

## PRESERVATION: THE COROLLARY OF INSPIRATION

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In the current discussion concerning the inspiration of the Scriptures, the basic necessity of inspiration has been stated quite clearly.<sup>1</sup> Yet nothing really has been said concerning another factor that is a related necessity: the preservation of those inspired writings. How did the sacred writings come down to us? Was it merely a matter of chance that it happens we have today 39 books of the OT? Did they get lost, and were they then found and made canonical by a council at a later date in their history?

This particular view is without historical foundation and is contrary to the internal evidence of the Scriptures themselves. The preservation of the Scriptures is bound up with their authority so that the two are really indissoluble. The former is a most necessary outgrowth of their inspiration.

Some remarks on the enduring character of the Scriptures will lead into the consideration of the necessity, method and history of their preservation. Christ the Lord sets out as the essence of Scripture that it was indestructible, this necessitating its preservation right down to his own day: "Verily, I say to you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot<sup>2</sup> or one tittle<sup>3</sup> shall in no manner pass from the law<sup>4</sup> until all is fulfilled." Jesus Christ was saying that what Scripture embodied was the enduring Word of God and that it would abide as long as the purposes of God existed.<sup>5</sup>

In demonstration of his divine stature Jesus had recourse to the law, calling to its authentication the fact that the Scriptures God had given could not be broken.<sup>6</sup> God's Word possessed an unbreakable character to which the Jews themselves assented.

It is specifically averred that the things the prophets wrote have become part of the divine record concerning the grace of God and may surely be trusted as the authoritative and therefore indestructible Word of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>The letter *yod*, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>3</sup>The small terminals at the ends of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>4</sup>Here, the OT.

<sup>5</sup>Matt 5:18.

<sup>6</sup>John 10:35.

<sup>7</sup>1 Pet 1:9-13.

## I. THE NECESSITY OF PRESERVATION

Josephus sets out for us the foundation of all divine authority, the law of Moses:

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the origin of mankind till his [Moses'] death.<sup>8</sup>

Josephus names the beginning of the Word of God on which is built all the rest of the Scriptures. The formation of that Word is ascribed to Moses.<sup>9</sup> It is quite a detailed record of the redemptive work of God among men, from the foundation of the world till Moses' day. Why was this revelation given to men? That men should have a sure knowledge of God's redemption:

Unto [the prophets] it was revealed, that not unto themselves but unto us they ministered the things which are now reported unto you by them who have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven.<sup>10</sup>

Note the presence of the Holy Spirit ascribed to these prophets, so that what they wrote should be the Word of God. In this Word written we have the only record by which the knowledge of sure salvation comes to men. Whether men believe it or not, it is a matter of obligation on the part of God's people to declare it unequivocally with appealing force to all to respond to the offer of the love of God in the gospel. The Holy Spirit will make his own Word bear fruit in those who hear so that they may turn to God.

The context in which Moses set out the law of God is of great significance for the people of God in respect to the preservation of the Scriptures. One can be enlightened respecting this significance through a review of the treaties made by kings of the ancient Near East:

The significance of the treaties for subjects like the *beginnings of the Canon of Scripture* and the authenticity of the Pentateuch as well as the historicity of various covenants recorded in the Bible can hardly be overestimated.<sup>11</sup>

The usual nine parts of such vassal treaties have been shown to occur in the covenant structure and its administration in Israel of the covenant that God made with his people at Sinai. Two factors are of significance for us in this paper.

The first is that there is the most emphatic demand made on Israel that this people remain loyal to the God who has redeemed them out of their bondage.<sup>12</sup> This is the element because of which the people are to obey God. It is the redemp-

<sup>8</sup>Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.8.

<sup>9</sup>Exod 17:14 for story of the Amalekite defeat; Num 33:2 from Egypt to the Jordan, and for the book of the law, Deut 31:24-26, of which more later. Cf. also Mark 12:26, 27.

<sup>10</sup>1 Pet 1:12.

<sup>11</sup>M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 7 (italics mine). In this study it is impossible to trace the whole discussion of this work. The purpose here is to make a more specific, somewhat limited application of certain points in Kline's book.

<sup>12</sup>Kline, *Treaty*, 14.

tive element. This is the reason why there are in the OT so many references to their deliverance from Egypt.

