

# **Ancient New Testament Manuscripts The Greek Editions**

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## **1. Review of textual criticism**

Since the original writings of the New Testament have not survived the two thousand year span of time, the task of determining their text becomes necessary. This process of evaluating the variant readings of existing 5,800+ New Testament manuscripts and coming to a decision about the original text is known as textual criticism.

The work of textual criticism surrounds the study of which manuscripts support which variant reading, known as the “external evidence.” The counterpart to this study is to consider which variant reading would have been more likely to give rise to the other reading(s), known as the “internal evidence.”

The best and most widely used approach to dealing with these variants in the manuscripts is called “reasoned eclecticism” which treats internal and external evidence as equally valuable, looking at the external evidence first before considering the internal evidence. However, it has taken centuries of development in the study of ancient manuscripts to come to a methodology approaching the reconstruction of the original New Testament text. Today’s class will look at this development in the published Greek New Testament editions.

## **2. The New Testament Greek text (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries)**

A Greek edition of the New Testament is a printed copy of the New Testament in Greek, unlike a Greek manuscript, which is a handwritten copy. With the invention of the movable text printing machine by Johann Gutenberg in 1454, the Bible could be mass produced. Gutenberg’s first effort was the Latin Bible. In fact, more than one hundred editions of the Latin Bible were published before anyone took up the task of printing a Greek New Testament.

The first printed copy of the Greek New Testament was part of the Complutensian Polygot in 1514 by Cardinal Francisco Cisneros, archbishop of Toledo. His New Testament was based upon only three minuscules, (140, 234 and 432), the earliest of which was from the thirteenth century. The publishing of this edition was delayed until it received papal authorization in 1520.

### **A. Erasmus’ Greek edition**

This delay in publishing of Cisneros’s edition led a printer in Basil, Johann Froben, to seize the publishing opportunity and he recruited Desiderius Erasmus, a highly respected Catholic priest and scholar to publish the first edition. Erasmus began his task in July of 1515, began the printing process in October of 1515 and published his Greek New Testament in March of 1516. This process occurred so quickly that a nineteenth century English critic called it the least carefully printed book ever published.

Regardless of its high number of printing errors, Erasmus's edition not only cemented his place in historical trivia but in actual influence. His work would become the basis for nearly all of the printed Bibles for the next four centuries.

Erasmus used a total of seven minuscules (1, 2, 817, 2814, 2815, 2816 and 2817) with the earliest dating from the twelfth century. Three of these manuscripts contained the gospels, four contained Paul's epistles, two contained Acts and the general epistles and only one contained the book of Revelation. The one manuscript of Revelation lacked the last six verses and Erasmus' edition simply translated the Latin Vulgate into Greek. This introduced significant errors, notably the reading "book of life" in Revelation 22:19 from his Latin texts instead of "tree of life" which is found in the Greek manuscripts. In fact, this edition was a Latin and Greek edition and Erasmus was more concerned about the Latin text.

Erasmus soon published a second edition in 1519, making over 400 changes and correcting many of the typos. He acquired another twelfth century manuscript with all but Revelation included. This second edition was used by Luther to translate the New Testament into German in 1522.

The most significant change in Erasmus' third edition (1522) was the inclusion of the "Comma Johanneum," meaning an extra clause found in 1 John 5:7 in some late manuscripts. The King James Version included this: "For there are three that bear record *in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.*"

Erasmus' omission of this phrase in his first two editions created a controversy since it was found in the Latin Vulgate (with the exception of the two oldest copies of the Vulgate). Erasmus only included 1 John 5:7 when he was provided a manuscript that included it. That manuscript, minuscule 61, was only a few years old (it is dated c. 1520) and there is evidence that the manuscript was copied from a text that did not have it. Erasmus actually included a lengthy footnote to this text regarding his concern that this text was prepared in order to make him include this text!

Of the thousands of Greek manuscripts examined since minuscule 61 was produced, the only other Greek manuscripts that contain the Comma Johanneum are minuscule 629 (fourteen or fifteenth century) where it was translated back from Latin; minuscule 918 (sixteenth century); minuscule 2318 and 2473 (both eighteenth century); and five other minuscule where it was included in the margin by a later scribe in the sixteenth century.

Erasmus' place in the history of the English Bible became secure when his third edition was used for William Tyndale's English New Testament in 1526, which was the first English translation from the original languages. It was highly popular with Protestant Christians and as such it became highly influential for all English translations for the next 350 years. Tyndale's use has led to Erasmus' third edition to be referred to generally by many as the "received text" or *Textus Receptus*.

Erasmus published a fourth edition in 1527 after seeing the text of the Complutensian Polygot and making changes accordingly, particularly in Revelation. His fifth edition (1535) differed little from his fourth edition. In the end, minuscule 1 was the best manuscript that Erasmus used in that it agrees often with the earlier uncial text, but Erasmus used it the least since he was concerned about its erratic text!

