

The Bible text and translation debate

One Layman's View

Contents

[The Original Manuscripts of the New Testament](#)

[The Hand Copies](#)

[The Printed Copies](#)

[The *Textus Receptus*](#)

[The Text Types](#)

[The Majority Text](#)

[The Critical Texts](#)

[Higher Criticism](#)

[The Westcott and Hort Text](#)

[Translating the Texts](#)

[Translation Methods](#)

[The King James Version](#)

[The Conservative Modern Translations](#)

[The Distorted Modern Translations](#)

[Biblical Arguments Related to Preservation](#)

[Some Examples of Minor Differences](#)

[Some Examples of More Significant Differences](#)

[Technical Details About Manuscripts](#)

[What About the Old Testament?](#)

The Original Manuscripts of the New Testament

The original manuscripts (the "autographs") of each New Testament book were divinely inspired, down to each individual word.

The autographs were written in Greek.

The autographs were written not in formal, polished, classical Greek, but in the everyday Greek spoken by the common people of the day.

God promised to preserve his word. (Ps 119:89, Is 40:6-8, Mt. 5:18, Luke 16:17, 1 Peter 1:23-25).

God did not chose to preserve his word by preserving the original manuscripts for us to read. As far as we know, every one of them is lost.

The Bible itself suggests a reason why the originals are not preserved. Judges 8:27 is an example of how artifacts become a snare.

The Hand Copies

Numerous copies were made by hand of each of the autographs.

The copying process was not perfect. Letters, words, phrases, and sometimes even paragraphs were

accidentally altered.

Later copyists encountered real or perceived copying errors and attempted to correct them, introducing still more discrepancies.

God could have preserved His Word by supernaturally causing all copies of the Bible to be perfect copies of the original autographs. He did not choose to do so - the copies we have today are clearly not perfect copies.

About 5,000 copies of parts or all of the Greek New Testament still exist today. Only a few of the 5,000 contain the complete New Testament.

It is a remarkable example of God's preservation that so many copies of the New Testament have lasted for so many centuries. Even though the copies are not perfect, the abundance of manuscripts is more of a blessing than a problem.

All existing copies differ from one another in occasional letters, words, and phrases.

The existing copies show remarkable agreement on the text of the New Testament. No overall doctrinal differences exist among any of them.

Of the few complete New Testaments in existence, all of them contain obvious copying errors. Not one of them can be claimed to be a perfect copy of the original.

God could have preserved his word by preserving one perfect manuscript by which we could compare all the others. He apparently chose not to do so. There is no single manuscript which is arguably a perfect copy.

Occasionally in history, someone made a copy of the Greek text which was deliberately altered for personal or theological reasons. Such heretical copies are easily detected by comparison with the thousands of other existing copies.

There is great debate among Bible scholars about which of the various differences scattered through the 5000 manuscripts represent the exact words in the original.

All of these ancient Bible manuscripts are locked away in museums, are difficult to read, and otherwise are generally inaccessible to modern readers, even to people who know Greek.

The Printed Copies

Until the invention of the printing press in the 1400's, nothing was available except the hand-copied manuscripts.

Anyone desiring to print a copy of the Greek New Testament must choose one or more of those ancient manuscripts to copy the verses from.

The process of comparing different manuscripts to determine which ones to copy verses from is known by the term "textual criticism."

The term is misleading because the word "criticism" has two meanings. Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary defines it as 1) the act of criticizing, usually unfavorably, or 2) the art of evaluating or analyzing works of art or literature. By textual criticism we mean evaluating the various copies of the Bible, not speaking unfavorably of them.

It is impossible to copy or reprint the Greek New Testament without engaging in textual criticism of some

form. There ought not be any debate over the fact of textual criticism - everybody has to somehow choose one manuscript (or printing) or another, and reject the others.

There is great debate over what guidelines to use in evaluating manuscripts (the "rules" of textual criticism).

Modern copies of the Greek New Testament, like ancient copies, are not error free. Copying (or printing) errors are introduced every time a new Greek Bible is produced.

The Textus Receptus

The first printing of the Greek New Testament was done by Erasmus in 1516.

Erasmus was a loyal Catholic in his theology.

Erasmus' text is not a copy of any single ancient manuscript. He used a process of textual criticism to combine about half a dozen manuscripts, none of which contained the entire New Testament.

The manuscripts Erasmus chose were simply those found in the library in Basel, Switzerland. He did not embark on a worldwide search for manuscripts. Nor was there a recognized manuscript or set of manuscripts which were accepted as correct in his day.

