

Exploring Ancient Manuscripts of the New Testament

Hand-written copies, of parts of what we know as the *New Testament* apparently began to circulate amongst the faithful in the late 1st century. The content mainly consisted of the letters of apostles to specific early Christian communities and stories of the life and teaching of Jesus passed by word of mouth, committed to memory by the earliest Christians and written down by others. In format they were rather humble copies, similar in size to modern pocket paperbacks, and comprising mainly single books of the Bible and only occasionally small groups of books such as the *Gospels* and *Epistles*.¹

The evidence indicates that the **Sources** of the **Greek manuscripts of New Testament books** were communities in which individual books were highly regarded. Less than 10% of the general population could read, and probably less than 5% could write. For most Christians, their connection to the books of the Bible was oral – they heard the books read. However, bishops and elders of Christian communities often had copies of their books made and traded copies of with other communities.

Jesus left nothing in writing. Three books of the New Testament, which originated in different communities have books that contain many of the same stories of what Jesus taught – *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*. They were written in Greek, but Jesus taught primarily in Hebrew. Scholars in different places have been comparing versions of the same story and using the **Septuagint** (Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures) to reconstruct the Hebrew words of Jesus.

The New Testament has been preserved in more manuscripts than any other ancient work of literature, with over **5,800 complete or fragmented Greek manuscripts** catalogued, **10,000 Latin manuscripts** and **9,300 manuscripts in various other ancient languages** including Syriac, Slavic, Gothic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Nubian, and Armenian. The dates of these manuscripts range from c. 125 to the introduction of printing in Germany in the 15th century.²

What is important to understand is that no single, original manuscript (i.e., an autograph) of any part of the Bible has survived! Moreover, no two of the thousands of manuscripts agree completely in the wording of the text they do contain. What this means is that we do not have an original text and that the products (editions of the Greek text) of the labors of the textual critics are the nearest things to the originals we can hope to have at the moment.³

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¹ <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/manuscripts-of-the-christian-bible>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript

³ *The Biblical Analyst: Manuscripts of the New Testament* By Dr. Isaac Tennison (June 2012)