

## GOD IN CANONICITY

### *On the Biblically Revealed Means by Which God Intended That the Scriptures Should Pass Through the Ages*

The Old Testament (which was the native language of the people of God of old) and the New Testament (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 authentical so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch.1, art. 8

A view shared both by Christians and the Jews who preceded us in the ancient faith is that God, though he is transcendent and incomprehensible, is, nevertheless, communicative with man. The Bible is replete with the intimate discourse between God and his creatures, and creation makes very little sense if God is not speaking to his crown creation, man. His speech may be comforting and loving or it may be rebuking and cursing, but God does not keep silence or recede, as the deists would have it, into the background of heaven while natural laws play out the history of the world under his apathetic glance or away from his attention as if he were not omniscient.

God decreed that human beings should know him and supplied them with all the senses and intelligence they needed to know him. He gave to man the gift of speech and language in order that we might have a format in our minds for such high thought by which we might comprehend him. He set all his creatures in an economic order reflecting the infinitely higher order that exists within the Trinity so that he might reveal himself to us through that order. For, as the Father decrees, the Son goes forth to execute his decrees, and the Spirit animates that which has been made by the Son, so God has shown how his words go forth to create and give life so that we might see, through the finite power of speech and thought how we are communicative of his infinite attribute of verbal fellowship.

So, we lack nothing for knowing him and giving him the glory he is due. God is to be beheld by us and we are made to behold him. We were not made to seek to be beheld ourselves, but to seek his kingdom and his righteousness and it is expedient that he has given us the means by which we may know him and quest for him, his written word.

Since we have fallen under the curse of sin, we now try to outspoke God. Rather than seek the pure revelation of God, we seek, rather to be revealed ourselves and to present images of ourselves to be beheld. Like God, we also speak and wish to be glorified thereby so that we distort his revelation in favor of our own. We add to his words where we find an advantage in doing so. We take away from his words where they condemn us and disagree with our self assessment. We, in our weaknesses under sin and in our finiteness, do damage to what knowledge of himself he offers us and, in self-deception, we try to excuse ourselves for our imperfections and to justify our sinfulness by twisting his word.

God anticipated our weakness as creatures by giving us faculties whereby we may know him. And he was not taken back by our fall, but instilled in us an understanding of symbols and their relations to language in order that we might make visible representations of our languages in writing. In so doing, he is fully vindicated in all that he does for us and to us so that we will never be able to accuse him of having been lacking in giving us what we need to know him. Furthermore, he has inspired a writing for us through which we may know him as he is and has both promised and decreed that his word should always be preserved for our spiritual benefit. He has prescribed a method by which his word will always be with us and has taught the Church throughout the ages how she should pass the scriptures from one generation to the next. He has decreed that his autographs should be meticulously copied and multiplied and has even given a pattern for their collation and transmission. He has, in short, provided, through the examples in scripture itself, a pattern for canonicity which the church has followed under his direction throughout the ages.

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Whether we attribute it to our finite natures or to the Fall, we either were not designed to hold and access memory for long or else we have become debilitated in this faculty. Whatever the case, it is necessary for people to keep written records so that essential knowledge will not be lost as it is transmitted from one generation to the next. It is essential to the building up of a civilization that the pool of knowledge from one generation be passed on so that later generations will not be bound to rebuild and relearn things that have

already been established.

Even the ancient pagans understood this and took great care to leave permanent records of their times. Various materials such as stone and clay were used as writing media for the purpose of instructing generations far into their future. Meticulous copy work was being done in Egypt about 3,000 years ago or more on perishable papyrus scrolls. The XVIII dynasty papyri of the Book of the Dead are still extant today and show the nearly perfect precision that was a normal practice in scribal work.<sup>1</sup>

Since God has chosen not to reveal all he means to reveal to his people at once, but to unfold his self-manifestations over long periods of history for our instruction, a written record of his revelation is absolutely essential to us. Furthermore, it is equally essential that the written record he inspired be kept in pure and perfect condition throughout all time so his people will not stumble over ambiguities and vagaries brought about by the succession of errors. There is no good reason to assume that God would take less care in the copy work of his inspired word than would be given by pagan Egyptian or Mesopotamian scribes.

