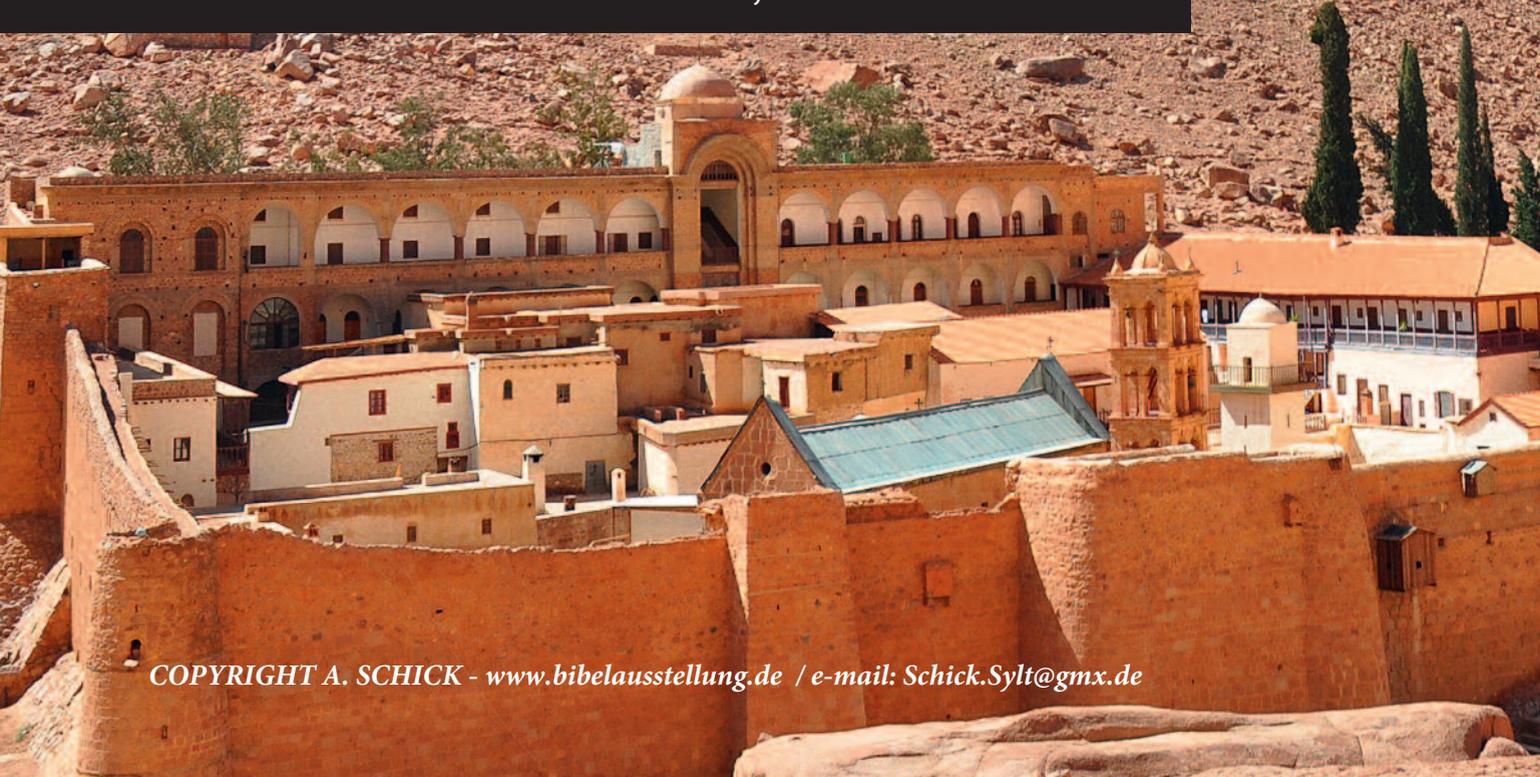


# Bible Treasure from the Desert Monastery

Alexander Schick

Constantin von Tischendorf and the discovery of the world's oldest Bible.



