

Textual Choices and Bible Versions

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This is one of two follow-up articles from the “Comparing Bible Versions” article. In that article, I promised to share my views on textual choices (consensus text versus majority text) and translation technique (formal equivalency versus dynamic equivalency). I will discuss dynamic equivalency next month. This month we will deal with textual issues.

Which textual base is the best, the one based on the majority of manuscripts or the one based on the scientific determinations of Bible scholars, the consensus text?

The key to the answer is trust. Which stream of documents can you trust the most? This question can only be answered by examining the historical facts of how both text streams came down to us today, and determining from that which is more likely to represent the original text God delivered through the apostles.

How Serious Is This Issue?

The truth of the matter is, both the critical text and the majority text are close enough to the originals and to one another that God can work through either text to bring people to salvation. There is at worst a 5% difference between the consensus text and the majority text. One may ask, “Then why address the topic at all?”

I have struggled with this question. 2 Timothy 2:14 says, “Remind them of these things, charging them in the sight of the Lord, that they don't argue about words, to no profit, to the subverting of those who hear” (WEB).

I have no desire to make the Bible version issue a defining issue of this web site, because I know that the bulk of the Bible version debate serves only the purpose of subverting those who hear. But at the same time, I know that having a Bible I believed I could trust completely helped lead to my own salvation.

Ultimately, I believe it is important to know in your heart that the Bible you are reading is as close as possible to the original text of the Bible. This is the entire goal of both the Majority Text camp and the Consensus Scholarship camp, to discover, in those areas in which the text is known to differ, which reading is closest to the original.

Basic Facts About Manuscripts

There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the Bible. These have been divided into four hypothetical “text types.” There are two main text types we need to be concerned with. These are the Byzantine text type, which was prevalent around Antioch, and the Alexandrian text type, which was prevalent around Alexandria, Egypt. There are a couple of other text types, the Caesarean and the Western, which seem to be a combination of these two other text types, but these are not important as we know they are derivatives of the other two types.

The vast majority of manuscripts, perhaps up to 95% of all manuscripts known, are of the Byzantine text type, which is therefore referred to today as the “majority text.” These are all “late manuscripts”, the majority of them having been produced after 600AD. Of the four text types, the Byzantine type is the largest text, meaning it has the most words.

The oldest manuscripts we have are all Alexandrian in nature. Of all known manuscripts, perhaps 5% reflect this text type. The two best examples of Alexandrian manuscripts are Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus,

two complete copies of the Bible in Greek, which were copied during the fourth century. But there are earlier manuscripts to be found, not complete Bibles but fragments thereof, stretching all the way back into the 200's and earlier. These earlier manuscripts also universally support the Alexandrian text type. The Alexandrian text type stopped appearing in the Greek texts in the 700's after a long period of tapering off.

However, it must be noted that the Western church changed languages in the 600's with the adoption of the Vulgate as its official version. From that point forward, the Roman Catholic Church preferred to keep their manuscript tradition in Latin rather than Greek. In the Vulgate, we find over half of the Alexandrian readings. The Alexandrian text is about 5% smaller than the Byzantine text, and there are some differences in words between the two texts. No Christian doctrine is omitted from the Alexandrian text, but some appear strengthened in the Byzantine text.

The difference in size between the two texts can only be explained one of two ways: Either text was dropped out of the Alexandrian text type, or text was added to the Byzantine type. If we can determine which we believe happened, we can be sure of our textual choice.

Evolution of the Bible Text

To review what we have covered up to now, it would seem that two texts arose, the Alexandrian which was supported in the Western church, and the Byzantine which was supported in the Eastern church. It would seem the schism between the churches led to the evolution of two texts.

The fact that the Alexandrian text disappeared from the Greek would seem at first to show it was not subject to God's providential preservation. This may be a valid argument, since God could be expected to extend His providential preservation only to the original language text. This is not made plain in Scripture, however, and many of the readings unique to the Alexandrian text type continued on in the Latin. It is quite difficult, then, to conclusively use the doctrine of preservation as an argument for one text or the other.

The differences between the texts became an issue in the 1500's. Up until that point, the standard version for the Roman Catholic Church was the Latin Vulgate, and translations into the vernacular language were forbidden by the Church. Muslim violence in the East had forced Eastern Orthodox Christians into Western Europe, taking their Greek texts of the Bible with them. This influx of documents exposed the differences between the Greek text and the Latin text.

The Roman Catholic Church was in a bit of a crisis at this time, in that people had begun to openly question the positions of the church as a result of its corruption, for example, the sale of indulgences. At this time of high suspicion, the new Greek texts were showing a testimony to another form of the original Bible text. A Catholic monk, Desiderius Erasmus, set to work to make a New Testament based on these Greek manuscripts, presuming that the Latin edition had strayed farther from the original text than the Greek, completing it around 1525.

