

The Forging of Codex Sinaiticus



**An illustrated consideration of the anomalies and
the many indicators of 19th-century forgery
contained in the manuscript**

by
Bill Cooper

This is for
Kevin Tuck
as a very small thank you for all his unstinting labours
Thank you, Kevin!

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ISBN: 978-0-9931415-6-0

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Acknowledgements

My heartiest thanks must go to Dr James J Scofield Johnson, Chief Academic Officer of the Institute for Creation Research School of Biblical Apologetics, my tutor and mentor in so many subjects. His expertise in Hebrew, Greek and Biblical Exegesis is invaluable, and is always freely at my disposal. My thanks also to Dr Gene Jeffries of Liberty University, whose past kindnesses, under the Lord, have made so much possible; to my good friend Dr Johnny Sanders of Downsville, Louisiana; to Leon Davey for his input; and last but by no means least, to Dr David and Joan Rosevear. Thank you all.

Cover illustration and Text composition

Text composition by K. Tuck. Cover designs by K. Tuck and L. Davey. The images on the front cover is of Constantine Simonides, and the Codex Sinaiticus book of Esther.

When at the first I took my pen in hand,
Thus for to write, I did not understand
That I at all should make a little book
In such a mode; nay, I had undertook
To make another, which, when almost done,
Before I was aware, I *this* begun!

John Bunyan, 1679

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Introduction

Next only to the King James Bible, Codex Sinaiticus is by now perhaps the most famous (many would say infamous) book in the world. Its impact when it surfaced in the mid 19th century was immediate, and even today is powerfully felt in the world of Bible scholarship. That is because it is pretended to represent a version of our Bible which is quite unlike the Received Text, and is trumpeted abroad as representing the original text of the Bible before the Protestant church and its bishops got their political hands on it, changing it into the Bible that we know today. It is also wrongly claimed to be the oldest and the best manuscript of the Bible, representing a text to which all others – especially the Received Text – are to be referred. In other words, whenever Sinaiticus differs from the Received Text – which is shockingly often – then its readings are to be held superior to all others and preferred before them all. The impact of this upon Christian doctrine, and especially upon the question of the Bible's integrity and Authority, has been immense, and it continues to shipwreck the faith of millions.

So, where did this strange book come from? Who wrote it, and why? Under what circumstances did they write it? These are all questions which we hope to answer in this examination of the subject. Until very recently, the task had been insurmountable. The codex is split up into four segments, one of them residing in the British Library; another at Leipzig University; a third in Russia; and a fourth which has recently come to light, is claimed to be part of the codex, and is held at the St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert. Thus, it was nigh impossible for any single scholar to assess the manuscript as a whole, assuming that he or she would ever be allowed to come within even a mile of it. However, a precise facsimile of all four segments has been published recently in a single volume, and it is this facsimile – famous for its exact and microscopically faithful replication of each of the manuscript's 700 or so pages – that we shall use in our study. This facsimile is a mine of information, highlighting anomalies that reveal time and again but one startling fact: Codex Sinaiticus is not what it is pretended to be. It is not the original and most ancient Biblical text at all. It is, in fact, a book of 19th-century composition and manufacture written out on ancient unused parchment. This will be demonstrated as we proceed.

As we proceed, we shall encounter the many evidences that a page-by-page examination reveals concerning the heavy, and not always competent,

tampering which the manuscript's pages and text have suffered - tampering that only a forger would attempt. Some of the attempts are hopelessly bungled to the extent that one wonders if they were deliberately made so in the hope that their falsity would become clear to all. Others, like the hideous scrawl which overwrites the Book of Isaiah, seem born of a hatred and contempt for the Scriptures which clearly tormented the man responsible. It is not a scholarly overwriting at all, but an act of sheer vandalism. But those who 'worked' on the manuscript were not always so incompetent. Some of them were more subtle and able to deceive the inattentive eye. But even their efforts are clearly exposed in this study. It falls to us merely to make them known.

What the reader will wish to conclude from it all is something that we have no control over. Some will dismiss the evidence out of hand, whilst others will welcome it with open arms. Yet others will wonder what the point of it all is. Our part is merely to report the facts and demonstrate them as we go along. In doing so, it might also be useful to consider the man, Constantine Simonides, who laid claim to having written out Codex Sinaiticus in the 1830s and '40s, and to listen to the story that he has to tell. The interesting thing is that much of it can be verified, especially on a forensic level, whereas his opponent's claims are seen – and widely known even by his admirers - to be less than honest. And then there's the deliberate tampering with Simonides' manuscript after he wrote it out. What are we to make of that?

