

THE WORD OF GOD FOR OUR GENERATION:
PRESERVATION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

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Edward Hills, in his classic work, “The King James Version Defended,” reminds us that the Holy Spirit convinces us of three things with regard to the Scripture:

1. The Infallible Inspiration of the Scriptures: Jesus recognised Moses (Mk. 12.36), David (Lk. 20.42), and Daniel (Matt. 24.15) by name as authors of the writings assigned to them by OT believers. Jesus believed the Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit (*“For David himself said by THE HOLY GHOST, the LORD said to my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool”* Mk. 12.36), not one word of them could be denied (*“and the scripture cannot be broken”* Jn. 10.35), and not one particle of them could perish (*“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”* Matt. 5.18) and that everything in them was divinely authoritative (*“It is written”* Matt. 4.4, 7, 10). This same high view of the OT Scriptures was held and taught by the Apostles: *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God”* 2 Tim. 3.16; *“For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost”* 2 Pet. 1.20-21.

Jesus promised that the NT would be infallibly inspired:

“I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall HE speak: and he will show you things to come.” Jn.16.12-13;

“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” Jn. 14.26.

And the apostles were conscious that as they wrote they did so under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”* 1 Cor. 14.37.

Thus, *“every word of God is pure”* Prov. 30.5.

2. The Eternal Origin of the Scriptures: Jesus affirmed that the very words which he spoke had been given to Him by God the Father before the creation of the world: *“For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that*

his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak." Jn. 12.49-50;

And in his high-priestly prayer Jesus states emphatically the words he spoke had been given to Him in eternity: *"For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me."* Jn. 17.8.

The Scriptures, therefore, are eternal: *"For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven."* Ps. 119.89.

Although the Scriptures were written during a definite historical period, they are not the product of that period; they are not the product of that period but of the eternal plan of God. When God designed the Holy Scriptures in eternity, He had the whole sweep of human history in view. Hence the Scriptures are forever relevant: *"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."* Isa. 40.8.

- 3. The Providential Preservation of Scriptures:** The reality of this providential preservation of the Scripture was proclaimed by the Lord Himself: *"For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."* Matt. 5.18;

"And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail." Lk. 16.17.

Here our Lord assures us that the OT text in common use among the Jews during His earthly ministry was an absolutely trustworthy reproduction of the original text written by Moses and the other inspired authors. Nothing had been lost from the text, and nothing ever would be lost. It would be easier for heaven and earth to pass than for such a loss to take place. Jesus also taught that the same divine providence that had preserved the OT would preserve the NT. Implicit in the Great Commission is the promise that through the working of God's providence the Church will always be kept in possession of an infallible record of Jesus' words and works: *"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."* Matt. 24.35; Mk. 13.31; Lk. 21.33."¹

Now, the Lord's people recognise the Providence of God and that its operations are clearly seen as the past is reviewed (*"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him."* 2 Chron. 16.9).

- For instance, taking the life of Joseph in retrospect, it is evident that Divine Providence ruled and overruled in all his vicissitudes, so that being sold and taken into Egypt, and his unjust imprisonment there, were links in a chain which led to his becoming the powerful minister of Pharaoh, in which capacity he was able to succour his father and his brethren in their necessity.

¹ E. F. Hills, "The King James Version Defended," pp. 88-90.

- The same over-ruling Providence is seen in the life of Moses, in that he was wondrously rescued from a watery grave as an infant, brought up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, received the best education and training that Egypt could give, and thus qualified, later, to be God's ambassador to Pharaoh, and to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness.
- So that by God's Special Providence, we have in mind the Sovereignty of God as he over-rules all the affairs of men to accomplish His Sovereign purposes in the earth: "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*" Romans 8.28.
- And the subject of this paper, is the Special Providence of God which has over-ruled the malice of men, and the fraud and corruption of Satan, to ensure that His Inspired Written Word is Preserved.

There are four terms which need definition:

The terms: *inerrancy and infallibility*.

Theodore Letis points out that the term *Inerrancy* as a term was first used in 1625 as a technical term for fixed stars. It is an astronomical term. It was first used in a religious context in 1865 by Edward Pusey to speak of the inerrancy of the Pope's preservation from error!

It was used by B. B. Warfield to refer to the original autographs. "It always invites the quest for the historical text, which in turn culminates in the quest for the historical Jesus. **This one word, inerrancy, has led to the complete destruction of the classical Protestant view of Scripture.** All exegetical and confessional literature of the 16th and 17th centuries use the word **INFALLIBLE** and never **INERRANCY**."²

The terms: *autographa and apographa*.

The Sacred *Apographa* are the faithful copies of the originally inspired *autographa* (the original manuscripts written by the hands of those holy men of God who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost). Apographa, meaning transcript, copies from an original manuscript.

Having defined the terms, I want us to consider four things:

1. The Current "Evangelical" Position
2. The Biblical Doctrine of Preservation
3. The Historic Reformed Understanding of the Doctrine of Preservation
4. The Process of Divine Preservation

² T. Letis, "The Ecclesiastical Text," p. 70.

1. The Current “Evangelical” Position.

Dr. Theodore Letis in his books, “*The Ecclesiastical Text*” and “*The Protestant Dogmaticians and the Late Princeton School on the Status of the Sacred Apographa*,” traces the influence of nineteenth century textual criticism. Since the late nineteenth century, the lower or textual criticism precipitated the ***autographic inerrancy theory*** adopted by several Protestant theologians, such as B. B. Warfield (1851–1921).