Moreover, it should not surprise us that God would give his word in promise that his words would always be preserved. This he does in a number of passages:

*Proverbs 22:12 The eyes of the Lord preserve knowledge, and he overthroweth the words of the transgressor. Luke 21:33 Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. Isaiah 40:8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. John 5:47 But if ye believe not his [Moses'] writings, how shall ye believe my [Jesus'] words? 1 Peter 1:23-25 <sup>23</sup>Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. <sup>24</sup>For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: <sup>25</sup>But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.*

However, God did not just promise to preserve his word, but he decreed that it should be preserved as well. Often, in scripture, we find him commanding that his word be written down. He commanded that Isaiah write the judgment against Israel in a book “*that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever*” (Isaiah 30:8). He commanded Ezekiel to record the forms of the temple to be built, the ordinances, and laws “*that*

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<sup>1</sup>Budge, E. A., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, preface.

*they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them*” (Ezekiel 43:11). The record must be written so that it would pass on to the future and so that full obedience could be given to God. Nothing could be lost in the transmission.

It was also necessary for the word of God to be written in order that it might be a fit record of the forensic evidence of the things God had done and said. God did not choose simply to reveal himself to a single individual at a specific point in time alone; he chose, rather, to reveal himself to all of his people over all of time. He, therefore, passed his revelation down through faithful witnesses who recorded those things they had seen and heard under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:1-4; 2 Pet. 1:21). The Old Testament was written in the sight of all the people and was preserved because there was never a dispute about their credibility from those who had been witnesses to the acts and words of God. When Christ came into the world, he became the focal point of the revelation of God and, as his witnesses, the Apostles were given the commission to record what was revealed to them just as scripture had always been created from the beginning.

An accurate written word is also necessary to our faith in Christ to salvation and to sanctification. We must have a sure anchorage for our souls or we will flounder in uncertainty and lack of assurance. If God says *“Whatsoever is not of faith is sin,”*<sup>2</sup> he must also provide us with a pure foundation for belief. He, therefore, assures us that he will always preserve his healthful and life-giving words. *“And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness”* (Isaiah 29:18).

Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:15, *“And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”* Faith in God unto salvation is completely dependent upon faith in the written word as the basis of the preached Gospel by which men are awakened to saving faith. If faith is the instrument through which we attain salvation

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<sup>2</sup>Romans 14:23

(Romans 3:21-29), then that faith must have an absolutely sure anchorage. This can only be so if God has both spoken and preserved that which he has spoken perfectly throughout the generations of the Church. A lack of faith, however, on the part of the critical scholars is being passed on to those below them. Calvin foresaw this eventuality toward the beginning of the Protestant era:

“But a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men! For they mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another, unless the church prescribe a sure rule for all these matters? What reverence is due Scripture and what books ought to be reckoned within its canon depend, they say, upon the determination of the church. Thus these sacrilegious men, wishing to impose an unbridled tyranny under the cover of the church, do not care with what absurdities they ensnare themselves and others, provided they can force this one idea upon the simple-minded: that the church has authority in all things. Yet, if this is so, what will happen to miserable consciences seeking firm assurance of eternal life if all promises of it consist in and depend solely upon the judgment of men? Will they cease to vacillate and tremble when they receive such an answer? Again, to what mockeries of the impious is our faith subjected, into what suspicion has it fallen among men, if we believe that it has a precarious authority dependent solely upon the good pleasure of men!”<sup>3</sup>

We may well substitute the word “seminaries,” “universities,” or “academicians” in the above quotation for “church,” to express the dilemma of our own time. Biblical criticism has long been subjected to the discipline of the same pseudo-sciences that probe into other areas of inquiry from geology to the internal and external aspects of human society. In the realm of history, archeology has supplanted the records of men under the pretense of possessing the chimera, objectivity, it claims to share with the scientific method. Likewise, biblical criticism has become enslaved to those who have contrived a method based upon uniformitarianism, having cast out the testimony of those who have used the Bible over all the centuries, the ministers of the Church. Therefore, criticism of the scriptures has been removed from the ministers of the Church and placed in the hands of professionals who are not accountable to the government of the Church for their methods and interpretations.

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 75.