## **B. Stephanus' Greek edition**

Robert Estienne, known by his Latin name of Stephanus, was a publisher in Paris who produced four editions of his Greek New Testament. The text of the first two editions of 1546 and 1549 was a compound of the Complutensian and Erasmusian editions.

Stephanus' third edition in 1550 was his most significant work, in terms of its quality of print and its contents, and become known as the "Royal Edition." It was the first edition to include an apparatus to explain the variants among the manuscripts that he used.

The Greek text of the third edition was closer to Erasmus' last edition than to the Complutensian Polyglot, and in addition it used several manuscripts not evaluated in earlier editions (4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 38, 398) all dated between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. It also consulted two Codices, Codex Regius (an Alexandrian text containing the Gospels and from the eighth century) and Codex Bezae (a Western text containing the Gospels and Acts from the fifth century).

Stephanus produced a fourth edition that was identical to the third edition but added New Testament verses for the first time. Stephanus' Greek edition was the text for the English Geneva New Testament (1557) and gained great standing in England among the Protestants and became the authorized version for the church.

## **C. Beza's Greek edition**

Theodore Beza, a follower of John Calvin, published a Greek New Testament in 1565, with further major editions in 1582, 1588-89 and 1598. Beza was significant because he owned two significant uncials of the Western text-type, Codex Bezae and Codex Claromonotanus (c. 550 A.D. and containing Paul's epistles). However, he made relatively little use of these texts since they deviated too much from the existing Greek text of Stephanus, which he leaned on heavily.

The primary significance of Beza's edition was that it was the Greek text the King James Version translators relied upon the most. It was depended upon so much that even some of Beza's "conjectural emendations" (changes he made to the text based upon what he thought the author must have written without any manuscript evidence at all) found their way into the King James Version.

The most famous of these is Revelation 16:5, which reads "Thou are righteous, O Lord, which are, and wast, and shalt be" in the King James Version. This phrase "and shalt be" does not exist in any manuscript but was added by Beza because he felt the pattern fit better with Revelation 1:4 and 1:8. Instead of "and shalt be," the manuscripts read "O Holy One," which all modern translations reflect.

## **D. Elzevir's Greek edition**

Bonaventure Elzevir, with his nephew Abraham, were notable Dutch printers instead of Greek scholars. Their first Greek edition (1624) deviated from Beza's 1565 edition in only fifty minor places. The quality of their printing was popular and this led to a second edition in 1633, which separated each verse and capitalized the first letter of each verse.

The single reason the Elzevir edition is noteworthy in the history of the Greek editions is because of the preface to the 1633 edition, which read “Therefore you have the text now received by all in which we give nothing altered or corrupt.” This marketing phrase led to this edition receiving the name “Textus Receptus,” or Received Text.

For the next 200 years, the Greek editions did almost nothing with the Greek text but were focused on adding material information from manuscript data to the margin only.

### **3. The New Testament Greek text (nineteenth through twenty-first centuries)**

The first Greek edition to break with the various permutations of the Textus Receptus was published by Karl Lachmann in 1831. It followed the manuscript evidence from older manuscripts and as such is considered the first “critical edition” of the Greek New Testament.

#### **A. Tischendorf’s Greek edition**

Constantin von Tischendorf, moved by his own discovery of important uncials, published his own edition of the Greek New Testament. His work culminated with his eighth edition that he published in 1872. It followed the Alexandrian text-type, particularly when it agreed with the Western texts.

Tischendorf set himself apart from his contemporaries by his work on an apparatus, which was at the time far and away the most complete and comprehensive information on the manuscript evidence at that time.

#### **B. The Westcott and Hort Greek edition**

Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort published their Greek New Testament in 1881. It strongly favored the Alexandrian text-type and Codex Vaticanus in particular, with secondary support from Codex Sinaiticus. Both of those Codices were published in the 1860s, giving them access to these ancient texts. The Westcott and Hort edition did not have an apparatus.

The significance of Westcott and Hort’s edition was primarily its use in English translations. The same year in which they published their Greek edition, the Revised Version was published. The timing was not accidental since Westcott and Hort were part of the revision committee for the translation. The Revised Version remains the only officially recognized revision of the KJV by the Church of England. This version gained quick popularity and began the movement toward modern Bible translations based upon the “critical text.” By 1901, the Revised Version was published with limited changes in the United States in the American Standard Version.

While the Revised Version sought to change as little of the KJV as possible, using the Westcott-Hort text created many highly noticeable changes, such as the Comma Johanneum (1 John 5:7) being omitted. There was a large resistance to departing from the KJV, particularly among Bible believing Protestants who had a fond affection for their familiar English text. Since the New Testament papyri had not yet been discovered, there were some theologians who argued against the Westcott-Hort text, on the basis of the manuscript evidence at the time. However, it would take about 100 years for this allegiance to the KJV to be fought on the ideological grounds of those who believe the KJV is the only inspired Bible and that any deviation from it in any fashion equaled a corruption of the Word of God.

