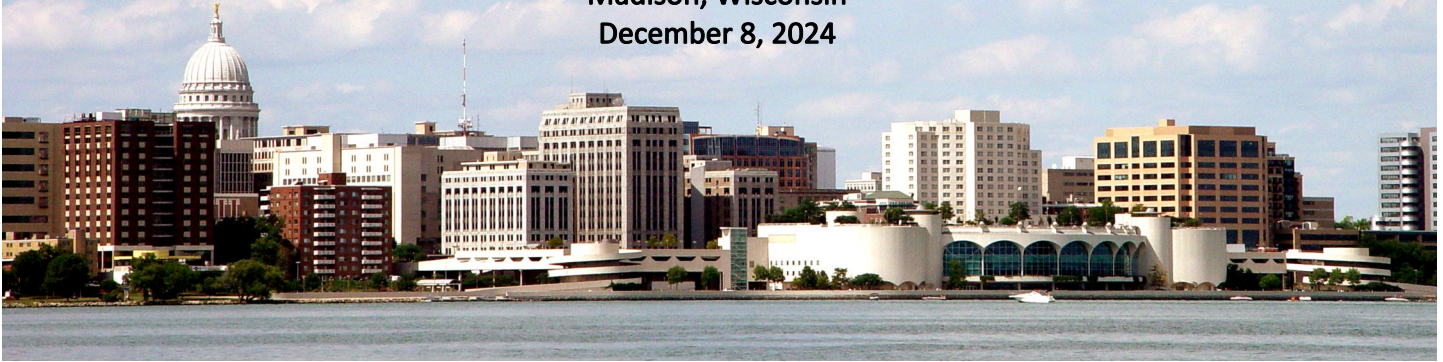


Are the Manuscripts Reliable?

How We Got the Bible: Part 3

Baxter T. Exum (#1763)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
December 8, 2024



Good morning and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting with us today, we are happy to have you with us, and we'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card – either online or on a card from the pew in front of you. And we also invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns in that way.

Before we get to our study of God's word today, thank you to all of you who helped with the soup, and gift cards, and old phones and inkjet cartridges for Shults-Lewis Child and Family Services! Don and Jim stopped by to do their pickup on Wednesday. As we were loading the van, Patsy showed up, so we took a picture together, and right as they were about to head out, Denise showed up with what was literally a last-minute contribution, and we did a quick re-do of the picture! They are doing a good work with some kids in some very difficult circumstances, and they were very thankful for our support again this year.

We are here this morning to preach the good news, that although we've sinned, God loves us and sent his Son Jesus to save us: He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up from the dead on the first day of the week. This is the gospel, the good news. And as I hope you've noticed by now in today's bulletin article, we must "obey the gospel" to be saved. The question, though, is: How do we "obey" the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus? Well, in scripture, we do have some commands associated with these facts. In Mark 16:15, right before he ascends back into heaven, Jesus gives the command, ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."*** And then he explains what that means by saying (in verse 16), ***"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."*** When we preach the gospel, then, we are preaching baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And, as usual, we do have several examples to share this week, starting with an update from the Madison Park Church of Christ in Seattle. They posted earlier this week, and they say, "Praise God, the angels in heaven are rejoicing! On November 18, 2024, our Minister, Bro. Nate Whitlock Sr., baptized our new sister in Christ, Debbie Williams, in the lake at Covington. This was beautiful baptism done the old-fashioned way—just as it was in the days of the early church, going down into the water to symbolize being buried with Christ and rising to walk in the newness of life!" They then quote Acts 8:30, where the Bible says that the Ethiopian officer, "...commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." This is one of the few I've seen where someone is wearing a wetsuit, but it is certainly appropriate with the weather this time of year out in Seattle, and we are thrilled with the good news from the Pacific Northwest this week.

This next one comes to us from a friend from somewhere in Texas. She says, "A few weeks ago right after services, Lee Ann and I were visiting with one another when Karis approached us with a look in her eyes that told us everything. She was ready and she could wait no longer to put Christ on in baptism. We trekked to the house and she entered the icy pool waters with her dad while he took her confession and her sins were washed as white as snow. Several things stick out to me about that day such as those who were willing to drive the 35 minutes to the house without even thinking twice to be a part of her new walk and the excitement on her brother's faces as they embraced her when she stepped out of the water. But, it is something else continues to tug at my heart as I look back over that day. Confidence in her surrender. With all her heart, she knew that Jesus came down to earth, lived a sinless life, was crucified on that cross, and raised again for her. With all her heart, she knew she was entering into a HOPE that only He provides because of His grace and mercy. With all her heart, she knew that He would never leave her or forsake her. With all her heart, she knew that He will continue to transform her as she chooses to surrender to Him each and every day. Confidence in the surrender [is] a beautiful thing." Amen to that!

