

Grace Church  
Roanoke, Virginia  
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Elementary Apologetics  
Lesson #10

## WHY I BELIEVE

### The Reliability of the New Testament Text

#### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Through the science of lower textual criticism (determining the original words of the Bible) the New Testament can almost be reproduced. God has preserved the New Testament in such a phenomenal manner that no Christian need ever doubt that the words of his New Testament are essentially the same words the Apostles wrote in the original manuscripts.
- B. God has providentially guided in the discovery of new manuscripts to authenticate and confirm the accuracy of our present day New Testaments. NOTE: Archeology and manuscript studies are throwing new light on the accuracy and meaning of the Greek New Testament. There is more evidence today to validate the New Testament than at any time since the New Testament was written in the first century. These are exciting days for evangelicals.

#### II. THE NUMBER AND STYLE OF THE GREEK MANUSCRIPTS

- A. Number of Manuscripts: All totaled there are more than 13,000 manuscripts of all or part of the N.T. POINT: People readily accept the historicity of Caesar and yet there are only 8 to 10 manuscripts about Caesar's Gallic Wars and none within 800 years of the original manuscripts. Yet there are thousands of N.T. manuscripts and a few go back within 35 years of the original. Paul Little comments,

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more evident when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without question. Bruce observes that only nine or ten good manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic Wars exist. The oldest of these manuscripts was written some 900 years after Caesar's time. The History of Thucydides (ca. 460-400 B.C.) is known to us from eight manuscripts, the earliest belonging to around A.D. 900, and a few papyrus scraps that belong to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (ca. 480-425 B.C.). However, no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of

their work which are of any use to us are more than 1,300 years later than the originals. (Know Why You Believe)

## B. Writing Styles of Extant Greek Manuscripts

1. Uncial: Written in Greek capital letters about an inch high. Most uncials are written on papyrus sheets, rolls or codex and are the earliest of the manuscripts. There was very little punctuation or spacing between words.
2. Cursive: Written in capital letters, only in longhand. Some later manuscripts are in cursive. After the 4<sup>th</sup> century vellum was used for writing material.
3. Minuscule: Small Greek letters which did not become popular until after the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

## III. THE EXISTING (EXTANT) MANUSCRIPTS

### A. Greek Manuscripts: There are at least 4,700 Greek manuscripts.

1. Papyri: The Papyri are very old manuscripts that were used in Egypt. There are now 80 papyri manuscripts which cover 20 N.T. books and 40% of the N.T. material. Some of these documents, which are mostly uncials, date back to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The Papyri give a text at least 125 to 150 years earlier than Codex Vaticanus, which is considered the best Greek manuscript. POINT: The Papyri were not discovered until 1897, so earlier English translations of the Bible did not have these manuscripts to work with.
2. Uncials: There are approximately 250 uncial manuscripts now and these are usually very early works.

A. Codex Sinaiticus: This manuscript is one of the two most important and dates in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (340 A.D.). It was discovered by Tischendorf (1844) who was looking for old manuscripts, at the convent of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai. He found these manuscripts in the wastebasket and was told that many more had been burned. Codex Sinaiticus was given as a gift to the Czar of Russia. In 1933 England bought it from Russia for \$500,000.00.

B. Codex Alexandrenus: Dated in 450 A.D., it is known as the longest and best known of the early uncial copies. It was probably written in Alexandria, Egypt, and was discovered

early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, then presented as a gift to King James I of England in 1627.

- C. Codex Vaticanus: This manuscript is considered to be oldest and most valuable for it dates from the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (350 A.D.). It had its origin in Egypt and was discovered around 1475, and taken to the Vatican in Rome. It has been there ever since, except for a brief period when Napoleon's armies conquered the pope and his cardinals and took some books from the Vatican. It was returned to Rome in 1850. After it was returned to the Vatican, Tischendorf, in 1859, was permitted to get two glimpses of it, once for 6 hours and the other for 42 hours. He probably would have gotten a longer look had he not broken his promise not to copy any of the text. He copied 20 pages. Tergellus later was permitted to look at it for 9 hours a day for six weeks. He memorized much of the text. The pope in 1889 permitted it to be photographed and at last was released to the libraries of the world.
- D. Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus: Dated in 450 A.D., it is thought to be written in Alexandria. The original was scrubbed clear by someone who did not recognize its worth and the discourses of Ephraem, a Syrian Father of the Fourth Century, were copied on it. This was given to the French Library in Paris where a student noticed the faint writing underneath the Syrian. Later, chemicals were applied that brought out much of the original writings. It is now in the National Library of Paris.
- E. Codex Bezae (550)
- F. Codex Claromontanus (550)
- G. Codex Washingtonianus (550)
- A. Ancient Translations or Versions: As the gospel spread, there was a need for the N.T. in other languages, so there were many translations made from the early Greek. Some of these go back as early as 150-200 A.D. and we now have thousands of these manuscripts.
1. Syriac Versions: These versions are divided into the Old Syriac and the Peshito and were written in the Aramaic of that day.
  2. Coptic Versions: There were also translations into Egyptian language and dialects.

