncials 048 and 068 are even double palimpsests, with the former containing parts of six other literary works besides parts of almost every epistle plus Acts.

c. Supplements

Supplements are the text of the New Testament inserted at a later date in order to replace the part of the original that was lost or damaged. For example, Codex Vaticanus lacks Hebrews after 9:14, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Revelation and was supplemented in the fifteenth century with minuscule 1957. More often, supplements are much closer to the date of the original and are noted with a superscription “s” or “supp” when that text of the primary codex is referenced.

d. Decorated Manuscripts

As time went on, Christians began to make the New Testament manuscripts more attractive. These attempts are referred to as “decorated manuscripts.” Examples include the “purple uncials” which were written around the sixth century with metallic ink on a purple dyed parchment. These four uncials are similar in their Greek text and are designated N, O, S, and F. Minuscules 565 and 1143 are written in gold ink on a purple parchment.

Jerome (347-420), who penned the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible which was the standard for mankind for a thousand years said, “Parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are decked with jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying.”

5. The grouping of New Testament manuscripts

- Gospels. Any manuscript that contains any part of one of the four gospel is designated by the letter e, which is shorthand for Evangelists.
- Acts and general letters. Any manuscript that contains any part of the book of Acts or one of the seven general epistles (James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John or Jude) is designated by the letter a, which is shorthand for Acts.
- Paul's letters (including Hebrews). Any manuscript that contains any part of one of Paul's epistles is designated by the letter p, which is shorthand for Paul. Hebrews is included because the early church viewed Hebrews as written by Paul.
- Revelation. Any manuscript that contains any part of one of Paul's epistles is designated by the letter r, which is shorthand for Revelation.

Manuscripts may contain more than one designation letter. Therefore, if a manuscript contains a part of each of these four groups it is given the designation "eapr".

Here are the totals of the New Testament Manuscripts according to this grouping:

2,123 E
273 AP
222 P
130 R
87 A
76 APR
59 EAPR
11 ER
11 EA
6 PR
5 EP
3 AR
2 EAR

One thing we can conclude from this data is that it appears that the ancient church saw the gospels as the most important part of the New Testament.

6. The arrangement of the New Testament books

When the books of the New Testament were written, they were not immediately compiled and organized. Therefore, it should not surprise us that it took a long time for our present order of books to become standardized. All of the existing papyri are fragmentary and there is only one uncial, Codex Sinaiticus, that contains the entire New Testament. Furthermore, until the time of the minuscules in the second millennium, to say there is a variety to the order of the New Testament books is an understatement.

The four groupings of the New Testament are quite consistent and the Gospels are nearly always first, followed typically by Acts and the general epistles, then the writings of Paul and finally Revelation. However, there are differences within those groups regarding the order of the books.

The Gospels are very commonly found in the order we are used to: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The most common alternative is Matthew, John, Luke and Mark, but that occurs only in two uncials (D, W) and possibly one papyrus (P45).

Paul's letters almost always begin with what is familiar to us: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians and Galatians. Hebrews is the most movable book, appearing in a wide variety of places in Paul's letters, more usually after Philemon or 2 Thessalonians.

The general epistles show the most variety, perhaps due to the question of canonicity of 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John and Jude.

The earlier the manuscript the more fragmentary the manuscript, and the earlier the manuscript the less standardized the order of the books are.

7. Eusebian Canons

Looking at ancient uncial manuscripts it becomes readily apparent how challenging it would be to find specific parts of the New Testament without our familiar chapters (added in thirteenth century) and verses (added in the sixteenth century). Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340) divided each of the four Gospels into sections, with roughly 1,165 sections in the Gospels.

The Eusebian Sections (also known as the Ammonian Sections) were numbered and the number of each section was placed in the margin of the manuscript. These sections became so popular that they are included in nearly all Greek and Latin manuscripts beginning from Codex Alexandrius (c. 400).

Eusebius also devised a system of comparison of the four Gospels. Along with the numbered sections, a letter was assigned to each section that corresponded to a parallel section. This served two primary purposes: (1) finding a section of the Gospels more quickly and (2) assisting the comparison of the similar accounts between the Gospels. This early attempt at cross-referencing was summarized in the Eusebian Tables.

The Eusebian Tables were as follows:

- Table I -- passages found in all four gospels
- Table II -- passages found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke
- Table III -- passages found in Matthew, Luke, and John
- Table IV -- passages found in Matthew, Mark, and John
- Table V -- passages found in Matthew and Luke
- Table VI -- passages found in Matthew and Mark
- Table VII -- passages found in Matthew and John
- Table VIII -- passages found in Mark and Luke
- Table IX -- passages found in Luke and John
- Table X -- passages that had no parallels in the other gospels

An added value to these sections is that they help us to date the manuscripts that do not have the Eusebian canons, such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, both copied prior to Codex Alexandrius.

8. The corrections in the New Testament manuscripts

Ancient New Testament scribes were as aware of differences between the manuscripts as we are today. In fact, as time went on they introduced a systematized means of assigning a scribe to double check for accuracy and rectify any discrepancies. With earlier manuscripts, corrections were made often centuries later.

The vast majority of manuscripts have some degree of correcting. The minuscules, being the most recent manuscripts, show very little correction with the sole exception of the heavily corrected 424. The uncials however often have many corrections. This is due to two major factors: (1) their age and (2) their tendency to not originally include readings from various later additions.

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the most corrected manuscripts, with an estimated 25,000 different corrections being made over the entire Bible. The New Testament was copied by three different scribes and two of them made their own corrections. There appears to be as many as nine or more scribes that made corrections over time to the text of Sinaiticus, mostly between the 5th and 7th centuries. The last corrector made very few changes in the 12th century.

The corrections to manuscripts are noted separately from the original so that we are able to know the progression of the alterations. The original reading is noted with a superscript asterisk and each subsequent correction is noted with a superscript number, beginning with 1. For example, Codex Vaticanus is known by the letter B and had three correctors. Therefore, the original reading would be referenced as B*, the first corrected reading would be referenced as B1, the second corrected reading would be referenced as B2, and the third corrected reading would be referenced as B3.

One would think manuscripts that were heavily corrected would be less helpful to the determination of the original text, but this is not the case. The corrections help us see what the options might be and more importantly, they point us to the changes that took place in the text as the centuries went by.

For example, one of the most poorly copied manuscripts is P66. P66 has most of the Gospel of John and dates from around 200 A.D., and some think as early as 150 A.D. It contains around 450 corrections. One might think that this very large number of corrections makes the manuscript less reliable. However, the vast majority of the errors in P66 are either (1) nonsense readings or (2) singular readings (found only in this manuscript). The original scribe simply was well meaning but not very skilled and his errors are very easy to discern. This actually makes this manuscript far more helpful since we can easily correct for misspellings or textual readings that are not found in any other manuscript.

Our next class will examine the significance of the variant readings of these New Testament manuscripts, along with an approach to determining what the original text actually contained.

9. Application

“Grow in our ability to give a defense of our faith “