

# PRESERVATION

The third step in the process that God used in bringing Divine Truth from Himself to us is called preservation.

Revelation

Inspiration

Preservation

**Definition:** Preservation refers to the providential protection of the inspired writings which are Divine Truth, from loss alteration through the centuries.

## I. The Limitations of Preservation: That is, what is not included in Preservation.

**A. The Original Manuscripts.** At the onset of this section it should be understood that we are not in possession of the autographs. The word "autograph" comes from two Greek words. "Auto" means "self" and "graphe" means "writing". The autographs then are the actual texts written by the authors themselves. What we have instead are copies of the originals, or better, copies of copies of copies, of copies of the originals. The questions may be interjected here, why don't we have the autographs?

Why did God not preserve those? The answer is not easy. There are several views, but the one I am most comfortable with is that man is notorious for idol worship. It is possible that by not preserving the autographs, God protected us from bibliolatry, the worship of the text instead of the God revealed in them.

**B. Perfect Copies.** You might notice in the definition of preservation I also mentioned that God protected the scripture from "significant" alteration, not from **any** alteration. Why? I believe the reason is the same. If we had a perfect copy of the text of scripture, man in his propensity to worship would be tempted to idolize the scripture. Now I want to be quick to say, don't let that scare you. I didn't say that the copies that we have are unreliable or inaccurate. We have very accurate copies of the originals. And even though they are not perfect, understand that no truth, no doctrine is harmed by that fact. You'll see what I mean as we continue.

**II. The Manner of Preservation:** How did God preserve the copies, and how do we know that what we have as our Bible is an accurate reflection of the autographs? The answer to the first question is that God used human instruments in preservation as well as inspiration. And remember that the use of human instruments did not limit God's ability to perfectly inspire the scripture and it does not limit His ability to preserve it. And as we see how they were used, we will also see the answer to the second question.

**A. Preservation in the Old Testament:** Four hundred years before Christ, after the writing of Malachi the final book of the Old Testament, Jewish scribes began to gather the manuscripts of scripture and make copies of them. And there were two groups of those scribes that I want to discuss with you.

**1. The Sopherim** ("Sopher" means "scribe" and when you put an [im] on the end of a Hebrew word it becomes plural. The Sopherim were a group of Jewish scholars who interpreted and taught biblical law and ethics from about the 5th century BC to about 200 BC. According to Jewish tradition, (That is, the Talmud, which are rabbinical commentaries on the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible.) the first of the sopherim was the biblical prophet Ezra. Ezra and his disciples initiated a tradition of rabbinic scholarship that remains to this day a fundamental feature of Judaism.

One of things that this early group of scribes did was copy the Scripture. In an age of computers that correct spelling, grammar, punctuation and just about anything else, it is difficult to imagine the care with which the scripture was handled in making sure that the copies were an accurate reflection of the original. Over the years, the Jewish scribes developed rigorous stipulations for copying biblical scrolls. The Talmud contains an entire

essay, almost an individual book, devoted to the rules for the work of the scribes. There are rules for the writing materials, the size and dimensions of the scrolls, and the size of the columns, lines and rules for where paragraphs can start.

The rules for writing each letter and each word are just as meticulous. When the copies were being made the scribe could do nothing from memory. He had to copy the manuscript in his possession letter by letter returning his eyes each time to the manuscript and then to the copy. Then in order to make accurate copies the words and letters were counted. But not only were they counted; they were placed in exactly the same location. The scribe counted the number of times a particular word occurred in the book, and he noted the middle word and the middle letter in the book, comparing all of these with his original. By making these careful checks, he hoped to avoid any scribal errors.

That doesn't mean that they never made a mistake, but it was very seldom. By the time Jesus was born, the Hebrew Old Testament had been copied and recopied over a span of more than four hundred years, yet during that time the scribes guarded the Old Testament text very well. It has been determined that on the average, they mistakenly copied only one letter out of every 1580 they wrote down. And they usually corrected those when they made another copy from that one.

**2. The Masorites.** After the Sopherim passed from the scene; another group of scribes called the Masorites, meaning (Tradition Keepers), began where the Sopherim left off. They too were careful scribes and are most well-known for preserving the pronunciation of Hebrew words. Ancient Hebrew was a consonantal language, that is, it had no vowels. Pronunciation was passed down by oral tradition, (That is from generation to generation.). so it looked like this.

