

Why God Did Not Perfectly and Supernaturally Preserve the Bible

This Doctrine was taken from the exegesis of **2Samuel 13** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) and from the Basic Exegesis series, **Genesis Lesson #163** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#))

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The question is simply this: since God is perfect, omniscient and omnipotent; and since His Word is of the utmost importance to our lives; why did God not, therefore, perfectly preserve His Word?

The doctrine below was taken out of **2Samuel 13** (which is presently a work in progress).

Why is the Word of God not Perfectly and Supernaturally Preserved?

1. Anyone who has any formal training in the Scriptures (and many who have had informal training) are aware that the Bible has not been perfectly preserved. There are alternate readings, there is text which has been dropped out, and a number of things which indicate to us that, the manuscripts which we have are not perfect.
2. The question is, *why?* After all, God is omnipotent; God could have chosen to perfectly preserve the Word of God exactly as it was originally recorded.
3. First of all, God did not want there to be veneration or worship of the Scriptures themselves. We respect the ancient manuscripts which have been preserved and we work hard to make the information of these Scriptures available, but there is no church of the Holy Scriptures where a supernaturally preserved manuscript is under glass and men all go there to worship it. We are never given objects to worship in Christianity (or, in the worship of Jehovah Elohim).
4. The key to the Word of God is, to get the information from the Word of God into our souls. This cannot be done if the Scriptures themselves are an object of worship.

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5. The Bible needed to be translated into the languages of the people. If we had the Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew manuscripts perfectly preserved, then there might be less call for them to be translated into another language. After all, what we have is perfect, so why would you want to change perfect? As a result, only scholars of these 3 languages would be able to study and appreciate the Word of God.
6. How many scholars of these languages would dare to try to teach the Scriptures by providing a modern translation of this or that passage? This may have been seen as adding to or taking from the Scriptures.
7. The focus of teaching would either be removed from the actual content of the Word of God, as there would be those who had no such formal training. So, veneration of the manuscripts themselves in the original languages would result in teaching that is separate from the Scriptures or the teaching would be so focused on each letter and word that little learning would occur. Let me give you an example: Keil and Delitzsch have written an excellent commentary of the Scriptures, but it is so thick with language and language references that it is hard to read and understand even a single paragraph before your mind goes numb.
8. If I know that I have access to the exact perfect words of God, recorded as they were originally in the original languages, I am going to be much less likely to translate these words imperfectly into another language. There may be some countries and churches which would even forbid such a thing from being done. However, I am less overwhelmed by this perfection if I know there are a few textual problems here and there. As a result, we have hundreds of translations into so many different languages. I personally refer to over 50 translations into the English alone. Furthermore, I have come to appreciate many of the looser translations to the point where, once and awhile, I understand a verse only because I see how the NIV or the Living Bible translated it, and the meaning becomes more clear to me than I find in the KJV, the NKJV or the NASB.
9. The textual problems which exist—and there are many in the book of Samuel, for example—have absolutely no affect upon our doctrinal understanding. There are at least 4 places in the text of 2Sam. 13 where there are major problems with the text. No matter how what text and what version we choose to believe is the original text, our understanding of the fundamentals of the faith are unchanged. I cannot choose one set of readings, someone else chooses another set of readings, and the end result are two very different theologies. That will not happen, even with the errors and textual problems that exist.
10. Consequently, God has allowed the imperfections of the world to have an effect upon the text of the Word of God without destroying its power or its meaning. As believers, this is reflected in our lives. We fail again and again; but, as long as we remain alive on this earth, God's plan continues for our lives, despite our imperfections.
11. Because the text is imperfect, there is not an overwhelming need to make every Bible translation into a word-for-word translation. What the New Living