One is hesitant to criticise such an indefatigable warrior for Scriptural truth as B. B. Warfield. Many of us have benefited greatly from his published works. Nevertheless, we shall never understand the current “evangelical” position without tracing the influence of Warfield on the Princeton School of theology.

- Warfield began by mastering the discipline of N.T. textual criticism in order to neutralise the threat of higher criticism, and to defend the doctrine of verbal inspiration. But his influence has left its indelible mark, not only at Princeton in his lifetime, but sadly, on the current “evangelical” view of Scripture.
- Warfield distanced himself from the historic Protestant approach to textual criticism which regarded the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the O.T. and the Textus receptus of the N.T. had been providentially preserved. This doctrine was enshrined in the creedal statements of the 17th century.
- From 1881, Warfield centred final authority in the autographic text. Warfield rejected the “received text.” He wrote, “*reverence for the Word of God, perversely but not unnaturally exercised, erected the standard or received text into the norm of a true text.*”³ He believed that a far better text was emerging!
- In abandoning the Textus Receptus he was abandoning the text thought to be verbally inspired by those divines who produced the Westminster Confession of Faith.
- Inspiration was therefore relegated to the non-extant autographs. However, he argued, when once they were reconstructed they would be inerrant in a way which far surpassed the text thought by the Westminster divines to be inspired.

³ B. B. Warfield, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), p.216

- On December 2nd 1882, Warfield published an article in which he declared that the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel are not to be regarded as part of the Word of God, "*We are not then, to ascribe to these verse the authority due to God's Word.*"⁴ Warfield had accepted the German Higher Critical interpretation of the passage.
- When Westcott & Hort's critical Greek text appeared in 1881, Warfield gave it a favourable review, "*We cannot doubt but that the leading principles of method which they have laid down will meet with speedy universal acceptance. They furnish us for the first time with a really scientific method.*"⁵ He accepted their claim to have reconstructed a neutral text, based on their claim that they had discovered "*seemingly the pure stock from which all others in existence appear to have diverged.*"⁶ Warfield also adopted the German method of "**conjectural emendation,**" which is no more than guessing what the true reading was!
- Warfield's view that only the original autographic text was inspired led him to re-interpret the Westminster Confession of Faith itself. Letis writes, "*The Confession which had once taught the providential preservation of the extant Church texts, was now used to affirm the providential restoration of an inerrant original text, by means of modern text criticism. Because he[Warfield] argued, We believe in God's continuous care over the purity of His Word, we are able to look upon the labours of the great critics of the nineteenth century – a Tregelles, a Westcott, a Hort - ... as instruments of providence in preserving [read: restoring] the Scriptures pure for the use of God's people.*"⁷
- For Warfield, the Westminster Confession no longer taught providential preservation of the text but rather its providential restoration in the latter part of the nineteenth century:
- Warfield wrote, "*We cannot despair of restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, His book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men.*"⁸

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration assumed that the Textus Receptus was the 'original' text. Warfield clearly did not!

⁴ B. B. Warfield, "The Genuineness of Mark 16.9-20," *Sunday School Times* 24 (Dec. 2, 1882): 755-756.

⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Presbyterian Review* 3 (1882), p. 355.

⁶ B. B. Warfield's review of Westcott & Hort, pp. 342-343.

⁷ Theodore P. Letis, "*The Ecclesiastical Text*" (Institute for Renaissance and Reformed Biblical Studies, 2000) p. 22.

⁸ B. B. Warfield, "The Rights of Criticism and the Church," *The Presbyterian* (April 13, 1892):15; quoted by Letis, p. 27.

Indeed, Warfield began a crusade against the “*uninspired apographa*,” for him, only the *original autographic text* was inspired.

The Scot, Thomas Lindsay (1843–1914) responded to Warfield’s “new theory of inspiration and inerrancy,” and saw clearly that Warfield’s position was much the same as Rome’s. Whereas the Roman Catholic view depends upon the mediation of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, **the modern evangelical depends upon the self-appointed textual critics to tell us what is the Word of God!** He writes, “Where are we to get our errorless Scripture? In the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs? Who are to recover these for us? **I suppose the band of experts in textual criticism who are year by year giving us the materials for a more perfect text.** Are they to be created by-and-by when their labours are ended into an authority doing for Protestants what the “Church” does for Roman Catholics? Are they to guarantee for us the inspired and infallible Word of God, or are we to say that the unknown autographs are unknowable, and that we can never get to this Scripture, which is the only Scripture inspired and infallible in the strictly formal sense of those words as used by the Princeton School? ... I for one shall never consent to erect the scholars whom I esteem into an authority for the text of Scripture which is alone inspired and infallible. That, however, is what this formalist theory is driving us to if we submit to it. I maintain, with all the Reformers, and with all the Reformed Creeds, that the Scriptures, as we now have them, are the inspired and infallible Word of God, and that all textual criticism, ... will not make the Scriptures one whit more inspired or more infallible in the true Scriptural and religious meanings of those words than they are now.”¹⁰

Now, Warfield’s view is the one that is widely held by “evangelicals” today; and not just by evangelicals, but those who claim to be reformed, and those who subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith!

