

THE NEW TESTAMENT: WHICH TEXT!

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

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If you have made any extensive use of the variety of Bible translations available today, you may have noticed that the King James Version and the New King James Version include words, phrases, verses, and even whole paragraphs of text that are missing from other modern translations. You may have also noticed that many modern translations have marginal comments regarding ancient manuscript evidence for certain inclusions or deletions that sound, well, rather snippy. What's going on?

You probably know that whatever English Bible you use is a translation from the original languages in which the Bible was written. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (except for a few Aramaic chapters), and the New Testament was written in Greek. You probably also know that until the invention of movable type and the printing press in the 1400's, publishing and preserving documents and books meant hand copying; a very difficult and expensive endeavor. So, from the days of the Biblical authors on until just prior to the Reformation, the Bible was published and preserved by being hand copied by scribes.

There are thousands of these hand copied manuscripts of the Bible in existence. There are also ancient translations of the Bible into Aramaic, Latin, Egyptian, etc., preserved in manuscript form, as well as hand copied church lectionaries (appointed readings for each day and each holiday of the church year), and quotations of Scripture in the writings of the ancient Church Fathers such as Augustine, Athanasius, Jerome, etc. So the evidence for the text of the Bible is very extensive and compelling. In the secular realm the text of an ancient book is accepted with confidence on far less than ten percent of the textual evidence that exists for the Bible.

Now, just about the time that Dr. Martin Luther was beginning to study and teach the Biblical truths that led to the Reformation, a humanist scholar by the name of Erasmus published the first printed and mass produced edition of the Greek New Testament. His printed text was based on the relatively small number of late manuscript witnesses that were available to him at the time. What has been discovered since his day dwarfs what he had available to him. Yet, we should not for this reason undervalue the manuscripts he worked with, or the text of his Greek New Testament. The manuscripts he used were late, but they were faithful exemplars of the vast majority of New Testament manuscripts used throughout the church since the apostolic era. Therefore Erasmus placed in the hands of the Reformers a printed Greek New Testament with genuine catholicity, which presented what had been preserved as sacred text in the church throughout its history.

It is important to realize, lest anyone deceive you in this regard, that the vast majority of ancient witnesses to the text of the New Testament favors this Ecclesiastical Text, Traditional Text, Majority Text, Received Text, or whatever else you want to call it. With Erasmus' Greek New Testament, and with other editions of that basic text by editors who followed Erasmus, scholars had at their disposal a printed edition of the consensus of ancient witnesses to the preserved, catholic, sacred text of the New Testament. In time, these printed editions became known as the *Textus Receptus*, or, Received Text. When Luther and the Reformers urged us "Back to the Sources", it was to these extant texts, not to some hypothetically reconstructed original autograph. It was the texts in hand that the Reformers and confessors called inspired and infallible. Unlike the Anabaptists, who believed that we must reject everything in the western church and go back to the first century (primitive restorationism), Luther and the Reformers corrected only the errors that had crept into the church. Luther was a "catholic preservationist". Hence, all of the Bible translations produced during the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, were translations of the received Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and the received Greek text of the New Testament, not some hypothetical reconstruction of lost original autographs.

So, Luther's 1545 edition, the Authorized (King James) Version (AV or KJV), and all of the updates of the Authorized Version such as the New King James Version, are based on the Ecclesiastical Text of the New Testament. Other modern translations of the Bible such as the New International Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, and others, are based on a somewhat different edition of the Greek New Testament, based on a minority of witnesses. This text is called by some the critical text. The most common published edition of this critical text is the 27th edition of the Nestle Aland

Greek New Testament.

In the 1700's and 1800's, as more and more ancient manuscripts and sources became available, it was discovered that some few of these witnesses differed substantially from the Ecclesiastical Text in numerous places. These variant readings were seized upon by rationalistic, sceptical scholars in order to attack the church's doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. Many conservative scholars responded to this threat by maintaining that the Ecclesiastical Text was the sacred text that God had preserved through the church throughout the centuries, and regarded the variant readings in the minority texts as either intentional or inadvertent corruptions. They were not overly intimidated by the variant readings.

However, some conservative scholars bought into the rationalistic argument that the Ecclesiastical Text was an ecclesiastical corruption of the text of the NT in the interests of orthodoxy. Conservatives began saying that the church had corrupted the NT by smoothing it out and taking out the rough edges. They began to assert that the inspiration and infallibility of the NT resided only with the original autographs, and that it was the task of conservative textual critics to use the "earliest and best" manuscripts and witnesses in order to reconstruct, as closely as possible, the text of the autographs. Thus conservatives turned against the Ecclesiastical Text and minimized the doctrine of divine preservation which had always gone hand in hand with the doctrine of inspiration. They felt safe in locating inspiration and infallibility in the (as far as we know non-existent) autographs, and they confidently began the quest for the original text.

It didn't seem to bother them that behind their quest lay the idea that for 1900 years labored with a "weak" text while the "purer" manuscripts lay mouldering in forgotten corners, only to be brought to light in an era noted more for its apostasy than for its faithfulness. Is it an accident that the Reformation had the Ecclesiastical Text as its sacred text?

