

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Manuscript Evidence For The New Testament

Textual critic, Frederic Kenyon has made the following statement regarding the Bible: “The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries” (*Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, page 55). How could this respected paleographer make such a statement? He has examined the manuscript evidence, and can conclude with confidence that the transmission of God’s Word is substantially accurate from its origin to the present.

We do not have the original autograph manuscripts of the Bible, and must rely on manuscript copies. While there are some differences between the many manuscripts, “no fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading” (*Philip Comfort, The Origin Of The Bible; page 182*) The large number of manuscripts and the comparative short time frame between the original and the extant copies fosters Mr. Kenyon’s confidence. Let us notice the manuscript evidence for the New Testament.

The number of Greek manuscripts existing today is re-

markable, especially when we compare the number existing of other ancient works. Between 5,000 – 6,000 Greek manuscripts exist today of the New Testament. Compare this with the number of copies of Homer’s Iliad that exist. There are 643 extant copies of Homer’s ancient work. His work was written in 800 B.C., and the number of copies is impressive, but is a small fraction of the number of New Testament manuscripts. When was the last time you heard textual critics claim we do not really have Homer’s Iliad? Yet the number of manuscripts we have to examine is a mere fraction of the number of New Testament manuscripts existing for scholarly investigation.

The oldest papyrus manuscript of the New Testament is dated A.D. 110-125. It contains John 18:31-34, and verses 37-38. In 1930, Chester Beatty, along with the University of Michigan, bought manuscripts from a dealer in Egypt. The collection contains most of Paul’s letters, and are dated late first century to early A.D. 100. The earliest manuscript of the entire New Testament is the Codex Sinaiticus, dated A.D. 350. Its name highlights the place where the written work was discovered. Constantin von Tischendorf discovered the manu-

script in St. Catherine’s Monastery.

The Gospel of John was written originally in the later part of the first century. With the discovered fragment copy, we are within 20 to 50 years of the original. Paul’s letters were originally written in the middle to late first century, yet we have copies of most of his letters dated some 20 to 100 years from the time of their origin. With the Codex Sinaiticus, our entire New Testament copy is within 100 years of the time when it was originally penned.

Compare this with the time range for other ancient works: Pliny’s Natural History was written between the years A.D. 61-113. The earliest copy we have is dated A.D. 850, some 750 years after the work was originally written. Thucydides’ History was originally written between the years 460-400 B.C. Yet the earliest copy of this work is dated A.D. 900, some 1,300 years from the original.

More copies to examine, and less time between the copy and the original help secure confidence that we have what the writers of the New Testament originally penned.