

Chapter eight: Master copy

Our journeys in time so far have been made through a process of analysis and reconstruction. Now, we are going to look at an actual manuscript compiled in the mid fourth century. This is Codex Sinaiticus, which has astonishingly been preserved largely intact for seventeen centuries. It is, along with Codex Vaticanus, one of only two very early, complete books of the Old and New Testaments to have survived. These may well have been among the first bibles ever to have been made.

The bible, which runs to well over a thousand pages, was written in a square format, with four columns of closely-packed small Greek capital letters (uncials), running to an average of around 43 lines. It would have been a huge, time-consuming enterprise to produce it, involving the slaughter of several hundred animals, a lengthy process to convert skins to parchment, careful stitching and binding and the labour over many weeks by a team of scribes.

The manuscript came to light in the mid nineteenth century through the efforts of biblical scholars looking to find the earliest versions of Christian writings and thereby, they hoped, restore an original Christian message. Among these textual adventurers was the German scholar Constantin Tischendorf, whose search took him to the heavily fortified monastery of St Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai. The monks at the monastery showed him a number of manuscripts, including parts of the very early bible.

Tischendorf made several journeys, ultimately taking away much of the bible. Whether this was on loan, as a gift or as a purchase, subsequently became a matter of dispute. The importance of the bible, now known as Codex Sinaiticus, was swiftly recognised. It stands alongside another early bible, Codex Vaticanus, which has been in the Vatican library since at least the fifteenth century. In terms of their text, the two bibles have much in common.

The bulk of the bible, which Tischendorf translated, came into the hands of the Russian Tsar Alexander II and was sold in 1933 to the British Museum. It was transferred a few years later to the British Library. Some fragments, used in book binding, were found by a Russian monk visiting the monastery and were taken to St Petersburg. A significant portion remains at the German University of Leipzig where Tischendorf had studied. There were a few pages still left at the monastery.

The four bodies holding parts of Codex Sinaiticus came together in 2009 to place the entire manuscript digitally online, where it is now free to view in its original form. It is an invaluable resource. Readers can access the manuscript and see what the scribes in the fourth century were doing, every letter written in care or in haste or in stress, every gap, every mark made for reference, every error, small or large.

Two colleagues Herbert Milne and Theodore Skeat worked together on the British Library's prestigious acquisition. They built on the analysis which Tischendorf had begun of the scribes

and the later correctors of Codex Sinaiticus. They developed a plausible theory that the codex had originally been produced at the library and scriptorium at Caesarea which at the time housed the largest available collection of Christian manuscripts.

There are some unconscious scribal harmonisations in the text, for example 'Caesarea' for 'Samaria', which suggest this and also two intriguing inscriptions by a later corrector, at the end of the books of 2 Esdras and Esther in the Old Testament. These indicate that the corrector had undertaken a comparison against a version by Pamphilus, recording that Pamphilus had added a note 'in his own hand' to the effect that he had in turn referenced or copied from the Hexapla by Origen. This latter work, no longer surviving, constituted a detailed comparison of the Hebrew Old Testament against a number of Greek translations.

Pamphilus had enlarged and developed the library at Caesarea Maritima. He had, according to Jerome, transcribed the greater part of Origen works, which would have included the Hexapla. Jerome also wrote that these transcriptions were still held at Caesarea. This in turn indicates that the corrector of 2 Esdras and Esther, presumed to be from the fifth century, may have been working on Codex Sinaiticus while it was at Caesarea, cross-comparing with the transcription of Origen by Pamphilus.

If Codex Sinaiticus were produced at the scriptorium at Caesarea, then it seems likely that the manuscript would have been removed, before this last Christian outpost in Syria fell to Islamic forces in CE 640. It was some distance to the monastery at Mount Sinai, which provided a relatively safe haven for early Christian manuscripts and other religious relics. From Caesarea or from wherever it originated, the codex did indeed find a secure place behind the steep walls of St Catherine's. The Christian monks there had in CE 625 secured a charter, giving them protection, signed by Mohammed himself and now held at the monastery.

