

The Oldest Surviving Manuscript of the Bible

It may seem strange, if not simply plain wrong, to be reviewing the oldest nearly complete bible manuscript in existence. Unsurprisingly, this review will avoid making any comments on the actual content of the text. Instead it will focus on the facsimile as an object in its own right. While some may think this to be an expensive book, if one considers the quality of production, the 822 colour plates, the accessibility to the text, and the scale of this tome, then probably this is actually one of the best value for money volumes that can be purchased. In fact when one compares the cost of the facsimile of Codex Vaticanus published in 2000, which is currently listed at US \$6750, it can be seen that this facsimile is less than one-eighth of the price. Moreover, the 822 superb colour photographic quality plates provide the highest level of reproduction of the original. In terms of serving as a teaching aid, a reference manuscript, or even an item for display to illustrate the transmission of the biblical text, there can be few more spectacular books available to the mass market.

This print version supplements the online images of the text (<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org>). The website has many electronic features that are not available in the print version. For instance, the display window opens up three panes. The first has a photographic image of the selected page of the manuscript on the left-hand side, on the top right there is a transcription of the Greek text, and on the lower right there is a translation available in either Russian, Modern Greek, German, or English. The various panes can be removed to allow more space to display the photographic images, or whichever display option is chosen. Moreover, it is possible to zoom-in on the manuscript photographs. This is an excellent feature for teaching purposes. This may leave one wondering where the 'value' is to be had in purchasing the facsimile, given the superlative features of the online images. Firstly, the online images do not allow for a display of a full manuscript page at anything like its full size. Admittedly, even the images in the facsimile have been slightly reduced. The reference guide explains:

The images, taken according to agreed technical standards, were processed to represent faithfully the actual appearance of the pages and were minimally reduced in size by approximately 5%. This reduction was essential to bring the pages down to the maximum size which could be bound by machine. The processing of the images required sensitive adjustments, since the appearance of the parchment and ink varied somewhat between the leaves at the four libraries, owing to many factors, including the difference of the absorption of ink on the 'flesh side' and the 'hair side' of the animal skin . (p. 4)

Notwithstanding this slight reduction in size, the print version gives a real sense of the size of the parchment pages. The second advantage also relates to size. The reproduction of the entire surviving leaves of the Codex in a physical form also provides an unrivalled sense of the overall dimensions of the original, and the reason why so few complete bibles were prepared as single books prior to the advent of printing.

The Reference Guide that accompanies the volume is a very handy introduction to the beautiful facsimile. As is observed, the significance of Codex Sinaiticus is not as an object of veneration, rather it reveals much about 'the reconstruction of the Christian Bible's original text, the history of the Bible and the history of Western book-making' (p. 3). Important introductory details are noted. In terms of the development of book technology, whereas rolls made from papyrus or animal skin were normative in the Graeco-Roman world, and the papyrus codex had become a distinctive feature of early Christian culture, Codex Sinaiticus marked a new departure.

The pages of Codex Sinaiticus however are of prepared animal skin called parchment. This marks it out as standing at an important transition in book history. Before it we see many examples of Greek and Latin texts on papyrus roll or papyrus codex, but almost no traces of parchment codices. After it, the parchment codex becomes normative. (p. 3)

Readers are told that the Codex is now housed in multiple locations: '347 leaves are held at the British Library, a further 43 leaves are kept at the University Library in Leipzig, parts of four leaves are kept at the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg and further portions remain at Saint Catherine's Monastery.' Here then is another advantage of the facsimile, namely bringing the images of pages from these various locations together to be readily consulted in a single reference work.

