

## How We Got the Bible

by Neil R. Lightfoot

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), 224pp, hardback, \$19.99

Dr. Lightfoot (Ph.D., Duke University) serves as Frank Pack Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University. In his preface to this, the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, he states (p. 9):

*This study seeks to be a factual and honest account of how the Bible has been preserved and handed down to our generation. The subject is vast and at times complex. It has been my constant aim, therefore, to simplify the material and to state it, so far as possible, in a nontechnical manner. On the other hand, I have tried to get down to the heart of the question, for too many studies of this kind have been content with the mere citing of superficial facts about the Bible. These facts are important and interesting, of course, but they do not tell us how we got the Bible.*

The author has delivered on his stated aim, balancing interesting details concerning the origin and preservation of the biblical text with simplicity of presentation. Significant emphasis is placed upon describing the various important manuscripts (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) which are behind the biblical text we have today. The text is never dry and includes fascinating descriptions of significant archaeological and manuscript finds which make the journey through the text read somewhat like a detective novel at times.

The text is especially well-suited as an introduction to all matters surrounding the discovery and preservation of the biblical text—covering topics such as early alphabets, writing materials, writing techniques (of early scribes and the Massorettes), as well as substantial descriptions of the most important manuscripts which are given priority in textual translation in our day.

A helpful section on textual variations explains the types of textual differences found among manuscripts and provides guidance in assessing their significance in an understanding of the reliability of what we have today as our Bible. This includes an assessment of the Hebrew (Massoretic) text and the Septuagint in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

A helpful aspect of this work is the author's greater emphasis--relative to other popular treatments of the topic--on understanding the earliest manuscripts, with relatively less text devoted to describing the English language translations which spring from them.

Slight detractions, from this reviewer's point of view, are the author's obvious preference for the few Alexandrian manuscripts and a perhaps overly-simplistic representation of textual criticism as an exact science rather than an art guided by fallible heuristics. No consideration is given to the possibility that the few oldest manuscripts, which appear to have been restricted in circulation, may not in fact represent the most reliable (best) text. Also, some comments by the author seem to argue against verbal inspiration (p. 91). But these are relatively minor criticisms among an overall excellent treatment of the subject matter by an author who is obviously himself a devoted man of faith.

We recommend this text to anyone who is interested in the subject of the discovery and analysis of manuscript evidence supporting the reliability of the Word of God.