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## ◀ St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai, Egypt is Christianity's oldest, continuously-inhabited monastery.

The *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of the most precious Bible manuscripts in the world, is available today on the World Wide Web with a few clicks ([www.codex-sinaiticus.net/en](http://www.codex-sinaiticus.net/en)). Digitizing the ancient parchment manuscript is one of the most extensive and expensive research projects of the Internet age, costing over 5.5 million dollars. The 1600-year-old Bible manuscript contains large parts of the Old Testament in Greek (Septuagint) and the entire New Testament. The Codex (book) dates from the 4th century AD and ranks next to the Codex Vaticanus (4th century AD) and the Codex Alexandrinus (5th century AD) as one of the three oldest full Bibles (OT and NT) in the world. But only the Codex Sinaiticus can claim to be the oldest completely preserved manuscript of the New Testament! At least three writers have drawn up this Bible translation in Caesarea Maritima or Egypt. The ultra-thin parchment was made of calf- or sheepskin. It is estimated that 350 animals had to give their hides for it. A whole cow or goat herd for a single Bible!

The leaves are 38 cm (15 in.) high and 34 cm (13 in.) wide, making them the largest of the Bible manuscripts. It is estimated that the original number of leaves totaled 739 (1,478 pages). Unfortunately, only 411 sheets have been preserved. Each page has four columns (with the exception of books of poetry, such as the Psalms, which have only two columns). Each column normally has 48 lines.

Although the leaves of the Codex are "virtually" united online and are all available together, they are in reality spread over the entire world. The lion's share of the manuscript (347 sheets) has been in safekeeping at the British Library in London since 1933. It spans most of the Old Testament according to the canon of the Septuagint, including the Apocrypha, as well as the whole New Testament. The number of New Testament books corresponds with our best present Bible editions. Only the arrangement is different; Hebrews falls after 2 Thessalonians, and Acts after Philemon and before James. In

addition, the Codex Sinaiticus also contains the two early Christian writings: The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas. These Bible pages were stored in the Czar's library in St. Petersburg/Leningrad until 1933, when Stalin sold them to the British for 100,000 pounds. This corresponded to the value of 3 Gutenberg Bibles, or, in today's currency, about 28 million dollars.

The second largest portion (43 sheets) is kept at the Leipzig University Library, and contains parts of 1 Chronicles and 2 Esdras, Esther (complete), Tobit (one side), a part of Jeremiah, and a part of Lamentations.

Parts of 4 sheets are in St. Petersburg, namely fragments of Genesis, Numbers, and Judith, as well as from the Shepherd of Hermas.

Eighteen sheets (partially fragmentary) are kept in Saint Catherine's Monastery. They contain parts from all five books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, 1 Chronicles, Joshua 1, and the Shepherd of Hermas.

The discovery of these parchment leaves is a true research crime thriller of Bible history, and is inseparably connected with the name Constantin von Tischendorf.

Tischendorf was born over 200 years ago on 18 January 1815 in Lengenfeld, Vogtland (Saxony, Germany). Even in school, the young boy showed a talent for classical language. He was an outstanding student and was always the best in his class at the University of Leipzig, where he graduated in 1938 with his Ph.D. While studying theology, Tischendorf, whose mother had shown him the way to the Christian faith, was also faced with liberal theology and violent attacks against the Christian faith. These attacks were partly based on the method of transmission of the New Testament, and it is here that Tischendorf wanted to act because of his excellent knowledge of ancient languages. It formed in his mind a desire to embark on a search for the oldest copies of the New Testament, in order to evaluate them for a new translation. The textual tradition of the New Testament should therefore be established on firm ground, and the rug pulled out

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◀ The love letters of Constantin and Angelika von Tischendorf give fascinating insight into Tischendorf's restless life for research.



from under the feet of the critics. But why was that necessary?