This next one also comes to us from Texas, from the Borger congregation. They say, "Welcome a new brother in Christ! Ivan Reams was baptized in the Lord yesterday evening! Let's rejoice with the angels in celebrating this new life. We continue to pray for Ivan's health and his walk with the Lord!" I am so thankful that Ivan's "walk with the Lord" doesn't necessarily require physically walking! Good news from Texas!

This next one comes to us from the South Point congregation in Ohio. I don't know whether you remember this, but several weeks ago we had one from the North Shore congregation in Kentucky, the northernmost spot in Kentucky. Well, South Point is the southernmost point in Ohio, even further south than North Shore. I just think that's cool. Nevertheless, they posted this week, and they say, "It is our privilege to introduce you to our new brother and sister in Christ! Adam and Jenny Ellsworth made the decision to be baptized this morning after services!" Good news from the southernmost point in Ohio!

Our last one this morning comes in the form of an update from the Lord's church in Holly Springs, North Carolina. The headline on this one says, "From Presbyterian 'Pastor' to preaching the truth of the gospel!" They say, "In June 2024 we posted on Facebook about Jim Snyder's visit to Holly Springs Church and his testimony why he left the Presbyterian Church after serving as a Pastor for 25 years. Jim obeyed the gospel in May 2024. As an update...Jim is sharing his faith and just a few weeks ago studied with and baptized a husband and wife for the remission of their sins as Acts 2:38 teaches. He also presented a lesson at the Northside Church of Christ in Russellville, Kentucky. May God continue to use Jim powerfully in teaching, preaching, and sharing Jesus with others! Glory to God for the increase! Thankful for our new brother and sister in Christ who have obeyed the gospel!" As always, we share these pictures by way of encouragement and as our invitation to you to consider obeying the good news yourself. If we can help, if you'd like to study together, please let us know. Pull me aside after worship, or give me a call or send a text to 608-224-0274.

This morning, we are returning to our study concerning HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE. We started several weeks ago by taking a look at the written word of God. Then we looked at the writing of ancient books, and that explains the papyrus in the building today. I thought I'd leave it here another week or two in case you missed it, and if you are interested in adopting a papyrus plant sometime soon, please let me know. We were out of town last week, visiting our daughter in Tennessee and then worshiping with the church down in Eureka, Illinois, last Sunday. This is the church we've helped supply with t-shirts for making diapers for at risk young moms in Nicaragua (we wanted to check in with them on our way through last Sunday), and now we are back and ready to ask: Are the manuscripts reliable? How do we know that the copies of copies of copies are accurate representations of the originals? We will look at this today and next week. Then, in two weeks, we'll look at what is known as the "canon of scripture." How do we know what books should be regarded as

Scripture? And then, finally, we'll take a look at what's involved in translating scripture from one language to another.

By way of very brief review, we started this series by asking: Why did God communicate in writing (as opposed to simply by word of mouth)? We had a grand total of around 72 verses in our study, and in no particular order, we noted some of the benefits of God communicating with us in writing. The written word is precise, it is authoritative, it is permanent, and it can be translated and shared far and wide, spanning many generations without being changed or corrupted.

And two weeks ago, we looked at the writing of ancient books. Yes, God communicated with us in writing, but how did people actually write in ancient times? We looked at a number of references, and we learned that people wrote on stone, pottery shards, clay tablets, wood, metal, wax tablets, papyrus, and vellum (or animal skin).

Now, before we move on, I need to tell you that someone asked a very good question after this lesson. Someone wanted to know: What did they use for ink back then? I've looked into that just a little bit, and as you can imagine, the answer varies widely. People wrote with all kinds of stuff back then – from silver and gold, to blood, to anything that would dry somewhat dark and be durable. However, it seems as if Biblical inks fell into one of two main categories. First of all, the most common ink back in Bible times was made with something burnt (like charcoal or the scrapings from a woodstove or grill), combined with water (to make it liquid), and combined with a small amount of gum arabic as a thickener. However, what I've just described was somewhat destructive when used on vellum (it would actually eat through the skin), so, secondly, they developed something known as "iron gall ink," and this was made from oak galls and ferrous sulfate. An oak gall is how an oak tree reacts when a wasp lays its eggs on the bud. The tree protects itself by growing a sphere around it. Well, somebody discovered they could boil these and combine it with the byproduct of boiling rusty nails in vinegar. When you combine this, it turns black almost immediately. Gum arabic comes from boiling the dried sap of acacia trees. We could study ink for a lifetime (some have), and there are literally thousands of recipes out there, but I just wanted to give a brief overview. Ink back then fell into two main categories: 1.) Burnt stuff (soot) mixed with water and a thickener, or 2.) Gall (from an oak tree) mixed with the remains of rusty nails, plus water, plus a thickener. In the Bible itself, we have four references to "*ink*." These are found in Jeremiah 36:18, where the scribe Baruch indicated that he wrote a message with "*ink*." And in the New Testament we have references in 2 Corinthians 3:3, in 2 John 12, and in 3 John 13. In Greek, the word is simply the word for "black." So, to answer the question Biblically, they wrote with "black stuff"! Anyway, I learned quite a bit this week, so thank you for the question!

