

How We Got the Bible – Tischendorf and the manuscripts [ONE]

1. I was asked how we know what the original writings said when so many made copies and adjusted it with their own style. The quick answer is: we check all the manuscripts. It is more complicated than that but let's first answer the question: where did we get the manuscripts?
2. [TWO] There are many stories but one of the most fascinating is that of a young man named Constantin von Tischendorf. He was traveling with a camel caravan as it came to the walls of the monastery of St. Catherine. Tischendorf had an amazing, quick mind and he had already, at 29yrs of age, mastered several ancient languages. He also had a mission: reconstruct the NT to its original form and words; to get it as accurate as humanly possible.
3. [THREE] The walls of St. Catherine's were over 30ft high for protection against marauding bands of nomadic tribesmen and the vagaries of local rulers. After spending time presenting his credentials and talking the monks into letting him in, he was hauled over the walls while astride a crossbar. This was merely another stop to him along a long journey.
4. He had published a Greek New Testament in 1841 but he'd been frustrated during his research by the poor quality and late date of so many manuscripts. He set himself a course to visit all of the best libraries of Europe to find and copy their best manuscripts and make comparisons between them.
5. He started in Paris with a manuscript no one had been able to decipher: the Ephraim Manuscript. [FOUR] This was a copy of the Bible – Old and New Testaments – made in the 400s and written in an ancient script on reused surfaces and then over-written with sermons by a man named Ephraim. Using only his eyes, he uncovered the writing and made an accurate copy of it, astounding the scholars of his day and impressing those of this age. (the manuscript was incomplete when he studied it*).
6. This brought Tischendorf such fame that he was now fully funded for his journey. [FIVE] He went all over Europe gaining fame as he continued to

uncover and translate manuscripts that were all but forgotten in central libraries. He then decided it was time to go to the East: to Egypt, Sinai, Palestine, Patmos, and Constantinople. He chronicled his journey in "Travels in the East" still available at Amazon (but not cheap). He knew that going into the East was dangerous so he wrote his brother that he was going into danger for a noble purpose: to hunt for forgotten storerooms of manuscripts so that the world could be certain we had the words of God.

7. At St. Catherine's, [SIX] he was given an apartment and told he could have access to any books in the library. They were brought into him one by one...and usually were useless. [SEVEN] Then, a basket of many scrolls was brought in, all in very poor condition. The librarian told him that these were of no value and that many of them had already been used as kindling for fires in the monastery. Picking them up, Tischendorf was astonished to find that some of them were books of the NT written in the oldest Greek he had ever seen.
8. Tischendorf called for all of the leaves but was only given 43 sheets, a third of them, that had already been marked as to be used for starting fires. His excitement over finding these sheets made the monks suspicious that he might steal their books so they refused to bring him any more. He begged them not to burn any more of them. He was sent away without seeing any more of the precious sheets of scripture.
9. He published his findings in Europe but refused to state where he found the ancient manuscripts. Nine years later, he returned to St. Catherine's for another try only to find out that no one there had any idea where the rest of the papers were. They had forgotten they were important. Crestfallen, he set himself to reading whatever they gave him. One much more modern book had a bookmark that made him excited [EIGHT] – it was a portion of Greek NT scripture in the same handwriting as the 43 sheets he'd taken 9yrs before.
10. He left and returned to Europe and published that he had found the 43pgs in St. Catherine's and that another 86 leaves were out there somewhere. The Czar of Russia, Alexander II, [NINE] sent Tischendorf back to see if he could find a clue where the other leaves had gone. So, 15yrs after his first

trip, he returned once again to St. Catherine's. He was allowed to have access to the library but it was a disheveled mess of rotting books and scrolls in pieces. After a while he became certain that he would never find the rest of the manuscript. At 45yrs, he was running out of time. On the 4th of February, 1859, he told his Bedouin caravaners to be ready to leave on the 7th. He was done.

