

#### **Preserved Text-v4. The Historical Evidence for Preservation**

Here I am again in the name of the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord Jesus Christ. I now turn to the historical evidence for Preservation.

To begin, I submit that the following references may reasonably be understood as a statement by the Sovereign Creator that He intended to preserve His Text, but He gave no indication as to just how He proposed to do it. We must work back from what He did. But first, the references:

1 Chronicles 16:14-15 is part of a psalm of praise to God that was sung when the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. “He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth. Remember His command forever, the word which He commanded for a thousand generations.” For the Word to be binding until the thousandth generation, it would have to be preserved until that generation, and it would need to be available to each generation along the way. I take it that “a thousand generations” is parallel to “forever”, since there have scarcely been 300 generations since Adam. “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness is to all generations” (Psalm 119:89-90). “Forever” is parallel to “all generations”. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8). To ‘stand’ forever, it must be preserved forever.

Matthew 5:17-18 are part of the so-called ‘Sermon on the Mount’, delivered by Sovereign Jesus while He walked this earth. “Do not suppose that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota nor one tittle shall pass away from the Law until everything happens.” The Lord here makes an impressively strong statement about the preservation through time of the precise form of the Sacred Text. Since our only access to the meaning is through the form, any alteration in the form will alter the meaning. (One of the most effective ways of annulling a commandment is to corrupt the Text—something Satan understands quite well.) “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one tittle of the Law to fail” (Luke 16:17). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away” (Luke 21:33). Sovereign Jesus declares that His words have eternal validity, and are therefore on a par with God’s written Revelation (see Psalm 119:89).

In Matthew 4:4 Sovereign Jesus rebuts Satan, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word coming out of God’s mouth’.” If we are to live by ‘every word’, then every word must be kept available.<sup>1</sup> Notice also Deuteronomy 29:29, “the secret things belong to the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:4 is precisely parallel, where less than half a percent of the extant Greek manuscripts, of objectively

LORD our God, but those which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law". "All the words" includes each individual word that contributes to the whole; and for the three hundredth generation to obey them all, they all must still be available. Consider also Isaiah 59:21—"As for Me", says the LORD, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouths, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants", says the LORD, "from this time and forevermore". "My words" includes each individual word that contributes to the whole, and they are to be available "from this time and forevermore", which includes all intervening generations. Revelation 22:18-19 also emphasizes the individual words.

I submit that the references presented above may reasonably be understood to constitute a declaration that the Sovereign Creator intends that His written Revelation be available to all generations until the end of the world—His concern extends to the individual words, and even the letters (Matthew 5:18)! However, since He gave no indication as to just how He proposed to do it, we must deduce the answer by analyzing what He did. I will begin with the New Testament. I proceed to marshal the evidences.

### **The Autographs**

When I speak of the divine preservation of the New Testament Text, I am referring to the precise wording of the original documents, the Autographs. When I speak of preservation, I am presuming divine inspiration; they are logically interdependent. Why would God inspire a written revelation if He was not going to preserve it? Why would God preserve writings that He had not inspired? I consider that the preservation of the NT Text is perhaps the strongest argument in favor of its inspired nature. The same holds true for the precise selection of books that make up the NT Canon. Since I consider that Matthew's Gospel was the first NT book to be released to the public ('published'), I will begin with it.

By the time that Matthew 'published' his Gospel in AD 38, the production of books in the Roman Empire was widespread, but there was no 'copyright'. As soon as a book was turned loose it became 'public domain', anyone could use it and change it. Now then, if the Holy Spirit gave thought to protecting the works that He was inspiring, protecting against free editing, what could He do? I suggest that the most obvious way would be to have those works 'published' in the form of multiple copies. Today the first run of a book will usually be thousands of copies, but in those days each copy had to be

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inferior quality, omit "but by every word of God" (lamentably followed by NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.).

handwritten (manuscript). [The colophones in 50% of the MSS, including Family 35, say that Matthew was 'published' eight years after the ascension of the Christ. Since Jesus ascended in 30 AD, Matthew was released in 38. The colophones say that Mark was published two years later (40), and Luke another five years later (45), and John in 62.]

A book the size of Matthew's Gospel would represent a considerable investment of time and effort, as well as papyrus and ink. I believe the NT writings were prepared in book form from the first (not scroll), and the material used was probably papyrus. ["Bring the books, especially the parchments" (2 timothy 4:13). We may gather from this that parchment was already in use, but the 'books' were presumably on papyrus; otherwise, why the contrast?] However, papyrus cannot stand a lot of handling, and by the year 38 there were many Christian congregations just in the Jewish territory, not to mention elsewhere. If the Holy Spirit intended that the NT writings should have a wide circulation, which would seem to be obvious, it would be necessary to start out with multiple copies. A single copy of Matthew would be falling apart before it got to the twentieth congregation (if on papyrus).

But why do I insist on papyrus instead of parchment? Well, a single copy of Matthew would represent around fifteen sheep or goats; on that basis, who could afford multiple copies? That said, however, the master copy may indeed have been done on parchment, for two reasons: if a master copy was to be kept, for quality control, it should be on durable material; if multiple copies of the master copy were to be made before turning it loose to the public, a master copy on papyrus could not last.

The idea of publishing a book in the form of multiple copies may be inferred from the Epistles. 2 Corinthians was written to "the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia" (verse 1). How many congregations would there have been "in all Achaia"? Was Paul thinking of multiple copies? 1 Corinthians was addressed to "all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 2). Now how many copies would **that** take? Galatians was written to "the churches of Galatia" (verse 2). Could a single copy get to all of them?

