

Four Basic Views on the Preservation of Scripture

This chart shows four conservative positions regarding the preservation of scripture. All four views accept the inspiration of the words penned by the original authors or their secretaries in the autographs (i.e., the original manuscripts). We do not have the autographs, but the inspired words have been preserved through a vast collection of manuscript copies, lectionaries, patristic quotes, printed texts, and translations. Liberal New Testament textual critics believe the New Testament original text cannot be reconstructed. Conservative textual critics believe it generally can, estimating that only around 1400 words (1%) remain in doubt out of the approximately 140,000 words in the Greek New Testament. The scriptures themselves do not specify the exact method of their own preservation. As a result, Christians are not in complete agreement on the means or extent of preservation. Due to the abundance of manuscripts, there are many variant readings in the manuscripts (estimated 200,000 to 400,000 variants in the 2.5 million pages of the almost 6000 extant Greek manuscripts—conservatively 1 variant per 6.25 pages). It was difficult for New Testament scribes to hand copy each document. They did not have eye glasses and some Koiné Greek manuscripts do not have spaces between words. Also, even simple Greek sentences can be spelled many different ways. Short of a miraculous supervision of every scribe who copied over 1500 years, these types and number of variants are normal, if not less severe and numerous than would be expected. The vast majority of variants are insignificant spelling, word order, and synonym differences that do not affect the fundamental meaning of the text. Only a very small percentage of the viable variants (estimated at 0.25% of the text) are significant to the meaning or implications of the text. These textual differences have varying degrees of significance. For example, compare different Bible versions (particularly the Textus Receptus/Majority Text/KJV/NKJV versus the Critical Nestlé-Aland Text/NIV/ NASB/ESV) at Matt 1:25; 19:9b; Mark 1:2-3; 41; 16:9-20; Luke 2:33; 23:42; Jn 1:18; 4:1; 7:53-8:11; 14:14; Acts 8:37; Rom 8:1b; 14:10; Col 1:14; 1Thes 2:7; 1Tim 3:16; Heb 3:16; 1Jn 5:7. Even when the underlying Greek text is the same, translation differences can also change the meaning or implications to varying degrees (reference Judges 16:4; Matt 5:2; [17:21; Mk 9:29]; [Matt 9:18; 20:20; Mark 5:6]; Acts 4:27; 12:4; 20:28; Rom 16:1; 1Thes 4:15; 1Tim 3:11). While differences exist in the particulars in a relatively small number of places, which may strengthen or weaken the case for certain doctrines, none of these differences in the Greek manuscripts, Greek printed texts, or mainstream English Bibles [KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, etc.] jeopardize any essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Sources used: Daniel Wallace, Peter J. Williams, William Lane Craig.

Scripture does not Promise Preservation but the Scriptures are Essentially Preserved (Daniel Wallace, Edward Glenny)	Scripture Promises Preservation and the Scriptures are Essentially Preserved (William W. Combs)	Scripture Promises Perfect Preservation and the Scriptures are Perfectly Preserved, but Not Necessarily in one Standard Text (James D. Price)	Scripture Promises Perfect Preservation and the Scriptures are Perfectly Preserved and can be Identified with Certainty in one Standard Text (Edward F. Hills, Theodore P. Letis)
Scriptural Position on Preservation			
The Bible does not teach a doctrine of scripture preservation	The Bible teaches a doctrine of preservation but not pertaining to the exact words of scripture (Psalm 119:152, 160; Isa 40:8; Matt 5:18; 24:35; Jn 10:35)	The Bible teaches a doctrine of preservation including the words of scripture (Psalm 12:5-6; 119:152, 160; Isa 40:8; Matt 4:4; 5:18; 24:35; Jn 10:35; Rev 1:3; 22:18-19)	The Bible teaches a doctrine of preservation including the words of scripture (Psalm 12:5-6; 119:152, 160; Isa 40:8; Matt 4:4; 5:18; 24:35; Jn 10:35; Rev 1:3; 22:18-19)