2. The Biblical Doctrine of Preservation

Preservation of the Old Testament

The duty of preserving this Scriptures written by Moses was assigned not to the prophets but to the priests: “*And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, That Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.*” Dt. 31.24-26.

Also the priests were commanded as part of their teaching function, to read the law to the people every seven years: “*Gather the people together, men and women, and children,*

¹⁰ Lindsay, p. 55; quoted by Letis.

and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law.” Dt. 31.12.

The priests were also given the task of making correct copies of the law for the use of kings and rulers, or at least of supervising the scribes to whom the king would delegate this work: *“And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites”*. Dt. 17.18.

The Psalms also were preserved in the Temple by the priests. And some of Solomon’s proverbs were copied out by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah: *“These are also proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.”* Prov. 25.1.

In Herod’s temple, in a special chamber, were deposited and preserved several standard codices of the entire OT from which copies of the whole or parts of it could be made, or existing copies checked and if necessary corrected: *“And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and unto all the elders of Israel.”* Deut.31.9;

“And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, That Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.” Deut. 31.24-26;

“Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the LORD.” 1 Sam. 10.25; 2 Ki. 22.8.

Thus when our Lord said, “It is written” (Matt. 4.4, 6, 7, 10; 21.13; 26.2, 31), or “Have ye not read?”, or similar (Matt. 2.5; 12.3, 5; 19.4; 21.16, 42; 22.31; 24.15) **it meant that the text quoted was to be found in that Temple Standard Scripture and in accurate and preserved copies of it. No one disputed the purity and accuracy of those sacred writings and objected that the text was ‘corrupt’, ‘hopelessly corrupt’, or that the original text was ‘irretrievably lost.’** The Scripture was ever the text at the time recognised by the Synagogue and the early church. And yet, Warfield argued that we must go back till we get to the original non-extant autographs of the authors before we have the inerrant Scripture!

No one, and certainly not our Lord, thought of searching for the original autographs. If inerrancy and certainty are only to be found in this way, they will never be found. **No, they appealed with authority to the extant apographa,** and it is the extant apographa of the OT Scriptures that the apostle declares in 2 Tim. 3.16, that *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God.”*

Isaiah 59.20-21 *“And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD.*

As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever."

- With those who have turned from their transgressions the LORD will make an everlasting covenant. The speaker here is the Lord. The very use of covenantal language (Gen. 9.9; 17.4) call attention to the grace of God in His dealings with His people, the true Israel, the remnant of election according to the promise, the CHURCH. This covenant finds its origin in God. The language is emphatic, twice over the expression "*saith the Lord*".
- The content of the promise is twofold: the church will be in possession of both the SPIRIT and the WORD. **The Spirit from on high, and the words placed in Israel's mouth will never depart from them.** God has placed these words in the mouth of Israel to show they are of divine origin; the Word is not of human origin, it is from God. (see Deut.18.18; 30.14; Rom. 10.8). The Spirit will instruct the church in all truth. As **Calvin** says, "*this is a most valuable treasure of the Church, that he has chosen for himself a habitation in it, to dwell in the hearts of believers by his Spirit, and next to preserve among them the doctrine of his gospel.*" (p. 271).
- The Lord is here declaring that the very words given by inspiration "*put in thy mouth*", **His eternal truth, revealed to man in words, is the peculiar possession of His people.** The pure Word of God and the Holy Spirit will never depart from the church.
- The Redeemer will bestow upon the Church His Spirit and His Word: and these will abide with His church for ever, "*shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, ... from henceforth and for ever.*"
- Calvin says, "*the Prophet promises that which God intends to fulfil.*"
- He will so care for the Church that He will never allow the church to be deprived of the Spirit and the Word. He will never forsake his people, but will always be present with them by "his Spirit" and by "the Word."
- He will not leave the church to the mercies of either an infallible church or a cabal of textual pundits. Here He promises the perpetual presence of His pure Word, and of His Spirit with the prophets, apostles, and ministers, and teachers of the church in all succeeding ages.

Matt. 5.18

"For verily I say unto thee, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."

& Luke 16.17

"And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than for one tittle of the law to fail."

- Heaven and earth are signs of permanence. While they are there, says our Lord, nothing shall pass away, not even a jot or a tittle.

- There is nothing smaller than these, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet and the smallest point in the smallest letter. Heaven and earth shall not pass away until every minute detail shall be absolutely and entirely fulfilled.
- This is one of the momentous and important pronouncements that have ever been made. *“Verily I say unto you.”*
- This is a statement of divine authority. The law that God has laid down, everything that has been said by the prophets, down to the minutest detail, it will hold and stand until its absolute fulfilment.
- Our Lord puts the seal of His supreme authority on the whole of the OT, its inspiration, its infallibility, its preservation. Not a jot or tittle will be lost! This is a vital statement. There is greater stability in the Word of God than there is in the heavens and the earth! Sooner shall heaven fall to pieces, and the whole frame of the world become a mass of confusion, than the stability of the law shall give way. (Calvin) *“There is nothing in the law that is unimportant, nothing that was put there at random; and so it is impossible that a single letter shall perish.”* (Calvin).

And the same divine providence which had preserved the OT would preserve the NT:

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”. Matt. 24.35; Mark 13.31; Luke 21.33.

