

Text and Translation

Preliminary Matters

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language, specifically Koine Greek.

The original documents of the New Testament no longer exist. Over time the ink on these documents faded and the manuscripts themselves disintegrated.

Before the invention of the printing press, books were kept in 'print' by a lengthy process of copying the original by hand. Well over 5,000 copies of the New Testament manuscripts are still in existence today. No other book or document from antiquity can compare to the New Testament in the number of manuscripts that testify to its authenticity.

Some of the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament are small fragments, while others are an entire page or pages, and some are even the entire New Testament in bound form (called a Codex).

Inspiration, Preservation, and Translation

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. While inspiration of the Scriptures benefitted the original audience, preservation is the vehicle by which God has kept His inspired Word pure, intact, and available throughout all generations. Preservation does not mean that every person throughout history has had access to the Bible. There are still languages without a translation of the Bible in their native tongue. For a period of time, when English was still in its infancy, there was not an English translation of the Bible. Preservation means that God's Word has been preserved in the original languages throughout all generations. The Bible itself promises preservation. (Psalm 12:6-7, Psalm 119:89, Matthew 5:18, 1 Peter 1:23-25)

Over the years the Bible has been translated into many different languages. A translation can be likened to a tree. Every tree has a root system under the ground. You don't see the root system, but you know it is there. Roots are what support the tree. When you read a translation of the Bible you must keep in mind that there is a Greek Text of Scripture underlying it—it's roots if you will.

There are two main sets of Greek New Testaments in print. The first is called the Textus Receptus(TR). This Latin name means 'received text.'¹ The second is called the Critical Text. (CT)²

The Textus Receptus and Critical Text differ substantially. Major differences between these texts can be found in the last chapter of Mark, John 7:53-8:11, and 1 John 5:7-8.

Thomas Strouse states, "The Textus Receptus has 140,521 Greek words. The Textus Criticus changes (primarily by adding or subtracting) 9,970 Greek words. This results in a 7% difference between the TR and the CT. Thus, the TR and the CT are identical with respect to 93% of their words."³

¹ Also known by other names such as the Traditional Text, Byzantine Text, and Confessional Text.

² Also known by other names such as the Alexandrian Text, Eclectic Text. Westcott and Hort Text.

³ Thomas Strouse, Fundamentalism and the Authorized Version.(Virginia Beach, VA; Tabernacle Baptist Theological Press, 1996) 4.

Considering the book of Revelation warns against adding to or taking away from the Scriptures, the question then is which Greek Text?

Concerns with Regard to the Critical Text (CT)

In the late 1800's a major change occurred in the way that Bible translations were made. In 1881 B.F. Westcott and J.A. Hort printed a Greek New Testament called the Critical Text. Virtually every English translation since then has been based solely on the CT or heavily influenced by it.⁴

It is important to note that the Critical Text is based upon Greek Manuscripts that were not used by the compilers of the Textus Receptus. Two such documents are called Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.⁵ There are so many variations within these two Greek manuscripts that Dean Burgon once said that it is, "easier to find two consecutive verses in which these two MSS. (manuscripts) differ the one from the other, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree."⁶ Thus, the Critical Text not only differs substantially from the Textus Receptus, there is also an alarming number of internal variations within the Greek manuscripts used to compose the Critical Text. So much variation has been a source of attack by critics of the Bible. Bart Ehrman, a skeptic and professor at the University of North Carolina, has said, "There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."⁷ Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are the main reason for such an evaluation.

Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are touted as the oldest and thereby closest in time of composition to the originals. However, even if they are the oldest, that does not mean they are authentic or authoritative. As early as the first century, heretics were attempting to alter the Greek New Testament. Early Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all spoke of heretics trying to alter New Testament books.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John that, "every one that is of the truth heareth my voice."⁸ The best way to determine the validity of a Greek manuscript is with historical proof showing sustained use in faithful, Bible-believing churches. The Vaticanus and Sinaiticus simply have no record of such use from the fourth century until the late 1800's when Westcott and Hort's Greek Critical Text was introduced. Therefore, those in favor of the Critical Text must conclude that portions of the Bible were lost or corrupted and not available to the church over a large portion of the church age.