Only one of Erasmus's manuscripts contained the book of Revelation, and it was missing the last page containing the last six verses. To complete the missing six verses, Erasmus made up a Greek text which matched as closely as possible the meaning of the verses in the Latin Vulgate.

In several places Erasmus found phrases in the Latin Bible which he could not find in any Greek manuscript. He filled in these phrases by making up a Greek equivalent. (Acts 9:6)

Erasmus text went through several editions in which the typographical errors were gradually corrected.

Erasmus text and the many subsequent copies based on it came to be known as the "Received Text" (*Textus Receptus*).

Some people believe that the received text is a divine preservation of the exact words from the original.

If the received text matches the original exactly, it involved a large miracle on God's part to overrule the haphazard way in which it was produced.

If the received text matches the original exactly, it does not explain preservation prior to 1516, since there was no received text before that time.

The Text Types

Although the 5,000 or so manuscripts all differ in some minor details, there are some recognizable groups of manuscripts that are similar. These groups of similar manuscripts are called "text-types."

The Byzantine text type is by far the largest, representing thousands of manuscripts. These manuscripts were preserved by the Byzantine Empire which continued to use the Greek language when the Western world abandoned it.

The Alexandrian text type is the second important text type. Most of these manuscripts came from Egypt. This group is not nearly as large as the Byzantine text-type (about 100 manuscripts). However, the manuscripts are older.

There are two other minor text types (Caesarean, Western) and numerous individual manuscripts which do not clearly fit in any text type.

Text-types are arbitrary groupings of manuscripts for the convenience of scholars. Many manuscripts show a mixture of readings from more than one text type. Every individual manuscript is in fact a unique hand copy with its own unique copying errors.

Arguments based on text-types are generally not helpful to laymen. Each manuscript has its own unique characteristics and deserves individual attention.

The Majority Text

Because it is the largest of the text-types, the Byzantine text-type is sometimes mistakenly called the "majority text."

The majority text is not a single manuscript. Rather it is a result of combining the most common or "best" words from all of the manuscripts in the majority text-type.

The different manuscripts in the Byzantine text-type are not identical. A process of textual criticism is necessary to resolve differences between manuscripts to form a majority text.

The main manuscripts available to Erasmus were from the Byzantine text-type. Thus his Greek text (the "received text") is similar (but not identical) to a majority text.

Erasmus included only a few manuscripts in his study. When all the manuscripts from the whole text-type are studied together, there are numerous minor places where the Received Text does not seem to represent what the majority of manuscripts actually suggest is the best reading. [example: I John 5:7 is not in the majority of manuscripts but Erasmus included it]

Some people believe that the majority text exactly matches the words of the original, and that this is how God has preserved his word.

The Critical Texts

Some people believe that rather than following any one text-type, the discrepancies ought to be resolved on a verse-by-verse basis.

During the 1800s and 1900s many manuscripts were discovered that were unknown in Erasmus' day.

These manuscripts were newly discovered but not new. Some of them were older than the oldest manuscripts Erasmus had available.

Some people believe that all of the available manuscripts ought to be considered in determining what the original words of scripture were.

In this view, God preserved his word by preserving all of the 5,000 plus manuscripts, not just one particular text-type.

Several scholars have produced editions of the Greek New Testament following this principle. Such editions match the majority text for most of the New Testament, but do contain some places where words, phrases, or verses are copied from the other text-types including the newly discovered older manuscripts.

Such editions are called "critical" or "eclectic" or "examined" texts.

Critical texts generally contain footnotes describing the alternative wordings found in the various manuscripts, so that the reader can decide for himself which is better.

Higher Criticism

Higher criticism refers to the study of where the words in the manuscripts came from (who wrote them, when, where, and why).

Many higher critics are unbelievers who do not believe the Bible is inspired. They spend their time constructing human explanations which are often contradictory to the claims of the Bible.

It is possible for a believer to construct arguments supporting the Bible's claims about when and by whom it was written. Such arguments could be called higher criticism, and would be legitimate.

Higher criticism is not to be confused with textual criticism, which any Greek scholar or translator must engage in.

The Westcott and Hort Text

The most famous critical text is that produced by Westcott and Hort in 1882.

Westcott and Hort were British scholars and members of the Anglican church.

Westcott and Hort did not translate anything - they were merely printing an edition of the Greek New Testament from ancient manuscripts.

Unlike Erasmus, Westcott and Hort didn't write anything in their text. Every word of their Greek text came from some ancient manuscript.

Westcott and Hort did not follow any particular text-type but decided on a verse-by-verse basis which variation they thought was most likely the original. They wrote a whole second volume explaining their reasons why.