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It is not unclear in the contents of scripture that God takes a very special interest in his written word. At the very outset of the inspiration of scripture, God commanded that the book undergo the very consecration that is given to the tabernacle, the altar and accouterments of worship, and the priests (Heb. 9:19). The Book of the Law was placed beside the Ark of the Covenant as a witness to and against the people of Israel, so highly was it exalted in their sight. Moreover, he hedged his word against the natural corruptions of sin by commanding that nothing be added to or taken from that which he had inspired, decreed, and commanded (Deut. 4:2; 12:32).<sup>4</sup>

It is unreasonable to hold that God would not account for biblical corruption while he was instituting the very system by which he would triumph over corruption itself, i.e. the nation of Israel and the seed of the Church encapsulated within that nation. The repetitious nature of his reminder to that generation to observe to do all that is written within the law manifests God's comprehensive awareness of human forgetfulness, erroneous handling, and willful innovation of those heavenly things they had received of him.<sup>5</sup>

The methods of canonicity are not new and are not the invention of men. They are drawn from God's decrees and have been passed on from the church of the Old Testament to the present time. Critical scholars have often innovated and corrupted the biblical method, but canonicity has always been under God's supervision, not man's.

The first time the idea of transmission through copies is conceived is in the Pentateuch itself. In anticipation of the monarchy of Israel, God commanded, "*And it shall be, when he [the king] sitteth upon*

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<sup>4</sup>The fact that more scripture is added only adds to the perception that the Pentateuch was always meant to be viewed as the very words of God. The restriction on addition to the Pentateuch refers to the words of men, not to the words of God. Only the words of God could, therefore, be added to the already established words of God which were written. This principle is seen clearly in Jeremiah 36:32, "*Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words.*"

<sup>5</sup>A sampling from Deuteronomy alone: Deut. 4:40; 6:1-2; 17; 7:11; 8:11; 10:13; 11:1; 32-12:1; 16:12; 26:16-17; 27:10; 28:15; 45; 30:10; 16

*the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites...*” (Deut. 17:18). Obviously, this passage commands copies (and multiple copies since there will be multiple kings), but implicit in the verse is a principle for the overall care of the copies;<sup>6</sup> the king’s copy was to be drawn from that which was under the care of the priests and Levites, i.e. the ministers of the word and worship of God. If the king’s copy is to have the integrity for him to rule over Israel in the “*fear [of] the LORD his God*” so that the king could keep “*all the words of this law and statutes,*” (v.19) the copy must reflect a perfectly accurate representation of the original autograph (“*of this law,*” [Deut.17:18] i.e. the very original in the hands of Moses). The king was under the same mandate to perform his duties according to subscription as the High Priest, who’s very life, on the Day of Atonement, depended upon perfect subscription to the written word. It would have, therefore, greatly behooved the High Priest to oversee perfection in the copies from generation to generation in order that the laws and statutes could be carried out exactly as God commanded them to be.

Since there was a mandate from God to copy scripture as well as repeated orders to adhere closely to the law of God and, since there was good incentive for the priests and Levites who oversaw the copies to do so with all care, it should not surprise us to find in the course of the Bible that God’s oversight of the transmission of scripture was being fulfilled. In 1 Kings 8, wherein Solomon is found dedicating the newly constructed sanctuary, the king declared in verse 56, “*Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised: **there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant.***” So it is that, from the time of Moses to Solomon about 480 years later, the words that Moses had written in an autograph long given over to decay had been received entirely intact.

124 years later, at the beginning of the reign of Amaziah, the young king confirmed his reign over Judah by executing the men who had assassinated his father, Joash (2 Kings 14: 1-4). He did not perform

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<sup>6</sup>In Jeremiah 45:1 even the autograph is in danger of the hostile hands of rebellious men.

the custom of kings by killing all the members of the conspirators' families, but, in obedience to the law of God, only killed those who had committed the crime of regicide. The Law is to be found in Deut. 24:16: "*The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.*" 2 Kings 14:6 quotes Deut. 24:16 directly: "...*The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children be put to death for the fathers; but every man shall be put to death for his own sin.*" This illustrates with what care the copies were made from generation to generation.

By examining the same narrative in 2 Chronicles 25:4, it is interesting to notice the same passage from Deuteronomy quoted: "... *The fathers shall not die for the children, neither shall the children die for the fathers, but every man shall die for his own sin.*" Here, we see some slight variation in the wording where "*shall not die*" and "*shall die*" are substituted for "*shall not be put to death*" and "*shall be put to death.*" Both variations of wording, probably drawn from different copies at different times, are acceptable in scripture because both reflect exactly the same meaning. At least in this instance, the slight variations are not considered variances worthy to be counted so that, by acceptance of the "variance", the Bible at least defines what is not to be counted as a variance.