Shortly before Luther's epochal translation of the New Testament (1522), Erasmus had published for the first time a printed Greco-Latin version of the New Testament (1516), which Luther used as an "original text edition" for his translation at Wartburg. But Erasmus had used very few (7) and very late Greek manuscripts from the 12th to the 15th centuries as the basis of his printing of the New Testament. These Greek texts from the medieval manuscripts were reprinted again and again in the following decades, and through further revisions were known since 1633 as "Textus Receptus" (the text adopted/received by all). For centuries, it was the basis for translations of the Bible (including the famous 1611 King James Version or Luther 1545/1912). But this "Textus Receptus" was not old enough for Tischendorf. He wanted older, much older manuscripts as a basis for a new critical edition in Greek, because—in Tischendorf's point of view—the older the copy is and the closer it is to the date of the Gospels' composition, the lower the

odds that the texts had been falsified. For him, it was clear that in the search for the original text of the New Testament, it was necessary to proceed from the oldest manuscripts, even though great age is also not always a guarantee that it is the best representative text.

So Tischendorf went in 1839/40 on research trips to libraries in southern Germany and Switzerland. Already in the following year (he was 26 years old at the time!), he published his first edition of the New Testament in Greek, under the title "Novum Testamentum Graece," for which he had evaluated the manuscripts available at the time. Over the course of his short life—Tischendorf died in 1872 at the age of 59—he had plans for 23 other editions of the New Testament in Greek to follow. He concerned himself with eight basic editions. The preface to the edition of his first New Testament in 1841 was also his postdoctoral thesis, which gave him the right to lecture at the University of Leipzig.

But instead of going to the University, Tischendorf took off to Paris, where over the course of two years he deciphered and immediately published the

► At that time, there were neither aircraft nor cars or railways. He covered all of these long distances by stagecoach! And something else must be imagined: there was neither scanner nor digital photography, so Tischendorf worked daily under extreme workloads and time constraints to copy the old Bibles in Greek.

Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, a previously unreadable fragmentary Bible manuscript from the 5th century AD. This work made him known in the professional sector with a bang. At just 27 years old, he was awarded an honorary doctorate for this work. Shortly after completing his studies, he fell in love with a charming pastor's daughter. Although she was eagerly awaiting his return to the vicinity of Leipzig, he was not satisfied with this success. He wrote to his Angelika, "Fate is dragging me violently away; I must follow." Angelika was willing to wait for him, and wrote to her Constantin: "Beloved heart, wander spryly and happily wherever your inner voice calls you." She didn't know that it would be more than four years before she was able to see him again.

During his time in Paris, he toured Holland and England. There he went to work in libraries in London (the British Museum), Cambridge and Oxford. When he had finished his studies in Paris, in 1843 he passed through Strasbourg to Basel, then Bern, Geneva, Lyon, Avignon, and Marseille. A year of research in Italy followed: Rome (working in the Vatican library), Naples, Florence, Venice, Modena, Verona, and Milan. At that time, there were neither aircraft nor cars or railways. He covered all of these long distances by stagecoach! And something else must be imagined: there was neither scanner nor digital photography, so Tischendorf worked daily under extreme workloads and time constraints to copy the old Bibles in Greek. But he also explored the Latin translation, the so-called Vulgate. In Florence lay a manuscript in giant format, 50 x 34 x 20 cm (19 x 13 x 7 in.), the Codex Amiatinus, which was considered one of the most important textual witnesses for the Vulgate. Tischendorf had to compare 1,040 sheets of parchment; that is to say, completely copy them. This required incredible efficiency. Over the course of his life, he completely copied the Bible approximately 50 times in Greek and Latin!

In addition to the libraries of Europe, Tischendorf especially wanted to explore the monastic libraries of the Middle East. The Bible originated in the Middle East. Here he hoped to find more ancient texts. So he went by steamer to Egypt. In addition to the Coptic monasteries in the Libyan desert and the libraries in Alexandria and Cairo, he wanted at all costs to visit St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai: it is the oldest monastery in the world, erected under the Emperor Justinian around 550 AD. The reputation of the monastery library was already legendary. After two weeks of dangerous desert travel, the Saxon Bible student reached the secluded convent in the south of the Sinai with a small camel caravan in May of 1844. But the tribulations would be worth it! In the monastery he discovered 129 sheets of the ancient Bible which is now world-famous as the Codex Sinaiticus (Book from Sinai). Tischendorf accepted 43 sheets as a gift from the Sinai monks and brought them to Leipzig. He left the others behind and asked the monks to look out for further sheets. The return journey went by way of Suez to Cairo, and then on to Jerusalem, Shechem, Beirut, Smyrna, Patmos, Constantinople, and Athens. He visited the libraries everywhere he went. He then went back to Lengenfeld through Italy, Vienna, and Munich at Christmas of 1844. A few days later, he went to see his Angelika. He became engaged at that time, and they married in 1845.

