Ad Fontes, Week Three: How We Got the New Testament

Chapter 2: How We Got the New Testament

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Three

Before the Bible was a book, it was a stack of letters and a few Gospels traveling between cities in saddlebags. This week we follow the text from Paul's mouth to your lap: what it was written on, who copied it, how copyists slipped, and how early the evidence begins. The point to carry home is that none of this makes the text fragile. It is what preservation looks like in real history.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 12	Report back: your footnote tally
12 to 22	Writing it down: papyrus, parchment, and the codex
22 to 30	Who copied the New Testament
30 to 48	How copyists made mistakes: four stations
48 to 58	When the evidence begins: P52 and the early papyri
58 to 65	How the books traveled, and preservation in the ordinary
65 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: your footnote tally

Last week you read a short epistle in one sitting and kept two counts: translation notes and textual notes. We will put the numbers on the board.

What to listen for:

- **Translation notes outnumber textual notes.** Almost everyone finds this. Most of the footnotes in your Bible are about English, not about manuscripts.
- **Different Bibles, different counts.** The NET has the most notes by far, the NIV the fewest. That tells you about each translation's habits, not about the evidence.

- **The hard cases.** Bring any note you could not sort. Some of them will make more sense after today, because we are going to learn how copyists actually produced the variants those notes report.

2. Writing it down

Around AD 56 or 57, Paul dictated Romans in Corinth while a believer named Tertius wrote it down. Tertius tells us so himself: “I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord” (Romans 16:22 BSB). Paul spoke, Tertius wrote, a courier carried it to Rome.

What they wrote on

Material	Made from	Strengths	Weaknesses
Papyrus	Strips of Nile reed pith, pressed in two layers	Cheap, light, everyday	Rots in damp climates; survives mostly in the dry sands of Egypt
Parchment	Scraped and stretched sheep, goat, or calf skin	Lasts for centuries; writes well on both sides	Expensive; standard for prestige Bibles by the 300s

Scroll or book?

The wider world kept its serious literature on scrolls. The codex, sheets folded and bound along one edge like a modern book, was for notebooks and account ledgers. Christians broke ranks. Nearly all our earliest Christian biblical manuscripts are codices. A codex was cheaper, easier to search while preaching, could hold several Gospels or letters at once, and traveled well. The Bible has been a book, not a scroll, for almost as long as it has existed.

Sacred names

Christian copyists shortened the names of God, Lord, Jesus, and Christ to their first and last letters and drew a line over the top. Scholars call these *nomina sacra*, “sacred names.” For example, IΣ with a line over it stands for Jesus. They show up in the earliest Christian papyri and almost nowhere outside Christian manuscripts. From the first generation of copying, these scribes were showing reverence on the page. They knew what they were copying.

3. Who copied the New Testament

There were two layers of copying, and both are part of God’s keeping of the text.

	Early copying	Later copying
When	Roughly the first 100 years after the apostles	From the 200s on, growing after Constantine

	Early copying	Later copying
Who	Literate believers in the congregation: a physician like Luke, a trained household servant, an educated convert	Trained scribes in organized workshops. Eusebius describes Origen's at Caesarea, with shorthand writers, copyists, and calligraphers
What it produced	Working copies, read to pieces and thrown out, later dug from Egyptian rubbish heaps	Complete, carefully made Bibles such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus
What it gives us	Our oldest witnesses to the wording	Our most complete manuscripts

Keep in mind that literacy in the Roman Empire was probably under 10 percent. The people who could copy were a minority, and they did it as a service to the church.

Neither era gets a free pass

It is tempting to trust the trained scribes more, or to trust the oldest copies more. Both instincts can mislead. A trained scribe may "fix" a hard reading he thinks is wrong. An untrained one may copy a hard reading faithfully because he did not know enough to change it. Textual criticism weighs each manuscript on its own character.

4. How copyists made mistakes: four stations

Copyists slipped in patterns we can name, and patterned mistakes leave fingerprints. If the changes were random, no recovery would be possible. Because they follow known habits, we can usually spot them and work back to what the apostle wrote.

