

Textual Criticism

*An Introduction to the film *Fragments of Truth**

Sunday, 24 March 2019, First Session

Introduction

One of the greatest tragedies in the modern-day history of Christianity [1880-present] is that church goers have not been educated about the history of the New Testament text. In fact, they are so misinformed that many do not even realize that the Hebrew text lies behind our English Old Testament, and the Koiné Greek text lies behind our English New Testament. Sadly, many seminaries that train pastors for today's churches have also required little or no studies in the history of the Old and New Testament texts.

There are presently critics of the Bible who contend, and do so accurately, that the original manuscripts of Old and New Testament books no longer exist. Consequently, there are actually no criticisms being directed at the Bible itself. Instead, they assert, since there are no extant "autographs" or "first editions" of the Bible then there is nothing to critique and therefore the Bible may be dismissed as an extinct number of ancient writings whose content is unknown. They assert therefore the claims of Judaism and Christianity may be dismissed out of hand as inauthentic.

Textual Criticism Defined

New Testament textual criticism is the study of families of manuscripts, especially the Greek New Testament, as well as versions (a translation of the New Testament in another language), lectionaries (a book containing readings from the Bible for Christian church services), and patristic quotations (New Testament references from early Christian writers such as the Apostolic Fathers, including Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna), along with internal evidence, in order to determine which reading is the original. Comparing any two copies of a document even a few pages long will reveal variant readings. "A textual variant is simply any difference from a standard text (e.g., a printed text) that involves spelling, word order, omission, addition, substitution, or a total rewrite of the text."



When we use the term “textual criticism,” we are not referring to something negative. In this instance, “criticism,” is a reference to a careful, measured, and painstaking study and analysis of the internal and external evidence for producing our New Testament Greek text, generally called a “critical text.” The goal of New Testament textual scholars today is to recover the earliest text *possible*, while the objective of the remaining few, such as the authors of this book, is to get back to the *ipissima verba* (“the very words”) of the original author.

An investigation into the enormous supply of Greek manuscripts, as well as the ancient versions in other languages, shows that they have preserved for us the text of the Word of God.

Throughout the period of the first five books of the Bible penned by Moses (beginning in the late sixteenth century [B.C.]), and down to the time of the printing press (1455 [A.D.]—almost 3,000 years—many forms of material have been used to receive the writing. Material such as bricks, sheets of papyrus, animal skin, broken pottery, metal, wooden tablets with or without wax, and much more have been used to pen or copy God’s Word. The following are some of the tools and materials used to produce a manuscript:

Stylus: The stylus was used to write on a waxed codex tablet. The stylus could be made of bone, metal, or ivory. It would be sharpened on one end for the purpose of writing and have a rounded knob on the other for making corrections.

Reed Pen: The quill pen was used with ink to write on papyrus or parchment manuscripts. **Κάλαμος** (*kálamos*) is the Greek word for “pen.” (3 John 13) There is no doubt that all the early extant papyrus manuscripts were copied with a reed pen.

Quill Pen: The quill pen came into use long after the reed pen. Quill would have been unsatisfactory for writing on papyrus, but parchment would have been an excellent surface for receiving writing from a quill pen. History shows that as parchment more fully displaced papyrus, the quill pen likewise replaced the reed pen.

Papyrus: Papyrus was the writing material used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans that was made from the pith of the stem of a water plant. It was cut into strips, with one layer laid out horizontally and the other vertically. Sometimes it was covered with a cloth and then beaten with a mallet. Scholarship has also suggested that paste may have been used between layers, and then a large stone would be placed on top until the materials were dry.



Typically, a sheet of papyrus would be between 6–9 inches in width and 12–15 inches long. These sheets were then glued end to end until scribes had enough length to copy the book they were working on. The writing was done only on the horizontal side, and it was rolled so that the writing would be on the inside. The scribe would have used a reed pen to write on the papyrus sheets. Papyrus was the main material used for writing until about 300 A.D.

