

CANON AND TEXT OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

Is It Necessary to Have the Original Manuscripts?

by James D. Bales

As far as we know the autograph copies, the very manuscripts written by Matthew, for example, have perished. Perhaps some day someone will find an original manuscript, but is this necessary? One theologian suggested that God let the original manuscripts perish lest some individuals worship them – some have worshipped things far less significant, things in the history of departure, within Christendom from the New Testament pattern.

We have no original manuscripts of any other work of ancient times, but do we reject Plato, for example, because we do not have the original manuscript which he penned? For what modern works do we have manuscripts? And how many of you have seen the original manuscript of this [lesson you are now studying]?

It should be obvious that it is unnecessary to have the autograph copy in order to have the message that the individual wrote. Why will people demand of the New Testament documents that which they would never dream of demanding before they accept ancient and modern documents? That such a demand is absurd may be shown by applying the argument to other matters where our skeptical friends would not think of declaring something valueless because we do not have the "original".

Who among us has seen an original manuscript of one of the atheist Bertrand Russell's works? Are we, therefore, to doubt that he wrote *Atheism of Astronomy*, or that nothing which claims to have been written by him has any truth in it whatever?

When debating evolution Teller will appeal to fossils the originals of which he doubtless has not seen, but simply copies or reconstructions. And certainly most people have not seen the original fossils which these men dug up. In these as in other matters we must rely on the standards of evidence which are applicable to these fields, and not on whether or not we have the "original manuscript."

Even if one has a manuscript which he says is an original one, one could not accept it if he took positions which some skeptics take; for how do you know that it is an original manuscript instead of a copy or a forgery? Did you see the individual write it with his own pen? No one could have seen an author, whom he never met or who died before we lived, write a manuscript. Has one out of a million of the world's population ever seen an author write a manuscript? And even if one did, how would one know that the man was not simply putting down from memory something he had once read? For who has read all that has ever been written so as to check on it?

This same skeptical attitude would say that no one could trust in the existence of any of the fossils unless he had seen them dug up. If a museum displays what claims to be an

original fossil how do you know that it is? Did you see the man dig it up? Did you stay with the fossil night and day until it reached the museum, and afterwards, so that you know that no other fossil was exchanged for the one which you saw the excavator dig up?

Our skeptical friends should not use arguments which they will not apply to other things, and the absurdity of which is shown when they are applied to other things.

Although we do not have the original manuscripts there is an abundance of testimony which establishes the reliability of the New Testament. On this subject [one] may read F. F. Bruce, *Are The New Testament Documents Reliable?* C. R. Gregory, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, and J. W. McGarvey, *Evidences of Christianity*. On the four gospels read: R. C. Foster, *An introduction to the Life of Christ* (138 edition) on The two-source theory (pp. 100-150.); Inspiration (pp. 151-178); text (pp. 178-193); canon (pp. 194-226); credibility of John (pp. 226-245). W. H. Turton, *The Truth of Christianity* (pp. 303-356).*

*Note: A reference to a book does not mean that everything in the book is endorsed.

"The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt ."

"There are in existence at least 3,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part. The best and most important of these go back to somewhere about A. D. 350, the two most important being the Codex Vaticanus, the chief treasure of the Vatican Library in Rome, and the well-known Codex Sinaiticus."

"Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar's Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 B. C.) there are several extant MSS [manuscripts], but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar's day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 B. C. - A. D. 17) only 35 survive; these are known to us from no more than twenty MSS of any consequence; only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi., is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus (c. A. D. 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant MSS of his minor works (*Dialogus de Oratoribus*, *Agricola*, *Germania*) all descend from a codex of the tenth century. The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 B. C.) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to c. A. D. 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 480-425 B. C.) . Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.

But how different is the situation of the New Testament in this respect! In addition to the two excellent MSS of the fourth century, the earliest of some thousands known to us, considerable fragments remain of papyrus copies of books of the New Testament dated from 100 to 200 years earlier still. The Chester Beatty Biblical papyri, the existence of which was made public in 1931, consist of portions of eleven papyrus codices, three of which contained most of the New Testament writings. Two of these three, containing respectively (1) the four Gospels with Acts and (2) Paul's nine Church Epistles with Hebrews, belong to the first half of the third century; the third, containing Revelation, belongs to the second half of the same century.

A more recent discovery consists of some papyrus fragments dated by papyrological experts not later than A. D. 150, published in *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and other Early Christian Papyri*, by H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat (1935).

