

## **Doctrine of the Ancient Manuscripts**

### Preface

1. Ancient manuscripts are classified into four groups. The oldest of these are the uncial manuscripts on vellum or parchment. They are written in all capital letters with no punctuation or spaces between words or sentences, or even paragraphs. The syntax (sentence structure) alone is the basis of all punctuation.
2. The second type of manuscript is called the minuscule. It dates back to the tenth century A.D. You can always tell a minuscule manuscript by its semi-uncial script. This script was developed by monks during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.
3. Thirdly, we have the Lectionaries. They are so named because of the purpose they served. For example, suppose a pastor in one of the early churches wanted to read Rom 5:1-12. The grouping of such Bible passages appointed for reading in worship services became known as lectionaries.
4. The fourth type of manuscript was simply called the papyri. This very delicate paper was too brittle to be folded but could be rolled into scrolls. Fortunately, little deterioration occurred when this material was stored in very hot and dry climates. Well-preserved papyri have been found dating prior to A.D. 200. Let's look at a few of the more important manuscripts.

### Introduction

1. Ancient manuscripts are classified into four groups. The oldest of these are the uncial manuscripts on vellum or parchment.
2. The second type of manuscript is called the minuscule. It dates back to the tenth century A.D.
3. Thirdly, we have the Lectionaries. They are so named because of the Bible passages they contain and the purpose they served. For example, suppose a pastor in one of the early churches wanted to read Rom 5:1-12. He would copy that portion of the Word from either the original text, or a Latin copy, or some other ancient language. He would then insert this passage in his order of service. Since many of these lectionaries are by far more ancient than the Manuscripts which are presently available to us, they are of great help in determining the text of the original wording of Scripture.
4. The fourth type of manuscript was simply called the papyri. This very delicate paper was too brittle to be folded but could be rolled into scrolls. Fortunately, little deterioration occurred when this material was stored in very hot and dry climates; well preserved papyri have been found dating prior to A.D. 200.

5. Let's review several of the more important manuscripts from which we garner our Canon.

## CODEX SINAITICUS

1. We owe much of our knowledge of the Scriptures to a brilliant nineteenth century German scholar, who spent his life piecing together the original New Testament. At the age of nineteen, young Count Konstantin von Tischendorf amazed his professors with his fluent knowledge of the classical languages and dialects of antiquity. Seven years later, he was appointed lecturer at the University of Leipzig. The following year, he published a new edition of the Greek New Testament.

2. In the spring of 1844, Tischendorf took a trip to the Near East. In the course of his travels, he journeyed to the Sinai Peninsula in search of an old monastery that had been hewn from the rock on the side of Mount Sinai. Since there were no hotels or motels in those days, travelers often spent the night in monasteries? When Tischendorf arrived at the Greek Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine's, he was welcomed by the Russian monks.

3. After a pleasant meal and welcome by one of the monks, Tischendorf presented his letter of introduction. He was then given a grand tour of the grounds and buildings and taken to the library. Tischendorf was disappointed by what he saw.

4. There were dusty parchments piled everywhere. In his bedroom he saw a large wastebasket filled with what looked like ancient vellums. The basket had been placed near the fireplace—apparently left there to warm his room. Tischendorf was aghast at the thought of anyone burning these vellums.

5. Here, if his eyes did not deceive him, was something of real value. Quickly he started going through the papers. Was there more of this kind of material around? If so, would they bring them to him? This is how Tischendorf discovered the 129 pages of what is today known as the Codex Sinaiticus, or the Codex Aleph.

6. Unhappily, Tischendorf did not 'play poker' well. His face lit up in such a way that the monks knew there was something of value in that wastebasket. So he had to tell them of his discovery --- a manuscript that possibly dated back to the second century. Would they let him have it? Immediately the attitude of the monks changed; the answer was no. Tischendorf could not take the papers with him, but he would be permitted to review the pages and take a few notes. Tischendorf did more than that; he copied the entire manuscript. In the end, after prolonged bargaining, he was allowed to take 43 of the 129 pages.

