

The Majority Text vs. The Critical Text

Part One

"It was the CORRUPT BYZANTINE form of text that provided the basis for almost all translations of the New Testament into modern languages down to the nineteenth century." This quote is from Bruce Metzger's book, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. On the same page, he also calls the Byzantine text-type "disfigured" and the Textus Receptus (TR), which is based upon it, "debased" (p.xxiii).

In a similar vein, Kurt Aland considers Greek manuscripts which are "purely or predominately Byzantine" to be "IRRELEVANT for textual criticism."

Furthermore, Aland refers to the Critical Text (CT) as "the modern SCHOLARLY text." This is because it is based mainly on the Alexandrian text-type, which he believes to be "of A VERY SPECIAL QUALITY which should always be considered in establishing the original text." And Aland considers this type of text to be the "Standard text" for our day (Aland, pp.viii,31,155).

In contradiction to this view is that of the Majority Text (MT) proponents. J.P. Green, for instance, claims the CT is based on "a handful of CORRUPTED Egyptian manuscripts." And further, he believes these manuscripts were produced by "GNOSTIC HERETICS." Thus, by basing their Greek text on these Alexandrian type texts, the CT scholars are, "RE-INSERTING THESE HERESIES into what they boldly call a 'Holy Bible'" (from press releases for the LITV and MKJV).

These two sets of quotes demonstrate the strong feelings held by proponents of both the CT and the MT. They also show that, for the most part, the CT is based on "Alexandrian" type Greek manuscripts and the MT is based on "Byzantine" type Greek manuscripts. For more on these text-type "families" and other terms used in this article, see the article [Introduction to Textual Criticism](#).

This three-part article will attempt to examine the most important issues relevant to this heated debate, without utilizing diatribes like the above.

Published Greek Texts

There are two primary Greek texts representing the CT. The first is The United Bible Societies' *The Greek New Testament* edited by five men, including Kurt Aland and Bruce Metzger who were quoted above. The second is *Novum Testamentum Graece* edited by Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland. The fourth edition of the UBS text and the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland's text are now identical.

As with the CT, there are two different published editions of the MT: *The New Testament in the Original Greek According to the Byzantine/ Majority Textform* edited by Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont and *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* edited by Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad. These two MTs are virtually identical. See [Meaning of Majority Text](#) for further discussion on these two texts.

Quotes from some of these editors will be utilized throughout this article, along with quotations from additional advocates of both positions.

"Providential Preservation"

"The Providential Preservation of the Greek Text of the New Testament" is the title of a booklet written by Rev. W. MacLean. This title sums up the first argument for the MT. The claim is, God has "providentially preserved" the Byzantine text-type since it best represents the autographs.

In arguing against this claim, D.A. Carson, another CT supporter, states, "I am suspicious of propositional arguments that rest too much on providence, because divine providence can be variously interpreted" (Carson, p.55).

Carson is right in saying it is sometimes difficult to interpret divine providence, but the reasons for the MT claim will be presented and the reader can draw his or her own conclusion.

1) The VAST MAJORITY OF GREEK MANUSCRIPTS reflect the Byzantine text-type.

Robinson and Pierpont write in the Introduction to their MT Greek text, "Of the over 5000 total continuous-text and lectionary manuscripts, 90% or more contain a basically Byzantine Textform" (p.xviii).

And CT proponents readily admit the Byzantine text-type is predominate in the manuscript evidence. For instance, in reference to the minuscules manuscripts, Aland writes, "... more than 80 percent of the manuscripts contain exclusively the Majority text." But the Alexandrian is represented in only "almost 10 percent" (Aland, pp.102, 128).

Metzger classifies "most minuscules" as "Byzantine Witnesses" (Metzger, p.xxx). And Carson says about the Byzantine text-type, "There are far more manuscripts extant in this tradition than in the other three combined [Alexandrian, Western and Caesarean]" (Carson, p.26).

