

EARLY GUIDES TO AN ACCURATE BIBLICAL TEXT

Presented at the Digging Up the Past Seminars

When one looks at the history of the preservation of the Bible one never fails to marvel that the modern text is so close to that of the ancient documents. There is an extensive amount of proof today which testifies to the accuracy and validity of the Biblical text, proof that has silenced the critics of a few generations ago who tried to point out what appeared to be weaknesses and contradictions in the Biblical text.

These priceless documents have been preserved for us through the centuries and they come to us in varying forms; sometimes a Bible manuscript is in fragments and sometimes these fragmentary portions are in different libraries of the world. For example Codex N or Codex Purpurens. This manuscript is written in silver letters on purple vellum and there are four leaves in the British Museum, two in the library at Vienna, six at the Vatican and thirty-three at Patmos.

A partial list of some of the many thousands of the manuscripts will reveal how many and how varied are the source materials for our English translations; -

Papyrus Rylands 457 - ascribed to first half of 2nd Century.

Papyrus 31 - contains Titus 1:11—15 and chap.2:3—8.

Papyrus 45 - another of the Chester Beatty Collection. Parts of the four Gospels and Acts.

Papyrus 20 - James 2:19 to chap.3:9.

Papyrus 22 - John 15:25 to chap.16:2.

These few illustrations reveal something of the way the various fragments are catalogued.

CODEX SINAITICUS - probably one of the fifty manuscripts of the Septuagint. Now in the British Museum.

CODEX ALEXANDRINUS - reaches back to 4th or 5th century. Contains most of the Old Testament as well as the New. This is in the British Museum.

CODEX VATICANUS - also thought to be one of the 50 manuscripts of the Septuagint prepared in AD 331. Contains most of the Old Testament in Greek and the New Testament to Hebrews 9:14. This manuscript can be found in the Vatican Library, Rome.

We could also mention: -

CODEX EPHRAEMI. This interesting manuscript is a palimpsest. The original writing was erased in

the 12th Century and written over by a monk named Ephraem. The Royal Library of Paris owns this.

CODEX BEZAE. A Greek and Latin manuscript of the Gospels and Acts now at Cambridge.

CODEX COTTONIANUS. Preserved in the British Museum; this famous manuscript is written in silver letters on a purple background. It is one of the oldest manuscripts.

CODEX CYPRIUS. A copy of the four Gospels on vellum and in excellent state of preservation.

CODEX MOSQUENSIS. These are the 55 Moscow Manuscripts belonging to the Byzantine recension.

CODEX CORSENDONCENSIS. This cursive containing the whole New Testament except Revelation was used by Erasmus in his second edition.

CODEX LEICESTIENSIS. All the New Testament is in this manuscript which harmonizes closely with the Old Syriac version.

There are other Manuscripts too numerous to mention but now perhaps a small note on some of the ancient versions.

Soon after the days of Jesus Christ, translations were made into various languages. These were made directly from the primary sources. The Syriac and the Latin versions were made within a century of the death of the last apostle.

SYRIAC VERSION — The Peshitta reaches back to the early 2nd Century and has always been held in great respect.

GOthic VERSION — This valuable version was made from the original Greek in the 4th Century by Ulfilus the leader of the Eastern Church.

LATIN VERSION — There were many. The earliest Latin translation was made about A.D.150 and originated in North Africa. Near the close of the 4th century a revision of the Latin text was undertaken by Jerome. Two manuscripts of Jerome's translation, Codex Amiatinus (A.D.541) and Codex Fuldensis (A.D.546) are still preserved. Jerome's Latin version is known as the Vulgate. Pope Sixtus 5th proclaimed in 1589 that the text of the Vulgate was the true and genuine text and that a curse would rest upon anyone attempting to revise it. However, in spite of this anathema, Clement VIII sanctioned a new copy and called in all the previous ones.

Other versions such as the Ethiopic Version, the Coptic and the Armenian are of great value to the translators of the Bible but perhaps enough has been mentioned of ancient documents to let us see that a vast treasure store exists from which translators can check and re-check the accuracy of the Biblical text - the world's most unique and interesting book.