

Bible Translation Day 2023 – Preservation

Back in 1966, the US Congress proclaimed that Sept 30 of each year would be marked as Bible Translation Day. Today is the Sunday closest to September 30, so I'd like to talk about the process of Bible translation.

We probably don't appreciate all the work and sacrifice that has made it possible for us to read the Bible in our own language. But we should. Many people paid a high price for us to have the Bible in English.

On Bible Translation Day, and every day, we should rejoice that God has preserved his word over the centuries. If God had not preserved the Bible, we wouldn't have it, or at least, we could not be confident in it. But we have it, and we can be certain that God has preserved what he inspired.

When we say that the Bible is "preserved," what does that mean?

I. Definition of Preservation

- A. Simply speaking, we believe that God has sustained the text of Scripture so that what we have today is what God gave originally; we possess the very Word of God as God originally inspired it.
- B. Preservation pertains to the text (words, record); we have today what God originally gave to the prophets and apostles. Nothing of the inspired written Scriptures has been lost. God preserved what he originally gave so what we have today is what God gave originally.
- C. That does *not* mean a couple of things.
 1. Preservation does *not* mean that we have the original MSS, the autographs. I.e., what Moses, Isaiah, Luke or Paul wrote. We have copies of the originals, but not the originals themselves.
 2. Preservation does *not* imply that every Christian throughout all time has had access to every part of Scripture. Many groups have only parts of Scripture in their language. Even the Jews have had periods of time when they did not have access to Scripture.
 3. Preservation does *not* mean that every Christian had an accurate translation of Scripture. Some translations are of fairly low quality.

4. Preservation does *not* mean that all of Scripture is preserved perfectly in any one place or in any one edition or translation. Translations are accurate to the degree that they preserve the original texts. Every translation has weaknesses; most translations are revised over time to improve them.

We do *not* claim that any particular translation is perfectly preserved in every minute detail. Every translation could be better than it is.

Does the Bible teach preservation? Yes ...

D. Several passages imply the preservation of Scripture.

1. Some passages assert that God's word is eternal.

Ps 119:89 *Forever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.*

Ps 119:152 *... you established [your statutes] to last forever.*

Ps 119:160 *All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.*

Isaiah 40:8 *The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.*

2. Some passages show that God's word continues to be authoritative.

Matthew 5:18 *For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.*

John 10:35 *... the Scripture cannot be broken*

2 Timothy 3:16–17 *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

NT authors often use the phrase "It is written..." when they quote from the OT. The grammar of that statement implies something like "It stands written..." or "It was written previously and it remains in authority."

If the Scriptures continue to be authoritative, it means that they must be preserved.

3. Some passages show that God's word is indestructible.
Matthew 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.
4. Some passages warn against the corrupting message of the text.
Re 22:19 if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and [from] the things which are written in this book.
5. Some passages urge us to study and know the Scripture.
Acts 17:11 [The people in] Thessalonica, ... received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

- E. All conservative Christians believe the Scriptures have been preserved. Inspiration seems to *require* the preservation of the Scriptures. The only way we know that we still have an accurate record of what God originally inspired is if God also preserved it.

We recognize that many evil men have tried to eradicate the Bible. And in many cases, they have succeeded in destroying many copies of it. Many false teachers have corrupted editions of the Bible. But ultimately, nothing and no one can change or eradicate Scripture. No matter what sinful man may do, the Bible stands and always will. God preserves it.

How did that happen? Let's now consider....

II. The Means of Preservation¹

- A. The work of preserving the text of Scripture is basically a providential one. God *inspired* his Word miraculously, but he has not chosen to *preserve* the text miraculously.
1. A miracle is a direct application of God's power into our world, resulting in a supernatural event. That's inspiration.
 2. A work of God's providence is indirect, through secondary or normal causes.
 3. There is no perpetual, continuing miracle of inspiration going on today and God never made such a promise.

¹ Some of this material is based on William Combs' study, "How We Got Our Bibles."

4. God has preserved his Word, but not through miraculous means. Preservation is providential—through normal, mundane methods and means. That’s exactly what we see when we examine the MS evidence.

B. Hebrew MSS preserve the OT.

Heb 1:1 says that “God spoke to the fathers through the prophets.” That material was written down. What happened to it after that?

Jewish scribes copied the OT Hebrew text with an incredibly high degree of faithfulness to the original manuscripts.