And finally, a flyer distributed by the publishers of the NASB (a CT based version) states in reference to the TR and Erasmus' Greek NT (which is similar to the TR), "... 95% of the known Greek NT manuscripts of the Greek NT are closer to these than to the Greek text behind most modern English translations" (MacRae).

2) Byzantine texts were MORE WIDELY DISTRIBUTED AND ACCEPTED than those reflecting an Alexandrian text-type.

Hodges and Farstad write in the Introduction to their Greek text in reference to the two above mentioned published CTs:

Although eclectic, both rely heavily on a relatively small number of ancient manuscripts that derive mainly from Egypt.... The text which results from dependence on such manuscripts as these may fairly be described as Egyptian. Its existence in early times outside of Egypt is unproven....

On the other hand, the witnesses to the Majority Text come from all over the ancient world. Their very number suggests that they represent a long and widespread chain of manuscript tradition (p.ix).

Robinson and Pierpont write similarly, "The 'Byzantine' Textform (otherwise called the 'Majority' or 'Traditional Text') predominated throughout the greatest period of manual copying of the Greek New Testament manuscripts - a span of over 1000 years (ca. AD 350 to AD 1516). It was without question

the dominate text used both liturgically and popularly by the Greek-speaking Christian community" (p.xviii).

Again, the CT people acknowledge this domination of the Byzantine texts. Aland says about the "Koine Text" (which he considers to be the precursor to the Byzantine text-type) that it, "... became widely disseminated even in the fourth century" and it became "the dominant text of the Byzantine church."

Meanwhile, the church in Egypt, "led an independent life" from the rest of the church, and, "From the fourth century it had a well defined text (known as the Alexandrian text type) because the administration of the Alexandrian patriarchs was effectively centralized."

So the Alexandrian text was used primarily in Egypt. But despite this, Aland states even the Egyptian text was later subjected to the "corrosive effects" of the Byzantine text-type (Aland, pp.65,56).

But note, nowhere does he say the Alexandrian text had a "corrosive effect" on the Byzantine. So scribes in the Egyptian church eventually tried to bring their text into conformity with the Byzantine text, but the reverse did not happen.

Metzger says the Byzantine text was "distributed widely throughout the Byzantine empire." Moreover, "... during the period from the sixth or seventh century down to the invention of printing with movable type (A.D. 1450-56), the Byzantine form of text was generally regarded as THE authoritative form of text and was the one most widely circulated and accepted" (emphasis in original, Metzger, p.xx).

3) EARLY TRANSLATIONS OF THE NT into other languages in the early centuries can often have a mixed text or it can be difficult to determine the kind of text they were based on. But they do generally contain a Byzantine text-type, at least in part.

According to Aland, these includes the following (with dates of original translation in parentheses): the Syriac Peshitta (c.400), the Syriac Harkelensis (616), the Palestinian Syriac Version (c.400), the Armenian version (c.400), the Gothic version (c.341), and the Old Church Slavonic version (c.850).

As for the most important early version, the Latin Vulgate, Carson claims this version was based on "a western textual tradition" (Carson, p.56). But Aland refutes this idea and states that in his revision the Old Latin versions, "... the consensus today favors the view that Jerome used a contemporary manuscript of the early Koine type [the precursor, according to Aland, to the Byzantine text-type]" (Aland, pp.181-210).

As for the Old Latin versions on which the Vulgate was based, Robinson and Pierpont write that they are, "... a veritable hodgepodge of readings created by individualistic scribes ... with no characteristically-prevailing 'majority' text, whether Byzantine or any other" (p.xxix).

So the Old Latin versions, along with the early version in general, can be somewhat of a mixed bag (due possibly to what Robinson and Pierpont call "the 'human factor' affecting translation into another language" along with scribal alterations; p.xxix). But the early versions do tend to favor the Byzantine Text-type.

4) Remember the quote by Metzger which opened this article? - "It was the corrupt Byzantine form of text that provided the basis for almost all TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT INTO MODERN LANGUAGES down to the nineteenth century."

It was Erasmus' Greek Testament, "... that Martin Luther and William Tyndale used as the basis of their translations of the New Testament into German (1522) and into English (1525)" (Metzger, pp. xxi-xxiii).