Translating the Texts

Throughout history and to this day the majority of Christians do not know Greek.

For such people, the only way to read the Word of God is for someone to translate it into a language they can read.

The New Testament has been translated into thousands of different languages.

It is impossible to produce a translation which is an exact word-for-word match of the Greek original.

Translations which accurately reflect the meaning of the original Greek are "the Word of God."

There are people in the world today who do not have a translation of the Bible in any language they can read.

Through much of the middle ages there was no translation in the common language of the people.

God has not preserved his word by guaranteeing a translation of the Bible into every language in the world.

Any translator must engage in textual criticism in order to pick a Greek text to translate.

There are three main texts which are often suggested as a basis for translation: The Received Text, the Majority Text, and a critical text such as Westcott and Hort.

There is great disagreement among modern Bible scholars about which of those three texts is best.

Fortunately for the rest of us, all three texts are nearly identical for nearly all of the New Testament. An accurate translation from any of them is the Word of God.

Translation Methods

No translation of the Bible can possibly contain the exact words written by the original authors.

An accurate translation of the Bible is still the Word of God, even though it does not and can not match the Greek word-for-word.

On the other hand, a translation cannot merely try to express the ideas of the original without considering the individual words. In some cases the idea is ambiguous or in fact hinges on a single word.[Gal. 3:16]

Following the wording of the original as closely as possible, even when it makes the meaning confusing, is known as "formal equivalency."

Trying to match the ideas of the original as closely as possible, even when it means altering the words, is known as "dynamic equivalency."

Any good translation must be a balance between representing the words and representing the ideas.

Translators tend to lean towards one or the other most of the time. The KJV and NASV are generally functional translations. The NIV is a more dynamic translation.

Translation methods have nothing to do with textual criticism. They are separate issues.

The King James Version

The King James version was translated largely from the Received Text.

Nearly every other translation since the King James has been based on some other text.

Scholars who prefer the Received Text thus generally prefer the KJV since it seems to be the best translation of it.

A small but vocal minority believe that the KJV itself is a perfect or an inspired translation.

Such a view raises serious questions about translations in other languages.

The KJV translators deny any such possibility. The [preface to the KJV](#) written by the translators is a very helpful document, and highly recommended although it is quite long and hard to read.

The KJV itself has gone through several editions in which various minor changes have been made.

The Conservative Modern Translations

Numerous translations of the Bible have been made since the KJV was written in 1611.

Many of these translations are the work of fairly conservative Christians who did their best to accurately translate the Greek text into English. For example, the New American Standard Version (NASV) is one such translation.

All such translations are the Word of God.

None of these translations is perfect, nor could any translation possibly be.

The Distorted Modern Translations

Some modern translations are the work of people who have goals in mind other than the accurate translation of the original text.

Some translations alter the meaning to represent a particular theological position. For example, the RSV changed "virgin" to "young woman" in Isaiah 7:14 in part because the liberal translators doubted the virgin birth.

Distorted translations still contain the word of God in the passages where the translators did not distort the meaning.

The major doctrines of the Bible are so interwoven throughout that they are difficult to remove, even by a translator with evil intent. For example, the passages in the New Testament supporting the virgin birth are still found in the RSV, although they removed the one in Isaiah.

Although distorted translations may contain the Word of God, use of such Bibles is not recommended since the distorted passages may lead readers into error.

It is possible to support a modern Greek text while condemning the distorted modern translations. The two are separate issues.

Biblical Arguments Related to Preservation

When the Bible quotes itself, often the idea is quoted without a strict adherence to the exact text of the original. [I Peter 1:23-25, Acts 8:32-33]

When Satan distorted scripture, he distorted the meaning and the application more than the words. [Lk 4:10-11, Gen 2:16-17]

The Bible doesn't specify HOW God will preserve his word. Psalm 119:89 says that the place God's word is settled is "in heaven".

If you want to know the exact words God inspired, you must learn Greek. Exact representation in any other language is impossible.

If you want to know the meaning of what God wrote, any good translation will work.

Some Examples of Minor Differences

Matt 1:7 Some manuscripts have "Asa," others including some of the oldest have "Asaph." It is clear that Asa king of Judah is the one being named (I Kings 15), and so the author's intent is not in doubt. KJV and NASV

both translate "Asa."

Mark 1:2 Some manuscripts including the oldest read "in Isaiah the prophet" (NASV) and others including the Received Text read "in the prophets" (KJV). Verse three is indeed a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 but the end of verse two is from Malachi 3:1. Which words Mark actually wrote is disputed. The meaning of the verse is the same either way.