7. Almost fourteen years would pass before all the negotiations for the transfer of this and other priceless documents. England's interest in the manuscripts was made known to the Russian government. The monks were shocked. Why sell their precious papers to English heretics? They would rather give them to Russia---on loan, of course. Triumphantly, and with the full backing of Russia, Tischendorf carried off his prize for further study. He published his findings in 1862. Then in 1933, the Russian Communists decided they had no need of Bibles, old or new, so they sold Codex Sinaiticus to Great Britain for 100,000 pounds sterling. The crumpled pages were restored and bound in two volumes and placed in the British Museum. Later they were photostatically reproduced and copies sent to libraries throughout the world.

8. Codex Sinaiticus is still one of the finest and most accurate texts available to us today, and it became the basis of many revisions and corrections of earlier editions of the Bible.

#### CODEX VATICANUS

1. With Tischendorf's findings a new interest in ancient manuscripts was kindled. Someone remembered their French/Vatican history and wondered what had become of the many old manuscripts which Napoleon's scholars had discovered in the Vatican when the Pope was captured. Actually, Codex Vaticanus, also known as Codex B, was known to be several years older than Sinaiticus. Vaticanus had probably been transported to the Vatican by Pope Nicholas in 1448. Until the Napoleonic Wars, the manuscript had been hidden from the outside world.

2. In 1809, when Napoleon exiled the Pope to Avignon (a city located northwest of Marseille), it took about fifty wagons to transport the Pope's library. With the fall of Napoleon in 1815, the papers were returned to the Vatican before anyone had a chance to examine them carefully. Once more in the Vatican library, they were jealously guarded by the Roman Catholics.

3. Tregelles, another great scholar and friend of Tischendorf's, decided to investigate the Codex Vaticanus in the Vatican library. He applied to the Pope for permission to examine the manuscript and was promptly refused. When he explained he was a professor of New Testament literature at Leipzig University the Pope agreed to let Tregelles study the documents for some six hours.

4. That was in the year 1843. Twenty years later, Tischendorf was permitted to reexamine the manuscript. Of course, he had to submit to stringent security measures. He was searched on his way in and on his way out; He could bring no writing materials and was not allowed to take notes. The manuscript was laid out on a large table where he could read no longer than the times established by the chief librarian. Furthermore, there would be guards watching him all the time he was reading.

5. Tischendorf memorized a portion of the text each day. When he returned home, he would sit down and write out that part of Scripture earlier memorized. The next day he would go back to the Vatican to master the next portion of the Word. This went on for the summer holidays, and in three months Tischendorf memorized the entire text of Codex Vaticanus. I suspect this was one of the greatest memory feats ever! Upon his return to Leipzig, Tischendorf published the results of his findings. So close was his text to the original, that Pope Pius IX in 1859 ordered the Vatican manuscript photographed. In that way it became public property for the world at large. Codex Vaticanus is still one of our most valuable manuscripts.

#### CODEX ALEXANDRINUS

1. A third very interesting manuscript is the Codex Alexandrinus. This Greek language manuscript had been written in about A.D. 450 in Alexandria, Egypt. Apparently no one paid any attention to it in the years that followed. In 1621, when Cyril Lucar became the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, he transferred the manuscript to Constantinople.

2. He had succumbed to the influence of Calvinistic teaching, and was corresponding with leading churchmen in the western world. He soon learned of England's keen interest in ancient Biblical manuscripts. So, when the British ambassador, Thomas Roe, was scheduled to return home, Lucar sent with him the manuscripts as a gift to King Charles the First. The beautiful document, Codex Alexandrinus, was presented at court in 1627; just fifteen years after the King James Version of the Bible had been completed.

3. What a pity that it came so late, because this very ancient manuscript may have helped in the correct rendition of the English text.

#### EPHRAEMI RESCRIPTUS

1. It is fascinating to learn what happened to some of the great libraries of the past and to trace their disposition throughout history. For example, we know that Cleopatra was very fond of reading and that Marc Antony was extraordinarily fond of Cleopatra. When he heard of her love for books, Marc Antony took his army to one of the great libraries of Asia Minor. There he 'liberated' 400,000 volumes of literature and took them down to Egypt as a gift for Cleopatra.

