

Sunday, January 22, 2017—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 45 Jot and Tittle Preservation, Matthew 5:17-18 (Part 2)

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 44 we looked at the use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Only Advocates. In doing so we observed that many King James defenders use Matthew 5 to establish their insistence upon verbatim identically as the standard for preservation.
- In this lesson, we want to look at the use of Matthew 5:17-18 by those critical of the King James Only position.
- In conclusion, I will offer my own thoughts on how these verses should be properly understood.

Use of Matthew 5:17-18 by Those Critical of the King James Only Position

- In Lesson 44 we used Gary C. Webb’s essay “Not One Jot or One Tittle Matthew 5:17-18” from *Thou Shalt Keep Them: A Biblical Theology of the Perfect Preservation of Scripture* as a means for framing the discussion.
- In like manner, in this lesson, we will use William C. Combs’ essay “The Preservation of Scripture” as framework for structuring our study.
- Combs commences his discussion of Matthew 5:17-18 by noting that the passage “is one of the most commonly referenced passages used to support the preservation of Scripture.” Moreover, he identifies the “jot” and “tittle” as follows:
 - Jot—“It is universally agreed that the “jot” (ἰῶτα *iota*) refers to the Hebrew (or Aramaic) letter ך (*yôd*), the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.” (Combs, 21)
 - Tittle—“The “tittle” (κεραία *keraiia*) literally means “horn,” that is, a “projection” or “hook.” This is often been understood to refer to small parts of letters, especially to small strokes distinguishing Hebrew letters.” (Combs, 21)
- When taken at face value Combs concedes that the phrase “could be understood to teach an absolutely perfect preservation of the “Law.” (21) Combs then cites Richard Flanders’ essay “[Does the Bible Promise Its Own Preservation](#)” as a case in point. Flanders wrote:
 - “Some say that this promise refers only to the fulfillment of scripture and not to its preservation. But notice that it says the text of the Bible (to the very letter) will not “pass” in the sense that “heaven and earth” shall one day “pass.” The Greek word used here for “pass” is *parelthe*, and it refers to the physical extinction of the thing that shall pass. It can also be translated “perish.” Just as God’s creation will pass someday, God’s Words will never pass! The actual existence of the original text of scripture will continue

eternally, just as the physical existence of heaven and earth will not continue.” (Quoted in Combs, 21)

- Mark well the nature of Flanders’ position. He makes two important assertions: 1) “the text of the Bible (the very letter will not pass” and 2) “the actual existence of the original text of scripture will continue eternally.” How is this accomplished according to Flanders? By preservation of course. If this not a statement arguing for verbatim preservation I am not sure what is.
- Combs is quick to jump on this point in his comments following the Flanders quote.
 - “Flanders’s interpretation is just how Matthew 5:18 is commonly understood from the KJV/TR viewpoint. Cloud explains: “In summary, the Bible promises that God will preserve His Word in pure form, including the most minute details (the jots and tittles [*sic*], the words), and that this would include the whole Scriptures, Old and New Testaments. The biblical doctrine of preservation is verbal, plenary preservation....” Waite describes this as the “inerrant preservation of the Words of the Bible.” But, in fact, these advocates of KJV/TR position do not actually take Matthew 5:18 literally, even though they claim to do so. If not one “jot” or “tittle” is to be changed, then they should insist on using only the 1611 edition of the KJV since “jot” and “tittle” certainly involve spelling, and there have been thousands of spelling changes since 1611.” (Combs, 21-22)
- Combs has just pointed out something the King James Only advocates have not dealt with honestly, in my opinion. If they are going to demand verbatim identity to every “jot and tittle”, which edition of the KJB exactly reproduced the original autographs. As we will see below, even Flanders is forced to hedge on this point later in his essay.
- Now Combs has the King James Only advocates positioned right where he wants them in order to deliver what he thinks is a final deciding FACTUAL blow.
 - “There are two things to be said about the KJV/TR interpretation of Matthew 5:18. First, it is an *incontrovertible fact*, obvious to anyone who has examined the manuscript evidence, that we do not now possess the words of the autographs in an absolutely inerrant state. This assertion is most significant since it flatly contradicts the whole thesis of the KJV/TR position. I will demonstrate the truth of this assertion later in this essay. Second, Jesus is not teaching in this verse the “inerrant preservation of the Words of the Bible.”” (Combs, 22)

Discussing Combs’ Statement on the Use of Matthew 5:17-18 by King James Advocates

- Let us now dissect Combs’ statement. First, Combs is correct, we cannot know for certain what the words of the original were; if one demands verbatim identity as their standard for preservation and inerrancy. Moreover, he is correct that this fact alone causes the King James Only notion that Matthew 5:17-18 is teaching exact identity of wording (the very jots and tittles) as the standard for preservation to suffer damage. Even within the Byzantine Text, the

textual tradition that King James advocates favor as the preserved text line, there is not verbatim identity of wording. The same could be said for the printed editions of the TR as well as the various editions of the KJB itself. In this way, the King James Only position is unscriptural because it demands more for the doctrine of preservation than what the Bible actually asserts.

