

Bible Manuscripts by Century: From Papyri to the King James Version and Beyond

What manuscripts each era had access to, what Bible they used, and how the transmission history developed through the 19th century

PERIOD	KEY MANUSCRIPTS AVAILABLE	MANUSCRIPT TYPE / LANGUAGE	WHAT WAS KNOWN / ACCESSIBLE	DOMINANT BIBLE IN USE	SIGNIFICANCE FOR TRANSMISSION HISTORY
Early Church & Patristic Era					
2nd–3rd Century (c. 100–300 AD)	Papyrus 52 (P52, c. 125 AD) Papyrus 66 (P66, c. 200 AD) Papyrus 75 (P75, c. 175–225 AD) Chester Beatty Papyri (P45, P46, P47) Old Latin versions (Vetus Latina) Old Syriac (Curetonian, Sinaiticus Syriacus)	Greek papyri (fragmentary) Early versional translations No bound codices yet	Scattered papyrus fragments circulating among churches; individual books rather than complete Bibles. Origen's Hexapla (c. 240) assembles OT in 6 columns. No single authoritative text — regional textual families forming (Alexandrian, Western, Caesarean).	No single Bible — individual scrolls/codices of separate books. Septuagint (LXX) for OT. Various Greek NT texts.	The papyri discovered in the 19th–20th centuries show that the NT text was already remarkably stable even in this earliest period. P52 (a fragment of John 18) is the oldest known NT manuscript. These papyri were completely unknown to the medieval and Reformation church and only became available to scholars after 1750–1900.
4th Century (c. 300–400 AD)	Codex Sinaiticus (c. 330–360 AD) — complete NT, most of OT Codex Vaticanus (c. 300–325 AD) — nearly complete Bible Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400–440 AD, completed early 5th c.) Peshitta Syriac (standardized c. 400) Vetus Latina widely copied	Vellum codices (bound books) Greek uncials Syriac and Latin versions	Constantine commissioned 50 complete Bibles (Eusebius, Life of Constantine) — likely vellum codices. Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are probably products of this era. Jerome begins Vulgate translation (382 AD). First complete Bibles in codex form now exist. Canon debates ongoing — Eusebius lists disputed books.	Septuagint (LXX) in East. Vetus Latina in West. Jerome's Vulgate begun 382 AD (completed c. 405).	Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus — the two most important NT manuscripts in existence — were produced in this century. Vaticanus sat in the Vatican library largely unused until the 19th century. Sinaiticus was unknown until Tischendorf discovered it at St. Catherine's Monastery in 1844/1859. Neither was available to Erasmus, the KJV translators, or any Reformation scholar.
5th–9th Century (c. 400–900 AD)	Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400–440) Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (c. 450) Codex Bezae (c. 400–450) — Gospels/Acts, Greek-Latin Codex Washingtonianus (c. 400–500) Vulgate (Jerome, completed c. 405) Peshitta widely used in East Codex Amiatinus (c. 700) — oldest complete Vulgate MS	Vellum codices Greek uncials and Latin Bilinguals (Greek-Latin) Syriac versions	Jerome's Vulgate becomes standard in the West by the 6th–7th century. The great uncial codices exist but are largely inaccessible — held in monasteries, not consulted comparatively. Scholars work almost entirely from the Vulgate in the West. Bede, Isidore, Gregory all cite the Vulgate exclusively. Greek NT virtually unknown in the Latin West.	Vulgate (Latin) dominant in West. Peshitta in Syriac East. LXX in Greek East.	Codex Bezae — a remarkable bilingual MS with a distinctive 'Western' text type full of unique readings — was donated to Cambridge by Beza in 1581 and thereafter available to scholars. Codex Alexandrinus arrived in England as a gift to Charles I in 1627 — too late for the KJV but used by subsequent scholars. The Vulgate's dominance during this period meant the Greek text was essentially frozen out of Western scholarship for centuries.
10th–14th Century (c. 900–1400 AD)	Byzantine majority text manuscripts (thousands of minuscules copied) Codex Leningradensis (1008–1009) — oldest complete Hebrew OT Aleppo Codex (c. 920 AD) — oldest Hebrew OT (nearly complete) Codex Reuchlini and other minuscules Paris Vulgate (13th c. standardized) Hebrew OT widely copied in Jewish communities	Greek minuscule manuscripts Massoretic Hebrew text (standardized) Vulgate copies proliferating	The Byzantine text type — a relatively standardized, smoothed Greek NT — dominates in the East through thousands of minuscule copies. The Massoretic Hebrew OT is stabilized by the Massoretes by the 10th century and is the text Reformation scholars will eventually return to. In the West, the Vulgate reigns absolutely. No significant new manuscript discoveries — scholars work from the texts they have.	Vulgate in West. Byzantine Greek text in East. Massoretic Hebrew OT in Jewish communities.	The Leningradensis and Aleppo Codex preserve the Massoretes' carefully pointed Hebrew text that became the basis for all modern OT translations including the KJV's Old Testament. The thousands of Byzantine minuscules copied in this period form what later became known as the Textus Receptus tradition — the manuscript base Erasmus and the KJV translators worked from. These were the most available manuscripts because they were the most recently copied.
Renaissance, Reformation & Early Modern Era					