Was it a safe presumption? Logic would seem to dictate that the original language text was better. This was the same position taken by Jerome in the late 300's, when he insisted on learning Hebrew in order to translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew manuscripts instead of the Greek version (the Septuagint). (Jerome, too, faced opposition from authorities in the Roman church for using the Hebrew Masoretic Text for his translation, but it nonetheless became the standard Latin translation for the Church in the 600's.)

Erasmus worked from a paltry collection of around 25 manuscripts. According to some sources, his copy of Revelation had to be painstakingly extracted from a Greek commentary, and even then he had to backward translate portions from the Vulgate. Even so, Erasmus' Greek New Testament was considered to be the best, purest Bible text available, especially by the Protestants who were predisposed to believe the Roman Catholic texts were farther from the truth.

The Roman Catholics, though one of their own had produced the text, never accepted it as the standard. The “imprimatur,” the approval the Church gives to Bible versions (and other writings), has never to this day been extended to any Bible version based on Erasmus' Greek text or the subsequent editions thereof. Erasmus' text went through a small number of revisions and a number of hands until in 1633, it finally became known as the Textus Receptus (or Received Text).

The Pendulum Swings Again

In the 1800's, a number of movements began that would rock the Christian world. Rationalism began in Germany, in which it was sought to apply “reasonable thought” to the Scriptures. As well, the “restoration movement” arose. It was a belief that the form of the early church had been completely lost (despite Jesus' statement that the gates of hell would never prevail against the church), and wished to restore it by throwing out all tradition and starting over.

In this theological climate, the scholarly tide turned almost universally against the Textus Receptus, which had by now become the “traditional” text. No longer would the scientific minds accept on faith that the Church had not tampered with the text, or in effect, that any form of the text had been providentially preserved. It was a time to question what had really come from God, and what was just church tradition.

Basically, the textual critics in the 1800's saw the Vulgate and the Byzantine text both emerging, one in the west and one in the east, from a root text that was the original New Testament text. Over the years, they believed the scribes added explanatory notes, improved grammar, and incorporated church liturgy right into the text of the Bible. This would have been done not necessarily with evil intent. Notes would be accidentally incorporated from commentaries, scribes would fail to maintain “bad grammar,” and people seeing readings that sounded like incomplete church liturgy may have thought something was wrong with their copy and corrected it.

They looked at the additions in the Vulgate and the Byzantine text, and tried to find the text that may have led to both of the divergent readings. This hypothetical text, at the base of all four of the textual families, was thought of as the “neutral text.” In 1859, a scholar named Constantin von Tischendorf discovered a full Bible (later called the *Codex Sinaiticus*) which dated from the fourth century. He believed it was representative of this “neutral text.”

In the late 1800's, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton J.A. Hort created a New Testament Greek Text based on this “neutral text,” which they believed was embodied in two important manuscripts called *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*, both manuscripts from the fourth century. Their text was the one primarily used for the English Revised Version and the later American Standard Version.

Continuing manuscript discoveries have led to an unending number of changes to the critical text in the time since then. Eberhard Nestle was the next caretaker of the text, and then his mantle fell to Kurt and Barbara Aland. There are at present 27 editions of the Nestle-Aland Greek Text. As well, the United Bible Societies have their own critical text, of which there have been four editions. It is essentially identical to the Nestle-Aland text except for some differences in punctuation.

Despite all the minute adjustments in a combined 31 editions, most modern versions still read similarly to the Sinaiticus manuscript, although some questionable readings have been clarified with more manuscript support. The more older manuscripts they find, the more the theories of Westcott and Hort seem proven, as the older manuscripts uniformly reflect the so-called “neutral” text type.

What Argument Is Left?

What I have written up until this point seems to conclusively prove that the Alexandrian text type is the better text, and that the theory behind modern textual criticism is valid. However, there are a number of

details that need to be considered in defense of the Byzantine text before a decision on textual issues can be made.

The first and foremost thing to understand is that no one can demonstrate that the Byzantine text ever grew. It is similar to the theory of evolution; no one can demonstrate from the fossil record that evolution ever occurred. No one can demonstrate a gradual growing or “evolution” of the Byzantine text, either. One may argue this is due to the lack of manuscript support before 500AD. But if the text was growing before then, why would it have stopped afterward? The Latin Vulgate did not stop growing in that time.