Consider the case of Peter's first letter: it is addressed to believers in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (verse 1). Well now, what basis could Peter (apostle to the circumcised, Galatians 2:8) have for writing to people in those places? Probably a good number of the older leaders had been with Peter at Pentecost, and had sat under his ministry until the persecution under Saul sent them packing back home, presumably (Acts 8:4). Notice that the list of places in Acts 2:9-11 includes the following places in Asia Minor: Asia,

Cappadocia, Pamphylia, Phrygia and Pontus. Three of the five are in Peter's list, and we need not assume that his list was exhaustive; for that matter, the list in Acts 2:9-11 is probably not exhaustive.

Have you ever looked at a map to see the location of Peter's five provinces? They basically represent the whole of Asia Minor (today's Turkey)! 'Asia' seems to have been used in different ways. Acts 27:2 has Asia including Cilicia and Pamphylia (verse 5). The glorified Christ put the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 1:4). In Acts 16:6 the term seems to refer to a more limited area, which, however, presumably included Ephesus, to which Paul returned later. Proconsular Asia included Mysia and Phrygia. Now how many congregations would there have been in all of Asia Minor? And how could a single copy get around to all of them? If the letter was written on papyrus (as seems likely—cheaper, more abundant) it would be falling apart by the time it got to the twentieth congregation, if not before (papyrus cannot stand all that much handling).

Now let us just suppose, for the sake of the argument, that Peter sent five copies of his letter, one to each province. What would the implications be for the transmission of its Text? It means that you multiply the process and progress of transmission by five! It means that you have the beginnings of a 'majority text' very early on. It means that the basic integrity of the text would be guaranteed (the more so if God was superintending the process). If Peter sent out more than five copies, so much the more. And what about James; how many copies would it take to reach "the twelve tribes that are in the dispersion" (verse 1)? (Does not the very term 'dispersion' suggest that they were widely scattered? And what if the 'twelve tribes' is literal?) Peter's second letter does not list the five provinces, but 3:1 would appear to indicate that he was targeting the same area.

To see that I did not pull the idea of multiple copies out of thin air, let us consider 2 Peter 1:12-15. Verses 12 & 13 refer to repeated reminders while he is still in his 'tent', which would be his own ongoing activity; so why the 'moreover' in verse 15? In the NKJV verse 15 reads: "Moreover, I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease". Well, how can you 'ensure' that someone will 'always have a reminder' of something? It seems clear to me that the something has to be written down; a reminder has to be in writing, to be guaranteed. So what is Peter's intention? He specifies "a reminder of these things", so what are the 'these things'? They are evidently the things he will discuss in this letter. But

he must be referring to something more than the initial draft of the letter (or the verse becomes meaningless)—hence, multiple copies.<sup>1</sup>

If Peter wrote his second letter under divine inspiration, then 1:15 is inspired, and in that event the idea of multiple copies came from God. It would be an efficient means of preserving the Text and guaranteeing its integrity down through the years of transmission. The churches in Asia Minor could always cross check with one another whenever a doubt arose or need required. If it was God's idea that a small letter be 'published' in the form of multiple copies, then how much more the larger books. Obviously God knew what He was doing, so the practice would have begun with the very first NT book, Matthew. [Quite apart from the idea of 'publishing' via multiple copies, consider what would happen when a congregation received a copy of 1 Peter, James, or any of Paul's Epistles, accompanied by the instruction that they had to pass it on. If you were one of the elders of that congregation, what would you do? I would most certainly make a copy for us to keep. Wouldn't you? The point is, as soon as an inspired book began to circulate, the proliferation of copies began at once. And that means that a 'majority text' also began at once!]

The idea is so good that it became the norm, the more so if it was a divine order. I believe all the NT books were released in the form of multiple copies, with the exception of the letters addressed to individuals. (Since Luke and Acts are addressed to an individual, they also may have started out as a single copy, unless Theophilus was a 'benefactor' who was financing the multiple copies. Luke and Acts are the two longest books of the NT, and multiple copies of them would represent a significant financial investment.) Again I say, the idea is so good, I would not be surprised if once they got it the churches would set about making multiple copies of other writings they considered to be inspired, such as letters to individuals. A 'majority text' would be well established throughout the Aegean area (Greece and Asia Minor) already in

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<sup>1</sup> It was Dr. Mike Loehrer, a pastor in California, who called 2 Peter 1:12-15 to my attention and got me started thinking about it. With reference to verse 15 he wrote me the following: "Could choosing to use *mneme* with *poieo* in the middle voice mean to ensure a way of always being able to validate a memory? In those days most people could not afford their own copy of a writing, and the church would no doubt become the repository of an autograph anyway. The usual way of getting the Scripture back then was by committing it to memory when hearing it during the public reading. Having multiple autographs in multiple locations would definitely ensure a way of validating a memory. Even if the leaders of a church or synagogue were imprisoned and their autograph was seized or destroyed, they could rest assured that they could locate another autograph to validate their memory of the way a verse or passage was actually written."

The idea of validating a memory is as interesting as it is suggestive. Peter's use of *μνημη*, basically reflexive, with *πολεω* in the middle voice, makes Mike's suggestion a reasonable one, as it seems to me. It goes along with the multiple copies. Irenaeus puzzled over verse 15 and came up with the suggestion that Peter intended to get copies of Mark's Gospel to those regions. Evidently the idea of multiple copies was not strange to him. And how about other books?

the first century. The 'heartland of the Church' (to use K. Aland's phrase) simply kept on using and copying that form of text—hence the mass of Byzantine MSS that have come down to us.