Upon his return, he was appointed professor at the University of Leipzig, where he immediately published the leaves from the Old Testament in an exemplary edition, but without revealing the site of their discovery. In 1853, Tischendorf traveled to the Middle East a second time to find the rest of the manuscript. But he discovered only a small fragment. In January 1859, a third trip to the Middle East followed. He wrote to his wife Angelika, "I go

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in the name of the Lord, looking for treasures that will bear fruit for His church.” For this third trip, Tischendorf even inspired the house of the Czar. Czar Alexander II was the patron saint of the Greek Orthodox Church. He took over the travel expenses, and the Czar’s brother, Grand Duke Constantine, became Tischendorf’s most important patron.

The monks in the monastery already knew Tischendorf well, but no one could remember what had become of the 86 sheets that had been left behind from the Bible discovery in 1844. Once more, Tischendorf combed through the rooms in which the library was housed with its thousands of books. But to no avail! Shortly before leaving, he ascended the traditional Mount Sinai, and as he was refreshed by a monk upon his return, he was shown “his” Greek Bible. It was February 4, 1859, a date that has gone down in Bible history! The monk brought Tischendorf a thick parchment bundle that was wrapped in a red cloth. This bundle contained not just the 86 left-behind sheets, but more leaves from the Old Testament and the entire New Testament! Tischendorf had reached his desired goal. To his wife he wrote, “I had hoped to give a victory bulletin: now truly, the Lord has decreed that it would be one. He has already given such a great blessing to my research in its first steps that I had only tears of emotion in response...What gave me no peace at home, so much that it also leaned on human striving and longings, that was the call of the Lord. I had always said it: I go in the name of the Lord and search for treasures that will bear fruit for His church: now I know it, and I was honestly shocked by the truth myself. The entire manuscript, as it is now, is an incomparable gem for science and the church” (Cairo, 15 February 1859).

A purchase of the manuscript was impossible, but the monks liked the idea of a gift to the Russian Czar. However, this was not carried out immediately, as the former Archbishop of the Sinai had just died, and a new one had to first be selected and accepted. As long as the gift was not immediately possible, Tischendorf’s manuscript would be given for publication purposes against a certificate of guarantee from the Russian ambassador. Czar Alexander II was delighted by the discovery and took over the