NOTE: Moisture is the enemy of papyrus, and it causes them to disintegrate over time. This is why the papyrus manuscripts that have survived have come from the dry sands of Egypt. Moreover, it seems not to have entered the minds of the early Christians to preserve their documents, because their solution to the loss of manuscripts was to just make more copies. Fortunately, the process of making copies transitioned to the more durable animal skins, which would last much longer. Those that have survived especially from the fourth century A.D. and earlier, are the path to restoring the original Greek New Testament.¹

Animal Skins or Parchment: About the fourth century A.D., Bible manuscripts made of papyrus began to be superseded by the use of vellum, a high-quality parchment made from calfskin, kidskin, or lambskin. Manuscripts such as the famous Codex Sinaiticus [includes the whole of the New Testament] and Codex Vaticanus [Matthew, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews 1:1–9, James–Jude] of the fourth century A.D. are parchment, or vellum, codices. This use of parchment over papyrus were many, such as (1) it was much easier to write on smooth parchment, (2) one could write on both sides, (3) parchment lasted much longer, and (4) when desired, old writing could be scraped off and the parchment reused.

Scroll or Roll: The scroll dominated until the beginning of the second century A.D., at which time the papyrus codex was replacing it. Papyrus enjoyed another two centuries of use until it was replaced with animal skin (vellum), which proved to be a far better writing material.

¹ J. H. Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 11.



The writing on a scroll was done in 2-3-inch columns, it opened, or unrolled, only partially. Although movies and television have portrayed the scroll being opened while holding it vertically, this was not the case; scrolls were opened horizontally. For the Greek or Latin reader, it would be rolled to the left as those languages were written left to right. The Jewish reader would roll it to the right as Hebrew was written right to left.

The difficulty of using a scroll should be apparent. If one had a long book (such as Isaiah) and were to attempt to locate a particular passage, it would not be use-friendly.

Codex: The trunk of a tree that bears leaves only at its apex was called a *caudex* in Latin. This name—modified to *codex*—would be applied to a tablet of wood that had raised edges, with a coat of wax placed within those raised edges. The dried wax would then be used to receive writing with a stylus. We might compare it to the schoolchild’s slate such as seen in some Hollywood Western movies. Around the fifth century B.C., some of these were being used and attached by strings that were run through the edges. It is because these bound tablets resembled a tree trunk that they were to take on the name “codex.”

This bulky item also was not user-friendly! Sometime later, it would be the Romans who would develop a lighter, more flexible material, the parchment notebook, which would fill the need before the development of the later book-form codex. The Latin word *membranae* (skins) is the name given to such notebooks of parchment. In fact, at 2 Timothy 4:13 the apostle Paul requested of Timothy that he “bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books [scrolls], and above all the “parchments” [**μεμβράνας** (*membránas*): Greek spelling].” One might ask why Paul used a Latin word (transliterated in Greek)? Undoubtedly it was due to the fact that there was no Greek word that would serve as an equivalent to what he was requesting. It was only later that the transliterated “codex” was brought into the Greek language as a reference to what we would know as a book.



Ink: The ink of the ancient manuscripts was usually one of two kinds. There was ink made of a mixture of soot and gum. These were sold in the form of a bar, which was dissolved in water in an inkwell, and produced a very black ink. There was also ink made out of nutgalls,² which resulted in a rusty-brown color. With the semi-professional and professional scribe, each character was written with care. Thus, writing was a slow, tedious, and often difficult task.³

Pulpit Application of Textual Criticism

When a pastor presents his Bible study, he may subscribe to the principle of going back to the original languages of Scripture, the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the *koiné* Greek for the New.

In doing so, he is alerting his congregation that the Bible was not written in English, but, rather, in these two languages. His presentation may include the Hebrew or Greek word, the part of speech presented, if a verb, its analysis, and quote a definition from a Hebrew or Greek dictionary or lexicon. Then he will strive to define the use of that word in context to provide a deeper understanding of its impact on the passage. In a way, he is performing the task of textual criticism on that word and a fuller meaning of the sentence or passage in which it appears.