Earlier still is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John xviii. 31-33, 37f., now in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, dated by Deissmann and others in the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), showing that the latest of the four Gospels, which was written according to tradition, at Ephesus between A. D. 90 and 100, was circulating in Egypt within about forty years of its composition (if, as is most likely, this papyrus originated in Egypt, where it was acquired in 1917). To quote Dr. H. Guppy, the John Rylands Librarian: "It was written when the ink of the original autograph (A. D. 100) can scarcely have been dry. It must be regarded as the earliest fragment by at least fifty years of any portion of the New Testament" (*Transmission of the Bible [Rylands Library, 1935]*). For the text and description of the papyrus see C. H. Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel [1935]*)

Attestation of another kind is provided by allusions to and quotations from the New Testament books in other early Writings. The authors known as the Apostolic Fathers wrote chiefly between A. D. 90 and 160, and in their works we find evidence for their acquaintance with most of the books of the New Testament. In three works whose date is probably earlier than A.D. 100 – the "Epistle of Barnabas," produced in Egypt some time after A. D. 70, the *Didache*, or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," produced in Syria or Palestine c. A. D. 90; and the letter written to the Corinthian church by Clement, bishop of Rome, about A. D. 96 – we find pretty certain quotations from the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and possible quotations from other books of the New Testament. In the letters written by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, as he journeyed to his martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 115, there are pretty certain quotations from Matthew, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and possible allusions to Mark, Luke, Acts, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. His younger contemporary Polycarp in a letter to the Philippians quotes from the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1 John. And so we might go on through the writers of the second century; amassing increasing evidence of their familiarity with and recognition of the authority of the New Testament writings. So far as the Apostolic Fathers are concerned, the evidence is collected and weighed in a work called *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, recording the findings of a

committee of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology in 1905.

The study of the kind of attestation found in MSS and quotations in later writers is connected with the approach known as Textual Criticism. This is a most important and fascinating branch of study, its object being to determine as exactly as possible from the available evidence the original words of the documents in question. It is easily proved by experiment that it is difficult to copy out a passage of any considerable length without making one or two slips at least. When we have documents like our New Testament writings copied and recopied thousands of times, the scope for copyists' errors is so enormously increased that it is surprising there are no more than there actually are. Fortunately, if the great number of MSS increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small. The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.

To sum up, we may quote the verdict pronounced in 1940 by Sir Frederic Kenyon, a scholar whose authority to make pronouncements on ancient MSS is second to none:

"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." (The Bible and Archaeology, pp. 288 f.).' (F. F. Bruce, Are the New Testament Documents Reliable? pp. 16-20).

Another very important class of witnesses to the text of the New Testament are the Ancient Versions in other languages, the oldest of which, the Old Syriac and the Old Latin, may be dated about the middle of the second century.

"Sir Frederic Kenyon in editing these papyri wrote: 'The first and most important truth to draw from these papyri is that they confirm the essential purity of the existing Gospel text – no important or fundamental variations, no important omissions, no additions, nothing but unimportant changes in the order of words, or in the form of words. In the assurance of the essential accuracy of our existing text these papyri make an epoch!' Professor Sanders, after comparing these papyri and all the other kindred fragments of the New Testament, closed his recent study with these words: 'The discovery of the original text of the Gospels lies in the future, but that text, when discovered, will neither shock nor astonish us. It will be a mean between extremes, it will be like neither the King James nor the Revised Version, but will lie between.'" (John A. Scott, Professor of Greek, Northwestern University, We Would Know Jesus, New York: The Abingdon Press, 1936).

"Just last year another small piece of papyrus was discovered. The forms of the letters show that it is at least one hundred years older than the Chester Beatty Papyrus. Experts assign it to the first quarter of the second century. This little fragment contains five

verses of Saint John, a Gospel that was generally assigned by advanced critics to a late date. Here we have reached almost to the time of John himself. So far as I know, not a single discovery has ever confirmed the conclusions of destructive criticism either in classical or biblical literature." (Dr. John A. Scott, Professor of Greek, Northwestern University, *We Would Know Jesus*, New York: The Abingdon Press, 1936).

Edgar J. Goodspeed, a modernist, recognized that the "four Gospels as a unit" were in circulation "early in the second century" ("The Making of the New Testament", in Luther A. Weigle, *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (1946), p. 35). Of course, they may have been in circulation as a unit even before this, but certainly they were in circulation separately some years before this.

Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* around A. D. 180. In it he refers to each Gospel by name (*Ante-Nicene Library*, Vol. I, pp. 292-293. Quoted in R. W. Dale, *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels*, pp. 142-143). He knew Polycarp who was a disciple of John the apostle (see Irenaeus' statement, Dale, 146). If John did not write the Gospel of John surely Irenaeus would have known better than to ascribe it to John.

On references to Christ outside the New Testament see R. C. Foster, *An Introduction to the Life of Christ*, page sources (pp. 20-25); Jewish sources (pp. 25-34); catacombs (pp. 35-40).

In speaking of Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, A. S. L. Farquharson wrote: "It is curious that not even in Julian is the work mentioned nor for many centuries after the author's death. Hardly a notice of it occurs until the days of Suidas, in the ninth century." *Marcus Aurelius His Life and His World*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1951, p. 120).

Do scholars, therefore, doubt their genuineness? And yet, some "scholars," cast doubt on the New Testament although the evidence for it is vastly superior to that of the *Meditations*. Is this not evidence of a strong bias when the New Testament is under consideration?

– *Gospel Treasure*, College Age, Year I, Book II, pp. 57-61