

## Why Trust the New Testament Text?

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV)

### What are papyrus fragments, and why should we care?

Often when a car doesn't work right, a mechanic will look up the specifications written by the people who made the car. Then the mechanic will compare the car's performance with what it was designed to do.

Like a mechanic we might wish to compare the Bible in our hands to what the first authors wrote. Unfortunately, none of the original documents exist, as far as we know. However, we do have many ancient papyrus fragments of the New Testament that allow comparisons of what we have with very, very old copies. We can see what has changed between then and now. We can also compare the differences between different ancient copies to see if they are the same or different.

### Which is the oldest fragment?

To illustrate what we can learn from the fragments of papyrus, which are the oldest documents, we will narrow our focus to one specific fragment, known as P<sup>52</sup>. It is the oldest papyrus fragment of the New Testament. The verses written on one side of the fragment of papyrus are John 18:37-38, shown in the picture on the left. On the other side are written John 18:31-33 in the right picture (portions of those verses). Some scholars have dated it as early as the year AD 90. Others have dated it to as late as AD 150. Both dates are very early. This means it was written 57 – 117 years after Jesus died on the cross. This would also have been 0-50 years after John wrote the original. It would have been copied at a time when the original still existed. Compared to many other ancient books, the gap between the time it was first written and the time that the copy was made is extremely short.



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### What is written on the oldest fragment?

In John 18:31-33, Pilate asks Jesus if He is King of the Jews. In John 18:37-38, Jesus says, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate sarcastically says, "What is truth?" He doesn't "listen" to Jesus' voice. In fact, Jesus is the source of all truth. We must decide whether we will accept the evidence of P<sup>52</sup>. as identifying Jesus as being the truth.

### What can we learn from the oldest fragment?

By studying P<sup>52</sup>, a small fragment of the Gospel of John, the following conclusions can be made about the reliability of the Gospel of John as we have it today. It was discovered in Egypt. That means that the written Gospel of John had spread from Asia Minor to Egypt within no more than 50 years after being written. Even though early Christians faced opposition because Christianity was an illegal religion, they still managed to copy John's Gospel and bring it to Egypt. The letters on the parchment are well-formed, and the material is of good quality. This indicates that the copies were made by a professional scribe who would have done a meticulous job.<sup>3</sup> Finally, a commentary of the New Testament text that is well-respected by scholars describes in detail the most significant variants in the New

<sup>3</sup> Evans. Craig. *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (Lecture notes of course taught through Logos Bible Software).

Testament Greek text.<sup>4</sup> It has no comments on John 8:31-33 and 8:37-38, the verses written on P<sup>52</sup>. This indicates there is little difference between what is written on P<sup>52</sup> and what we have in our Bibles today.

**What about other ancient manuscripts?**

We’ve discussed only one small fragment of the Gospel of John. There are many thousands of ancient copies of the New Testament. We can see that the scribes, or copyists, sometimes made small mistakes called “variants”. The Bible was copied by hand until the invention of the printing press in 1436. Until then all copies of the Bible were made by hand. We might prefer to think that would God have taken total control of the copyists and prevented them from making mistakes. God could have done that but chose not to. Physical evidence shows that copyists did make mistakes. Virtually all but a very few of the mistakes are quite insignificant. When all of the “variants” are analyzed only 2 out of 100 “variants” have any meaningful significance. Of that number of “variants”, 70% of them are due to changes in spelling (but there were no standardized spellings at that time). What this means is that very, very few “variants” affect the meaning of the text.<sup>5</sup> It boils down to about 400 times in the entire New Testament that a single word is in dispute. This affects a total of about 40 verses in the entire New Testament. Everything other than those 400 words, in 40 verses, is considered to be identical or virtually identical to the original. Or, to put it another way, all the manuscripts are in universal agreement. The content of these 40 verses contains no issues that alter any New Testament teaching. “As a result, scholars can recover 97 to 99 percent of the original content of the New Testament with certainty.”<sup>6</sup>

At least 5,800 ancient copies of the Greek New Testament exist today. Some are small fragments, others are complete copies of the entire New Testament, and the rest are between those two extremes. These manuscripts total about 2.5 million pages.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Dan Wallace has said that the most ancient manuscripts available for any other ancient Greco-Roman literature, if stacked on top of one another, would be about 4 feet tall. If all the manuscripts of the New Testament were stacked on top of one another, it would be a mile and a quarter tall.<sup>8</sup> Our focus is on Greek manuscripts because that eliminates issues of changes in translation, because they were first written in Greek. In fact, there are

Author	Title	# of Manuscripts	Date First Written
Homer	Iliad	650	800 BC
Euripides	Tragedies	330	AD 400s
Demosthenes	Works	200	300 BC
Josephus	Works	55	AD 75-95
Tacitus	Annals	20	AD 100
Livy	History of Rome	20	59 BC - AD 17
Caesar	Gallic Wars	10	100 - 44 BC
Herodotus	Histories	8	480-435 BC
Thucydides	Histories	8	460-400 BC
Plato	Dialogues	7	400 BC
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	7	AD 61-113
Gospel of Judas	Gospel of Judas	1	AD 100 -199
Gospel of Mary	Gospel of Mary	2	AD 100-199
Gospel of Thomas	Gospel of Thomas	4	AD 100-199
New Testament	New Testament	5800	AD 50-100

almost 25,000 ancient manuscripts of the New Testament written in languages other than Greek.<sup>9</sup>

There are many other very ancient papyrus fragments. There are also many very old copies of the New Testament written on parchment. The chart and diagram on the next page compares other ancient writings to the Bible. This will give us a sense of how the New Testament compares to other ancient writings.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Metzger, Bruce (1975). *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (pp. 224 – 225). United Bible Societies: New York.  
<sup>5</sup> Wallace, Daniel. *Fragments of the Truth* (Documentary film).  
<sup>6</sup> Powell, D. (2006). *Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics* (p. 161). Nashville, TN: Holman Reference. (A footnote in the cited resource indicates that this quote is taken from a lecture at Biola College from David Allen Black, titled: “Key Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism.”)  
<sup>7</sup> Wallace, Daniel. *Fragments of the Truth* (Documentary film).  
<sup>8</sup> (672) *Is The New Testament Reliable? | Daniel Wallace - YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldX\\_3jQs65k&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldX_3jQs65k&t=1s)  
<sup>9</sup> McDowell, Josh (1999). *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (p. 34). Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1999.  
<sup>10</sup> McDowell, Josh (1999). *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (p. 34). Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1999.