Bible Manuscripts

**Introduction:**

We do not have the original autographs of the Bible. However, there are extensive manuscript witnesses that together give us a very accurate copy of the original writings. This short lesson is an examination of the Old and New Testament manuscript witnesses.

**The Old Testament Text**

* Not as vast as the New Testament. Not as comprehensive, nor as ancient
* A large gap of centuries between the time of the originals, and our earliest Hebrew copies
  + However, (as related earlier), the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls clearly indicates the accuracy of the copies we do have.
  + The Hebrew copyists were reverent and very careful in their efforts to preserve the text.
* The major Old Testament witnesses (Hebrew Bible)
  + The Aleppo Codex – Created in Syria in city of same name. Finished in the 10th century. 25% of it destroyed in December 1947 by Arab mobs who were partitioning the United Nations partitioning Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. Smuggled into Jerusalem where it remains.
  + The Leningrad Codex – Oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, the copy was made in Cairo, Egypt in 1010. Now in the National Library in St. Petersburg, Russia. Both the Leningrad and Aleppo Codexes are examples of the Massoretic Text.
  + The Cairo Codex – A copy of the Prophetic books, dating from 895.
  + The Leningrad Codex of the Prophets – Dating from 916. Includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets.
  + British Library Codex of the Pentateuch – Dating from 10th century.
* The present Hebrew text of the Bible relies almost entirely upon the witnesses listed above.
* (**Note:** Most earlier manuscripts were destroyed by Jewish scribes, who had great respect for God’s word. Any copy of the scripture that was damaged or worn was buried ceremonially to preclude its being misused).
* (**Note:** As time has progressed, a study of the Dead Sea scrolls has revealed that the vast majority of those manuscripts are virtually identical to the Massoretic Text.)

**The New Testament Text**

* The original autographs were probably written on papyrus sheets. Such sheets with frequent use would last no longer than a decade or so.
* Early Christians, recognizing their divine authority, were prompted to make many copies. These copies, called manuscripts, make up the witness for the Greek New Testament.
* Two major types of manuscripts
  + Uncials – Earliest. Written in capital letters only. Most significant witnesses.
  + Cursives – Later. More cursive like in appearance, utilizing lower case letters. (These manuscripts had their beginning in the 9th century, and are less important.
* Large Numbers of manuscripts. (Note: The New Testament is the most well attested of all ancient books. Over 5,300 manuscript copies exist. Note: Few are complete. Consider that a hand produced copy of the entire New Testament would be extremely bulky and difficult to use.
* Manuscripts generally fit into several different categories:
  + The Four Gospels
  + Acts and the General Epistles
  + The Epistles of Paul
  + Revelation
* About 650 of the important Uncial manuscripts are known to exist.
  + 95 papyri (50 of which date from 2nd to 4th century)
  + 270 lectionaries (manuscripts designed for reading in public worship)
  + 280 parchment (from 3rd century to 10th century).
* (**Note:** While cursive writing took place in New Testament times, when copied as books in a “book hand”, the practice was to write in the Uncial style. I.E. - large capital letters, without intervening spaces between words, few punctuation marks).
* Important Uncial manuscripts (vellum, almost or entirely complete, from 300-450 A.D.):
  + *Vatican Manuscript* – In Rome since at least 1481. The Catholic church severely limited access until mid 1800’s. A good, dependable copy was not made available until 1890. Contains almost all of the Greek Old and New Testaments. Missing Hebrews, after 9:14, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Revelation. Does not include Mark 16:9-20, though there is a blank column at that location. (759 leaves of the finest vellum, 10 inches square). Considered the most exact copy of the New Testament, though not complete.
  + *Sinaitic Manuscript* – Discovered by Constantin von Tischendorf at St. Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai in 1844. (**Note:** Read Tischendorf’s account of his discovery of the manuscript, page 43 of How We Got the Bible, Lightfoot). It was not until 15 years later that the manuscript could be copied and published, a project completed in 1862. Purchased by the British Museum from the Russian government, it is on prominent display there. (Originally 730 leaves. Only 393 remain – 245 of the Old Testament, and all 148 of the New Testament. 15” square). Oldest of the three.
  + *Alexandrian Manuscript* – Several centuries known to be in Alexandria, from 1627 in the possession of England, now property of the British Museum. Survived Royal Library fire of 1731, as librarian Dr. Richard Bentley was seen in his nightgown and great wig, carrying out one of its four volumes under his arm. Contains Greek Old and New Testaments, mostly complete. (773 leaves. Some of the New Testament missing, including Matthew 1:1-25:6; John 6:50-8:52; 2 Cor. 4:13-12:6. 12” X 10” leaves). Note quite as old as the Vatican or Sinaitic. First of the three discovered.

**Conclusion:**

“**The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning.** And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians.

“Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar’s Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant MSS [manuscripts], but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar’s day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 BC – AD 17) only thirty-five survive, these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus (c. AD 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depend entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant MSS of his minor works Dialogus de Oratoribus, Agricola, Germania all descend from a codex of the tenth century. The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to C. AD 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 480-425 BC). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.” (F.F. Bruce, 1960).