1. The OT text is often called the Masoretic Text; most translations use this text.
2. Who were the Masoretes? They were a group of scholars and scribes in Palestine and Babylonia, active from AD 600–1000, who developed elaborate methods to ensure the accurate copying of the Hebrew OT text.
 - a) These scholars are called Masoretes because they developed and preserved the Masorah, a body of traditions pertaining to the Hebrew text to ensure its precise copying.
 - b) They developed systems for indicating vowels, accents, and annotations to instruct scribes and readers exactly how the Hebrew text should be copied and read. Their labors ensured a high degree of accuracy in transmission.
3. The Masoretes were very careful to preserve the text as they received it. Even if the text contained reading they thought should be different, they did not change the received text. Instead, they put potential readings in the margin.

Quote: The Masoretes counted every word, made copious lists, and wrote thousands of notes on the margins of the manuscripts.²

BTW, marginal notes have been included in the Bible for many centuries, in both OT and NT MSS. These marginal notes inform the reader regarding potential readings and/or they provide the reader with possible options for translation.

4. After the Masoretic era (c. 1000 AD), Jewish scholars continued to faithfully transmit the text.

² DAVID MARCUS, “What’s the Masorah for?” <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/whats-the-masorah-for/>

5. Christians showed little interest in the Hebrew OT during the Middle Ages. The Latin Vulgate was the Bible of the church, and many church leaders were convinced that the Latin was equal to if not better than the Hebrew.

C. Ancient Translations of the OT Preserved the Word of God.

Besides the Hebrew MSS of OT, we also have translations of the OT into other languages. These are not as important as the Hebrew MSS but are helpful in preserving the original text of the OT.

1. The Samaritan Pentateuch — The Samaritans were a mixed race of people living just north of Israel. They produced part of the OT in their language.

- a) The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as their Bible and preserved their own text independent of the Jews (non-Masoretic).
- b) The oldest manuscript dates from about A.D. 1000. Its value as an aid to translation is limited.

2. The Aramaic Targums

- a) The Jews mainly spoke Aramaic when they returned to Israel after the Babylonian exile. Since Hebrew remained the language in which the Scriptures were written, it was necessary that oral translations into Aramaic be given in the synagogue after the sacred text was read.

Nehemiah 8:8 So they read distinctly from ... the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

- b) By the time of Christ, some of these translations, called Targums (meaning “translation” or “paraphrase”), were written down.

Quote: [The Targums] are a witness to the Hebrew Bible text as it existed in the first few centuries [after Jesus] many of the targums preserve valuable information about Jewish theology, practice, and interpretation of Scripture from the early centuries of the Christian era.³

³ <https://www.accordancebible.com/article/buzz-articles-targ-php/>

3. The Greek Septuagint (meaning “seventy,” abbreviated as LXX)
 - a) The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the OT done in Egypt c. 100 B.C. This translation was needed because most Jews outside of Palestine knew only Greek.
 - b) According to legend, the LXX was the work of 72 Palestinian Jews, six from each tribe, who came to Alexandria at the request of Egyptian ruler, Ptolemy Philadelphus.
 - c) The LXX as a whole contains much variation within the MSS, some quite accurate and some rather interpretive, like a paraphrase. Parts of it are of more value than others.
 - d) The Septuagint was the Bible of Greek speaking Christians in the early church. It is the translation that is commonly quoted in the NT.

That’s all OT; what about the NT?

D. A Multitude of Manuscripts Preserve the NT.

1. There are currently over 5,800 cataloged NT MSS available. Some of these are small fragments, while others are parts of books, complete books, or complete NTs.
2. Some of the earliest/oldest NT MSS were written on papyrus. The earliest NT fragment is from the Gospel of John, dated to about AD 100–125 (P52). There are only about 140 papyri MSS existing today, but they are likely the oldest materials available.

Illus.: I recently read about a papyrus MS found in Egypt at a place called Oxyrhynchus; here are some details:

In 1896, British scholars came across the ancient city’s garbage dump—filled with thousands of manuscripts. While most of these manuscripts are fairly mundane records—like receipts, letters, contracts, etc.—occasionally scholars find NT MSS.

Among the Oxyrhynchus materials included a papyrus fragment of the Gospel of Mark, probably from the 2nd or 3rd century. It is the oldest copy of material from the Gospel of Mark known to exist.⁴ It shows that the Gospels were in circulation around the Roman Empire very shortly after the time of Jesus.