3. Latin Versions: There would be a need for a Latin Bible and from the Greek came the Old Latin version (150) and the Latin Vulgate (385), which is the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.
- B. Citations From the Church Fathers: These men were the earliest leaders of the Christian Church after the days of the Apostles. For the most part they were well-educated men and voluminous writers. Their writings comprise a great bridge between the ancient manuscripts now in existence and the original New Testament writings. They quoted repeatedly from the New Testament. NOTE: Although we have only a small percentage of the writings of the church fathers preserved for us to the present day, they still contain all but 11 verses of the New Testament. This indicates that we can trace the actual words of the New Testament within a very few years of their writing. POINT: The disadvantage of the writings of the church fathers is that they quoted loosely at times, had theological bias and we can't be sure of their sources.
- C. Lectionaries: These were reading lessons used in public church services after the 5<sup>th</sup> century. About 1,800 of these lessons have now been classified. There are lectionaries of the Gospels, Acts and the epistles. Though they did not appear before the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the text from which they quote may itself be early and of high quality.

## I. GROUPING OF MANUSCRIPTS AND PRESERVATION OF THE TEXT

- A. Originals Copied: In the first century, copies would be made of the various N.T. books so all Christians could be blessed by the inspired Word. Often these copies were made by skilled scribes and other times by non-professionals. In the copying of the letters (transcription) there was always the possibility of corruption of the true text. NOTE: An evangelical admits the possibility of error in transcription but not in the original manuscripts. Yet, it is simply amazing how most of the extant copies we have today are close to the originals.
- B. Manuscript Families: As manuscripts were copied, they would be taken to various areas of the Roman Empire. Among the major cities, the copies would be re-copied and take on certain family characteristics. Around Rome and Carthage, a western family grouping took form. This is called the Western text. There were groupings around Alexandria (Alexandrian text), Caesarea (Caesarean text), Antioch (Syriac text) and Constantinople (Byzantine text). POINT: The textual critic compares the family groupings with one another. There are certain rules among textual critics for determining the most important family groupings and determining the true text word for word, which are not important to this study.

## II. THE ACCURACY OF OUR MODERN DAY MANUSCRIPTS

- A. Through textual criticism, we have today or nearly have the very words of the books of the New Testament.
- B. S. Lewis Johnson (Professor of Greek New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary): “If you took all the verses of the New Testament of which there is some question, it would only fill ½ page of the New Testament. The choice would still lie between this or that and would not be unknown, and there is no doctrine affected by the textual differences.”
- C. Hort (one of the Greek scholars): “The proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands and raised above all is very great, being about 7/8 of the whole. The remaining 1/8, because of changes or order and other trivialities may be greatly reduced still further by using sound principles. This leaves around 1/1000 of the whole still in doubt, and here doubt is between two readings. No important doctrine rests upon any of these doubtful passages.:
- D. Philip Schaff (Church historian): “Not one variation affects an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubtful passages.”

- E. L.D. Twilley (Green scholar): “The last few years have added very much to our evidence for the New Testament and we can look forward to yet richer finds which shall enable us to ascertain with even more certainty that in every detail we have the exact words of the sacred writers. One fact of the untold importance emerges from all those investigations; no serious error has crept into our New Testament, and they who read it reverently will be led into the Truth of God’s saving love for them.”
- F. Alva J. McClain (Greek scholar and theologian): “And when the critic triumphantly announces that there are between 150,000 and 200,00 variant readings in the whole number of New Testament manuscripts, we need not become frightened. Too often the critic fails to tell the whole story. First, he often fails to explain that the same variant reading is counted every time it occurs in all the different manuscripts. Second, he does not explain that the vast majority of these variant readings are of little importance, and that in no instance is any vital Christian doctrine involved. Third, he omits to mention that there are nearly 4,000 manuscripts of the New Testament either in whole or in part, and that it is improbable to suppose hundreds of copyists, working at different times and in various localities, would all make the same mistake in the same place. Where one copyist got drowsy and left out a word, we have several hundred others to give us the true reading. Fourth, he fails to state the conclusions of competent scholarship in the field of textual criticism, that only about one word out of every thousand in our present text is really under any serious suspicion.”
- G. Sir Frederick Kenyon (world-renowned scholar of ancient manuscripts): “The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. It must be concluded that God has providentially preserved His Word in a marvelous way. He has preserved for us a sufficient number of manuscripts so that by comparison we may ascertain the true reading of the original in almost every passage where there is any question. The providential preservation of the Scriptures is in itself a great miracle which is unparalleled in any other writings.
- B. Scripture has been preserved because God said it would be, for He said, “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of men as the flower of grass. The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of

the Lord endureth for ever. This is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (I Peter 1:24-25).