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- Translation may lack in exactness of translation, it makes up for in reaching people who would not have any interest in reading the King James Version. The gospel and most fundamental doctrines are as clear in the Living Bible as they are in the KJV.
12. Similarly, we have other translations in simple English, so that a person on a 6th grade reading level and lower can understand what he is reading.
 13. We know from history that the Catholic church persecuted and even executed those who attempted to get the Word of God into the hands of the people in a language that they understood. That is key. The idea of having services in Latin is absolutely ridiculous; there is nothing that can be learned, unless the people know Latin.
 14. We develop an appreciation for the scribes who preserved the Scriptures over the past 3000 or so years. We have come to learn what they did and the lengths that they went to in order to preserve the Word of God.
 15. Knowing the lengths that the Scribes went to in order to preserve the Word of God tells us that they had tremendous respect for those old manuscripts as the Word of God. This indicates to us that the Bible was recognized as the Word of God very early on.
 16. God has given us enough manuscripts of various kinds so that we can determine, in almost every case, exactly what is in the Word of God. In the places where we have difficulty, most of these difficulties are minor, and involve number or modernized spellings or change of script. I may come up to a verse that I do not have a complete grasp of; however, I almost never come up to a verse where I am unable to understand it or explain it because I might not have the exact correct text to work from or text which is close enough to the original to work from. In other words, almost never do I come across a verse and say, "Well, I do not have a clue as to how this should actually read in the original language; and therefore, I have no clue as to how to explain it." I may be unhappy with my explanation, but it is almost never because of a problem with the text.
 17. As a result of text being imperfect, there have been men of all sorts of spiritual gifts rise up and tackle the problem of textual criticism, and their thoughts and work on these matters are often quite helpful in determining what is to be found substantively in any verse. God has granted men spiritual gifts which allow them to deal with imperfect text.
 18. The inexact text (and some of this is a result of the changing of the spelling of some words or the insertion of glosses) keeps people from getting weird with the text, and looking for hidden messages unearthed by various numerology methods. There are some goofballs out there who claim to find the Kennedy assassination and a variety of other things hidden in the text of the Word of God by taking, say, every tenth letter and stringing the results together, but this falls apart as, by the end of Gen. 1, we do not truly know what the tenth letter was (which may be, by the way, because of a simple change in spelling a word).
 19. I would argue that, the pastor who is moderately obsessed with determining the

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- correct text will also, in this search for the correct text, be able to best present the meaning of the passage in question to his congregation.
20. One may reasonably argue that God has preserved His Word. There is nothing more hated and more attacked throughout world history than God's Word (except for the Jewish people). Yet, we have 26,000 full and partial manuscripts of the New Testament (no other ancient manuscript has anywhere near that many preserved copies) and the time between the original manuscripts being written and the first copies to emerge is far shorter for the New Testament than for any other ancient document.
 21. When it comes to the Old Testament, its accuracy was preserved in a much different way. For many years, our Old Testament text was based upon principally one manuscript copied perhaps 1300 years after the canon for the Old Testament was closed. Since then, only a handful of manuscripts have been discovered—and then came along the Dead Sea Scrolls, which confirmed the accuracy of the few manuscripts that we have. 2Sam. 13 is perhaps one of the weakest and most poorly transmitted chapters in all of the Bible. And yet, the problems we unearthed in this chapter have nothing to do with the fundamentals of the faith. We are not questioning any of God's attributes, the advent of His Son, His death on the cross for our sins, etc. The textual problems that we come across do not affect the information that we have.
 22. Now, although there are only 7 or so complete or near complete ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament (along with the Dead Sea Scrolls), the Old Testament has been preserve in the Greek, the Latin, the Syriac, the Arabic, etc. So, when we are confused about, say, the meaning of this or that word, this or that phrase, or about the transmission of the text, we have several other languages to go to, translations made 1000–2000 years ago and more (from more ancient manuscripts than we possess today), and we can see how they understood it.
 23. One may argue as to the corruptness and apostasy of the Catholic church; however, St. Jerome's Latin translation (which was adopted by the Catholic church) is outstanding; it is accurate; and it has been preserved by the Catholic church, despite the problems within that institution. And, if one ignores the apocrypha, you can pick up any English translation approved by the Catholic church and use that as your main Bible, and your spiritual life will not be harmed.
 24. In John Lee's *The Greatest Book in the World*, we read: *It seems strange that the text of Shakespeare, which has been in existence less than two hundred and eight years, should be far more uncertain and corrupt than that of the New Testament, now over eighteen centuries old, during nearly fifteen of which it existed only in manuscript...With perhaps a dozen or twenty exceptions, the text of every verse in the New Testament may be said to be so far settled by general consent of scholars, that any dispute as to its readings must relate rather to the interpretation of the words than to any doubts respecting the words themselves. But in every one of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays there are probably a*

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*hundred readings still in dispute, a large portion of which materially affects the meaning of the passages in which they occur.*¹ Assuming the truth of this quotation, that would make the Bible supernaturally but not perfectly preserved.

