



Manuscript Evidence for the Reliability of the New Testament

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The New Testament is often criticised more than most ancient historical documents, yet when it is evaluated using the same standards applied to other ancient texts or historical figures, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is exceptionally strong.

This study focuses on manuscript evidence, how the New Testament text has been passed down over time, and what that reveals about the reliability of the text we have today.

Manuscript Evidence

The New Testament books were originally written as letters and historical accounts by the apostles and their associates, and were copied by scribes across many regions over time.

This occurred before the invention of the printing press and despite the cost and

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labour involved in manual copying, the New Testament was widely reproduced and spread throughout the early church.

This resulted in multiple lines of copies rather than a single linear transmission where one copy is passed down through successive generations. Instead, the New Testament text spread through multiple independent copies across different regions, allowing comparison between manuscripts.

The original documents no longer exist. The text is therefore reconstructed through surviving manuscripts using a process known as textual criticism. Scholars assess multiple factors such as manuscript age and distribution, along with the text itself, to determine what most likely reflects the original wording.

A clear example of this process is found when looking at Mark 1:2.

The King James Version reads:

“As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.” — Mark 1:2

However, most modern translations such as the ESV and NIV read:

“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet...”

This variation comes from differences in manuscript evidence. Some Greek manuscripts read “the prophets,” while others read “Isaiah the prophet.” Most modern translations follow “Isaiah the prophet” while noting the alternative reading.

This reflects the fact that Isaiah is the primary prophetic source being referenced, while the passage also draws from Malachi. The difference does not change the meaning of the passage.

This demonstrates an important point: variations exist between manuscripts, but they are almost always identifiable, explainable, and few.

Scale of Manuscript Evidence

For the New Testament alone, there are over 5,800 Greek manuscripts in existence today. When early translations such as Latin, Syriac, and Coptic are included, along

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with quotations from early church writers, the total rises to well over 20,000 witnesses.

Most ancient works survive in fewer than a dozen manuscripts. One of the best-attested classical works, the *Iliad*, survives in around 600 manuscripts, far fewer than the New Testament.

Among the earliest surviving manuscripts is P52, a small fragment of John's Gospel commonly dated to the second century, though exact dating is debated. Other early manuscripts such as P66 and P75 contain larger portions of the New Testament and demonstrate early circulation of the text.

The earliest New Testament fragments appear within decades of the original writings, while most ancient works have gaps of several hundred years or more. This places the New Testament in a uniquely strong position among ancient documents.

Quotations from Early Church Writers

Early Christian writers quoted the New Testament extensively. These quotations are so numerous that nearly the entire New Testament can be reconstructed from them alone, even without surviving manuscripts.

This provides an additional independent line of evidence alongside the manuscript tradition.

The Nature of Copying

The idea that the Bible is "a copy of a copy of a copy" assumes a single linear chain of transmission. This is not how ancient copying actually worked.

Instead, there are thousands of overlapping copies across different regions. Where a variation appears in one manuscript, it can be compared against others from different locations and time periods.

The vast majority of differences between manuscripts are minor. These include spelling variations, word order changes, or small additions and omissions that do not affect meaning. The message of the New Testament remains consistent across the manuscript tradition.

The Byzantine Manuscript Group

The Greek manuscripts can be grouped into different families. The Byzantine group is the largest and was used by the Greek-speaking church for many centuries.

While there are some differences, they mostly agree, showing the text was passed down in a reliable way.

Connection to English Bible Translations

The manuscript evidence is directly connected to English Bible translations.

The King James Version (KJV) and New King James Version (NKJV) are based on the Textus Receptus, which is closely related to the Byzantine manuscript tradition.

Modern translations such as the ESV, NIV, and NASB are based on modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament, which draw from a broad range of manuscripts, including earlier Alexandrian copies.

This explains why some passages differ between translations.

The Byzantine text is supported by the majority of Greek manuscripts and reflects a consistent and widely used tradition preserved in the church over many centuries, whereas Alexandrian manuscripts are fewer and come from a more limited line of transmission.

Today, we have the privilege of multiple translations that have developed over the centuries. I use the King James Bible as my base text and compare it with translations from other manuscript traditions such as the NIV and ESV, allowing me to examine word differences and gain a fuller understanding of the text.

Early Recognition and Preservation

The core New Testament writings were recognised, copied, and circulated together at an early stage in church history. This widespread distribution across multiple regions made large-scale alteration highly unlikely, since manuscripts could be compared across churches.

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Even during periods of persecution, such as under the Roman emperor Diocletian, when manuscripts were destroyed, the widespread distribution of copies ensured the text could not be eliminated or significantly altered.

Conclusion

When all the manuscript evidence is considered together, the New Testament has a strong historical foundation. It is supported by thousands of manuscripts and multiple lines of transmission, with early copies and a high level of agreement across the text.

The differences that exist are small, identifiable, and do not change the main message. This makes it one of the best-preserved texts from the ancient world and shows that the New Testament we have today closely reflects the original writings.