

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

Textus Receptus

Casey Jenison
Valley Bible Church, Lancaster, California
www.valleybible.net

1. Introduction

During the Reformation, common language Bibles were being translated in many parts of Europe. Copies of the Bible in Spanish, English, and German appeared on a large scale for the first time. Prior, the Bible had only been in Latin for centuries in Western Europe, and instead of using this translation to make these Bibles, translators worked from a Greek translation called the *Textus Receptus*.

Much weight was put on this translation to hold the most accurate translation of the original autographs of the NT scriptures. At the time, this weight was well-placed, however in more recent years more and better NT manuscripts have surfaced leading to opportunity for better Bible translations utilizing textual criticism. While most Bible scholars agree on this approach of using the whole of what currently exists to refine modern Bible translations, some groups are resistant holding that the Greek text of the *Textus Receptus* is still the best manuscript from which to work.

2. Review of Greek NT Editions and the Textus Receptus

Since the first published Greek edition of the NT by Erasmus in 1516, there have been several NT editions that have come to be referred to as the “Textus Receptus” by different groups.

- a. *Erasmus’ Edition* – 1516, Since it was the first printed and published edition, and consequently became the baseline for every Greek text in the four centuries following. The first publication was hastily and carelessly composed requiring many changes to be made in the years following. He used only seven minuscule a for his edition, none of which overlapped for comparison purposes. Revelation was back-translated from Latin editions of the Bible since none of the manuscripts he had contained Revelation. Nonetheless it became the main Greek edition used for the next four hundred years.
- b. *Stephanus’ 3rd Edition* – 1550, It was nearly identical to Beza’s later edition (1598) and was deemed the “Royal Edition” for its quality. He had access to older manuscripts (i.e., Codices Regius and Bezae). Additionally, he inserted verse identifiers, which serve to make organization more convenient but that present their own interpretive challenges
- c. *Beza’s Edition* – 1598, He had access to two great uncials but did not use them since they seemed to differ too greatly from the more recent manuscripts he utilized. Instead, he made several conjectural emendations of his own. This is significant since this was the main edition used by the King James Version translators.
- d. *Elzevir’s Edition* – 1633, In the preface appeared the first usage of the phrase *textum receptum*, which was later changed to *Textus Receptus*, or “received text”. This was a marketing advertisement for their high-quality edition, but has been used to support the idea that the TR is the perfect, or at least the best, Greek edition of the NT.

Consequently, when the TR is referenced, there may be several possibilities for what is meant. Ultimately, and most generally though, it is considered to be the Greek text behind the 1611 King James Version. This vacillation and uncertainty as to what the TR actually was and is presents some very significant problems for those who hold that the KJV is the only inspired version of the Bible.

For the purposes of this class it is significant to note that the reason for the dethroning of the TR from the position of the most prominent Greek text is due to the inception of textual criticism.¹ Beginning in 1881, the *Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament*, which utilized the approach of more modern textual criticism, became the most popular and used Greek NT edition.

The question that arises with all of this is: Where did the concept of a Textus Receptus come from?

3. Philosophy of the Textus Receptus

Several factors led to a concept of a Textus Receptus, meaning the idea of a perfect Greek text which perfectly represents God's Word.

- a. The ecclesiastical authority of the Church of England, dubbing the KJV as the "Authorized Version."
- b. The preface of Elzevir's edition providing the popular phrasing for the concept.
- c. The lack of understanding the process of the KJV translation.
- d. The sentimental attachment to the KJV in response to the 1881 Revised Version, and other English translations that followed.
- e. The belief that God must have perfectly preserved His Word through what was most widely used.

Today, those who hold to the idea that the KJV is the only truly inspired version of the Bible have been labeled members of the "KJV-only Movement." This movement is common among the Independent Baptist Churches.

There is a spectrum of loyalty to the KJV-only movement which ranges from those who simply have a fond or nostalgic affinity for the style of the KJV to those who believe that the KJV is new or advanced revelation from God. The latter has been consequently deemed "double-inspiration."