3. The Classical Protestant Understanding of Preservation.

The Westminster Confession of 1646

The Westminster divines, focussed authority in present, extant copies of the biblical texts (*apographa*). Article VIII states that *“The Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek were immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, and therefore authentic.”* **The stress is on the authenticity and purity of the extant manuscripts in Hebrew and Greek, that is the sacred apographa.**

Formula Consensus Helvetica of 1675

“God, the supreme Judge, not only took care to have His Word, which is the ‘power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth,’ committed to writing by Moses, the prophets, and the apostles, but also watched and cherished it with paternal care ever since it was written up to this present time, so that it could not be corrupted by craft of Satan or fraud of man. Therefore the church justly ascribes it to His singular grace and goodness that she has, and will have to the end of the world, a ‘sure word of prophecy’ and ‘Holy Scripture’ from which, though heaven and earth perish, ‘one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass.’”

The Reformed theologians who constructed the Confessional Statements were so convinced of the Bible's textual purity that they referred to the "*extant apographa*" as the "*original texts*".

John Robinson in his Ph.D. thesis, "The Doctrine of Scripture in the Seventeenth Century Reformed Theology" (1971) writes:

*"Reformed theologians were not arguing for the obvious authenticity of the no longer extant autographs. Instead, they were claiming authenticity for the received texts which they referred to as the 'authentic sources,' the 'first editions,' the 'Greek and Hebrew originals,' the 'original texts.' The authenticity of the Greek and Hebrew 'sources' was held to be absolute both in form and content . . . In summary, the Reformed theologians held that only the received Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament were authentic, authoritative editions of the Scriptures."*¹

In other words,

- They did not appeal to non-extant autographa. They appealed to the Greek and Hebrew texts that they knew, and devoted themselves to translating them into modern languages to give the Word of God to the people; and they used these translations as the Word of God with divine, and infallible authority.
- No one at the time of the Reformation was so foolhardy as to affirm that the 'Canon of Scripture is . . . solely and alone in the original autographs of the inspired authors, which have not one of them been in the possession of the Church since the second century A.D. It is altogether irrational to take the position that the inerrant Bible is solely and alone in the original autographs which no one has seen since the Church had a Canon, and which no one can ever see.'" ²

i) Lutheran Dogmaticians:

- ***Gerhard (1582-1637)*** argued for the providential preservation of the **apographa**.

"Divine Providence did not permit those books to be corrupted and perverted; otherwise the foundation of the church would totter and fall . . . Were one to grant that something in Holy Scripture was changed, most of its genuine authority would disappear.

On the other hand, however, Christ declares, Matt. 5.18 'Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law till all is accomplished.' Also Luke 16.17, 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.' . . .

¹ Quoted by Letis, p. 47.

² Letis, p. 48.

Just as Paul testifies that ‘the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God.’ Namely, those described in the books of the Old Testament, Rom. 3.2; so too, we can say in regard to the primitive Christian Church that it is entrusted with the oracles of God described in the books of the New Testament.

You see, it has received the autographs from the very evangelists and apostles and has faithfully preserved them in the patriarchal churches so that they could correct copies [apographa] and other versions according to the tenor of the autographs.”³

Gerhard quotes with approval Sixtus of Sena who said, “We say that this Greek codex which we are now reading in the church is the very same one which the Greek Church used at the time of Jerome and all the way back to the days of the apostles; it is true, genuine, faithful and contaminated by no fault or falsehood, as a continual reading of all Greek fathers shows very clearly.”⁴

- ***Quenstedt (1617 – 1688)***

“Every Holy Scripture which existed at the time of Paul was theopneustos (2 Tim. 3.16) and authentic. Not the autographic (for they had perished long before), but the apographic writings existed at the time of Paul. Therefore the apographic Scripture also is theopneustos . . .

For although inspiration and divine authority inhered originally in the autographa, these attributes belong to the apographa by virtue of their derivation, since they were faithfully transcribed from them so that not only the sense but also the words were precisely the same.”⁵

“Not only the Canonical books of the sacred volume themselves, but even the letters, points, and words of the original text survive without any corruption, that is, in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament . . . and also the Greek text of the New Testament . . . have been preserved by the divine providence complete and uncorrupted.”⁶

“We believe, as is our duty, that the providential care of God has watched over the original and primitive texts of the canonical Scriptures in such a way that we can now be certain that the sacred codices which we now have in our hands are those which existed at the time of Jerome and Augustine, nay at the time of Christ Himself and His apostles.”⁷

3 Letis p. 37.

4 Letis p. 37.

5 Letis, p. 38.

6 Letis, p. 38.

7 Letis, p.40

And this was the Lutheran position in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

ii) Reformed Dogmatians:

- **John Owen (1616 – 1683):** The publishing of **Walton’s Polyglot (1657)** provided the occasion for one of the most systematic defences of the apographa. Owen was alarmed at Walton’s list of textual variants that gave the impression that the very wording of the New Testament text was in doubt. Owen’s response, ‘*Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of Scriptures,*’ was published in 1659.
- “Of all the inventions of Satan to draw off the minds of men from the Word of God, this decrying the authority of the originals [the apographa] seems to me the most pernicious.”⁸
- “The providence of God hath manifested itself no less concerned in the preservation of the writings than of the doctrine contained in them: the writing itself being the product of his own eternal counsel for the preservation of the doctrine . . . And hence the malice of Satan hath raged no less against the book than against the truth contained in it . . . It is true, we have not the Autographa of Moses and the prophets, of the apostles and the evangelists: but the Apographa or ‘copies’ which we have contain every iota that was in them . . . we affirm that the whole Word of God, in every letter and tittle, as given from him by inspiration, is preserved without corruption.”⁹
- “But to depress the sacred truth of the originals [apographa] into such a condition as wherein it should stand in need of this apology . . . will at length be found a work unbecoming a Christian, Protestant divine. Besides the injury done hereby to the providence of God towards his church, and care of his Word.”¹⁰
- The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were immediately and entirely given out by God himself, . . . so by his good and merciful providential dispensation, in his love to his Word and church, his whole Word, as first given out by him, is preserved unto us entire in the original languages; where shining in its own beauty and lustre (as also in all translations, so far as they faithfully represent the originals⁰, it manifests and evidences unto the consciences of men, . . . its divine original and authority.”¹¹

8 Owen, vol. 16, p. 285.

9 Owen, p. 301.

10 Owen, p. 300.

11 Owen, p. 350.

- “But what, I pray, will it advantage us that God did so once deliver his word, if we are not assured also that that word so delivered hath been, by his special care and providence, preserved entire and uncorrupted unto us. God, whose covenant with his church is that his Word and Spirit shall never depart from it, Isa. 59.21; Matt. 5.18; 1 Pet. 1.25; 1 Cor. 11.23; Matt. 28.20.” We are not left uncertain about the things that are the foundation of all that faith and obedience require at our hands. Owen speaks of ‘copies in the original languages, which the church of God doth now and hath for many ages enjoyed as her chiefest treasure.’¹²
- And again, Owen writes, “The whole of Scripture, entire as given out from God, without any loss, is preserved in the copies of the originals yet remaining. In them all, we say, is every letter and tittle of the word. These copies, we say, are the rule, standard, and touchstone of all translations, ancient or modern, by which they are in all things to be examined, tried, corrected, amended; and themselves only by themselves. Translations contain the word of God, and are the word of God, perfectly or imperfectly, according as they express the words, sense, and meaning of the originals.”¹³
- Owen, rejected “the spurious brood that hath now spawned itself over the face of so much paper, that ought by no means to be brought into competition with the common reading . . . to create a temptation to the reader that nothing is left sound and entire in the word of God.”¹⁴
- And, he goes on to warn, “We went from Rome under the conduct of the purity of the originals; I wish none have a mind to return thither again under the pretence of their corruption.”¹⁵
- “let us now consider the disease intimated, ‘That of old there were sundry copies extant differing in many things from those we now enjoy, according to which the ancient translations were made, whence it is come to pass that in so many places they differ from our present Bibles.’¹⁶
- “And so do what in us lieth to prevent that horrible and outrageous violence which will undoubtedly be offered to the sacred [Scriptures], if every learned mountebank may be allowed to practise upon it with his conjectures.”¹⁷

12 Owen, p. 350.

13 Owen, p. 357.

14 Owen, p. 364.

15 Owen, p. 370.

16 Owen, p. 408.

17 Owen, p. 408.

- “It is the foundation of Mohammedanism, the chiefest and principal prop of Popery that . . . corruptions have befallen toe originals of the Scripture.”¹⁸

Francis Turretin (1623 – 1687)

Professor of Theology at the University of Geneva (1653) made the same point as Owen, in his *‘Institutio Theologiae Elencticae’* (1688). Arguing for the ‘Purity of the Original Text,’ he writes, “This question is forced upon us by the Roman Catholics, who raise doubts concerning the purity of the sources in order more readily to establish the authority of their Vulgate and lead us to he tribunal of the church. . . . By ‘original texts’ we do not mean the autographs from the hands of Moses, the prophets, and the apostles, which are known to be non-existent. We mean copies (apographa), which have come in their name (autographa) because they record for us that Word of God in the same words into which the sacred writers committed it under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. . . . Faithful and accurate copies, not less than autographs, are norms for all other copies . . . and for translations.”¹⁹

4. The Process of Preservation

The Scribes

- Copies made from the originals (autographs) were known as the apographa. It is clear that great care was taken in copying the Scriptures. At first the priests were responsible for this (Deut. 17:18), but later SCRIBES of SOPHERIM (from Heb. SAPHIR, to write) [see Jer. 8:8]. The scribes concentrated on the task of TRANSCRIPTION. Ezra, for example was called “*a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel*” (Ezra 7:11).
- They were not allowed to take a copy from a copy, but only from the preserved codices in the Temple. All existing copies were checked and corrected from the originals.
- The scribes formed themselves into guilds or families: “*And the families of the scribes which dwelt at Jabez...*” (1 Chron. 2:55). The scribes had specific expertise in this field, which together with their profound reverence for Holy Scriptures, meant that the copies they produced were remarkably accurate. So much so, that their copies are designated the “word of God”. David commands Solomon, his son “*Keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to*

18 Owen, p. 408.

19 Quoted by Letis, p. 44.

keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses". Now Solomon would only have had access to a copy, such as is mentioned in Deut. 17:18-19, but this copy is described as "*what is written in the law of Moses*". Such painstaking care had been taken over the copying that the resultant manuscript retained the authority of the original! It was the Word of God, and it was cited as such.