11. [TEN] He went on a walk within the monastery when a steward of the monastery (think "accountant and janitor") asked him to come into his room for tea. As they spoke of Tischendorf's work, the steward casually said "I, too, have read a Septuagint." He then took down a bulky volume from a shelf in the room, wrapped up in red cloth, and handed it to Tischendorf. To his shock, there it was: all of the missing leaves along with other OT and apocryphal books. He had the entire NT now.
12. Remembering his mistake 15yrs ago, he acted as if this was nothing. He knew if the monks knew he was interested, they would keep him away from the book and might send him away immediately from the monastery. He casually asked if he might take the manuscript into his sleeping room to look it over. He returned to his room at 8 that evening, fell to his knees and thanked God. Working through the night, he translated the Epistle of Barnabas, a long lost book that was known to scholars but which had disappeared centuries before. The early church considered it scripture but lost it.
13. Tischendorf asked for permission to copy the entire book. That was given but it wasn't possible to do it there (scholarly reference books and access to scholars was required due to the condition of the leaves). He asked to take it to Cairo and was quickly refused. Pressing, they said only the abbot could give that permission. Where was the abbot? In Cairo. He set out immediately for Cairo where he got the abbot's permission to bring the manuscript there. He sent back riders on camels with a large "gift" of money to ensure it got back as soon as possible. Twelve days later, it arrived. [ELEVEN]
14. With the help of two assistants who knew Greek, Tischendorf and crew copied and checked 110,000 lines of Greek. So many other marks were on

the paper – including corrections – that the task was excruciatingly difficult. It took two months in the stifling heat of an apartment in Cairo before they identified, marked, and logged every single writer who had, over the centuries, handled these pages and made notes. Still, they had one problem: they needed the original manuscript for future study.

15. Tischendorf made a bargain: if the monks gave it to Czar Alexander II, he would bestow on them a great gift. That was a hard sale but they finally agreed if he gave his word that it would be returned if the gift didn't materialize.
16. Back in Europe, Tischendorf was not done blessing the world. He decided to publish the codex. He wanted to make an exact copy. That meant new letters had to be made that would closely resemble not only the original handwriting but that of the corrections as well. Every letter, the spaces between the letters, the position and slant of the alterations, the brown and red inks, everything – even the color of the paper used – had to correspond precisely to the original. Yet in two years' time, with all these minutia to attend to, the printing was finished by the spring of 1862. In the fall of that year, 300 copies were presented to the czar who, in turn, sent out copies to selected scholars and universities all over the world. [this taken from Lightfoot's book]
17. In case you are wondering, eventually the czar and the monks came to terms on the gift: 9,000 rubles and medals for certain monks.
18. Tischendorf, who knew the oldest manuscripts found to that day, believed absolutely that the gospels were legitimate, written by those who said they wrote them, and accurate. He also believed that if the church taught anything about Jesus that was not in the ancient gospels (or didn't teach what was found there) it must repent and that the church should change, not the scripture.
19. Today, in the British Library (used to be in the British Museum) is the Siniatic Manuscript. It arrived in England in December 1933 when the English government bought it from Russia for about half a million dollars in today's money. It arrived with an official delegation from Russia and was

greeted by hundreds of royals, leaders, dignitaries, and scholars. When it was brought from the taxi, all the men took off their hats. This is NOT a copy: it is the one Tischendorf found and rescued from St. Catherine's monastery. It is the oldest complete manuscript of the NT that survives to this day, dating from the early 400s. It and the Vatican codex are the two best witnesses to our NT.

20. But there is more: [TWELVE] on May 26, 1975 another discovery was made at St. Catherine's. A fire had caused some damage so some rooms which had fallen in hundreds of years ago were opened up as debris was cleared. Inside some of the rooms were found hundreds of manuscripts, most likely as old as the Siniatic Codex. Many of these are scripture but a great deal are of other books. A few of these have been examined and published but the vast majority are still hidden from view. The abbot of the monastery says that translation continues and that when they are published, it will be the monastery that publishes them. Until then, we wait.