Moreover, every English translation after Tyndale, until 1881, followed the Byzantine text-type. This, of course, included the monumental *King James Version*. Further, "Even though the *Revised Version* of 1881 was intended to replace the KJV, it failed to do so" (Green, MKJV press release).

And, despite numerous new versions which were published following the *Revised Version*, it was not until the *New International Version* (published in 1978) that a Bible version based on the CT rivaled the sales of the KJV.

John Robbins sums up the situation if the CT scholars are correct, "For nineteen hundred years the church had limped along with defective Bibles, but modern scholarship has greatly improved the Bibles we read" (preface to Clark, p.v).

Denial of Providence

There are two basic arguments used by CT people to try to evade the force of above information. The first is to deny the whole concept of the providence of God operating in the transmission of the NT texts.

For instance, Westcott and Hort promoted the idea that the text of the Bible should be treated like any other ancient book. And Aland says he disagrees with the MT supporters because they, "... oppose all the laws of philology [linguistics] which apply just as much to the New Testament as to all other documents of antiquity" (Aland, p.19).

But, "The Textual Criticism of Westcott and Hort, and their cohorts, cannot be defended from the Bible." Moreover, "It does not matter to them whether the Bible's testimony to itself is denied..." (Green, Unholy, Vol.I, p.11).

And what is "the Bible's testimony to itself" in this regard?

Psalm 12:6,7 declares:

THE WORDS OF THE LORD ARE PURE WORDS: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, THOU SHALT PRESERVE THEM from this generation for ever" (KJV; see also Matt 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17).

"Lateness" of Byzantine Text-Type

The second argument of the CT scholars is the claim the Byzantine text-type originated "late" (i.e. after the third century). Carson writes, "There is no unambiguous evidence that the Byzantine text-type was known before the middle of the fourth century."

On the other hand, the CT people point to several second and third century papyri which reflect the Alexandrian text-type (Metzger, p.xxix). However, Robinson and Pierpont state that only one of these papyri (P75) is predominately Alexandrian. Of the remaining papyri, they state that each, "... possesses a good degree of 'mixture' between Alexandrian and Western readings (with some 'distinctively Byzantine' readings thrown in for good measure)" (pp.xxvi,xxvii).

Harry Sturz discusses these "distinctively Byzantine" readings in his book, *The Byzantine Text-Type and New Testament Textual Criticism*. First, he writes, "Although the reasoning of Westcott and Hort seemed sound at the time they wrote, discoveries since then have undermined the confident appraisal that characteristically Syrian [Byzantine] readings are necessarily late" (p.55).

The most important of these discoveries was several Egyptian papyri. Sturz lists "150 distinctively Byzantine readings" found in these papyri. Included in his list are papyri numbers 13, 45, 46, 47, 49,

59, 66, 72, 74, and 75 (pp.61, 145-159).

Green states the importance of these discoveries, "For example, the Chester Beatty Papyri [P45,46,47] contained sixty-five readings which had been ejected from the Bible by the critics. And Papyrus Bodmer II [P66], of the second century, actually was found to contain thirteen percent of all the so called late readings of the critic despised Majority Text" (*Interlinear*, p.xi).

Sturz brings up another very important point about these papyri, "They attest the early existence of readings in the Eastern part of the Roman empire in which the Byzantine and the properly (i.e. geographically) Western witnesses agree and at the same time are opposed by the Alexandrian" (p.70).

In other words, some early "Western" texts agree with the Byzantine tradition where it differs from the Alexandrian. Sturz lists 170 of these types of readings (pp.160-174).

Robinson and Pierpont refer to these kinds of readings as "dually-aligned." They also use this term to refer to readings where the Alexandrian and Byzantine manuscripts agree but they differ from the Western. They then note that in such cases of dually-aligned readings, the Alexandrian-Byzantine combinations are termed by modern critics as "Alexandrian" and the Western-Byzantine readings are termed "Western."