- The originals were probably lost in 586BC when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (2 Chron. 36:17-19). But by then, numerous copies had been made of those precious originals, and these copies were taken into the land of captivity. Daniel quoted from a copy of the Law of Moses (Dan. 9:11) and makes mention of Jeremiah's prophecy (Dan. 9:2). In 537 BC, the Jews returned and re-established worship in Jerusalem "*as it is written in the book of Moses*" (Ezra 6:18). And according to Nehemiah 8:1 the people requested Ezra to bring "*the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel*". This was a copy, but it is called "the law of Moses". God had wonderfully preserved His Word and it retained the same authority as the original.

The Men of the Great Synagogue.

- Ezra assumed the presidency of a body of learned men (Neh. 8:4, 7, 13; Ezra 7:6, 11, 22). Some 120 men including Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi - the men of the Great Synagogue, collected together all copies of the Sacred Scriptures and subjected them to detailed examination and comparison. Many minor errors, inadvertently made, were now corrected. These errors were such as the omission of a letter, a word, or perhaps even a line. Any copies that were found to be particularly faulty were buried in a 'holy place' near to a Jewish synagogue.
- As a result of the Great Synagogue's work, the Second Temple was supplied with a remarkably accurate text. By the time of our Lord's appearance, there were many accurate and reliable copies. And the Lord constantly appears to them.

"It is written" Matt. 4.4, 7, 10; 21.13; 26.24, 31.

Or, he could say, "***have ye not read?***"

- The Scripture quoted could be found in the Temple Standard Scripture. He constantly appealed to them; He read from them in the synagogues; He quoted from them in His public ministry; and He exhorted His hearers to read them for themselves. There can be no doubt that He regarded the extant copies as the **very infallible Word of God**.
- Never once did He call into question the integrity of the Hebrew text. The same could be said of the Apostles (Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; Heb. 1:1,6,7). No one disputed the **purity** and the **accuracy** of these sacred writings. None could object that the text was corrupt, or had been lost! Our Lord asserted that the O.T. Scriptures had been preserved:

Matt. 5.18: *“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in now wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”.*

Luke 16.17: *“And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail”.*

- There is greater stability to the Word of God than there is to the heavens and the earth!
- [Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. The city suffered dreadful damage and the great temple built by Solomon was completely destroyed (2 Chron. 36.17-19). Although not mentioned in the history, it is almost certain that the original writings perished along with the city. However, all was not lost. By that time, numerous copies had been made and some of these were taken into the land of captivity; for we find Daniel quoting from what must have been a copy of the Law of Moses (Dan. 9.11), and also making mention of Jeremiah’s prophecy, a copy of which must also have been in his possession (9.2)
- In 537 BC, the Jews began to return from their captivity and we know that Ezra re-established worship in Jerusalem *“as it is written in the book of Moses”* (Ezra 6.18). This suggests that they had copies of the Scriptures and that they were able to consult them when arranging worship for the second temple. According to Nehemiah 8.1 the people actually requested Ezra to bring *“the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel”*. This was not the original, only a copy – yet it is significantly described as *“the law of Moses”*. Clearly God had wonderfully preserved His Word.

What of the Septuagint?

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament is also frequently quoted by the inspired Apostles in the New Testament. Does this fact not suggest that the Septuagint is an inspired and an accurate text? No, because, in a number of places in the New Testament, the Apostles scrupulously avoid quoting from it:

- Matthew 2:15 *“out of Egypt have I called my son”*(AV), whereas the Septuagint reading of Hosea 11:1 is *“Out of Egypt I called his children”*.
- Romans 10:15 *“And how shall they preach except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things”*(AV), whereas the Septuagint reading of Isa. 52:7 is, *“I am present at a season of beauty upon the mountains, as the feet of one preaching glad tidings of peace, as one preaching good news”*.

So that, whilst some New Testament quotations show a preference for the Septuagint rendering, the variations in these cases will be found to be very minimal:

- Matthew 15:8-9 *“their heart they have removed far from me, and their fearing of me has become a precept of men, a thing taught”*.

- Acts 13:34 *“I will give you the sure mercies of David”*. Quoting Isa. 55:3 The New Testament Greek text actually quotes the Septuagint here, as in the margin of our Authorised Version, *2I will give to you .. the holy things of David, the sure things.*”

The purpose of quoting the Septuagint is often to bring out more clearly the intended meaning of the original. For example in Romans 10:18 the rendering “sound” is preferred to “line” in the quotation from Psalm 19:4 *“their line is gone out in all the earth”*. Becomes *“Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth”*.

The Apostles’ willingness to make use of the Septuagint, in spite of some of its defects, indicates that God’s word can be conveyed through a translation, and that an appeal can be made to a version insofar as it agrees with the original.

The Famous Masoretes:

“God raised up scribes, or sopherim, to produce a remarkably pure text. It fell to others to continue their work and take the necessary steps for its preservation. These were the Masoretes.

The Masoretes knew that the dispersed Jews and their succeeding generations would require copies of the Holy Scriptures and they believed that certain things should be done to ensure the preservation of the pure Hebrew text.

They introduced the vowel-points, fixed accents, explained the meaning of words (where ambiguity existed), supplied marginal readings (to remove obscurity), and marked intended pauses. So meticulous were they in their studies that they even counted the verses, words, and letters of the Old Testament, noting for example that ALEPH occurs 42,377 times; BETH, 38,218 times; GIMEL, 29,537 times; and so on!

