

# The Monastery on Mount Sinai – St. Catherine's

If you happened to find yourself vacationing in Cairo, you might decide to take a sight-seeing tour. First you could cross the famous Red sea of Biblical fame. Then you could hire a camel at some romantic small town market and trek out into the vast Arabian desert – a lone western tourist seeking adventure. Then you would quickly get lost and no one would ever see you again.

But... if you happened to enlist the aid of some trusty bedouin guides and took with you ample supplies and an awful lot of water, then you just might make it (after several long, hot days) to the huge Raha desert plain. You would be able to see a mountain range at the southern side – the traditional site of Mount Sinai. Then, after traversing the barren, desert plain for a few more long, hot days you would finally see in the distance the eighty foot high walls of a majestic fortress. Approaching, you'd make out the tall, cross-topped spire of a Christian church and the minaret-topped tower of a Muslim Mosque within the fortress walls.

Directly behind the massive structure looms the stark northern face of Mount Sinai. You have arrived at St. Catherine's – the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world.

Before any structure existed in this remote region, hermit monks began to dwell in the caves on the sides of the great mountain in self exile from the evils of the world. Then, in **330** C.E. a small church and tower were erected at the supposed sight of the 'burning bush' at the request of Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. She dedicated the church to the Virgin Mary. Two centuries later during the reign of Justinian, the emperor had the monastery with its fortress-like walls constructed in memory of his wife Theodora, who died of cancer in **548** C.E. The monastery was simply referred to as the monastery of Mount Sinai, until it was dedicated to its namesake, St. Catherine, in the ninth century.

St. Catherine was not always a saint. Before her death, she was Princess Catherine and she lived in Alexandria. She was a devote Christian – which is a good thing if you plan on being a saint. She gained the attention of the Emperor Maximian by attacking him for his paganism – which is not a good thing if you plan on staying alive. To give the emperor credit, he could have just had her killed outright for daring to attack his religious beliefs – but he didn't do that. Instead, he sent fifty learned men to convert Catherine to Paganism. To his dismay, she converted all fifty of them to Christianity. So then he had her killed.

Legend has it that Catherine was put on the wheel to be broken – but the spiked wheels on which she was to be broken – broke themselves. Then he decided that cutting her head off would be better – but when she was beheaded, milk flowed from her neck rather than blood.

I guess that's enough to make you a saint. But it wasn't enough to change the name of the monastery on Mount Sinai... not yet anyway. Not until the ninth century when, as legend has it, the body of St. Catherine was somehow miraculously transported to a cave on the side of Mt. Sinai. They identified the body as St. Catherine even though the body was in slight disrepair. Her hands had decayed somewhat and a few of her finger bones were sticking out – but she was a saint, after all, so they put her body on display in the monastery.

Then one day someone noticed that an oil-like substance kept oozing out of her exposed finger bones. Well, the monks knew a good thing when they saw it – so they started collecting the oil in small vials which they presented to notaries and prominent visitors to the monastery. The oil was supposed to miraculously heal afflicted people who were anointed with it. It was considered a valued relic, even though I am sure it wasn't suitable for cooking with at all.

Centuries passed and things went pretty smoothly – with the monks collecting the oil in vials, visitors and donations pouring in – thanks to Catherine. 1,000 years later, in the 19th century, St. Catherine's became the site of what many consider the most profound theological discovery of the past millennium.

Not to take anything away from oozing Catherine – her's is a great story – but it is not of the scholarly interest that the discovery of a great ancient manuscript holds – and which we will speak of today.

So we shall let St. Catherine rest in oily peace – and become acquainted with the man who made the amazing discovery in the 19th century.

## The Scholar

He was born in **1815** in a small town south of Leipzig in what today is East Germany. His parents were Lutheran and baptized him Lobegott Friedrich Constantine von Tischendorf. He was destined to become the most famous as well as the most controversial Biblical scholar of all time.

Young Constantine was sent by his family to the Gymnasium (grammar school) to learn Latin and Greek. He was well taught and a prize winner. In **1834**, he entered the theology school of the University of Leipzig. He published two prize winning essays there and became a Doctor of Philosophy in **1838**.

