

# Discovering and Classifying New Testament Manuscripts

by

James Arlandson

This article is the third in a four-part series on New Testament textual criticism. It provides basic facts on how some of the New Testament manuscripts were discovered and how they are classified. It answers such questions as these:

What does *Oxyrhynchus* mean? What do *Beatty* or *Bodmer* mean? What are the totals of the New Testament manuscripts? Were some of them destroyed during the persecution of the early church? Why wouldn't God protect his Word from such complications? Should I trust the New Testament?

These questions and more are explored in a basic Question and Answer format, for ease of understanding. It is written by a nonspecialist and is intended for the laity.

As noted in Part One, NT stands for New Testament, MS stands for manuscript (singular), and MSS for manuscripts (plural).

This article has three companion pieces. It should be read third, after the first two listed here:

1. Preliminary Questions and Answers
2. Basic Facts on Producing New Testament Manuscripts
3. Discovering and Classifying New Testament Manuscripts
4. The Manuscripts Tell the Story: the New Testament Is Reliable

## **1. What are the kinds and amount of variants?**

As noted in the previous two parts, this article assumes the basics of the Christian doctrine of inspiration. The original authors were inspired, but we do not have their very originals. (Incidentally, no original manuscript of any book coming out of the Greco-Roman world exists today.) The original New Testament documents were transmitted by scribes, who were not inspired. But does this cast doubt on the New Testament? Not if we are reasonable. New Testament textual criticism attempts to purge out the less likely and decide on the most likely variants that evolved over the tedious process of copying.

They can be classified in this way:

### I. Spelling differences and nonsense errors

This is by far the majority. For example, the name *John* in Greek can be spelled with two *n*'s or one *n*. Nonsense errors can come from the fatigue of the scribe, such as spelling *and* (*kai* in Greek) for *Lord* (*kyrios* in Greek).

## II. Differences that do not affect translation or that involve synonyms

This is also a sizeable chunk of the scribal variants. Two examples: Greek can use or not the definite article for proper nouns, such as Mary or the Mary. Also, the word order in Greek is much more flexible than it is in English, and this is counted in the grand total of variants, but they do not affect the meaning for us nonspecialists. Such is the nature of Greek back then.

## III. Meaningful variants that are not viable

This category represents the third smallest number of variants, but it amounts to only a tiny fraction. For example, 1 Thessalonians 2:9 could read "the gospel of God" (found in most manuscripts) or "the gospel of Christ" (found in one late thirteenth century manuscript).

## IV. Meaningful and viable

This represents only one percent of all variants. For example, the ending of the Gospel of Mark 16 is classified thus. Any reputable modern translation will mention that the best manuscripts do not support the longer ending. The reader should look at the New International Version, for example. Please go to [Bible Gateway](#) and type in Mark 16 and then John 7, and scroll down to the end of the page.

So what do these four categories of variants have in common? No variant overturns Christian doctrine, such as the deity of Christ, which is often supported by other verses. Skeptics appearing in the national media mislead the public about this. Also, the majority of variants are a concern for scholars, but not for average Bible readers, who need to know that our Bible is completely trustworthy. For us non-specialists, this means that only one percent of these variants are in play and are often noted in our translations. On the positive side, 99% of the Bible is established. Or if we combine the third and fourth categories, then only about 5% are relevant for us indirectly. This means that around 95% of the Bible is established. No text in the ancient Greco-Roman world comes close to this outcome, but a very far distant second.

As I wrote in the previous article in this series, the Bible is a highly reliable, accurate, and faithful record of the words and ideas of the original authors, as inspired by God.

Source: Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, pp. 54-63.

## **2. What is the original language of the New Testament?**

Since the question and answer is so fundamental, I have repeated them in the other parts in this series. It was written in common Greek of the first century, in a vocabulary and sentence structure that most people could understand. This is especially true of the four Gospels. Christianity is a missionary religion, so it had to use the language that everyone knew in the cities in the first century. And that language was Greek. Not much later, as Christianity expanded farther, scribes translated the Greek New Testament into other languages.

## **3. Who physically wrote down the original New Testament books and epistles?**

It is likely that the original authors wrote their own books and epistles. But it is equally likely that at least some employed scribes to do this, as the authors dictated their words. For example, the scribe or amanuensis of Paul's long Epistle to the Romans reveals himself: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Rom. 16:22; see Gal. 6:11 and 1 Pe. 5:12).

