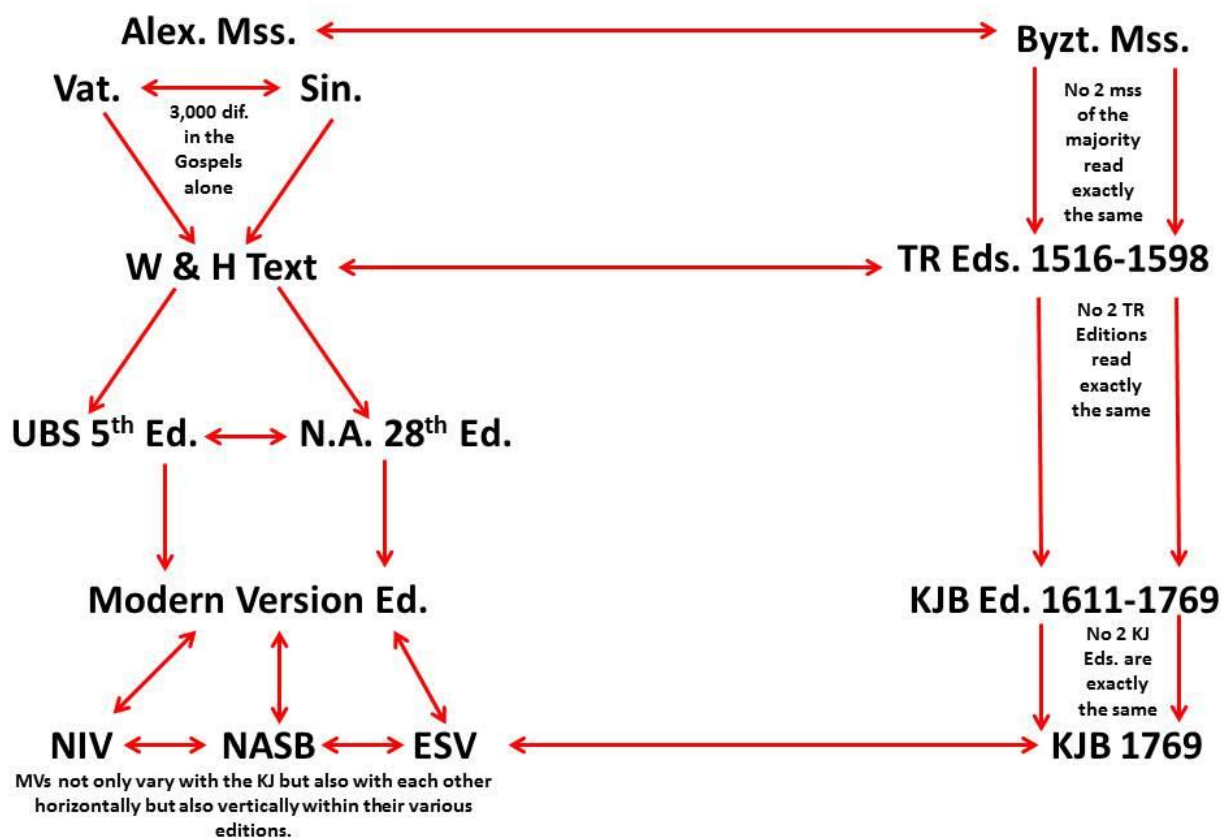


Sunday, February 5, 2017—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 47 The Method of Preservation: Providential or Miraculous

Introduction

- In Lessons 28 and 29 we began the second term of the class with an Introduction to Preservation. After reviewing some key points regarding inspiration from the first term, we took stock of the following facts exhibited on this chart.