The nineteenth century culmination of the new approach to the text of the New Testament came with the publication of the English Revised Version of 1881. This granddaddy of all modern Bible translations reflects the text critical outlook of two famous English scholars, Messrs. Westcott and Hort. They and the translation committee that worked with them were charged by the Anglican Church to revise the Authorized version as gently and sparingly as possible, making only patently necessary changes. So what did they do? Well, first they edited an altogether new edition of the Greek New Testament which reflected their preference for a small minority of ancient manuscripts that differ sometimes sharply from the Byzantine/Majority text. Then they translated their new text into English rather than following the text used by the Authorized Version translators. They made unnecessary changes to the wording of the AV, even when this made their version more obtuse and stilted, and unleashed it on the world.

How did the world react? First, the scholars. By and large they liked Westcott and Hort's new Greek Text, but were mixed about the quality of the English translation. The nineteenth century was a time when people snapped hungrily at any novel new idea. And just as they had done with Darwin and evolution, so they did now with an amazing fascination for discarded old manuscripts dug out of monastery wastebaskets and cellars. In the scholarly world Westcott and Hort's Greek New Testament, and the multitudinous revised editions of it throughout the 20th century, have become the almost universally recognized New Textus Receptus.

But among ordinary folk things were different. This newfangled revision was stiff and stilted, retaining little of the beauty of the AV. And many words, phrases, verses and even parts of chapters were missing or altered. Where disputed passages were retained, there were crabby little comments in the margins to aggravate the reader's doubt. By and large, the laity would have none of it and continued to use the AV as if the Revised Version didn't exist, and for the most part, forced the clergy to do likewise. The RV was dead at the starting gate.

It wasn't until the Bible translation mania of the post World War II era that the AV slowly began to make room for various modern versions. The Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, An American Translation, etc. all had their small niches in the Bible reading world. But it wasn't until the publication of the long awaited New International Version that the AV was given a run for its money. Not that the NIV was so good; it wasn't. It was dull and two-dimensional, wordy and unmemorable. But it was marketed like no other Bible in history. It became the Big Mac of the Bible publishing world. The Rupert Murdoch owned Zondervan Publishing Co., which is the main publisher of NIV Bibles, claims that sales of their baby have outstripped the old AV. This is probably hype, but despite continued strong sales of the old AV, it looks as though we are entering a post-King James Version era.

With the exception of the recent New King James Version, nearly all modern translations of the Bible are in the Westcott and Hort tradition of New Testament textual criticism.

But not everyone has jumped on the bandwagon. Back in the nineteenth century a small number of scholars contended vigorously for the Traditional Text; among them, John William Burgon and F. H. A. Scrivner, two massively gifted textual critics. Now, while their work has been largely ignored by the majority, there has always been a small but ardent group of scholars who have kept the home fires burning for the Traditional Text of the New Testament. Outstanding modern exponents of this outlook are Dr. Edward F. Hills (now deceased) and Dr. Theodore Letis (very much alive). Hills' book, [The King James Version Defended: A Christian View of the New Testament Manuscripts](#), and Letis' book, [The Ecclesiastical Text](#) are notable for their defense of the Traditional Text from an ecclesiological and theological perspective.

The work of Hills and Letis must be contrasted with other groups of scholars who support the Traditional Text for different reasons. One group has become known as the "King James Only" group. They believe that the AV is the perfect, preserved Word of God for the English speaking world. For them, the AV is equal in authority to the original Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments. The "King James Only" group generally consists of a small group of fundamentalist Baptists who have little positive impact on the world of scholarship with the exception that some among them have managed to keep the works of Burgon and Scrivner in print, despite the fact that Burgon and Scrivner would never subscribe to their views.

A second group of scholars that must be distinguished from the work of Hills and Letis is the Majority Text school. This school, again, mostly fundamentalist Baptist, have produced two recent notable editions of the Greek New Testament. Maurice Robinson and William Pierpont have edited [The New Testament in the Original Greek According to the Byzantine/Majority Textform](#) (1991). This is the Byzantine Greek Text found in many Bible Software programs such as BibleWorks, Logos, and the Online Bible. Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad have edited [The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text](#) (1985). It is important to note that the Majority Text school is in no way made up of "King James Only" advocates. The fact is that the KJ-Only people consider the Majority Text people to be in league with the devil! Be that as it may, what the Majority Text school is up to is attempting to purge the Traditional Text of its slight "corruptions" in the interest of making it conform more closely to the hypothetical original autographs. They, like the critical school of textual criticism, are primitive restorationists, with the exception that they hold that the Byzantine manuscripts and witnesses better reflect the originals than do the Alexandrian texts. But like the critical school, they are attempting to get behind the church's preserved texts to the posited originals. Both groups assume that the church, to some degree, corrupted the originals.