They then write:

From the present perspective, the Byzantine-Alexandrian and Byzantine-Western alignments are merely those autograph readings of the Byzantine Textform from which the Alexandrian or Western manuscripts did NOT deviate - a very different picture. Thus, the Alexandrian manuscripts are themselves far more "Byzantine" than they have been given credit for, if only their readings are first considered from a Byzantine-priority perspective (p.xxxv; emphasis in original).

So even in textual criticism, the problem of presuppositions cannot be ignored. If one starts with the assumption that the Byzantine text is "corrupt" then dually-aligned readings will automatically be considered to be anything but Byzantine. But if one assumes the Byzantine text is superior then dually-aligned readings will be considered Byzantine.

Sturz concludes, "In view of the above, it is concluded that the papyri supply valid evidence that distinctively Byzantine readings were not created in the fourth century but were already in existence before the end of the second century and that, because of this, Byzantine readings merit serious consideration" (p.69).

Now, it is true that the above is referring to specific readings in the papyri. They do still favor an Alexandrian-Western type of text overall. However, Robinson and Pierpont state in this regard, "Any bold assertion that the point is settled, since no predominately Byzantine manuscripts of the second century have yet to be discovered, certainly seems to beg the question from an argument based on silence" (p.xxvii).

And Sturz asks the question, "What about Byzantine readings which occur in parts of the New Testament where there are no papyri, AS YET, to confirm them?" (p.64, emphasis in original). The problem is, that even with the most recent discoveries, the papyri data is still rather sparse.

Next a word needs to be said about the preservation and location of the early papyri. Aland says all but one of these early papyri, "... are from Egypt where the hot, dry sands preserved the papyri through the centuries." Meanwhile, in Asia Minor and Greece (eastern areas), "... the climate in these regions has been unfavorable to the preservation of any papyri from the early period" (pp.59,67).

Hodges and Farstad write similarly in this regard, "Egypt, almost alone, offers climatic conditions highly favorable to the preservation of very ancient manuscripts" (p.ix).

So it is not surprising many early papyri have been found which reflect the Alexandrian text since this text existed in Egypt. But even some of these Egyptian papyri, as mentioned above, contain Byzantine and even Western readings.

Meanwhile, papyri used in the east would not have survived due to the unfavorable climatic conditions. So what text was used in these regions in the second and third centuries cannot be determined by specific manuscript evidence.

However, what is known is all of the autographs, except two, were sent to eastern churches. The only exceptions are Romans and Mark which were sent to Rome. But NONE were sent to Egyptian churches (Green, *Unholy*, Vol.II, p.613).

Moreover, starting in the fourth century, parchment began to be used. This material is much more durable than papyri (Aland, p.76). This, along with the cessation of persecution, accounts for why the number of known manuscripts begin to increase starting with this century. And the vast majority of these later manuscripts reflect the Byzantine text.

In sum, the east held the autographs. In the second and third centuries, Byzantine AND Alexandrian readings existed in Egypt. And from the fourth century on the east utilized the Byzantine text.

Furthermore, papyri has, "... a useful library life of several decades" (Aland, p.75). So the east could still appeal to the autographs, or at least direct copies of them, well into the second century. Meanwhile, Egypt only had copies of copies.

So, if the CT people are correct, despite this advantage, the east, sometime during the second or third centuries and for some unknown reason, abandoned the best text-type in favor of an inferior one. But the Egyptian churches were able to retain the text which reflected the autographs, despite the fact they never saw them.

Lastly in this section, it should to be mentioned that Sturz, who is quoted at length here, is NOT a supporter of the MT. He takes a middle position in this debate. He simply believes, "... the Byzantine text should be recognized as having an important and useful place in textual criticism because it is an independent witness to an early form of the New Testament text" (p.23).

Compare this attitude with the quote from Aland in the introduction to this article. He declared the Byzantine text to be "irrelevant for textual criticism."

This article is continued at [The Majority Text vs. the Critical Text - Part Two](#).

Bibliography:

See end of [Part Three](#).

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