

Sunday, January 15, 2017—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 44 Jot and Tittle Preservation, Matthew 5:17-18

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 42, I demonstrated using Scripture demanding verbatim identically as the standard for preservation was overreaching and not supported by the Biblical data. Based upon the textual FACTS observed in Lesson 42, we concluded that it would be wrong to require “verbatim identity” as the standard for preservation. This standard cannot even be sustained within the King James text. Consequently, it is not helpful or productive for King James advocates to adopt a standard for preservation that cannot even be sustained in the very Bible they are asserting is “perfect.”
- In addition, Lesson 43 demonstrated that the testimony of the scriptures does not require verbatim phraseology but simply equivalent meaning. It is possible to say the exact same thing using different words.
 - “At 3:30, I drove to the store.”
 - “I drove to the store at half past three.”
- Consider the following example from II Timothy 2:15.
 - Geneva—“. . . dividing the word of truth aright.”
 - King James—“rightly dividing the word of truth.”
- The following four proofs that scripture approves of substantive equivalence and does not require verbatim identity were offered in Lesson 43.
 - The fact that New Testament quotes of the Old Testament do not match verbatim.
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 - II Kings 19 and Isaiah 37 do not match verbatim.
- Our comparison between II Kings 19 and Isaiah 37 within the KJB produced the following baseline data (Not claiming these statistics are infallible. It is very possible that I miscounted something.):
 - 2 completely identical verses
 - 2 different prepositions

- 4 different punctuations
 - 4 cases where singular and plural can both be correct
 - 9 different words and phraseologies
 - 12 different spellings
 - 15 different verse divisions
 - 35 different phrasings
- The lack of identity in both phraseology and punctuation exhibited by this comparison calls into question how King James advocates have traditionally understood Christ's statement in Matthew 5:17-18. The goal of this lesson is to consider the meaning of Matthew 5:17-18 in light of textual/historical FACTS.
 - In order to accomplish this purpose, we will consider the following points:
 - Use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Only Advocates
 - Use of Matthew 5:17-18 by those critical of the King James Only position

Use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Only Advocates

- Many King James Only advocates have used Matthew 5:17-18 as a proof text for their belief that preservation occurred with exact identity. In the past, I have used these verses to make the argument for verbatim identity; so I know whereof I speak.
- Gary C. Webb's chapter titled "Not One Jot or One Tittle Matthew 5:17-18" in *Thou Shalt Keep Them: A Biblical Theology of the Perfect Preservation of Scripture* stands out as a case in point of this thinking.
- In the introduction, Webb argues that Matthew 5:17-18 establishes the doctrine of verbal plenary preservation or the preservation of "the precise wording of the text of Scripture." Webb states:
 - "The precise wording of the text of Scripture provides the authority of the inspired, inerrant Word of God. When one combines Jesus' promise that "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law" with His assertion that spiritual greatness belongs to those who keep and teach the "least commandments," His statements demand a doctrine of verbal and plenary preservation of the text of Scripture." (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 41)
- In a section titled "The Apologetic Assertion of Matthew 5:17-20" Webb identifies the "jot" and "tittle" as follows:
 - "Jesus continued His defense with a solemn statement of the plenary infallibility of the law. He indicated the authority of the smallest portion of the teaching of the Old

Testament by referring to the smallest portions of the Hebrew text itself. The “jot” refers to the smallest Hebrew consonant. Modern scholars normally define the “tittle” as only referring to a bend or point in the actual Hebrew letters themselves. Jesus asserted that no portion of the teaching of the Old Testament would pass out of existence, lose its authority, or be annulled until every bit of it had its fulfillment. Indeed, he declared that such an occurrence is an absolute impossibility.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 43)

- If Webb would have stopped here I would be inclined to agree with him. Jesus is saying that no detail of the law is going to go unfulfilled. That being said, Webb certainly does not stop there, he goes on to argue that Matthew 5:17-18 means that even the “jots” and “tittles” would be preserved with exact identicality to what was given under inspiration.
- “The Application of the Passage to the Textual Debate: The Demand for the Verbal Preservation of the Text of Scripture” comprises one of the major sections of Webb’s essay. In this section, Webb clearly equates “Verbal Preservation” with exact identicality of wording as the standard for preservation.
 - “Could the changing of one letter in the Hebrew or Greek text change a word and thereby affect the meaning of a command or doctrine? Certainly it could and usually does. What if a Christian, facing severe repercussions, struggles with the issue of complete honesty in a certain situation? The day of importance arrives, and he rises early to meet with his God. His soul agonizes as he opens his New American Standard Version of the Bible to the seventh chapter of John’s Gospel, the place assigned by his daily reading schedule. In that passage, he reads that Jesus lied to his brothers, saying that he would not go to the feast in verse 8, when in fact verse 10 says He did go up later. Suppose to read this about Jesus, he nevertheless believes he has his answer from God. A “proper” interpretation of the text tells him he can lie in some circumstances. That “proper” interpretation would also nullify the sinlessness of Christ and render Him incapable of accomplishing our redemption.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 45-46)
- In this example, Webb is referring to the fact that the NASV follows the Critical Text in John 7:8 in omitting the word “yet” as it reads in the TR and KJB.