To cut a very long story short, in the 1830s Simonides was commissioned by an official of the Greek Orthodox Church to write a likeness of an ancient copy of the Bible which was supposed to be a gift for the then Tsar of Russia. It was meant to be a 'thank you' present for the many rich kindnesses that the Tsar had bestowed on the church. Simonides, taken in by the lie, duly fulfilled his commission, writing the book out at the Mount Athos monastery, and had supposed the book (which he referred to as Codex Simonides) to have been on its way to the Tsar when he later came across it, much altered and aged, whilst visiting St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert. He was profoundly disturbed at the evasive answers that he was given when he asked how the codex came to be at Sinai, and was even more disturbed when he found it later being published and broadcast as a genuine and ancient copy of the Scriptures. He immediately went public about his own authorship of the manuscript, though to no avail of course. The world was eagerly swallowing the lies that were being told about his book, now renamed Codex Sinaiticus, whilst he himself was being denounced as a hopeless fraud. What follows in this present study is an examination of the tampering and forgery of the codex of which Simonides so

bitterly complained. What emerges from the study of these details is profoundly disturbing. Simonides, it seems, was telling the truth.

Bill Cooper

Chapter One: Tales of Tischendorf

“That master and pupil of all guile, and all wickedness, the German Tischendorf....”

Kallinikos Hieromonachos. Alexandria. 9th November 1861.



Fig. 1: Constantine von Tischendorf, ca 1870. Image in the public domain.

We all know the story of Tischendorf finding a portion of Codex Sinaiticus in a wastepaper basket at the St Catherine's monastery in the desert of Sinai. It has been told by others often enough. However, here is Tischendorf's own account of the event:

“In visiting the library of the monastery, in the month of May, 1844, I perceived in the middle of the great hall a wide basket full of old parchments, and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that two heaps of papers like these, mouldered by time, had been already committed to the flames. What was my surprise to find amid this heap of papers a considerable number of sheets of a copy of the Old Testament in Greek, which seemed to me to be the most ancient that I had ever seen. The authorities of the convent allowed me to possess myself of a third of these parchments, or about forty-three sheets, all the more readily as they were destined for the fire. But I could not get them to yield up possession of the remainder. The too

lively satisfaction I had displayed, had aroused their suspicions as to the value of their manuscript.”¹

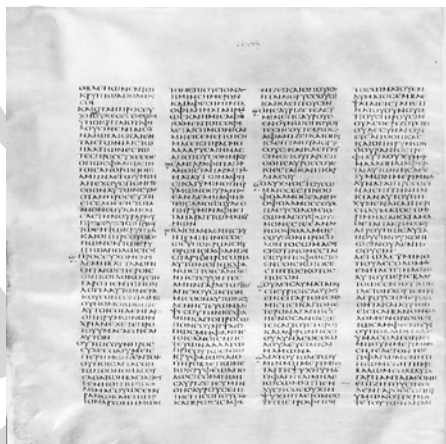


Fig. 2: Codex Sinaiticus, Matthew 6: 3-42. Image in the public domain.

The interesting thing is that even among his supporters, this story is hardly believed.² That is because there are several things wrong with it. Tischendorf says that the leaves he found were lying in a wastepaper basket waiting to be used as kindling, and that he had heroically rescued them just as they were about to be burned. What he didn't know, however, is that vellum makes extremely poor kindling and would virtually never be used for that purpose. It is very difficult indeed to make it take flame, and it is far more likely to smoulder and fill the room with acrid smoke than make a fire. To be brief, his story is nonsense. The monks of St Catherine's were no more given to burning their ancient manuscripts than anyone else would be – even if vellum *could* easily burn. Indeed, their library, which is stuffed to the rafters with ancient and lovingly cherished manuscripts, speaks eloquently against such a notion, and they were not so ignorant of their manuscripts' value as Tischendorf so contemptuously alleges.