Next, we need to consider textual transmission theory. The fact is, the Byzantine manuscripts flow from the area in which the early church was the strongest, and where the church was centered after the fall of Jerusalem, Antioch. All of the original writings of the apostles with a few exceptions either originated from this area or came into this area first. Certainly none of the apostles' writings originated in Egypt or were directed to Egypt. All of the text that came to Egypt would have to come from Antioch first. Naturally, that text could lose something in transmission from scribe to scribe, and Egypt was a very long distance from Antioch. It is well within the realm of possibility that Egypt would receive an abbreviated text.

The Alexandrian manuscripts, including Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, contain a lot of errors, and disagree with each other in a number of places. One of the oldest manuscripts known is called Papyrus 66 (or “P66”). It is Alexandrian. It contains on average two errors per verse. How could this happen? It is speculated that the person transcribing P66 probably did not personally know Greek, but was simply copying out, letter by letter, the papyrus manuscript. The amount of error in the document is consistent with this explanation.

Another problem arises when you add in the testimony of the early church fathers. They obviously quoted the Bible extensively, and they seem to include a mix of Alexandrian and Byzantine readings. One glaring example in which the church fathers disagree with the Alexandrian manuscripts involves Mark 16. Mark 16 ends at verse 8 in the most important Alexandrian manuscripts. Nevertheless, the very early church fathers Ireneus and Hippolytus quoted from Mark 16:9-20 in the second century, long before Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were copied.

This proves that, while we have no Byzantine manuscripts from the period, the *readings* in the Byzantine manuscripts existed in the second century. Why were they not included in the Alexandrian manuscripts, if the readings existed?

The absence of Byzantine manuscripts, and the presence of the readings, creates a mysterious conundrum. While the absence of Byzantine manuscripts from the period is seen as a point in favor of the Alexandrian text, it can be seen as a condemnation of that text as well. You see, the best manuscripts were copied extensively, until the first copy was worn out completely from use and discarded. (This was almost certainly the fate of the very originals.) The fact that the older Alexandrian copies exist can be seen as evidence that they were not considered good enough to copy, yet not bad enough to be discarded.

Furthermore, the climate in Alexandria is much kinder to papyrus than the climate around Antioch. It is possible that the Byzantine readings have existed since the beginning, even though there are no manuscripts physically available to prove it.

More Problems from Church Fathers

The early church fathers create another complication for both the Alexandrian and Byzantine textual families, and that problem is 1 John 5:7-8, also known as a Johannine Comma. It is not to be included in the Bible under the rules of either the Majority Text advocates or the Consensus Text advocates.

The King James Version, based on the Received Text, contains the Johannine Comma, and reads, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And

there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (1 John 5:7-8, KJV).

The American Standard Version, based on the Westcott-Hort text, does not contain the Johannine Comma, reading, “And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one” (ASV). This is the same reading found in the Majority Text.

The Johannine Comma is confessed to exist in six manuscripts according to the United Bible Societies' New Testament notes, the UBS being opposed to its inclusion. D.A. Waite, a proponent of the Comma, listed twenty manuscripts containing the text, and noted its inclusion in the writings of four church fathers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine and Jerome.

The Johannine Comma would not be included in the Majority Text because it appears in a minority of manuscripts. It would not be included in the Consensus Text because it is not included in the “best” manuscripts. Yet, its support in the church fathers would seem to be quite strong.

Maintenance In the East and West

The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church had very different policies concerning the maintenance of the Bible text. For starters, the Roman Catholics maintained a version of the text, a Latin translation, while the Eastern Orthodox maintained the text in the original language. The translation was based on the textual choices of essentially one man, Jerome, while the Eastern text never went through any sort of recension. A “recension,” put simply, is the act of gathering up all the variant readings and standardizing on a particular reading. (The textual critics Westcott and Hort theorized that the Byzantine text had been through a recension, but it was never proven historically.)

The Eastern Orthodox Church did not restrict access to the Bible, while in the later centuries, the Roman Catholic Church did. This leads to arguments for and against both texts. Given the restrictions, it would seem reasonable that the Roman Church, using only professional copyists, would have preserved their text better than the Eastern Church, which copied the Greek manuscripts rather freely. In the east, the people had access to the manuscripts and could make their own copies.

This practice could have led to the very problems textual criticism addresses, such as “expansions of piety” and the adoption of liturgy into the text. On the other hand, the wide access to the Bible text in the East would have prevented change. The Greek documents were in the hands of many Christian groups not associated at all with either branch of the Catholic Church, the underground churches that were heavily persecuted throughout time, many for their practice of believers' baptism rather than infant baptism. Meanwhile, the carefully guarded Latin text could have been changed virtually at will without the knowledge of anyone outside the ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Church.

Weighing the Testimony of the Fathers

If one believes the testimony of the church fathers, it would be impossible to conclude that the Alexandrian text is pure. It would seem to suffer from serious dropout errors, and therefore, its text could not be trusted. By extension, today's critical text could not be trusted either.