And we had a second question. You might remember I shared my homemade Isaiah scroll two weeks ago. On the way out, one of the kiddos with us that day was asking: How many characters are there in that scroll? Not words, but characters, and he specified that he wasn't interested in the number of spaces, only characters! What an interesting question! So, I would invite you to take a guess real quick: How many characters are there in the book of Isaiah (in English)? Out on the front porch, as I remember it, our estimates varied between 30,000 and 90,000. By way of review, I was trying to illustrate the difficulty of navigating a scroll like they would have used back in Bible times. In preparing for our study two weeks ago, I looked up what is known as the "Great Isaiah Scroll" from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it was 24 feet long. To get to 24 feet, I multiplied 24 by 12, resulting in a length of 288 inches. I then divided by 8.5 (the width of a standard sheet of paper), resulting in a total of 34 pages.

Well, to answer the question, I started by using the word count tool in LibreOffice, and it said there were nearly 201,000 total characters, and removing the spaces brings that total down to around 163,000. But, we

can do better than that! So, I copied the entire text of Isaiah, I dropped it into an online tool for counting characters, and this is what happened. I know it's small, so we are zooming in on the results here. To summarize, once we remove all of the spaces and all of the numbers, we are looking at a total character count of 151,281 characters in the book of Isaiah. It's more than I thought it would be. We also have an estimated reading level over there, somewhere around 9th grade give or take a few years. All kinds of information here! But I did want to share a little more bonus information here. Of all of the characters in Isaiah, the letter "e" is the most popular, with 19,091 occurrences, followed by "t," "a," "h," "o," and the others. But, thank you to the young man who was asking about the number of characters in the Isaiah scroll!

Today, I want us to move into the part of our study where we question the reliability of the manuscripts. In other words, how do we know that the manuscripts we have are reliable? How do we know that we have today the exact words as they were first written by Paul, and Peter, and John, and the others? And how do we know that the manuscripts have been accurately copied and preserved through the years? I'm so glad we were able to sing "Ancient Words" this morning. We sang about those "ancient words, long preserve, for our walk in this world." Those ancient words have been preserved! As some people see it, though, one of the biggest problems is that we no longer have the original autographs. And as you can probably guess, an autograph would be a letter or book in the actual handwriting of the original author. However, those originals have been lost. And so, in their place, we have copies of copies. And this is an issue for some people. First of all, I have personally heard atheists make the argument that the books of the Bible were written and copied and translated by human beings, human beings make mistakes; therefore, the Bible is full of mistakes (that's the argument, anyway). And then, secondly, our Islamic friends will often say the same thing. They suggest that since the Bible has been copied so many times, it's no longer reliable; therefore, the prophet Mohammad came on the scene to fix that. In a sense, then, it was this issue that gave us Islam.

As we begin, I want to introduce the closest we can get to the autographs (at this point, at least). Up here on the wall, we are looking at a portion of John's gospel account, written on papyrus and found in Egypt in 1934. I shared this very briefly two weeks ago, but it is referred to as the John Rylands Fragment (orP52, for "Papyrus 52). There is still discussion on this, scholars rarely agree on anything, but this fragment is dated to early in the Second Century. Some say it should be dated as early as 100 AD, others suggest something closer to 175 AD, but many have suggested a date of around 117 AD. Think about that date. If this was really written in 117 AD (as many people think that it was), then that means that this is quite possibly a copy made from the original. In other words, as this copy was being made, there's a good chance that the scribe was looking at John's handwriting as he made this copy. And if this copy really dates to 117 AD, that means that the copy was made within about 30 years of when the book of John was first written. That's like one of us making a copy of a handwritten letter from 1994. Many of us in this room were alive in 1994. And to me, that is amazing, to realize that we have a copy of the original this close to the original. Just a bonus note here: Remember, this fragment was found in Egypt. Egypt is dry, and papyrus is more likely to survive down there. That tells us, though, that the written word of God traveled to Egypt almost immediately!