Tischendorf invented the tale in order to present himself to the world as the discoverer of the 'original' Bible, something he had dreamed of becoming over many years. He detested the Received Text (the *Textus Receptus*) on which all the Reformation Bibles of Europe were based, and he made it his mission in life to replace it with another:

“But we have at last hit upon a better plan even than this, which is to set aside this *textus receptus* (sic) altogether, and to construct a fresh text, derived immediately from the most ancient and authoritative sources.”³

But who is this ‘we’? And what’s all this about a ‘plan’? Tischendorf’s contempt for the *Textus Receptus* was no secret. He had uttered it in public often enough; so often and so loudly in fact that it had aroused the interest of the papacy in Rome, and soon the Vatican would be summoning him to a private audience with the pope in order to see to it that his wish was fulfilled:

“The desire which I felt to discover some precious remains of any manuscripts, more especially Biblical, of a date which would carry us back to the early times of Christianity, was realised beyond my expectations.”⁴

The bait with which he was hooked was the papal permission to view Codex Vaticanus, the first time any non-Catholic had been allowed anywhere near it. Like Sinaiticus, this was a mutilated and horrendously distorted ‘version’ of the Bible of Alexandrian provenance which it was hoped would eventually topple the Received Text from its Reformation pedestal, a long cherished ambition of the papacy and its Jesuits – as well as of Tischendorf himself of course. And like Sinaiticus, its origins and ‘authenticity’ are highly suspect.

Equally suspect is the glaring question of who funded his quest. In his own account of the matter, Tischendorf boasts that in 1840 he set out on what was a blind quest with nothing more to his name than some unpaid bills (changing this later to \$50). Yet he also tells us that his expenses (travel and hotels) came to \$5,000. That was no insignificant sum in the 1840s, and he would have us believe that he was reimbursed for his outlay – though not until his return - by the Saxony Government and Leipzig University on his presenting to each of those bodies a collection of manuscripts which he had picked up on his travels, fifty of which he gave to the university library and an untold number to the government. We are being asked to believe, in other words, that he was able to rack up a \$5,000 travel and accommodation bill over five years through several countries on unsecured credit and as a penniless itinerant to boot, whilst picking up two large and valuable collections of ancient manuscripts on the way?⁵

How, as a penniless itinerant, he was able to purchase these ancient manuscripts he does not say, unless we are to assume that he stole them, but he

does try to intimate elsewhere that he funded himself by doing ‘favours’ and ‘services’ for people he met on the way. But it just doesn’t ring true. Unless he knew the languages of every country he travelled through, then he’d have a very hard time indeed serving anyone. And even then, his ‘services’ would have to have been such that they would earn him colossal sums of money with which to keep himself in travel and hotel accommodation over several years through several countries, and have enough left over to purchase not one but *two* large collections of ancient manuscripts, one of which he gave to his university, and the other to the government of Saxony. But then, sensing the danger of raising too many questions in his readers’ minds, he immediately changes the subject by telling his readers that they would much rather hear about his journeys and discoveries, promising them later “clues” about how he paid for things in the narrative. But these promised “clues” are microscopic and are very few and far between.

One such clue, though, is most telling in what it does not tell, and that is this:

“However, I soon found men in Paris who were interested in my undertaking.”⁶

Where in Paris he found them he does not say; nor does he say who they were. But they clearly had large disposable funds at their command, sufficient funds at any rate to bestow upon a stranger who told them that he was on a quest. And this quest was not a short one. It was to take in a two year stay in Paris, exploring its many libraries. Then several journeys into England and Holland. Then Switzerland; the south of France; Italy, where he explored the libraries of Florence, Venice, Modena, Milan, Verona and Turin. Then, in April of 1844, he went into Egypt, and thence to the monasteries of Libya, Mount Sinai, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, St Saba on the Dead Sea, Nazareth, Smyrna, Patmos, Beirut, Constantinople and Athens. And these were only his ‘principal’ journeys. Then, whilst returning to Leipzig, he still had sufficient funds to call in on Vienna and Munich, arriving home in January 1845.

In all, his quest had lasted five years, he having set out from Leipzig, with the delicious irony which he savours that his departure was on the “very day of the Feast of the Reformation.”⁷ - that same Reformation which he had long hoped to overturn. The libraries that he visited were not public libraries which anyone in the street could simply walk into. For most of them he would need, in several languages, letters of introduction, commendation and tickets. Who supplied them? Who gained him admission to the numerous monasteries which

he claims to have visited and worked in? You certainly can't just knock on the door, announce yourself as a Protestant scholar, enter such places and demand to examine their libraries, especially without making them a commensurate 'gift' of some sort and presenting excellent credentials. And you can't just walk away with their manuscripts either.