## **4. Was copying hard work for the scribe?**

We do not have enough information about the originals, but later scribes sometimes would include in their manuscript a complaint, such as the following:

He who does not know how to write supposes it to be no labor; but though only three fingers write, the whole body labors.

A traditional formula reads:

Writing bows one's back, thrusts the ribs into one's stomach, and fosters a general debility of the body.

Still another scribe wrote:

As travelers rejoice to see their home country, so also is the end of a book to those who toil [in writing].

An Armenian copyist says in a Gospel that "a heavy snow storm was raging and that the scribe's ink froze, his hand became numb, and the pen fell from his fingers!"

Finally, manuscripts may end with gratitude:

"The end of the book; thanks be to God!"

(Source: Metzger and Ehrman, p. 29)

## 5. Did scribes use contractions?

Yes, but it is unknown whether the originals had contractions or abbreviations. A short time after the originals, scribes used them mostly for sacred names (*nomina sacra*). Here are some examples, in transliterated English.

God = Theos → THS (*Th* in Greek is one letter)

Christ = Christos → CHS or CHR (*Ch* or *Kh* in Greek is one letter and is spoken as a hard *c*, as in *cool*)

Lord = Kurios → KS

Spirit = Pneuma → PNA

Jesus = Iēsous → IS or IĒ

After the scribe abbreviated or contracted the sacred names, he would draw a bar or line over the letters to signal a contraction.

One textual critic says of the sacred names: “Scribes wrote these names with special regard, and readers (lectors) uttered these names with special attention in church meetings as they read the Scriptures aloud” (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 253)

See real-life [abbreviations](#) in a papyrus of a part of Paul’s epistles.

## 6. What does “P” stand for (usually in Gothic or Old English font style), and what about the raised number, as in P<sup>75</sup>?

This is used only by modern scholars.

The “P” stands for papyrus, and the number indicates the individual papyrus that has been catalogued. Metzger and Ehrman say that a total of 116 papyri have been examined and catalogued (p. 48). All of the papyri, among many other manuscripts, have been used to produce the most highly accurate and reliable New Testament possible.

## 7. What do *recto* and *verso* mean?

In being made (see this [slide show](#) on how), the reed plant produced horizontal and vertical lines, as the strips of the plant were laid horizontally and vertically, in two layers. *Recto* stands for the “front” of the papyrus sheet or page, with the horizontal lines. The *verso* is the “back” side of the same sheet or page, and its lines were vertical, so it was more difficult to write on that side.

## 8. The name *Oxyrhynchus* appears often. What does it mean?

It is a city in Egypt, on the west side of the Nile, about 125 miles south of Cairo. In 1897, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, two archaeologists, traveled to this city

because they knew that a Christian community had flourished in the early centuries of Christianity. Egypt was naturally dry, so papyrus manuscripts could survive there, buried. They searched in cemeteries, tombs, churches, and monasteries, but they found a trash or rubbish heap, and carefully excavated it. They struck “papyrus gold,” so to speak. Philip W. Comfort, another prominent textual critic, describes the value of trash heaps, specifically for Grenfell and Hunt and the New Testament:

Manuscripts found in rubbish heaps are not “rubbish” per se or defective copies. When a manuscript became old and worn, it was customary to replace it with a fresh copy and discard the old one. Since the Egyptians are known to have disposed of such copies by putting them in rubbish heaps, excavators looking for ancient Egyptian papyri would search for ancient rubbish heaps in deserted sites on ground higher than the Nile River. Grenfell and Hunt’s choice of ancient rubbish heap at Oxyrhynchus was fortuitous, for it yielded that largest cache of papyri ever discovered. (Comfort, *In Quest*, p. 62)

Then Comfort tells us how long the excavations lasted.

Grenfell and Hunt excavated at Oxyrhynchus until 1907; the Italian exploration society (under G. Vitelli) continued the work there during the years 1910-14 and 1927-34 (Comfort, *In Quest*, p. 64).

Clearly the First World War (1914-1918) stopped the second dig, the first for the Italians.

The Oxyrhynchus papyri are different from the ones discovered at Nag Hammadi.

See this [Website](#) for more information on Oxyrhynchus papyri. Or do a Google search with “Oxyrhynchus.”

### **9. How many manuscripts were found at Oxyrhynchus?**

High-quality classical works were found, such as those of Homer and Pindar. But what about the New Testament?

