

Bible Manuscripts

Dramatically, when the Bible manuscripts are compared to other ancient writings, they stand alone as the best-preserved literary works of all antiquity. Remarkably, there are thousands of existing Old Testament manuscripts and fragments copied throughout the Middle East, Mediterranean and European regions that agree phenomenally with each other. ¹ In addition, these texts substantially agree with the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which was translated from Hebrew to Greek some time during the 3rd century BC. ² The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in Israel in the 1940's and 50's, also provide astounding evidence for the reliability of the ancient transmission of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries BC. ³

The manuscript evidence for the "New Testament" is also dramatic, with nearly 25,000 ancient manuscripts discovered and archived so far, at least 5,600 of which are copies and fragments in the original Greek. ⁴ Some manuscript texts date to the early second and third centuries, with the time between the original autographs and our earliest existing fragment being a remarkably short 40-60 years. ⁵

Interestingly, this manuscript evidence far surpasses the manuscript reliability of other ancient writings that we trust as authentic every day. Look at these comparisons: Julius Caesar's *The Gallic Wars* (10 manuscripts remain, with the earliest one dating to 1,000 years after the original autograph); Pliny the Younger's *Natural History* (7 manuscripts; 750 years elapsed); Thucydides' *History* (8 manuscripts; 1,300 years elapsed); Herodotus' *History* (8 manuscripts; 1,350 years elapsed); Plato (7 manuscripts; 1,300 years); and Tacitus' *Annals* (20 manuscripts; 1,000 years). ⁶

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.

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

Renowned Bible scholar F.F. Bruce declares:

*There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.*⁷

Homer's *Iliad*, the most renowned book of ancient Greece, is the second best-preserved literary work of all antiquity, with 643 copies of manuscript support discovered to date. In those copies, there are 764 disputed lines of text, as compared to 40 lines in all the New Testament manuscripts.⁸ In fact, many people are unaware that there are no surviving manuscripts of any of William Shakespeare's 37 plays (written in the 1600's), and scholars have been forced to fill some gaps in his works.⁹ This pales in textual comparison with the over 5,600 copies and fragments of the New Testament in the original Greek that, together, assure us that nothing's been lost. In fact, all of the New Testament except eleven minor verses can be reconstructed outside the Bible from the writings of the early church leaders in the second and third centuries AD.¹⁰

*In real terms, the New Testament is easily the best attested ancient writing in terms of the sheer number of documents, the time span between the events and the document, and the variety of documents available to sustain or contradict it. There is nothing in ancient manuscript evidence to match such textual availability and integrity.*¹¹

The academic discipline of "textual criticism" assures us that the Bible translations we have today are essentially the same as the ancient Bible manuscripts, with the exception of a few inconsequential discrepancies that have been introduced over time through copyist error. We must remember that the Bible was hand-copied for hundreds of years before the invention of the first printing press. Nevertheless, the text is exceedingly well preserved. Again, I pondered this -- of the approximately 20,000 lines that make up the entire New Testament, only 40 lines are in question. These 40 lines represent one quarter of one percent of the entire text and do not in any way affect the teaching and doctrine of the New Testament. I again compared this with Homer's *Iliad*. Of the approximately 15,600 lines that make up Homer's classic, 764 lines are in question. These 764 lines represent over 5% of the entire text, and yet nobody seems to question the general integrity of that ancient work.

WORK	WHEN WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME SPAN	# COPIES
Homer (<i>Iliad</i>)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 years	643
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	125 A.D.*	25 years	24,000+

To my real surprise, I discovered the Bible to be better preserved -- by far -- than other ancient works I've read and accepted over the years, such as Homer, Plato and Aristotle. As far as my "interpretation of an interpolation of an oral tradition" theory, I found that the Bible was not changed or interpreted from the ancient source texts. Simply, as the Bible was carried from country to country, it was translated into languages that don't necessarily mirror the original languages of Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. However, other than some grammatical and cultural differences, the "Bible manuscripts" are absolutely true to their original form and content, and remarkably well-preserved in their various translations.

¹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, 71-73.

² Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol.1, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979, 58-59.

³ Ibid, 56-57.

⁴ McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 34-36.

⁵ *John Ryland's Gospel of John fragment*, John Ryland's Library of Manchester, England. See also, Ibid., 38.

⁶ McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol.1, 42.

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: How We Got Our English Bible*, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1950, 178.

⁸ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody, Chicago, Revised and Expanded 1986, 366-67.

⁹ <http://shakespeare.com/faq/>, Dana Spradley, Publisher, 2002.

¹⁰ McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1, 50-51.

¹¹ Ravi K. Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* Word Publishing, 1994, 162.

This article borrowed from <http://www.allaboutthejourney.org/bible-manuscripts.htm>