The second relates to the covenant symbols, the memorial of the two stones and the divinely inspired word of the prophets by which is administered the covenant of God among them. The two tablets of the law formed the epitome of the larger written law by the hand of Moses. In the style of the ancient treaties one copy of the treaty was laid up in the temple of the god of the vassal and another in the temple of the great king, the vassal's suzerain. So then, as is stated, the writing on both tablets was the same.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of Israel since only the true God was both the Suzerain and was to be the God of the vassal, both tablets were kept in the one sanctuary,<sup>14</sup> that for Israel representing their acceptance of Yahweh as their god and that for Yahweh indicating that he would be faithful to those whom he was adopting as his people.

Although the tablets of the law were the epitome of the law of God, they were not the whole of the treaty. The word written by Moses became also a part—the larger part—containing the detailed stipulations of the treaty. These were necessary to guide the vassal in loyal obedience:

And it came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book to completion, that Moses commanded the Levites, who carried the ark of the covenant of Yahweh, "Take this book of the covenant and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of Yahweh that it may be a witness against you."<sup>15</sup>

The covenant was thus to be an enduring covenant, not to be neglected or forgotten, either the covenant itself or its written record.

A further obligation was laid on the people, a further demonstration of the necessity of preserving the record of Yahweh's covenant. That obligation was the public reading of the law of the covenant, the law of Moses, each seven years:

And Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and unto all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place which he will choose, you will read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, women and children, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear, that they may learn to fear Yahweh your God and be careful to do all the words of this law."<sup>16</sup>

Moses laid this covenant obligation on Israel so that they should learn to know God and so that the generations following should likewise know and enjoy the favor of their divine Sovereign by maintaining the covenant of Yahweh. In no way could a late composition of the Pentateuch agree with the view presented herein. It cannot be held that this is a pious creation of a late redactor to explain Israel's observance of the law of Moses through long centuries.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 17, 18. Nor did both tablets have to be written on both sides. This would be a matter of the size of the tablets and of the letters.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 19, 20.

<sup>15</sup>Deut 31:24-26.

<sup>16</sup>Deut 31:9-12.

## II. THE METHOD OF PRESERVATION

The delivery of the written covenant to the Levites for safekeeping has been noted above. It began a tradition that was carried throughout the history of the people of Israel. The manner of preserving specific parts of the history of the nation was not unknown to Israel. This is in agreement with the composition of the treaties that record the beneficent acts of the suzerain toward his vassal.

The divine enablement of Israel's warriors to overcome Amalek is that kind of gracious act of the Lord, Israel's Suzerain. This event Moses was commanded to write up for a memorial that God would always war against Amalek—that is, those who opposed God's redemptive program. God's work in Israel was an essential part of that program, hence the defeat of Amalek. Moses wrote the record "in the book."<sup>17</sup>

The matter of the record book occurs again in Deut 29:21, anticipatory of 31:24. Deuteronomy is the renewal of the covenant<sup>18</sup> made at Sinai, renewed with the new generation. Deut 31:24-26 speaks of "this law" being "written in a book to completion," which might be read "made a complete record." The significance here pertains to more than Deuteronomy. This portion of the Pentateuch contains the same nine parts as do the suzerainty treaties, one pointed element being the recital of the previous history of the vassal. The references to the curses and blessings in Deut 29:21 refer to the sanctions, another part of the nine parts of the treaties. In this instance the "book" has been brought up to date and is now the law that Moses wrote. This was committed to the Levites for safekeeping. It was to be deposited by them in or at the side of the ark. This locale may be assumed to be some sort of permanent container made of wood and presumably covered with gold and perhaps having a lid. Where the ark went the box with the copy of the law went also.

## III. THE HISTORY OF PRESERVATION

Moses, having established before the people the written covenant, was taken from the scene, and Joshua became heir to the work of taking Israel into the land. His basis of achieving that land was the law:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is in it, for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.

Success in what was before the people depended on how they observed the law of Moses.

When the land had largely been subdued, Joshua summoned Israel to appear before Yahweh at Shechem for another renewal of the covenant at this point in Israel's history (Josh 24:1). He made the demand on Israel to destroy foreign gods—idols—from among them (24:14, 23). This was his choice put to them.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Exod 17:14.

<sup>18</sup>Kline, *Treaty*, 20, 29-30.

<sup>19</sup>One other condition of the treaties is that the vassal would not make alliances with any other kings. To have idols in Israel is to make another god their king, equivalent to that forbidden in the treaties. It is rebellion and the height of ingratitude.