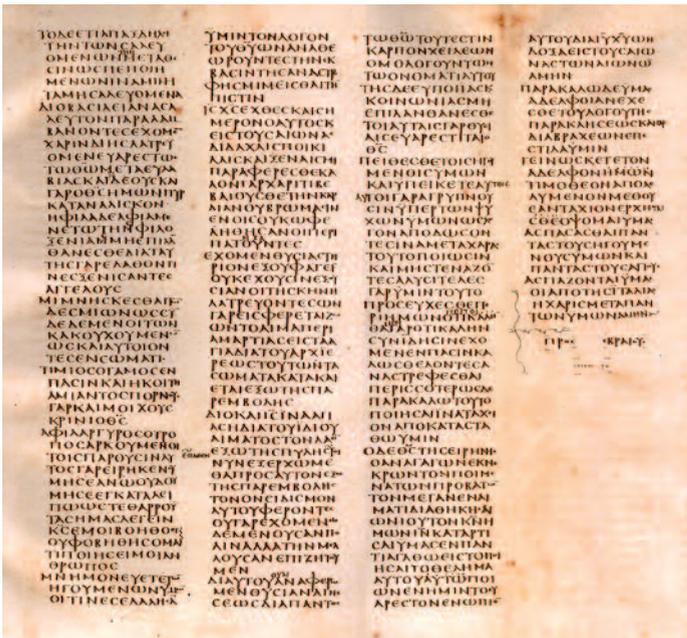
costs of publishing a facsimile (detailed replica). The University of Leipzig established a Chair of “Biblical Paleography and Theology” just for Tischendorf. In an incredibly short period of three years—Tischendorf must have toiled day and night—he accomplished the Herculean task. In 1862, the Codex Sinaiticus appeared as a magnificent reprint for the Russian Czar, for the 1000-year anniversary of the Russian Empire. The Czar gave the facsimile away to all the major libraries and royal dynasties. In addition to this, Tischendorf also published inexpensive editions and various publications on the history of the discovery of the “Sinai Bible,” as the Codex was then called. Tischendorf also revised his text edition of the New Testament again. As already mentioned, Tischendorf released 24 editions of the New Testament in Greek during his life as a researcher. The highlight is the “*Editio Octava Critica Maior*,” (Volume I 1869 / Volume II 1872), which is considered a milestone and is still used in New Testament textual research today. This edition of the Codex Sinaiticus takes the most important position next to the Codex Vaticanus as a textual witness. Many questions of textual criticism could be resolved, and at the same time it pointed out that the New Testament has been quite outstandingly passed down. To date, the discovery of the Sinaiticus from the 4th century leaves all other discoveries in the shadows. Meanwhile, there are certainly older records of the New Testament, but only the Sinaiticus offers the entire New Testament!

The monks gave the valuable manuscript in 1869 as a gift to the Czar, after which the monastery received 9,000 rubles in return, as is customary in the Middle East. Tischendorf’s discovery of the manuscript has often been described. Shortly before his death (1874), however, there were voices alleging that Tischendorf had fraudulently taken the Sinaitic manuscript. It is often said that he had the manuscript only on loan, but it was never returned in spite of promises made; instead, that he bequeathed it to the Czar without permission from the monks. Within the scope of the digital research project, archives were searched intensely in Germany, England, and especially in Russia and in Saint Catherine’s Monastery—with great success! The monks’ deed of

**All important documents related to the donation of the Codex to Czar the you can find here:**

**[http://nlr.ru/eng\\_old/exib/CodexSinaiticus/](http://nlr.ru/eng_old/exib/CodexSinaiticus/) --- most important: [http://nlr.ru/eng\\_old/exib/CodexSinaiticus/zah/3\\_8.html](http://nlr.ru/eng_old/exib/CodexSinaiticus/zah/3_8.html)**

## ▼ Page from the Codex Sinaiticus with the end of Hebrews.



a gift to the Russian Emperor was found in the Czar's archive. Professor Christfried Böttrich of the University of Greifswald (formerly Leipzig) has published, among other things, these documents in German as part of the digital research project. I can only support his conclusion: "The transfer of 'Codex Sinaiticus' to St. Petersburg took place—despite...all the difficult circumstances—legally correctly. A theft is, in any case, out of the question." For over two decades I've researched Tischendorf. His descendants have given me his estate to process (among other things, 300 love letters from 1838-1868, with more than 1,000 pages). For years I also worked with unpublished scientific works, which are preserved at the University of Leipzig. From all of the documents, it is doubtless that Tischendorf was not only a devout Christian, but also a gentleman all the way!

For his 200th birthday anniversary, the city of Lengenfeld (near Dresden) held a large Bible and Tischendorf exhibition at City Hall. The accompanying anniversary lectures and church services were very well attended. Tischendorf's great-granddaughter traveled specially from London for the occasion, and approximately 3,000 visitors flocked from all over Germany to tiny Lengenfeld. It is a pleasure to see

how this unique biblical scholar and his scholarship have newly aroused the interest of the people, because his research adventures are more exciting than any thriller. Tischendorf's motto was, "Doubtless, science strengthens the research, but only faith sanctifies it!" Therefore, he had always tried to explain all of his research to the Christian community and make it accessible. Unfortunately, Tischendorf's fascinating life and work are wholly unknown to many Christians today. It is very welcome that an effort is being made to rename the city of his birth "Tischendorfstadt-Lengenfeld."

