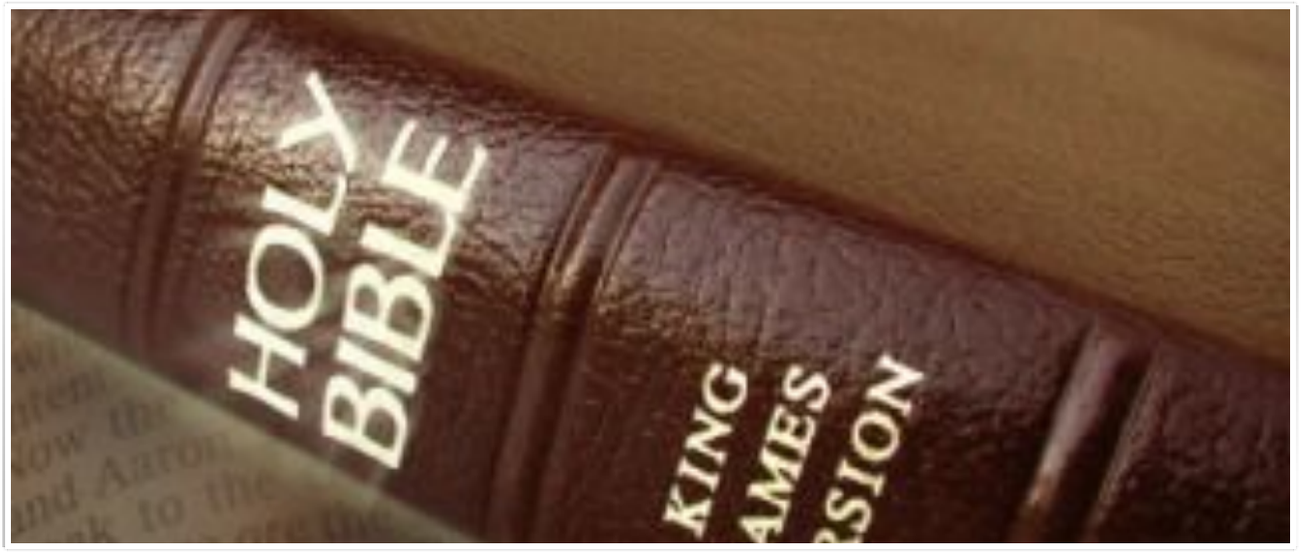

Matthew 5:17-20 And The KJV

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Matthew 5:17-20 is a major text often quoted in defense of the understanding of preservation that is presented as support for the "Textus Receptus and Masoretic Text = The Right Text" view of the textual issue. The assertion is that the phrase "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law" is support for the idea that God has promised to preserve his word, down to even the minutest details. This preservation is then defined to mean that God has kept this promise by protecting one particular stream of manuscript transmission pure and free from error. Thus, only one text (the TR) stands as the one "pure" Greek text, and only one text (MT) stands as the "pure" Hebrew text. Since the KJV is (mistakenly assumed to be) translated from these texts, it is then deduced that the KJV is the "preserved" Bible.

But is that the best way to frame what Jesus is teaching here? Could we perhaps be more accurate in stating what this passage teaches? What contribution does this text make to the text/translation discussion? In its context, what is it actually teaching about preservation? To answer these questions we must do the basic exegetical work to understand the Gospel as a whole, the Sermon on the Mount in particular, and then this specific text within that larger context. We will not do a thorough exegesis of the entire passage, as that would require a treatment of much greater length, but we will do enough of the work to give us a context from which to look at the relevant phrase here in detail.

The Gospel of Matthew as a Whole

Author

While this gospel, (like all four canonical gospels) is technically anonymous, Matthean authorship has been the traditional position of the church, (carrying support from such figures as Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Eusebius) and fits well the internal evidence of the gospel. Critical scholars have often denied it (since it would place the account on the level of an eyewitness to Jesus life and ministry), but there is no objective reason to do so. There is no tradition contradicting it or suggesting a more likely alternative. Craig Blomberg, one of the leading authorities in gospels study today, summarizes the voice of scholarship by stating, "Matthew remains the most plausible choice of author." [1] After arguing convincingly for Matthew the Apostle as the author, Carson and Moo wisely note, "It must be said that at one level very little hangs on the question of the authorship of this gospel. By and large, neither its meaning nor its purpose is greatly changed if one decides that its author was not an apostle." [2]

Recipients

It is generally assumed that Matthew writes for a Jewish community of Christians. While the specifics of their situation are harder to spell out with confidence, their Jewish ethnicity, and their status as believers, seems fairly well founded. This is evident by Matthew's repeated references to the Hebrew Bible, his "fulfillment" motif, and the gradual building of the theme of "Gentile inclusion," among other things.

Date

I tentatively take a date prior to AD 70. The reasons are primarily related to the Olivet Discourse. In our present passage, the dating of the book (apart from some far extremes) makes little or no difference in the interpretation of the text. We will thus deal with the issue at greater length in the essay on the Matt. 24:35 passage in the Olivet Discourse.

