

# Chapter Four

## DIVINE PRESERVATION

### DIVINE INSPIRATION

Many Christians today believe in the divine and verbal inspiration of the Bible. The Holy Spirit fell upon the prophets and apostles of old to pen every word of Scripture. Millions of Christians also believe in the providential preservation of the Bible. Providential preservation is also necessary, for if the original inspired Scriptures were lost shortly after they were penned, they would be of limited value.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (17<sup>th</sup> Century) explains the importance of divine preservation: *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 into 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. (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1 “Of the Holy Scripture”, no. 8)*

In times past, MOST Christians accepted these basic fundamental truths. Currently, however, growing numbers of Christians have strong reservations regarding divine preservation. They will accept that the original autographs (original manuscripts), no longer available, were divinely inspired.

### DIVINE PRESERVATION

The Bible is often referred to as *the Holy Scriptures*. It is divided into two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is a collection of 39 books that was originally written in the Hebrew language.

The original autographs (masters) of the Hebrew Scriptures were the hand-written scrolls penned by divinely inspired sentinels (guardians). The masters were hand written on vellum or papyrus. Vellum was *a fined grained un-split lambskin, kidskin, or calfskin* (biblically clean animals) *prepared especially for writing on or for binding books*. Vellum was more durable than papyrus, but more costly. An entire antelope would only provide 2-3 pages of manuscript. Due to cost and limited writing space per animal skin, the majority of Old Testament manuscripts were written on papyrus.

Papyrus is a *reed-like water plant with thick fibrous stems from which a kind of paper was made in ancient times*. The average scroll of papyrus was 10 inches in width by 30 feet in length.

The years of constant use (being rolled and unrolled) resulted in the deterioration of the original autograph manuscripts (vellum and papyrus). Before the original manuscripts were completely disintegrated, they were carefully transcribed by a special sect of Levites later known as Masorettes.

## MASORETES

The Western or Palestinian Masoretes (not to be confused with the Babylonian Masoretes) were selected by God to preserve the Old Testament Scriptures. The process of copying *the oracles of God* from a deteriorating manuscript to a new manuscript was quite involved. The Masoretes devised many checks to prevent human error from creeping into a new copy. They would count the number of letters, words, and verses in each book. If the new manuscript did not match the old, it was discarded and the process was repeated. They would also count how many times each letter appeared in each book of the Bible, and compare it to the original.

The book "Story of Our English Bible", written over a hundred years ago by W. Scott gives a remarkable account as to the reliability of the copies made by these God-inspired priests:

*It is well known that among the Jews [Israelites] it was the profession of the Masorites, or doctors of tradition, to transcribe the scripture. We know to what extent these indefatigable [untiring] scholars carried their respect for the letter; and when we read the rules under which their labours were carried on, we understand the use that the providence of God made of their superstition. They reckoned the number of verses, words, and letters in each book. They tell us, for instance, that the letter **A** occurs forty-two thousand three hundred and seventy-seven times in the Bible; the letter **B** thirty-eight thousand two hundred and eighteen times; and so on to the end. They were scrupulous of changing the position even of a letter, though evidently misplaced, but limited themselves to noting in the margin, supposing some mystery was involved. They tell us which is the middle*

*letter of the Pentateuch [the first 5 books of the Bible], as well as of each of the books of which it is composed.*

***They never allowed themselves to correct their manuscripts; and if any mistake escaped them, they rejected the papyrus or the skin they had blemished, and recommended upon a fresh one; for they were equally interdicted from even correcting one of their own errors, and from retaining for their sacred volume a single parchment or skin in which an error had been made...***

*These facts, we repeat it, together with the astonishing **preservation** of the Hebrew text (1200 years more ancient than that of the Septuagint), plainly tell us how the intervention of the mighty hand of God was needed in the destinies of the sacred book. (p.17)*

In his book **God Wrote Only One Bible**, Jasper James Ray reveals confirming proof as to the infallibility these ancient scribes exercised in preserving God's Word. He writes:

*In making copies of the original manuscripts, the Jewish [Israelite] scribes exercised the greatest possible care. When they wrote the name of God in any form they were to reverently wipe their pen, and wash their whole body before writing "Jehovah" [not Yahweh] lest that holy name should be tainted even in writing.*

*The new copy was examined and carefully checked with the original almost immediately, and it is said that **if only one incorrect letter was discovered the whole copy was rejected**. Each new copy had to be made from an approved manuscript, written from a "clean" animal [or papyrus].*

*The writer had to pronounce aloud each word before writing it. In no case was the word to be written from memory. They counted, not only the words, but every letter, and how many times each letter occurred, and compared it with the original...This shows how unlikely it is that any considerable change could occur when making copies of the sacred scriptures, when the intent and purpose of the writer was guided by a motive to please God. (pp. 94-95)*

## MANUSCRIPTS

A manuscript is a hand written document that is often abbreviated as **MS** or **ms** (singular) or **MSS** or **mss** (plural). Currently, there are between 5250 and 5309 existing manuscripts of Scripture or parts thereof. Manuscripts fall into two basic categories: masters and copies.

**Masters** were the original autographs that have longed been replaced by copies. Currently, there are no original autographs or masters in existence.

**Copies** are hand-written copies of the masters or earlier copies. There are currently over 5000 extant (existing) hand-written copies of the whole or parts of Scripture still in existence.

The early Christians produced manuscripts that fall into three basic categories: Copies, Versions, or Church Fathers.

**Copies**, as stated above, are copies of the masters or earlier copies.

**Versions** are translations made directly from the original languages, Hebrew or Greek, into Latin, Syriac, German, French or English. Versions are not to be confused with a **translation**. A **translation** is merely

a translation of a translation; whereas a **version** must be a translation of the original language. Translating a bible from Latin into English or English into Chinese is simply a **translation**, not a version.

**Church Fathers** are the third group. The early church fathers are the men which led the early Christians in the first few centuries, after the New Testament was completed. We have record of their early sermons, books, and commentaries. They provide us with crucial information especially on disputed passages. Some church fathers may have even seen the original autographs of the New Testament.

## CHURCH FATHERS

The writings of the church fathers form an invaluable source of information as to what the apostles wrote, and help verify the original text. The writings of these early elders contain many quotations from the original masters or the earliest copies of the New Testament.

There were many church fathers that scribed the whole or portions of Scripture, and greatly influenced the early church, especially in Europe. The following quotes are a few examples.

In his book **Story of Our English Bible**, W. Scott states:

***Crysostom**, the most eloquent of the fathers, spoke of them [Scriptures] as the Divine Books, **Polycarp**, who lived at a still earlier date, having been personally instructed by the Apostle John, spoke of the Bible as The Sacred Scripture, as also the Oracles of the Lord. **Clement** of Rome, whom Paul styles his 'fellow-labourer' (Phil.1v.3), termed the Scriptures, The True Sayings of the Holy Spirit. **Irenaeus**, of the second century,*

makes about 1200 citations or references from the New Testament; **Tertullian**, also of the second century refers to or quotes from the New Testament about 2500 times; **Clement** of Alexandria, another of the second century Fathers, cites from or refers to the New Testament 800 times; and **Polycarp**, already referred to, in a brief epistle addressed to the Philippians, quotes from the New Testament about 50 times. (p.31)

### Lucian of Antioch

**Lucian** (250-312 AD) founded a college in Antioch to counter the alliance between Rome/Italy and Alexandria/Egypt. In Antioch, the early believers in Jesus Christ were first called Christians (**Acts 11:26**).