Published alongside the facsimile, is the superb volume written by David Parker that communicates the story of Codex Sinaiticus and the project that resulted in the production of the facsimile and the development of the technologically innovative website. Parker's book is much more than a retelling of the history of Codex Sinaiticus. As a master scholar of textual criticism and codicology, he unpacks the relevance of this gargantuan manuscript as part of the fascinating task of understanding the development of book-making and the ongoing quest to study the text of the bible. Arranged over twelve

chapters and lavishly illustrated, Parker presents a highly readable yet also intellectually sophisticated appreciation of this fourth century textual masterpiece. In the first chapter the history of the manuscript is described. The process of correcting the manuscript from the time of its creation till around the year 600 is outlined in a section dealing with the use of the Codex in antiquity (p. 3). The next chapter provides a more generalized overview of Christian books in the time of Constantine, particularly highlighting the emperor's commission to Eusebius to produce fifty copies of the scriptures for use in churches in Constantinople (p. 19). Chapter three discusses some of the decisions which may have led to the selection of texts included in Codex Sinaiticus - including the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas after the book of Revelation.

After considering details of the selection process, Parker spends the next three chapters outlining what can be known about the actual production process. Tischendorf's 'romantic notion that the parchment might be antelope hide' (p. 44) is rejected with the benefit of scientific analysis. Parker states that 'examination of the entry point of the hair into the skin reveals that some sheets are cattle hide and some are sheep skin' (p. 44). It is estimated that the cost of producing the manuscript would have been equivalent to the price of about five tons of wheat, or slightly less than the annual income of a priest or deacon. Yet Parker provides far more than fascinating snippets. Issues surrounding scribal habits are described in detail in chapter five, and in the sixth chapter the work of the various correctors. It may at first glance seem staggering to the casual reader to learn that there are approximately '27,305 places where the text has been altered' (p. 79). Three broad reasons for corrections are noted: to correct mistakes made by the scribe; to change the presentation; and, to change the text to make it conform to a different text (p. 86). The seventh chapter discusses major text-critical issues that revolve around discussing the type of texts to which it bears witness. As Parker highlights, it is necessary to speak of texts in the plural because Codex Sinaiticus contains Greek texts of much of the Old Testament, including writings that are often designated as part of the Apocrypha, as well as the earliest complete collection of New Testament writings, and two other early Christian writings. Each of the texts that make up this Codex has a different textual history, which prevents one from resorting to broad generalizations. Here some of the principles of New Testament textual criticism are introduced to non-specialist readers using the data in Sinaiticus to provide examples. In particular the absence of both the longer ending of Mark's Gospel (Mk 16.9-20) and the story of the woman taken in adultery is noted.

Chapters eight to twelve cover the later history of this Codex. Annotations found written within the Codex are documented, as well as possible sightings of the manuscript in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. In chapter nine, the now famous (or infamous) story of Constantin von Tischendorf's 'discovery' is recounted. The account that Tischendorf rescued the manuscript just before it was about to be burnt is deconstructed (pp. 128-131). The story of the 'transfer' of Codex Sinaiticus into Russian hands is presented as being due to discussion surrounding the withdrawal of financial support from St Catherine's monastery. Next, the modern stage of the story is traced, with an account of the purchase of the Codex by the British Library in 1933 for the sum of £100,000, which at the time 'made it by a long way the most expensive book in the world' (p. 157). The final chapter relates the story of the presentation of digital web-based images (pp. 167-184).

Codex Sinaiticus, one of the most ancient of the extensive biblical manuscripts, is now available in the most modern and technologically advanced of formats. The website allows access to a huge range of extra digital features. The facsimile is not just a physical monument to this great fourth century manuscript; moreover, it is a significant research tool in its own right. Parker's introduction, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World's Oldest Bible*, makes the story of this astounding Codex more accessible, but more than this it also updates that story in light of recent developments and the latest scholarship. Whereas the original Codex Sinaiticus cost something in the vicinity of the annual wage of a priest, this splendid facsimile costs less than the weekly wage of most workers. Nearly seventeen centuries on from its original production, Codex Sinaiticus is no less magnificent, no less splendid, no less breath taking. It is amazing that this beautiful facsimile reproduction can be part of even a private library. Many thanks go to David Parker and the entire team of scholars and technicians involved in the Codex Sinaiticus Project. The life of this great book is guaranteed for many centuries to come.

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