Structure

Matthew clearly structures his gospel around five major "discourses" of Jesus. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, in one of the standard NT introductions, note that each of these discourses begins by placing Jesus in a specific context and "ends with a formula found nowhere else in the gospel" followed by a "transitional pericope with links pointing forward and backward." [3] These five transitional formulae are easily identifiable and Matthew's audience would clearly have picked up on them as the basic structural clue around which Matthew has arranged his material. "The five discourses are so clearly marked, from a literary point of view, that it is well nigh impossible to believe that Mathew did not plan them." [4] Thus, after an introductory prologue (1:1-2:23), Matthew uses the basic structure as follows: [5]

- The Gospel of the Kingdom (3:1-7:29)
  - Narrative 1 – 3:1-4:25
  - Discourse 1 – 5:1-7:29 – Sermon on the Mount / The Ethics of the Kingdom
  - (Transitional statement – 7:28)
- The Kingdom Extended under Jesus' Authority (8:1-11:1)
  - Narrative 2 - 8:1-10:4
  - Discourse 2 – 10:5-11:1 – The Disciple's Mission / The Expansion of the Kingdom
  - (Transitional statement – 11:1)
- Teaching and Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom: Rising Opposition (11:2-13:53)
  - Narrative 3 – 11:2-12:50
  - Discourse 3 – 13:1-53 – Kingdom Parables / Illustrations of the Kingdom
  - (Transitional statement – 13:53)
- The Glory and the Shadow: Progressive Polarization (13:54-19:2)
  - Narrative 4 – 13:53-17:27
  - Discourse 4 – 18:1-19:2 – The Community of the Kingdom
  - (Transitional Statement - 19:1)
- Opposition and Eschatology: The Triumph of Grace (19:3-26:5)
  - Narrative 5- 19:3-23:39

    - Discourse 5 –24:1-26:2 – The Olivet Discourse / Watching for the Coming King
    - (Transitional statement - 26:1)

While it is perhaps a little more debated, a good case can be made that Matthew intends 26:3-28:18 to serve as a "sixth narrative," and intends the apostolic preaching or "The Great Commission" to function as the "sixth discourse of Jesus." [6] That is, Jesus is not done teaching. He had authority to teach, and that authority has now been passed on to the apostles and the church to continue his teaching. Their gospel witness to all nations – now including the Gentiles – is the continuation of the Voice of Jesus, as it were. After the transitional statement of 26:1, in keeping with Matthew's literary pattern, the readers would have anticipated the narrative of 26:3-28:18. They would then have clearly expected Matthew to keep with his pattern and present a major discourse of Jesus. Instead Matthew has Jesus say in effect, "I have already spoken, and I alone have authority to speak. Now I give you that same authority. Now, instead of I, go ye therefore and teach." The whole gospel thus builds up towards the climax of the Great Commission and its message of Gentile inclusion and worldwide gospel proclamation and discipleship. Thus:

- The Gospel Preached by Jesus' Followers to All Nations
    - Narrative 6 - 26:3-28:18
    - Discourse 6 – The continued preaching of the gospel in the context of Gentile inclusion

Occasion / Purpose / Message

When it comes to the matters of occasion, purpose, and the message of the text, we must distinguish the answers to these questions at multiple levels. First, we must examine the historical setting of the Sermon on the Mount itself in history. Who was Jesus talking to and what did He intend to say? We must further – and from an exegetical standpoint, more importantly – examine what Matthew was intending to use the material to say to his audience in their original setting. This is the intent of the inspired author. This is where the exegetical task must focus. Then we will ask what implications or direct teachings this all has in reference to a doctrine of preservation.
Why does Matthew write his gospel? What does he ultimately intend to say? David Turner, writing one of the more substantial modern treatments of the Gospel, suggests that, "Matthew equips his Christian Jewish community with the Torah-fulfilling teachings of Jesus on righteous living, on opposition during mission, on the mixed external reception of the message, on the internal values that characterize his community, and on how to live in light of his coming. This teaching along with Jesus' powerful presence will enable the community to continue kingdom ministry to Israel and begin discipling the Gentiles." [7] The aspect of this purpose most relevant to our discussion is the fact that Matthew intends to address the major issue of how Jesus and his teaching relate to the Law of Moses. Since Gentile inclusion in the Great Commission forms the climax of the Gospel, explaining the specifics of Jew/Gentile relations is a major part of what Matthew intends to do. While there is some discussion among scholars about whether or not Matthew's Jewish community has separated fully from the synagogue yet or has still retained some connection to the synagogue, [8] it is undeniable that they are wrestling with the issues of just how exactly Jesus relates to the law. This is a major theme in Matthew's gospel, and in the Sermon on the Mount in particular.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7)

The Sermon on the Mount thus functions for Matthew as the first major discourse of Jesus, primarily to his disciples, in which He will take up the issues of his relation to the Torah, and the ethics of the kingdom that flow from that relationship. Turner writes, "The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' authoritative teaching about the way that believers should live today. Those who repented when they heard the gospel preached by John and Jesus (3:2; 4:17) needed to know how to live under God's saving reign. As Jews, they especially needed to know how Jesus' teaching related to Moses and the Hebrew Bible. Fulfilling Biblical values is the framework of the sermon (5:17; 7:12), and Jesus' disciples are those who long for the time when these values will be fully realized on earth (6:10)."[9]

Matthew presents Jesus as having pulled his disciples aside to the mountain into a more private venue, but it is likely that the crowds are still at least somewhat present on the sidelines. Turner notes that "It is doubtful that the crowd is entirely absent from this discourse. More likely, the disciples, as the inner circle, closely listen to Jesus while a throng of people gathers around the periphery of the scene and exhibits varied levels of interest and comprehension."[10] Jesus apparently sits (as is common for rabbinic instruction) and the disciples gather around him as he teaches this great sermon introducing them to Kingdom ethics.

