

APPENDIX A

Inspiration and Preservation

"I have deliberately avoided introducing any arguments based upon these doctrines in the preceding discussion in the hope that I will not be misrepresented by critics in the way that Burgon has been."¹ So I wrote in the first edition of this book (Nelson, 1977). It didn't do much good. Surely any person of at least average integrity must grant that in the body of this book I have argued on the basis of historical evidence and logical deductions from that evidence. And yet there are those who perversely persist in affirming that my case is based on theological presupposition.² Bart Ehrman's treatment of the subject is typical.

One cannot read the literature produced by the various advocates of the Majority text without being impressed by a remarkable theological concurrence. To one degree or another, they all (to my knowledge, without exception) affirm that God's inspiration of an inerrant Bible required [emphasis added] His preservation of its text.³

He then discusses three "appropriations" of this position. The first is that of E.F. Hills (and D.O. Fuller, and others) who argued that God "must" have preserved the N.T. text inerrantly.⁴ I agree with Ehrman's critique of Hill's position, though his is not the first⁵—Hill's position is inconsistent and arbitrary, and does not square with the evidence. Granting the inspiration of the Text,⁶ its preservation is merely a logical inference (see Appendix F for a philosophical discussion of the implications). I relinquish the claim that God must have preserved the Text, unless it can be demonstrated that He Himself said that He would. I think it is implied,⁷ but nowhere does it say how He proposed to do it—we must deduce the answer from what He has indeed done. We discover that He did preserve it, whether or not He had to.

Ehrman limits the concept of preservation in a way that verges on the creation of a straw man.

Any claim that God preserved the text of the New Testament intact, giving His church actual, not theoretical, possession of it, must [emphasis added] mean one of three things—either 1) God preserved it in all the extant manuscripts so that none of them contain any textual corruptions, or 2) He preserved it in a group of manuscripts, none of which contain any corruptions, or 3) He preserved it in a solitary manuscript which alone contains no corruptions.⁸

He then proceeds to demonstrate, correctly, that no one of the three options is true. But there is a fourth option—He preserved the Text through a normal process of transmission, done by careful people, such that

¹*The Identity of the New Testament Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 143. Metzger is typical: "Burgon's argument was basically theological and speculative." (*The Text*, p. 135.) See also Greenlee, p. 81; Harrison, p. 73; Vaganay, p. 172; Sturz, p. 24; Paul McReynolds, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XCIII (1974), 481; etc.

²For instance, Fee and Wallace. Gordon D. Fee, "A Critique of W.N. Pickering's *The Identity of the New Testament Text: a Review Article*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1979), pp. 397-98. [A condensed version of this article appeared in the January, 1980 (Vol. 31, No. 1) issue of *The Bible Translator*. I submitted a response to TBT which they refused to publish. I have a copy of a letter from Fee to Paul Ellingworth, the editor, suggesting he not print my response.] Daniel B. Wallace, "The Majority Text and the Original Text: Are They Identical?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1991, pp. 152-155. [I prepared an answer and took it personally to Roy Zuck, the editor. I showed him that Wallace had deliberately misrepresented my position—he agreed, but refused to publish my response.]

³I am quoting from a copy sent to me personally by the author, Bart D. Ehrman: "New Testament Textual Criticism: Search for Method," M.Div thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1981, p. 40.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 40-44.

⁵Cf. Harry Sturz and D.A. Carson.

⁶I declare the divine inspiration of the NT to be a presupposition which I bring to my task. The evidence and arguments in defense of this position are well known and have been adequately stated by others, before and since B.B. Warfield.

⁷I take it that passages such as 1 Chr. 16:15, Ps. 119:89, Isa. 40:8, Matt. 5:18, Luke 16:17 and 21:33, John 10:35 and 16:12-13, 1 Pet. 1:23-25 and Luke 4:4 may reasonably be taken to imply a promise that the Scriptures (to the tittle) will be preserved for man's use (we are to live "by every word of God"), and to the end of the world ("for a thousand generations"), but no intimation is given as to just how God proposes to do it.

⁸Ehrman, p.44.

we can identify the original wording on the basis of the consensus of the independent, reliable witnesses (determined empirically). Although it is presumably true that every known MS has at least some careless copying errors, these can be readily isolated because the other MSS agree as to the correct reading.

The second position that Ehrman discusses is that of J.W. Burgon. He begins by allowing Burgon to speak for himself.