2. An act like this would be tantamount to the Library of Congress being stolen and moved to another country. Many of the great libraries of the ancient world have disappeared, and we know of their existence only because history has recorded it for us.

3. It is equally interesting to discover that some ancient manuscripts, thought to be lost, were eventually recovered. One of these is known to us as the Ephraemi Rescriptus, or Codex C.

3.1 This recovery in the sixteenth century involved Catherine de Medici, who was as ambitious as she was clever. Catherine was a member of the colorful Italian family that had risen from obscurity to immense wealth and fame. Over a period of nearly three hundred years, the Medicis had made a name for themselves which ran the gamut from popes to poisoners to patrons of the arts. They had affiliated themselves with the great houses of Europe through marriage, and Catherine had become the wife of King Henry II of France. She bore him four sons who eventually, through her constant manipulations, became kings.

4. Catherine de Medici was an avid, if somewhat superficial reader, who treasured her books and took them wherever she went. Among her favorites were the sermons of a Syrian theologian, Father Ephraem. When Catherine died, her books went to the French National Library in Paris. They were stacked away and ignored for a long time--- 245 years to be exact.

5. In 1834, a student of theology decided to write a thesis on the sermons of Father Ephraem. He went to the French National Library and asked permission to check out some of the Medici books. He was told that they could not be removed from the premises, since the collection had great historic value; however, he was permitted to examine the books. While he was reading, the light fell on the page in such a way that indentations in the vellum were visible. What appeared to the student as so many indentations were, in fact, inscriptions made prior to those of Father Ephraem. What actually had happened was that in 1553, when Father Ephraem wanted to record his sermons, paper was very scarce and hard to obtain. He found some used vellums in an ancient Syrian monastery and simply erased the writing.

6. True, the indentations were still there, but Father Ephraem's sermons had been written over them. Without realizing it Father Ephraem had erased one of the finest of all Bible manuscripts in order to write his own sermons! Immediately, the alert student became far more interested in what Father Ephraem had erased than in what he had written. Through the use of chemicals, the original manuscript was restored.

7. This type of manuscript is called a palimpsest, which means "erased and written over." This particular one became known as Ephraemi Rescriptus; in other words, Ephraem wrote over it. Since its discovery, the manuscript has been removed from the Medici stacks of literature and placed where it belongs---in the Bible stack.

## THE POPYRI

### The Oxyrhynchos Manuscripts

1. Archaeological findings have provided us with priceless manuscripts of the past. Oxford University professors, Dr. Grenfell and Dr. Hunt in c. 1900 went to Oxyrhynchos (Och see rin quist) in Upper Egypt, west of the Nile. They were searching for ancient treasure and trinkets of silver and gold that lay buried in the tombs. During the course of their excavations of the one-time provincial capital, they came upon a tremendous hall filled with stuffed, mummified crocodiles.

2. They were baffled and disappointed; they had expected to find priceless art treasures and jewels in the great chamber, not two thousand stuffed crocodiles! Possibly on the other side of the chamber they would find what they were looking for—and indeed they did. They recovered many valuable artifacts which are still in British museums today, estimated to be worth millions of dollars. This find can scarcely be compared, however, to their discovery of far greater spiritual value---a discovery which came about quite by accident.

3. To reach the other side of the great chamber, the crocodiles had to be moved out of the way. It was a tedious job, but it paid off handsomely. When one of the native workers stumbled and fell, the crocodile he was carrying hit a sharp rock and broke open. Dr. Grenfell's eyes widened in amazement at what he saw: Inside that crocodile were papyri! Upon investigation, they found inside the crocodiles entire libraries of the ancient world---not just one, but many different kinds of manuscripts. These included some Biblical manuscripts from the second century---the then autograph of the New Testament also dated from the second century. Here also were grammar and etymology books which led to further discoveries of principles involved in the syntax and grammar of the koine Greek, which we still use today. The Oxyrhynchos (Och see rin quist) Papyri can be seen in museums in both Egypt and Britain.