Section on the Fulfilling of the Law 5:17-48

In this section, Matthew will take up the major issue of just exactly how Jesus relates to the OT law. Our text is essentially the introduction to this larger section. In some ways it is irresponsible to deal with 5:17-20 without continuing through the entire text, since just exactly what Jesus means by "fulfilling" the law can only be understood in light of the six examples that follow in verses 21-47. However, space and time permit here only the brief mention of these broader contexts. The structure of this section of the sermon can be presented in three simple parts.[11]

- 5:17-20 – Fulfilling the Law: General Principles
- 5:21-47 – Fulfilling the Law: Six Specific Examples
- 5:48 – Fulfilling the Law: Summary

Matt. 5:17-20 In More Detail

We zoom in now to the passage that will be the focus of our discussion. But before we provide an exegesis of the passage as we find it in Matthew, a few notes about text-critical issues and synoptic issues are in order.

Text Critical Issues

The NA28 list four rather minor variants in the text. None of them are significant. The UBS4 (which seeks to present only the variants important enough to affect exegesis and translation) does not list any variants in the apparatus for verses 17-20. Metzger's textual commentary does not list any variants in the passage, and Comfort's textual commentary does not list any variants in this passage. Commentators thus almost unanimously represent no real text critical issues in this text. However, since we are examining the contribution of the text to the doctrine of preservation, and will consider what relevance it might have for a theory of textual criticism, it might be instructive and a good exercise to walk through the relatively unimportant variants listed in NA28 anyway. These variants are not even a blip on the radar in contending for the position of the original text, but we will examine them anyway. The four variants listed are:

1. The phrase "and the prophets" is added after "the law" in verse 18 by
    1. Θ (038), a 9th century Byzantine uncial manuscript,
    2. Family 13, (f13), a grouping of a dozen or so Caesarean and Byzantine manuscripts dating from the 11th to the 15th century,
    3. 565, a 9th century Caesarean minuscule manuscript,
    4. The Latin translation of Irenaeus's quotation of the text.
    - The TR, the NA28, and the UBS4 have all agreed in following the original hand of codex B and lectionary 2211 in omitting the additional phrase.
2. The phrase "heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (If I have read and understood the Latin in the NA28 apparatus correctly – this is not my strong point) have been imported from Matt 24:35 by an Old Latin witness in an attempt at harmonization of the two

passages. No Greek witnesses contain the phrase here, and no Greek texts include it.

3. The phrase "but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" in verse 19b is omitted by a handful of uncial and miniscule manuscripts. Only the "negative" apparatus is given, (the manuscripts which support the TR and NA28 are not listed in the apparatus) since the variant has little chance of being original. The NA28 has only listed it for its importance to the history and interpretation of the text. Manuscripts which omit the phrase are:
    1. The original hand of "א"
    2. Codex D
    3. Codex W
    4. Minuscule 579 – a 13th century Byzantine (in Matthew) manuscript.
    5. One Boharic witness
4. Verse 20 is omitted by Codex D. All the other consistently cited witnesses for Matthew include it. The TR, NA28, UBS4, and all other Greek texts have agreed in retaining it.

Synoptic Issues / Redaction Criticism

It would be irresponsible to deal with any text in Matthew without at least briefly mentioning the synoptic problem and its relation to the exegesis of the text. While there are some recent dissenting voices, the majority of evangelical scholarship today holds to Marcan priority.[12] That is, that Mark wrote first, and that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark. Further, because Matthew and Luke have a large amount of material that they share in common yet which is not present in Mark, it is likely that they had both had access to a source Mark was unaware of.[13] This source is referred to as "Q." I make no assumption as to whether there was a single written document that is represented by "Q." It could have been a variety of sources, either written, or oral, or both. Whatever the form, it represents only the source or sources that Matthew and Luke shared in addition to Mark. That position is assumed here rather than defended. The passage at hand in verse 18 is clearly "Q" material, or material which Matthew and Luke draw from a common source unknown to Mark. It is worth noting how Matthew has uniquely shaped this material for his Jewish audience.[14] Matthew's source could be set forth as follows (presenting the TR text):[15]

Matthew 5:18	Q 16:17	Luke 16:17
ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ		
	εὐκοπώτερον δέ ἐστιν	εὐκοπώτερον δέ ἐστι
ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ,	τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν παρελθεῖν, ἢ	τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν παρελθεῖν, ἢ
ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ		
μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου,	μίαν κεραίαν τοῦ νόμου	τοῦ νόμου μίαν κεραίαν
ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται.	πεσεῖ.	πεσεῖν.