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ **Genesis 1:1**

But after the diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews through the world, it was feared that the vocalization might be lost forever. Also there capitalization wasn't used to mark the beginning of a sentence and usually no spaces between words. So imagine reading the bible like this.

(fwsywhvnsnwdcvrslvsndthtrthsntns)

Ok let's make it easier. I'll provide spaces between the words. How about now?

(f w s y w h v n s n w d c v r s l v s n d t h t r t h s n t n s)

Ok here it is with vowels. **1John 1:8** "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

So the Masorites developed a system of vowels call "pointing" for the Hebrew language. They consisted of dots configured in a variety of ways placed under a consonant to be vocalized between it and the next consonant.

Here's **Genesis 1:1** in Hebrew, again, without pointing.  
Now here it is with pointing.

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ  
בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

In doing so God used the Masorites to preserved the ancient Hebrew language and with it, the text of the Old Testament. It is from this group of scholar-scribes that we get the Masoretic Text, which is the authoritative Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible and is also widely used as the basis for translations of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles. There were many other contributions made by the Sopherim and the Masorites to the preservation of the text of scripture, but what we have seen is enough to illustrate that great care was taken to insure that the texts of the Old Testament were preserved.

**B. The New Testament.** What about the New Testament? Was the same care taken to insure the accuracy of the text? We do not have evidence of **that** kind of care regarding the New Testament. But God has provided a different means of preservation for the New Testament. In the early years of the New Testament, Christianity was an illegal religion. There was great persecution, first by the Jews and then by the Romans and with it many attempts to destroy the writings that would eventually comprise the New Testament. Because of this persecution, most of those who copied the scripture in those early centuries of the New Testament era, were not professional scribes but persecuted believers who just wanted their own copy of whatever portion of the New Testament was available to them.

As I mentioned, what we do have however is another kind of evidence of the faithful preservation of the New Testament. That evidence is found in the number of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts in our possession. We have thousands of copies of portions of the New Testament (I'll give you some specifics later) and by examining and comparing the existing copies and fragments it is possible to determine with incredible accuracy, the words of the original manuscripts.

### **Textual Criticism:**

Let's start by reading **Acts 8:37** from the New International Version (NIV). You will find it in a footnote at the bottom of the page. "*Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The official answered, 'I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'*" Now why is this verse left out of the NIV? Well the translators give a brief explanation before the verse in the footnote. It says, "Some late manuscripts say..." What does that mean?

In order to understand this we must do a brief study of what is called "Textual Criticism". As mentioned earlier we do not have in our possession the "autographs", the original manuscripts of the Bible, written by the biblical authors themselves. Instead we have copies of those manuscripts. Something else that most Christians don't know is that we don't just have just one copy of the whole Bible or one copy each of all the books of the Bible from which we make all of our translations. Actually there are many. We'll talk about how many in just a moment.

Not only do we have many copies of these manuscripts, but those copies (which remember were made by hand) were made over a long period of time. Further, the copies are not all exactly alike for obvious reasons. Some of them read differently than others. The questions that must follow here are, "How do we know which ones are correct and which ones do we use to translate the Bible"? That's where the study of textual criticism comes in.

Now when I use the word "**criticism**" or "**textual critic**" here, it's not being used in the negative sense. The word "**criticism**" can simply mean "**analyze**". So the study of **textual criticism** could be called **textual analysis**. When I was a young Bible student and I heard this phrase, I immediately threw up a barrier because I misunderstood the meaning of the word. But we are called to carefully examine and analyze the scripture and the study of textual analysis is one of the ways that we "*study (the scripture) to show ourselves approved*" as the Bible commands. (**2Timothy 2:15**)

We need to be careful here, because there **are** two kinds of biblical "**Criticism**", and one of them **is** harmful. The other is helpful. What we call "**textual criticism**" or "**lower criticism**" is helpful and that is what I'm talking about here. **Textual criticism, by the use of observable and verifiable facts, seeks to discover the exact reading of the original manuscripts, that is the "autographs", which were inerrant.**

The other kind of criticism that is harmful is called "**Higher Criticism**". It's often called "**German Higher Criticism**" because it began with a German Rationalist named Julius Wellhausen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then it spread to the rest of Europe and to the United States. Higher criticism is very subjective. It starts with certain presuppositions such as "there is no such thing as the supernatural", or "there is no such thing as prophetic revelation". And it proceeds from there to prove its presupposition, and not from demonstrable facts but from

subjective inference. That is, a conclusion not based on evidenced drawn from the text, but from unverifiable theories or speculation **about** the text **or read into** the text.