The untimely death of his father forced Tischendorf to leave the university and earn a living by teaching in a school near Leipzig run by a Lutheran pastor. There he fell in love with a fellow teacher, Angelike Zehme, the pastor's daughter.

At the age of 25 he returned to the University of Leipzig, this time as a university lecturer and a member of the faculty of theology. Tischendorf was, by his own words, a man committed to defending the truths of Christianity. He saw his return to the academic life a chance to pursue this commitment, and not a moment too soon. The Christian scriptures, both the Old and the New Testament, were under attack as never before.

One group of German theologians had come to doubt the reliability of virtually all of the New Testament. Christians had formerly believed that nearly every word in the New Testament had been written either by one of Jesus' own followers or by a close associate of those followers, some theologians were now asserting that scarcely any part of the New Testament contained the authentic record of Jesus' disciples.

All of this horrified Constantine von Tischendorf. In his view, the four Gospels as written down by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were entirely trustworthy. All that Christianity needed was an accurate text of the New Testament, which would support the sacred truths – and he was determined to find it.

Although many men and women had previously doubted some of the words of the Bible, such doubts were generally suppressed in public until, in the 18th century, two Englishmen brought them out into the open. One of these men was the famous historian Edward Gibbon.

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* shocked the devout by asserting that the early church fathers defeated heretics by using forged testimonies. He went further by insisting that the 'rash and sacrilegious hands' of these church fathers had even contaminated the Holy Scripture itself. He concentrated his attack on one text in particular. The 1st Epistle of John, chapter 5, verses 7 and 8, had long been used to prove the difficult doctrine of the Trinity – that Jesus, the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit are in fact three persons united in one God. The text reads, 'there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one.' Gibbon declared the text to be spurious.

'This memorable text,' he wrote, which asserts the unity of the THREE who bear witness in heaven, is condemned by the universal silence of the orthodox fathers, ancient versions, and authentic manuscripts.' In short, it had been inserted into the genuine text at some later time. In effect Gibbon implied that Christians were defending the doctrine of the Trinity by fraudulent means.

Many of the faithful were scandalized. In Britain the clergy instantly attacked Gibbon. They were led by the Reverend George Travis. Unfortunately for them, Gibbon was right – and the Rev. Travis was an

incompetent scholar. Moreover, to Gibbon's defense leapt one of the great creative geniuses of that century, Richard Porson.

Porson greatly admired Gibbon. He considered the *Decline and Fall* the greatest literary work of the 18th century. His defense of Gibbon's involved a technique which proved to be a breakthrough – for which he was in large part responsible – in the textual criticism of the Bible. This technique has been used since by every competent textual scholar.

Porson faced the daunting question of how to determine, out of many different manuscripts of the Bible, which gave the correct text. His method was to group them into 'families'. All the manuscripts that shared common errors, misreadings, misspellings, alterations and so on, belonged to the same family, he decided. This ingenious technique enabled him to eliminate later manuscripts which were obvious copies of earlier ones. He found it possible to build up a family tree of any manuscript, discovering the various stages at which the text had undergone change or alteration.

Porson used this technique to destroy the reliability of the text of the three heavenly witnesses in the 1st Epistle of John. He showed that none of the oldest Greek manuscripts of the Bible contained it. The text first appeared in an obscure Latin manuscript of the 5th century. Not one of the early fathers ever quoted or cited the text. Through its inclusion in the Latin text, it reached a few very late Greek manuscripts, and in **1522** Erasmus included it in his third edition of his Greek Bible (the 1st Greek Bible ever published).

By Tischendorf's time scholars were forced to admit that the generally accepted text of the New Testament was inaccurate. Constantine von Tischendorf wasn't satisfied with that at all. He made it his life's work to rectify the problems and doubts that assailed his beloved faith.

"I am confronted by a sacred task," he wrote to his fiancée Angelike, "the struggle to regain the original form of the New Testament." To do so, he built up a personal library of over 3,000 rare volumes which can now be found in the University of Glasgow. Extant at that time were four great ancient manuscripts – or nearly so, because two of them were virtually inaccessible. The 1st was the famous manuscript known as the Codex Alexandrinus, stored in the British Museum. The second ancient manuscript, the Codex Claramontanus, was in the National Library of Paris. Both these manuscripts contained copies of part, though not all, of the Bible. One of the inaccessible manuscripts was the Codex Vaticanus. The Vatican simply refused to let anyone see it. The 4th great manuscript, the Codex Ephraemi, also in Paris, was considered inaccessible because no one was able to read it. It preserved a text of the Bible probably dated from the 5th Century, but several centuries later this text had been more or less erased, so that the parchment could be used again to record the writings of a Syrian teacher named Ephraem.

