

Providential Preservation of Scripture

The doctrine of divine inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture naturally expects that the original words written by the inspired prophets and apostles would be providentially preserved and made available to all of God's people everywhere the Gospel spreads throughout history. Without providential preservation the doctrine of inspiration is of little practical value because it would lack a reliable foundation for authority. While Scripture does not explicitly articulate the doctrine of providential preservation, the doctrine may be undoubtedly inferred from a variety of Biblical statements.¹ Given these facts, it is possible for people to believe in providential preservation of the Biblical text, but differ over the manner in which they believe the text was preserved.

One may speculate about how the Biblical text could or should have been preserved, but a better approach is to examine what has actually *been* preserved—the surviving Bibles of antiquity. Unless one favors selective providence, every ancient Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament that has survived has done so because of providence. Every ancient Bible was the property of some church or private individual. Each Bible was regarded as the divinely inspired word of God by its owner and was used as authority for doctrine and practice.² Apart from a few scholars in antiquity, owners of those ancient Bibles were unaware of the minor variations between their Bible and that of others; just as most modern owners of King James Bibles are unaware of the hundreds of textual differences between the various editions of the KJV. This manner of preservation was true everywhere throughout history. Otherwise one must embrace selective, special providence in order to justify a theory of preservation that says only certain ancient Bibles enjoyed special providential preservation and the others survived under subversive influence outside the purview of providence. But where in God's universe is providence not operative?

Since no one claims that any surviving ancient Bible (manuscript) is a flawless copy of the original text, then the original text must reside, not in any particular Bible, but in the consensus of the all the surviving ancient Bibles. Since all the surviving ancient Bibles have been preserved by divine providence, then all should contribute to the consensus. However, since also all

¹ For example Matt. 5:10; Luke 16:17; 21:33. Some have supposed that Psalm 12:6-7 asserts the doctrine of preservation. However in the Hebrew text, the grammar determines that the antecedent of the pronoun “them” must be the poor and needy of verse 5, not the words of the Lord in verse 6.

² Surviving ancient Bibles (manuscripts) do not deny or contradict Biblical doctrines. But in places where variations occur some manuscripts may express a doctrine in stronger or weaker terms than others do. Ancient manuscripts are not *doctrinally* corrupt; in a textual context, the term *corrupt* refers to the presence of non-original readings. All manuscripts contain non-original readings to some degree and thus are textually corrupt, some more than others.

are genealogical descendants of the original autograph, and thus enjoy genealogical relationships, their consensus should be determined genealogically rather than by mere numerical preponderance. Following the principle of numerical preponderance rather than genealogical descent, one could conclude that Adam and Eve must have been Chinese, because the Chinese now out number all other racial groups. Obviously mere numbers do not determine genealogical descent. Numerical preponderance fails in many places of variation in the Bible where the witnesses divide into two and sometimes three equal groups. In such places some other principle must function in order to determine consensus, such as genealogy or internal evidence. But if one of these alternate principles can determine consensus in the difficult places where numerical preponderance fails, then it surely is more reliable in the less difficult places. Consequently, I conclude that the autographic text of the Bible has been providentially preserved in the genealogical consensus of the surviving ancient Bibles. Genealogical consensus is essentially the method behind the current editions of the Nestle-Aland and United Bible Society's Greek New Testament. When better methods for determining genealogical consensus become available they should be welcomed.

One may object that the editors of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament hold to questionable theology and have made some questionable decisions about what readings they regard as original. That is true, but their theological views are known and none of the editors has tried to legislate me and fellow believers to prison or death for not agreeing with them. They have clearly articulated and published the textual principles they follow in their decision making process. They have identified and published the places in the New Testament text where variations occur, and have listed the variants at each place together with the ancient witnesses supporting each variant—Greek Bibles (manuscripts), translations, and quotations of Church Fathers. How much more honest and aboveboard can one be? Even though I may not agree with some of their textual decisions, at least I have the preserved evidence at hand that enables me to know why I should disagree. When I hold their Greek New Testament in my hand I know that I have a book containing the words penned by the apostles, either in the main body of the printed text itself, or as one of the variants listed in the textual notes at the bottom of the page. I have the privilege of examining the preserved evidence and judging for myself which readings are original. I may not be able to judge with certainty in every case, but at least I know that at every place of variation one of the variants I hold in my hand was penned by the apostle.

