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A (Not So) Brief Defense
Christianity

I Biblical Documents -New
Testament

Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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A (Not So) Brief Defense of Christianity

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VII. The New Testament

A. The Greek Manuscript Evidence

There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament that have survived to our time. These are written on different materials.

1. Papyrus and Parchment.

During the early Christian era, the writing material most commonly used was **papyrus**. This highly durable reed from the Nile Valley was glued together much like plywood and then allowed to dry in the sun. In the twentieth century many remains of documents (both biblical and non-biblical) on papyrus have been discovered, especially in the dry, arid lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

Another material used was **parchment**. This was made from the skin of sheep or goats, and was in wide use until the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. It was scarce and more expensive; hence, it was used almost exclusively for important documents.

2. Examples

a. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Siniaticus

These are two excellent parchment copies of the entire New Testament which date from the 4th century (325-450 A.D.).

b. Older Papyrii

Earlier still, fragments and papyrus copies of portions of the New

Testament date from 100 to 200 years (180-225 A.D.) before Vaticanus and Siniaticus. The outstanding ones are the **Chester Beatty Papyrus** (P45, P46, P47) and the **Bodmer Papyrus II, XIV, XV** (P46, P75).

From these five manuscripts alone, we can construct all of Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and portions of Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Only the Pastoral Epistles (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy) and the General Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, and 3 John) and Philemon are excluded.

c. Oldest Fragment.

Perhaps the earliest piece of Scripture surviving is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33, and 37. It is called the **Rylands Papyrus** (P52) and dates from 130 A.D., having been found in Egypt. The Rylands Papyrus has forced the critics to place the fourth gospel back into the first century, abandoning their earlier assertion that it could not have been written then by the Apostle John.

d. This manuscript evidence creates a bridge of extant papyrus and parchment fragments and copies of the New Testament stretching back to almost the end of the first century.

B. Versions (Translations)

In addition to the actual Greek manuscripts, there are more than 1,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament in Syria, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic, as well as 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate, some of which date back almost to Jerome's original translation in 384-400 A.D.

C. Church Fathers

A further witness to the New Testament text is sourced in the thousands of quotations found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers (the early Christian clergy (100-450 A.D) who followed the Apostles and gave leadership to the fledgling church, beginning with Clement of Rome (96 A.D.).

It has been observed that if all of the New Testament manuscripts and Versions mentioned above were to disappear overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament with quotes from the Church Fathers, with the exception of fifteen to twenty verses!

D. A Comparison

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more significant when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without

question. Consider the following chart:

| Author and Work | Author's Lifespan | Date of Events | Date of Writing* | Earliest Extant MS** | Lapse: Event to Writing | Lapse: Event to MS |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Matthew, <i>Gospel</i> | ca. 0-70? | 4 BC - AD 30 | 50 - 65/75 | ca. 200 | <50 years | <200 years |
| Mark, <i>Gospel</i> | ca. 15-90? | 27 - 30 | 65/70 | ca. 225 | <50 years | <200 years |
| Luke, <i>Gospel</i> | ca. 10-80? | 5 BC - AD 30 | 60/75 | ca. 200 | <50 years | <200 years |
| John, <i>Gospel</i> | ca. 10-100 | 27-30 | 90-110 | ca. 130 | <80 years | <100 years |
| Paul, <i>Letters</i> | ca. 0-65 | 30 | 50-65 | ca. 200 | 20-30 years | <200 years |
| Josephus, <i>War</i> | ca. 37-100 | 200 BC - AD 70 | ca. 80 | ca. 950 | 10-300 years | 900-1200 years |
| Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i> | ca. 37-100 | 200 BC - AD 65 | ca. 95 | ca. 1050 | 30-300 years | 1000-1300 years |
| Tacitus, <i>Annals</i> | ca. 56-120 | AD 14-68 | 100-120 | ca. 850 | 30-100 years | 800-850 years |
| Seutonius, <i>Lives</i> | ca. 69-130 | 50 BC - AD 95 | ca. 120 | ca. 850 | 25-170 years | 750-900 years |
| Pliny, <i>Letters</i> | ca. 60-115 | 97-112 | 110-112 | ca. 850 | 0-3 years | 725-750 years |
| Plutarch, <i>Lives</i> | ca. 50-120 | 500 BC - AD 70 | ca. 100 | ca. 950 | 30-600 years | 850-1500 years |
| Herodotus, <i>History</i> | ca. 485-425 BC | 546-478 BC | 430-425 BC | ca. 900 | 50-125 years | 1400-1450 years |
| Thucydides, <i>History</i> | ca. 460-400 BC | 431-411 BC | 410-400 BC | ca. 900 | 0-30 years | 1300-1350 years |
| Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i> | ca. 430-355 BC | 401-399 BC | 385-375 BC | ca. 1350 | 15-25 years | 1750 years |
| Polybius, <i>History</i> | ca. 200-120 BC | 220-168 BC | ca. 150 BC | ca. 950 | 20-70 years | 1100-1150 years |

*Where a slash occurs, the first date is conservative, and the second is liberal.

**New Testament manuscripts are fragmentary. Earliest complete manuscript is from ca. 350; lapse of event to complete manuscript is about 325 years.

I Conclusion

In his book, *The Bible and Archeology*, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, stated about the New Testament, "The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact, negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New testament may be regarded as finally established."

To be skeptical of the 27 documents in the New Testament, and to say they are unreliable is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as these in the New Testament.

B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, the creators of *The New Testament in Original Greek*, also commented: "If comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like are set aside, the works in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly mount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament." In other words, the small changes and variations in manuscripts change no major doctrine: they do not affect Christianity in the least. The message is the same with or without the variations.

We have the Word of God.

The Anvil^{3/4}God's Word.



Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime:
Then looking in, I saw upon the floor
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.

"How many anvils have you had," said I,
"To wear and batter all these hammers so?"
"Just one," said he, and then, with twinkling eye,
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."

And so, thought I, the anvil of God's word,
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;
Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard,
The anvil is unharmed . . . the hammer's gone.

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