

Biblical Studies #106

External & Extant Witnesses

In the world of ancient documents, Scripture stands above all others. We have Full Old Testament canons, with some books only a few hundred years from the original. In regard to the New Testament, we have full copies less than 300 years from the originals. When you compare this to Josephus' "Jewish Antiquities" (earliest copy 1300 years from the original), Tacitus' "Augustus to Nero" (earliest copy 800 years from the original), or Julius Caesar's "Gallic Wars" (earliest copy 900 years from the original)—you can see that in comparison to ancient texts of a similar period, we have many more copies much closer to the original than all others. These surpass the number of copies by hundreds and thousands, and they get closer to the original date by hundreds and in many cases, over a thousand years. So, in the realm of ancient textual studies, and in studies of the ancient written word, God's Word has no peer in authenticity and sheer volume.

As mentioned earlier, there are almost 25,000 ancient texts, some as old as 2250 years. So, let's take a quick look at some examples of these early texts. Of the thousands of Greek texts, one of the oldest full copies of the New Testament is "Codex Sinaiticus," given this name because it was found in Saint Catherine's Monastery, at the foot of Mount Sinai. This text is dated to around 350 AD.

Let's look at some of the ancient fragments that our papyrologist brought to class today. There is a collection of 15 New Testament books discovered by a Mr. Chester Beatty, and this papyrus collection is dated to around 200 AD. There are 5 verses from John 18 discovered by Mr. John Ryland that date from 125 AD. One of the oldest fragments we have is a Qumran fragment designated 7Q5. This fragment is from what appears to be Mark 6:52-53. (It is hard to tell as it is such a small fragment.) This little piece of papyrus was discovered in 1955 and was in a jar that was sealed in 68 AD, only decades after Christ walked the earth.

As we come to the end of our study of God's Word from the perspective of the study of ancient text, let us briefly remind ourselves why we can be so sure that God's Word is a clearly defined set of writings, divine in origin, and universal in their authority, by consulting the text itself for assurance: 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed..." and we can be sure that He who is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent can and will give us His Word, without flaw or error. But do not take my word for it; take His word: Proverbs 30:5-6 "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. 6 Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar."