

Manuscripts: how the letters were preserved

What can manuscripts tell us about Paul's letters?

Surviving manuscripts preserve the letters through copies made after their composition. Comparing those witnesses helps scholars evaluate textual differences. A manuscript's age, a letter's authorship, and the historical truth of an event described in it are related but distinct questions.

A witness has its own date

Papyrus 46 is an important early collection of Pauline writings, conventionally dated around AD 200, with the dating expressed as a range rather than an exact copying year. Its survival witnesses to the transmission of letters written earlier; it is not Paul's original manuscript. A gallery should distinguish the date of the physical copy from the proposed first-century composition date of its contents.

Biblical references: Romans 16:22

Sources: csntm-p46, letters

Why copies differ

Handwritten copies contain differences, called textual variants. Many concern spelling or small details; others affect meaning and require careful discussion. Textual criticism compares witnesses and considers both their relationships and how differences may have arisen. It is neither a vote in which the largest number automatically wins nor a license to choose a preferred wording. Modern textual notes make significant uncertainty visible to readers.

Biblical references: Ephesians 1:1

Sources: csntm-variants, letters

Ask the question the evidence can answer

A manuscript image can show a surviving reading, layout, correction, or physical feature. It cannot by itself establish who originally composed a disputed letter or verify every narrated event. Christians can affirm Scripture's authority while examining its transmission honestly. For teaching, link the repository record, describe the particular evidence, and check the image's reuse terms separately from the ancient text: access to a photograph does not automatically grant redistribution rights.

Biblical references: Colossians 4:16 · 1 Thessalonians 5:27

Sources: csntm-variants, letters

Sources

- [csntm-p46] Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, GA P46 (Ann Arbor): late second or early third century, approximately AD 200. https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/Group/GA_P46_Mich
- [letters] Romans through Philemon; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/>
- [csntm-variants] Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, “Manuscripts 101: What is a textual variant?” March 14, 2023. <https://www.csntm.org/2023/03/14/manuscripts-101-what-is-a-textual-variant/>

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