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Biblical Preservation: Examining the Historical Preservation of the Biblical Text Through the Providence of God

Joseph Bauer
Liberty University, jjbauer@liberty.edu

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Introduction

Prior to the fall of the innocent state of mankind the crafty serpent uttered these fatal words into the ear of Eve, “Did God actually say?” (Gen 3:1). Since the genesis of creation, the veracity and reliability of the word of God has been brought into question. Consequently, the divine Scriptures self-attest, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” (2 Timothy 3:16). In light of this key biblical truth one New Testament scholar, as well as the founder and director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, Daniel Wallace openly concedes, “When it comes to the New Testament, the original twenty-seven books disappeared long ago, probably within decades of their composition.”¹ Wallace continues, “Handwritten copies, or manuscripts, must be relied on to determine the wording of the original text. Yet no two manuscripts are exactly alike, and even the closest two early manuscripts have at least half a dozen differences per chapter.”² Due to the absence of the original autographs penned by the Apostles, what assurance can be given that the words have been preserved through the ages and not altered? Thus, the same infamous question begs to be asked about the modern-day Bible, “Did God actually say?” This question is unavoidable and needs to be addressed. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to understand the method of textual preservation, identify common misconceptions about preservation, and examine the historical manuscript evidence to prove that God did in fact providentially preserve His Word.

¹ Wayne Grudem, John Collins and Thomas Schreiner, *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 10N.

² Ibid.

Definitions

Textual criticism, the process of preservation, and transmission of the biblical texts certainly are technical fields of study. However, the common laity can develop a thorough understanding of the concept of biblical preservation. Therefore, before delving into this study, it is important to establish definitions of key terms which are seldom used outside of biblical scholarship. To start it would be advantageous to explicate what exactly is being communicated by the phrase “preservation of the biblical text.” As the aforementioned citation from biblical scholar Daniel Wallace stated no original manuscript is known to exist. Thus, biblical preservation simply affirms that despite the absence of the original autographs, that is the original writings and words penned by the biblical writers, their writings are preserved in the plethora of manuscripts discovered throughout the centuries.

Since affirming biblical preservation in the absence of the original autographs may appear to be a bold assertion, the method of rediscovering the original writings through textual criticism needs to be understood. According to theologian, Alex Cairns, textual criticism is defined as, “A scholarly examination of the manuscript witnesses to the New Testament text, with a view to the identification and removal of errors that have been introduced into them during centuries of hand-copying, either innocently by copyists’ errors or intentionally for dogmatic purposes.”³ It is not the intent at this time to outline the exact methods utilized by scholars to reconstruct the original writings. However, it is the intent to illustrate that there does exist a method of discovering the original text. This could be compared to that of archaeology. It is the archeologist’s task to unearth and recover that which has been buried under centuries of time. Likewise, the textual critic, seeks through the methodology of textual criticism to extract

³ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms: A Ready Reference of Over 800 Theological and Doctrinal Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2002), 454.

the original divine words from the manuscript evidence. One pioneer of textual criticism, F. F. Bruce, comments on this process, “The very abundance of the manuscript evidence means that an error in one manuscript or group of manuscripts can usually be corrected with the aid of some other manuscript or group of manuscripts.”⁴ This is perhaps the simplest explanation and most helpful in providing a foundational understanding of textual criticism.

Delving deeper into the field of textual criticism one must become acquainted with the term textual variant, as it is these variants which provide the critics and skeptics the necessary doubt to dispute the claim of biblical preservation. Daniel Wallace provides an adequate and foundational definition for a variant in his book, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*. Wallace writes, “A textual variant is any place among the manuscripts in which there is variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling differences.”⁵ It should be noted that there are in fact approximately 300,000 to 400,000 known variants among the manuscripts.⁶ Indeed, this is a staggering number and one could simply glance at this sizeable number and conclude that with this amount of variations the biblical text most certainly has become corrupt. It would be unfortunate, however, to postulate such a notion from this fact. As will be made evident, these variants will be shown to be futile. In fact, Wallace asserts, “If this were the only piece of data, it would discourage anyone from attempting to recover the wording of the original. But there is more to the story.”⁷

⁴ F.F. Bruce, “Textual Criticism,” in *Understanding Biblical Criticism* (Nashville, TN: Kingsley Books, 2017), 137.