Hills and Letis, like Burgon, are not primitive restorationists. They are, to use a term borrowed from Letis, "catholic preservationists". This means that they believe that God, who inspired the infallible Scriptures, has, through His church, preserved what he gave for the church's use and benefit. The inspired, infallible sacred text is not some minority text hidden in a corner for 1900 years and only lately rediscovered. Rather, the inspired, infallible sacred text is the text everywhere preserved and used in the church throughout its history. The best text of the New Testament reflects the consensus of this catholicity of witnesses. Therefore the text of Erasmus and his successors, the text that formed the basis of all Reformation era Protestant Bible translations, which reflects this preserved catholic consensus; the text which Letis calls The Ecclesiastical Text, but which is also known as the Byzantine Text, the Majority Text, or the Textus Receptus, is rightly to be regarded and received as the sacred text of the churches of the Reformation.

As I said above, when Luther and the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy urged, "Back to the sources!" it was to the extant Hebrew and Greek texts in hand to which they were pointing, and not to some reprinted original autographs. When they spoke of the Scriptures as inspired and infallible, it was the texts in hand and in use to which they were referring. What God gave, He has preserved, not in a dark corner, but in the use of the church catholic.

Lutherans, both pastors and laity, should carefully read the section on "Holy Scripture" in Francis Pieper's, [Christian Dogmatics](#), Vol. 1, pp. 193-370. At a time when primitive restoration was being urged by such notables as B. B. Warfield, Francis Pieper wouldn't bite. While he is neither threatened nor opposed to the use of modern critical editions of the New Testament, his comments on textual matters, and on divine inspiration, show that he was solidly in line with the catholic preservationism of our Lutheran

forebears. This shows itself in his defense of the Traditional Text. His words, especially in our day, are judicious and wise.

Now in all that I've said above, it is not my intention to impugn the scriptural commitment of those who prefer the modern critical texts and the translations based on them, but to urge a reconsideration of a view that has a long and distinguished place in the churches of the Reformation. Nor am I urging the exclusive use of the AV. It would be nice to see some modern translations of the Bible based on the Ecclesiastical Text. The New King James Version is a good start. Indeed, the movement in this direction is encouraging. The number of Lutheran pastors who are rediscovering the Traditional Text is growing every day. In this day, when so many are gaining a new appreciation of catholicity on the one hand, and the failure of modernism on the other, it is a wonder that more scholars aren't adopting catholic preservationism. Well, all in good time.

Finally, any discussion of these issues runs the risk of creating the impression that the differences between the various editions of the Greek New Testament are more numerous than they are. Therefore, we should keep in mind that the textual differences between any given edition of the Ecclesiastical Text amounts to no more than about two percent. And the textual differences between the Ecclesiastical Text and the modern critical texts amounts to no more than about fifteen percent. Therefore, over 85% of the text in all manuscripts and witnesses is identical. It should be obvious then, that we are not talking about two entirely different kinds of New Testament. The layman should keep this in mind while studying these matters. This amazing textual agreement, even between the divergent Ecclesiastical and critical texts, makes the New Testament by far the best attested ancient text ever.

But we must not be sanguine. While we do not want to be hysterical or to get caught up in wild conspiracy theories after the manner of our fundamentalist counterparts, neither do we want to minimize the fact that the modern critical texts, at certain strategic places in the text make omissions, or alterations that are far from innocuous. For approximately twenty five years the Revised Standard Version was published with the last half of Mark 16 relegated to a footnote in accordance with the then current edition of the Nestle Greek Text. Other translations, less bold, included the text but added marginal comments which cast doubt on it. This is not harmless. Neither should it be a matter of indifference when Paul's words concerning Christ: "God was manifest in the flesh..." are changed to the more ambiguous: "He was manifest in the flesh" on the basis of a few paltry textual witnesses against the overwhelming majority (1 Tim. 3:16). Nor should we merely shrug our shoulders when the overwhelmingly well attested and orthodox rendering: "...the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father..." is replaced with the poorly attested and arguably Gnostic: "...the only begotten God, which is in the bosom of the Father..." (John 1:18). But enough.

We can be thankful that even in the most critically reduced New Testament text the doctrines of the Law and Gospel are still set forth clearly and accurately for the benefit of the church. But this does not mitigate the fact that in the 19th century the discipline of textual criticism went in the wrong direction; a direction that has had serious consequences with regard to faith in the authority of Scripture, even down to our day. Nor does it absolve us of the responsibility to study these matters carefully and return the discipline of textual criticism to the service of the church and its divinely inspired, infallible, and preserved sacred text.

The following is a list of Bible versions currently in print that are based on the Ecclesiastical Text:

- [The Authorized \(or King James\) Version](#) (Cambridge University Press, etc.)
- [The New King James Version](#) (Thomas Nelson Publishers)
- [The 21st Century King James Version](#) (Deuel Publishing)
- [The Third Millennium Bible](#) (Deuel Publishing)
- [The Modern King James Version](#) (Sovereign Grace Publishers)

If you are interested in doing further reading on this subject, I recommend the following books:

- [The King James Version Defended](#), Edward F. Hills
- [The Ecclesiastical Text](#), Theodore Letis

- The Traditional Text, John William Burgon
- The Last Twelve Verse of Mark, John William Burgon
- The Revision Revised, John William Burgon