

This now will be the next portion of my longer blog post that will serve as an Introduction to the New Testament. The previous section was on how the 27 books came to be collected into “the” New Testament; this one is on how the books were copied/transmitted over the centuries.

As with the other sections, I’ve made this one pretty short, because I’m trying to be as concise as I can, with links to other blog posts throughout. I don’t want the entire article to be massively long. One could obviously write a book or two on this topic (and many have!); but for a brief introduction, I want to hit only the really key points.

The Text of the New Testament

How, though, were the books copied? In the ancient world the only way to get a copy of a book was by copying it by hand or by having someone else do so: one page, one sentence, one word at a time. The earliest Christian copyists would not have been trained professionals – these came in only later. At first, anyone who could read and write might be asked to produce a copy of, say, one of the Gospels or one of Paul’s letters. Most people at the time were illiterate, and so literate Christians were a precious commodity for a church community. There would have been no guarantees, of course, of their individual copying skills (it is a real skill); and we need always to remember that these earliest scribes did not think they were copying The Inspired Word of God. They were just copying a letter one of their leaders wrote, or an account of what Jesus had said and done.

We do not have the originals of any of the books of the New Testament – or in fact of any literary work from the ancient world. We instead have copies. In the case of the New Testament, we have ...

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