

# Know the Scriptures - Part Five

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## New Testament Witnesses

It will be impossible for us to list even the majority of manuscripts, versions and lectionaries that contain all or part of the New Testament. You will see the reason as we give you the total number of existing witnesses in the various categories.

According to one of the latest catalogues, there are 78 papyrus fragments dating from the second to the eighth centuries. Capital letter manuscripts (uncials), written between the fourth and tenth centuries, number 247. Small letter manuscripts (minuscules or cursives) total 2,623; they were written between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. Lectionaries, books designed to be read in public worship and containing excerpts from the New Testament, number 1,968. And who really knows how many versions or translations of all or part of the New Testament exist today – not only English or German, but a thousand other languages and dialects as well? [As of 1997 there were 98 papyrus, 301 uncials, 2,829 cursives, and 2,500 lectionaries catalogued.]

But let us acquaint ourselves with some of the more important witnesses, at least – those that have a definite bearing on the translations that we use today.

## Ancient Manuscripts

A small fragment of papyrus, measuring only 2 ½ by 3 ½ inches and containing only 30 Greek words from St. John's Gospel, is the oldest known manuscript of the New Testament. It is from a codex because there is writing on both sides and it dates from the first half of the second century. It rests in a library in England.

Between 1956 and 1961, several portions of the Bodmer Papyri were published, containing sections of John, Luke, Jude and 2 Peter. It is believed that these copies were made about 200 A.D. The Chester Beatty Papyri, dating from the beginning of the third century, contain the earliest copies of Paul's epistles together with parts of the Gospels, Acts and Revelation. These were first announced to the world as such in 1931 and they are housed in Ireland in the Chester Beatty Library.

A man named Tischendorf discovered in 1844 several leaves of what is known as the Sinai Codex in a wastebasket of a monastery on Mt. Sinai. The monks evidently considered them to be of little or no value. Fifteen years later he was able to acquire what was left of this manuscript, but only with much difficulty. This is a copy dating back to the fourth century, containing most of the Old Testament and all of the New. Most of it now is in a British Museum in London. That nation purchased it from Russia, who owned it for 74 years.

From the same period comes the Vatican Codex, so named because it was discovered in the Vatican library. After a brief stay in France, it was returned to the Vatican. It contains the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament and the New Testament up to Hebrews 9:14. While it was known to some individuals in the fifteenth century and although several scholars tried many times to bring it out of seclusion, it was not until 1867 that Tischendorf was able to place it before the world in published form. It might be of interest to note here that this manuscript does not include Mark 16:9-20. Some scholars consider this and the Sinai Codex to be the best available.

The Alexandrian Manuscript got its name from that city in Egypt whence it came. Ten pages are missing from the Old Testament and 30 have been lost from the New, most of these being from the beginning of Matthew. This codex, together with the preceding two, constitute what some like to call "the big three" of the uncial manuscripts. It dates from the fifth century.

Codex Beza was given to the University of Cambridge by Theodore Beza in 1581. Its double facing pages present the Greek on the left and Latin on the right hand side. When our King James Bible was printed, this, it seems, was the only important uncial available.

Codex Ephraem is what is known as a "palimpsest" manuscript, having two or more layers of writing. In order to use the parchment again, previous writings were "erased" and new characters were written over the old. This one had been used five times before. Chemicals, and now ultraviolet rays, have done much to reveal what was hidden underneath. There remain 145 out of 238 New Testament pages.

The minuscules, or cursives, are of a later date than the uncial manuscripts, but this does not necessarily diminish their value. Recalling

our example in an earlier section, it is possible for these more modern manuscripts to be of great value. Suppose a scribe of the fourteenth century had made his copy directly from an uncial of the fourth century, rather than from a manuscript of the thirteenth century. Or, to take it a step further, suppose a scribe of the ninth century had made a cursive copy of a manuscript (before it was lost) dating back to the third century. Then such a cursive could be more important than even “the big three.” And, indeed, there is one that has such distinction, “The Queen of Cursives.”

### **Ancient Versions**

These witnesses, translations of the Bible into the language of the day and area, gain importance when we realize that most of them came into being long before the uncials and cursives that still exist. In fact, these were Bibles used by men whose parents might well have heard the words of the apostles as they were first read in the churches from their very autographs, or, in some cases, might have seen and heard the apostles themselves.

Perhaps the oldest of the versions are the various Syriac Scriptures, some of which were in use about 50 years after the New Testament was written. This was the language of those people who lived where the apostles lived, worked and wrote and to whom they wrote, in Asia Minor, in Mesopotamia, and in Antioch of Syria, where was the mother church of the churches in Asia minor. The earliest of these versions could have been translated directly from the autographs of the apostles. The Peshitta (simple) Syriac is preserved in 243 manuscripts in London, but the following are missing from them: 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude and Revelation.

The Egyptian Christians had a language of their own and they had translations of their own called the Coptic Version, dating from the third and fourth centuries. The version for those living in northern Egypt contains the whole New Testament; the other for southern Egypt contains most of it.

There are several more: the Gothic and Armenian of the fourth century, the Georgian and the Ethiopic of the fifth century. This is most interesting: a harmony of the four Gospels was compiled already only

some eighty years after the last Gospel (John) was written.

By far the most notable of the old Latin translations is the one by Jerome, the Vulgate. His revision of the New Testament Latin versions was completed in 385 A.D., making it older than some of our earliest Greek manuscripts. And, since he no doubt used the oldest manuscripts he could find, his authorities could have gone back to the days of the apostles. The Vulgate is the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church and was the version of the Middle Ages, although it was not given official status until 1546 at the Council of Trent. Jerome’s Vulgate was the foundation for every version of the Scriptures for over 1000 years, yes, influencing even our King James Version 1300 years later. Over 8000 manuscripts of the Vulgate are still in existence.

### **Quotations**

We are able to gather additional information concerning the history of the New Testament text from the quotations found in writings of the early church fathers. There are three major groups, divided according to localities, the Western (Europe), the Alexandrian (Egypt), and the Byzantine (Asia Minor). Here are a few examples of quotations from these men: “*Be ye wise as serpents in all things, and harmless as a dove*”; “*Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus which He spake, teaching us gentleness and longsuffering; for He said, ‘Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven unto you; as ye give, it shall be given unto you; ...’*”. We recognize them, don’t we?

Although their quotations are not always exact literal translations, yet they are valuable to the history of the Bible. Volumes of their writings have been preserved and most of them are filled with New Testament quotations. Because these men lived at the right time, they had copies of the Scriptures which pre-date many of the oldest manuscripts. One of them, (Irenaeus), saw and spoke with Polycarp, a disciple of St. John. Irenaeus wrote: “*I can tell the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and taught, ..., and how he related his conversations with John and others.*”

All these witnesses! Now how shall their testimony be evaluated? What use can and dare we make of them? That is another topic for another time.