⁵ Daniel Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 26.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Lastly, it has been asserted that preservation of the biblical text has been accomplished through the providence of God. To aid the understanding of this theological concept, author and Professor of Theology at Memphis Theological Seminary, Donald McKim, defines providence as, “The Christian understanding of God’s continuing action by which all creation is preserved, supported, and governed by God’s purposes and plans for human history and for human lives.”⁸ It will later be explained and explored the exact way God providentially preserved His divine revelation, but sufficient for now is that through the governance of God He has historically preserved His words through the extant manuscripts.

What’s at Stake? The Importance of Understanding Biblical Preservation

The Bible is unique in the sense of its own claim to divine authorship. Most self-professing evangelical Christians would affirm the doctrine of inerrancy and concur that it is indeed delivered from the “breath” of God. This core doctrine of the Christian faith becomes problematic in light of the already mentioned staggering number of textual variants. Thus, it is one thing to verbally affirm the inerrancy of Scripture yet quite another to prove and defend this doctrine in the presence of well-educated erudite scholars. One example of a brilliant scholar that has actually walked away from the evangelical faith is New Testament textual critic and New York Times best-selling author Professor Bart Ehrman. Not only has Ehrman walked away from his Christian faith, he has been recognized as the most prominent and outspoken critic of the Bible in North America. In fact, Ehrman has written multiple books discrediting the Bible as the word of God to include the New York Times best seller, *Misquoting Jesus*. The seeds of doubt are planted in the readers’ minds as millions read his introduction to this book. Ehrman begins, “Not only do we not have the originals, we don’t have the first copies of the originals. We don’t

⁸ Donald McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 256.

even have copies of the copies of the originals or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals.”⁹ Indeed, this tautological critique on the surface level is compelling and most assuredly can cripple the confidence of an impressionable Christian not well read in biblical preservation. It is important to note that it is not only biblical preservation that becomes attacked, in that the seeds of doubt proliferate into other foundational doctrines including biblical inspiration. Case in point, Ehrman writes the following:

This became a problem for my view of inspiration, for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place. If he wanted his people to have his words, surely, he would have given them to them (and possibly even given them the words in a language they could understand, rather than Greek and Hebrew). The fact that we don't have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn't perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.¹⁰

In light of this deduction, it is evident that the question of biblical preservation has left the realm of peripheral issues and entered the center stage of academic debate demanding answers.

To demonstrate that the questions and attacks on biblical preservation are not isolated to twenty-first century academia, one needs to look no further than observing the claims of other world religions. For example, written in the pages the book, *Medieval Islam and Biblical Criticism*, an allegation is presented, “The accusation that Jews and Christians have falsified their Scriptures is the most basic Muslim argument against both the Old and New Testaments... Jews and Christians were accused of having concealed or deleted verses from their Scriptures, as well as having distorted and rewritten others.”¹¹ Thus, it is significant to demonstrate that a

⁹ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 11.

¹¹ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

failure to articulate or understand biblical preservation has led to the development of entire religions that introduce their own holy books, such as the Qur'an. Needless to say, the very foundations of the Christian faith are consequently weakened if biblical preservation is not properly understood, stated, and defended. Additionally, this topic matter must not be circumvented and pawned off on professional clergy as the Apostle Peter exhorts, "But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15).

Common Misconceptions

As made evident there exists legitimate and substantial objections against God's ability to preserve His Word. More importantly, these objections have accentuated the necessity for logical and historically accurate responses to these textual criticisms. It is paramount to understand what is meant by biblical preservation, but also to address what it is not. Additionally, many well intentioned Christians equip themselves with their favorite proof-texts when caught in the heat of a debate regarding textual preservation. Therefore, it would be beneficial to highlight often quoted Scriptures, typically taken out of context, that actually undermine the defense of biblical preservation and should be avoided.