⁴ MICHAEL J. KRUGER, *New ‘Gospel’ Manuscript Discovered? (What It Is and Why It Matters.)*

Even ancient garbage dumps can preserve the Word of God.

Papyrus is not a very robust material to write on.

3. The vast majority of NT MSS are written on parchment or vellum—i.e., animal skins, leather.
 - a) Some of these were written in upper-case script from the 3rd to the 10th century. There are about 300 of these MSS existing.
 - b) Starting in about the 9th century, Greek was usually written in lower case or cursive script. These form the majority of existing MSS. There are about 2800 of these MSS existing.
- E. Lectionaries preserve the Word of God. Lectionaries are MSS in which sections of the Scriptures have been arranged for reading in church services. These come from the 6th century and continue through the age of printing. There are about 2400 lectionary MSS still existing.
- F. These NT documents are far more numerous than any other document from ancient history. There is better support for the claims of the NT than for any other ancient writing.
- G. Early Christian writings also preserve the Word of God. The entire NT could probably be reconstructed from the thousands of quotations found in early Christian writings, i.e., the church fathers—Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Ignatius, Cyprian, etc. These men included long sections of Scripture in their writing.
- H. Early Translations of the Bible preserve God’s Word.

Within just a few decades after the time of Christ, the Gospel was being circulated throughout the Roman Empire, and Christians were translating the NT into the various languages of that region.

 1. Syriac —Syriac is a form of Aramaic, but using a different script. The Syriac Bible is called the Peshitta, which means “simple” or “common.”
 2. Coptic — Coptic is “Egyptian.” Coptic is a language of several dialects, so translations of the Bible were made into several of these.

3. Armenian— 5th century
4. Georgian— 5th century
5. Ethiopic— 6th century
6. Latin
 - a) By the year AD 200, Greek was no longer being spoken in the West (i.e., around Rome). Latin became dominant and this produced the need for Latin translations of the Bible.
 - b) The earliest/oldest Latin translations are called Old Latin. The OT was translated from the LXX rather than the original Hebrew because Christians did not know Hebrew and the LXX was the dominant version at the time.
 - c) The Latin Vulgate (meaning “commonly accepted”) — This translation was done by the famous scholar Jerome (ca. 342–420), the most learned Christian scholar of his day. Jerome undertook a thorough revision of the Old Latin based on the original Hebrew, which he finished about 405.

The Vulgate became the Bible of the church for the next 1000 years and had a profound influence on Bible translations made prior to the 19th century. The first printed Bible, the 1454 Gutenberg Bible, was the Vulgate. The Vulgate was the basis for pre-Reformation Bibles, such as Wycliffe’s English translation (1380).

Interesting note: A fair number of readings (c. 190) found in the KJV depend on the Latin rather than the original languages. Obviously, the Latin was held in high esteem.

III. The Preservation of the New Testament Text Over Time

A. Preservation before AD 325 (variants)

1. During this period Christianity was an outlawed religion, and most copying of manuscripts was *not* done by professional scribes. Therefore, many variant readings arose during this period.

2. A “variant” is simply a difference found between two MS copies. Variants happen through the hand-copying process that was used before the printing press was invented. One MS (or set of them) has one reading at a particular passage, while another MS (or set of them) has a slightly different reading at that same spot.
3. Variants are usually very small and inconsequential—the spelling of a word, order of words, use of synonyms, etc. The vast majority of variants are of this type—they have very little significance and don’t change the meaning of a passage. Scholars examine the evidence and choose the reading that they believe reflects the original. That reading ends up in the translation. Sometimes variants end up in marginal notes.
4. Only about fifty of the variants of the NT MSS are very important, and none of them change the overall meaning of the Bible or the Christian faith. Even the most significant variants do not change Christian doctrine. In those rare places where the reading is uncertain, the correct reading is available. Modern translations often set off a variant in brackets or otherwise indicate that the reading may or may not be supported by various MSS. Marginal notes usually show the options.

Quote: [F]or over 99 percent of the words of the Bible, we know what the original manuscript said. Even for many of the verses where there are textual variants, ... the correct decision is often quite clear, and there are really very few places where the textual variant is both difficult to evaluate and significant in determining the meaning. For most practical purposes, then, the current published scholarly texts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament are the same as the original manuscripts.⁵

B. Preservation from 325–1516 (Latin replaces Greek in the west)

1. During this period, Greek began to fade from use in the western part of the Roman Empire, to be replaced by Latin. After AD 300, Greek was spoken only in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (i.e., around Byzantium). Copying of Greek MSS continued only in the east. Since Latin was the predominate language in the west (i.e., in western Europe), the Bible was copied in that language.

⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 96.

2. The result of these factors was that the transmission of the Greek NT was generally limited to the Eastern Church, where the majority of copies reflected the standardized text used at the capital, Byzantium (later Constantinople, now Istanbul).
- C. Preservation from 1516–1633 (printing press, Erasmus)
1. With the invention of mechanical printing in the 15th century (1454), the copying of the biblical text by hand came to an end. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press meant that now many copies of a book, all identical, could be produced. The first major book printed by Gutenberg was the Bible—an edition of the Latin Vulgate.
 2. The first published Greek NT was produced in 1516 by the Roman Catholic priest and humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus. He is an important person because he published the GNT that translators used for many years.
 - a) Before this, Greek NT MSS were not compiled and published. Erasmus was the first to compile and publish the entire GNT.
 - b) It appears that he used only seven MSS to compile the Greek text. These were all from the 11th century and later. We now see that fact as a significant weakness of his text.
 - c) Erasmus' second edition was published in 1519, and this was the basis for Luther's German NT translation. Tyndale based his English translation on the third edition of Erasmus' GNT (1522).
 - d) After Erasmus died, other publishers produced various editions of his work, each one refining it or editing it slightly.
 - e) Theodore Beza, the successor of John Calvin at Geneva, produced nine editions between 1565 and 1604 containing only slight changes. Scholars believe that Beza's edition of 1598 was the main source for the translators of the KJV.
 - f) For nearly 300 years, Erasmus' Greek NT formed the basis for virtually all Protestant translations of the NT.

D. Preservation from 1633–1831 (older MSS discovered)

During this time period, scholars and archaeologist began discovering older NT MSS. Still, the Greek text being printed during this period was still that of Erasmus. New evidence from older MSS was placed in the footnotes of printed Bibles. Scholars began studying the differences between the MSS in great detail during this era.

E. Preservation from 1831–1881 (rise of the critical text)

1. For the first time, scholars began producing printed GNTs based upon the *oldest* MSS instead of the printed work of Erasmus.
2. In 1881, scholars in England produced a GNT based on the oldest MSS they could find. This text today is commonly called the “critical text” because it’s based on modern scholarship and scientific theories of textual transmission.

IV. English Translations of the Bible Preserve the Word of God.

A. The first known English translation was by a herdsman named Caedmon, who translated various portions of the OT into English poetry in around AD 670.

B. The earliest modern English translations were done by men like John Wycliffe (1330–84), William Tyndale (1494–1536), and Miles Coverdale (1488–1569).

C. In 1560, a group of English Protestants in Europe produced *the Geneva Bible*.

For about 75 years, the Geneva Bible was the household Bible for most English Protestants. It’s the Bible of Shakespeare. The KJV translators quote from the Geneva Bible in the preface to the KJV.

D. The King James Version (KJV) — 1611

1. At a special conference in 1604, the English Puritans convinced King James to permit a new translation of the Bible. Several committees of scholars worked on the translation. The work was published in 1611.
2. Although the KJV was superior to previous versions, it was not well received at first. Many English Christians continued to use the Geneva Bible until it went out of print in 1644. Only after that did the KJV really take off in popularity.

3. For almost 300 years, the KJV was the default Bible for most English-speaking people. It still is quite popular today. Minor corrections were made in 1612, 1613, and 1616. Major revisions were made in 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769. The currently published edition of the KJV is often called the Blayney revision of 1769.
- E. Of course, many other translations are available today of varying quality, accuracy, and style. Translations produced by conservative Christian scholars preserve God's Word for us today.

It would not do us much good to know that "God, ... spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets" (Hebrews 1:1) if the record of those words were lost, garbled, or corrupted. Through the good providence of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments have been preserved over time so that what we have today is the same as what God originally inspired. We can have great confidence that the Bible we hold in our hands today is the inspired, infallible, inerrant, preserved Word of God.

Like those early Christians, it's our obligation to circulate the Bible as widely as possible. We can do that ourselves personally by giving out Bibles to those who don't have them. And we can do it by supporting agencies that are printing copies and translations of the Bible, like Bibles International and Bearing Precious Seed.

Of course, the point of having a copy of the preserved Word of God is that we read it, obey it, and proclaim it to others. We should have a deep appreciation for the Word of God and for those who preserved it for us over the centuries.