The codex is undoubtedly old, but just how old? There are marginal references in some of the gospels relating to canon tables, developed by the bishop of Caesarea Eusebius, for cross referencing similar passages in the gospels. Given that this system only came into use in the early fourth century, Codex Sinaiticus cannot have originated earlier than this. There is, on the other hand, some agreement, based on factors such as the style of handwriting and the plain titles used for the gospels, that the manuscript predates the fifth century.

Codex Sinaiticus was therefore, on the balance of probability, written in the mid fourth century. This was a pivotal time, in which the codex played some part, soon after Christianity had been incorporated as one of the religions of the Roman Empire. Along with his fellow Emperor from the east, Licinius, Constantine in CE 313 issued an edict removing sanctions and prohibitions directed at Christians. Constantine became a patron of the Christian Church, encouraging its organisation and development. Eusebius records that the Emperor commissioned 50 copies of the scriptures for use in churches in his new capital, named after him as Constantinople.

Theodore Skeat believed that Codex Sinaiticus had a role in this early promulgation of the Christian message. The manuscript has, however, been subjected to more than 23,000 corrections and so could be considered to have been badly written. Put together in quires of

sixteen pages (from four leaves bound together), Sinaiticus appears from its numbering to have one quire missing between the Old and the New Testaments. Skeat reasonably supposed this to have consisted of the Eusebian comparison tables which would have been used in conjunction with the marginal references.

Skeat's theory was that the manuscript was a prototype, made as part of an effort to fulfil the Emperor's order. But, he argued, its unusual bulky format was wasteful in terms of the use of animal skins. The cost would have been too great in replicating it over a number of copies.

So, according to the theory, Sinaiticus was left unfinished and put to one side until many years later, when a succession of correctors then went over the manuscript and remedied its many errors. Skeat suggested that Codex Vaticanus, with its more conventional rectangular format, was one of the fifty copies requested by the Emperor Constantine.

The theory is based on a number of shaky presumptions. First of all, it seems unlikely that 50 churches were being built in Constantinople or that the 'scriptures' requested referred to whole copies of the bible, the production of which would have been a vast undertaking. This was certainly a time when there was a need for more copies of Christian literature, as the Church expanded under Roman patronage. But there is nothing directly to link either bible with the order that Eusebius recorded.

Furthermore, far from being abandoned, Codex Sinaiticus was effectively completed, with all of the Old and New Testaments transcribed and missing only one quire, most probably comprising the Eusebian canon tables. It is hard to see why at this point, after so much effort and such great expense, the bible would not straightaway have been corrected and put into use.

Skeat thought that it was instead left for perhaps as much as a century before the first of a series of correctors (denoted now as Ca) began working on the manuscript. It has to be assumed first of all, on this view, that the bible was actually discarded. Then, after a long gap, it must be further construed that it was suddenly thought worthwhile to undertake wholesale corrections.

Why this was might have been the case and why there was apparently such a delay are matters that are hard to comprehend. This was especially since, in the fifth century, Jerome had begun working on a new version, for common use, of the Latin translations of the bible used by the Roman Church. What need would there have been to correct an old and abandoned Greek version at such a late stage?

The codex lacks the page wear and candle stains which would have been incurred for a bible used for daily reading. So, for what purpose was it so extensively corrected?

While many other correctors were subsequently involved, the first corrector Ca made about two thirds of all the changes to the text. A further ten per cent were made by the scribes themselves, in the course of production. Ca picked up just about all of the most common form

of error, involving the omission of a substantial portion of text. These 'skip' errors occurred when a scribe, continuing after a line of text, accidentally read on to a later line which began or ended with the same characters. In this way, the scribe in copying missed one or more lines of text.

There is no reason of style or substance for assigning Ca to the fifth century. He is more likely to have worked as the scriptorium corrector, checking the work of the scribes as the manuscript was being produced and as soon as it was finished. The outcome of the efforts by Ca was that, when Sinaiticus was completed, the vast majority of corrections to the text had been made. Discounting subsequent harmonisations, elaborations and adjustments against alternative exemplars, there were few actual errors remaining.