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Not Promised but Essentially Preserved	Promised and Essentially Preserved	Perfectly Preserved, but Not Necessarily in a Standard Text	Perfectly Preserved in a Standard Text
Definition of Scripture			
Only the autographs are technically "scripture" (2Tim 3:16; 2Pet 1:19-21)	Only the autographs are technically "scripture" (2Tim 3:16; 2Pet 1:19-21)	The words in the autographs (2Tim 3:16; 2Pet 1:19-21) and in their preserved copies/translations to which believers have had access are "scripture". Jesus and the apostles refer to copies/translations as "scripture" (2Tim 3:15; Matt 21:42; 22:29; Jn 5:39; Acts 17:2, 11; 8:32). Not all <i>or any one</i> manuscript, text, or translation <i>is necessarily</i> 100% scripture, but the autographic text resides in the genealogical consensus of all these preserved ancient manuscripts.	The words in the autographs (2Tim 3:16; 2Pet 1:19-21) and in their preserved copies/ translations to which believers have had access are "scripture". Jesus and the apostles refer to copies/translations as "scripture" (2Tim 3:15; Matt 21:42; 22:29; Jn 5:39; Acts 17:2, 11; 8:32). Not all manuscripts, texts, or translations are necessarily 100% scripture, <i>but one standard text is.</i>
Method of Preservation and its Ascertainment			
All scripture is <i>essentially</i> preserved in the totality of manuscripts, patristic quotes, and translations of scripture available. It is ascertained by diligent study, comparison, and correlation.	All scripture is <i>essentially</i> preserved in the totality of manuscripts, patristic quotes, and translations of scripture available. It is ascertained by diligent study, comparison, and correlation.	All scripture is <i>perfectly</i> preserved within the consensus of manuscripts, patristic quotes, and translations of scripture available. Texts/translations with significant meaning differences cannot all be the 100% inspired scriptures. <i>The correct readings are ascertained on a verse-by-verse, word-by-word basis by diligent study, comparison, and correlation.</i>	All scripture is <i>perfectly</i> preserved through a particular manuscript text type and/or translation. Texts/translations with significant word differences cannot all be the 100% inspired scriptures. <i>When there are significant differences in readings, the words of the standard preserved text type/translation are always correct.</i>

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Certainty of the preserved scripture			
<p>God has preserved his word. Although textual criticism cannot yet produce certainty about the exact wording of the original text in every place, carefully produced texts and versions are able to convey God's truth to the reader with competent adequacy for all the needs of the Christian life.</p>	<p>God has preserved his word as he promised. Although textual criticism cannot yet produce certainty about the exact wording of the original text in every place, carefully produced texts and versions are able to convey God's truth to the reader with competent adequacy for all the needs of the Christian life.</p>	<p>God has preserved his word as he promised. Although textual criticism cannot yet produce certainty about the exact wording of the original text in every place, carefully produced texts and versions are able to convey God's truth to the reader with competent adequacy for all the needs of the Christian life. <i>Through careful study, a person can gain more and more certainty</i> about which readings in the various texts and translations express God's inspired words and which do not.</p>	<p>God has preserved his word as he promised. Although textual criticism cannot yet produce certainty about the exact wording of the original text in every place, carefully produced texts and versions are able to convey God's truth to the reader with competent adequacy for all the needs of the Christian life. <i>Through careful study, a person can gain absolute certainty about which text/translation expresses God's inspired words in every place and which texts/translations are corrupted in various places.</i></p>

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Questions Raised			
<p>If God has not promised to preserve the scriptures, how do we know we have the scriptures at all? How do we know there are not words within books or entire books that have been completely lost?</p> <p>All the questions in the second column apply.</p>	<p>Where are the inspired scriptures today? What value is the verbal, plenary inspiration of the scriptures without their verbal plenary preservation?</p> <p>Does <i>essential</i> preservation satisfy scripture's promises regarding scriptural preservation?</p> <p>Can <i>essential</i> preservation give the Christian adequate confidence <i>in the details</i> of scripture? Are the details ("every word", "jot and tittle") not important?</p> <p>Since the Bible is God's Word, shouldn't Christian textual critics view the Bible differently than other books of antiquity? Wouldn't God and Satan have been active in respectively preserving and corrupting it throughout the generations? Or at least, shouldn't textual criticism be harmonized with sound theology?</p>	<p>Where are the inspired scriptures? What value is the verbal plenary inspiration and preservation of scripture if the inspired, preserved words have not been preserved in an easily-identifiable standard text/Bible?</p> <p>When readings significantly differ in the various texts/translations, how are ordinary Christians to discover which words are the perfectly-preserved inspired words and which are not, especially in places where the textual critics disagree? Are all Christians required to be textual critics themselves in order to gain certainty regarding the verses involving variants? Is it reasonable to think that certainty is achievable regarding all these verses? Is certainty in these details not important?</p>	<p>Where did God promise that He would preserve the scriptures in one standard text throughout all ages or in a particular age?</p> <p>On what scriptural and/or historical basis does a Christian identify which text/translation represents the inspired scriptures? Which manuscript family (Byzantine, Western, Alexandrian)? Which text (Textus Receptus, Majority Text, Critical Text, etc.). Which edition of the text (Beza's fourth or fifth, Nestle-Aland's 27th or 28th, etc)? Which type of translation (formal or dynamic)? Which translation (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV)? Which edition of the translation?</p> <p>Where were the scriptures before the perfectly-preserved text/translation was produced/translated? Does the historical data regarding the continuity of textual transmission over 2000 years <i>support</i> this view of preservation or <i>discredit</i> it as being arbitrary and contrived?</p>