Tischendorf decided he must visit Paris, London and Rome to examine these ancient manuscripts of the Bible in person. He applied to the Saxon Ministry of Public Worship and Education for a grant and received two hundred Thalers. His own brother generously matched this sum and Tischendorf set off for Paris in **1841**. There he achieved the first of many astonishing successes of his career.

Constantine Tischendorf happened to have phenomenal eyesight. He used that gift to pour over the pale and washed-out letters of the rewritten-over text of the Codex Ephraemi for two full years. In **1843**, he published his edition of the deciphered Codex. It was an outstanding achievement that made him world famous virtually overnight.

After Paris he visited London, and then Rome to study the manuscripts there. Deciding that his quest was not over, he set out for the Middle East to look for even more ancient manuscripts that might not have yet been discovered. In **1844**, he arrived at St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

## The Monastery

St. Catherine's was at that time, and still is, the oldest continuously inhabited Christian Monastery in the world. In Tischendorf's time, its most noteworthy features were its prestigious age and location, and the fact that St. Catherine's held one of the world's largest collection of surviving religious icons.

Some European Biblical scholars had visited St. Catherine's before Tischendorf, but not very many. There were two main reasons for this; religious icons weren't very considered important at that time, and the monastery wasn't very easy to get into. Even if you managed to make the arduous and dangerous trip from Cairo, through the desert on camelback, to the site of the monastery successfully – you would find yourself confronted by formidable walls (over 80 feet tall in places), and no door!

Now, I know what you're thinking – how could you get in if there's no door? Well, it was somewhat complicated. First, you had to stand at the base of the walls of the monastery and scream your lungs out, hoping that a monk would hear you. If no one heard you (or pretended not to), you had the choice of waiting there until you were noticed (which could be never), or just go away. If you were fortunate enough to be acknowledged, then a small basket would be lowered over the wall, and you could place a letter of introduction, or perhaps some kind of gift, into the basket that might convince the monks to allow you to enter. If they decided not to allow you in, then you just had one choice – go away. If the monks decided to allow you to enter, then they would lower a larger basket over the wall which you could climb into and be hauled up the wall. Piece of cake, right?

In the 1800's, it would take quite a bit of determination to venture an excursion to St. Catherine's Monastery, without any guarantee of gaining entrance. But if nothing else, Constantine von Tischendorf was an extremely determined scholar.

## The Discovery of the Codex

It took Tischendorf's party twelve days to travel from Cairo, Egypt to the monastery. Arriving at the north side of Mount Sinai by way of the plain of Raha, legend has it that Tischendorf was so excited by the sight of the monastery that he made his bedouin helpers run the camels all the way to the base of the majestic grey walls of St. Catherine's. They had to wait there until ten o'clock before a small basket was lowered down to them.

Tischendorf had two letters of introduction with him, which he had obtained from St. Catherine's sister house in Cairo. He placed the one he considered the most favorable in the basket, keeping the other one in his vest pocket 'just in case'. The basket was drawn up into the monastery and after some delay, the larger basket with a crossbar attached to the rope was lowered. Tischendorf and his party were drawn up. He was on the verge of the most momentous discovery of the Christian centuries.

Tischendorf was treated hospitably by the monks of St. Catherine's. The librarian of the monastery, a Greek named Kyrillos, allowed him to take manuscripts from the library to examine them in his own rooms. At that time books and manuscripts were kept in three separate rooms of the monastery. In one of these rooms, Tischendorf discovered what he described as 'the pearl of all of his researches'. According to his own account:

"I perceived in the middle of the great hall a large and wide basket full of old parchments; and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that two heaps of papers like these, moldered by time, had already been 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 one of the most ancient I had ever seen."

Altogether Tischendorf claimed to have found 130 parchments of the Greek Old testament. Kyrillos gave him 43 of them, but the abbot of the monastery refused to let him have the rest. Taking his precious 43 parchments with him, he left the monastery and returned to Cairo.