Perhaps the most comprehensive understanding of what is meant to be communicated by biblical preservation was outlined in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978. During this conference, over two hundred of the leading evangelicals convened to articulate a defense from the liberal conception of Scripture. Due to the direct relevance at hand, it would prove beneficial to become acquainted with the subsection of the statement pertaining to biblical transmission and translation. The statement reads:

Since God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to

maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission. The verdict of this science, however, is that the Hebrew and Greek text appear to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free.¹²

Thus, the original autographs are claimed to be the only inspired and inerrant text. However, despite scribal errors and textual variants the original texts are in fact well preserved. This statement is ideal to safeguard from radical advocates of Bible preservation that insist the Bible has been perfectly and miraculously preserved through only the King James translation. These radicals commonly designated as “King James Onlyists” epitomize the flawed perception of a preserved text, and consequently equip critics with easily formulated refutations. Due to the nonsensical nature of the King James Only advocates as well as the historical inaccuracy no further time will be spent refuting this position.

In regard to the proof texts often offered as an apologetic plea for preservation, none is more popular than Psalms 12:6-7 which states, “The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. You, O Lord, will keep them; you will guard us from this generation forever,” (Psalms 12: 6-7). This scripture is offered as a means to demonstrate that the Lord will keep His Word forever. So biblical preservation is appealed to as a divine truth being taught in this passage. However, through the use of sound exegesis one will surmise that the phrase “You, O Lord, will keep them,” does not refer to the “pure words” referenced in v. 7. To help draw out the true meaning of this text one professor of theology, John Rerhurek, writes in his journal article “Preservation of the Bible,” “The context shows that the proper antecedent of ‘them’ in v. 7a is the ‘afflicted’ and ‘needy’ man of v. 5a, who is the same

¹² International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.” Accessed on November 30, 2019, https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf.

‘godly man’ of v. 1.”¹³ Consequently, Rehurek concludes, “This passage does not speak of the preservation of God’s written Word; it only addresses the purity and trustworthiness of His words and the preservation that is being spoken of concerns the righteous man.”¹⁴ When taken in its entirety this Psalm is clearly not pertaining to the preservation of the biblical text.

Examining the Historical Manuscript Evidence

Upon a cursory glance of the textual data presented thus far, opponents of preservation do in fact possess reasonable grounds for objection. Some advocates for preservation, in efforts to defend preservation, actually undermine their own position by faulty exegesis of misapplied scriptural references. More abysmal are the attempts to defend biblical preservation through unashamedly ignorant and historically inaccurate argumentation. Thus, the question remains, “Are the divine words preserved, and if so, how?”

To begin unpacking the answer to that question, it is essential to first address the vast number of textual known variants; as this is often the biggest stumbling block. As previously cited, there is common agreeance there exists between 300,000 to 400,000 variants within the manuscripts. Even more mind blowing is this number means there are technically more variants than there are words in the New Testament. These statistics, apart from any type of context, are used as an appeal to emotion and lack any honest foundation. In an effort to place these numbers upon a genuine foundation, the most basic cause for this vast number of variants is due to the fact that there exists an enormous amount of manuscript evidence discovered throughout the centuries. To place this in a historical setting, Daniel Wallace writes, “It would be safe to say that we have altogether about 20,000 handwritten manuscripts of the New Testament...But if we

¹³ John Rehurek. 2008. “Preservation of the Bible: Providential or Miraculous? The Biblical View.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 19/1 (Spring): 82.