What are the alternatives? One may speculate that special divine providence was operative when Erasmus' first edition of the Greek New Testament came off the printing press, thus establishing a providential precedent. But was not providence also operative when the second

and third and fourth corrected editions came off the press? Yes! Was the text in those early printed editions based on the consensus of all the existing ancient Bibles? No! They were based on the consensus of a small handful of manuscripts that happened to be on hand at the time. Succeeding editions were corrected as additional manuscript evidence became available. That practice has continued to the present time, except in circles that now think they have a fixed providentially approved text. In my opinion, this is a wrong conclusion. Providentially preserved ancient Bibles continue to be discovered and become available to contribute to the consensus. And that process should not stop because of prejudice.

One may speculate that special providence authenticated the text of the Reformation. This text is sometimes called the *Textus Receptus* or the “received” text. But the British and European reformers did not agree on which printed edition of the Greek New Testament was the “received” text. Those in England accepted Robert Stephanus’ third edition of 1550 as the “received” text, and those on the mainland accepted Elzevir’s edition of 1633 as their “received” text even though the texts differ in at least 287 places. Likewise, the translations they made did not consistently follow their “received” edition of the Greek New Testament, but were eclectic, picking and choosing from several differing editions. So there was no consistent textual consensus among the reformers. And no one can hold in their hand a printed edition of the Greek New Testament claiming that it is the flawless authority behind the various translations the reformers made.

One may speculate that special providence authenticated the Greek text underlying the King James Bible, that is, the Greek words chosen by the textual decisions of the King James translators. However, just as in the case of the textual editors of the Nestle-Aland New Testament, the King James translators held some theological views I regard as questionable. But unlike the textual editors of the Nestle-Aland New Testament, some of the King James translators attempted to legislate me out of existence.³ Because, if it were not that my dissenting British ancestors fled (by the providence of God) for their lives, I would not be here to write on providential preservation.

The King James translators did not fully follow their “received” edition of the Greek New Testament, but picked and chose from several editions, including the Latin Vulgate and the Greek Septuagint, as though none of the existing editions was totally reliable. Yet they left no

³ For example, Thomas Ravis, George Abbot, and Lancelot Andrewes approved and abetted persecution and death for dissenters. And King James himself spearheaded the operation.

printed edition containing the words of their textual decisions.⁴ They did not articulate and publish the textual principles they followed, nor the reasons for their textual choices. They seldom recorded the places in the text where variations occur, and never recorded the manuscript evidence supporting their decisions.⁵ Yet it is known that they occasionally included readings found in only a small number of Greek manuscripts,⁶ or none at all;⁷ and they sometimes omitted readings found in most of the manuscripts.⁸ It is also known that some of their textual decisions were motivated by theological and political pressure to support Anglican ecclesiology and the divine rights of kings. All of this leaves me reluctant to trust the text underlying their translation because they left little textual documentation, giving the impression that their undocumented decisions were totally certain. I have no way of checking their decisions without consulting the textual evidence supplied by the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament.

Now, having said all this, I do not regard textual variations to be of any serious theological significance. Biblical hermeneutics, the principles for interpreting Scripture, understand that Biblical doctrines are expressed redundantly in a variety of ways. No doctrine is established by one isolated verse, but by the consensus of multiple passages in various contexts. No passage with textual uncertainty is ever granted the authority to settle a doctrinal issue. Consequently, textual variations cannot and do not affect doctrine and should not be of serious concern except to textual specialists who deal with these issues. The manner in which the Biblical text was providentially preserved should not be a test of orthodoxy or for ecclesiastical fellowship. Those who do so render a disservice to themselves and those who trust and follow them.

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⁴ The Trinitarian Bible Society edition of the *Textus Receptus* that lies behind the English words of the King James Bible was first published in 1894. So for almost 300 years no tangible Greek New Testament was available that fully accounted for the English words in the King James Bible. This edition lists no places of variation, giving readers the impression that all readings are of equal certainty. No printed edition of the Hebrew Bible yet fully accounts for the English words in the King James Old Testament; the edition of Christian David Ginsburg was not produced for that purpose and fails to support the King James Bible in numerous places.

⁵ According to F. H. A. Scrivener the KJV 1611 had 67 marginal notes indicating alternate readings in the Hebrew or Greek manuscripts. See, for example, Luke 17:36; Acts 13:18; 25:6; Eph. 6:9; James 2:18; 1 Pet. 2:21; etc.

⁶ Luke 17:36; Acts 8:37; 9:5-6; 15:34; 1 John 5:7-8, etc.

⁷ Acts 9:5-6.

⁸ Matt. 27:34; Luke 10:22; John 8:11; James 4:12, etc.