

The Attackers: Preservation of New Testament Manuscripts; Their Comparison with Other Works of Antiquity: Content of All Biblical Manuscripts Reflect 99.5% Harmony; Writing Surfaces: Papyrus Rolls & Parchment & Vellum Codices; Handwriting: Uncials & Minuscule: Principles: Revelation, Inspiration, Illumination, Interpretation, & Animation

Preservation of New Testament Manuscripts

1. By comparison, the number of biblical manuscripts that have been preserved from antiquity exceeds by far those of other ancient writers:

The writings of some ancient authors are represented by only one manuscript from ancient times (e.g., *The Annals of Tacitus*¹) are represented by only one manuscript from ancient times. Other writings have survived in a few or a few dozen copies. A few hundred manuscripts of the works of some authors, including Euripides [vol. 5, EB:GBWW] and Cicero, are known. Of the New Testament, on the other hand, nearly 3,000 handwritten copies in Greek are preserved—ranging from fragments of a few verses to the entire New Testament—plus some 2,000 additional Greek manuscripts, 8,000 manuscripts in Latin, and 2,000 or more in other ancient versions.

In another respect, too, the manuscript tradition of the New Testament is distinctly superior to that of other ancient literature. The oldest known manuscripts of the works of some ancient authors date from a thousand years or more after the death of the author. A time interval of several hundred years is not uncommon, ranging downward to a mere three hundred years, as in the case of Virgil [vol. 13, EB:GBWW]. In contrast, two of the most important existing manuscripts of the New Testament were written less than 300 years after the New Testament was completed, and an appreciable amount of the New Testament is extant on papyrus manuscripts from one to two centuries after the Biblical authors wrote. Since classical scholars assume the general reliability of these secular works even where the time interval is great and where only a few manuscripts are available, it is clear that with far great assurance the student of the New Testament may assume that the presently-available New Testament text reliably represents what the authors originally wrote.²

2. Copies of the New Testament text may include those which are derived from copies far removed from the date of the most ancient currently available.
3. Some copies may be shown to have been developed from late manuscripts while others from the very early period of the New Testament.
4. In the field of textual criticism, this presents a problem that only close, critical examination of both manuscripts' history can resolve.
5. However, the work done over the centuries in vetting New Testament manuscripts has resulted in discovering that the error rate between the most recent and the most ancient is minuscule.
6. This is even more remarkable since there is such a large inventory of manuscripts that are presently available to the textual critic. One would think that out of such a large inventory, the error rate would be quite high. Such is decidedly not the case.

¹ Volume 15 in Encyclopaedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World* (EB:GBWW).

² J. H. Greenlee, "Text and Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 5:697–98.

7. Virtually all manuscripts within the present inventory are effectively the same. The only differences of significance are considered to affect only one-sixtieth of the New Testament text, or about one word for every thousand.
8. The Greek New Testament contains 138, 020³ words, so the number of words that present any level of ambiguity amount to only 138.
9. It is of interest to note among the 138,020 words who contributed the most down to the least in the New Testament canon:⁴

Luke:	37, 933
Paul:	32,407
John:	28,092
Matthew:	18,345
Mark:	11,304
(Hebrews):	4,953
Peter:	2,783
James:	1,174
Jude:	461

10. The writing surface and the style of handwriting are important to textual critics in determining when a manuscript was written. We will first take up the writing surfaces and then the penmanship.
11. **Papyrus Roll.** The autographs of all twenty-seven New Testament books were written on papyrus rolls.
 - (1) Papyrus is a tall reed unique to Egypt's Nile River Delta. Its stem was processed into a writing material that was in use from 3500 B.C. and was used primarily by the Roman government into the fifth century A.D.
 - (2) The pith of the plant was cut into thin strips in a crisscross pattern and affixed together with a paste that after drying in the sun produced an excellent writing surface.
 - (3) The papyrus sheets were then glued together into a scroll, usually of twenty sheets. Writers would inscribe text in narrow columns so that as the scroll was unrolled the information could be easily read.
 - (4) All of the extant manuscripts of the New Testament are papyri that date back to the second through the fourth century A.D. and include a large percentage of New Testament books.
 - (5) Two collections of these papyri have contributed much to the authentication of the New Testament canon: (1) Chester Beatty's and (2) the Bodmer Library's in Geneva.
 - (6) The Chester Beatty collection is a group of twelve manuscripts acquired by Beatty around 1930. They include biblical, apocryphal, and early Christian writings.