In total, forty-six papyrus manuscripts containing portions of the New Testament have been discovered at Oxyrhynchus. (Comfort, *Encountering*, p. 64)

Oxyrhynchus is sometimes abbreviated as Oxy. or Ox.

### **10. Who was Chester Beatty, and why is his name mentioned so often in the context of papyri?**

[Chester Beatty](#) was an American living in Britain. He purchased papyri of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, found in Egypt in the early 1930s. The precise location of the discovery is a mystery because the Egyptian diggers and dealers

would not reveal it. This find must not be confused with the Oxyrhynchus papyri or Nag Hammadi papyri. The University of Michigan also purchased some leaves of this sensational discovery.

### **11. What manuscripts were discovered and then placed in his collection?**

Eight manuscripts of portions of the Greek Old Testament were found in codices (plural of codex), which is the forerunner of our book. All dates, in AD, refer to the time that the manuscripts were copied, not originally written.

- Two manuscripts of Genesis (one from the third century, another from the fourth)
- One of Numbers and Deuteronomy (second century)
- One of Ezekiel and Esther (third century)
- One of Isaiah (third century)
- One of Jeremiah (late second century)
- One of Daniel (third century)
- One of Ecclesiastes (fourth century)

Greek New Testament

- One codex of the four Gospels and Acts, P<sup>45</sup> (late second or early third century)
- One Codex of the Pauline Epistles, P<sup>46</sup>, (late first or early second century, or early third); *Pauline* is the adjective form of Paul, who was a major apostle.
- One Codex of Revelation, P<sup>47</sup>, the last Book in the New Testament (third century)

This collection is housed in Dublin, Ireland, as the Chester Beatty Library.

### **12. Who was Martin Bodmer, and why is his name mentioned so often in the context of papyri?**

He was a Swiss bibliophile and humanist who founded the Bodmer Library of World Literature, at Coligny, a suburb of Geneva (Metzger and Ehrman, p. 56).

He purchased papyri in 1952, discovered in Jabal Abu Manna, north of the Dishna plain, in Egypt. They are different from the Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi papyri.

### **13. What manuscripts were discovered, now in the Bodmer collection?**

All dates, in AD, refer to the century that the manuscripts were copied, not originally written.

- One containing most of the Gospel of John, P<sup>66</sup>, (ca. 150-200)
- One having all of 1 and 2 Peter and Jude, P<sup>72</sup> (third century)
- One having the Gospel of Matthew, P<sup>73</sup> (seventh century)
- One having the Book of Acts and the general epistles, P<sup>74</sup>, e.g. James, Jude, and other non-Pauline epistles (seventh century)
- One having the Gospels of Luke and John, P<sup>75</sup>, (ca. 175-225)

#### 14. What other discoveries of manuscripts are there?

The most famous discovery was done by Constantin von Tischendorf, a German who traveled to Egypt and then to the Sinai Peninsula in 1843, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery. He describes his discovery. Apparently, some parchments were thrown in the fire, until he rescued the remaining ones.

It was at the foot of Mount Sinai, in the Convent of St. Catherine, that I discovered the pearl of all my researches. In visiting the library of the monastery, in the month of May, 1844, I perceived in the middle of the great hall a large and wide basket full of old parchments; and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that two heaps of papers like these, mouldered by time, had been already committed to the flames. What was my surprise to find amid this heap of papers a considerable number of sheets of a copy of the Old Testament in Greek, which seemed to me to be one of the most ancient that I had ever seen. The authorities of the convent allowed me to possess myself of a third of these parchments, or about forty-three sheets, all the more readily as they were destined for the fire. But I could not get them to yield up possession of the remainder. The too lively satisfaction which I had displayed had aroused their suspicions as to the value of this manuscript. I transcribed a page of the text of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and enjoined on the monks to take religious care of all such remains which might fall in their way.

Then in 1853, Tischendorf returned to St. Catherine's Monastery for more manuscripts. He concealed his joy, so as not arouse the suspicions of the steward of the monastery, who jealously guarded his ancient manuscripts.