There exists no reason for supposing that the Divine Agent, who in the first instance thus gave to mankind the Scriptures of Truth; straightway abdicated His office; took no further care of His work; abandoned those precious writings to their fate. That a perpetual miracle was wrought for their preservation—that copyists were protected against the risk of error, or evil men prevented from adulterating shamefully copies of the Deposit—no one, it is presumed, is so weak as to suppose. But it is quite a different thing to claim that all down the ages the sacred writings must needs have been God’s peculiar care; that the Church under Him has watched over them with intelligence and skill; has recognized which copies exhibit a fabricated, which an honestly transcribed text; has generally sanctioned the one, and generally disallowed the other.⁹

After identifying Burgon’s position as one of “general providence”, he affirms: “The chief problem with Burgon’s position is that it is totally arbitrary. If one affirms God’s involvement in the transmission process in any way at all, is it anything but high handed to claim that He was generally, but not fully involved?”¹⁰ Not at all. Both the Bible and human history agree that the human being was created with the power or ability to choose, and both God and men must live with the consequences of their choices. Burgon’s position is Biblical and historical.

Ehrman goes on to quote B.B. Warfield and concludes:

The fact that Warfield and Burgon both affirmed a doctrine of general preservation, and yet held antithetical views of how the text was preserved suggests that the doctrine is inappropriately used in support of any particular view of the text’s transmission history. Instead such affirmations can only be made subsequent to the assessment of the evidence for the progress of the history of transmission. The evidence must lead to the doctrine, not *vice versa*—else the doctrine will simply be adduced to support a certain set of historical conclusions.¹¹

Very good! I agree; and so would Burgon—he stated his conclusion after many years of scrutinizing the evidence (in contrast to Warfield). Ehrman’s criticism of Burgon is mistaken and unjust, perhaps because of his own presuppositions.

The third position that Ehrman discusses is that of Z.C. Hodges. I find Ehrman’s treatment of Hodges to be especially objectionable. He criticizes Hodges, and others, for declaring his presuppositions and affirms: “As a result the conclusions are unmistakably biased.” What is objectionable here is that Ehrman fails to recognize that it is impossible to work without presuppositions. Every practitioner in whatever discipline brings presuppositions to his work, inescapably. Ehrman criticizes Hodges for stating his presuppositions while failing to state his own. The nature of his criticism dishonestly implies that he himself does not have any, but obviously Ehrman is just as biased as Hodges. Ehrman is unfair and incorrect when he charges that Hodges’ presuppositions render him incapable of entertaining sensible arguments from other quarters. Since everyone has presuppositions and yet people constantly change their minds, and even their presuppositions, it becomes obvious that Ehrman’s charge is false.¹²

Ever since Burgon, who stated his presuppositions honestly and openly (as any true scholar must), there has been a constant and insistent attack against those presuppositions and even the stating of them. A psychosis has been created to the extent that even some modern defenders of the majority text have become paranoid on the subject. However, in Luke 11:23 the Creator, Jehovah the Son incarnate, declares:

⁹Burgon, *The Traditional Text*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰Ehrman, p. 47.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

“He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” Here is a plain statement—there are only two teams in this world; there are only two sides; there is no neutral ground; there is no true agnosticism.¹³ If you are not with Jesus, you are automatically against Him; if you are not gathering with Him, you are automatically scattering. If you do not accept Jesus’ affirmations about Scripture, you have rejected them. Neutrality does not exist.

We must challenge the competence of those who pretend that they have no presuppositions, who refuse, or in any case fail, to declare their presuppositions openly. If those same people criticize us for declaring ours, we must question their basic honesty. Such an unscholarly and cowardly tactic should no longer be tolerated. They accuse us of using “ad hominum” argumentation as a cover up for their own despicable “ad hominum” procedure. They challenge us to publish but refuse our articles. Enough!

I believe in the verbal plenary inspiration of the Autographs. I believe that God has providentially preserved the original wording of the text down to our day, and that it is possible for us to know precisely what it is on the basis of a defensible procedure (though due to our carelessness and laziness we do not, at this moment). My beliefs become presuppositions which I bring to my study of the evidence—any thoughtful person will realize that it is impossible to work without presuppositions—but a serious effort should be made to let the evidence tell its own story. It is not legitimate to declare *a priori* what the situation must be, on the basis of one’s presuppositions. One’s presuppositions do inescapably figure in his interpretation, so that different sets of presuppositions usually result in differing conclusions, but the body of evidence should be the same for everybody. In the end, the reasonableness of the presuppositions themselves should be measured by the evidence.

So, how does my belief that God has preserved the N.T. text square with the evidence? I see in the Traditional Text (“Byzantine”) both the result and the proof of that preservation. Please note that I am not imposing my presuppositions on the evidence—the Traditional Text does exist and so far as I can see represents the normal transmission of the original.

We are still left with the necessity of carefully evaluating the evidence that has come down to us so as to be able to identify with confidence the exact original wording. Even when that is done, it will be necessary for us to candidly admit that we cannot *prove*, in any ultimate sense, that we have the original wording; we do not have the Autographs. In the end, my affirmation that God has preserved the original wording of the New Testament text is a statement of faith; an intelligent faith, a faith that accords with the available evidence, but faith nonetheless. It may be that God’s purpose in creating the human race entailed not allowing the truth to be inescapable; if the evidence were absolute there would be no test.

“Without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

¹³Agnosticism is a passive rejection; the agnostic is not accepting the claim.