While Robinson list nine minor[16] (mostly stylistic) changes to the original source material,[17] there are only a few that are notable above (in blue) that are relevant to the present purpose of this essay.[18]

1. Matthew has added the "for verily I say unto you" to his source.
2. Matthew has added the "not one jot or" to his source (or conversely, Luke has omitted it, but this is less likely).
3. Matthew has repeated the "shall not pass" at the end of his saying, and has added "from the law, until all be fulfilled."

Each of these minor changes is related to his particular Jewish audience, and his unique purpose with them.

- The phrase "verily I say unto you" is a play on the way that a rabbi would typically speak, which would have more impact upon Matthew's Jewish audience than the Gentile Theophilus that Luke writes for. The phrase occurs 30 times in Matthew, but only six times in Luke. Rabbis would typically introduce their teachings with the name of an earlier rabbi, by whose authority they would then speak. They would conclude their teaching with the "amen" that would reinforce what they have just taught as true. Jesus consistently adapted that practice, beginning his own teaching by asserting that what he was about to say was true on his own authority, and should be taken as true before it is even taught. He thus asserts his own personal authority above and beyond that which any other rabbi had ever claimed.[19]
- The specific reference to a "jot" is a phenomenon of the Hebrew language, which might have been less meaningful to a Gentile like Theophilus (though the same basic meaning can be retained by the more generic "tittle" alone, but without the thrust more common to the Hebrew reference.)
- The specification of "the law" and the specific language of "fulfillment" is part of a major Matthean theme[20] that Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT.

A Brief Exegesis of Matt. 5:17-20

This should not be seen as a detailed exegesis of all of 5:17-20, which would require a more thorough treatment, but we will present just enough for us to understand the phrase purportedly relevant to preservation in its context.

> *"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. 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. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."*
> *(Matthew 5:17–20 KJV)*

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."

What specific problem does Jesus seek to address in these first verses of his teaching on the fulfillment of the law? It is evident from verse 17 that some had began to wonder if Jesus was trying to set aside the Torah altogether. The usage of the word "καταλυω" (destroy) here falls under the 3rd category of meaning listed by BDAG as "to end the effect or validity of something, put and end to." Thus in this passage in particular it means, "To cause to no longer be in force, abolish, annul, make invalid…to do away with, annul, or repeal the law."[21] Jesus' handling of the Sabbath commands in particular had raised the difficult question of what exactly His attitude was towards the mosaic legislation. Darrell Bock, a prominent evangelical voice in synoptic studies today notes, "It seems likely that here Jesus is dealing with the charge of being antinomian since His controversies suggested an approach to the law that was different from traditional thinking."[22] Did He see the OT legislation as essentially irrelevant? Did He believe it was no longer binding? Did He think it could be set aside? Did He think there were some commands that no longer were applicable? Jesus clearly addressed these concerns with an emphatic *no*.

The situation into which Matthew writes when he includes this material from Jesus' sermon had to deal with the same questions in an even more direct way. The followers of Jesus had at times been accused of setting aside the authority of the OT altogether (see Acts 6:11, 13-14; 21:28). There was a clear antinomian element of teaching that was citing Jesus (and perhaps Paul) in support of the idea that law can be altogether abandoned and that there are no longer any rules for the Christ-follower. Matthew includes this section of Jesus teaching to address those elements with an authoritative word from the Lord.

"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."

By presenting Jesus' teaching here, Matthew intends to show that Jesus never taught any kind of antinomianism. He clears Jesus (and thus, his followers) of such charges by presenting Jesus' statements in verses 17-20. Thus he is saying, "No part of the law can be set aside as irrelevant." Jesus will go on to explain with six examples that the law has a continuing relevance for his followers. This relevance is seen in that what the law was ultimately about was never external conformity and actions of obedience, but the direction of the heart. Jesus is still as concerned about the heart as His Father ever was, and thus each command still has something to say, once we realize that the original intention of the law was a spiritual one, and can only be fulfilled in Christ.

"one jot or one tittle"

The phrase is strengthened and emphasized by the repetition of the numeral here. BDF, in the standard advanced Greek grammar, notes that the repetition is intended for emphasis.[23] Thus the idea is "not even one" jot or tittle. It is important to understand that our "jot and tittle" is an English translation, of a Greek text, that is translating Aramaic words of Jesus, that refer to particulars of the Hebrew text. Matthew thus uses the word "jot" to explain Jesus' reference to the yod, the smallest letter of the Hebrew and Aramaic alphabet, and the word "tittle" to explain his reference to something as small as an accent or breathing mark, most probably an ornamental mark added to a letter. Donald Hagner notes that the "tittle" probably "Refers to the ornamental marks customarily added to certain letters."[24] The point especially of this "tittle" reference is that it is something quite insignificant.