The short answer to it all, as we shall presently see, is that the Vatican, through the Jesuits, funded his journeys in order to funnel him towards the 'discovery' which they intended him to make after his papal audience. It is they who supplied him with money, travel arrangements, accommodations, letters, and anything else that he might need for the 'quest' to be successful, as well as the necessarily fat purse with which to make his purchases of so many ancient manuscripts.⁸ Tischendorf is painfully reticent about discussing any of these details, hoping no doubt that his readers would be more taken with his exciting 'discoveries' than to ever wonder about such things as finance, accommodation and commendation.

Even his acquisition of the codex was attained by fraudulent means. Removing the leaves from the monastery, he had clearly no intention of returning them in spite of his solemn promise to do so. The following signed document from him tells us about that promise:

"I, the undersigned, Constantin von Tischendorf, now on mission to the Levant upon the command of Alexander, Autocrat of All the Russias, attest by these presents that the Holy Confraternity of Mount Sinai, in accordance with the letter of His Excellency Ambassador Lobanov, has delivered to me *as a loan* an ancient manuscript of both Testaments, being the property of the aforesaid monastery and containing 346 folia and a small fragment. These I shall take with me to St. Petersburg in order that I may collate the copy previously made by me with the original at the time of publication of the manuscript. The manuscript has been entrusted to me under the conditions stipulated in the aforementioned letter of Mr. Lobanov, dated September 10, 1859, Number 510. This manuscript *I promise to return* undamaged and in a good state of preservation, to the Holy Confraternity of Sinai at its earliest request. [italics added]

Constantin von Tischendorf Cairo, September 16/28, 1859"⁹

That they were never returned is a simple fact of history. But Tischendorf's account contains other revealing flaws in his character which made him the

perfect willing tool of the Vatican. One of them was his colossal vanity. He could not resist quoting the editor of a certain German publication in order to impress his readers:

“I venture to say that no address has ever stirred our hearts like that short one of M. Tischendorf. As a critic he is here on ground on which he has no rival. When history [i.e. Tischendorf] speaks, it is the duty of philosophy to be silent.”¹⁰

Later he adds:

“I had just completed at the time a work which had been very favourably received in Europe, and for which I had received marks of approval from several learned bodies, and even from crowned heads.”¹¹

The footnote to this self-praise tells us:

“M. Tischendorf, then 27 years of age, received from a German University the degree of Doctor of Divinity just as a Swiss University was about to confer it. Three foreign governments decorated him. Others sent him gold medals. The Dutch Government caused one to be engraved expressly in recognition of this work.”¹²

The work for which he received such accolades was an edition of a Greek ‘New Testament’ based, not on any Greek manuscript, but on the Latin Vulgate Bible.¹³ It was merely a rendering into Greek of Jerome’s erroneous Alexandrian-based ‘translation’, expressly intended to advance the Vatican’s cause of overthrowing or replacing the Textus Receptus.

One wonders at the readiness with which ‘foreign governments’ got to hear of this edition, and the astonishing readiness with which they poured honours and medals upon Tischendorf for producing it. Governments are not usually so hungry for the Word of God that they spend their time looking for such opportunity, so what was going on here? The 1840s, like every decade that had gone before, was not renowned for its ease of communication, yet there was (and still remains) one body politic which was able to pull strings simultaneously in many of the nations of Europe, strings which were then as now attached to their several monarchs and heads of state. In short, it is clear that these bodies had received their instructions to commend and honour one

Constantine Tischendorf, a young and hitherto unknown scholar of whom they had never heard, and who would otherwise have remained entirely unknown to them. But they obeyed the instruction and accordingly awarded the honours. We may wonder what body-politic of that time could exercise such power?

Later in his book, Tischendorf tells us this:

“A learned Englishman, one of my friends, had been sent into the East by his Government to discover and purchase old Greek manuscripts, and spared no cost in obtaining them.....but I heard that he had not succeeded in acquiring anything, and had not even gone so far as Sinai; “for,” as he said in his official report, “after the visit of such an antiquarian and critic as Dr. Tischendorf, I could not expect any success.”¹⁴

Tischendorf fails to mention by what strange chance he was able to pry into official British government reports from which he could lift this fortuitous quote, but this is rounded off by the following:

“It is only a few months ago that the two most celebrated Universities of England, Cambridge and Oxford, desired to show me honour by conferring on me their highest academic degree. ‘I would rather,’ said an old man – himself of the highest distinction for learning – ‘I would rather have discovered this Sinaitic manuscript than the Koh-i-noor [diamond] of the Queen of England.’”¹⁵

Such an enlarged ego as this needs feeding, and the Vatican knew exactly how to satisfy its appetite. How did they do that? Tischendorf himself tells us how:

“I had been commended in the most earnest manner by Guizot to the French Ambassador, Count Latour Maubourg; I was also favored with many letters of introduction from Prince John of Saxony to his personal friends of high rank; and in addition with a very flattering note from the Archbishop Affre, of Paris, directed to Gregory XVI. The latter, after a prolonged audience granted to me, took an ardent interest in my undertaking; Cardinal Mai received me with kind recognition; [and] Cardinal Mezzofanti honored me with some Greek verses composed in my praise...”¹⁶



Fig. 3: Cardinal Mezzofanti.
Image in the public domain.

