

On the text of the Greek New Testament that also happens to be the right one for cousin audiences

We expect that each recipient of whatever writing—later to become part of the New Testament—received the intended document and profited thereby. In fact, the collected writings of the New Testament were soon recognized as inspired and shared about widely. In the copying process it was inevitable that variation was introduced, but the documents were still copied over and over again.

Thousands of manuscripts were produced. Some were worn out through usage and replaced. Others were destroyed in various campaigns of very evil intent. If we have upwards of 6000 manuscripts extant today, we can assume that there were at least that many source manuscripts. And because the same source may have been copied multiple times, it is likely that the total number of manuscripts once copied and circulated was many times the number that are extant today.

Since that time and throughout recorded history there is evidence that the differences between manuscripts were observed and commented on. This started in the age of the church fathers and continues through the present.

Down through the centuries the Scriptures were widely available and generally of one major type that may be called the "Traditional Text." Despite that, there were clearly minor differences between manuscripts of the same book.

Erasmus published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516. His text was determined by comparing the small number of manuscripts available to him. Several other printed Greek texts, nearly identical, came into circulation in the following period. One of them was given the moniker *Textus Receptus* (Received Text, TR) and that name has stuck. The TR was largely congruent with the traditional text. At very least it belongs to the same wider stream.

The Enlightenment period gave rise to many scholars that studied the manuscripts critically. More manuscripts came to light. And in the twentieth century still more manuscripts were found, in particular, papyrus fragments in the dry sands of Egypt.

For a couple of centuries scholars were publishing their findings from comparing existing manuscripts. Mill, Wetstein and Bengel were among the earliest. With each successive scholar, the resultant critical text published diverged more and more from the traditional text.

Then in 1881-82 Westcott and Hort, two English scholars, published their *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. What was significant about that was that they managed to get their text to underlie the revision of the King James Bible in what became known as the English Revised Version of 1881. From that point on biblical textual criticism and translation became inextricably interconnected.

Almost all translation since 1881, beginning with the American revised version of 1901 (ASV), followed the Westcott-Hort text, as it came to be known, or its successor critical editions, those of Eberhard Nestle and his son Edwin. Following them came Kurt Aland. The Nestle text eventually was taken over by the United Bible Societies (in particular, the German Bible Society), which publish both the Nestle-Aland edition, most recently N/A28, and a translator-friendly companion, now GNT5. For all practical purposes the texts of N/A28 and GNT5 are identical.

There was sure to be a reaction to the direction of textual criticism since Westcott and Hort. It has many precursors, but four strands may be identified. The TR camp, which claims originality for Erasmus's edition or one of its early look-alikes. The KJV-only camp, which claims the GNT behind the KJV is original, even though, since no such Greek text is extant, its followers are happy to create the Greek text supposedly underlying the English KJV. The Majority text camp (MT), which takes

the reading found in the majority of manuscripts as definitive in every case. (A few other principles are followed where the manuscripts show no obvious majority, namely, in John 7.53-8.11 and in the book of Revelation.) Finally, the Byzantine Text, which has been determined on still other grounds, though showing large congruity with these other approaches.

It must be stressed that the TR, KJV-only, MT and BT are not identical. As an example of "distances," the BT differs from the modern critical text (GNT5) in at least 6000 places, whereas it differs from the TR in 1800 places and the MT in some four hundred places.

The obvious question is which one of these various editions most closely reflects the autographs. Each claims that it does. Whether it does or not, the Westcott-Hort tradition (today's GNT5, N/A28) is certainly the dominant edition used widely in seminaries and in Bible translation. It corresponds to Ptolemaic astronomy, Newtonian physics, and structural linguistics before Copernicus, Einstein and Chomsky, respectively, came along, that is, it is the ruling paradigm. All it has to do is outlast (whether by arguing or ignoring) all other pretenders or outsiders to mainline scholarly thinking.

I have followed textual criticism as a hobby for some fifty years. Though I have been an enduring observer, I am still an outsider and a novice. Nevertheless, I have come to embrace the position that the Byzantine Textform, as it is called, is the closest thing to the originals that we have to date. There are many good reasons for this. Why should I stand outside of accepted scholarship if there were not very good reasons to do so?

My thinking on the subject can be summarized by two very concise terms: *theory* and *text*. As for *theory*, the Byzantine Textform is backed by an underlying theory that is testable, indeed falsifiable.¹ It is not subjective, but highly objective. In some sense (not to despise the decades of time that have gone into developing the theory through data observation or the sweat expended in some pronouncements of finer detail) the BT can be said to be formulaic. Apply the theory and the results are in general obvious, except in a very few small details.

The CT (critical text), on the other hand, is underlain by no equivalent theory, no overall testable statement of its origin and development, in part because it didn't develop through history, but in meeting rooms. BT theory, on the other hand, not only explains its own resultant Byzantine Text, but it also explains the underlying readings of the critical text, especially those of the Alexandrian texttype.

As for *text*, we do not speak or write in disparate units, but rather in connected texts. Human communication is all about connected texts. Applying this to the identity of the Greek New Testament, it is clear that its component books were not only written as texts, but also read, copied and preserved as texts. There is no hint in history that the church was ever without the New Testament as distinct and continuous texts.