Referent of "Jot and Tittle"		
Jot	ἰῶτα	*yod* "Evidently the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic *yod* which, in the original form of the saying, represented the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet."[25]
Tittle	κεραία	"Little Horn" "anything that projects like a horn, *projection*, *hook*, as a part of a letter, a *serif* of letters... of accents and breathing marks.[26]

Notice that this is not a reference to the "words" of the text, as "TR = the original" advocates sometimes assert in referring to the verbal preservation of the text, (and thus essentially denying the existence of textual variants). It is rather a reference to something *much smaller than an individual word*. It represents the type of things that stylistically would vary even in an individual manuscript, where the same scribe would often spell the same word in different ways, and would ornament the letters in different ways. Let alone the spelling differences between different manuscripts! Yet none of the "TR = original" proponents would dare to take the meaning that far in regards to preservation. It would be a far too drastic and easily falsifiable a claim. Yet that is exactly the point of the language - the impact. It is simply not likely that what Jesus is saying can be taken as referring to verbal preservation and precision of manuscript transmission. This is rather a clear use of the rhetorical device of "hyperbole," where an author or speaker intentionally exaggerates to make a point. Hagner states, "We have here thus a deliberate hyperbole – an overstatement that is designed to drive home the main point..."[27] Albright notes, "This statement is certainly hyperbolic for purposes of effect."[28] Jesus has intentionally exaggerated for rhetorical effect. Bock also notes that in this same context Jesus' reference to heaven and earth passing away "reflects Jesus' rhetorical, hyperbolic flair."[29] Craig Keener makes the same point, noting that Jesus underlines his point in a "graphic, hyperbolic manner."[30] He then cites numerous literary parallels to usage of this same phrase from the literature of second temple Judaism. A brief perusal of these literary parallels reveals that Jesus is clearly using language well established in rabbinic instruction as rhetorical hyperbole. Noting these parallels, it would be hard to see how Matthew's readers could have taken the already well-known phrase any other way.

Understanding the text as hyperbolic language is further reinforced when we see how Jesus spells out the implication of his own statement in verse 19. His reference to "commandments" instead of to "jots and tittles" there makes it even more clear that his statement in verse 18 is designed for rhetorical effect.

Jesus indisputably does this again in the context of this same section of the sermon (5:27-32), when speaking about cutting off a hand or foot that causes you to stumble. No one today would take that command literally. It is indubitably understood in that text, spoken in this same sermon's context, that Jesus is exaggerating to make his point. Jesus had a clear penchant for that kind of powerful rhetorical speech, which was common to Jewish teachers of his day, and Jesus is clearly using that form of speech here.

"shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled"

As would be expected in what we have established as a rhetorical assertion employing hyperbole for effect, the assertion made here is a strong one. Daniel Wallace notes the use of the negative with the subjunctive mood here as an *emphatic negation subjunctive*, with the idea that they "will not at all pass away" translated here as "shall in no wise pass."[31] What is it that is being so emphatically stated? The word "pass" means here "to lose force, or become invalid." We will examine the word and its usage here in detail in a moment. Matthew is emphatically stating that not even the smallest part of the law will cease to have relevance for Jesus' followers. This is made clear by how Jesus develops his statement in the next verse.

> *"Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."*

Here Jesus extends his statement to their conclusion that he is not advocating lawlessness, and that none of his disciples can likewise advocate antinomianism. In fact, anyone who teaches that parts of the Law are irrelevant and unimportant will lose spiritual stature. This is not to say that Jesus is a legalist, since he distinctly separates himself from the legalism of the Scribes and Pharisees, but rather that He understands the original point of God's laws to be less concerned with external conformity, and more concerned with the general direction of the heart. He then fleshes this understanding out in the six examples that follow. Some have suggested that Jesus is "raising the standard" here so to speak, but Jesus isn't so much moving the standard from a low place to a high one as much as he is moving the standard from an external place to an internal one. "Jesus looks for the inner disposition as well as the outer action."[32] The central idea of this whole section on fulfilling the Law is thus that *true spirituality isn't based on the external* (as the Pharisees' understanding of the law was), but on the internal.

A Note on the Word "Pass"

The verb has the preposition παρα attached to it here, thus literally it is "to pass by" or "to pass beside." This compound verb alone would be significant.[33] All the more, because it emphasizes by the very nature of that preposition that something will not pass, from its place beside or by the law. But it is followed by the varying preposition "απο." Thus, if we were to be woodenly literal here, the two words would be rendered *"to pass from beside"* thus emphasizing that what was previously contained in the law is now no longer considered part of the Law.[34] This is the clear metaphorical use of the compound verb, in keeping with the hyperbolic rhetoric we have noted already. Thayer, an older lexicon, notes the metaphorical usage, then explains this usage here as follows, "Here belongs also Matt. 5:18 ('not even the smallest part shall pass away from the law,' i.e. so as no longer to belong to it)."[35] The idea is that not even the most insignificant part will pass from its place of validity in the law. All the standard lexicons agree in this basic metaphorical understanding of the word here.

One of the Greek NT lexicons used as a standard today, the EDNT, explains the meaning of the word "pass" in this text as follows. "In Matt 5:18 (c.f. Luke 16:17) it is stressed that the validity of the law continues 'until heaven and earth pass away.' Here 'heaven and earth' refer to the present aeon, in which the law has indissoluble validity. Therefore, in the foreground is 'the positive and unwavering validity of the law and not its essential dissolubility and imminent dissolution' (Broer 44)."[36] William Mounce lists its meaning in this passage as "to become vain, be rendered void."[37] These standard works would be enough to define the word, and assign it the meaning we have noted, but serious NT study usually makes reference to an even more respected lexical tool.