Copyists had to follow the Talmud’s strict rules, which included the following: only skins of clean animals were to be used; each skin must contain the same number of columns; there were to be no less than forty-eight and no more than sixty lines; black ink was to be prepared according to a particular recipe; no word or letter was to be written from memory; if so much as a letter was omitted, or wrongly inserted, or even if one letter touched another, the sheet had to be destroyed; three mistakes on a sheet meant that the whole manuscript was condemned; and revision of the copy had to be made within 30 days, for otherwise it had to be rejected. A manuscript surviving this process could hardly be anything but amazingly accurate.” The Lord Gave The Word, Malcolm Watts. Trinitarian Bible Society, p. 9.

Through God’s special providence, we are able to confidently say that in the Hebrew Masoretic Text **we have a text, which is minutely close to the original.**

So that the Old Testament Scriptures were jealously guarded and wonderfully preserved. God used the following means to preserve His Word:

- i) The Jews had a profound reverence for the Holy Scriptures. They trembled at the word of God. According to Josephus they would suffer any torments, even death itself, rather than change anything in God's Word. They feared lest God's Word be corrupted.
- ii) The scriptures themselves contained severe prohibitions against tampering with the Written Word of God: "*ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it*" (Deut. 4:2).
- iii) The scrolls were laid up in the Holy of Holies, near the ark, out of the reach of corrupting hands.
- iv) The scribes and Masoretes secured and preserved a pure text.
- v) There was the oversight of the prophets. Any error in transcription would soon have been detected by them.
- vi) The Jews were in the habit of repeating their Scriptures: "*And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up*" (Deut. 6:7). This created such a holy familiarity with the text that if any word had been changed, it would have been noticed immediately.
- vii) Christ and His apostles confirmed the Old Testament Scriptures. The text they used is the standard text that we use today. Their citation of it as God's Word is an indisputable seal of its authenticity and reliability.

God has preserved His Word in the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. Though we are not in possession of the autographa, nevertheless, in the apographa we have in the words of John H. Skilton, "*God who gave the Scriptures, who works all things after the counsel of his will, has exercised a remarkable care over his Word, has preserved it in all ages in a state of essential purity, and has enabled it to accomplish the purpose for which he gave it*".

But what of the New Testament?

Our Lord taught that the same Divine providence which had preserved the O.T. would preserve the N.T. The New Testament Church would have an infallible guide, the Comforter - the Holy Spirit Himself.

- **John 14.26:** *But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.*"
- **16.12-13:** "*I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.*"

The Holy Spirit exerted His supernatural influence on certain chosen men so that they wrote down that which was infallible. John describes himself as *“the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things”* (see John 21.24-25; 1 John 1.4; Phil. 3.1; 1 Cor. 14.37).

What happened to these original documents? They were immediately recognized by the early church as divinely authoritative.

- **1 Cor. 14.37:** *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”*
- **1 Thess. 2.13** *“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”*

These manuscripts were first read by those to whom they were sent, and then they were circulated so that as many as possible could benefit from the apostles’ teachings:

- **1 Thess. 5.27:** *“I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren”*
- **Rev. 1.3:** *“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand”.*
- **Col. 4.16:** *“And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea”*
- **2 Pet. 3.15-16** *“And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”*

These originals could not have survived long, although Tertullian possibly makes reference to the Greek originals in 200 AD. Yet our Lord asserted that the Christian Scriptures would be preserved, *“Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away”* (Matt. 24.35); *“Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away. But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”* (1 Peter 1.23-25).

Their preservation was secured by faithful, accurate, and conscientious copying. Indeed, even in New Testament days, copies of New Testament books were available to individuals and churches.

- Peter was familiar with Paul’s epistles (2 Peter 3.15,16).

- The Colossian church almost certainly made a copy of their letter so that it could be read in the church at Laodicea, and they in turn had received a copy of the letter sent to the Ephesians (Col. 4.16).
- Certainly by the time of Polycarp, he could write to the Philippians and say that they were “*well versed in the Sacred Scriptures*”.
- The apostles themselves may have made copies, as is indicated by the reference to the “*parchments*” (2 Tim. 4.13), and it is thought that John would have made seven copies of his Revelation (Rev. 1.4-6,2.1,8,18 etc).
- Both Paul and Peter employed secretaries to write the epistles (Rom. 16.22; 1 Pet. 5.12), and they may have been employed in copying.

The Lord had promised “**scribes**” would be given to the church (Matt. 23.34 c.f. 13.52). The copyists would transcribe these documents with scrupulous care:

- NT books were invested with the same authority as OT scriptures (1 Tim. 5.18 “*For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth the corn. And, the labourer is worthy of his reward.*” cites Luke 10.7 and Deut. 25.4 as scripture;
- The copyists would have been converted Jewish scribes whose reverence for God’s written word compelled them to transcribe with perfect accuracy (Jer. 36.28 and Deut. 10.4)
- The writings themselves issued severe prohibitions against any tampering with the text (2 Cor. 2.17: *For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.*” Also, Rev. 22.18-19)
- The apostles were still alive.