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15th Century (c. 1400–1500 AD)	Gutenberg Bible (1455) — printed Vulgate Codex Vaticanus (in Vatican, largely inaccessible) Numerous Byzantine minuscules Complutensian Polyglot begun (completed 1514–17) Hebrew OT printed (Soncino, 1488)	Printed books begin replacing manuscripts Latin Vulgate dominant Hebrew OT now in print	Gutenberg's printing press (c. 1440) transforms transmission — Bibles can now be mass produced. The first printed Hebrew OT (Soncino, 1488) makes the Massoretic text widely available to Christian Hebraists for the first time. Cardinal Ximenes commissions the Complutensian Polyglot — the first printed Hebrew/Greek/Latin parallel Bible. The Greek NT text is still only available in manuscripts.	Printed Vulgate dominant. First printed Hebrew OT (1488). Greek NT still only in MS.	The printing press is the single most transformative event in the history of Bible transmission since the codex replaced the scroll. The availability of the Hebrew OT in print directly enabled the Reformation's return to the Hebrew text. The Complutensian Polyglot (finished 1514–17, published 1520) placed Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin in parallel columns — the first critical biblical scholarship tool in print.
16th Century (c. 1500–1600 AD) Erasmus → KJV Preparation	Erasmus Greek NT (Novum Instrumentum, 1516) — based on ~6 late Byzantine MSS Complutensian Polyglot (printed 1520) Robert Estienne (Stephanus) Greek NT editions (1546–1551) Beza's Greek NT editions (1565–1611) Codex Bezae donated to Cambridge (1581) Codex Alexandrinus arrives England (1627 — early 17th c.) Textus Receptus tradition established	Printed Greek NT (from Byzantine MSS) Printed Hebrew OT (Massoretic) Polyglot editions Latin Vulgate still widely used	Erasmus's Greek NT — based on only 6 late minuscule manuscripts hastily collated — becomes the foundation of the Reformation's biblical scholarship and eventually the KJV. The Textus Receptus ('Received Text') is codified through Erasmus, Estienne, and Beza's successive editions. Luther translates from Erasmus's Greek; Tyndale translates from it into English. Tregelles later called Erasmus's method 'a manuscript picked up in a corner.' Codex Vaticanus is known to exist but Erasmus is denied full access.	Erasmus's printed Greek NT. Tyndale NT (1526). Luther Bible (1534). Geneva Bible (1560). Bishops' Bible (1568). All based on Textus Receptus.	The irony of the Reformation era is that its great Bible translations — Luther, Tyndale, Geneva, KJV — were all based on a relatively thin manuscript tradition (late Byzantine minuscules) while the oldest and best manuscripts (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus) were either locked away or undiscovered. The Textus Receptus served the church well but represented a fraction of the available manuscript evidence. This would only become apparent in the 19th century.
17th Century (c. 1600–1700 AD) King James Version	King James Bible (1611) — based on Textus Receptus (Beza's 1598 edition) Codex Alexandrinus arrives in England (1627) Walton's London Polyglot (1654–1657) — assembles multiple texts Brian Walton collates many MSS for Polyglot John Mill begins NT manuscript collation (published 1707)	Printed Textus Receptus First significant manuscript collation work begins Codex Alexandrinus now available	The KJV (1611) is produced by 47 scholars using primarily Beza's Greek NT, Tyndale/Geneva tradition, and the Bishops' Bible. Codex Alexandrinus arrives in England as a gift to Charles I in 1627 — 16 years too late for the KJV. John Mill spends 30 years collating 100 manuscripts, publishing 30,000 variant readings in 1707 — the first systematic demonstration that the NT manuscript tradition was more complex than the Textus Receptus suggested.	King James Bible (1611) — the dominant English Bible for 300 years. Based on Textus Receptus.	The KJV is the summit of the Textus Receptus tradition and the most influential English book ever printed. But within 16 years of its publication, Codex Alexandrinus arrived in England and scholars began to realize the manuscript tradition was richer and more complex than the KJV translators had access to. Mill's 1707 collation shocked readers who assumed the NT text was uniform — but his 30,000 variants were largely matters of spelling and word order, with no doctrine affected.
Modern Textual Criticism & Discovery					
18th Century (c. 1700–1800 AD)	John Mill's collation published (1707, 30,000 variants) Richard Bentley proposes critical text (1720) Johann Bengel's critical edition (1734) Johann Wettstein's critical apparatus (1751–1752) Codex Vaticanus partially published (1809, first full collation 1868) Griesbach's critical text (1775–1777) — first to challenge TR systematically	Growing manuscript collation Textus Receptus still dominant in churches Scholarship increasingly aware of variants	Textual criticism emerges as a formal discipline. Griesbach classifies manuscripts into three text types (Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine) — a framework still used today. He is the first scholar to systematically argue that the Textus Receptus is not the best text. The Enlightenment's philological methods are applied to the NT. Church use still entirely dominated by KJV in England and America, Luther Bible in Germany.	KJV dominant in English world. Luther Bible in Germany. Textus Receptus still the scholarly standard, but increasingly challenged.	The 18th century is the century when scholars began to realize that the oldest manuscripts — particularly Alexandrian text type witnesses like Vaticanus — often differ from the Textus Receptus, and that older generally means closer to the original. This set up the revolution of the 19th century. Griesbach's work directly influenced Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Westcott-Hort.