In **1846**, back in Leipzig, he published a brilliant edition of the 43 parchments under the name Codex Frederico-Augustanus. Tischendorf did not reveal where he had found the parchments, or that he had left over 80 more behind. He simply said that the parchments came somewhere from the east, in the neighborhood of Egypt.

Years passed as Tischendorf furthered his already illustrious career by publishing scores of editions of ancient documents he had discovered during his journeys. Then news reached him that a Russian scholar had visited St. Catherine's and had been shown not only the 130 parchments that he had discovered there (minus the 43 that he took with him) but the rest of the Codex in its entirety!

In **1853** he made a second trip to St. Catherine's, but he came away empty-handed. The monks could not (or would not) produce the additional parchments that he had seen 9 years earlier. He feared that they had been destroyed.

Later, news reached him once again that the Codex still existed and was being kept safely at St. Catherine's. This time he decided to take a different approach. He would appeal to the Tsar of Russia, then considered the protectorate of the Greek Orthodox Church. He immediately went to Dresden, and promised the Russian minister there that if funded by Tsar Alexander II, he would go to the east and give to his Imperial Majesty all that he could bring back. The Tsar agreed to his proposition and in **1859**, Tischendorf set sail once again for Cairo.

The first day that he arrived at St. Catherine's, Tischendorf was invited to have refreshments with the steward of the monastery in his private room. When Tischendorf inquired about the parchments that he had seen on a previous visit, the steward said that he too had seen that Greek version of the Old Testament, and took down from the corner of his cell a bulky parcel, wrapped in a red cloth, and presented it to Tischendorf.

Tischendorf took it with him to his own rooms for examination. He was astonished to find that it contained altogether 346 parchments, all from the same volume. It had most of the Old Testament, the complete books of the New Testament – plus two additional books, Barnabas and The Shepherd of Hermas.

Tischendorf had to have it. He tried to bribe the steward to allow him to take the manuscript from the monastery, but the steward refused. He decided to appeal to the abbot of St. Catherine's and ask to merely 'borrow' the Codex – but there was a problem. The abbot was in Cairo, en route to Constantinople, there to meet with other abbots of sister monasteries to elect a new archbishop to replace the one who had recently died.

Tischendorf sped off to Cairo. There he was able to meet with the abbots before they left for Constantinople. They heard him out and agreed to his plan, as long as he would stay in Cairo and study the Codex there.

A trusted bedouin Sheik was sent to St. Catherine's to retrieve the Codex. He returned with it in a remarkable 12 days. Tischendorf was allowed to take only 6 parchments at a time into his rooms for study. For two months he copied the manuscript at his disposal. All the while considering how he might somehow convince the monks of St. Catherine's to let him have the Codex.

The abbot of St. Catherine's remained in Constantinople all the while. Apparently the abbots were in dispute over the election of the new archbishop. When Tischendorf learned of the situation, an idea came to him. If he could enlist the Tsar's support for the abbot's favorite candidate, perhaps they would let him take the precious manuscript to Russia. His plan was greeted favorably by the Tsar.

He presented a letter to the abbot of St. Catherine's from Prince Lobanov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, asking that in return for their support, Tischendorf be allowed to take the Codex to Russia not as a gift, but as a loan. An agreement was reached, Tischendorf left Cairo with the manuscript – and the monks of St. Catherine's never saw their Codex again.

Tischendorf took the Codex with him to St. Petersburg, presenting it to Tsar Alexander II. Alexander agreed to pay for Tischendorf's publication of the Codex, providing the publication could coincide with the 1,000 year jubilee of the Russian monarchy in **1862**.

Tischendorf finished the project on time, and in November of **1862** he presented the Tsar with 1,232 volumes of the Codex Sinaiticus printed on genuine parchment. The Codex itself was put on exhibition in the Imperial Public Library.

Meanwhile, back at the monastery... the monks were beginning to figure out that possession is nine-tenths of the law. They deposed their new archbishop, Cyril (thereby severing any obligation they might have to Russia for supporting his election) and demanded that the Codex be returned to them.