And so saying, he [the Steward] took down from the corner of the room a bulky kind of volume, wrapped up in a red cloth, and laid it before me. I unrolled the cover, and discovered, to my great surprise, not only those very fragments which, fifteen years before, I had taken out of the basket, but also other parts of the Old Testament, the New Testament complete, and, in addition, the Epistle of Barnabas and a part of the Pastor of Hermas. Full of joy, which this time I had the self-command to conceal from the steward and the rest of the community, I asked, as if in a careless way, for permission to take the manuscript into my sleeping chamber to look over it more at leisure. There by myself I could give way to the transport of joy which I [felt]. I knew that I held in my hand the most precious Biblical treasure in existence—a document whose age and importance exceeded that of all the manuscripts which I had ever examined during twenty years' study of the subject. I cannot now, I confess, recall all the emotions which I felt in that exciting moment with such a diamond in my possession . . .

(Source)

He named the manuscript he discovered Codex Sinaiticus (or Aleph, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet). See this quick write-up.

## **15. How are manuscripts classified?**

Manuscript (singular) is abbreviated as MS and manuscripts (plural) as MSS. NT stands for New Testament. There are five main classifications, plus quotations from the church fathers.

### I. Papyri

Papyrus comes from a reed plant (see this slide show on how it is made). Scribes used majuscules and minuscules handwriting on this material. It is quite possible that the autograph (original) manuscripts of the New Testament were written on it, or perhaps on parchment, or both, but scholarship is unclear on this point. But papyrus was not very durable, so we do not have the originals now.

This Webpage on papyri, written by Dr. Peter M. Head, a prominent textual critic, lists the papyri and provides further links.

Here is a complete list of papyri. The page also has links to images.

### II. Uncials

This word performs a double duty. It means a handwriting style, but it “ordinarily designates [manuscripts] on parchment” (Greenlee, p. 27). It dominates from the fourth through the tenth centuries.

Generally speaking, the uncial MSS, especially the earlier ones, are the most dependable group of witnesses to the NT text. (Greenlee p. 28)

This page on uncials, also written up by Dr. Head, lists the major uncials, and has further links.

This page provides links to uncials on parchments, including links to photos.

Here is a study of Codex B (03) or Codex Vaticanus.

This page has facsimile photos of Codex Alexandrinus (02).

### III. Minuscules

“By far the largest group of Greek NT MSS [is] those written in minuscule handwriting, thus dating from the ninth century and later. Most are on parchment” . . . (Greenlee, p. 33)

Generally, this group of witnesses may not be as reliable as the earlier ones, but this is not always true. A later manuscript may have a more reliable exemplar (now unknown) than an earlier manuscript.

Dr. Head also provides a list of the major minuscules.

#### IV. Lectionaries

This word comes from the Latin for *reading*.

These are MSS in which the Scriptures are written, not in ordinary sequence, but in sections arranged in units for reading in church services. In very ancient times certain scripture passages were designated as the reading for each day of the year and for special services and days. The lectionary MSS were then written to follow the sequence of readings, with the day and the week generally indicated at the beginning of each lection. (Greenlee, p. 35)

Finally, Dr. Head lists the major lectionaries.

#### V. Versions

Christianity is a missionary religion, so it needed to translate the NT in other languages from the original Greek. Here are some common ones, as Christianity spread out:

Latin (Itala), Syriac, Coptic (Egyptian), Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Gothic, Arabic, Persian, Slavonic, Frankish, Gothic, and Anglo-Saxon.

These versions are helpful in NT textual criticism because they can decide key words and phrases and clauses, provided they are easy to translate back into Greek. A Syriac version, for example, some of which are earlier than Greek MSS, help textual critics decide on variants.

#### VI. Quotations from the church fathers

The quotations of the NT in the writings of the church fathers have been studied in detail, but not all of them. Though this fertile area is undergoing more study, Metzger and Ehrman estimate that the quotations are extensive (though this quotation is found in the third edition before Ehrman joined Metzger for the fourth edition):

Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament. (p. 126)

This is significant in attesting to the reliability of the NT that we have in our possession. Also, the number of citations exceeded a million. Metzger is right to say that the citations are "so extensive."

## **16. What are the totals for these classes of manuscripts?**

The official listing (as of 2006) of the several important categories of Greek New Testament manuscripts can be summarized as follows:

Papyri...118  
Majuscule MSS...317  
Miniscule MSS...2877  
Lectionary MSS...2433  
Total...5745

Source: Papyri

The summary gives us a clear idea of how many manuscripts scholars have to sort through.

Hat tip: Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace p. 77.