However, it is clear that errors did appear in some copies, and as more and more copies were made, there began to appear a number of **variant readings**. Some of these variants were **unintentional** and included misspelt words, changes in the word order and so on. Other variants were **deliberate and intentional**, and included the corrupting of the word of God in favour of a particular doctrine. Men such as Marcion and Origen are known to have deliberately tampered with the Sacred Text of Holy Scripture. Now these manuscripts which were known to be corrupted were not used for copying purposes. Only those which, faithfully preserved the original became the standard codices from which copies were made.

The Byzantine Text became the standard text of the Christian Church throughout the Byzantine Period (312 – 1453 AD). That text had been preserved at Antioch in Syria and then at Byzantium or Constantinople. Antioch became the mother city of the Gentile Church, the Apostle Paul was based there. After 70 AD it became the undisputed centre of the Christian Church. A Text proceeding from Antioch would be the text approved by the Apostles and the early Christian Church.

- At Constantinople it became established as the standard Greek Text. Constantinople was the centre of both the Greek-speaking world and the Greek-

speaking Church. Greek scholars in Constantinople were well fitted to recognise the authentic text.

- Christian teachers such as Methodius (260-312 AD), Athanasius (296-373 AD), Hilary of Poitiers (315-367 AD), Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386 AD), Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus (330-394AD), Theodoret of Cyrus, and Chrysostom of Constantinople all used this Text. These men were involved in formulating doctrine and ratifying the canon of Scripture. They also devoted themselves to the study of the Text. The Text which emerged from this period was considered genuine, uncorrupted, and the Standard Text.
- Just as the Old Testament Scriptures had been committed to the Jews *“unto them were committed the oracles of God”*(Romans 3:2) so likewise the New Testament Scriptures were *omitted to the Church, the priesthood of all believers”*.
- The overwhelming majority, some 90%, of the extant Greek manuscripts support the Byzantine text type. It became widespread because it faithfully represented the original.
- Moreover, the earliest translations of the Scriptures used the Byzantine text: the Syriac, the early Italic Versions of the 2nd century; the Peshitta; and the Gothic of the 4th century.
- Furthermore, the early church Fathers such as Justin Martyr (100-165AD), Irenaeus (130-200AD), Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), Tertullian (160-220 AD), Hippolytus (185-254 AD), and even Origen (185-254 AD) repeatedly quoted from the Byzantine Text.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, all protestant evangelicals believed that the Greek New Testament had been:

“kept pure through subsequent ages by his singular care and providence”.

It is inconceivable that God would give a totally corrupt and mutilated text to His Church and then allow that text to be used for over eighteen centuries. Yet that is exactly what the modern textual critics and their spurious brood of versions would have us believe!

Concluding Comments

Fundamentally there are only two Bibles, and they are based upon two streams of manuscripts. The *first stream* began with the apostles and the early church and has continued down through the centuries, based upon the precious Hebrew manuscripts and the traditional text of the Greek New Testament. This first stream appears, with very little change, in the Protestant Bibles of many languages, and in the Authorised Version or King James Bible. These manuscripts constitute 96% of all the available Greek manuscripts in existence!

The second stream consists of a very small number of Greek manuscripts (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, Alexandrine, Ephraim, and Bezae); four of these were rejected by the Reformers, and there is no question that they would have rejected Sinaiticus.

Learned textual critics have concocted a Darwinian myth, namely, that the NT text was lost for more than 1,500 years and then began to be restored by Westcott & Hort, and eventually through the process of textual criticism will evolve a true copy of the original autographs!

Theodore Letis writes, “Warfield, . . . felt the need to shift the locus of authority away from **extant** editions to a theoretical **autographic exemplar**, that is, exclusively to the **original text** of Scripture.” And Warfield echoed the words of Dr. Hodge, “We do not assert that the common text, but only that the original autographic text was inspired.” He abandoned the sacred text of the Church for a future, unobtainable, scientific text reconstructed by the textual experts. One need only look today at the NIV – the product of Warfield’s evangelical, inerrancy-advocating heirs – as one tangible result of Warfield’s theory! Here Mark’s account of the resurrection is treated as non-canonical

Dean Burgon writes, “The Church, remember, hath been from the beginning the ‘Witness and Keeper of Holy Writ.’ Did not the Divine Author pour out upon her in largest measure, ‘the Spirit of truth,’ and pledge Himself that it should be that Spirit’s special function to ‘guide his children into all truth’? . . . That by a perpetual miracle, Sacred Manuscripts would be protected all down the ages against the depraving influences of whatever sort. . . . But the Church, in her collective capacity hath been perpetually purging herself of those shamefully depraved copies which once everywhere abounded in her pale. . . . Never, however, up to the present hour, hath there been any complete eradication of all traces of the attempted mischief – any absolute getting rid of every depraved copy extant. A few such copies linger on to the present day, ‘What in the meantime, is to be thought of those blind guides – those deluded ones – who would now, if they could, persuade us to go back to those same codices of which the Church hath already purged herself?’”²⁰

Bishop Thompson, “Those who from deep conviction of the Traditional Text and the Authorised Version of the Bible, are considered a nuisance, incomprehensible and cranks. But those who stand in the ‘old paths’ (Jer. 6.16) of morality and of evangelical religion are content to bear reproach, confident that the Protestant Reformed theology, built upon the Textus Receptus and the King James Version, will yet be vindicated at the throne of God.”²¹

20 Hills, p. 140.

21 Thompson, “Truth Unchanged, Unchanging,” *The Bible League*, 1984, p. 496.