The Reliability of the Textus Receptus (TR)

The TR has been the predominant Greek Text used throughout the church age. Strong opponents of the TR, Westcott and Hort, even concede that the TR has been the Greek Text of choice from the 4th century to the 19th century.⁹

⁴ Refer to Text and Translation Timeline at the end of this work.

⁵ Vaticanus is also known as B and Sinaiticus is often called Aleph (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet.)

⁶ Dean Burgon. The Revision Revised.(New York, Dover Publications, 1971) 12.

⁷ Bart Ehrman. Misquoting Jesus-The story behind who changed the Bible and why. (San Francisco, Harper, 2007) 90.

⁸ John 18:37

⁹ B.F. Westcott and H.A. Hort. The New Testament in the Original Greek. (New York, Harper, 1882).

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Quotes made by Early Church Fathers support the TR.¹⁰

Ancient Bible translations like the Syrian Peshitta support the TR.¹¹

The TR was the Greek New Testament used during the Protestant Reformation.

English Translations of the Bible until the late 1800's were based upon the TR. The King James (Authorized Version) is based upon the TR.

The overwhelming number of Greek New Testament manuscripts testify to the TR. There are approximately 5600 Greek Manuscripts still in existence. 5200 of those manuscripts testify to the TR. Only 400 support the CT.

Conclusion

Those in favor of the Critical Text hold that portions of the Bible were lost or corrupted and not available to the church over a large portion of the church age. They claim to be gradually restoring the Bible back to its original form and purity as new manuscripts are found. This is a frightening prospect and in total contradiction to the testimony that the Bible makes concerning preservation.

God's Word was never lost and is in no need of restoration. The Traditional text (The Textus Receptus) has been used by faithful followers of Jesus Christ throughout the church age and is still in use to this day.

For More Information

Books by Dean Burgon on this topic such as Revision Revised and Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels

Hills, Edward. The King James Defended. Des Moines: The Christian Research Press, 1956, 1973.

Milne, Garnet Howard. Has the Bible Been Kept Pure? The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Providential Preservation of Scripture. Garnet Howard Milne, 2017.

Pickering, William. The Identity of the New Testament Text. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1981.

Shrivener, F.H. Six Lectures on the Text of the New Testament. Cambridge, Bell and Sons, 1875.

Sorenson, David. Touch Not the Unclean Thing. Duluth, MN: Northwest Baptist Ministries, 2001.

Surrett, Charles. Which Greek Text? Kings Mountain, NC: Surrett Family Publications, 2013.

¹⁰ Dean Burgon, The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38960/38960-h/38960-h.html#toc13> chapter V

¹¹ David Sorenson, Touch Not the Unclean Thing. (Duluth, MN: Northwest Baptist Ministries, 2001) 79-81.

Text and Translation Timeline

Printings of the Textus Receptus Greek New Testament

Erasmus-1516

Robert Stephanus(Stephens)-1536

Theodore Beza-1565

Abraham and Bonaventure Elzevir-1624

English Translations based upon the TR

William Tyndale-1525

Miles Coverdale-1535

Geneva Bible-1560

Bishops Bible-1568

King James Version-1611

Printing of Westcott and Hort's Critical Text 1881

English Translations based upon CT

English Revised Version-1881

American Standard Version-1901

Revised Standard Version-1946

New American Standard Bible-1963

New International Version-1973

Among many others

* Note: The introduction to New King James Version states that it was translated from the TR. In theory this is true, however, the influence of the Critical Text can be seen in the footnotes of the NKJV and beyond. It is revealing to note that the Trinitarian Bible Society (a company that has been printing the Textus Receptus since 1831) is unwilling to endorse the NKJV. For further information on this topic you can read articles on the NKJV found on Trinitarian Bible Society's website.

<https://www.tbsbibles.org/page/articles>