

Bible - Inspiration & Authority

How do we know that the authentic Bible has been providentially preserved by God?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

We know this for two reasons. First, God has promised very specifically that He would do it. Second, the historical evidence shows God's continuing faithfulness to His promise.

What's At Issue?

If the authentic, untainted Word of God is to be translated from the original Hebrew and Greek into our own language, we need to have an authentic original. How can we know that we have an authentic original today, thousands of years after the Bible was written?

The Bible itself gives us the answer. The same God who calls upon His people to obey the Bible alone in every area of life and ministry has also made a vital promise concerning His Word: He will preserve it and keep it pure in all ages. We have this promise from Christ Himself, who declared that until heaven and earth shall pass away, not a single letter nor even the smallest stroke of a single letter of the Scriptures shall be taken away (Matthew 5:18). Jesus also said that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). We have God's promise that "the Word of the Lord endures forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Providential Preservation: A Vital Doctrine

Today many Evangelicals do not grasp the vital importance of God's promise to preserve His Word uncorrupted in all ages. One result is the use, in many translations, of highly questionable source texts that do not bear the marks of His providential

preservation. The church does this at its peril. If we are not careful to use authentic source texts for the translation of the Scriptures into our own language, the inevitable result will be a Bible version that is less than fully the Word of God.

Which source texts are the authentic ones? Hundreds of books and essays have been written on this question. The correct answer involves careful evaluation of thousands of pieces of evidence using the sciences of linguistics and textual analysis. Without getting bogged down in those daunting details, what follows is a very brief summary of the answer.

Although we do not have the original manuscripts, it is clear that God has providentially preserved His Word in the original languages. There is more manuscript evidence for the authenticity of the Old and New Testaments than for any other book, ancient or modern. For example, there are over 5,000 manuscripts of the books of the Greek New Testament, some of them from as early as 50 years after the time of the apostles. By comparison, there are only seven available manuscripts of the writings of Plato, and the earliest is from 1,200 years after his death. Yet postmodern scholars rarely question the authenticity of the writings of Plato, while constantly questioning the authenticity of the New Testament!

The Preserved Hebrew Text

The Hebrew text. Beginning with Moses, God made provisions for the preservation of the Hebrew text of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Every Israelite was commanded to know the Torah and to teach it to his children (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-9, 11:19). An original copy of the Torah was kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:19-29) which was first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. In due course, Hebrew scholars tell us, manuscripts of the books of the rest of the Old Testament were added until they became a complete authoritative manuscript of the Old Testament. At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., Jewish

scholars met at Jamnia, northeast of Gaza, and began what became the work of the Masoretes, Jewish scribes who preserved the authentic text until the 11th century. Other scribes took over the work until the 15th century. In the 16th century, Jacob ben Chayim produced an authenticated version of the Masoretic text which has come to be known as the Hebrew portion of the Received Text. This is the source text for the Geneva Bible used by the Pilgrims (1560), the King James Bibles of both 1611 and 1769 (the Authorized Version used today), and the New King James Bible (1982).

A Hebrew text of the Old Testament called the Bahya ben Asher text, produced by a competing group of scribes, is considered by the most careful scholars to be much less authentic; there are over 20,000 differences from the ben Chayim text. Yet the ben Asher text is the one used for the Old Testament in most Bible versions today. Later in this series, we'll explain why.

The Preserved Greek Text

The Greek text. As noted earlier, over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist today, some from the early decades after the apostles. Most of these support what is called the Byzantine body of manuscripts. Beginning in the 1500s, scholars such as Erasmus, Stephens, and Beza used these manuscripts to compile the Greek New Testament portion of what is now called the Received Text of the Bible. The Protestant Reformers and their successors used the Received Text to produce the English Bibles named above, among others. In the 1800s, English scholar John Burgon did extensive research proving that the Greek text used by the post-apostolic church fathers was the same as what is now known as the Received Text.

What About the Critical Text?

However, in the late 1800s another form of the Greek New Testament, called by various names (e.g., Alexandrian, Westcott-Hort, Nestle-Aland, or Critical Text),

became the one used for most New Testament translations. This text omits many words, verses, and passages found in the Received Text and in the translations that are based on it. The Critical Text is based on a small handful of Greek manuscripts dating from the 4th century onward. The Critical Text varies greatly from Greek New Testament quotations found in the writings of post-apostolic church fathers. The Critical Text differs from the Received Text over 5,300 times, omitting over 2,800 words from the Gospels alone. Many of these omissions affect essential doctrines such as the deity and virgin birth of Christ.

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We have God's very specific promise to preserve His Word, and the evidence that He has kept it.

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