Original Autographs



- Summary Statement:
 - “If the preservation of the Word of God depends upon exact preservation of the words of the original documents, then the situation is dire. No two manuscripts contain exactly the same words. No two editions of the Masoretic Text contain exactly the same words. No two editions of the Textus Receptus contain exactly the same words. No two modifications of the King James Version contain exactly the same words and the Bible nowhere tells us which edition, if any, does contain the exact words of the originals. These are not speculations, these are plain facts.” (Bauder, 155)

- In Lesson 29 we used the Book of Jeremiah as a case study to prove that God could preserve His word without preserving the original autographs.
- In Lesson 30, after discussing the Core Issue of Preservation verses Restoration, we studied how the TEXTUAL FACTS presented in Lessons 28 and 29 have given birth to the following three views on the doctrine of preservation:
 - View 1—Denial of a Doctrine of Preservation
 - View 2—Preservation in the KJV/TR/MT Tradition
 - View 3—Preservation in the Totality of Manuscripts
- With these three views in mind, Lessons 31 through 38 were devoted to determining whether or not the scriptures teach their own preservation.
 - Psalm 12:6-7 (Lessons 31 & 32)
 - Psalm 119: 111, 152, 160 (Lesson 33)
 - Isaiah 30:8; 40:8; I Peter 1:23-25 (Lessons 34 & 35)
 - Matthew 4:4 (Lessons 36 & 37)
 - Matthew 24:35 (Lesson 38)
- Lesson 39 brought closure to our study of the relevant passages and concluded that the scriptures do promise their own preservation. This conclusion was arrived at through a consideration of the following four points:
 - Preservation: The Bible’s Claim For Itself
 - Preservation: God Keeps His Promises
 - Preservation: The Superiority of the Fideistic Approach
 - Preservation: The Historic Position of the Reformers
- In Lesson 40 we studied “Why Preservation Matters” by looking at how [Protestant Bibliology](#) was revamped during the latter half of the 19th century. Moreover, we considered the [Agnosticism of Bart Ehrman](#) as an example of the logical conclusion of the reworked Bibliology and its removal of the promise of preservation.

- More recently, Lessons 41 through 46 covered the corollary between preservation and inspiration as well as the extent of preservation. These lessons presented the notion that preservation did not occur with verbatim identicality and that some have carried the corollary too far and used it to make unscriptural assertions regarding preservation.
- In this Lesson we want to begin a consideration of the method of preservation. We will begin this study by looking at whether “providential” is an appropriate descriptor to describe the method of preservation.

Preservation: Miraculous or Providential

- First, as we saw in Lessons 31 through 39 the scriptures do teach their own preservation.
 - Psalm 12:6-7; 119:111, 152, 160; Isaiah 30:8; 40:8; Matthew 4:4; 24:35; I Peter 1:23-25
- Given that preservation is the Bible’s claim for itself; it must have occurred or else God would have failed to keep his promise (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2). This means that the Godhead was active in some way, shape, manner, or form to ensure the fulfillment of the fundamental promise of preservation. The question is how does one explain/understand how the Godhead accomplished the preservation of scripture?
- Before there was a textual or King James Only controversy, the Protestant Reformers elected to describe preservation as “providential” in their early doctrinal statements. The following language from Chapter I Article VIII from *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) was repeated in the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* of 1658, *London Baptist Confession* of 1689, and *Philadelphia Baptist Confession* of 1742.
 - “The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, **by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages**, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated in to the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”
- Consequently, there has been a long standing precedent within Protestantism to not only affirm belief in the promise of preservation but to do so using the term “providence” as a descriptor for how preservation occurred.
- Therefore, one should not be surprised to find Edward F. Hills, a Presbyterian defender of the Traditional Text in the 20th century, using the term “providential” to describe how preservation

occurred. As a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, Hills viewed himself as a defender of the historic position enunciated by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. We have already observed the following statement from Hills' 1956 work *The King James Version Defended* regarding "providential preservation" in Lesson 8.