One of the very best books available on the topic of the Bible, its transmission, the ancient manuscripts, etc. is Geisler and Nix's *General Introduction to the Bible*. Somewhere in this book, there are additional points on this topic.

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I audited a couple of classes at a Bible institute as a young believer and getting this text was one of the greatest blessings from attending that institute.

I have given this example before, but I find it to be very instructive: when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, there was a word-by-word, letter-by-letter comparison between the text of Isa. 53 in the Dead Sea Scrolls (100 B.C.) and the Masoretic text (A.D. 900). There are 166 words in Isa. 53, but only 17 letters are different. 10 of these letters represent a slightly different spelling of the same word and 4 letters represent minor stylistic changes (such as, conjunctions). The most dramatic difference in these manuscripts, copied down over 1000 years apart from one another, is the 3 letter word *light* in v. 11, which had been dropped out of the MT.

¹ Taken from Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*; ©1972 by Campus Crusade for Christ; p. 22. He takes this from p. 15 of John Lee's *The Greatest Book in the World*; who is quoting an unnamed author from an article in the *North American Review*.

Related to this topic is, just how does the Bible compare to other ancient manuscripts. In this case, we will examine just the New Testament:

Here's a table which I have seen in both Geisler and Nix and McDowell's books.

Manuscripts of Ancient Literature					
Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Approximate Time Span between original & copy	Number of Copies	Accuracy of Copies
Lucretius	died 55 or 53 B.C.		1100 yrs	2	----
Pliny	61-113 A.D.	850 A.D.	750 yrs	7	----
Plato	427-347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1200 yrs	7	----

Demosthenes	4th Cent. B.C.	1100 A.D.	800 yrs	8	----
Herodotus	480-425 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 yrs	8	----
Suetonius	75-160 A.D.	950 A.D.	800 yrs	8	----
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 yrs	8	----
Euripides	480-406 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1300 yrs	9	----
Aristophanes	450-385 B.C.	900 A.D.	1200	10	----
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1000	10	----
Livy	59 BC-AD 17	----	???	20	----
Tacitus	circa 100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1000 yrs	20	----
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1400	49	----
Sophocles	496-406 B.C.	1000 A.D.	1400 yrs	193	----
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 yrs	643	95%
New Testament	1st Cent. A.D. (50-100 A.D.)	2 nd Cent. A.D. (circa 130 A.D. f.)	less than 100 years	5600	99.5%

This table was taken from <http://carm.org/manuscript-evidence> This table indicates to us that there is no book quite like the Bible, and certainly no ancient book which is like the Bible.

Here's another table with the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament:

Individual Biblical Manuscripts	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span
Magdalene Ms (Matthew 26)	1 st century	50-60 AD	co-existent (?)
John Rylands (John)	90 AD	130 AD	40 years
Bodmer Papyrus II (John)	90 AD	150-200 AD	60-110 years
Chester Beatty Papyri (N.T.)	1 st century	200 AD	150 years
Diatessaron by Tatian (Gospels)	1 st century	200 AD	150 years
Codex Vaticanus (Bible)	1 st century	325-350 AD	275-300 years
Codex Sinaiticus (Bible)	1 st century	350 AD	300 years
Codex Alexandrinus (Bible)	1 st century	400 AD	350 years

(Total New Testament manuscripts = 5,300 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin Vulgates, 9,300 others = 24,000 copies). (Total manuscripts compiled prior to 600 AD = 230)

From: <http://debate.org.uk/topics/history/bib-qur/bibmanu.htm>

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