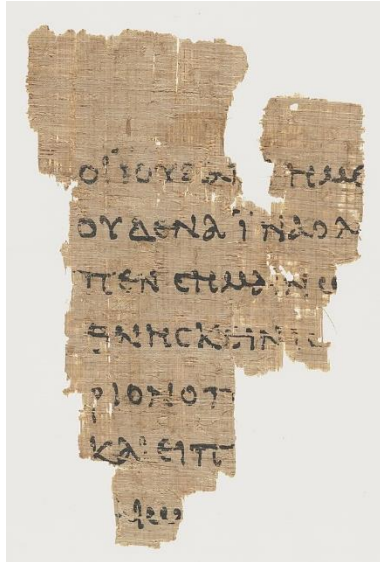


NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

Not all artifacts from the ancient past consist of architecture, pottery and buried objects. Ancient manuscripts, also, are part of the past, and for Christians, the text of the New Testament is the most



p52 (John 18:31-33) is generally agreed upon by scholars as the earliest fragment of a canonical gospel (ca. AD 125)
(University of Manchester, England)

important of all. The original documents of the New Testament all were composed within about half a century (ca. AD 40s through the 90s). None of these original writings (autographs) actually penned by the New Testament writers have survived, but we have very early copies that form the manuscript base for our modern translations of the New Testament, indeed, a far more extensive base than for any other text in the ancient world.

Prior to Gutenberg's invention of movable type (1456), all reproduction of writing was by hand. Naturally, this made lengthy works, such as the New Testament, a laborious and expensive process. It also resulted in minor variations within texts. Today, nearly 6000 manuscripts have survived of hand-copied Greek New Testament texts (either entire or portions).

Before their discovery, there were theories that the Greek New Testament was composed of some sort of special Greek. Clearly, it was significantly different than the works of classical Greek from a few centuries earlier. In fact, as late as the late 1800s some scholars were still advocating that the New Testament was written in a form of Greek that stood alone, a peculiar and unique form, and a few even advocated that it was especially formulated by the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost Greek!). To the contrary, the more recent discovery of the wide array of early Greek manuscripts has demonstrated that

the New Testament was written in a common dialect (*koine*) to be found in all of them. It was not a "spiritual" language at all, or for that matter, even a unique form. It was common Greek as widely spoken and written throughout the 1st century Greco-Roman world.

The Papyri

The documents of the New Testament circulated at first as individual books and letters before they were collected into a single volume (cf. Col. 4:16). While Jews and pagans wrote their documents on scrolls, either papyrus or leather, Christians began writing their documents as codices (i.e., pages bound on one side so that both sides could be used).¹ The oldest of these were written on papyrus sheets, a product not unlike paper, which was created by pressing together and drying the reedy papyrus plants from the Nile valley. Relatively few (less than 100) of these manuscripts have survived, and they come from Egypt, where the hot, arid climate made deterioration much slower. Though some were known prior to the 20th century, their value was largely unrecognized, and they were unavailable for earlier translations of the English Bible.

Of the New Testament papyri, the Chester Beatty and the Bodmer collections rank as most

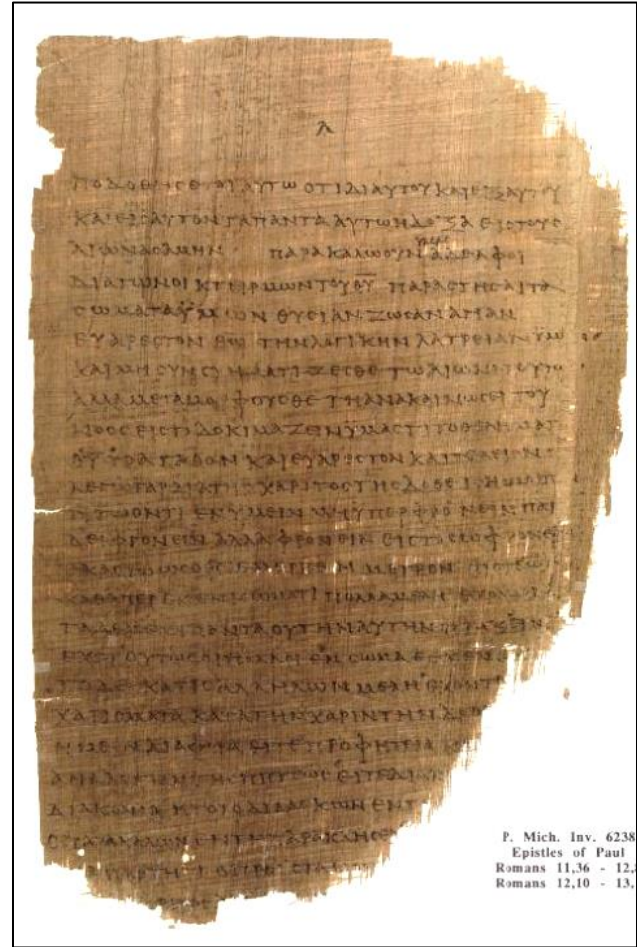
¹ Of the more than 80 known papyri of the New Testament, only four are written on scrolls. All the rest are codices.