- "If the doctrine of divine inspiration of the Old and New Testament Scripture is a true doctrine, the doctrine of the **providential preservation** of the Scriptures must also be a true doctrine. It must be that down through the centuries God has exercised a **special providential control** over the copying of the Scriptures and the preservation and use of the copies, so that trustworthy representatives of the original text have been available to God's people in every age. God must have done this, for if He gave the Scriptures to His Church by inspiration as the perfect and final revelation of His will, then it is obvious that He would not allow this revelation to disappear or undergo any alteration of its fundamental character.

Although this doctrine of the **providential preservation** of the Old and New Testament Scriptures has sometimes been misused, nevertheless, it also has been held, either implicitly or explicitly, by all branches of the Christian Church as a necessary consequence of the divine inspiration of these Scriptures." (Hills, 2)

- Elsewhere in *The King James Bible Defended*, when discussing the minor differences that exist in the various editions of the *TR*, Dr. Hills recognizes a difference between what he calls "providential" and "miraculous" preservation.
 - "The texts of the several editions of the Textus Receptus were God-guided. They were set up under the leading of God's **special providence**. Hence the differences between them were kept to a minimum. But these disagreements were not eliminated altogether, for this would require not merely **providential guidance** but a **miracle**. In short, God chose to preserve the New Testament text **providentially** rather than **miraculously**, and this is why even the several editions of the Textus Receptus vary from each other slightly." (Hills, 222-223)
- We have already seen in Lessons 41 through 46 that using "verbatim identity" as the standard for preservation is overreaching. In order to accomplish preservation in a state of "exact sameness" God would have had to supernaturally, i.e. miraculously, overtake the pen of every scribe, copyist, typesetter, and printer who ever handled the text to ensure that no differences of any kind ever entered the text. That God did not choose to accomplish preservation in this manner is apparent because there are slight differences even in the manuscripts comprising the Byzantine Text Type not to mention the various editions of the *TR*.
- That being said, the question at hand in Lesson 47 is how does one explain how this was accomplished? Hills looks at the historical data and concludes that preservation could not have been "miraculous" because of the existence of textual variants. These statements by Hills ought to make one wonder how he is using the term "miraculous." The first definition for "miraculous" offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is ". . . not explicable by natural laws; supernatural."

- In recent conversation regarding these matters our beloved Brother David Reid stated the following:
 - “I am not sure that preservation was not miraculous as the term is properly defined. Miraculous means "not explicable by natural laws, supernatural." We critique modern textual theory when it treats the Bible the same as any other book and fails to account for its unique character. Did God inspire His word and then simply leave it to natural human processes with zero involvement by God as to whether and to what extent His word was preserved? The answer has to be no. God did and does something because He has promised to preserve His word, and He is going to make sure that it happens. That something that God does is beyond common human processes and is therefore supernatural, i.e. miraculous.

I think the appropriate analogy is the preservation of the Jews. Personally, I would say that God's preservation of the Jews throughout time has been miraculous even though there has been great loss of life of individual Jews. Something can be miraculous even if man can point to examples where there was not "perfect preservation" as theologians have defined the term. God "failed," so to speak, to prevent the Holocaust and the individual destruction of millions of Jews, but He nonetheless has preserved the Jews because they would no longer exist at all if God had not often acted miraculously as for example in the book of Esther. So, it is with the word of God. God permitted textual variants to occur within the universe of manuscripts, but God nonetheless has acted to preserve His word, otherwise Satan would have destroyed the entire Received Text tradition. It is a miracle that the word of God can be found at all given Satanic and human attempts to destroy it. Preservation wasn't "miraculous" as theologians use the term because they make the unscriptural assumption that miraculous preservation would not allow for the existence of any textual variants. However, using the dictionary definition of the word "miraculous," i.e. not explicable by natural laws, supernatural, it is obvious that God has miraculously preserved his word." (Reid, email dated 1/23/17)