In fairness to Tischendorf, there are very few men on this good earth, especially amongst scholars with tender egos and great ambitions, who could have snubbed such concerted and high-powered advances as these. He was clearly being set up for the task ahead of him on a Wagnerian level, and the poor man just could not see it. But why should he? Did he never ask himself, I wonder, why all this was happening to him? Perhaps, but the praises were louder than such misgivings could ever be, and the Vatican knew exactly what it was doing.

Mezzofanti had been educated by the Jesuits, and he had risen under Gregory XVI to become the Custodian-in-Chief of the Vatican Library.¹⁷ Through the Jesuits, who had been set up in the 16th century expressly for the purpose of overturning the Reformation, the Vatican had tried unsuccessfully for three hundred years to overthrow the Reformation Bible. That Bible had been translated into many languages from the Received Text of the Greek New Testament – the *Textus Receptus*. The closest they ever came to dislodging this Bible was with the printing of the Douay-Rheims Bible of 1610, translated out of Jerome's Latin Vulgate. But alas for the enterprise, though its English loosely mimicked that of William Tyndale's New Testament, it was based on a very faulty translation - the Latin Vulgate - and it showed. This Jesuit version simply did not, as they say, 'cut it'. So the next two centuries were spent finding another way. And when it came, the Jesuits were ready.

Footnotes to Chapter One

1. Tischendorf. *When Were Our Gospels Written?* 1867. pp. 23-24. This is translated from the German edition, *Wann wurden unsere Euangelien uerfasst?* It was also published in English under the title, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Ancient Biblical Manuscript now in the British Museum* (see Bibliography).
2. Shanks, Hershel. 'Who Owns The Codex Sinaiticus?' *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Vol 30. No. 6. November/December, 2007. pp. 32-43. The British Library's Codex Sinaiticus website shrewdly avoids all discussion of Tischendorf's claims, just as it does any claims of ownership.
3. Tischendorf. *When Were Our Gospels Written?* 1867. p. 17.
4. Ibid., p. 23.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. Ibid. p. 13.
7. Ibid.
8. There were considerably more than fifty in fact. Tischendorf goes on to tell us, "I handed up to the Saxon Government my rich collection of oriental manuscripts." Ibid., p. 24. His gift of fifty manuscripts to the library of Leipzig University was clearly separate from those which he donated to the government. Even in those days, unless he is a thief, no man could possibly acquire such collections without massive funding. So where did that funding come from? And then, of course, there is Codex Sinaiticus....
9. Cit. by Shanks, Hershel. 'Who Owns The Codex Sinaiticus?' *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Vol 30. No. 6. November/December, 2007. pp. 32-43.
10. Tischendorf. *When Were Our Gospels Written?* 1867. p. 10, citing *Allgemeine Kirchenzeitung*, 3rd July (1865?).
11. Ibid., pp. 20-21.
12. Ibid.
13. See his *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 1894. 3 vols.(reprinted 2013). Cambridge University Press.
14. Tischendorf. *When Were Our Gospels Written?* 1867. p. 28.
15. Ibid., p. 36. Chris Pinto's DVD - *Tares Among The Wheat*. Adullam Films – has often been criticised for its portrayal of Tischendorf as a vain glory-seeker courting and soaking up the world's adulation. Yet Tischendorf's own words tell us that Pinto's portrayal is entirely accurate.
16. Merrill, George. *The Parchments of the Faith*. 1894. Philadelphia. p. 176, citing Tischendorf's own article in *Leipziger Zeitung* for 31st May 1866.

Displaying his colossal vanity, Tischendorf even adorns the title page of his *Novum Testamentum Vaticanum* with a list of all his various honours. It takes up eight lines of small close type. It was this weakness for honours and admiration of his that the Vatican was able to exploit to the full.

17. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10270b.htm> (website of the Catholic Encyclopaedia).