For instance, higher critics don't believe the first 5 books of the O.T. were written by Moses. Why? **Because they have already rejected prophetic revelation.** (Even though Jesus himself attributed these books to Moses). And so they come up with an elaborate explanation of how and who wrote these books. It's called the Documentary Hypothesis, and it lists the "**supposed**" existence of four different documents in the Pentateuch, supposedly written by **several different authors** over a period of hundreds of years.

Again the reason I make this point is simply to demonstrate the difference between textual criticism, which is just good scholarship, and in no way damages or threatens the revealed truth of scripture, and higher criticism which is a very biased attempted to tear apart the authority of the Word of God.

### **Now I mentioned that there are many copies of manuscripts.**

There are as a matter of fact over 5500 manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts of the New Testament alone, (At least that have been discovered to this date). What do I mean by **manuscripts**? The printing press wasn't invented until the 15th century, so when we talk about **manuscripts** we mean copies of the scripture that were made by hand, primarily in the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, (although there were manuscripts made in other languages - especially Latin), over a period of around 3000 years. That is, copies made by hand from Moses until the invention of the printing press by German Goldsmith, Johannes Gutenberg in 1450.

Since these manuscripts were copied over and over by hand, and copied from one to the other, (That is they were not just copies of the originals, they were copies of copies of copies.), as we mentioned, there are differences in them. These differences are called "variants". (Differences in the way they read.) Now the obvious question is, how can the scripture be authoritative if there are that many variants? Well first of all we must be careful not to mistake a variant for an error. The vast majority of the variants are simply differences in spelling, the addition or subtraction of a definite article, or the presence or absence of a movable v (nu) which is the Greek equivalent of the difference between "a" and "an". **And no doctrine of scripture is threatened by these variants.**

Now let me answer the question that brought us to this point. "How do we know which manuscripts are correct or closest to the original and which ones do we use to translate the Bible"? There are two primary tests used to discover the accuracy of a manuscript. They are (1) Age, and (2) Number.

Suppose that we have a N.T. passage of scripture that is in question. And we have a thousand manuscripts that contain the passage. Of those 1000 let's say that 956 of them read one way and 44 of them read another way. Now if this was all you had to go on, and if you had no bias, which reading would you trust the most? Probably, (Not always), but probably the one with the most manuscripts supporting it.

All right now here's the second test and this one usually carries even more weight than the first. Suppose of those 1000 manuscripts 700 of them were written between AD 900-1200 and the other 300 were written between AD 150-500. Which would carry the most weight and why? The manuscripts that were written closer to the original would be more likely to accurately reflect the autograph. Because have gone through fewer copyings, there has been less occasion for scribal errors.

One reason why it's important occasionally to make a new translation of scripture, is because often, more manuscripts, and more ancient manuscripts, (that is manuscripts written closer to the date of the autograph) are found and added to the number that can be used to analyze the text. For instance, when the KJV was translated in 1611 it was based on only 6 manuscripts that dated from the 10th-12th century A.D., a thousand years after the writing of the original. But as time went on (In the last 400 years) we discovered more and earlier manuscripts. By 1881 we had 2000 manuscripts, some of which dated all the way back to the 4th century A.D.

By 1973 we had 5000 and today we have 5500 manuscripts, with some dating back as early as 150 A.D. That's within 50-60 years of the writing of John's gospel, and the Revelation and 50 years from the death of John which means that it is only one generation removed from the original, and it could actually have been a copy of the original. So by determining the age of the manuscript and the number of manuscripts, and considering the relative insignificance of most variants, we can come to a very satisfactory conclusion that, while the particular translation that you hold in your hand is not perfect, (There is no such thing as a perfect **translation**. When we talk about the Bible being inerrant we are talking about the autographs.), but again, while the particular translation that you hold in your hand is not perfect, it is never the less a very, very accurate and reliable reflection of the original writings of the biblical authors. **And no doctrine of the Bible has been lost or altered.**