

What today's Christian
needs to know about

The Greek New Testament

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The Greek New Testament

In recent years there has been much confusion concerning modern translations and editions of the Greek New Testament. Some people make claims regarding the Greek New Testament without having information and facts to support their claims. Many people claim that their translations are accurate because those translations are based upon the best available Greek texts. Some claim that their translations are better than the Authorised Version because the Authorised Version and its underlying Greek Textus Receptus add variants and extra readings to the text. Others, however, claim that the Greek text of the New Testament is not important because their favourite translation is better than any Greek text. Still others say that the Greek

text is not important because most people cannot read the Greek of the New Testament era. However, the Greek text upon which a translation is based will have an impact both upon a Christian's reading of Scripture devotionally and the proclaiming of the Word of God in bearing witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. It is necessary that today's Christian understands the importance of the traditional Greek text in his Christian life.

The Traditional Text

First of all it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term 'traditional text'. During the 1st century following the resurrection of Christ, God moved men to pen His Word (2 Peter 1.21).

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The result was a group of letters and books, written in *Koiné* Greek (called the 'original autographs'). These letters and books were copied and recopied throughout the centuries and distributed throughout the world. These copies comprise the manuscripts of the New Testament. Over 5,000 of these Greek manuscripts have survived to this day. The great number of these Greek manuscripts supports what is called the Byzantine textual tradition, Byzantine because it came from all over the Greek-speaking world at that time. These Byzantine manuscripts make up what is called the Traditional Text of the New Testament. The best printed representation of this Byzantine text-type is the Textus Receptus (or Received Text). In addition to the manuscripts, we also have available many works in which numerous Church Fathers quoted from the manuscripts. The work of John Burgon has established that the basic text used by numerous Church Fathers is the same as the text now known as the Byzantine Text.

The Textus Receptus was compiled from a number of Byzantine manuscripts by numerous editors from the early 1500s. There were editions from textual editors such as Erasmus, Stephens, Beza, the Elzevirs, Mill and Scrivener. These editions differ

slightly from one another but still are regarded as the same basic text. Certain editions were popular in different countries and provided the basis for New Testament translations. The Textus Receptus (as it later became known) was the text used by Tyndale and in turn by the translators of the English Authorised (King James) Version of 1611 and other Reformation era translations.

The Critical Text

During the 19th and 20th centuries, however, another form of Greek New Testament has come into the forefront and is used for most modern New Testament translations. This Critical Text, as it is called, differs widely from the Traditional Text in that it omits many words, verses and passages which are found in the Received Text and translations based upon it.

The modern versions are based mainly upon a Greek New Testament which was derived from a small handful of Greek manuscripts from the 4th century onwards. Two of these manuscripts, which many modern scholars claim to be superior to the Byzantine, are the Sinai manuscript and the Vatican manuscript (c. 4th century). These are derived from a text type known as the Alexandrian text (because of its origin in Egypt); this

text type was referred to by the textual critics Westcott and Hort as the 'Neutral text'. These two manuscripts form the basis of the Greek New Testament, referred to as the Critical Text, which has been in widespread use since the late 19th century. In recent years there has been an attempt to improve this text by calling it an 'eclectic' text (meaning that many other manuscripts were consulted in its editing and evolution), but it is still a text which has as its central foundation these two manuscripts.

Problems in the Critical Text

There are many problems of omission which characterise this Greek New Testament. Verses and passages which are found in the writings of Church Fathers from around AD 200 to 300 are missing in the Alexandrian Text manuscripts which date from around AD 300 to 400. In addition, these early readings are found in manuscripts in existence from AD 500 onwards. An example of this is Mark 16.9–20: this passage is found in the writings of Irenaeus and Hippolytus in the 2nd century, and is in almost every manuscript of Mark's Gospel from AD 500 onwards. It is missing in two Alexandrian manuscripts, the Sinai and the Vatican.

