

Intro:

The great question: “We have in our present New Testament the very books God intended the Church to have; [but] can we say that we also have the very text in which they were originally written?” Thiessen, p. 31.

“In reply we are obliged to admit that none of the originals are known to exist and that what we have is but copies of copies of the originals. When we turn to these copies we find that there is much agreement among them, as also considerable disagreement. A careful examination of the various manuscripts leads us to the conclusion that no one of them is perfect. In view of this situation we seem doomed to lose a part of the argument for an authoritative account of what the evangelists and apostles wrote; for if we cannot produce the original text, what is the value in having the books which they wrote?” Thiessen, p. 31

The fact is that the Bible is indeed completely authoritative and trustworthy.

In this study, I want to show you why we have good reasons to trust the Bibles we hold in our hands as the very Word of God, without error and absolutely authoritative over our lives.

Today, we must first begin with a dull study of the materials of the composition of the manuscripts that were handed down from generation to generation.

I. Materials

A. Papyrus

1. Made from the reeds that grew in the banks of the Nile.
2. “It became very brittle with age and easily rotted when it became damp.” Thiessen, p. 32
3. Only the desert regions of Egypt “above” the lush Delta region offered an environment where papyrus could really successfully be preserved.
4. Papyrus was in use as far back as the 27th century BC.
5. “Since the Greeks mainly used papyrus for their books from the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD, since parchment was too expensive for ordinary usage, and since actual papyrus fragments of the New Testament have come down to us from the second and third centuries, we have reason to believe that the autographs of the books of the New Testament were written on this material.” Thiessen, p. 33

B. Parchment/Vellum

1. Parchment vs. Vellum

- a. Vellum is a material made from the skins of calves and antelopes.
- b. Parchment is a material made from the skins of sheep and goats.

2. OT copied on parchments around time of Christ

- a. The ruler of Egypt placed an embargo (tax) on papyrus exports for a time
- b. Pliny mentions that a certain ruler restored the use of parchments during this period because of this problem.
- c. Paul asks Timothy to bring “the parchments” when he comes to Rome (2 Tim 4.13) — probably the OT scriptures.

3. Factors in use:

- a. Lasts longer than papyrus, does not rot in moist climates.
- b. More expensive to produce
- c. Could be made anywhere, whereas papyrus basically had to come from Egypt.

C. Paper

1. Finally superseded parchment usage only in the 14th century AD.
2. Likely originated in China
3. Brought to Western Europe by the Arabs.

D. Time Line

1. Papyrus period: 1st century to beginning of the 4th
2. Vellum period: 4th century to the 9th
3. Vellum and paper period: 9th to 15th

With the adoption of the printing press in the late 15th century, the manuscripts (hand-copied documents) ceased production.

II. Style

A. Uncials: Used in early times

1. Uncials are manuscripts written in individual letters (printing as opposed to cursive writing), All Caps, No Spaces
2. “Rough flowing style”

B. Cursive: Used in later times

1. Flowing, smaller letters, joined together

III. Preservation factors

A. Climatic factors

1. Egypt: Dry desert air, especially in the southern part of Egypt (Upper Nile)
2. Mediterranean world: Not suited to the preservation of papyrus

B. Manufacturing Process

1. Papyrus vs. parchment vs. paper

- a. Papyrus tends to be earlier than parchment/vellum
- b. Paper late introduction, generally little value for “textual criticism”

2. Rolls vs. Codices

- a. Originals of NT probably written on rolls, like the OT
- b. Codices are books made of bound leaves, like ours. (singular: codex)

1) Originally thought to have only come into use with the adoption of vellum in the fourth century.

2) Subsequently papyrus codices have been discovered as early as the first half of the second century. (AD 101-150)

“Some papyrus codices have come down to us from the third century or earlier containing considerable portions of Scriptures, as we shall see a little later. All our great vellum manuscripts of the Greek New Testament are likewise in codex form.” Thiessen, p. 34.

Each of these factors affect dating of manuscripts.