

Lecture Nineteen

The Romance of Manuscripts

Scope: With the invention of printing, manuscripts ceased being indispensable instruments of community life and became objects either to be discarded or preserved as art. Scholars began to appreciate the value of manuscripts for more than their antiquity or ornamentation; they were seen as windows into the past. The 19th century in particular was a time of exploration for ancient manuscripts, made urgent by the danger of their disappearance. The quest for ancient biblical manuscripts was supplemented by archaeological discoveries. Some sites contained biblical papyri—the oldest physical evidence for the Bible—and others revealed ancient writings of great importance for understanding the world that produced the Bible.

Outline

- I. Once the Bible was printed, the relationship between the book and manuscripts became more complicated.
 - A. Before the invention of printing, manuscripts *were* the Bibles of specific communities of Christians. The multiplication of differences in manuscripts was less obvious because of patterns of use.
 - B. Printing held the promise of stabilizing the biblical text and making a single version available to all.
 1. The multiple editions and corrections made to the KJV showed that printing itself could not ensure perfection.
 2. As translations multiplied, furthermore, the question of their basis became more pressing.
 - C. Scholars also became increasingly aware of how few and how poor were the manuscripts on which the Textus Receptus was based.
 - D. Thus, there was a three-stage progression: from manuscript as Scripture, to manuscript as the basis for the Bible, to manuscript as challenge to the printed Bible.

- II.** The 18th through the 20th centuries saw antiquarians and historians scouring monasteries and libraries throughout Europe and the Middle East in the search for biblical manuscripts.
- A.** The most dramatic tale of discovery is that of the Codex Sinaiticus, found by Constantin von Tischendorf in 1844.
1. On his visit to Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, von Tischendorf found monks using leaves of a manuscript of the LXX for kindling and persuaded them to preserve the valuable manuscript.
 2. On later visits, he recovered a large portion of the Old Testament and the entire New Testament in the form of an uncial manuscript dating from the 4th century, including in that manuscript two other early Christian works known before that time only by title.
 3. The manuscript was given to Russia, but after the Revolution of 1917, it was sold to the British Museum.
- B.** Less dramatic, but equally important, was the location and study of manuscripts that would be older and more reliable than the medieval manuscripts used as the basis of the Textus Receptus.
1. Of great importance is Codex Vaticanus, stored at the Vatican Library since 1475 and another example of a 4th-century uncial, perhaps one of those ordered by the Emperor Constantine. It contains both Testaments (including Apocrypha), with some *lacunae*.
 2. Codex Alexandrinus dates from the 5th century; it was donated to Charles I of England by the patriarch of Constantinople in 1627 and is today in the British Museum. It contains the Old Testament and substantial portions of the New Testament.
 3. Codex Ephraemi carries another dramatic tale: It is a palimpsest text from the 5th century that had been erased and had sermons of St. Ephraem written over it. Von Tischendorf recovered the original, an important witness to portions of the Old and New Testaments.
 4. Among the oddest of the ancient manuscripts is Codex Bezae (also Codex Cantabrigiensis), a bilingual (Latin and Greek) manuscript of the Gospels, Acts, and a portion of 3 John, written in parallel columns; it was donated to Cambridge by the reformer—and editor of the Greek New Testament—Theodore Beza in 1581.

- C. The late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw the discovery of ancient papyrus manuscripts, particularly of the New Testament.
 - 1. The Chester Beatty Papyri include P46, a manuscript from c. 200 that contains Paul's Letters, and P52, the oldest copy of any portion of the New Testament, a tiny scrap of John from the first half of the 2nd century.
 - 2. The Bodmer Papyri include P66, a portion of John dating from c. 200; P72, the earliest known text of Jude and 2 Peter (3rd century); and P75, the earliest witness to the Gospel of Luke (c. 175–225).
- III. Over the same period of time, extraordinarily important archaeological discoveries uncovered other ancient manuscripts and gave hope for the discovery of more.
 - A. From 1897, many thousands of fragments of papyri were found at Oxyrhynchus near the Nile River, containing a wide assortment of material from the late 1st century to the 7th century C.E., including scriptural and apocryphal writings.
 - B. In 1945, a collection of 13 papyrus codices in leather bindings was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, containing a variety of Gnostic writings in Coptic from the 3rd and 4th centuries.
 - C. In 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in jars located in a series of caves at Wadi Qumran in Israel, containing an entire library of scriptural and sectarian writings from the ancient sect of the Essenes.
- IV. The effect of such discoveries was to stimulate further an already healthy appetite to revisit and retell the story of Judaism and Christianity, as well as the story of the Bible.
 - A. The overall effect of discovering earlier biblical manuscripts was the realization of greater variation in the manuscript tradition in earlier years rather than in later years.
 - B. The overall effect of the discovery of other ancient literature was to challenge conclusions drawn on the basis of a much smaller body of data.

Essential Reading:

B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*.

Supplementary Reading:

W. F. Albright, “The Bible after Twenty Years of Archaeology (1932–1952),” in W. Yarchin, ed., *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader*, pp. 263–275.

Questions to Consider:

1. What effect would the continuous discovery of ancient manuscripts have on widening the gap between the believer’s Bible and the scholar’s Bible?
2. How does the recovery of manuscripts from the 2nd to the 6th centuries challenge the translations made of texts based on 10th- and 11th-century manuscripts?