4, The History of the KJV-only Movement

The King James translators sought originally to make a translation that would be easily accessible to English-speakers; and for decades, it served that purpose. As the English language changed over time, as all languages do, the Church of England decided to publish a revision of the KJV in 1870 called the Revised Version. Those who worked on this project did not use the TR for their Greek edition, but instead used a new Greek edition that was being simultaneously synthesized. This Greek edition was the work of B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort.

¹ "What is the Textus Receptus?", GotQuestions.org, <http://www.gotquestions.org/Textus-Receptus.html> (accessed 8/6/16).

The approach utilized in their synthesis of this new Greek edition was based on the presupposition that the older manuscripts most likely were the more accurate when comparing textual variants. This approach is called the Alexandrian Priority approach. This is significant since there had been so many more manuscripts discovered since the *seven* dating from the 12th Century that were utilized by Erasmus in 1516. In 1881 both the Westcott & Hort Greek Edition and the Revised Version were published.

The first significant person to oppose the approach of Westcott & Hort (which undermined the authority of the TR as the best Greek edition) was the Dean of Chichester, William Burgon. He published a review of the Revised Version titled “The Revision Revised” in which he defended the TR and rejected the Revised Version, thus beginning the KJV-only movement.² His views were not as extreme as conservative KJV-only advocates hold today. In his own words,

Once for all, we request it may be clearly understood that we do not, by any means, claim *perfection* for the Received text. We entertain no extravagant notions on this subject. Again and again we shall have occasion to point out (e.g. at page 107) that the *Textus Receptus* needs correction (*Revision Revised*, p. 21, fn. 2).

Instead, Burgon argued for what he called the Traditional Text of the church, by which he was referring to the Greek text found in the majority of the later medieval Byzantine manuscripts and which was generally represented by the TR.³ What concerned Burgon most was how many improvements had been made to the original KJV. He was specifically concerned that these improvements meant that God had somehow failed in preserving the NT text. Burgon’s view of preservation was particularly related to his High Church Anglicanism and apostolic succession. He believed that the correct text was to be found in what the Church, through its bishops, had preserved.⁴

Unlike the modern KJV-only adherents, Burgon disclaimed that no doctrinal issues were at stake with the Revised Version and that their “errors” in updating the English text were minor technicalities. Nonetheless, his views have been passed down and expanded upon to form the modern KJV-only movement.

5. Arguments Given by KJV-only Proponents⁵

- a. Argument #1: The doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible necessitates not only that the original manuscripts were without error but also that there must be extant copies without error to preserve this inerrancy. Otherwise, even liberals can believe in the inerrancy of the originals but deny the inerrancy of the Bible we have today if all extant copies have textual errors. In the Greek, the inerrant manuscripts are those of the *Textus Receptus* or the Byzantine family, which underlie the Authorized King James Version of the Bible.

² Bill Combs, “Beginnings of the KJV-only Movement”, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, <http://www.dbts.edu/2012/03/09/beginning-of-kjv-only-movement/> (accessed 8/6/16).

³ Bill Combs, “Dean Burgon: Father of the KJV-only Movement,” Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, <http://www.dbts.edu/2012/03/14/dean-burgon-father-of-the-kjv-only-movement/> (accessed 8/9/16).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Douglas S. Chinn & Robert C. Newman, “Demystifying the Controversy Over the *Textus Receptus* and the King James Version of the Bible”, <http://www.kjvonly.org/other/demystify.htm> (accessed 8/5/16).