But does one necessarily believe the testimony of the church fathers?

There are three problems with trusting the testimony of the church fathers on textual matters. First, they testify to 1 John 5:7, which is not supported by either consensus scholarship or majority text scholarship. 1 John 5:7 existed in the Received Text only due to the insistence of the Roman Catholic Church to include the text. It was contained in none of the Greek manuscripts originally in Erasmus' possession. It was probably

included because the Vulgate testified to it, and the Vulgate probably testified to it because its translator, Jerome, had quoted it.

The second problem is that the church fathers quoted from non-canonical works such as The Gospel of Peter. The canon was still evolving during the lives of some of the church fathers. Only two church fathers make reference to Mark 16:9-20; they could well have been part of an apocryphal work posing as the work of Mark that was later identified to be unoriginal.

The third problem is that the church fathers sometimes paraphrased their quotations of Scripture rather than quoting literally. It is possible that Scripture was adjusted to support the church fathers' quotations, either by accident (through familiarity with their writings) or by design.

The argument in favor of accepting the church fathers is that they were apologists, which meant that they argued in favor of Christian doctrines from texts at their disposal. They were communicating on the teachings of people considered to be heretics by the Catholic Church. If they argued from readings that did not exist, their arguments would have been summarily dismissed, and they would have lost their arguments. History shows this did not happen.

In light of that, I believe that the testimony of the church fathers must be taken as being true. Even when they did quote from apocryphal works, they were quoting from readings that existed, that people could verify.

The Answer

So, did text get left out of the Alexandrian text or added into the Byzantine? This remains the question we need to answer for ourselves. I have provided as much information as I can for you to formulate your own answer to the question.

My answer is this: in light of the fact that no one can prove the Byzantine text ever changed; that the readings of the Alexandrian text may be incomplete due to its being a regionalized text; that the public availability throughout all time of the Byzantine text would have served as a safeguard against changes as massive as alleged; upon the testimony of the church fathers of readings that never existed in the Alexandrian text type; and finally, the fact that the Alexandrian text type ceased to exist in the Greek, in light of the Biblical doctrine of providential preservation, the Majority Text must be considered the most trustworthy possible text of the Holy Bible.

The Recommendation

There are very few Bibles available today that reflect the Majority Text. Actually, none presently published are based on the Byzantine Majority Text, but two major versions are based on the Received Text, which reflects 98% of the Majority Text already. These two versions are the King James Version and the New King James Version. I find both versions useful. I consider the New King James Version much easier to read, and it is my recommendation for most people. The New King James Version also benefits from footnotes that show where the consensus text and the majority text differ from the Received Text.

Because the church fathers make reference to the Johannine Comma, and the Received Text contains the Comma, I recommend that your version either be based on the Received Text, or be based on the Majority Text with footnotes noting the Received Text readings. The Comma is a highly disputed piece of text, but because there is a chance this rare reading was providentially preserved, I think it should be maintained at least as a footnote.

There are a few other versions based on the Received Text that are worthy of note. The Literal Version and the Interlinear Bible are two versions offered by Sovereign Grace Publishers. They are simply excellent

reference tools. I have the Interlinear Bible which has the LITV in the margin.

Our software, the Bible Search Utility, offers two more excellent Majority Text versions. The World English Bible is an easy-to-read version that is actually based on the Byzantine Majority Text. The Analytical-Literal Version is fast becoming one of my favorite study versions. Based on the Received Text now, it will later be based on the Byzantine Majority Text and will have Received Text footnotes.

There is one Critical Text version that is worthy of mention, the New American Standard Bible. If you disagree with my conclusions about the Majority Text, and believe the Critical Text is best, this is the version I recommend to you. The New American Standard Bible is definitely the best translation of the Critical Text, and it footnotes some of the important Majority Text readings that are missing.

In Conclusion

I wrestled with the question of Bible texts for years, giving great consideration to the pros and cons of both text types. Perhaps the evidence I presented leads you to a different conclusion than mine, and if so, so be it! The difference between the two texts is very small compared to some variances in history. The Septuagint in some places differed greatly from the Hebrew, and yet, when the translations were accurate, the apostles quoted the Septuagint, in a sense placing a stamp of approval on the version. For example, Jeremiah in the Septuagint omitted approximately 2700 words. That's close to the amount of difference between the Majority Text and the Consensus Text in all 27 books in the New Testament! Nevertheless, Jeremiah is quoted from the Septuagint in the New Testament.

The Bible text is remarkably pure text with an unparalleled number of ancient witnesses. Let's not ignore the witness of 95% of those manuscripts when the reasons to do so cannot be satisfactorily proven.

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