NT ARCHAEOLOGY

important, because they are older, relatively more complete, and in better states of preservation than the others. Beatty and Bodmer were important collectors, and their manuscript collections were transferred to libraries and universities beginning in the 1930s. Today, the Chester Beatty Papyri reside in Dublin, Ireland and at the University of Michigan. The Chester Beatty collection includes p^{45} (portions of the four Gospels and Acts; ca. AD late 200s), p^{46} (Paul's letters, except those to Timothy and Titus, plus the Book of Hebrews; ca. AD 200) and p^{47} (portions of Revelation; ca. AD late 200s). The Bodmer collection, which resides in Geneva at the Bodmer Library and the Vatican Library in Rome, includes p^{66} (Gospel of John; ca. AD 200), p^{72} and p^{75} (portions of John and Luke; ca. 3rd century).

The Uncials

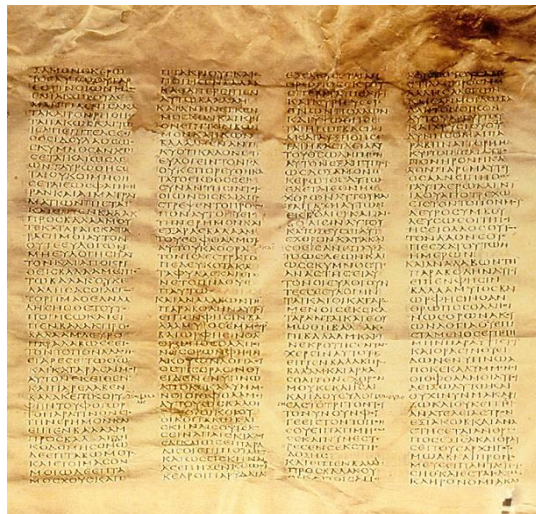
Early texts of the New Testament written on parchment (leather from cattle, sheep, goats, antelope) proved to be much more stable than those written on papyri. By the early 300s AD, after Christianity became a legal religion,



P. Mich. Inv. 6238
Epistles of Paul
Romans 11,36 - 12,
Romans 12,10 - 13,

Romans 11:36ff., p^{46} , ca. AD 200

(University of Michigan)



Page of Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, the oldest complete Bible
(British Library, London)

parchment had surpassed papyri as the preferred writing surface, even though it was more expensive to produce. The style of writing, called uncial, was in all uppercase letters. There was no punctuation nor even word divisions, such as we are accustomed to in the modern world. Nevertheless, the uncials, especially because of their durability, are very important. Nearly 300 uncials have been discovered, and their dates range from the 300s to the 800s. Of them, three are probably the most important, since they are early and largely complete.

Codex Vaticanus (coded B 03), dating to the 4th century, resides in the Vatican library in Rome. It contains the Septuagint Old Testament and most of the New Testament. **Codex Sinaiticus** (coded \aleph 01), also dating to the 4th century, resides in the British Library

in London. It contains most of the Septuagint Old Testament, all of the New Testament, and two other early Christian writings (the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas). **Codex Alexandrinus** (coded A 02), dating from the 5th century, also in the British Library, contains both the Old and New Testaments.

The Minuscules

The third category of Greek manuscripts after the papyri and the uncials are the minuscules. By the 9th century, the uncial style was being replaced by a form of a running script. The earliest example dates to AD 835 (minuscule 461, Public Library, St. Petersburg, Russia). While uncials are similar to our uppercase letters, the minuscules are similar to our lowercase cursive letters. The minuscules outnumber the uncials by about 10 to 1, and some 2795 have survived since the 9th century. Though not as old as the manuscripts in the previous categories, some were copied from very ancient texts and so preserve an ancient form.

The Lexionaries

Lexionaries are church compilations of selected readings from Scripture arranged according to the Christian calendar. Following synagogue tradition, the early church appointed scriptural lessons to be read for Saturday and Sunday services as well as for the daily office on other days of the week. About 2200 such lexionaries using Greek portions of the New Testament have survived. The Saturday-Sunday sequence of lessons may be as old as the mid-2nd century, while the weekday system seems to have developed after Constantine in the 4th century.