In lexical study today there is no more authoritative voice than the standard "BAGD," now in its 3rd edition known affectionately as "BDAG." The reason this lexicon has become such a standard is its comprehensive ability to locate the language of the NT in the common usage of its day by comparison with other early Greek literature of the same Koine period. Since the meaning of words is determined by their common usage,[38] (not, incidentally, by their etymology, as some older lexical works presumed) there is little that is more important for understanding the meaning of a word than to note the common uses of that word with the same shade of meaning in surrounding literature. This is what BDAG does,

classifying the various usages of a word, and then listing the parallels of that usage. This standard Greek Lexicon notes that the word "pass" here ("παρελθη") is being used in its figurative sense and means in this passage "To pass away in the sense of lose force or become invalid."[39] Under the usage of the verb with the same subset of meaning found in this text, BDAG notes only seven instances of parallels elsewhere. They list Psalm 148:6 in the LXX, Esther 10:3b in the LXX, Matt 24:35; Mrk. 13:31b; Luke 21:33b; Matt. 5:18b, and I Clement 27:5. It would be instructive to examine these uses. (The synoptic passages will be dealt with in the essays on those texts.)

Psalm 148:6 in the LXX

> *"Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and the water that is above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord: for he spoke, and they were made; he commanded and they were created. He has established them for ever, even for ever and ever: he has made an ordinance, and it shall not pass away."*
> *(Psalms 148:0–7 LXX-Brenton Translation)*

Note the usage here. The psalmist refers to the decree (or "ordinance") by which God created heaven and earth. He spoke and they came into existence. This decree that they would exist has established them forever. This ordinance "shall not pass away." The word used here is the same as that in our text. What is being asserted is that God's ordinance will always be effective. That is, his command that the heaven and earth be created and exist (which is why we now have the physical law that matter cannot be created or destroyed) has not failed. Note that this utterance itself, which occurred at the beginning of creation, was not written down until Moses' recounting of the primeval period in Genesis 1-11, probably several thousand years after the fact. Thus, for thousands of years the decree wasn't "preserved" in a manuscript anywhere. Humanity was without it. But the psalmist wasn't saying that the decree would always be preserved in a particular (or in any) manuscript – he was saying that it would surely be fulfilled, and will never fail of being fulfilled. That is the clear use of the word. The KJV translation of the Hebrew text makes the same point with the language that "he hath made a decree which shall not pass." The word clearly refers not to preservation, but to fulfillment.

Esther 10:3b in the LXX

> *"And Mardochaeus said, These things have been done of God. For I remember the dream which I had concerning these matters: for not one particular of them has failed."*
> *(Esther 10:3b LXX – Brenton Translation)*

In this section of the apocryphal addition to Esther, note that the dream referred to here no longer existed in the manuscript record, even for the author of the apocryphal material. His usage of the word doesn't mean that the material will be preserved in written form. In fact it probably never was put into written form. His point is rather that what was promised has come to pass. "Not one particular of them has failed." The word clearly speaks not to preservation, but to fulfillment.

I Clement 27:5 in the Apostolic Fathers

> *"By His majestic word he established the universe, and by a word he can destroy it. Who will say to him, 'What have you done? Or who will resist the might of his strength?' He will do all things when he wills and as he wills, and none of those things decreed by him will fail."*
> *(I Clement 27:4-5)[40]*

Clement, traditionally an acquaintance of Paul an Peter, in his letter to the Corinthians in the late 90s, makes a point similar to the psalmist above, noting the (technically not always preserved, but always fulfilled) word by which God created the universe in order to give praise to the strength of God's word. When God decrees to do something, He will do it. It will come to pass, and will not fail. Again, the word clearly refers not to preservation, but to fulfillment.

Thus, according to the standard lexicon, which traces the parallel uses of the verb with this sense, and in keeping with basic lexical methodology, the referent of the word is clearly not preservation but fulfillment and continued relevance. It is clearly not a reference to whether textual variation can occur in manuscript transmission, but to whether or not the commands of the law still have relevance for Jesus' followers.

Implications for a Doctrine of Preservation

There is much legitimate disagreement among scholars about the precise way in which Jesus fulfills the Law of Moses. There is serious discussion of his relation to the OT, which is something of a watershed issue in Biblical theology.[41] There is discussion of how exactly the disciples' righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. These are legitimate concerns raised by the text. However, there is no discussion whatsoever about the teaching of the text concerning preservation. One would be hard pressed to find a single serious modern commentator in any bibliography that even entertains that meaning as a possible interpretation of the text. It's not that they discuss a "preservation" interpretation and then reject it. Rather, such an idea is simply not even on the table for discussion.