- Second, what is Combs' standard for speaking about "an absolutely inerrant state?" It is none other than the standard of verbatim identity in wording. While Combs is correct in his criticism of the King James Only position, on the other side of the spectrum he is arguing for the absolute inerrancy of the original autographs that no longer exist and which no one alive has ever seen. What verse of scripture teaches you to believe that God confined His inspired and inerrant word to some non-existent pieces of parchment?
- In this way both sides are making unscriptural assumptions and talking past each other with the issue of exact sameness or verbatim identity being the great mount impassible that divides them. Recall from Lesson 40 that the language "in the original autographs" was added to Protestant doctrinal statements in the latter half of the 19th century as a means of answering the German Higher Critics and Rationalists. In this way, Protestant Christians reworked their position on the Bible based upon terms set by their opponents. This reworked Bibliology became the new orthodoxy in Fundamental and Evangelical circles in the 20th century. In the same way that Protestant scholars in the 19th century overreacted to the forces of liberalism; believers in the 20th century overreacted to the new "Originals Only" orthodoxy by overstating their case in the opposite direction. Therefore, cordial and productive dialogue on this topic has proved elusive. Both sides are separated by the same thing (the false assumption that preservation requires verbatim identity), do not realize it, and are therefore talking past each other.
- The position I am arguing for in this class is both scriptural as well as logical and in line with the historical and textual facts. The scriptures assert their own inspiration and preservation which means we must have more than the non-existent originals. They do not, however, teach verbatim identity as the standard for preservation.
- Above we saw that Combs quoted Richard Flanders' article "[Does the Bible Promise Its Own Preservation](#)" to buttress his point regarding the use of Matthew 5:17-18 by some King James advocates. A deeper look at the Flanders article will prove instructive. Flanders offers the connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hebrew Masoretic Text as historical proof of the promise of preservation as well as the existence of the Traditional Hebrew supporting the KJB from before the time of Christ (50 BC). Flanders quotes Drs. Gleason Archer and Randell Price to support his conclusion:
 - Archer—" . . . the Hebrew University Isaiah Scroll [of the Dead Sea Scrolls] . . . corresponds **almost letter for letter** with the [traditional text] . . . and yet dates from 50 B.C." (Reproduced from Flanders)
 - Price—"Once a comparison was made between the text of the Isaiah Scroll and the Masoretic Text [the traditional Hebrew 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** . . . It confirmed the accuracy with which the scribes had carefully preserved and transmitted the biblical text through time.” (Reproduced from Flanders)

- Please note that Flanders’ quotes do not quite support his position. Above we quoted Flanders as saying the following with respect to Matthew 5:17-18, “But notice that it says the text of the Bible (to the very letter) will not “pass” in the sense that “heaven and earth” shall one day “pass.”” But then later in the same essay, when seeking to furnish historical proof of “jot and tittle” preservation Flanders quotes two scholars who stop short of the exact identity in preservation that Flanders had previously used Matthew 5:17-18 to argue for.
- Next, note the underlined portion of the quote from Price. Price admits that one does not need verbatim identity for the text to convey the exact same meaning without possessing the exact same words.
- Without realizing the inconsistencies in his argumentation, following the quotes by Archer and Price, Flanders goes on to highlight a very interesting point in the opposite direction. Consider what he says about the nature of textual variants:
 - “To my friend, however, and many scholars like him, the most significant find at the Dead Sea in regard to the Bible’s text was the existence of variant texts! The principles of modern textual criticism are based on the assumption that the **exact preservation** of the original text of an ancient document is extremely unlikely.” (Flanders)
- This statement on the part of Flanders highlights precisely why modern textual critics adopt a reconstructionist approach to the text. They do not believe in the promise of preservation on account of the fact that it did not occur with exact identity.
- At this point it might be good to remind everyone regarding the definition of the English word preservation. Noah Webster defined the word as follows in *American Dictionary of English Language*.
 - *Preservation*—the act of preserving or keeping safe; the act of keeping from injury, destruction or decay; as the *preservation* of life or health; the *preservation* of buildings from fire or decay; the *preservation* of grain from insects; the *preservation* of fruit or plants. When a thing is kept entirely from decay, **or nearly in its original state**, we say it is in a high state of *preservation*.
- Even according to the English dictionary, something does not have to be in an exactly identical state or condition in order to qualify as having been preserved.

Combs and Glenny on the Correct Understanding of Matthew 5:17-18

- Having rejected how many King James advocates utilize Matthew 5:17-18 in their argumentation, Combs offers the following alternative.
 - “Matthew 5:18 is first of all an example of hyperbole, “a conscious exaggeration or a type of overstatement in order to increase the effect of what is being said.” In a graphic way, then, this text makes a point similar to Isaiah 40:8—if “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished,” the “Law” is immutable; it “stands forever.” “No part of the law, not the most insignificant letter, was to be set aside”; “the law is unalterable.” But unlike Isaiah 40:8, this text is more directly tied to Scripture since “Law” in verse 18 is at least a reference to the Torah, more probably the entire OT. But again, this is not to be taken literally, as though Jesus were promising that no Hebrew manuscript could be changed or that no copyist could make an error. This is simply a hyperbolic way of saying that God’s written revelation cannot be changed.