While addressing a certain word in a verse, the pastor may say, “The original Greek word found here is” and then cite it followed by its definition. This procedure expands the understanding of the word beyond the singular word found in the English translation. He can then authenticate the definition by citing his source or referencing it in a footnote.

Such an approach is an application of textual criticism. By citing a dictionary or a lexicon, the pastor has applied the efforts of textual critics who established the definition of the word in the time it was used in Scripture.

² “A nutlike gall. Nutgalls on certain oak trees were formally used as a source of tannic acid for making ink and dye” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed. (2016), s.v. “nutgall.”)

³ Don Wilkins and Edward D. Andrews, *The Text of the New Testament: The Science and Art of Textual Criticism* (Cambridge, Oh.: Christian Publishing House, 2017), 24–30.



Those who are experts in textual criticism have done their research and usually publish their discoveries in textbooks. These works provide the process and procedure of how manuscripts or fragments were analyzed in order to verify and date the authenticity of their discoveries.

New Testament Manuscripts Plus Its Collection of Fragments

In the chart below, the **Work** of famous classical **Authors** are displayed revealing the **Date Written**, the **Earliest Known Manuscript** followed by the **Time Gap** between the original work and the earliest know copy. The final column, **New**, displays the number of complete copies presently collected.

A COMPARISON OF ANCIENT WORKS WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

Author	Work	Date Written	Earliest Known MSS	Time Gap	Old No.	New
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	c. 400 BC	400	643	1,757
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480–425 BC	10th C	1,350	8	109
Sophocles	Plays	496–406 BC	3rd C BC	100-200	100	193
Plato	Tetralogies	400 BC	895	1,300	7	210
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100-44 BC	9th C	950	10	251
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 BC–AD 17	Early 5th C	400	1 Partial, 19 copies	150
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	AD 100	1st half:850, 2nd: 1050 (AD 1100)	750–950	20	2 + 31 15 th C
Pliny, the Elder	<i>Natural History</i>	AD 49–79	5th C fragment: 1; Rem. 14–15th C	400 (750)	7	200
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460–400 BC	3rd C BC (AD 900)	200 (1,350)	8	96
Demosthenes	Speeches	300 BC	Some fragments from 1 C. BC. (AD 1100)	1,100+ (1,400)	200	340
NT		AD 50–100	AD 130 (or less)	40	5,366	5,795

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The number of complete, New Testament copies in *koiné* Greek is 5,795. Its nearest competitor is Homer 's *Iliad* at 1,757.



Almost 2,000 years have elapsed since the original autographs of the New Testament were written, none of which survive today. The question arises as to how close to the original writings are the copies presently available? The answer is astonishing: 5,686⁴ Greek manuscripts (wholly or partially) plus 19,284 in other languages, totaling 24,970 manuscripts exist today. The degree of variation among these manuscripts is incredibly small. Textual scholars Westcott and Hort estimated that only sixty variants (or 2 percent) in this vast collection of documents had any significance and none adversely affected the intended meaning of the biblical subject matter.

Therefore, they concluded that the New Testament manuscripts presently existing have been duplicated with 98 percent accuracy. No copy of manuscripts written by other ancient authors duplicates its original as accurately as those of the New Testament, some of which date back to the early second century A.D.⁵

Vocabulary Terms Used in Textual Criticism

Autograph: The text actually written by a New Testament author, or the author and scribe as the author dictated to him. The author would have authority over all corrections since Holy Spirit did not move the scribe. This text is also often referred to as the original. Hence, the terms *autograph* and *original* are often used interchangeably.

Codex: A physical book of scripture in contrast to the ancient scroll. The church began to produce codices early in the second century or perhaps at the end of the first. Aside from whatever monetary savings may have resulted, the codex provided a great advantage in locating passages: quite literally what we can call random access as opposed to the serial access necessitated by unwinding a scroll.