John 7:8 (KJB)	John 7:8 (NASV)
Go ye up unto this feast: I go not up yet unto this feast; for my time is not yet full come.	"Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come."

- The problem in verse 8 resides in the fact that in verse 10 in both versions Jesus goes up to the feast.

John 7:10 (KJB)	John 7:10 (NASV)
But when his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret.	But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as if, in secret.

- Notice carefully what is going on here. Webb has correctly identified that the NASV’s reading in John 7:8 creates a problem with verse 10 by it’s dropping of the word “yet.” That being said, why is the problem created? Because they are not identical in their wording or because they differ substantively? It is because they differ substantively i.e., the Critical Text’s omission of the word “yet” creates a textual difficulty within John 7 for the NASB but, more than that, it asserts something that is *opposite* from the TR/KJB. In others words, both readings cannot be factually correct because they teach opposites. Therefore, Webb’s example does not prove what he is arguing for, namely that every “jot” and “tittle” must be preserved with verbatim identically. Rather it proves that preservation excludes substantive differences in meaning.
- According to Webb, a reading must have exact precision in order to be considered the word of God. One wonders what Webb would say about the following pre-King James English translations of the *TR*. The Geneva Bible and the Bishops Bible both contain the word “yet” in John 7:8 but are not exactly identical in the totality of their wording. Yet, they do not differ from each other substantively. In other words, they are substantively equivalent without being exactly identical.

Geneva Bible	Bishops Bible	King James
Go ye vp vnto this feast: I wil not go vp yet vnto this feast: for my time is not yet fulfilled.	Go ye vp vnto this feast: I wyll not go vp yet vnto this feast, for my tyme is not yet full come.	Go ye up unto this feast: I go not up yet unto this feast; for my time is not yet full come.

- Webb clearly argues for the preservation of the “exact wording” as his standard for preservation based upon Matthew 5:17-18.
 - “But, as the Lord indicated, the authority and validity of the least command or any command in Scripture depends upon the exact wording of that command in the Scriptural text. . . Jesus immediately states man’s obligation to obey and teach all the commands, even the least of them, which demands that we must have the very jots and tittles that express those commands.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 47)
- Later in this section, Webb provides an example of doubling down on verbal preservation for faith’s sake.
 - “Some scholars and textual critics mock this clear, unbiased, derived doctrine of verbal preservation, claiming that the “evidence” of copies containing errors refutes the Bible doctrine (Wallace and Glenny would be a case in point.) . . . (Quotes Rom. 3:3-4) . . . The “evidence” claimed by evolutionists does not cause the believer to give up the Bible doctrine of creation. Why? Because he knows that the evolutionist’s humanistic presuppositions have caused him to view and judge the “evidence” wrongly. Likewise, the scholar who follows the humanistic precepts of modern textual criticism makes the same type of error, judging the evidence with rationalistic presuppositions rather than by those in Scripture.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 47)