Today, then, as we think about the manuscripts (the copies of scripture) I'd like to pass along some very basic facts that have helped me personally have greater faith in the New Testament documents. And next week, we will continue by looking at some examples of variations between the manuscripts.

Today, though, as we think about this question concerning the reliability of the manuscripts, I'd like to share four very basic facts that have built up my faith in the New Testament documents.

I. **First of all, it is significant that WE NOW HAVE SOMEWHERE AROUND 6,000 HAND-WRITTEN COPIES OF VARIOUS PARTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE.**

And I say “around 6,000,” 1.) because that figure is always increasing, and 2.) as with the dating of the John Rylands Fragment, scholars are constantly debating these things. Generally speaking, though, the deeper we dig over there and the more we learn, the better it gets. Some of these 6,000 manuscripts are nearly complete, and others are tiny fragments (like the John Rylands Fragment up here, roughly the size of a credit card). Some of them are dated to within just a few decades of the originals, and others are dated to within a few centuries. This is amazing, and I don’t think we always realize how amazing this is.

In contrast, other ancient documents are not nearly as well-supported by the manuscript evidence. *Caesar’s Gallic War*, for example, was written by Julius Caesar and describes his battles against the residents of modern-day France, and these battles happened between 58-50 BC (so, just before the time of Christ). As I understand it, *Caesar’s Gallic War* only has 9 or 10 decent manuscripts, and the oldest we have was copied roughly 900 years after the original. Think about that: A 900-year gap between the original and our first copy. But virtually no one questions the accuracy of the manuscript evidence. In Latin class in high school, the class spent the second semester of the second year translating *Caesar’s Gallic War*, and we considered the text in front of us to be an accurate rendition of what Caesar himself had actually written (even though it has only a tiny fraction of the manuscript evidence that we have for the New Testament: 9 or 10 manuscripts with a 900-year gap as opposed to nearly 6,000 manuscripts with a gap of only 30 years on some of those. It’s hard to over-emphasize the significance of that. And we could do this with just about any other ancient document. The Bible has more manuscript evidence by far than any other ancient writing. So, the point here is that we have thousands of hand-written copies of the New Testament in the original language, and many of these can be dated to within just a few decades of the originals.

II. **There is a second fact that has reinforced my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is: WE HAVE MANY ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT INTO OTHER LANGUAGES.**

Almost immediately, New Testament books and letters were translated into other languages and were passed along to other congregations. Early translations were often in Latin (the official language of the Roman empire), some were in Aramaic (the Hebrew dialect spoken by Jesus and the apostles), and some were in Syriac (a major literary language that was used throughout the Middle East). You might remember that one of the first challenges the early church had to overcome was the language barrier. In Acts 2, as Peter and the other apostles preached, the lesson was miraculously translated so that it could be understood by people from all over the world who had come together in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. As those people went home, they would have translated the various letters and books in their own language. So, not only do we have those 6,000 manuscripts in Greek, but we also have thousands of early manuscripts in other languages.

And there’s a huge value in this. I might compare it to backing up the pictures on your phone. If every picture I’ve ever taken is only on my phone, those pictures are at risk. I could lose my phone, I could drop it in a lake somewhere, somebody could steal it, and so on. However, if I back these up on a portable hard drive at home, if I back up these images in the cloud, if I keep a copy on a thumb drive somewhere, those images have a better chance of surviving through the years. And in a sense, that’s what happened with those first copies of the New Testament. They were copied, and translated, and shared. In Colossians 4:16, for example, Paul says, ***“When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and you for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”*** Those early scriptures were copied and shared as soon as they were received.

III. There is a third fact that has strengthened my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is, WE HAVE THOUSANDS OF SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS THAT ARE FOUND IN ANCIENT NON-INSPIRED WRITINGS.

