

Chapter Twelve: The Strength of Many Manuscripts

The manuscript history of the New Testament gives good reason for confidence that the New Testament we have today is substantially the same as the original manuscripts (see chart 1 on next page). There are more early manuscripts of the New Testament writings, and in better condition, than any other first-century writing. There is no classical Greek or Roman author whose writings are preserved on the scale and quality of the New Testament (see chart 2). The New Testament writings are even better attested than writings of a much later era, such as the Muslim biographies of the messenger of Islam.

It is in this area that the *Izhār al-ḥaqq* most clearly reveals its unscholarly character and its merely polemical use of academic scholarship. The only information the *Izhār* provided about biblical manuscripts was a brief description of the opinions of few European scholars about three codices of the Bible from the fourth and fifth centuries.

Scholars now agree these three biblical codices were certainly written before the rise of Islam; and since publication of the *Izhār* in 1864, hundreds of pre-Islamic New Testament manuscripts have been discovered and made available to scholars, including on the Internet. There is no doubt about the strength of the manuscript evidence.

1. Manuscripts and the ravages of time

- The abundance and quality of biblical manuscripts in existence today is something for which scholars can be very thankful, considering the dangers to ancient manuscripts from the ravages of time and deliberate attempts by foreign rulers (e.g. Roman, Muslim) to seek out and destroy them.

2. Abundance of Gospel manuscripts

- In spite of the hazardous conditions affecting all ancient manuscripts, scholars today have a great number of New Testament manuscripts available for establishing the original text. This brings great benefits as well as great challenges given the extreme complexity in the academic study of the text.

3. Comparison to Islamic sourcebooks

- Only a single copy of the *earliest* biography of Islam's messenger, the *Kitāb al-maghāzī* by al-Wāqidi (d. 822), has been discovered so far and it "is error-ridden and a significant challenge to use." The *best known* biography, the *Sīrat al-nabawiyya* by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), is not known to exist and can only be accessed in the thoroughly edited version of Ibn Hishām (d. 833).

4. Text types and manuscript variants

- Of the 5735 New Testament manuscripts available for study not all are the same. With a high number of manuscripts come a high number of variants. Scholars have categorized these manuscripts into three main "text types" which they have named the Byzantine, the Western and the Alexandrian.

5. Science of textual criticism

- The basic task of New Testament textual criticism is to recover the original text of scripture, a difficult task that demands great learning and skill. The three main methods are explained.

6. Strong manuscripts prior to political power

- The text of the New Testament developed, and its authority was accepted by the followers of Jesus, without the involvement of political power. By contrast, according to Muslim tradition the Qur'an had the forceful backing of a powerful state ordering the editing of the Qur'an and then destroying all variant versions (see chapter 18 for more details).

7. Scholarly answers to difficult questions

- Many questions about Bible manuscripts remain, but the way forward with difficult questions and questionable scholarship is to return to the evidence, study it more carefully, and use better methodology. The methods and accusations of the *Izhār al-ḥaqq* are false yet continue to be published without any qualification in the new printings of the *Izhār*. Where is the integrity in this?

Chart 1: Manuscripts, Versions and Sources used to restore the original text

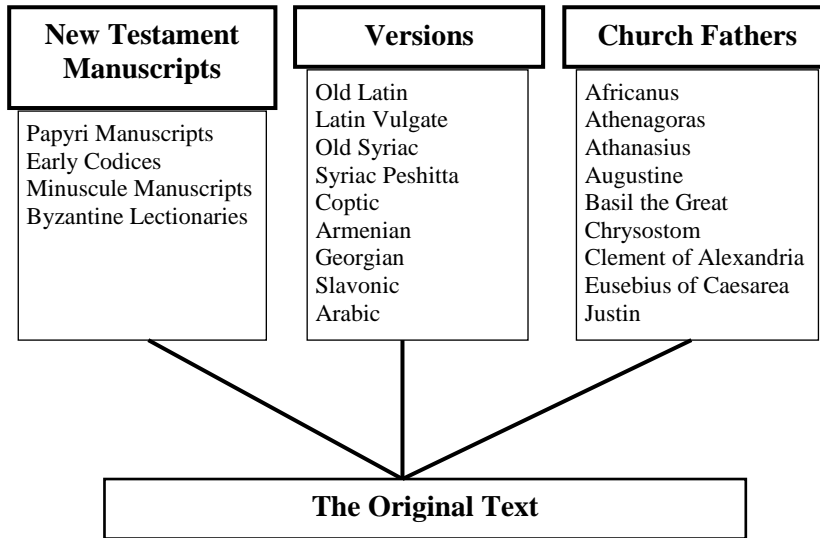


Chart 2: Comparison of manuscript evidence for major ancient writings

Document	Originals written	Earliest copies	Time between originals and copies	Number of ancient copies before the printing press
NEW TESTAMENT [NT]	50-100 AD	65-150 AD (fragments of books), 200 AD (whole books), 325 AD (whole NT together).	50-200 years from originals.	5300+, plus thousands of quotes from early Church fathers and Heretics
OLD TESTAMENT [OT]	1500-400 BC	100 BC for some parts, up to 1000 AD for others.	300- 2000 years from originals.	6 in Hebrew , Dead Sea Scrolls (especially Isaiah), Dozens of copies of the Greek LXX, plus quotations from early Rabbis
ILLIAD [by Homer]	ca. 800 BC	ca. 400 BC.	400 years from originals	643
THE HISTORIES [by Herodotus]	ca. 400's BC	ca. 900 AD.	1300+ years from originals.	8
THE HISTORIES [by Thucydides]	ca. 400's BC	ca. 900 AD.	1300+ years from originals.	8
COLLECTED WORKS [by Plato]	ca. 400 BC	ca. 900 AD.	1300+ years from originals.	7
THE GALLIC WARS [by Julius Caesar]	ca. 50 BC	ca. 900 AD	1000 years from originals	10

Chains of Transmission (*tawātur*) in Islam

In traditional Muslim thought, *tawātur* meant that the truth of a historical report or prophetic tradition is assumed to be guaranteed if supported by a large number of *isnād*¹ strands, each beginning with a different companion or other ancient authority.

¹ *isnād s* are “chains of transmission”. The main sources for these stories of the messenger of Islam are: (1) the *Sīrat al-nabawiyya* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), = earliest extant Muslim story of the life of the messenger of Islam, (2) *Kitāb al-maghāzī* (“Book of the military campaigns) by al-Wāqidi (d. 832) = the career of Islam’s messenger in Medina, and (3) *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (“Book of the major classes”) by Al-Wāqidi’s secretary and disciple Muḥammad ibn Sa’d (d. 845) = a work which includes a biography of the messenger. (*The Gentle Answer*, p. 62)