Quotations by the Early Fathers

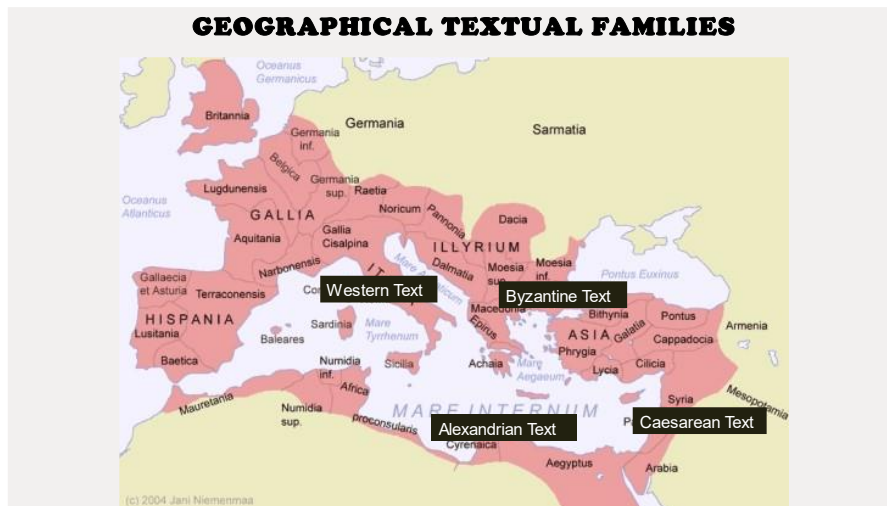
Quotations abound in the patristic writers of the first several centuries of the Christian church. However, these are generally of lesser value than the previous manuscripts, since sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether a passage is a pure quotation or an allusion or a paraphrase. The church fathers may have quoted from memory (which, admittedly, can be faulty), though they may have copied from existing biblical texts as well.

Textual Families

The autographs of the New Testament were penned by Paul and Luke and others or dictated in shorthand to an amanuensis, who then put the document in its final form (cf. Ro. 16:22; 1 Pe. 5:12; 1 Co. 16:21; Ga. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17). Before distribution, the original author would likely review, edit, and then sign off on the official edition in his own handwriting (1 Co. 16:21; Ga. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17). He may even have kept a copy in a special letter book for reference when composing subsequent correspondence (possibly alluded to in 2 Ti. 4:13).

The reproduction of biblical texts was gradual. Soon after they were composed, Christians began making copies of the texts owned by neighboring churches (cf. Col. 4:16). Some of the early papyri demonstrate that various New Testament books were collected in groups, such as, the Gospels and Acts, Paul's letters, and the non-Pauline letters.

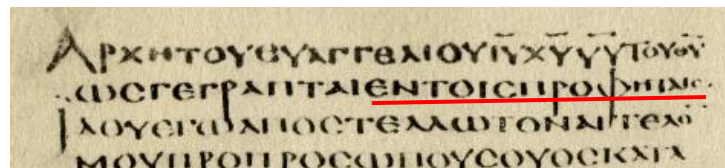
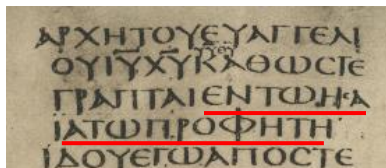
Yet a further development is that the texts of the New Testament were copied and recopied in various geographical locations. Many of these copies were produced during the four decades of relative peace from the middle of the 3rd century until AD 303, when severe persecutions began again during the reign of Diocletian. The persecution under Diocletian saw the destruction of many churches and the public burning of Christian manuscripts. After the emperor Constantine's



conversion to Christianity in AD 312, more and more copies were needed due to the shortage. Hence, with the new Christian freedoms provided by Constantine, the bishops were able to organize scriptoria (copying houses) where an exemplar (the prototype text available) was used to produce large quantities of copies. Irregularities in

the exemplar (whether real or imagined) were corrected, and all the copies bore the characteristics of the model text being used.

Consequently, any copies of biblical texts in various parts of the world came to share the same characteristics as the other texts from the same region. This means that a textual variant in one part of the world tended to be reproduced in later copies in the same geographical area. Today, textual scholars speak of at least two or more major possible text types in the New Testament: the *Alexandrian* (preserved by churches in Egypt) and the *Byzantine* (preserved by churches in the eastern part of the empire). In addition, some scholars see a *Western* text type preserved in the Western part of the Empire (chiefly Rome), and others argue for even other text types, such as, the *Caesarean* (produced in Palestine).



EXAMPLE OF A TEXTUAL VARIATION: In Mark 1:2, 4th century Codex Sinaiticus (left) reads, "...in Isaiah the prophet," while 5th century Codex Alexandrinus (right) reads, "...in the prophets." The KJV follows Alexandrinus and all modern versions follow Sinaiticus.

Early Translations

Beginning in about AD 180, the New Testament documents began being translated into other languages in the Roman world. The ones that are most valuable, of course, are those that were translated directly from Greek texts of the Bible. The most important early translations are: Old Latin (late 2nd century), Vulgate (4th century), Syriac (there are several Syriac Versions from the 4th century and later), Coptic (3rd or 4th century), Gothic (4th century), Armenian (5th century), Ethiopic (6th century and later), and Georgian (5th century and later). In the West, Jerome's Latin Vulgate emerged as the standard translation for approximately a millennium until the Protestant Reformation. Revived interest in translation, augmented by the invention of the printing press, led to new translations of the Bible by Luther (German), Wycliffe (Middle English), and Tyndale (Modern English), among others.