

## Transmission of the Text of the New Testament

By Chuck May

- *How did we get our New Testament?*
- *How were New Testament writings reproduced in ancient times?*
- *How was the New Testament text copied?*
- *How can we be sure we have an accurate text?*

The purpose of this brochure is to give a brief summary of the subject of textual transmission as it relates to the New Testament (NT). We will here describe the basic methods of writing and copying ancient manuscripts and then describe how these were put together to give us our New Testament. We will also discuss why we can be confident that our present text is reliable.

### How Did We Get Our New Testament?

We believe that the New Testament is the inspired Word of God written by men between 40 and 100 A.D. The original writing from the author's hand or from that of his stenographer is called the "autograph." The autograph is the writing that we hold to be infallible. A manuscript is a handwritten copy of the autograph or of other manuscripts and is not considered to be infallible.

The New Testament autographs (original writings) were completed by about 100 A.D. and were copied by hand (manuscripts) until the invention of the printing press (1456). There are more than 5,000 existing manuscripts which contain all or part of the New Testament.

**The New Testament is by far the best attested ancient document in history, sacred or secular.**

By the process of Textual Criticism literary, scholars have sifted through the manuscripts and have collated a text which we believe accurately represents the autographs.

The books of the New Testament were collated by the process of canonization. The word canon means "rule" or "measuring rod." Canon, as it pertains to biblical books, refers to the collection of books that passed a test of authenticity and authority. The canon was recognized at the synod of Carthage in 397 A.D.

### How were Scriptures reproduced in ancient times?

As far as the New Testament manuscripts are concerned, the two most important materials used for writing were papyrus and parchment (vellum). Papyrus is a plant whose stem could be cut into thin strips. These strips were placed on top of each other, with the fibers of each strip placed at right angles to the one preceding it. When these layers were pressed together they formed one fabric, which was quite strong and would receive ink very well.

Parchment, or vellum, was made from the skins of animals. It had benefit over papyrus in that it was sturdier and would last longer. Parchment was used until the late Middle Ages, when cotton and flax became popular for writing materials.

Both papyrus and parchment were put into the form of scrolls. The scroll was made by gluing together separate sheets of material end-to-end and then winding them around a stick, thus producing a volume; from the Latin word *volumen*, meaning "something rolled up." The length of the scroll was limited by considerations of ease of handling. Ancient authors, therefore,

would divide a long literary work into several books, each of which could be accommodated in one scroll. This is probably the reason Luke and Acts were issued in two scrolls instead of one.

Because of the inconvenience of the scroll, the codex, or leaf form of a book, became popular in the early 100s A.D. A codex was made by folding one or more sheets of print in the middle and sewing them together. The codex permitted many documents to be bound into one “book.” It also facilitated the consultation of proof-texts, and its pages were better suited to

be written on both sides. It’s probably true that the Gentile Christians adopted the use of the codex for their Scriptures in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the Jews who used the scroll.

In the manuscripts of the New Testament, two styles of handwriting are differentiated. The first is a very old, formal style of writing called “uncials.” This was characterized by more deliberate and carefully executed letters. It would be analogous to us as writing in all printed capital letters. In the Greek it looked something like this: ENAPACHHNOLOGOS.

Uncials were common through the 500s A.D. About the beginning of the 800s, a reform in handwriting was initiated and a script of smaller letters in a running hand called “miniscules” became popular. Miniscule text looked like this: enarchhnologo.

It is important to note that many ancient manuscripts used no spaces between words. Thus New Testament manuscripts fall into two categories, the earlier being written in uncial script and the latter in minuscule. The example given of miniscules is simply a lower case version of the uncials. Both read, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1a).

## **How was the New Testament Text Copied?**

As Christianity spread, there developed a need to reproduce and disseminate copies of the New Testament. In the early days of the church, individual Christians would copy the text for their local bodies. After Christianity became legal in 313 A.D., it was usual for book manufacturers, or scriptoria, to produce copies of the New Testament. In the workroom of a scriptorium several trained scribes would each write a copy of the text as it was read by a lector (reader). In this way several copies could be made at once. Manuscripts were then reviewed by a corrector who was trained to rectify mistakes. Copies were also made by monks as an act of devotion and ministry. None of these copying methods were perfect, and errors in transmission did occur.

After the text had been taken to various cities, it would again be copied there. Of course any deviation the text had from the original when it arrived would be carried into successive copies. Because of this fact, various centers of Christianity produced texts which were different from those of other areas. These texts are grouped according to their similarity of style into manuscript families. The names of some of these families include the Byzantine or Syrian, the Western, and the Alexandrian.

## **How do we know our text is reliable?**

Our confidence in the reliability of the text is not based solely on faith. Because of the great numbers of extant manuscripts of the New Testament, subjective evaluation plays a very small part in determining what the original said. The science of Textual Criticism can determine the causes of many of the variant readings in the New Testament and thereby give us strong confidence in what the original reading was. Also, there is a relatively short period of time from the autographs to some of the manuscripts we possess. This gives us confidence in knowing that centuries of time did not distort the manuscripts.

Finally, it has been asserted that the vast majority of the New Testament is accepted by all, thus only a small portion involves deciding between variant readings. Therefore, while there are many variant readings in the manuscripts of the New Testament, there is only a small area of the New Testament open to meaningful questions, and that area is theologically insignificant.

**So the conclusion is that we have a sound representation of the autographs.**

## Questions and Answers

**Q:** *How did we get our New Testament?*

**A:** God inspired the autographs of the New Testament. These autographs were copied into thousands of manuscripts which have been collated into our New Testament.

**Q:** *How were biblical writings reproduced in ancient times?*

**A:** The text of the New Testament was copied by hand onto materials such as parchment and papyrus until the invention of the printing press.

**Q:** *How was the New Testament text copied?*

**A:** The copiers of ancient times included professional scribes, monks, and individual Christians.

**Q:** *How can we be sure we have an accurate text?*

**A:** The science of Textual Criticism can give us strong confidence that we have a sound representation of the autographs.