

Faith Pulpit

The Preservation of Scripture

The Message of 2 Timothy 3:16–17

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). Another way of saying this would be, “all Scripture is God-breathed,” or “all Scripture comes from the mouth of God.” This means God is directly responsible for causing the Bible writers to put down everything that He wanted written without error and without omission. But what of the Bible I hold in my hand? Is it God’s Word? Can it be trusted? The answer is yes! Both truths—the inspiration and inerrancy of the original manuscripts and the trustworthiness of the Bible in my hand—must be acknowledged. To affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of the original writings while casting doubt on the authority of the Bible that is available to us is just plain silly. Can you really imagine someone seriously saying, “I have good news and I have bad news: the good news is that God wanted to give us a message and therefore caused a book to be written; the bad news is that He didn’t possess the power to preserve it and therefore we don’t know what it said!” A view of inspiration without a corresponding view of preservation is of no value.

God’s Word teaches this truth here. After telling Timothy, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” Paul states that Scripture “is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction (literally, child-training) in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect (complete), thoroughly furnished (fully equipped) unto all good works.” What, precisely, was profitable to Timothy? Primarily, this cannot refer to the God-breathed originals because they were not directly available. Rather, Timothy possessed copies of those manuscripts, and they were profitable because they conveyed accurately what the original God-breathed manuscripts said. Is this true only for Timothy? Certainly not, because the passage tells us that the purpose of Scripture being profitable is that “the man of God (this includes believers today) may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

The Real Issue in the Preservation Debate

There are more than 5000 copies, some complete and others partial, of the Greek New Testament. At least 85% of them belong to the Byzantine family. That is why this family is sometimes called “the majority text.” Of course there are some differences among these manuscripts but there is also great similarity. Byzantine manuscripts have been available to scholars for hundreds of years, although the Bible that was available to ordinary Christian people for about 1100 years was Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (from around A.D. 400 when Jerome produced the Vulgate until the early 1500s when Erasmus produced the first printed copy of the Greek New Testament).

Since the early 1800s Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have been discovered that were written much earlier than those in the Byzantine family. These more recently discovered manuscripts are generally grouped into either the Alexandrian family or the Western family. As might be expected, there are differences among the manuscripts. Textual scholars like Westcott and Hort taught that when there was more than one possible reading for a verse, if the two key Alexandrian family manuscripts (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) agreed, that was the correct reading. The majority of textual scholars today reject that policy and teach instead that a reading found in manuscripts from more than one of the three families is better than a reading found in manuscripts belonging to one family. The heart of the issue is this: Do the differences in manuscripts require believers to change any doctrine? On this issue fundamental Christians do not agree among themselves.

Examining Some Key Differences

(1) John 7:53–8:11 (the woman taken in adultery) and Mark 16:9–20 (the appearance of the risen Christ) . Following Westcott and Hort’s teaching, these passages were removed from printed Greek texts of the New Testament and English versions that used those texts. But more recently scholars have agreed that these two passages should be restored. [See, for example, the Preface to the 1971 revision of the RSV New Testament].

(2) Luke 2:33, 43 . In Luke 2:28–32 Simeon blesses the infant Jesus. In verse 33 the KJV and NKJV [following the Textus Receptus, a printed Greek text based on some of the Byzantine manuscripts] describe the response of “Joseph and His mother,” while most other modern versions (following other manuscripts) have “His father and mother.” A similar situation exists in verse 43, where Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, remains in Jerusalem. The KJV and NKJV state, “and Joseph and His mother” did not know it, while most modern versions say, “His parents.” Those who believe the differences change one’s doctrine point to these verses as proof. They argue that describing Joseph as the father of Jesus, or referring to Mary and Joseph as His parents is a denial of our Lord’s virgin birth. But the KJV and NKJV (following the Byzantine manuscripts) also describe Mary and Joseph as the “parents” of Jesus (Luke 2:41) and Mary reproves Jesus with the words, “Behold, thy father and I have sought thee

sorrowing.” (Luke 2:48).

(3) Romans 4:19. Did Abraham consider his own body? The KJV and NKJV (following the Textus Receptus and the Byzantine family) says Abraham did not consider his own body, while most modern versions omit the negative and say Abraham did consider his own body. If one were to ask: “Which reading is correct?” the answer would have to be, based on Genesis 17:17: “Yes, Abraham did consider his own body. But that is not the issue. The real issue is: “Can both readings be harmonized?” And the answer to that question is: “Yes.” Abraham did consider how old his body was, but he did not consider the age of his body to be an obstacle too great for God, as Romans 4:19–21 makes clear.

Scholars Disagree

After making a detailed study of many passages where there is a difference in readings, I have concluded that these differences do not change one’s doctrine. Other scholars disagree. For example, Dr. Theodore Letis is a scholar who believes in the Trinity and the deity of Christ. He believes the Byzantine manuscripts are superior to the others because they preserve rather than weaken these doctrines. In support of his belief that the other manuscripts weaken sound doctrine, he cites *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* by Bart Ehrman [see Letis, *The Ecclesiastical Text*, pages 224,225]. Ehrman, however, argues against manuscripts that teach the Trinity and the deity of Christ because he thinks they are the result of “Orthodox” tampering. Usually Ehrman supports Byzantine readings (like “Son” in John 1:18) because he believes they are vague on Christ’s deity! At other times he supports non-Byzantine readings. For example, in 1 Timothy 3:16 Ehrman thinks the correct reading should be, “He who was manifest in the flesh” rather than, “God was manifest in the flesh.” (See Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Holy Scripture*, page 78.)

Conclusion

I believe God verbally inspired the original manuscripts of Scripture without error and without omission, but I also believe He has preserved His Word through manuscripts that have some differences. I do not always know which reading reflects the original wording of a passage, but I do know that all of these readings reflect doctrine taught somewhere in the Bible and that none of these differences change what God’s Word teaches. I can trust the Bible in my hands to be the Word of God.

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.