

Finer Grounds

Can We Trust Our Bibles? (Part 3)

Over the last few studies we have considered the idea of whether or not we can trust our Bible. We began with a study of our Bible's claim of inspiration, and the internal evidences that it is, in fact, the inspired word of God. From there, we considered our Old Testament text specifically. How did it come to be? It was written so long ago, how can we be sure that what we have is really what God intended? In this study, we are going to look specifically at our New Testament text, and the evidences we have to affirm that what we have is truly the inspired word of God.

What we consider to be the New Testament came into being gradually, although it was written over a much shorter time span than the Old Testament. To begin, let's look at some basic facts regarding our New Testament text.

- The New Testament was written over a period of about 50 years, from approximately 50 A.D. to 100 A.D.
- It is comprised mostly of letters written by inspired men and addressed to various individuals or congregations of the church.
- From the very beginning, these letters were looked upon by those who read them as being the authoritative word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13).
- They were read in the assemblies of the church – 1 Thessalonians 5:27, "I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers."
- These letters were then exchanged among the various congregations – Colossians 4:16, "And when this letter has been read

among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter for Laodicea."

- In addition, the personal history of Jesus' life and teachings were recorded by eyewitnesses – Matthew, Mark and John, and by one who wrote from his own personal research and investigations into these eyewitness testimonies – Luke.
- The book of Acts was a natural outgrowth of the events recorded in the gospel accounts.

Do we consider the seriousness of these eyewitness accounts? Many over the years have accused the apostles of lying to protect Jesus' reputation. However, all of these men save one (the apostle John) died a painful death as a martyr for the cause of Christ. Would these men, as eye witnesses, have been willing to die for what they knew was a lie?

Have you ever studied the books of Acts and Luke together? If so, did you take care to notice the personal pronouns in Acts? When, "I, we," have seen, Luke is traveling with the apostles, when it changes to, "they," he has stayed behind.

As with our study of the Old Testament manuscripts, it is very important to be able to date the manuscripts that our modern New Testament was translated from.

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Why would this impact the reliability of the Scriptures?

The New Testament manuscripts are much easier to date than Old Testament manuscripts. Many of them actually have the date written on them, and the others are easily identifiable by their writing style.

The earliest and most important manuscripts are called the, "uncials." These are written in large letters with no punctuation. Why is this so important? For example:

- Acts 2:38, "And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
- Acts 2:38, "And Peter said to them, "Repent and BE BAPTIZED every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF YOUR SINS, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

What difference was there in these two verses?

It was all in where the emphasis is placed through capitalization. In the uncials, it was strictly the word of God where there would be nothing but context to determine how people understood the Scripture.

Do you believe that improper punctuation, verse/chapter breaks/ capitalization, etc. influence people's understanding of Scripture today?

What are ways we can help ensure that we are not unduly influenced by such things in our personal study?

While there are other important manuscripts called the minuscules, some of our most important manuscripts are uncial manuscripts. These are vellum manuscripts dating from 300-450 A.D. Today we have approximately 5,300 manuscripts, and 650 of these date from the 3-8th century placing them close to the time of Christ.

There are three of these, and they contain not only all of the New Testament, but much of the Old Testament as well. They are called the Vaticanus, the Sinaiticus and the Alexandrianus.

As suggested by the name, the Vaticanus has been located in the Vatican in Rome since 1481. It is from the 4th century A.D.

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For hundreds of years, the Vatican refused to allow any scholars to publish the contents of this manuscript. To view the contents, scholars had to agree not to copy a single word, and were searched and all writing materials were taken away. Finally, in 1867, the scholar Tischendorf was able to publish the most perfect edition of the Vatican that had yet appeared. In 1889-1890, a complete photographic facsimile made its contents available to all scholars.

The Vatican Manuscript contains in Greek almost all of both the Old and New Testaments. It is the most complete copy of a New Testament manuscript known to exist.

The Sinaiticus is of almost equal importance with the Vaticanus – the only difference is that it is not as complete. It was discovered by Tischendorf at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai in 1844-1859. He had permission to study the ancient manuscripts in the library of the Monastery but found nothing of real interest. He accidentally happened to see a large basket full of manuscripts sitting in the floor, and when he asked, he was told that it was worthless faded material scheduled for the fire. In that basket, he found one of the greatest Biblical finds of the centuries – what has come to be called the, "Sinaitic Manuscript."

It is now on display in the British Library in London, England. It contains 245 leaves of the Old Testament and 148 leaves of the New Testament and is the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament that has been found to date.

In 1976 a fire gutted part of St. Catherine's Monastery. On May 26, 1976 during the removal of dirt and debris, a pile of manuscripts was found that had apparently been buried more than 200 years earlier when a ceiling collapsed. Three years later, news of the discovery leaked out and was reported by Professor James Charlesworth. Found were more than a dozen

Old Testament leaves missing from the Sinaitic Manuscript, plus some 4,000 other manuscripts on all kinds of subjects – most in Greek.

Next we will look at the Alexandrianus, called such because it is known to have been in Alexandria, Egypt for several centuries. It was, "probably," brought from Alexandria to Constantinople by Cyril Lucar who became the Greek patriarch of Constantinople.

Lucar presented the codex to Charles the 1st of England on January 1, 1627 and it became a part of the Royal Library. Then in 1731 there was a disastrous fire at the Royal Library and the librarian, Dr. Richard Bently, was seen in his nightgown and a great wig carrying the volume out under his arm.

In 1757 it became part of the part of the British Museum in London. It contains both the Old Testament and the New Testament, mostly complete, but over the years it has suffered some loss – 10 leaves are missing from the Old Testament, and most of Matthew, two chapters in John, and eight chapters of 2 Corinthians are missing.

While certainly these three manuscripts are the most vital in proving the accuracy of our modern texts, there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 5,000 other manuscripts that are available. The only difference is that the other manuscripts are not as old, or as complete.

Once again, in all of these manuscripts, there is not a single contradiction to what we consider our New Testament text today. Once again, we see the providence of God in ensuring through time, natural disasters, and any number of man-made obstacles, that we have his inspired word to guide us still today.

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The question then becomes..

What are we doing with it?

Would we be like Dr. Bentley and risk our own lives to carry God's word out of a burning building?

These ancient manuscripts are considered so valuable that they are kept in high security museums. How do we treat our copies of God's Word? Do we keep them on a shelf collecting dust? Do we throw them on the floor when done with them? Or do we, like those who have gone before us, risk everything to preserve the inspired word of God not in a class case, but in our hearts and the hearts of our children?