- Hills' use of terminology appears confused because of his insistence that "miraculous" in this case would equate with zero textual variants. That being said, the question remains whether or not it was providential? What does one mean when they use the terminology providential?
- Dr. William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary addresses this issue in his essay "The Preservation of Scripture." Regarding whether preservation was "miraculous" or "providential" Combs states the following:
 - “As far as the method of preservation is concerned, there are only two options. Scripture must be preserved either directly, by miraculous intervention in the transmission process, and/or indirectly, through secondary causation—"through the actions of human wills," as Sproul reminded us earlier. It is generally agreed that God's normal method of preservation has been indirect, through secondary causation. This method has usually been termed providential, though, as we previously noted, providence simply has to do with God carrying out his design for the universe, regardless of whether that is done directly or indirectly. But in discussions of preservation the term providential is used to signify that though God miraculously inspired his Word, he has normally chosen to preserve it via secondary causation, that is, through ordinary human means. And because preservation has been by ordinary human means, the transmission process has inevitably resulted in the introduction of errors.” (Combs, 30)

- First, note that Combs equates all textual variants with “errors” i.e., he does not distinguish between the nature of the variants: 1) substantively equivalent variants, or 2) substantive differences in meaning. He does this because he is assuming “verbatim identity” as the standard for preservation.
- Second, it is important to note how Combs defines “providence.” He defines it as “secondary causation—through the actions of human wills” or “ordinary human means.” In other words, according to Combs, there is nothing supernatural about preservation at all; it is a completely “ordinary” process. God was content to use secondary causation i.e., men copying the text by “ordinary human means” to accomplish the preservation of His word. Once again it is important to note that Combs holds this position because of the existence of variant readings and the fact that the copies do not possess “verbatim identity.”
- Regarding these comments by Combs, Brother Reid stated the following:
 - “Because textual variants exist, Combs concludes that God’s method of preservation must have been providential and used “ordinary human means.” Combs reasons that if God had used miraculous means to preserve His word then there would be no textual variants. But this hardly follows.

God never promised to preserve Shakespeare or Aristotle so their writings have been preserved through ordinary human means. Whether what we have today is an accurate reflection of what they originally wrote, no one knows. But God has promised to preserve His word, and He therefore obligated himself to ensure that it happened. To think that God took no personal action whatsoever to facilitate preservation while Satan has been actively attempting to corrupt and destroy the word of God since Genesis 3 seems to me the height of naiveté.

As normally defined, miraculous and providential are not direct antonyms. Rather, they have been defined by the participants in this discussion as antonyms because of the shared pernicious assumption that miraculous preservation would prevent textual variants from existing. This seems reminiscent of the Calvinism v. Arminianism debate. Both sides start with a flawed understanding. They then, frame the terms of the discussion while laboring under that misunderstanding and insist that people pick a side. The appropriate response is not to pick a side but to reject both flawed positions. Similarly, the proper response to the miraculous v. providential debate is to choose neither side because the debate has been framed in a manner that is unscriptural, confusing and contrary to the natural meaning of words. Since God didn’t feel the need to put a label on the manner in which He chose to accomplish preservation, it doesn’t seem profitable for man to invent one.” (Reid, email dated 1/23/17)

- It is difficult to see how the preservation of the “precise wording” demanded by many King James Onlyists could be accomplished via the ordinary human means of secondary causation. Yet many King James Only (KJO) advocates view the use of “providential” as a means of avoiding some of the more outlandish enunciations of the KJO position. Combs is quick to point this out in the next paragraph.
 - “As we have observed earlier, because advocates of the KJV/TR position commonly claim to believe in providential preservation through ordinary human means, they generally wish to distance themselves from the idea of a miraculous re-inspiration of

manuscripts or versions. However, providential preservation via secondary causation cannot produce the kind of product this position claims to possess—an error-free TR and/or KJV. Speaking of the TR, Waite says:

- It is my own personal conviction and belief, after studying this subject since 1971, that the words of the Received Greek and Masoretic Hebrew texts that underlie the King James Bible are the very words which God has preserved down through the centuries, **being the exact words of the originals themselves**. As such, I believe they are inspired words.