Even the collection of various texts of Scripture and their collation is addressed in the Scriptures themselves. Throughout the writing of the Histories, the inspired words of several writers must have been combined into units and groups of Scripture. The Psalms reflect a collection of psalms by a number of writers beside David. Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote, <sup>9</sup>"*And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.* <sup>10</sup>*The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth*" (Eccles. 12:8-10). God, therefore, foresaw that the copies would sometimes need to be brought together in order that the unity of Scripture might be recognized by his people and preserved.

So we see that God ordained that his revelation of himself should necessarily be recorded in written form and built into man the faculties of language and symbolism by which the revelation should be passed through the successive generations. Mindful of the effects of corruption on men and materials, God saw that worthy copies were assiduously made and passed on from generation to generation. He gave incentives for striving for perfection in scribal work and watched over the transmission over the centuries. This system is God's manner of fulfilling his promise and decree to preserve his written word, both by his sovereignty over time, matter, and events and through his revealed method by which faithful men should care for his word.

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Often it is held either that the New Testament copyists were less careful with the transmission of the New Testament or that they somewhat loosely continued the assiduous methods of the Old Testament scribes. The former view is based on the erroneous idea that New Testament copyists did not fully realize that they were handling Scripture while the latter view takes a somewhat pragmatic approach to transmission. However, since it can be easily shown from within the New Testament that the inspired writers possessed superior knowledge of the Old Testament, it stands to reason that they would have known by what method God had decreed that the Bible should be successively preserved, especially since these methods were still in wide use in their own time. If, in fact, they followed the Jewish schools of scribalism it is only because the Jewish method of transmission, for the most part, was recognized by the Church as biblical.

Jesus demonstrated his knowledge and recognition — in short his ratification of Old Testament canonicity— in Matthew 5:18 when he said, “*For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*” The statement is absolute and couched in the form of an inviolable decree and the substance of that decree is that even the type-set, as it were, of the law would not pass away, thus referring to the embellishments of the finest scribal arts. The jots refer to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the yodh and is represented in the verse by the Greek *iota*. The tittles, or *keraiia*, refer to the ornamental horns in the block Hebrew alphabet. A witness to the Jewish scribal

arts commented in the mid twentieth century, “A more elegant Hebrew manuscript, a more perfect specimen of the calligraphic art, I never saw than that executed by this Jewish amanuensis. No printed page could surpass it in the beauty, symmetry, and distinctness with which the characters were drawn.”<sup>7</sup> God taught the Jewish people at least to revere the forms of his words and this teaching was reflected in their culture. Jesus statement in Matthew 5 brought to earth the heavenly decree that transmission of the text of scripture should be done with perfection as its goal.

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The care of the Old Testament scribes was reflected in their name, *sopher*, which has its roots in the Hebrew terms (*saphar* and *misepar*) for counting, measuring, and alining. The Jewish scribe does now and has always strived for perfection in copy by counting the letters in a line and the lines on the page and has made something of a science of transmission. The success of this method has been demonstrated in comparisons of copies separated by centuries and it has been observed satisfactorily that variances between the copies are relatively insignificant.

This probably explains, from a purely practical perspective, why all the Apostles chosen were Jews. Since one of their primary tasks in the foundation work of the Church was to complete the written revelation of God on this side of the resurrection of our Lord, our Jewish founding fathers would have understood the Old Testament scribes’ reverence for the propositional words of God based on the Old Testament pattern for transmission and would have passed this attitude and teaching on to the scribes of the New Testament as well, based on the saying of Jesus. Furthermore, even if the Old Testament was copied by later scribes who, from time to time, handled scripture carefully out of superstition or in order to advance their own influence and authority, how much more care should we expect was given to copying the New Testament by those who loved it and had felt its gracious effects upon their lives?

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<sup>7</sup>Freeman, James E., *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, Logos International, Plainfield, NJ, 1972, p. 337.

