



A folio from **Papyrus 46**, one of the oldest extant New Testament manuscripts

No other ancient text is substantiated by such a wealth of ancient textual witnesses as is the New Testament, about 5,800 separate manuscripts are available, variously containing anything from the entire New Testament corpus to a slight fragment of a single verse. There are also hundreds of copies of ancient translations (or versions) in languages other than Koine' Greek of the New Testament that reveal the form of the text known to their translators, as well as numerous New Testament quotations in the writings of the early church "fathers" that disclose the form of the particular texts known to them.

- The oldest known copy of any portion of the New Testament is the John Rylands papyrus, officially designated p⁵² and dated to approximately A.D. 125. It contains **John 18:31-33, 37-38**.
- The oldest complete, or almost complete, manuscripts of the New Testament are Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, both from the fourth century.

- Sixty-five other New Testament partial manuscripts from the fourth century or earlier are also extant, along with many complete manuscripts from later centuries.

This textual support is far superior to that available for any other ancient documents, such *is* the classical texts from Greek and Roman writers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle and Cicero). Only partial manuscripts have survived for many works of antiquity, and it is not unusual to find that the only complete manuscript for some ancient writing is a copy dating from 1,000 years after its composition.

The original New Testament manuscripts probably would have been recorded on papyrus, the most common writing material of the time, and would have been read and copied continuously until they were no longer legible. As was invariably the case in antiquity, no two copies of a manuscript were exactly alike, despite meticulous care on the part of copyists. Although we can no longer consult the original manuscripts, the richness and antiquity of those that are at the disposal of scholars are such that it is usually not difficult to determine what the original authors wrote. In most cases we can also discern how and why variations arose in the manuscripts. In no case does a fundamental Christian teaching depend upon accepting one manuscript reading over another.

Let's take one example of this:

The history of the manuscript tradition at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most complicated in all of the New Testament. The closing benediction found in **Romans 16:25-27** appears in three other places in the various manuscripts: either immediately following chapter 14, immediately following chapter 15 or at the end of both chapters 14 and 16. To complicate the situation, some manuscripts do not include the doxology at all. This evidence has led to a wide array of suggestions about the history of the writing of Romans:

- Some scholars conclude that the letter originally had only 14 or 15 chapters, ending with the doxology. They hold that the remainder was added later, probably by Paul himself when sending a later edition of the Roman letter to another church.

- Most scholars, however, concur that the letter originally included all 16 chapters but that shortened versions were circulated among some churches.

Some believe that the doxology itself was a later addition, originally written to provide an appropriate ending to one of the shorter forms but subsequently added to the end of the other forms as well.

It is just as likely, however, that the doxology was the original ending of Romans and that it was later moved to the end of the shorter versions, leading to the complicated situation found in the history of the manuscript tradition. But, in any case, there is absolutely no change in any of the New Testament teachings.

Main Source: New International Version Archaeological Study Bible