. . . No matter whether one uses the miraculous language of inspiration to describe preservation, or simply calls it providential, the Bible the KJV/TR position claims to possess—an infallible and inerrant Bible— requires a continuous chain of miracles throughout the transmission process.” (Combs, 31-32)

- Combs is absolutely correct if one demands “verbatim identicality” as the standard for preservation. The only way the text could have traversed the seas of time and history in a state of “exact sameness” is for the Godhead’s involvement in the process of preservation to have been of the sort that no variations of any kind ever entered the text. The fact that there are textual variants in the very Greek manuscripts (Byzantine) that KJO advocates maintain are the most accurate proves that historically this TYPE of miraculous preservation did not occur.
- All this highlights why dropping “verbatim identicality” as the standard for preservation is such a crucial move. As Brother Reid pointed out above, “the pernicious assumption that perfect preservation would avoid textual variants” has led to extremely poor uses of terminology by those on both sides of preservation/textual debate.
- All this highlights a potential problem with using term “providential” at all as a descriptor for how preservation was accomplished. Most notably, the Bible never uses the term “providential” to describe how preservation would occur.
- Acts 24:2—the word “providence” only occurs one time in your Bible and it is not in a context having anything to do with preservation. The underlying Greek word only occurs one other time in the Greek text supporting the KJB.
 - Romans 13:14—“provision”
- According to *Strong’s Concordance* the Greek word rendered as “providence” and “provision” is the word *pronoia* which means: 1) forethought, providential care, and 2) to make provision for a thing.
- The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines “providence” as follows:
 1. a. Foresight; anticipation of and preparation for the future; prudent management, government, or guidance.
 - b. Regard for future needs in the management of resources; thrift, frugality.

2. In full *providence of God (also nature, etc.), divine providence*. The foreknowing and protective care of God (or nature, etc.); divine direction, control, or guidance.
 3. That which is provided; a supply, a provision.
 4. The action of providing something; provision, preparation, arrangement. Chiefly in *to make providence*.
 5. a. An act or instance of divine intervention; an event or circumstance which indicates divine dispensation.
 - *special providence*, a particular act of direct divine intervention.
- Notice that the two uses of the Greek word *pronoia* correspond to the following English uses which have nothing to do with “an act or instance of divine intervention.”
 1. a. Foresight; anticipation of and preparation for the future; prudent management, government, or guidance.
 3. That which is provided; a supply, a provision.
 - Based upon the Biblical use of “providence”, one could only call preservation “providential” in that God, in his foresight, provided a mechanism through which preservation would be accomplished namely, the copying process. It says nothing, though, about how that copying process would be conducted.
 - Secondly, things get confused when one uses words that the scriptures do not. The theological uses of “providence” exhibited by definitions 2 and 5.a. certainly imply some sort of direct divine intervention that conjures meanings more along the lines of the “miraculous” than secondary causation by ordinary human means.
 - Note the *OED*’s sub entry under 5.a. for “special providence” or “a particular act of direct divine intervention.” Once again this speaks of a particular “miraculous” act more so than the secondary causation notion of “providence” outlined by Combs above in his essay.
 - With this definition work in mind, notice how confused the second Hills quote actually is. He uses the terminology “special providence” in the middle of arguing for why preservation was not “miraculous.”
 - “The texts of the several editions of the Textus Receptus were God-guided. They were set up under the leading of God’s **special providence**. Hence the differences between them were kept to a minimum. But these disagreements were not eliminated altogether, for this would require not merely providential guidance but a miracle. In short, God chose to preserve the New Testament text providentially rather than miraculously, and this is why even the several editions of the Textus Receptus vary from each other slightly.” (Hills, 222-223)
 - When one lays aside the "no textual variants" presumption, there is really no difference between “miraculous” and "special providence" as described by Hills?