The question, therefore, is whether the early Church shared the Apostles' attitude toward copy and transmission. One does not have to read far into the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers to find with what celestial heights they regarded the Bible (including the New Testament) in its authority over the Church as well as the value of its physical origins and the necessity for passing it on in good integrity through the ages to come. In their view, the Gospel itself was a "pillar and ground of truth," every doctrine had to be backed by the scripture, and nothing deserved to be counted credible that could not find its confirmation in the Word of God. Tertullian stated, negatively, "that heretics cannot stand on pure scriptural ground."<sup>8</sup> As to the autographs, Tertullian has this to say:

Come, now, if you would practise inquiry to more advantage in the matter of your salvation, go through the apostolic churches, in which the very chairs of the apostles still preside, *in which their own authentic letters are publicly read*, uttering the voice and representing the face of every one. If Achaia is nearest, you have Corinth. If you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi, you have Thessalonica. If you can go to Asia, you have Ephesus. But if you live near Italy, you have Rome, whence also we [of the African church] derive our origin. How happy is the church to which the apostles poured out their doctrine with their blood....<sup>9</sup>

An interesting quotation from Cyprian regarding the relationship between the Apostolic traditions and the New Testament can be unpacked to reveal a great deal about the early fathers' views of Scripture, New Testament, the authority of the written word, and the transmission of the Bible into the future:

In the substance of its doctrine this apostolic tradition agrees with the holy scriptures, and though derived, as to its form, from the oral preaching of the apostles, is really, as to its contents, one and the same with those apostolic writings. In this view, the apparent contradictions of the earlier fathers, in ascribing the highest authority to both the scripture and tradition in matters of faith, resolve themselves. It is one and the same gospel which the apostles preached with their lips, and then laid down in their writings, *and which the church faithfully hands down by word and writing from one generation to another.*<sup>10</sup>

So, the better picture of New Testament transmission from that given by the theorists who would

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<sup>8</sup>Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., 2002, vol ii, p. 521.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 526, italics mine.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, pp. 527-8, italics mine.

invent a history to defend their method is that the scribes of the New Testament codices reflected a serious reverence for the integrity of the copies that had been handed down to them from Christ through the Apostles. Since the subsequent ministers to whom the baton of the Gospel had been entrusted by the Apostles held closely to all the traditions of the Apostles to verify their teachings against the rising tide of heresies, they also held to the absolute necessity of passing on a pure form of the written word of God as well. Their heavenly view of the authority of written, revealed truth was a strong motivation for overseeing the multiplicity of copies each of which was as closely aligned to the originals as possible so that within the whole of the copies the autographs might be perfectly preserved throughout the history of the Church.

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Mere motivation, however, is not enough to ensure that perfection will always be the aim in canonicity and this has been proven by the existence of copies that contain seriously compromised truth. Not all scribes were faithful to Christ and the Apostles, nor did they always build upon the same foundation. The pure transmission of the scriptures depends upon the work of the Gospel contained within the scriptures on the hearts of copyists and their supervisors. The transformed heart that proceeds from the work of redemption is closely tied to the providence by which God has fulfilled his promise to preserve his word intact.

The surety for the preservation of the word of God is not men. From the outset, God both promised to preserve the scriptures through his mysterious providences and decreed by means of his redeemed people that the scriptures would be passed on by a method he prescribed within the very scriptures themselves. Not every technique of canonicity is accounted for in scripture, but the broad outlay for transmission is there. The autographs were to be copied carefully and repeatedly and occasionally collected, collated, and compared. Just as God joined with holy men of old to inspire the writing of scripture, so God joins with faithful men throughout the ages to preserve it. And it must not be passed over lightly that the kind of obedience God requires of his people is dependent upon an equally perfect scripture no matter at what time

in history his people may be found.

Finally, canonicity belongs to Jesus Christ alone. While, “*in his flesh*,” Jesus repeatedly claimed that the revelation and the words of God belonged to him. In Matthew 11:27 (Luke 10:22), Jesus boldly declared, “*All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.*” How can we know Jesus or his Father except through the written record that has been left to us from him? He, also, claimed that he revealed to his disciples a complete revelation from the Father, “*Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you*” (John 15:15). He was both proven by scripture (Luke 24:27; Acts 18:28; 1 Cor. 15:3-4) and is the proof of scripture (Heb. 1:1-2) so that he, as the Living Word, is inextricably tied up with the Written Word. Furthermore, as Head of the Church which is itself the pillar and ground of truth, all that has to do with the written word is under his authority and control. Having demonstrated that he only delivers a perfect work of redemption (Heb. 9:12-27), it is unreasonable to assume that, under his supervision, the written word would pass into history flawed, incomplete, and composite. He alone is worthy to receive a book from the hands of God and in his worthy hands, we have a sure anchor of hope in the Bible.

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