

Codex Sinaiticus

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Much mystery and misinformation seems to surround Codex Sinaiticus, but surely only by deliberately fostering confusion could this codex possibly be made a vehicle for an 'attack on Bible believers'. Given some basic and undisputable facts it is certain that there is no need at all for Bible believers to 'do some explaining'. In truth the very reverse is the case, for the codex is self-explanatory as to its own origin and pedigree, and with that information it certainly cannot disturb our faith in God's inspired and preserved Bible in any way at all.

Let us first look at the *recent* history of Codex Sinaiticus. In 1844 Constantine von Tischendorf found 129 loose leaves from a Septuagint Old Testament 'in a wastepaper basket' in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Here we might clear away one myth, for fundamentalist writers are fond of claiming that modern New Testament eclectic versions are based on two doubtful manuscripts, one ('B', Vaticanus) from the Pope's library and the other ('Aleph', Sinaiticus) from a monastery waste basket. As the textual disputes concern mainly the New Testament, we should note that the New Testament portion was never in the 'waste basket'. Of the 129 Septuagint Old Testament leaves Tischendorf was able to secure just 43, with the promise that the monks (now alerted to its value) would preserve the rest. This portion, after examination in the West, was given the title of 'Codex Frederico-Augustanus'. In 1853 Tischendorf returned to the monastery, only to discover that the remaining leaves had since been mislaid, and were assumed to have been destroyed. However, in a subsequent visit in 1859 Tischendorf returned, now armed with the authority of the Russian Emperor (protector of the Eastern Orthodox faith), and was shown, to his amazement, not only the missing portion of the Septuagint Old Testament, but a further 112 leaves of the Old Testament, with a complete New Testament, and the previously missing texts of 'The Shepherd of Hermas' and 'The Letter of Barnabas'. The entire codex (both testaments plus the apocryphal writings) was apparently produced at one time, although at least three major scribes shared the writing, and there was much later revision and alteration. All these portions were taken to the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg, where it was renamed as the 'Codex Sinaiticus' and given the reference letter 'Aleph'. In 1933 the then-Soviet government sold them to the British Library for £100,000.

Let us now back-track to the *early* history of Codex Sinaiticus. As the Codex was originally a complete (and more than complete) Bible, we need not restrict our consideration just to the New Testament (a practice which has produced much of the confusion and error). Turn to the Codex's own Old Testament and, lo and behold, at the end of the Book of Esther is a scribe's annotation, in a space provided for it, giving a precise and detailed statement of the origin of the Codex. There simply is no mystery here, all is self-explanatory! The note describes how the Codex was compared and collated with a previously 'very old' manuscript prepared under the authority of the martyr Bishop of Caesarea, Pamphilus (c. AD 240–309), and that his copy in turn had been corrected by a copy of Origen's 'Hexapla' which had been *corrected by Origen himself*. So Sinaiticus is self-confessed as an 'Origenic' manuscript — Origen's Septuagint-Hexapla version, exactly copied for Origen's disciple Pamphilus, and again exactly copied to produce Sinaiticus. And so Origen of Alexandria is expressly stated as the real author of Codex Sinaiticus.

What, then, can we say about Origen? Origen (c. 185–254) of Alexandria, later Caesarea, was a prolific theological writer. His major surviving work *De Principiis* makes Christ subordinate to the Father (a teaching which would later be called semi-Arianism), whilst he teaches the ultimate salvation of all men and even devils (apocatastasis). Origen's theology was condemned as heretical by a Church Council at Alexandria in AD 400. And what was his view of the Bible? 'Scripture contains many things not true, but actually impossible and absurd' (*De Principiis*, IV, 3.4). Origen became the leader of the Alexandrian allegorical school, which denied the literal sense of much of the Bible, and proposed a hidden and mystical 'true sense' available only to advanced disciples (the *disciplina arcani*). Finding discrepancies in the Scripture copies he collated for his 'Hexapla' he indulged in conjectural emendation to such a degree that Dean Burgon could comment that 'the mischief done by Origen is not to be told'.¹ Add semi-Arian views on Christ's divinity and the Trinity, and redemptionist views on the resurrection, heaven and hell, and an Origenic codex is, by definition, unorthodox if not heretical. These facts explain, of course, why, being recognised as such by the orthodox, this Codex was shelved, mistrusted, disused — and thus happened to survive whilst its orthodox betters came and went with use. Where, we ask, is the mystery in all this? What is to explain, when Sinaiticus proudly proclaims its own origins and predictably errs just where we would expect it to? That there were corrupted copies of the Scriptures in the early Church, and that the orthodox knew which these were is a well known fact. Why should the accidental survival of one such Codex 'unsettle' anything?

A final word is needed on the 'Epistle of Baranabas'. This early church document was known only by name until a copy was found written by the same scribes as the Codex Sinaiticus. As Pamphilus collected early Christian writings for his once-famous library at Caesarea he naturally had his scribes copy 'Barnabas' as well as the 'Shepherd' along with the Septuagint and New Testament revisions by his master Origen. In no way does this hint that these works were ever part of the Biblical Canon — before or after Origen, Pamphilus — or the Sinai Codex!

1. John Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, 'Westcott and Hort's New Textual Theory' (London, England: J. Murray, 1885), p. 292.