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<p>19th Century (c. 1800–1900 AD)</p>	<p>Codex Sinaiticus discovered by Tischendorf (1844/1859) at St. Catherine's Monastery Codex Vaticanus fully collated and published (1868–1881) Tischendorf's critical text (8th edition, 1869–1872) Tregelles critical text (1857–1872) Westcott-Hort Greek NT (1881) — eclipses Textus Receptus in scholarship Revised Version (1881–1885) — first major English revision of KJV using critical text Papyrus discoveries beginning in Egypt (Chester Beatty, Oxyrhynchus) Dead Sea Scrolls region surveys begin</p>	<p>Ancient papyri Great uncial codices now fully available Systematic critical apparatus Modern printing enables wide scholarly access</p>	<p>Tischendorf's discovery of Codex Sinaiticus at St. Catherine's Monastery (finding leaves in a wastepaper basket in 1844, then the full codex in 1859) is the most dramatic manuscript discovery of the modern era. Westcott and Hort's 1881 Greek NT, built primarily on Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, displaces the Textus Receptus in academic scholarship. The Revised Version (1881) is the first English Bible to break from the KJV/TR tradition. The manuscript tradition is now understood to be vastly richer than any previous generation had access to.</p>	<p>KJV still dominant in churches. Revised Version (1881) introduces critical text to English readers. Scholars now working from Westcott-Hort rather than Textus Receptus.</p>	<p>The 19th century is the pivotal century in Bible manuscript history. In 80 years the church went from having essentially the Textus Receptus as its only scholarly Greek text to having Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and a critical apparatus of hundreds of manuscripts. This directly produced the modern Bible translation era — every major 20th-century translation (RSV, NASB, NIV, ESV) is based on the critical text tradition pioneered in this century, not the Textus Receptus behind the KJV.</p>