

MANUSCRIPTS OF THE BIBLE

While the original texts of the Old and New Testaments are no longer available, early manuscripts and ancient fragments provide an essential window into the history of the biblical text, its transmission, and its interpretation. The Scriptures were originally written on papyrus, a plant-based material that was cut into strips, pressed together, and formed into scrolls that could reach up to thirty-five feet in length. These texts were written in parallel columns, without punctuation or spacing between words.

From the early second century A.D., the codex gradually replaced the scroll. The codex, similar to a modern book, made the text more accessible and easier to use. Over time, parchment and vellum, made from animal skins, replaced papyrus and remained the standard writing material until the widespread use of paper in the Middle Ages. The oldest complete biblical manuscripts date from the fourth century, though earlier fragments of both the Old and New Testaments provide valuable material for comparison and study.

Hebrew Texts of the Old Testament

Among the most significant discoveries are the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, uncovered in 1947. These manuscripts, dating from approximately 250–175 B.C., include texts such as the Great Isaiah Scroll and provide an important witness to the Hebrew Scriptures in an earlier form than previously known. They allow scholars to compare these texts with later Hebrew traditions. Other important collections include the Masada manuscripts and later medieval witnesses such as the Cairo Codex of the Prophets (A.D. 895), the oldest extant complete Hebrew manuscript of the prophetic books. Additional finds from geniza storage sites, where worn manuscripts were preserved, have also yielded important texts, including the Cairo Geniza fragment of Sirach.

Greek Versions of the Old Testament

The most important early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Septuagint (LXX), produced in the second century B.C. and widely used in the time of the apostles and the early Church. Pre-Christian fragments of the Septuagint exist alongside later revisions from the second and third centuries. Important papyrus collections, such as the Chester Beatty and Freer collections, preserve early witnesses to the text. The major uncial codices from the fourth to tenth centuries remain key sources for study, especially Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) and Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century).

Other Versions of the Bible

Early Aramaic translations, known as the Targums, dating from the last centuries before Christ, provide important insight into the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures within Judaism. For the Catholic Church, the Latin Vulgate translated by St. Jerome in A.D. 389, based directly on the Hebrew text, became the standard biblical text for many centuries. Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, and other ancient versions further demonstrate the wide transmission of Scripture throughout the ancient world.

Greek Texts of the New Testament

The earliest substantial New Testament manuscripts are the great uncial codices of the fourth and fifth centuries. Codex Vaticanus contains most of the New Testament but is missing Hebrews 9:14 onward, the Pastoral Letters, and Revelation. Codex Sinaiticus preserves the entire New Testament. Codex Alexandrinus lacks portions of Matthew (1–24), John (7–8), and 2 Corinthians (4–12). Codex Bezae preserves significant portions of the New Testament in both Greek and Latin.

In addition, the Chester Beatty and Rylands papyri provide important fragments dating from the second to the eighth centuries.

Beyond the manuscripts themselves, citations of the New Testament in the writings of the early Church Fathers offer additional evidence for the transmission of the text. Ongoing archaeological discoveries and textual research continue to deepen our understanding of the history and preservation of Sacred Scripture.