In his book **Truth Triumphant**, the historian Benjamin George Wilkinson PhD writes revealing information about Lucian:

*Lucian founded a college at Antioch which strove to counteract the dangerous ecclesiastical alliance between Rome and Alexandria. How bitter the situation became and how it finally split West and East will be clarified by the following four facts:*

*First, the original founders of the ecclesiastical college at Alexandria strove to exalt tradition. Justin Martyr, as early as 150 [AD], had stood for this.*

*Second, Clement, most famous of the Alexandrian college faculty and a teacher of Origen, boasted that he would not teach Christianity unless it was mixed with pagan philosophy.*

*Third, Victor I, bishop of Rome, entered a compact with Clement, about 190 [AD], to carry on research around the Mediterranean basin to secure support to help make Sunday the prominent day of worship in the church. Sunday was already a day exalted among the heathen, being a day on which they worshipped the sun; yet Rome and Alexandria well knew that most churches throughout the world sanctified Saturday as the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.*

*Fourth, when Victor I, in lordly tones, pronounced excommunication on all the churches of the East who would not with him make Easter always come on Sunday, Alexandria supported this exhibition of spiritual tyranny by the bishop of Rome. Lucian opposed Alexandria's policies and for this has been bitterly hated and his name kept in the background. (pp. 47-48)*

### Patrick in Ireland

Tradition has it that Patrick of Ireland was born about 360 A.D. in the kingdom of Strathclyde in Scotland. In **Truth Triumphant**, Wilkinson writes of Patrick:

*Patrick preached the Bible. He appealed to it as the sole authority for founding the Irish Church. He gave credit to no other worldly authority; he recited no creed. Several official creeds of the church of Rome had by that time been ratified and commanded, but Patrick mentions none. In his Confession he makes a brief statement of his beliefs, but he does not refer to any church council or creed as authority.*

The training centres he founded, which later grew into colleges and large universities, were all Bible schools. Famous students of these schools – **Columba, who brought Scotland to Christ, Adrian, who won pagan England to the gospel, and Columbanus with his successors, who brought Christianity to Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy** – took the Bible as their only authority, and founded renowned Bible training centres for the Christian believers.

One authority, describing the hand-written Bibles produced at these schools, says, 'In delicacy of handling and minute but faultless execution, the whole range of paleography [the study of ancient writings and inscriptions] offers nothing comparable to these early Irish manuscripts...**Patrick, like his example, Jesus, put the words of Scripture above the teachings of men. He differs from the papacy, which puts church tradition above the Bible.** In his writings he nowhere appeals to the church of **Rome** for the authorization of his mission. Whenever he speaks in defence of his mission, he refers to God alone, and declared that he received his call direct from heaven...

Patrick believed that **Christianity should be founded with the home and the family as its strength.** Too often the Christian organizations of that age were centred in celibacy. This was not true in the Irish church and its Celtic daughters in Great Britain, Scotland and on the continent. **The Celtic Church, as organized and developed under Patrick, permitted its clergy to marry.** (pp. 83-84)

### **Columba in Scotland**

Columba, an Irishman, was born in Donegal in 521, and both his parents were of royal stock. He founded a memorable college on

the small island of **Iona** which was a lighthouse of truth in Europe for centuries. That the Celtic, not the Latin, race populated the British Isles was a determining factor, for the Christian churches in which Patrick had been reared received their doctrine, not from **Rome**, but from their brethren of the same in Asia Minor. **Here was the link which connected the faith of Patrick and Columba with primitive Christianity. The farthest lands touching the Atlantic saw the rise of a vigorous apostolic Christianity not connected with the Church of Rome, but independent of it...**

**Columba** possessed a superior education. He was familiar with Latin and Greek, secular and ecclesiastical history, the principals of jurisprudence, the law of nations, the science of medicine, and the law of the mind. He was the greatest Irishman of the Celtic race in mental powers; and he founded in **Iona** the most learned school in the British Islands, and probably in Western Europe for a long period... (p.100)

Few Christians are aware that Columba kept the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath of the fourth Commandment.

The last hours of Columba are recorded as follows: Having continued his labours in Scotland thirty-four years, he clearly and openly foretold his death, and on **Saturday**, the ninth of June, said to his disciple Diermit: '**This day is called the Sabbath, that is the day of rest, and such will it truly be to me: for it will put an end to my labours.**' (p.108)

Columba is credited with hand-copying the New Testament 300 times based upon the **Itala** Version of the Bible.