How we will do this. Four tables, four stations. Spend about four minutes at each. Look up the passage in a King James and in a modern translation, read the footnote, and decide what kind of slip you are looking at.

Station 1: The eye skips

The copyist's eye jumps from one word to the same word a few lines down, and everything in between drops out. Scholars call it *homoeoteleuton*, "same ending."

Look up 1 John 2:23. Both halves of the verse end with the same words, "has the Father." Many printings of the King James set the second half in italics, because the Greek text behind it lacked the line. Modern translations, the BSB among them, print both halves.

Station 2: The ear mishears

When a room of copyists wrote from dictation, some Greek sounds had merged. *Hēmeis* ("we") and *humeis* ("you") sounded nearly alike, and so did "our" and "your."

Translation	1 John 1:4
KJV	“that **your** joy may be full”
NET	“so that **our** joy may be complete”
BSB	“so that **our** joy may be complete,” with the note “BYZ and TR your”

Not malicious, not doctrinal. Just a sound.

Station 3: Memory fills in

A copyist who has prayed Matthew’s form of the Lord’s Prayer a thousand times writes it into Luke without meaning to.

Look up Luke 11:2 to 4 and Matthew 6:9 to 13. In the BSB, Luke’s prayer begins simply, “Father, hallowed be Your name,” and the footnotes tell you what the Byzantine text and the Textus Receptus add. In the King James, Luke’s prayer has grown to match Matthew: “Our Father which art in heaven” and “Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.”

Station 4: The helpful fix

A careful copyist meets something that looks like a problem and tries to help.

Translation	Mark 1:2
KJV	“As it is written in **the prophets**”
NET	“As it is written in **Isaiah the prophet**”
BSB	“As it is written in **Isaiah the prophet**,” with the note “BYZ and TR in the prophets”

Mark’s quotation blends Malachi 3:1 with Isaiah 40:3 but names only Isaiah. A copyist “fixed” it to “the prophets.” Notice which direction the change runs. It is easy to see why someone would smooth the harder reading into the easier one. Scribes did sometimes add a prophet’s name elsewhere, but here adding “Isaiah” would have created an error, not removed one, and the reading “Isaiah” has the broader early support. Chapter 4 turns this into a rule: **the more difficult reading is generally the original.**

Back to Romans 8:1

Which station does last week’s verse belong to? Most likely stations 1 and 3 working together: the phrase from verse 4 was in the copyist’s ear, or his eye caught it on the page, and it came up into verse 1. The mistake fits the pattern.

One surprise from recent research: when scholars studied the habits of the early papyrus copyists, they found them more likely to leave words out than to add them. The old assumption that copyists mostly padded the text needed correcting.

5. When the evidence begins: P52

Our earliest surviving piece of the New Testament is a scrap of papyrus the size of a credit card. It is called **P52**: P for papyrus, 52 for its catalog number. It sits in a glass case at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England.

- **What it holds.** Part of John 18:31 to 33 on one side and John 18:37 to 38 on the other: Jesus before Pilate. Of all the words that could have survived first, we have the chapter where Jesus says he came into the world "to testify to the truth" (John 18:37 BSB).
- **How it was found.** Acquired in Egypt in 1920 by Bernard Grenfell, it sat unidentified in a box until 1934, when a young scholar named Colin Roberts recognized the Greek letters as John 18. He published it in 1935.
- **How old it is.** Roberts dated it by its handwriting to about AD 125 to 150. Some careful scholars allow a later date. Most place it in the 100s, which puts it within decades of when John wrote, around AD 90.

How that compares

Author	Gap between writing and earliest surviving copy
John's Gospel	Decades (P52)
Tacitus	About 700 years
Caesar, *Gallic War*	About 900 years
Plato	More than 1,000 years

P52 is not alone

We have sixty or so Greek New Testament manuscripts from the 100s and 200s, most preserved by Egypt's dry climate. A few of the big ones:

Papyrus	Date	Contents
P46 (Chester Beatty)	About AD 200	Most of nine of Paul's letters
P66 (Bodmer)	About AD 200	Most of John
P75 (Bodmer)	About the same period	Luke and John; one of the most carefully copied manuscripts we have

When you read your Bible at the kitchen table, the Greek behind it can be traced through manuscripts that begin within a generation or two of the apostles. That is true of almost no other ancient book.