This is but one of many examples of this problem. There

are many words, verses and passages which are omitted from the modern versions but which are found in the Traditional or Byzantine Text of the New Testament, and thus in the Textus Receptus. The Critical Text differs from the Textus Receptus text 5,337 times, according to one calculation. The Vatican manuscript omits 2,877 words in the Gospels; the Sinai manuscript 3,455 words in the Gospels. These problems between the Textus Receptus and the Critical Text are very important to the correct translation and interpretation of the New Testament. Contrary to the contention of supporters of the Critical Text, these omissions do affect doctrine and faith in the Christian life.

Several examples of doctrinal problems caused by the omissions of the Critical Text follow. This is by no means an exhaustive list. The modern reconstructed Critical Text

- omits reference to the Virgin Birth in Luke 2.33
- omits reference to the deity of Christ in 1 Timothy 3.16
- omits reference to the deity of Christ in Romans 14.10 and 12
- omits reference to the blood of Christ in Colossians 1.14

In addition, an error is created in the Bible in Mark 1.2; in this passage in the Critical Text Isaiah

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is made the author of the book of Malachi. In numerous places in the New Testament the name of Jesus is omitted from the Critical Text; seventy times 'Jesus' is omitted and twenty-nine times 'Christ' is omitted.¹

Another problem with the modern Critical Text is that the two main manuscripts upon which this text is constructed, the Sinai and the Vatican, disagree between themselves over 3,000 times in the Gospels alone. Thus, the Alexandrian text presents itself as a text type which is characterised in many places by readings which are not common to the manuscripts of their own tradition. The Critical Text is characterised by wording which in the original language is difficult, abrupt or even impossible. It appears that no matter how peculiar or aberrant the variant reading is, it must have been in the original autographs because (as is sometimes claimed) a scribe would never make a change which disagrees with other manuscripts; he would, instead, make a change which would make a passage read more smoothly.

Much is said about the Alexandrian manuscripts being very old. This is true, but the emphasis in the study of textual criticism should not be upon how old the manuscript is but upon how many

copies removed from the original it is. A manuscript which is dated as having been copied during the 10th century could have been the fifth in a line of copies originating with the original autograph, whilst a manuscript dated as having been copied during the 3rd century could have been the one hundredth in the line of copies. Since it is difficult to tell the genealogy—the family—of any given manuscript, it is important to note that age is relative in the sense that you could have a corrupt 3rd century manuscript or a faithful 10th century manuscript.

A good illustration would be to suppose that, in the year 3000, a copy of the English Bible was found which dated from the 1970s. Suppose this Bible happened to be the oldest existing Bible available, and this Bible happened to differ in hundreds of places from the Bible that was in use by Christians in the year 3000. One could well imagine the scientific critics, with their methodology, extolling the virtues of the ancient age of this Bible, the page design showing quality, careful care in the layout and the paper of this particular volume, the binding and so on. But their arguments would tend to fall apart when, after beginning to translate Bibles into modern languages on the basis of this ancient book, Christians discovered that this version of the Scriptures was the

New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Providential Preservation

The Traditional Text of the New Testament is understood by conservative Bible-believing Christians to have been providentially preserved by God. God has promised in His Word that He would not only preserve His Word for generations to come, but that His Word was permanent and would be kept free from corruption.

- *Matthew 5.18* states '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'.
- *Isaiah 59.21* says 'As for me, this *is* my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that *is* upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever'.
- *John 10.35* says 'and the scripture cannot be broken'.

These verses demonstrate that God has not left His church for centuries without an authoritative copy of the Word of God, but that God's people down through the

ages have faithfully copied and recopied copies of the original autographs. The church all over the world has used the Traditional Text in all of its various forms, and God has seen fit to multiply multitudes of copies and has brought salvation to many generations through this preservation process. This doctrine of providential preservation is succinctly stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph VIII:

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.