This interpretation of the evidence provides a basis for understanding the purpose of the codex. It was compiled at great cost in terms of time and resources and at some speed, judging by the sheer number of corrections and also frequency of skip errors, indicating that the scribes were pushing on and looking ahead. But the manuscript was then corrected by the scriptorium corrector Ca, carefully and exhaustively.

This combination of fast working by the scribes, combined with intensive effort by the scriptorium corrector following on, could have been the best means of undertaking work that needed to be done both urgently and with some accuracy. The bible was clearly not produced primarily for display. Nor, was it used for daily reading.

But we now have the evidence as to the purpose for which it was to be used. In the mid fourth century, there was suddenly a huge opportunity to spread the message of Christianity to the far corners of the Roman Empire, and a challenge to get this done speedily and effectively. There was a need to generate and spread an authorised version of the scriptures, corrected to remove errors and where necessary also to reflect Church doctrine.

Great effort and care were put into the production of Codex Sinaiticus because it was, I suggest, to be used as a master copy for the purpose of further production and for reference. New copies could be made of particular books, or perhaps the whole of the New Testament, using the codex as an authoritative source. Other versions could be brought in to be checked and amended, to bring these into line. Sinaiticus would have been housed somewhere for this purpose, quite likely in a Christian library and possibly, from the limited clues available, in the one created by Pamphilus at Caesarea.

There are some points that need to be considered. The codex may well have been seen in a different light to the way that we now see it, as a single book. It was more of a small library of books, albeit linked by a theme, within one cover. As in the case of a library, not every book would have been regarded as equally essential. Different books could have been, and were included or excluded, in other codices. This can clearly be seen to have been the case for books within the Old Testament.

As far as the core books of the New Testament were concerned, however, the aim would have been to generate and sustain a high degree of conformity.

There are just two fourth century codices, embracing the Old and the New Testaments, surviving and a handful more from the following century. Does this mean that there were a large number of other early Greek bibles produced, which were then lost through wear and tear or by being replaced as the Latin Vulgate became more popular? We only see the survivors and some at least will have been destroyed. But my perception is that the effort in producing a work like Sinaiticus was so great that it would not at that time have been a routine operation.

Codex Vaticanus was one from the same period that did survive and it is clearly linked to Codex Sinaiticus. These two manuscripts have more in common with each other than either does with any other surviving Greek manuscript. The codices share in Acts a chapter division which is not found in other manuscripts. They share the plain headings for books, which are indicative of an early date. There are a number of similarities in style and even a close resemblance, in handwriting and the decorative flourishes used to sign off books. These indicate that one scribe (D) for Sinaiticus may have been the same individual as another (hand A) who worked on Vaticanus.

There is enough in these parallels to indicate that the codices were produced at around the same time and had at least one main exemplar (that is, source) in common. But did the two derive, at least for parts of the New Testament, from a single, proximate exemplar or was one codex in parts copied from the other?

This is a question that can be addressed by examining the format and pattern of errors in these two manuscripts. Codex Sinaiticus has a pattern of errors of omission, indicating exemplars with an average line length in the range of between 9 and 15 characters. It is likely that the scribes for Sinaiticus had a library of manuscripts available and did consult more than one exemplar, with average line lengths within this range.

But Codex Vaticanus, written in three columns, has an average of 17 characters per line. This has implications for errors in any manuscript which may have been copied from it. Where one or more lines of text have been accidentally skipped, this should amount to about 17 characters of text for one line and multiples of 17 characters for more than one line.

Although there are over 150 such skip errors in the New Testament of Codex Sinaiticus, these do not appear as multiples of 17 characters. This in turn indicates that Codex Vaticanus could not have been the source. There is further confirmation in that the omitted text should furthermore appear as full lines in any source, with the replicated characters (which initiated the skip) at the end or beginning of lines. There is in fact no such correspondence and this further confirms that Vaticanus was not an exemplar for Codex Sinaiticus.

If the matter is looked at the other way round, then a very different picture emerges. There are relatively few skip errors in Codex Vaticanus, indicating that it was being prepared as a copy, where time was not the main consideration and presentation by contrast more important. With slow and studied progress there would have been, and indeed were, fewer such errors. On

examination of a facsimile copy, I found just 14 possible skip errors in the New Testament and 11 in the parts of the Old Testament covered by both manuscripts.