The Russians countered. First they announced that during the dispute of possession of the Codex Sinaiticus, they would put it in the library vault for 'safe keeping'. Then they proposed to recognize Cyril's chief rival Kallistratus as archbishop, provided Kallistratus would cooperate with them in the matter of the Codex. Kallistratus agreed to the proposition. He persuaded some of his fellow monks to sign over the manuscript to the Tsar. In return, the monks were given 9,000 roubles and some Imperial decorations.

It didn't take long for the monks of St. Catherine's to become unhappy about the transaction. To this day, the monks of the monastery dispute the rightful ownership of the Codex.

It was too late, however – the Codex went back on display in the Imperial Public Library of Russia. It remained there until the Russian revolution of **1917**, when the Tsar and his family were executed and the fortunes of Russia abruptly changed. The precious Codex was lost in the chaos that ensued.

The Codex wasn't heard of again until **1931**, when an English antiquarian bookseller traveled to Russia to acquire a first edition of Homer. While touring the basement archives of what was once the Imperial Public Library he saw a leather box, with a leather cover titled 'Codex Sinaiticus'.

Negotiations for the buying of the manuscript followed, and in **1933** England purchased the Codex Sinaiticus from Russia for 100,000 pounds. The Codex was immediately delivered to the British Museum in Bloomsbury, where it remains to this day. It has become the most frequently visited artifact that the museum has to offer.

## **The Significance of the Codex**

That the Codex Sinaiticus is one of the most significant Biblical texts yet discovered is indisputable.

Codex Sinaiticus is the only known complete copy of the New Testament in uncial (that is, rounded, capital) script. Also, along with the Codex Vaticanus, it is one of our two earliest copies of the whole Greek Bible (both Old and New Testaments written in Greek).

The credibility of the Sinaiticus text is supported by the earliest New Testament documents.

The Bodmer papyrus, dated around 200 C.E. or earlier, supports Codex Sinaiticus much more closely than any other of the major Codex manuscripts. The name of this papyrus came from the place of its permanent residence, the Bodmer Library in Geneva.

The oldest fragment of the New testament ever discovered resides in the John Rylands University Library, Manchester. Referred to as the 'Jesus Fragment', it is no larger than the palm of a man's hand. The fragment is dated at around 90 C.E. and contains a few verses from the Gospel of John.

This papyrus fragment, along with the few other extant papyrus fragments dated prior to the fourth century, agree with the text of the Codex Sinaiticus over all other early Codices.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Sinaitic text is the degree to which it differs from the traditionally accepted English translation of the 'Received Text' – commonly known as the King James version of the New Testament.

For example: The famous story of the woman caught in adultery – (in which Jesus supposedly directs her accusers, "He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone) – does not appear in the Codex Sinaiticus.

In recent texts, the Gospel of Mark begins with the phrase, 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' – Codex Sinaiticus omits the words, 'the Son of God'.

Later in the first chapter of Mark, the Codex tells of Jesus becoming angry – later manuscripts omit all instances of anger in regard to Jesus (such negative emotions seemed too 'human' for the Lord).

In instances, the Sinaiticus minimizes punishments in store for the wicked. For example, in the 9th chapter of Mark, recent texts describe Hell as a place 'where the worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched' – Codex Sinaiticus omits the ghastly description.

Moreover, the last chapter of the Gospel of Mark omits the last 12 verses. Mark chapter 16 ends at verse 8 with these words, 'They went out and ran away from the tomb, beside themselves with terror. They said nothing to anybody, because they were afraid.' This is an amazing omission, because ending the book here leaves the Gospel of Mark (considered the first Gospel written) without any incident of Jesus appearing to any of his disciples after his death.

In the Received Text, Luke chapter 17 tells how Jesus left his disciples after his resurrection. He blessed them, parted from them, 'and was carried up into heaven'. Codex Sinaiticus omits the final clause. As C.S.C. Williams observed, if these omissions are correct, 'there is no reference at all to the Ascension in the original text of the Gospels'.

Perhaps most significantly of all, the text of the Codex Sinaiticus does not support the traditional 'Trinitarian' verses that appear in later manuscripts.

Although these facts about the earliest complete text of the New Testament are well known to many theological scholars, the Codex Sinaiticus remains inaccessible to the average layman, as it has never been completely translated into the English language.