It is absolutely foreign to Jesus' context in preaching the sermon, and to Matthew's in presenting it, to suggest that he is teaching that, "The exact words of the text will be preserved in a particular manuscript or group of manuscripts." Jesus is absolutely presenting no theory of the history of textual transmission here. There is no historically plausible context in which this interpretation would make sense. No one was saying anything in his day about how manuscript corruption destroyed the authority of the text. In fact, no one in his day would have considered the minor variants that we find today in the manuscript tradition to effect the authority of the text in any way. They lived in a primarily oral culture where texts were passed down in an oral fashion, often in language that was different in its specific particulars, yet still retaining the same essential message. The variation in the synoptic tradition alone would make this clear to any objective observer, let alone a study of historiographical transmission in the ANE, or any serious study of the varied textual traditions (Hebrew, LXX, Aramaic, etc.) from which the Evangelists and New Testament authors authoritatively quote.[42] This is not to say that scribes played "fast and loose" with the texts that they transcribed – they most certainly did not. It is to say that we must not project onto Matthew's passage rather modern concerns of exact verbal conformity as prerequisites to authority. In order to reconstruct a historical background to this text that would make sense of a preservation interpretation, someone would have to plausibly show that these Cartesian attitudes to the authority of a text were somehow anachronistically present in Jesus' day.

Matthew 5:17-20 is simply not a statement about the preservation of the canon. In the clear context of the passage, Jesus is saying rather that the entire Old Testament was still *applicable* in some way. Its prophecies would be fulfilled, and its commandments (understood in light of his coming, and in term of a heart-focused intent) must still be obeyed. D. A. Carson, in what many today consider the best English treatment on the Gospel of Matthew, sums up the meaning of the text by stating "Verse 18d simply means the entire divine purpose prophesied in Scripture must take place; not one jot or tittle will fail of its fulfillment."[43] At issue is not whether Scripture would be *preserved*, but whether it would be *fulfilled*, and whether it was still applicable in some sense. There is nothing inherent in this idea of fulfillment that would entail verbal preservation.

This is made even clearer by the context of verse 19. If Jesus was teaching about preservation, the logic of verse 19 would be something like, "Therefore, do not allow anyone to cast doubt on whether or not Scripture has been preserved, because God has promised to preserve it." Yet the conclusion that Jesus draws from his statement in verse 18 is instead that each command of the OT is still *applicable* in some way and needing obedience. "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

To take the text as referring to preservation in any way at all absolutely misses the point of Jesus' use of hyperbole. It misses Matthew's intention in the Gospel to show Jesus' relation to the Old Testament. It misses the point of this whole section of the Sermon to show how Jesus fulfills the Law. It especially ignores the clear immediate context of vs. 17 and 19, which make it plain that both Jesus and Matthew are addressing whether or not particular commandments are binding upon Jesus' followers, and exactly how that relationship works out. Quite frankly, such an interpretation misses the text altogether.

There is nothing said or assumed about preservation of the canon here. There is nothing in this text which interpreted in its context has anything to do with a history of textual transmission, a theory of textual criticism, or what Greek and Hebrew texts should be seen as more pure than others. Anyone who uses this text to address those issues has imported their own ideas into the text, and may be revealing by their mishandling of the text that they do not actually hold the high view of Scripture which they claim. This is not exegesis, but eisegesis.

Further, a preservation interpretation of the text is quite simply out of line with the history of biblical interpreters, both modern and ancient. While a commitment to Sola Scriptura should give us the courage to stand against the historical tradition of past interpreters when our conscience demands it, a respect for the working of the Holy Spirit in them should give us great pause before we do so. The same Holy Spirit who is in us leading us to truth was likewise in every Christian previous to our own generation, and this should beget a humility in how we approach the text. We should be especially wary when our interpretations run directly contrary to the earliest generations which were so much closer in history to the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. We must be courageous enough to disagree with others throughout history when the text absolutely demands it, but humble enough in our own interpretation to eschew novel and unique interpretations never found before in the history of interpretation. To confirm that no interpreters of the ancient fathers of the church even entertained a preservation interpretation, one need only consult the brief comments on the passage found in Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, or Chrysostom to see that they all assume a "fulfillment" interpretation of the text. Their statements, as well as many others from later church history, combine into one harmonious voice rising against any new and novel "preservation" understanding of this text.

Note finally that, even if the statement in vs. 18 was not hyperbolic, that would still not make it a reference to preservation. A lexical study of the phrase "shall in no wise pass" would still not allow for a preservation interpretation. Even if that lexical study was found to be in error, the historical context would still prevent a preservation interpretation. Even if a plausible historical context could somehow be found that would make sense of a preservation interpretation, the historical context that is clearly revealed in verses 17 and 19 would still trump that historical reconstruction. The context of Jesus' and of Matthew's readers would still not allow a preservation interpretation. But what if all that could be ignored? What if we could somehow throw out all the rules of exegesis and somehow make the text a statement about preservation? What would be the result in relation to the text / translation issue?