Luke 1:3 After Luke said "it seemed good to me" a small handful of copies add the words "and to the Holy Spirit." It is generally agreed that someone added these words later, and neither the KJV nor the NASV include them.

John 3:25 There are many examples of both "the Jews" (KJV) and "a Jew" (NASV) in the manuscripts. The meaning is unaffected either way.

2 Thes. 2:3 A vast majority of manuscripts read "man of sin" (KJV) but a few of the oldest read "man of lawlessness" (NASV). Many scholars prefer the minority reading "lawlessness" because 1) knowing the Greek words, it seems more likely a copyist would change "sin" to "lawlessness" than the other way around, and 2) in verse 7 the word translated "iniquity" (KJV) is in fact the Greek word "lawlessness." Either way, the verse means the same thing.

There are hundreds of other similar variations which in the end don't change the meaning of the passages at all.

If you want to see them all, read *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* by Bruce Metzger. You will need a basic knowledge of Greek to understand much of this book.

Some Examples of More Significant Differences

Mark 16:9-20. Many of the oldest Greek manuscripts do not have these verses at all. Several of the early church fathers state or suggest that these verses were not in the texts they used. In Greek the vocabulary and style of writing seems to change abruptly at verse 9. For all of these reasons, it is questioned whether these verses were in Mark's original. Why such a large discrepancy exists in the manuscripts is hotly debated. Possible explanations include: 1. Mark indeed wrote an unusual ending which someone removed 2. Mark's original ending was lost and was rewritten but not in the original words 3. The whole ending is a later addition which Mark never wrote. The arguments involved are complicated, and the truth is simply not known. What is known is that no doctrine is affected, since the events in the verses are all recorded in the other gospels. Any doctrine of preservation must take into account that God allowed this discrepancy to happen.

I John 5:7-8. The text of this verse "there are three that bear record in heaven..." (KJV) is missing from every Greek manuscript in the world except for four late and very suspect manuscripts. The early church fathers never quoted it even when discussing the trinity. All of the early translations into other languages omit it. Erasmus himself omitted it from all but the third edition of his text, suspecting that the manuscript containing it was a fraud. Nevertheless, it is found in the Latin Bible, the Received Text, and the KJV. Any doctrine of preservation must take into account why this verse, if it is part of scripture, is unknown through most of church history. Again no doctrine is affected, since the trinity is well supported by many other verses throughout the Bible.

There are only a handful of places in the entire New Testament where the manuscripts differ in these types of important ways.

Technical Details About Manuscripts

Papyrus is an ancient paper-like material made from the papyrus plant. It was the most common writing material in the time of Christ and through the first three centuries after.

Only about 70 papyrus manuscripts containing parts the New Testament have been found. Nearly all were found in Egypt, where the dry climate makes their preservation possible.

The New Testament Papyri are named with a P followed by a number. For example, P-52 is the oldest known manuscript. It is a small piece of papyrus containing four verses of the gospel of John.

Manuscripts were generally rolled into scrolls, but some were in book ("codex") form.

Parchment is leather specially prepared to form a thin smooth paper-like writing material.

From the fourth century on, parchment gradually became the most common writing material.

The vast majority of N.T. manuscripts are on parchment.

There are two kinds of Greek handwriting. "Uncial" writing uses printed capitals. Other manuscripts use cursive. One particular form of cursive known as "minuscule" was particularly popular.

The majority of 4th-9th century manuscripts were written in uncial handwriting on parchment. We have about 250 such manuscripts.

The majority of later manuscripts are in minuscule on parchment. We have over 2000 such manuscripts.

Uncial manuscripts have a zero added in front of the manuscript number. Thus Codex 01 (Codex Sinaiticus) is a famous uncial manuscript. Codex 1 is a different but also famous minuscule manuscript known in Erasmus' day.

Some manuscripts have also been assigned as a name a single letter from the English, Greek, or Hebrew alphabets. For example, Codex 042 is also known as Codex S or simply as S.

What About the Old Testament?

There is not much controversy about the Old Testament because all of the manuscripts are in near perfect agreement.

The ancient Hebrew scribes copied the Old Testament far more carefully than did the people who copied the New Testament.

The Kittel printing of the Hebrew O.T. used by most modern translators differs in only eight places from the 1525 printing used to translate the KJV, and none of the eight differences affects the meaning at all.

References

The King James Version Debate, D.A. Carson, Baker Book House, 1979

Scribes, Scrolls, and Scripture, Harold Greenlee, Eerdmans, 1985.

A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Bruce M. Metzger, United Bible Societies, 1971



© Copyright 1999 by Bill Lovegrove. All rights reserved.

Last Updated 9/4/1999