There are five such errors in Isaiah, all of which are in multiples of 17 – 18 characters, suggesting that the Vaticanus scribes used an exemplar for this book that had the same column width as Vaticanus itself. So, as would be expected, there is no correspondence with the Sinaiticus text. In another Old Testament book Tobit, it can be seen that the scribes were using a different Greek version so that, for the one identified skip error here, there is also no match.

For the remaining nineteen examples, there is however an extraordinary level of correspondence that could not have happened by chance. The errors for the most part fit precisely as whole lines of Sinaiticus text. It is possible to see where, at the end or beginning of a line, the eye of the Vaticanus scribe skipped ahead to the same characters a line or so later, in the process missing out on one or more lines. A detailed examination of these errors and their correspondence with the text of Codex Sinaiticus can be found in chapter five of *The Invention of Jesus*.

In the minority of cases, which are not explained in this way, it is possible in each case to see what may have happened. One instance indicates that the Vaticanus scribe, in registering a correction by the scriptorium corrector Ca, was deflected into skipping a portion of text.

This itself is interesting, in that the corrections made by Ca (the first corrector of Codex Sinaiticus since he or she makes no changes to any of the other correctors) are routinely followed by the scribes of Codex Vaticanus. This is even where Ca has generated a novel version in blending copy from more than one exemplar. So, here is another reason why Vaticanus used Sinaiticus as a source and not vice versa.

Two of the skip errors in the New Testament (at Matthew 15, 5-6 and Mark 7, 11-13) appear as respectively one and three whole line skips in Codex Sinaiticus which, uncharacteristically, Ca failed to identify and correct. The Vaticanus scribe then also failed to notice these mistakes and replicated the Sinaiticus text.

The best overall explanation is that the Vaticanus scribes had available Codex Sinaiticus and were, for parts of the New Testament, copying from it. They were therefore likely to have been working in the library and scriptorium in which Codex Sinaiticus was housed. Since the manuscripts also closely resemble in each other in style and in the processes of production, these would have been produced at around the same time. It is therefore also a reasonable presumption that the Vaticanus scribes had access to still-existing exemplars used by the Sinaiticus scribes. So, they could at points have been able to check against both these and the manuscript (Sinaiticus) which was copied from them.

Codex Sinaiticus was, I suggest, used as a master copy in the production of Codex Vaticanus and for other copies of books of the Old and particularly the New Testament. It would have been used for direct transcription into Greek and possibly for translation into Latin, for copies which predate the Vulgate produced later by Jerome and other writers in the fifth century.

Having, in the form of Codex Sinaiticus and preserved from the mid fourth century, a master copy is a game changer for understanding the practicalities and policies of the production and transmission of Christian texts and doctrine. It might be argued that its survival, as compared say with any one of many texts copied from it, was unlikely and thus a lucky circumstance.

As against this, it is the case that the other bibles produced for everyday use would have worn out much sooner through wear and tear. Furthermore, there would have been little value in preserving a very badly damaged bible, when it could be substituted by a new copy. A master copy was, however, needed for continuing reference and was not something that could easily be replaced. So, the codex was as far as possible preserved from damage and retained.

Over a period of centuries, copies based on the Latin Vulgate became more popular and there was in consequence less need for master copies such as Sinaiticus. As a very ancient bible, the codex – housed as it was at St Catherine’s monastery – came instead to have the status of a religious relic. So, it was then kept for that reason, until it came to the attention of a German textual adventurer, Constantin Tischendorf. From that point, its importance was once again fully recognised and its survival was assured.

We have travelled back to the time when a master copy of the Greek bible was produced and that followed that great work of reference through to the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Now, we are returning once again to the work of the scribes on Codex Sinaiticus. Their input should tell us something of how they went about their work, the constraints under which they operated and the impact of the decisions they made upon the text.

We are now looking over the shoulder of a Christian scribe, working at a wooden bench in a draughty scriptorium, around CE 350, quite likely somewhere in Caesarea.