If the Scripture cannot be changed, then it obviously remains valid, with full authority. Thus, the emphasis in Matthew 5:18 is more on the *authority* and *validity* of the OT, not primarily its preservation. As Moo observes: “Probably, then, we should understand v. 18 to be an endorsement of the continuing ‘usefulness’ or authority of the law.” Thus, this verse makes no *direct* affirmation concerning preservation; however, the emphasis on the continuing authority of the Scriptures can *by implication* be used to argue for the preservation of those same Scriptures.” (Combs, 22-23)

- In summation, Combs views the passage as dealing more generally with the authority and validity of the Old Testament than with the exact preservation of every word of scripture.
- W. Edward Glenny writing in 1997, a few years before Combs, took a similar yet somewhat different understanding of Matthew 5:17-18.
 - “Matthew 5:18 is clearly speaking of the fulfillment in Christ of OT ethical (3:15) and prophetic (1:23; 2:15; 4:14; etc.) texts. When Matthew writes in verse 18 “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled,” it must be read in light of its context. Verse 17 says, “Think not that I am come to *destroy* the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to *fulfill*.” The point of the verse is that Jesus did not come to destroy (or to perpetuate for the matter) the OT Law. He is the one whom all the OT points to (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46) and He came to fulfill all that was prophesied about Him in it. Ryrie comments in his study notes that “The Lord’s point is that every letter of every word in the O.T. is vital and will be fulfilled.” This passage is not speaking about the preservation of the exact words found in the autographa; it is declaring that all the prophecies in the OT which pointed to Christ will be fulfilled down to the smallest detail. In addition, the context makes it clear that Jesus is speaking about the fulfillment of every detail in the OT text. Matthew 5:18 does not

ever refer to the NT text, let alone speak of its perfect supernatural preservation.”
(Glenny in *The Bible Version Debate*, 87)

- In a nut shell Glenny is saying that Matthew 5:17-18 are asserting that even the smallest details of the Old Testament are going to be fulfilled.

Conclusion

- In the past I believed that Matthew 5:17-18 taught jot and tittle preservation. When I taught the series *Final Authority: Locating God's Word in English* here at the church in 2010, I used Matthew 5:17-18 to assert the notion that preservation took place with exact identity. Now in the light of further research and study I would no longer hold to my former position on Matthew 5:17-18. This does not mean, however, that I do not believe in the fundamental promise of preservation.
- Matthew 5:17-18 is simply teaching that no detail of the Law is going to go unfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the perfect fulfillment of the righteous requirements of the law.
- Given that the passage is not asserting that the Old Testament was preserved with exact identity there is no reason to argue by extension that Matthew 5:18-19 is teaching the verbatim preservation of the New Testament. This is a King James Only argument used to buttress their position of perfect or verbal plenary preservation.
- As I said in Lesson 28:
 - God promised to preserve His word.
 - Psalms 12:6-7; 119:111, 152, 160; Isaiah 30:8; 40:8; Matthew 4:4; 24:35; I Peter 1:23-25
 - God did not see fit to preserve His word by preserving the originals.
 - This is self-evident because the originals no longer exist.
 - God did not supernaturally over-take the pen of every scribe, copyist, or typesetter who ever handled the text to ensure that no differences of any kind entered the text.
 - Differences exist at every level of this discussion.
 - If the standard for preservation is “plenary” or “pristine” identity, why did God not just preserve the originals and thereby remove all doubt.
- If God intended to preserve His word with verbatim identity, we would have historical/textual evidence that preservation occurred with that level of precision. No such evidence exists.

- This does not mean that one must abandon belief in the promise of preservation in the face of variant readings. Rather, it means that one must amend their understanding of preservation to match what the Bible teaches about the matter.
- To be clear, I do believe in a perfect Bible if, by perfect, one means the following:
 - I believe in “perfect preservation” if, by perfect, one means the existence of a pure text **that does not report information about God, His nature or character, His doctrine, His dispensational dealings with mankind, history, archeology, or science that is FALSE. In short, God’s promise to preserve His word assures the existence of a text that has not been altered in its “character” or “doctrinal content” despite not being preserved in a state of “verbatim identity.”**

Works Cited

- Combs, William W. “The Preservation of Scripture?” in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*. Fall 2000.
- Flanders, Richard. [*Does the Bible Promise its Own Preservation*](#).
- Glenny, W. Edward. “The Preservation of Scripture” in *The Bible Version Debate: The Perspective of Central Baptist Theological Seminary*. Minneapolis, MN: Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997.