On the other hand, the CT is determined by committee, subjectively weighing every next set of competing readings to determine which passes muster. Of course there are principles of choice used by the CT committee, called canons, that apply to both internal and external evidence, as indeed there are for the Byzantine Text. But the linguistically sophisticated canons of BT theory speak to text and not to the disparate particles of CT praxis.

¹ In true science we look for falsifiability and not verifiability. Take the theory of evolution. What would it take to verify it? Its opponents could always ask for one more verification, one more validation. But if you can falsify something, you need only one effecting contradiction. Granted, opponents of seeing a theory falsified can always ignore the falsifying evidence regarding its truthfulness or they can alter the theory to make the falsification no longer valid or they can dump the theory and come up with a new one. The difficulty with the CT is that there is no publicly stated theory to falsify; the best that can be done is to falsify its canons—its axioms—which have taken a beating in several thoughtful dissertations—and still get ignored. That is the privilege of a reigning paradigm—and its weakness.

I know all the arguments that you my readers might put forth in support of the critical text. Every one of them I have ever examined is satisfyingly answered by BT theory. Yes, every one of them. In fact, many CT scholars have themselves admitted the correctness of BT theory or parts thereof (and/or the observational failure of their own approach). But apple pie and Sears catalogues die hard. The reigning paradigm stands on its own inertia.

I was satisfied enough with the BT to use it as the source text when we began translating for the Konjo people. Early on my translation helper looked puzzled when we made decisions that seemed to conflict with the national-language translations available to her. So I undertook to write up for her the basis for translation according to the BT. It is now available in a small twenty-page essay called "A layman's guide to determining the identity of the Greek New Testament" (Layman's Guide). In it I go to original writings in BT theory and simplify them for the layman. There is nothing original in my words. I am facilitator of understanding of the thoughts of others.

The main developer of BT theory and praxis is Maurice A. Robinson (primarily along with William Pierpont). But these ideas, the nuts and bolts of a workable theory concerning the transmission of continuous texts, are not created out of nothing. Dr. Robinson knows the history of textual criticism as few others. He shows that even Westcott and Hort, who delighted to overturn the TR, had some things right.

I invite you to read the Layman's Guide and consider its claims. They are most satisfying. They answer the big questions, whose answering allows us to fit together the autographs, which have largely always been there.

But now how does this apply to the cousins among whom we work? Wonderfully, this applies directly and easily. No tortured application need be feared. The underlying text of the New Testament was copied and preserved in the monasteries of the Middle East. It is the text that is largely subscribed to by Orthodox churches in their various expressions from Athens to Moscow. It is the text that has always been there.

We know that our cousin friends have been preconditioned to think that our Scriptures have been hopelessly tampered with by successive generations of adherents of Isa. Of course some will hold that opinion to their deaths. Some will even publish with intent to discredit our Scriptures with footnotes and other commentary showing difficulties, contradictions, non sequiturs and impossibilities. That is no different in thrust from modern Westerners that scoff at an authoritative word from God. Let them be.

The encouraging thing about the Byzantine Textform is that it not only deals with continuous texts, but also with a history of continuous transmission from the very beginning. Thoughtful reconstruction shows that manuscripts containing the BT go back to the autographs, practically shown through the earliest times of extant manuscripts and theoretically shown beyond that to the very beginning.

The approach of the CT, on the other hand, subjects each successive set of readings to the deliberations of the committee. Their apparatus and their writings seem to delight to show that what we hold in our hands, if only in translated form, came to us in acceptable form only through much piecemeal work. What more need we do to abet the enemy of faith?

Don't tell our cousin friends, but the edited form of fully 105 unit verses in the CT text is found in no, repeat NO, extant manuscript whatsoever. True. And for two-verse sequences, the distressing figure is fully 210 additional units. Shamefully true. That's because the CT is put together piecemeal from single words and phrases. The BT, on the other form, shows textual integrity and continuity because that is the way it was written.

Unlike many modern translations, our own effort does not footnote textual differences. Why? Because the autographs can be established with 99.9% certainty.² The basis for that is textual criticism of continuous texts, not piece by piece of every next possible variant-reading unit. And underlying that is a theory that is satisfying to the intellect, something that leaves subjectivity behind and answers to objectivity.

So why show cousin friends textual variants that are provably not original? Why not give them the text that is defensible even by laymen, based on a straightforward and not-ad-hoc theory and demonstrably connected in continuous texts with a continuous history right back to the beginning?

In summary I urge you to read the Layman's Guide. These few paragraphs are merely a teaser. The Layman's Guide is a serious work of summary, providing clarification and simplification for the layman. If you have been trained in textual criticism, if even in just a course or two, you may have to disengage your mind from the *modus operandi* taught you as the only way it could possibly ever be, the result of 140 years of groupthink. But if you possibly can, initially for an hour or two, I expect that you will see that the case for Byzantine priority is logically, linguistically and practically extremely compelling.

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² This is not to deny that there are also some places where the BT shows divided readings.