- While I agree with Webb concerning the “rationalistic presuppositions” of modern textual criticism, his answer is simply to double down on faith for faith’s sake in his understanding of verbal preservation. In doing so, he is demanding verbatim identity of wording as his standard for preservation.
- On page 57 in footnote 59 Webb quotes from Samuel Schnaiter’s “Textual Criticism and the Modern English Version Controversy” in *Biblical Viewpoint* Vol. XVI, No. 1 from 1982. In this quote, Schnaiter states the following regarding Wilbur N. Pickering’s view of preservation.
 - “Pickering shows that he has fallen into the error of equating inspiration with preservation as described above. He also demonstrates that his view of the authority of God’s Word depends on the recovery of the original wording of the New Testament text. And if it is true that his concept of authority is dependent on the preservation of precise wordings, then it is scarcely conceivable that even such a scholar as he has arrived at his conclusions from the evidence as much as from his predisposition. Knowledge that Pickering’s concept of authority depends upon preservation of precise wordings brings into question his entire procedure.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 47)
- Just as modern textual criticism has been built upon a set of rationalistic presuppositions, Schnaiter is pointing out that the verbal plenary position has as well. No one arguing for “the preservation of the precise wordings” can point to which manuscript, TR edition, or edition of the KJB got everything exactly correct. Therefore, this position suffers from the “predisposition” or presupposition that preservation demands verbatim identity of wording. Ruckman knew this, but, instead of looking back to the Bible to inform his beliefs as to the *nature* of preservation, he argued that the King James translators were inspired in the same sense as the Biblical writers as a means of providing the identity of wording demanded by this position.
- Watch how Webb doubles down on his own presupposition in footnote 59 following the above quotation from Schnaiter. Webb states the following in response:
 - “How could a Christian who professes to believe in verbal inspiration make such a statement? Verbal inspiration guarantees “precise wordings,” which are the basis for every Christian doctrine. **If we do not have “precise wordings,” we do not have “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”** (Jude 3). For the Christians, the “predisposition” of a preserved text of Scripture which provides “precise wordings” should underlie our conclusion on the textual debate just as it does our conclusion on every other issue of faith and practice.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 47)
- This is where Webb’s fideistic (believing) approach needs to be Biblically adjusted by allowing the Bible to teach him how to think about variant readings. If Webb were honest, he would admit that he cannot sustain this standard within the printed history of the KJB—the very Bible he is arguing reproduced the “precise wordings” of the originals.

- In the “Conclusion” to his essay on Matthew 5:17-18 Dr. Webb writes:
 - “In defending Himself against the possible criticism that He came to “destroy” the teaching of the Old Testament, Jesus gave Christians an absolute assurance in Matthew 5:18-19 of the verbal and plenary preservation of the text of Scripture. His Words demand that Christians concerned about textual criticism return to a position of faith, a position that builds its textual method on the teaching of the Bible. Modern textual criticism does not do this but ignores or discounts Jesus’ **exact assurance**.

Whom then should Christians believe? Did God leave the preservation of the texts of the Old and New Testaments to fallible copyists? Do Christians have only the evidence of history to support the doctrine of preservation? Or did Jesus mean what He taught when He said, “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?” Jesus taught that the authority of God’s Word rested upon the Divine preservation of the text. Belief in this doctrine leads men today to reject modern textual criticism with its invalid texts and to accept the texts (and the methods that produced them) behind the King James Version of the Bible.” (Webb in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 50)

- Webb is clearly using Matthew 5:17-18 to advance the notion that preservation extends to the very “jots” and “tittles” and requires exact identically. Webb’s position is correct in principle regarding the faith approach but he fails to fully apply his own principle and thereby fails to arrive at a sound and sustainable understanding of preservation. In the end, Webb’s essay is an example of Option 2 Faith for Faith’s Sake from our chart in Lesson 43.

Use of Matthew 5:17-18 in Other King James Only Literature

- Webb is certainly not alone in using Matthew 5:17-18 as a proof text for the notion of verbal plenary preservation or the notion that preservation occurred with exact identically. The following pro-King James authors include the passage in their lists of verses that teach preservation but offer little direct commentary upon the verse.
 - 1975—*Counterfeit or Genuine: Mark 19? John 8?* Edited by David Otis Fuller
 - See the essay “The Preservation of the Scriptures” by Donald L. Brake on pages 182-183.
 - 1999—*Forever Settled: A Survey of the Documents and History of the Bible* by Jack A. Moorman
 - 2000—*Crowned With Glory: The Bible from Ancient Text to Authorized Version* by Dr. Thomas Holland