Tischendorf once said, "You know that it was enthusiasm for the Book of books that swept me from the arms of friends and saw me under foreign skies, looking for hidden treasures" ("Letter from Jerusalem," 15 July 1844). Tischendorf found Bible treasures in quantity, and through him, modern textual research was founded. Additional discoveries of the New Testament in the hot desert sands of Egypt in the 1930s and 50s demonstrate the outstanding tradition of the New Testament writings. Despite all predictions to the contrary, the New Testament is well documented. No text in antiquity can boast such a wealth of tradition. God watches over His Word!

Tischendorf's manuscripts are a milestone in textual research, and equal in meaning to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Today, Tischendorf's findings decorate the greatest museums in the world. Among all of his discoveries, the Codex Sinaiticus stands out. Through him we have a copy of the entire New Testament from the 4th century in front of us! In John 20:31, we read the reason for the writing of the Gospels: "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." If we personally accept Jesus in our life as the Messiah, the Savior and Redeemer of the world, then the Bible will be a very personal book for us. And may Psalm 119:162 be as true in our lives as it was for Bible researcher Tischendorf: "I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil."



*Alexander Schick*

is the initiator of the Qumran & Bibleexhibition Sylt, the largest traveling bible museum in Germany ([www.bibelausstellung.de](http://www.bibelausstellung.de)). He particularly enjoys teaching as a lecturer for the world and environment of the Bible at the Bible-Seminary-Bonn and the Martin-Bucer-Seminary.

His list of his publications you can find here:

[www.bucer.de/mitarbeiter/a-schick.html](http://www.bucer.de/mitarbeiter/a-schick.html)

His area of expertise includes the history of the discovery of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls (his mentor was Prof. Claus-Hunno Hunzinger from the first international Dead-Sea-Scrolls-Team:

<https://www.jpost.com/archaeology/last-member-of-original-dead-sea-scrolls-research-team-dies-from-covid-19-654922>) and the finds from the St. Catherine's Monastery by the German

Biblescholar Konstantin from Tischendorf. Schick became internationally known through his Bestsellers "Fascination Qumran" and the non-fiction book against the Da Vinci Code: "Das wahre Sakrileg". In Austria, this book was number 1 and in Germany in the 11th place on the bestseller list.

Schick is the Senior Advisor for Biblical Archaeology and History of the Bible for the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance and since 30 years Tourleader in Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

As part of the Historical Faith Society's monthly talk show series Alexander Schick was interviewed in the beginning of 2022. You can watch the talk show here in english:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9Lb0GybK04](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9Lb0GybK04)

Alexander Schick holds one of the greatest archives in Europe of historical photos from archaeological sites in the Holy Land. His photos are used by NOVA, BBC, ZDF and many more. His pictures are printed in archaeological books all over the world (a small sample of his collection available for publishers and private users you can find here:

<https://bibleplaces.photoshelter.com/gallery/Qumran-Dead-Sea-Scrolls/G0000u9.AzTkvrVA/C0000BTOF14vAriE>)

In 1993 the Tischendorfffamily asked Alexander Schick to work on the history of their famous ancestor. Beside the University of Leipzig the Tischendorfffamily still owns the original papers of

Tischendorf. So for many years Alexander Schick worked on the original papers.

He digitized the Letters, Documents, Newspapers etc. and published a first book for the 200th anniversary of Tischendorfs birthday in 2015. Schick was also the guestspeaker in the hometown of Tischendorf, in Lengenfeld, where he also put on display a huge exhibition about the life and work of the german scholar.

His book (in German) is now available in the 3rd revised edition. Here are many

documents published nowhere else before. The book is translated in english and the author hopes to find an american / english publisher.

Beside this Alexander Schick is also the Co-editor of the „Elberfelder Bibel“ as well as from the „Lexikon zur Bibel“ ([www.ritmeyer.com/2014/04/01/new-german-bible-lexicon/](http://www.ritmeyer.com/2014/04/01/new-german-bible-lexicon/)).

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