### **C. The Nestle-Aland Greek edition**

The Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament is known by the abbreviation “NA” and it has a long history. In 1898, Eberhard Nestle published the first edition of what was then known as the Nestle Edition by doing little more than comparing the Westcott-Hort Greek text with the Tischendorf Greek text. If they did not agree he broke the tie with a third Greek text (Weymouth’s 1892 edition and later Weiss’ 1900 edition).

The first major change in this edition occurred in the thirteenth edition in 1927, when Nestle’s son Erwin took over the work. Erwin not only improved his father’s methodology of conforming to the majority view of other editions but also added an apparatus explaining the discrepancies.

The reason why the Nestle-Aland edition is so important is the work of Kurt Aland, who joined the project with the production of the twenty-first edition in 1952. The discovery of significant New Testament papyri along with Aland’s new role in the edition fueled the work of a major advancement with the Greek apparatus and in 1955 an internationally acclaimed team of textual scholars was formed to produce an independent Greek New Testament apart from the prior Nestle methodology.

Aland’s finished product was many years in the making, finally published as the Nestle-Aland twenty-sixth edition in 1979. It is known as NA26 and was basically a new edition. The NA27 was published in 1993 and the NA28 was published in 2012, with the changes essentially surrounding the apparatus. The impact of the Nestle-Aland edition can be seen in the English translations that use its Greek text, beginning in 1946 with the Revised Standard Version (NT). The NASB, NIV, ESV, HCSB and many more all begin their translation from Greek text from the Nestle-Aland committee.

### **D. The United Bible Societies Greek edition**

The same committee that was working on the Nestle-Aland edition published the first United Bible Societies Greek New Testament in 1966. Therefore, the United Bible Societies and the Nestle-Aland editions print the same Greek text. The only difference lies in the interpretive matters such as punctuation that were never part of the original text in the first place.

The United Bible Society published the third edition in 1975 with the same Greek text as the NA26 edition. This new edition was known as UBS3. The UBS4 (1993) and the UBS5 (2014) were published primarily to revise the apparatus.

The reason for the United Bible Societies edition was with the purpose of the apparatus. The stated goal of the committee was that the UBS edition was for the use by Bible translators while the NA edition was for the use by textual scholars. The apparatus of the UBS edition references far fewer textual variants, with the NA apparatus noting ten times more variants than the UBS apparatus. However, the listing of the manuscript evidence is far fuller in the UBS text, allowing a greater degree of ability to examine the textual data. It includes all the significant variants, along with the more well-known textual issues.

Since the UBS and the NA text are identical, the quality of the apparatus has made the UBS edition the most popular and useful Greek New Testament, to the point of when people refer to the Greek New Testament they now mean the UBS edition.

## E. Editio Critica Maior edition

The Editio Critica Maior (ECM) is a more recent initiative to produce a Greek edition in support of the Nestle-Aland text but with a vast greater depth of textual analysis. The ECM first published its work on the Epistle of James in 1997 and to date has completed only the general epistles. The NA28 and UBS5 both incorporated their work on the general epistles to a limited extent their respective apparatuses. The hope of the ECM is to complete the entire New Testament with this full apparatus by 2030.

### 4. Update on specific passages

So far in this class we have looked at certain variants as examples. With some of these variants, the UBS5 has provided additional information for us beyond the UBS4.

**John 4:1:** “Jesus knew” was chosen over “the Lord knew” with a confidence level of C according to the UBS committee entirely on the weight of the internal evidence, noting that the church used the term “Lord” to refer to Jesus through the years.

The additional information provided by the UBS5 shows that P66 was corrected to read “Lord” when the original reading was “Jesus.” The UBS4 only showed P66 supporting the corrected reading of “Lord.” This is important because not only puts the earliest text in favor of word “Jesus” but it also shows the propensity for later scribes to change “Jesus” to “Lord.” This is also an example of the need to carefully study the manuscript in close detail.

**Revelation 13:18:** “666” was chosen over “616” with a confidence level of A on the basis of strong manuscript evidence and Irenaeus is quoted for support that 666 is found “in all good and ancient copies” and is “attested by those who had themselves seen John face to face.”

Additional information provided by the UBS5 shows the variant reading of 616 to be found in P115, which was originally discovered at the turn of the twentieth century but was able to be identified as a text from Revelation 100 years later. Nevertheless, P115 was not enough to sway the UBS committee away from the certainty that 666 represents the original text.

This manuscript is an example of a text being deciphered long after it had been found. It still required several years before a close examination could be done on Revelation 13:18 (mostly because there are twenty-six separate fragments that make up P115).

### 5. Conclusion

The continued discovery of additional manuscripts, combined with the ongoing work of careful examination of the known manuscripts will result in additional understanding of the New Testament. This should be an encouragement toward continued learning the Word of God rather than a discouragement regarding our challenge with the variants. Throughout the ages there has been a continued growth in understanding the Word of God, whether from the provision of additional revelation through the prophets, or whether through a greater ability to obtain the Word of God, or whether through the greater examination of the Word of God.

### 6. Application

“Be amazed at the survival of God’s Word.”