⁴ Subsequent to this publication, this number has been updated to 5,795.

⁵ Joe Griffin, *One Day at a Time: Overview of Christian Doctrines*, ed. John Cameron Smith (St. Charles, Mo.: Joe Griffin Media Ministries, 2013), 155n121.



Fragment: As the name indicates, a portion of a text, the remainder of which has been lost. The term may be used to refer to a fairly significant amount of text or as little as a mutilated piece containing only a few letters. The value of very small fragments is that if they can be dated and identified, they may establish an early date for a particular reading. Identification is often very difficult or impossible, however.

Lectonaries: Books of New Testament passages chosen by the Christian church for reading at services. For the most part, they represent the Byzantine text and are of use in reconstructing the history of that text.

Manuscript (MS), Manuscripts (MSS): Essentially any physical container of text, but usually a reference to a codex of some length in contrast to a papyrus of short length, and typically excluding fragments.

Minuscule [mi-nús-kūl]: From a Latin word meaning “somewhat smaller,” a set of small, cursive letters as opposed to **minuscules** [or **uncials**]. In a loose sense, minuscules are often thought of as lowercase Greek letters. They seem to have been invented in the ninth century to speed and lower the cost of book production.

Paleography [pá-lē-ä'-gra-fē]: Study of ancient and medieval handwriting. The primary tasks of the paleographer are to read the writings of the past and to assign them a date and a place of origin. As a rule, paleography deals with Greek and Latin scripts and their derivatives

Palimpsest [pá-lemp-sest]: A Greek word meaning “scraped again,” referring to a manuscript that has been written on used parchment as a cost-saving measure. In these cases, the parchments originally contained biblical texts and the ink was scraped off so that a new text of some kind could be written on the erased parchment. Almost needless to say, the new text is usually worthless compared to the old, whose loss can bring tears to the eye of any Bible student. Fortunately, modern technology can be used to recover most of the original text.



Papyrus, Papyri [pa-pī'-rus; pa-pī'-rī]: Named for the Egyptian plant from which it is made, in the proper climate this is a very durable writing material that was made by bonding vertical strips of the papyrus pith to horizontal strips. Writing could easily be done on the side with the horizontal strips, and with some difficulty on the other side (called an “opisthograph” when written on both sides). The oldest manuscripts of the New Testament were written on papyrus; some of them are as early as the second century.

Parchment: Thin leather, the best material for the ancient production of books. It was naturally more durable than papyrus, and since both sides of a parchment page could be smoothed out for writing, it was much better for writing on both sides and producing books. It seems to have begun to replace papyrus in the early fourth century. Like papyrus, however, it was expensive, as one can imagine, and as the existence of palimpsests confirm.

Scribes: In Jewish culture scribes were meticulous copyists of scripture who also were recognized as experts on the scripture as a result of their work. Scribes of the New Testament, on the other hand, could have been either professional copyists or amateurs, and the quality of their work varied. Research shows, however, that New Testament scribes recognized the value of works they were producing and for the most part were careful to preserve what had been entrusted to them.

Text: This term has several meanings, the simplest of which is the content of a manuscript as opposed to its materials. This is a non-technical meaning, the same as the content of any book, or a portion of the content.



Textual Criticism: The art and science of determining the original text from variant readings exhibited by extant manuscripts. At present, a good deal of scientific methodology seems to be used as statistics, and computer processing are heavily employed. At the same time, however, textual criticism is also faith-based (at least among conservative theologians), and the results are arguably impossible to verify. Faith plays a role in the belief by many that God has preserved His word somewhere among extant Greek manuscripts.