#### The Chester Beatty Papyri

1. After the discovery of the Oxyrhynchos (Och see rin quist) there was increasing excitement over the discovery of papyri and searches for ancient papyri intensified. Countless small hills and sand dunes were dug up, and many turned out to be only rubbish heaps of the past, containing bits of slates, vases, broken pottery and other reminders of a life long ago. The Arabs, not to be outdone, soon joined hunt carrying off many valuable treasures. So, here and there, fragments of Biblical writings turned up for sale. Among these was an ancient Jewish temple library of the seventh century B.C., discovered at Elephantine, Egypt. The acquisition and cataloguing took the greater part of two years---1906 to 1908.

2. Another great discovery came on November 19, 1931, when the Chester Beatty Papyri were found. Chester Beatty was a millionaire from Philadelphia who made a tour of Palestine and Egypt. He had heard that certain Old Testament papyri were being offered for sale. Even though the prices were exorbitant, Beatty paid immediately.

2.1 He then turned the entire collection of documents over to two scholars, F.G. Kenyon and H.A. Sanders. A detailed study of these second and third century papyri revealed some of the missing papers of the Codex Sinaiticus, portions of Paul's Epistles and the four Gospels. The 'haul' was well worth the price paid. This collection is now housed at the University of Pennsylvania.

### The Work of Deissmann

1. The ever-increasing supply of newly recovered papyri furnished abundant material for research and evaluation by knowledgeable philologists. We owe much to a group of very famous German scholars who, under the leadership of Adolph Deissmann, shed new light on the language of the New Testament. His studies clarified the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the koine Greek. Light from the Ancient East, translated from the German, is a fascinating book on this subject and contains some of Deissmann's findings.

### The Dead Sea Scrolls

1. In 1947, a fifteen-year-old Bedouin boy followed a goat which had strayed. When he casually threw a pebble into the cleft of a rock, he was startled at the sound of breaking pottery. Later he returned with a friend to explore the cave. Here they stumbled upon several earthenware jars that contained dirty, musty-smelling parchments. What seemed like an accidental find turned out to be Biblical manuscripts antedating the oldest known Old Testament manuscripts by one thousand years. This included the complete book of Isaiah. It would take many years and a small fortune to acquire these scrolls from the Arab black market, and even more patience to piece them together and decipher. There could be no doubt however, the scrolls were genuine.

2. In the following years many additional caches were located, including the main library of the Essenes, a Jewish sect. The Dead Sea Scrolls were named after the area in which they had been found. Although the Scrolls provided little additional information as to the content of the Canon, they did in fact verify that what we had earlier discovered was in fact accurate and reliable.

### THE CRITERIA FOR OLD TESTAMENT CANONICITY

1. With the awareness of the need for a Canon, five criteria were agreed upon: inspiration, external evidence, documentation by quotation, the law of public official action and external evidence. On this basis, the inclusion or exclusion of certain books into the Canon was eventually determined.

## 1.1 Inspiration

Was the book of divine origin? Every book must have been written by an acknowledged messenger of God, commissioned by God to make known His will, and the book must have been immediately accepted as the Word of God.

## 1.2 Internal Evidence

Was its claim to inspiration adequately sustained by the awareness of the writers that the book was indeed sacred Scripture? Nehemiah 8:1-8 is a critical passage, which presents the facts that the people were taught the Word of God.

## 1.3 Documentation by Quotation

The New Testament contains quotations from the Old Testament made by Jesus Christ and others who declared it to be the Word of God. We have many such passages, among them Matthew 22:29, Joh 5:39 and 10:35.

## 1.4 The Law of Public Official Action

We have an illustration of this in Neh 8:5. “And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people) and when he opened it all the people stood up.”

## 1.5 External Evidence

During Israel’s captivity (586-516 B.C.) the Jews realized why they had disintegrated as a nation. This led to a resurgence of the study of Bible doctrine. More than that, these same Jewish leaders invented marvelous system for the preservation of the Canon. They counted every letter in every book. They knew the middle letter of the Canon. Now whenever copies were made of the Scriptures and a scribe arrived at the midpoint of the text, they would check him out by counting the exact number of letters. The same was done upon the completion of the text. As a result, we are assured that the Old Testament we have today is precisely the same as at the time of its original writing.