6. How the books traveled

The letters were meant to be shared. Paul tells the Colossians, "After this letter has been read among you, make sure that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans" (Colossians 4:16 BSB). Read it, copy it, send it on: that was the engine of circulation.

By about AD 155, Justin Martyr in Rome describes "the memoirs of the apostles" being read aloud on the Lord's day alongside the prophets, as settled practice (*First Apology* 67). He did not have to argue for it.

Public reading mattered for the text. A book read aloud every week in churches across the Mediterranean gets copied often, and its wording is steadied by use. A copyist whose copy strayed far from what the congregations heard on Sunday would find no church that wanted it. Long before any council or any bound Bible, worship was already guarding the words.

The process was not perfectly tidy. Not every church had every book at once, and some books were received more slowly than others. The history of the canon is its own subject for another day.

Preservation in the ordinary

Papyrus and parchment, amateur copyists and trained scribes, eye-skips and borrowed phrases, P52 and P75, a letter passed from Colossae to Laodicea: this is not a story of a fragile text. It is what preservation looks like when God does it through ordinary means.

	Inspiration	Preservation
What it is	Paul speaks, Tertius writes, and the words on the page are God's Word	Every faithful copy made afterward, in Corinth, Caesarea, Egypt, and Constantinople
When	A moment we can name and date	Two thousand years, and still going
Through what	The prophets and apostles	Ordinary believers, materials, and trade routes, governed by God's providence

Preservation does not need a perfect manuscript, a surviving original, or a copyist who never slipped. It needs God to keep his Word in the whole stream of witnesses, taken together, and in use in his church. The variants are real. The faithfulness is also real.

We are not living after the age of preservation. We are living in it.

For discussion

1. Christians chose the humble codex over the respected scroll. What does that choice say about how they meant Scripture to be used?

2. The copyist who carried Matthew's words into Luke's Lord's Prayer knew the Bible well. Can loving a text too familiarly ever work against it? Where might we do the same today?
3. Which is more reassuring to you: that copyists made mistakes we can detect, or that they made so few that matter? Why?
4. The weekly public reading of Scripture helped protect its wording. What does that suggest about the Sunday readings in our own service?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Codex. A book with pages bound along one edge, as opposed to a scroll. Plural: codices.

Parchment. A writing surface made from processed animal skin. More durable and more expensive than papyrus.

Source copy. The manuscript a copyist is copying from.

Scriptorium. A workshop where manuscripts were copied. Plural: scriptoria.

Nomina sacra. Latin, "sacred names." The shortened, overlined forms Christian copyists used for God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, and a small handful of other sacred words.

Homoeoteleuton. Greek, "same ending." An eye-skip from one word to the same word further on, dropping what lies between.

Harmonization. A change that makes one passage match a familiar parallel, such as Luke's Lord's Prayer made to match Matthew's.

Paleography. The study of ancient handwriting, used to date manuscripts like P52.

P52. The earliest known fragment of the New Testament: John 18, from the 100s, held in Manchester.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 3, "The History of the Printed Greek New Testament." It is one of the longer chapters, so start early in the week. It gives the full story of Erasmus and the Textus Receptus we tasted in Week Two.

Do this one thing. Read John 18:31 to 38, the verses on the two sides of P52. As you read, picture a scrap the size of a credit card, written in second-century Greek, carrying the words in front of you.

Bring. Your Bible, a King James if you have one, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. We will never know the names of the copyists who carried the text to us, except one: Tertius. What does it mean to you that God kept his Word through people whose names are lost?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for papyrus and parchment. Thanks be to God for copyists whose names we will never know, and for one named Tertius whose name we do. The Word came to us through ordinary hands and ordinary materials by extraordinary providence, and it lies open on our tables this morning, two thousand years after a man in Corinth spoke it into the air.

The Word travels still.

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.” Colossians 3:16 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.