Today, for example, if you have ever seen one of my sermons in printed form, then you know that my lessons include quotations from the word of God, and these lessons are published. They are uploaded to the website, usually every Monday morning when I'm at Firefly Coffeehouse down in Oregon (between swimming at 5:30 a.m and seeing my dad at 9). So, these are online, and there was a time when I would print these for several of our members with difficulty hearing, so they could follow along. By the way, this lesson (from two weeks ago) contains just over 6,000 words. And for those who are interested, that's 32,083 characters, or 26,127 characters not including the spaces! But in each lesson, I put any quotation from the Bible in bold italics. By the way, I used to put scripture references in bold green italics, but one Saturday night I went to print out the final draft, and the printer was out of green ink. So, I looked at my sermon, and it was everything but the Bible! It was a sermon with no scripture whatsoever. That was terrible! So now I put all quotes from the Bible in bold italics. As of this morning, I have preached 1,763 sermons in my life. Those lessons take up roughly 8 feet on a ledge in my office. If somehow all copies of the Bible everywhere in the world were suddenly destroyed (not a Bible left anywhere on earth), I would suggest that you could reconstruct a rather large portion of the Bible just based on the bold italics in those lessons. It would be hard work to put it all together in the proper order, but it would be possible to reconstruct a rather large portion of the Bible just based on those quotations. Well, so also with ancient writers. When some guy in 150 AD wrote to encourage another congregation, he very well would have written, "As Paul said...", and then he would have quoted from Paul. And something related to this: We also have quite a bit of scripture in our songbooks. And so, when we sing #883, "Seek Ye First," we are actually singing the word of God. It would be possible, then, to reconstruct quite a bit of scripture based on our songbooks. In a similar way, we have thousands of very early manuscripts of sermons, letters, and books that all quote various parts of the Bible. In fact, all but just a few verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed based on these inspired quotations alone.

IV. There is a fourth basic fact that has strengthened my faith in the New Testament documents, and that is: WE KNOW FROM HISTORY AND FROM ARCHAEOLOGY THAT ANCIENT SCRIBES WERE FANATICALLY PRECISE IN THEIR WORK.

We know, for example, that the scribes would check their work by counting the number of letters and words per line, per page, per book, the middle letter in each line, page, book, and so on. We know this, because sometimes they would put these notations in the margins. And so, maybe a lead scribe would be at the front of the room calling out a line of text so that a room full of others could copy it, and after each line, he would say, "Okay, there were five words on line 12, there were 27 letters, and the middle letter is A." Each scribe would then go back and check his work. They were extremely accurate, and they would audit their work.

And please remember: there were many times in the gospel accounts when Jesus disagreed with the scribes concerning their doctrine. There were times when Jesus condemned the scribes right along with the Pharisees and the Saducees, but not once did Jesus ever criticize the accuracy of their copies of the scriptures. In fact, over time, the scribes came to be known as the experts on the Law. After all, if your job was to copy the Bible word-by-word all year long for a lifetime (if that was your occupation), you would probably very quickly become an expert on what is in there! But the point is: The scribes were fanatics when it came to making accurate copies of God's word.

Well, I know some people may doubt that, and until fairly recently there were no Jewish manuscripts dating before around 1000 AD. So, there were obviously some concerns as to whether the modern copies, of copies,

of copies were really accurate. In other words, there was no way to “test” the accuracy of the scribes over a long stretch of time.

That was true, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940’s. Basically, around 1946 a young Arab boy was trying to get one of his goats down off a cliff near the Dead Sea. And, as any boy might do, he threw a rock at it. Well, he missed the goat, the rock flew into a cave, and the young man heard a crashing sound. That’s weird. So, he climbed up the cliff and found some old jars containing some ancient scrolls. Word got out, and archaeologists started discovering many, many scrolls in clay jars – scrolls that dated from around the time of Jesus. They found parts of every Old Testament book except for Esther, along with many manuscripts (old songs and commentaries, and so on). Now, concerning our study today, the important thing is that when they compared the copies, of copies, of copies, of copies to the scrolls from 2,000 years ago, they discovered that our copies were almost identical to those scrolls that were 2,000 years closer to the originals.

In my lifetime, I have seen various parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls twice – once at the Maltz Jewish Museum just outside Cleveland, Ohio (they were on loan from a museum in Jerusalem), and again maybe 15 years ago at the Milwaukee Public Museum. I’ve posted a couple of souvenirs from those trips here in the auditorium. But the point is: The Dead Sea Scrolls are basically an audit on the work of the scribes, proving that they were incredibly accurate. Our copies of copies of copies have passed the test.

Conclusion:

So, these are some basic facts that have helped to strengthen my own faith in the reliability of the manuscripts. However, even though all of this is true (thousands of manuscripts, thousands of ancient translations, thousands of quotations in uninspired documents, and scribes who were fanatically accurate), when we study these thousands of documents side by side, we do see some differences between some of these ancient manuscripts. After all, with thousands of hand written copies we would expect some variation. The question is: How do we handle this? And to answer that question, I would invite you to join us next Lord’s Day morning! Next week, I want us to examine those variations. For now, we end with the passage Josh read for us earlier, the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:35, when he said, ***“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.”*** What an awesome promise!

Let’s close our study today by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We are thankful this morning for your written word. We are thankful for all the ways you have communicated to us, and we are thankful for those who have given their lives to copy and translate and print your word so that we can have it available to us today, in our own language. We are thankful for the promise that your word will always be with us.

We come to you this morning in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com