Uncial [únt-shel]: A term commonly used to refer to a majuscule (capital) letters. It is agreed, however, that the term, taken from Latin and meaning “one-twelfth,” should be applied only to a particular type of Latin script or document.⁶

Greek Codices:

Codex Sinaiticus: One of the most celebrated manuscripts of the Greek Bible, probably dating from the late fourth century. It was found in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai in the mid-nineteenth century, acquired by the Tzar of Russia, and bought by the British Museum (for £100,000) in 1933.⁷

The oldest extant Greek codex, said to date from the 4th century, is the Codex Sinaiticus, a biblical manuscript written in Greek. Also important is the Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek text of the Bible that probably was produced in the 5th century and is now preserved in the British Library, London.⁸

What is Codex Sinaiticus?

The literal meaning of 'Codex Sinaiticus' is the Sinai Book. The word 'Sinaiticus' derives from the fact that the Codex was preserved for many centuries at St Catherine's Monastery near the foot of Mount Sinai in Egypt.

⁶ Don Wilkins and Edward D. Andrews, *The Text of the New Testament: The Science and Art of Textual Criticism* (Cambridge, Oh.: Christian Publishing House, 2017), 544–546, 551. 555–563, passim.

⁷ M. C. Howatson, ed., “codex Sinaiticus,” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144.

⁸ “Codex,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia* (2010), 3:427.



The Codex is the remains of a huge hand-written book that contained all the Christian scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, together with two late 1st-century Christian texts, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas. This book was made up of over 1,460 pages, each of which measured approximately 41cm tall and 36cm wide.

Just over half of the original book has survived, now dispersed between four institutions: St Catherine's Monastery, the British Library, Leipzig University Library (Germany), and the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg. At the British Library the largest surviving portion – 347 leaves, or 694 pages – includes the whole of the New Testament.

All the texts written down in the Codex are in Greek. They include the translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The Greek text is written using a form of capital or upper-case letters known as Biblical majuscule (mi-nūs-kūl) and without word division. The pages of the Codex are of prepared animal skin called parchment.

Who made Codex Sinaiticus?

Modern scholars have identified four scribes as responsible for writing the Greek text. Trained to write in very similar ways they, and their contributions to the manuscript, have been distinguished only after painstaking analysis of their handwriting, spelling, and method of marking the end of each of the books of the Bible.

As is the case with most manuscripts of this antiquity, we do not know either the names of these scribes or the exact place in which they worked. Successive critics have argued that it was made in one of the great cities of the Greco-Roman world, such as Alexandria, Constantinople, or Caesarea in Palestine.

During the production of the Codex each of the scribes corrected their own work and one of them corrected and rewrote parts by another. These corrections contain many significant alterations and, together with further extensive corrections undertaken probably in the 7th century, are some of the most interesting features of the manuscript.



Why is the Codex so important?

The Codex is critical to our understanding of the history of the Christian Bible and the development of Christianity. It is one of the two earliest surviving manuscripts into which the full 'canon' (collection of accepted texts) of the Christian Bible was copied into one volume. It is thus the antecedent of modern Christian Bibles. Before this date the individual books of the Bible were copied into much smaller volumes, often comprising only one or a handful of texts. The ambition of the Codex to include the entire canon of Christian scriptures coincides with the adoption of Christianity by Emperor Constantine the Great and an attempt to define once and for all, or 'codify', the texts that qualified as sacred scripture.

The Codex also marks a pivotal point in the history of the book. It is arguably the first large bound book to have been produced. For one volume to contain all the Christian scriptures, book technology had to make a great technological leap forward. This advance was something akin to the introduction of printing with moveable type or the introduction of personal computers. Whereas most previous bound books, as opposed to rolls, were relatively short and small in page size, the Codex was huge in length and large in page size.⁹

Second Session:

The DVD, *Fragments of Truth*, will be viewed in the auditorium following our break. The film's length is one hour and 17 minutes after which we will take a brief pause to allow those who must leave to exit the building. Those who remain will view a 25-minute question and answer period about the film and its content.

We will now dismiss for halftime and report back here in twenty minutes.

⁹ "Codex Sinaiticus," *The British Library Treasures Collection*, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/codex-sinaiticus>, accessed March 23, 2019.