³ This total includes Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11 which contains 166 and 167 words respectively. These two passages are not found in the most ancient manuscripts.

⁴ Statistics based on the *Analytical Greek New Testament*, eds. Barbara Friberg, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975; 1981).

- (7) Beatty Biblical Papyrus I (p⁴⁵) contains 30 leaves of an early-or mid-3rd-century codex of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts.
 - (8) Beatty Papyrus II (p⁴⁶) consists of 86 leaves of an early-3rd-century (c. 200) codex containing the Pauline Letters in the following order: Romans, Hebrews, I and II Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and I Thessalonians.
 - (9) Beatty Papyrus III (p⁴⁷) is from the late 3rd century and contains Revelation 9:10-17:2.
 - (10) M. Martin Bodmer purchased a collection of papyri discovered in Egypt in 1952. It is presently preserved at the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana in Geneva, Switzerland.
 - (11) Papyrus 66 contains the text of the Gospel of John that dates back to the 2nd century. Papyrus 72 contains a 3rd-century manuscript of Jude as well as 1 and 2 Peter. Papyrus 75 is a partial codex containing most of the Gospels of Luke and John.
12. **Parchment Codex.** The use of animal skins for writing surfaces goes back into ancient history. But around 200 B.C. an advance on this method was discovered.
- (1) Animal skins were scraped, soaked in quicklime, and rubbed with chalk and pumice stone producing a thin, firm, and durable writing surface.
 - (2) This material was known as parchment or vellum. Parchment is the end product of sheep or goat skin while vellum is primarily from the skin of a calf.
 - (3) In the first century the codex, or book form, was popular and was made of both papyri and parchment or vellum.
 - (4) However, the standard form used for literary efforts was the papyrus scroll and all of the New Testament autographs used this method.
 - (5) It was only later that the codex became the standard for copying New Testament manuscripts.
 - (6) By the fourth century the papyrus codex had given way to the parchment codex and this status quo was continued until the mid- fifteenth century with the introduction of the printing press.
13. **Handwriting.** Two forms of handwriting were popular before the first century: (1) uncial and (2) minuscule.
- (1) For letters, business documents, and other nonliterary purposes, a connected “cursive” style of handwriting was used, somewhat analogous to English longhand writing.
 - (2) For literary purposes, a style known as “uncial” was used. Uncial letters, corresponding to English printed capital letters, were written separately.
 - (3) Using John 1:1 as an example, this style would look like this:
ENAPXHHNOΛOΓΟΣ: INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORD.

- (4) It is surmised that the Gospels' autographs were written in the uncial style while the epistles were in cursive.
- (5) However, when the autographs were first copied for distribution they were considered literature. Therefore, the early manuscripts of the New Testament's catalogue were written in uncials.
- (6) During the 9th century A.D., a new writing style called minuscule was adopted.
- (7) This was developed from the non-literary cursive and could be written more quickly than when using the uncial form. By the tenth century it had completely replaced the uncial.
- (8) As a result of these transitions, one can easily date manuscripts by their handwriting styles: uncial in the early centuries A.D., uncials and minuscule in the latter part of the ninth and tenth centuries, and minuscule thereafter.
- (9) One characteristic of Greek manuscripts that remained constant was the absence of spacing between words.⁵

Principles

1. **Revelation** is the direct, divine influence which communicates truth from God to man.
2. **Inspiration** is the direct divine influence which secures an accurate transference of truth into language which others may understand.
3. Those individuals who were chosen to receive these two divine influences are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and probably the writer of Hebrews.
4. **Illumination** is the divine influence of the Holy Spirit that enables those who are in fellowship to understand the Scripture.
5. **Interpretation** is accomplished by means of the science of hermeneutics, a system which must recognize certain established principles in order to achieve an accurate translation of a passage.
6. **Animation** refers to the fact that the written Word is a living document (Hebrews 4:12).

⁵ Principles in this section of our study were developed from: J. H. Greenlee, "Text and Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 5:683–713.