- b. **Argument #2:** Although God has allowed textual errors to occur in all of the Greek copies of the original NT manuscripts, He has preserved the best text in the vast majority of these copies. The best text is found by looking through all of the extant Greek manuscripts and choosing the wording of the majority of those manuscripts. When 80-95% of the manuscripts have almost identical readings for any given passage, it should be obvious that the majority text is God's providentially preserved text.
- c. **Argument #3:** The Greek manuscripts underlying all of the modern versions of the NT come from Alexandria, Egypt. They could not be the best manuscripts because they have been in the possession of heretics, such as Origen and the Roman Catholic Church. God would not use such people to transmit the best text, since they would alter the text to suit their own teachings. Furthermore, the Alexandrian text was not in general use from the 8th to 19th centuries. God would not allow the true text to be hidden from public view for such a long time. Finally, God would not use liberals such as Tischendorf, Westcott, and Hort to rediscover and resurrect the true text.
- d. **Argument #4:** The TR manuscripts are the best manuscripts because they properly exalt the person of the Lord Jesus Christ while the Alexandrian manuscripts do not. When the Alexandrian manuscripts are compared with the TR, many places are found where the words "Lord" and "Christ" are missing in reference to Jesus. This shows that the people who copied the Alexandrian manuscripts did not want to believe that Jesus is both "Lord" and "Christ."
- e. **Argument #5:** The Alexandrian manuscripts could not be the true text because they teach doctrines different from those found in the TR. These errors include justification by works, Arianism, and belief that the Apocrypha is part of the Bible.
- f. **Argument 6:** The KJV, and the Greek TR text underlying it, must be the best text because God has so blessed its use since the time of the Reformation. In every major modern revival, men have preached from the TR-KJV texts. God has not used and will not use the corrupt Alexandrian text to do such great works among men.

In our discussions with pro-KJV people, it is not uncommon for them to claim that even the TR can be wrong, but the KJV cannot.

6. The King James Translators Speak

In the preface of the 1611 KJV, the translators explain their endeavor and provide some defense for their work against potential naysayers. Some of their main points puncture the largest holes in the KJV-only Movement.

- a. They praise scripture for its perfection, but they recognize that it cannot be appreciated unless it is translated into the common tongue of the people. The intent therefore is to make it accessible to the readers.
- b. They point out how the Septuagint was called the Word of God by the apostles even though it was far from perfect. They then acknowledge that there was a need for improved Greek translations after.
- c. They then answer the objection that there were already English translations at that time, so why would there be a need for another one? They answer this by saying, "nothing is

begun and perfected at the same time.” Hence, they admit that even their translation is imperfect. They write that previous English translators would thank them for what they are doing since there is always a need to improve.

- d. They then admit that all English translations could be rightly called the “Word of God” even though they contain minor blemishes. Further, no translation can ever be perfect since it was the original autographs that were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- e. They criticize the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for feeling the need to translate their own English bible, even reluctantly so, to have an “officially recognized” English translation. They make a case again this action by the RCC in pointing out how the Latin Vulgate has undergone several corrections over the centuries.
- f. They state their purpose: To not make a new translation but to make the best translation by improving upon previous ones. To do this they utilize and examine the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts since no translation should be done aside from examining the original languages.
- g. They admit that they relied on marginal notes often since they were unsure about the exact translation of a phrase or word.
- h. They even quote Augustine as saying, a “variety of translations is profitable for finding out of the sense of the Scriptures.”

Evidently, the KJV translators knew what they were doing would not be the best and surely would not be the final work in translating the Bible into the common language of the people. More than any other critique, what the KJV translators record in the preface of the 1611 edition exposes the flaws in the reasoning and convictions of the KJV-only proponents.⁶

7. The Textus Receptus Today

One Greek edition not previously mentioned was Scrivener’s 1881 edition. The Scrivener 1881 text was produced to reconstruct the Greek text behind the KJV of 1611.

Since the translators of the KJV never published the Greek text from which they worked, Scrivener attempted to back-translate into Greek based on the Greek texts and manuscripts that would have been available to the translators in 1611. Beza’s and Stephanus’s were those most widely used. Based on this Scrivener’s text can also fall into the camp of being labeled as the Textus Receptus as well.

Finally it is worth stating that, “there is no single Greek manuscript that represents the Textus Receptus, for the more than 30 varieties of the Textus Receptus were all eclectic texts formed by incorporating variant readings.”⁷

8. Application

Be open to improvement until your life is over.

⁶ Bill Combs, “The Preface and Opposition to New Translations”, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (accessed 8/6/16).

⁷ “Textus Receptus,” Theopedia, <http://www.theopedia.com/textus-receptus> (accessed 8/12/16).