- 2007—*The History of Your Bible: Proving the King James to be the Perfectly Preserved Words of God* by Terence D. McLean
- 2013—*Which Bible Would Jesus Use? The Bible Version Controversy Explained and Resolved* by Jack McElroy
- The following authors comment more extensively on how Matthew 5:17-18 relates to or establishes the doctrine of preservation.
 - 1970—*Which Bible?* Edited by David Otis Fuller
 - “The power and providence of God are displayed in the history of the preservation and transmission of His Word, in fulfillment of the promise of the Son of God, “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). Our Lord was not given to exaggeration, and God’s holy Law was not confined to the commands of Sinai but is set forth in all that He inspired His prophets and apostles to write.” (Fuller, 5)
 - 1999—*Myths about the Modern Versions* by David W. Cloud. Regarding Matthew 5:18 and Matthew 24:35 Clouds states the following:
 - “As we see from the above Scriptures, the Lord Jesus Christ is very specific in His teaching about the preservation of Scripture. He teaches that man must have the very words of God, and He promises that His WORDS will not pass away. In Matthew 5:18, He says the very JOTS AND TITLES of God’s Word will not pass away! That is certainly verbal preservation.” (109)
 - 2003—*In Awe of thy Word: Understanding the King James Bible Its Mystery & History Letter by Letter* by Gail Riplinger
 - This book is an expansion of Riplinger’s earlier book from 1998 titled *The Language of the King James Bible: Discover Its Hidden Built-In Dictionary*. While I have not been able to locate in these volumes the specific use of Matthew 5:17-18, they both demand verbatim identity as the standard of preservation to the very letter and word order.
 - In 2011, in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the KJB, Riplinger published an essay titled *Settings of the King James Bible* in which she derided non-British spellings in the English Bible. American printings that changed the spelling of a word like “musick” to “music” were viewed as introducing careless errors into the KJB.

- 2006—*Defending the King James Bible 3rd Ed.* by D.A. Waite
 - “Not “one jot” nor “one tittle”—that is Bible preservation, isn’t it? Now, He’s talking about the Old Testament, and I’m sure by extension we can carry that on to the New Testament as well. . . The Lord Jesus said that not one jot or tittle would pass away until all would be fulfilled. So, the Lord Jesus believed in Bible preservation, didn’t He? There is good evidence that a tittle is the smallest Hebrew vowel which is a dot.” (10-11)

- 2009—*Glistering Truths: Distinctions in Bible Words* by Matthew Verschuur (Bible Protector)
 - “That every jot and tittle in our pure English Bible is necessary for giving the exact sense.” (Title Page)
 - “In fact, the King James Bible has been called the best translation in the world. If we look at this Bible, that is, at the proper edition of it—the Pure Cambridge Edition—we find that every word is right and good. (4)
 - “Let no man presume that he can improve upon our English Bible as it now stands, pure and perfect. No matter what word, to alter it in any way is to violate the Scriptures teaching concerning its own certainty and perfection. . . Certainly the King James Bible has gone through the “purified seven times” process to arrive to where it is at now. But this is not license for further changes, updates or alterations once this process has been completed. . . Rightness and exactness of words can be a matter of life and death. The very spelling of Bible words should be observed with the fear of God. . . In order to give the sense accurately, the exact words and letters and punctuation are required.” (8)
 - “Let us be perfectly clear, changing so much as the word order, spelling or punctuation is destructive.” (13)
 - “That a change as small as a minor point of punctuation is dire, if not obviously, at least puts in jeopardy the doctrine of the reliability of its jots and tittles.” (16)

- The above list does not claim to be exhaustive of every use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Only advocates supporting the notion of plenary verbal preservation. Only indexed works were searched, I did not read every line in every work ever written on this topic. That being said, I am confident that the above sampling is indicative of how Matthew 5:17-18 is used by the majority of King James Only advocates.

Conclusion

- Matthew 5:17-18—these verses are clearly referring to the Old Testament scriptures originally given to the nation of Israel.
- Jewish scribes knew they were duplicating God’s word, so they went to incredible lengths to prevent error from creeping into their work. The whole process of copying the Bible was controlled by strict religious rituals, and the scribes carefully counted every line, word, syllable, and letter to ensure accuracy.
- The earliest surviving copies of the Hebrew Masoretic Text, the text supporting the King James Old Testament date from around 900 A.D. Discovered in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls date from around 150 B.C. roughly one thousand years earlier. When compared with the Masoretic Text for the book of Isaiah, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found to be word for word identical in over 95% of the text. The remaining 5% variation consisted of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. Dr. Randell Price stated the following in his book on the Dead Sea Scrolls:
 - “Once a comparison was made between the text of the *Isaiah Scroll* and the Masoretic Text, it was evident that, **except for minor details (such as spelling) that do not affect the meaning of the text**, the two were **almost identical**. Even though the Qumran text was more than six centuries older than the text of the Masoretes, it confirmed the accuracy with which the scribes had carefully preserved and transmitted the biblical text through time.” (Price, 127)
- This is historical confirmation of the Biblical promise of Preservation. Yet, even with its high degree of precision, there is not exact identicality. The use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Only advocates demanding verbatim identicality or “jot and tittle” precision as the standard for preservation goes too far and demands more than can be historically proven.
- In the next Lesson, we will look at the use of Matthew 5:17-18 by those critical of the King James Only position.

Works Cited

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