## THE NEED FOR THE CANON

1. Why does the believer need a canon of Scripture? Why were the various portions of the divinely inspired Word of God collected and bound into a book called the Holy Bible? Let’s consider four reasons why there was a very definite need for the Canon.
2. First, so that believers in every generation might have complete revelation from God, the dispensation in which they live, their relationship to the angelic conflict, as well as many other principles of doctrine. To operate in the devil’s world believers must have a norm or standard of absolute authority.



3. When it comes to absolutes, no ordinary human being can speak with authority—no matter what title or office you may give him. Every human being has some area of limitation because he possesses a sin nature. No matter how capable he may be or how excellent his judgment, there cannot be absolute authority vested in any individual. Absolute authority is a divine prerogative.

4. There has been only one member of the human race to whom absolute authority was given—the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ (Mat 28:18). Because He is absent from the earth and at the right hand of the Father. He must leave behind a standard which carries the same authority with which He spoke during His incarnation. That absolute standard of authority is found only in the Word of God (1Co 2:16).

I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth. (Joh 16:12-13a)

5. The entire Bible is the Word of God! Just remember that our Lord said to His disciples, so rest assured that the New Testament Epistles carry the same weight as those words which the Lord spoke in person. They are addressed to you and to me.

6. Second, a Canon was necessary so that people might have God's Word in writing. Whether you realize it or not, you happen to be one of the generations of believers who has in your possession the greatest treasure of all time—the completed canon of Scripture! There is nothing more rewarding and profitable than to go 'prospecting' in the Word of God. In addition to Bible doctrine, the Word contains thousands of promises to which God has put His signature. All are guaranteed by the very essence of God, and you and I have them in writing.

7. This has not always been the case, since revelation from God in the past dispensations came to man in other ways. Since the completion of the canon of Scripture in A.D. 96, all extra-Biblical revelation has ceased. Today, if anyone claims that God speaks to him in a dream or trance, he is out of line; God speaks to us only through His Word. Therefore, in order to learn, understand, and apply God's Word.

8. Therefore, in order to learn, understand, and apply God's Word, Bible doctrine must be taught, "isagogically, categorically, exegetically and dispensationally." God made every provision necessary for our assimilation of the content of the divine textbook. Once you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, the Bible should become your manual for living. So you see there should become your manual for living. So you see there should be no such thing as a drab, depressing, miserable existence for any believer. Life should have meaning, purpose, and definition; God has a special plan for you.

8.1 Everything that you will ever need in life for inner peace and happiness, for blessing and strength and stability is found in the completed canon of Scripture. There is no substitute for Bible doctrine or for positive volition toward it on your part.

9. Third, there was a need for the preservation and circulation of the sacred writings. For example, in A.D. 320, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered the destruction of all sacred books of the Christians. Although Diocletian was not aware of it, his persecutions acted as a catalyst to precipitate the necessary settlement of a grave dispute. Theologians had been arguing over the inclusion of James, Hebrews and Second and Third John into the Canon; but now that controversy had to be resolved in a hurry. The Roman soldiers were on their way to carry out the order, so Christians attempted to determine what was sacred and what was not.

10. Fourth, there had to be some norm or criteria for canonicity so that people might know which writings were canonical. The inspired writing had to be protected from the infiltration of non-canonical books. A tremendous mass of literature had appeared in the first three or four centuries, all of which claimed to be authoritative and inspired. Much of this literature was promoted by various cults in an attempt to prove their false theology or heretical ideas. They even went so far as to maintain that some of these were Paul's lost messages. Something had to be done to determine which books were canonical and which were not canonical.

11. After the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian, he was so eager for doctrine that he ordered fifty copies of the Scriptures for the churches of his new capital—Constantinople. Again the question: What is Scripture and what is not? This had to be settled once and for all. The scribes began their mammoth task of writing out by hand the fifty copies that the emperor had ordered. The job was completed before Constantine's death.