This precious doctrine of the providential preservation of the Scriptures has been all but forgotten by modern textual scholars. Many of them treat the Word of God as just another book that can be submitted to the whims and changing norms of modern scientific methods. Many of the destructive forms of higher

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criticism of the 19th century have come from a lack of belief that the Bible is a supernatural book. The Bible has the marks of inspiration which clearly can be seen by believing eyes, but which can be trampled under the feet of men rushing headlong toward destruction. But, in spite of this, God has raised up His people who love and cherish His Word and recognise the marks of inspiration that the early believers recognised, and that these copies which have been handed down through the ages represent well what God has intended to be used. This does not mean that any particular printed edition of the Greek New Testament today is perfect, but what it does mean is that the New Testament that we have today is essentially the same as that passed down through the ages through various groups of believers who have loved and kept His Word.

The strength of this preservation in the Old Testament comes in the quality of scribe that copied the Old Testament Hebrew. In the New Testament this is seen in the abundance of manuscripts which we possess today. This has been God's method for keeping His Word pure. This preservation provides that no one local text, such as the one from Alexandria, Egypt, would become the dominant text. It took liberalism and unbelief to challenge this preservation process. It has

never been proven that these few Alexandrian manuscripts ever existed outside of Alexandria, Egypt. Many of God's people around the world reject the Critical Text in all of its forms. The practical application of providential preservation is that the believer today must choose between a modern reconstructed text based essentially upon two manuscripts from the 4th century, which omits the deity of Christ in many places and is estimated by some to leave out approximately 200 verses (the equivalent of 1 and 2 Peter), or that he must choose as a text one which God has used through the centuries. Do we use the text which God has blessed, and which best honours and glorifies the Lord Jesus, or do we not?

The printed editions of the Greek New Testament which were published during the 1500s and 1600s were produced by men who understood what the glory of God meant and the importance of having accurate copies of the Bible. From the work known as the Complutensian Polyglot to the various editions of Erasmus, to the four editions of Robert Stephens (the best known of which is the 1550 text and which is the basis for what is called the Berry Interlinear or the *Englishman's Greek New Testament*), to the work of the great critic Theodore Beza in his five editions, to the editions of

the Elzevirs in 1624 and 1633, and ultimately to the work of F. H. A. Scrivener in the 1870s and '80s, we have scholarship in textual criticism and the most faithful and careful attitude toward the manuscripts that one can imagine. The Traditional Text of the New Testament was the text of the Reformation period, so that whether it was the work of Erasmus or of Stephens, Luther's own translation or that of the heirs of the Reformation such as the Westminster Divines and the translators of the Authorised Version in English, this text has been widely used and tremendously blessed by God.

The Responsibility of Believers Today

The textual critic J. Harold Greenlee has said, 'New Testament textual criticism is, therefore, the basic Biblical study, a prerequisite to all other Biblical and theological work'.² This is not an overstatement of the importance of this issue. As believers we have the responsibility in our day and age of proclaiming the Gospel, the pure Gospel, the undiluted Gospel. We also have the right and privilege of being the next in the line of protecting God's Word and proclaiming it. Each individual Christian will make a decision on this matter, of which text is correct. Unmistakably, this decision

will be made, consciously or unconsciously, by every single believer. This decision is made when the believer decides which edition of the Bible he will use to read and study; and if he chooses a translation based upon corrupted manuscripts which reflect views which omit the deity of Christ, His blood atonement, His virgin birth, then the decision has been made to extend this error to the next generation. If, however, today's Christian chooses a translation of the Word of God which is translated from the Traditional Text of the New Testament, the decision has been made to continue to see God working through His providence in providing His Word in its complete form, for not only this generation but for those to come.

Endnotes

1. See 'The Great Omission', *The Quarterly Record* (London, England: The Trinitarian Bible Society, no. 524, July-September 1993).

2. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 17.

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- To publish and distribute the Holy Scriptures throughout the world in many languages.
- To promote Bible translations which are accurate and trustworthy, conforming to the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, and the Greek Textus Receptus of the New Testament, upon which texts the English Authorised Version is based.
- To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.
- To uphold the doctrines of reformed Christianity, bearing witness to the equal and eternal deity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, One God in three Persons.
- To uphold the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God.
- For the Glory of God and the increase of His Kingdom through the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God.

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