These elements amount to an addition to the covenant, and in line with the common practice concerning suzerainty treaties of bringing the stipulations up to date, so it was done by Joshua. The basic covenant was still in force. Joshua, likewise as in the suzerainty treaties, wrote it up necessarily in the book of the law.<sup>20</sup>

The record of the conquest of the land in the book of the law, the covenant record, becomes necessary to set out the fact that Yahweh has been faithful to his promises made to Israel's forebears and to their descendants. Gaining inheritance to the land becomes also an enduring memorial concerning Israel's keeping of the covenant. That she failed is due to original sin finding a ready outlet in particular sins of disobedience, demonstrating that it really requires a new heart to fulfill this covenant. Hence Jesus' words in Heb 10:7: "Then said I, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God"—a reference to Ps 40:6 and Exod 21:6.

In the days of Samuel, Israel demanded a king<sup>21</sup> to be their deliverer. Though Samuel was displeased, perhaps because it meant a rejection of his sons as administrators of the theocracy, he took it to Yahweh. The Lord then stated Samuel's real displeasure: The people were rejecting Yahweh as their King. Samuel was told to warn Israel most emphatically that they might not like the manner of the kingdom.

Samuel then set out for the people the nature of the kingdom, that they were opting for a quite different life: one of subjection to an environment that could bring them a harsher, even cruel, rule, and which—if they joined in that king's alien program—could shut God's ears to their cry. Samuel set out in detail the change of life-style that would come to the people.<sup>22</sup>

After Samuel had presented Saul to be king over Israel and had stated in detail to the people what the manner of the kingdom would be, he wrote up the whole and "laid it up before the Lord."<sup>23</sup> The record was deposited in the tabernacle.

This whole matter pertains again to a change of covenant relations between Yahweh and Israel and includes stipulations, which as in the occasion with Joshua was recorded and laid up before the Lord.

Another has said of this process that

it is an act analogous to that of Moses in making a similar disposition of the fundamental constitution of Israel as the people of God, and so far confirmatory of it. It has sometimes been inferred that what was done with a paper of national importance [the book of the law] must *a fortiori* have been also done with each fresh addition to the volume of God's revelation. . . . There is, however, no historical confirmation of this conjecture.<sup>24</sup>

The last sentence, while honestly stated, is a misapprehension of what was the custom. That was known to the people. No explanation was necessary. Additionally, God commanded it upon succeeding generations. Not till some forty years

<sup>20</sup>Josh 24:26; cf. Kline, *Treaty*, p. 28 n. 6.

<sup>21</sup>1 Sam 8:5.

<sup>22</sup>1 Sam 8:10-18.

<sup>23</sup>1 Sam 10:25.

<sup>24</sup>W. H. Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon* (New York: Scribner's, 1906) 14.

later did the suzerainty treaties achieve proper explication and put the whole in proper perspective. Not only was the original constitution preserved but each subsequent addition was a necessary adjunct to the written covenant, that God might be justified for applying the stipulated sanctions against Israel. But there is also the broadening out of specific redemptive promises accompanied by increasingly detailed characterization of the Anointed of Yahweh by which it was to be made possible for humans to obey God to his approval. God promised to circumcise the heart of the penitent—that is, as Ezekiel puts it, to give them a heart of flesh on which Yahweh could write his law. This is regeneration, the culmination of God's redemptive plan.

A later note is found in the history of Josiah. In the process of the repair of the temple at his orders, the book of the law was found. It was brought to Shaphan the scribe by Hilkiyah the high priest. Shaphan in turn took it to Josiah, and it was read to the king. That reading produced amazement, confusion, shame, shock—and fear of imminent judgment from Yahweh.<sup>25</sup> Josiah immediately called all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem to a hearing of the reading of the book of the law, as was commanded in Deut 31:10-11. This reading drew from the people and king an avowal to keep the law and do it.

The central element here is the identity of the book as the law of God. It was recognized immediately. It was found in the temple—as was to be expected, following Moses' command to the priests and Levites. The record of the find centers about the effect and, above all, the consequences for Israel for transgressing the stipulations of the covenant. Out of it came the pronouncement of irrevocable judgment (2 Kgs 22:19-20). This is the reason for including the record of the finding of the book of the law. God was doing according to what he had caused to be written in that book. While the book had escaped the evils of the idolatry of Manasseh the people could not escape the judgment written in it, so faithfully preserved in the temple.

Preservation of the law continued into post-exilic times. Most of the books of the OT are found in the works of the scribes of Qumran and Murabbaat, so that it can be said that the institution of preservation is the cause whereby the whole of divine writings has come down to us in an unbroken line as the result of obedience to Moses' instruction from the Lord, not by a council finding lost books and canonizing them.

<sup>25</sup>2 Kgs 22:3-11.