## **17. Were manuscripts ever destroyed during the persecutions of early Christians?**

The totals gathered by Metzger (and Ehrman), cited in the previous Question, seem like a lot (and they are), but we could have benefited from many more manuscripts. Diocletian, a Roman Emperor who reigned from AD 284 to 305, ordered the destruction of church buildings and the Christian Scriptures in 303-304, but the persecution occurred before and continued after that date.

Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, two prominent leaders in textual criticism of any generation, explain the devastation this decree wreaked on the NT MSS.

The persecution of Diocletian left a deep scar not only in church history but also in the history of the New Testament text. Innumerable manuscripts were destroyed during the persecution and had to be replaced. Even more were needed to supply the flood of new churches which sprang up in the Age of Constantine [an Emperor who reigned immediately after Diocletian]. (Aland and Aland, p. 70)

This was a time of crisis. A “snitch” society developed. Non-Christians exposed the Christians and the whereabouts of their Scriptures. Some devout believers paid with their lives, protecting God’s Word. They deserve our admiration. We should honor them by honoring God’s Word in our lives. Honoring means reading and studying it.

### **18. All of the discoveries and recovery process seem so complicated. Why wouldn't God protect his Word?**

I have asked and answered this question in the other parts in this series. Christians believe that God works through history and humans. C. S. Lewis' preliminary study on miracles is relevant. Once the inspired original manuscripts get assimilated into history, they undergo the effects of time:

The moment [the newcomer, e.g. miracle] enters [Nature's] realm, it obeys her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. (*Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, p. 81)

However, these errors have been purged out (and continue to be), with very few remainders. Why can't devout believers today conclude that God is in fact working through humans in the purging process? Isn't this a kind of divine protection that is worked out over time and history?

### **19. So what's the bottom line on all of this? Should I lose my confidence in the NT?**

I have also asked and answered this question in the other three articles in this four-part series on New Testament manuscripts, but it is repeated here since it is critical both for seekers and the devout. The persecution of the church may have devastated the number of manuscripts, but enough have survived to help us put together the original, as much as this can be done, by cross-checking and comparing the thousands we have.

Sir Frederick Kenyon (d. 1952), a premier NT textual critic of the first half of the twentieth century, is optimistic about the general result of all of the hard work done by many scholars.

It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God (qtd. in Wegner, p. 25).

Kenyon worked in an earlier generation, and other MSS have been found since his time. However, nothing has cropped up that challenges in a substantive way the meaning and content of the NT. "Still there are relatively few significant variants in the Bible, and among these variants there is very little difference in meaning and content" (Wegner, p. 25).

Christians should have gratitude, if I may intrude with my own opinion, for scholars putting in so much time and energy and for clarifying the NT. Somebody has to do this thankless yeoman's work, done often behind the scenes, with no glamour.

Therefore, far from losing one's confidence, it should grow.

See the final article in the series: *The Manuscripts Tell the Story: the New Testament Is Reliable*. It surveys the opinions of many specialists on New Testament textual criticism. They also are optimistic.

This article has many links to other scholarship and sites. If the readers would like to click on them, they are encouraged to go to American Thinker, click on "Archives," find "James Arlandson," and then click on the article "New Testament Manuscripts: Discovery and Classification"; or they may follow this URL:

[http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/new\\_testament\\_manuscripts\\_disc.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/new_testament_manuscripts_disc.html)

The article hosted by biblicalstudies.org.uk has been updated in other areas.

## References

Aland, Kurt and Barbara Aland. *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*. 2nd ed. Trans. Erroll F. Rhodes. Eerdmans, 1989.

Black, David Alan, *New Testament Textual Criticism: a Concise Guide*. Baker, 1994.

Comfort, Philip Wesley. *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*. Wipf and Stock (originally at Baker), 1992.

---. *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism*. Broadman and Holman, 2005.

Elliott, Keith and Ian Moir. *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers*. T & T Clark, 1995.

Finegan, Jack. *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism*. Eerdmans, 1974.

Greenlee, J. Harold. *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*. Rev. ed. Hendrickson, 1995.

Komoszewski, J. Ed, M. James Sawyer and Daniel B. Wallace. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture*. Kregel, 2006. See Chapters 4-8.

Metzger, Bruce M. and Bart D. Ehrman. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 4th ed. Oxford UP, 2005.

Roberts, Colin H. *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*. Published for the British Academy by the Oxford UP, 1979.

--- and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, published for the British Academy by the Oxford UP, 1983.

Wegner, Paul D. *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods, and Results*. InterVarsity, 2006.