- In short, it seems that the use of the word “providence” in this theological sense muddies the waters with respect to the methodology of preservation. For these reasons, I recommend that one not use the term as a descriptor for explaining how preservation occurred. There is nothing to be gained from using such a loaded and confused term.
- Even if I cannot explain the exact mechanics and methodology, I know that God must be active in the preservation process somehow. After all, he promised that he would preserve his word. Consider the following words of wisdom from Brother David W. Reid
 - “The Bible tells us what God wants us to know. It doesn’t tell us all the things that God does, which are innumerable (John 21:25), and most significantly, God doesn’t tell us how he does what he does. Often we would like to know how God does certain things so that we can then leverage that mechanism to accomplish what we want without having to rely upon God. However, that knowledge is hid from us. Instead, what we must do is believe what God has chosen to reveal and trust God to administer the details to accomplish the good pleasure of His will, whether we know the details or not (Eph. 1:5, Isa 46:10).”
 - Job 5:9—**Which doeth great things and unsearchable**; marvellous things without number:
 - Job 9:10—**Which doeth great things past finding out**; yea, and wonders without number.
 - Job 33:13—Why dost thou strive against him? **for he giveth not account of any of his matters.**
 - Ecclesiastes 3:11—He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, **so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.**
 - Isaiah 40:28—Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, *that* the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? **there is no searching of his understanding.**
 - Romans 11:33—O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and **his ways past finding out!**
 - Romans 11:34—**For who hath known the mind of the Lord?** or who hath been his counsellor?

An example may help. In II Kings 6:4-7, God caused an axe head to swim, obviously a miracle. But how did God do that? Did God decrease the density of the axe head temporarily so that it rose to the surface of the water? Or did God increase the density of the water around the axe head so that the axe head floated? Or perhaps God without altering the density of any object created a powerful upward current in the water that caused the axe head to rise? Or perhaps something altogether different occurred. We do not know because scripture is silent on this matter as it so often is in describing the mechanics of how God accomplishes His will. Evidently, God has chosen to reveal to

man the end result of what God has chosen to accomplish while leaving out the details of how it was actually performed. So it would seem with the innumerable unknown acts God has performed throughout history to preserve His word.” (Reid, email dated 1/23/17)

- Generally speaking, during the dispensation of grace, God works in His saints through the written word of God and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.
 - Ephesians 3:20—God’s power is at work in the believer’s inner man during the current dispensation.
 - Philippians 2:13—once again God is at work today during the dispensation of grace but it is primarily an inward work.
 - I Thessalonians 2:13—this working of God is accomplished in the believer’s inner man through “the word of God.”
- It seems that God chose to preserve His word through Bible believing saints. As we will study in future lessons, in Time Past with respect to the Old Testament this was accomplished through the nation of Israel. Today during the dispensation of grace, preservation was accomplished through Bible believing saints who knew they had God’s word, and faithfully copied the text to the best of their ability without the aid of direct supernatural/miraculous intervention.
- At the end of the day here is what can know for sure.
 - 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 original autographs.
 - This is self-evident because the original autographs no longer exist.
 - God did not supernaturally i.e., miraculously 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 if by miraculous one means exact identity.
 - Differences (textual variants) exist at every level of this discussion.
 - If God intended to preserve His word with verbatim identity (plenary verbal preservation) we would have historical/textual evidence that preservation occurred with that level of verbatim precision.
 - No such evidence exists.
 - If the standard for preservation is “plenary” or “pristine” identity, why did God not just preserve the originals and thereby remove all doubt?

- I Corinthians 1:25-29; 2:5—I believe that the reason God chose to do it this way is because He wanted us to stand by faith in the power and wisdom of God and not in the wisdom and ability of man.
- This is why I am so excited about the revised understanding of preservation (Reset Button) that we have presented in Lessons 41 through 46. One can maintain it by faith in God’s word alone without need to insert rationalistic suppositions to rescue the enterprise.
- In short, the Bible does not use the term “providential” to describe how preservation was accomplished. Therefore, it is not helpful for us to do so either.

Works Cited

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