Even if an exegesis of the text was abandoned, there is still nothing in the text that would say how this preservation would be carried out. If we were we to ignore all of the exegetical work done so far, and simply assume that the text was a reference to some kind of verbal preservation, promising that the very details of that text will be miraculously guarded, there is still nothing that would even remotely suggest that this preservation must occur in one particular manuscript or one particular family of manuscripts. Much less would anything suggest that one printed Greek text was "the pure" word of God, while another printed Greek text, was not. Even less so that one particular translation of a text was the preserved word of God, while others are not (!). Even if the text were teaching a doctrine of preservation, these conclusions would still not follow. They are major leaps in logic that simply cannot be sustained. The most natural interpretation of such a teaching in light of the manuscript evidence, even if it were present in the text (which is demonstrably not the case), would still only be that God has preserved his word in the entirety of the manuscript tradition, which is what every single evangelical scholar (and really, every scholar except the proponents of absolute skepticism) claims has in fact happened. While I can still affirm that God's Word has been preserved in the entirety of the manuscript tradition, good exegesis reveals that this text is simply irrelevant to the issue, and there is absolutely nothing in this text that would suggest any "doctrine of preservation." Certainly not any doctrine of preservation any more rigid than that God has preserved His Word in the entirety of the manuscript tradition.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to briefly examine the text of Matthew 5:17-20 in order to assess what exegetical foundation there is for an interpretation of the text that would relate to the preservation of the canon. What has been discovered is that the historical context of the Sermon on the Mount, the historical context of Matthew's gospel, and the immediate literary context of the passage at hand all make it certain that this text is about *fulfillment* not *preservation*. An examination of the lexical and syntactical features of the pertinent phrase "One jot or one tittle" has likewise shown that it is most likely that the phrase was intended hyperbolically, and it is on any account a reference to fulfillment, not preservation. Further, a brief lexical and syntactical study of the phrase "shall in no wise pass" has ruled out any reference to preservation in the language of the text, and has shown instead that it is a clear reference to fulfillment, not preservation. Thus, it has been concluded that the text makes no contribution whatsoever to a doctrine of "preservation" and it is, I think, less than an honest use of the text to continue to use the passage in support of such a doctrine, as well as being disrespectful to the history of interpretation behind the text. It is even more dishonest to use the passage to endorse any particular Greek or Hebrew text, (or by extension any particular English translation) to the exclusion of any other. Those who genuinely love the Bible must refuse to incorporate a passage as a major pillar in a divisive doctrine unless serious exegetical work can be done that could show such an interpretation to be plausible. Those who refuse to discontinue the use of this passage in such a manner may in fact reveal that they do not genuinely love the Bible in the way that they claim. Perhaps the one who says, "I love the Bible too much to pretend it says something it doesn't" has in fact manifested a higher view of Scripture than one who indiscriminately uses an unexamined proof text.

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EndNotes

[1] Blomberg, NAC, pg. 44.
[2] Carson and Moo, pg. 150.
[3] Carson, EBC, pg. 50.
[4] Carson and Moo, pg. 136.
[5] Adapted from the presentation by Carson and Moo, pg. 136-139.
[6] Carson and Moo, pg. 136.
[7] Turner, BECNT pg. 2.
[8] See turner BECNT pg. 14 for discussion.
[9] Turner BECNT pg. 144.
[10] Turner, pg. 149.
[11] See France NICNT, pg. 178.
[12] For a detailed inductive case for Marcan priority that has yet to be refuted by those in the modern “Mathean priority” movement, see Allen, ICC, pg. xii-lxii. His treatment of Mathean redaction is excellent.
[13] See Blomberg, “Jesus and the Gospels” pg. 87-110.
[14] See Aland, Kurt, ed. “Synopsis of the Four Gospels” pg. 52 for a parallel presentation of the Greek and English texts of Matthew and Luke without a “Q” reconstruction. This synopsis (and its more academic Greek-only version) has been the standard in the academic field of synoptic study since its publication decades ago.
[15] I have adapted this table from the reconstructive work of Robinson and Klopenborg.
[16] That none of them is of great significance is evident from the fact that Darrell Bock, in his commentary on the gospels synopsis, where he discusses how the evangelists use and adapt their source material and how this relates to the exegesis of the passages, does not discuss any adaptions. See Bock, JAS, Pg.131-133, and 285-286.
[17] Robinson, et. al. "Q" Pg. 468-469.
[18] For discussion of each of the redactional changes, see Guelich, Pg. 134-174.
[19] Note the discussion of the phrase in France NICNT, pg. 184-185.
[20] See Turner's discussion of the "fulfillment" theme in BECNT pg. 17-25.
[21] BDAG, pg. 521-522.
[22] Bock, pg. 131.
[23] BDF, pg. 250. Part 474 note 1.
[24] Hagner, WBC pg. 106
[25] BDAG, pg. 487.
[26] BDAG, pg. 540.
[27] Hagner, WBC pg. 106.
[28] Albright, pg. 58
[29] Bock, JAS pg. 132.
[30] Keener, Pg. 178.
[31] Wallace, ExSyn, Pg. 468-469. Robertson notes the same point. Pg 751.
[32] Green, BST, pg. 92.
[33] Robertson, pg. 558-560.
[34] Robertson notes this repetition of a varying preposition and its strength on pg. 561.
[35] Thayer, paragraph 7388.
[36] Balz-Schneider, EDNT, Vol. 3.
[37] Mounce, Willam D. G-K# G4216
[38] See Silva, Moises, "Lexical Semantics," and Carson, D. A. "Exegetical Fallacies."
[39] BDAG, Pg. 776.
[40] Holmes, Michael, (translator) "The Apostolic Fathers," 3rd ed. pg. 81.
[41] This essay is in some ways seriously deficient for not dealing at great length with this issue. It is the crucial exegetical and theological issue of the passage. However, the ongoing debate about Jesus and His relation to the law is peripheral to our intent in this essay.
[42] These issues will be dealt with in detail in later essays.
[43] Carson, EBC pg. 146

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