¹⁴ Ibid. 83.

compare all the manuscripts of a particular classical author, regardless of when they were written, the total would still average at least less than 20 and probably less than a dozen.”¹⁵

Simply put, there are many variants because there are many manuscripts. The New Testament alone is the most copied and recovered piece of literature from antiquity. To belabor this point, Wallace writes, “In comparison with the remaining manuscripts, of any other ancient Greek or Latin literature, the New Testament suffers from an embarrassment of riches. It is almost incomprehensible to think about this disparity...the New Testament has no peer.”¹⁶

As the initial shock of the quantity of variants begins to fade it is more important to focus on whether or not these variants actually change or affect the meaning of the text. To help with this assessment it would be worthwhile to recall what a true variant is, “A textual variant is any place among the manuscripts in which there is variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling differences.”¹⁷ Therefore, simple misspellings or word orders constitute as a variant. To provide a meaningful example of a common variant one manuscript might read “Jesus”, another manuscript might render it as “Jesus Christ”, and finally one might read “the Lord Jesus Christ.” This would constitute three separate variants, yet it is clear who is being identified in that passage. To alleviate any further concern, one New Testament Scholar as well as biblical language expert and author, Dr. James White writes, “We must emphasize that 99 percent of the four hundred thousand variations are irrelevant to the proper translation and understanding of the Greek text. Even the most liberal textual critic agrees

¹⁵ Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 28-29.

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, John Collins, and Thomas Schreiner, *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 10N.

¹⁷ Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 26.

here.”¹⁸ To prove Dr. White’s assertion even the most notorious bible critic Bart Ehrmen concedes, “Most of these differences are completely immaterial and insignificant. A good portion of them simply show us that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than most people can today.”¹⁹

In discussing the method of biblical preservation, it is important to understand an essential concept of textual criticism known as the tenacity of the text. This concept, which is unique to the Bible alone, helps thwart the allegations from the Muslims of biblical corruption. To help explain this technical concept, one biblical scholar specializing in textual criticism Kurt Aland writes, “Once a variant or a new reading enters the tradition it refuses to disappear, persisting (if only in a few manuscripts) and perpetuating itself through the centuries.”²⁰ Aland continues with this significant concept, “Once a reading occurs it will persist obstinacy. It is precisely the overwhelming mass of the New Testament textual tradition ... which provides an assurance of certainty in establishing the original text.”²¹ Put simply, even if a mistake or additional word is brought into a manuscript, it stays in place and then gets recopied in the future. Therefore, this concludes that the original text remains and does not simply disappear.

Undoubtedly, the most unique part of the biblical preservation was the method of open transmission. This simply communicates that the Bible was not reserved to any particular group of people. This will prove to be the best safeguard against the allegations of a corrupted text. To offer a fuller elaboration on the open transmission Dr. White writes, “Since the gospel went to

¹⁸ James White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 64.

¹⁹ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 10-11.

²⁰ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 56.

²¹ *Ibid.* 291-292.

‘all people’ all sorts of different people had direct access to the New Testament and therefore were able to make copies of the documents in a language they understood.”²² White concludes, “Christians were open about spreading their message far and wide, and as a result, the New Testament text went far and wide as well.”²³ This openness of the text prevented any one people group, government, or nation from controlling the text and therefore having the ability to alter or manipulate the manuscripts. This is the benefit to having such a surplus of manuscript copies. Despite what the Muslims may allege it simply would be an impossibility to change all the readings of the text or corrupt them without any obvious notice. To set this in perspective, if only one manuscript did exist, one would have to trust the source that provided that manuscript and hope that nothing was changed or altered. Thus, the authenticity of a single manuscript would always be cast in doubt. The New Testament manuscripts avoids this dilemma.

Conclusion

In closing, the words of the cover story from *Time* magazine in 1974 could be restated today, “After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived- and is perhaps better for the siege. Even on the critic’s own terms -historical fact- the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.”²⁴ It has been demonstrated and can be said with a significant degree of certainty that God has indeed providentially preserved His Word through the manuscript evidence preserved through the millennia. By the “embarrassment of riches” of the number of

²² White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 70.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “The Bible: The Believers Gain,” *Time*, 30 December 1974, 41.

manuscripts discovered, the tenacity of the text, and the use of open transmission, the question “Did God actually say?” can be answered with yes and it has been preserved.

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