

THE MAJORITY TEXT DEBATE: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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The recent appearance of *The New King James Version* (1982) and *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (1982) will undoubtedly give added impetus to those who argue against translating the New Testament from a critical Greek text, such as the UBS/Nestle-Aland text. The reissue of the *Textus Receptus* by the Trinitarian Bible Society also offers an attractively produced reset edition of F. H. A. Scrivener's *The New Testament in the Original Greek according to the text followed in the Authorised Version* (Cambridge, 1881). What appeared to be an isolated phenomenon of primary interest to a part of some groups in the United States has now gained added impetus through these publications which is likely to have an impact on Bible readers throughout the world.

To understand the revival of interest in this phenomenon, it is informative to study some of the underlying presuppositions and the motives of those who have expressed an interest in the Majority text of the Greek New Testament. At the outset we should pause to define the terms *Textus Receptus* and Majority text. The story of the origin of the phrase *textus receptus* has been frequently told in the introductions to New Testament textual criticism. After a century of important publications of the Greek NT, including, notably, Erasmus' several editions, the Greek NT text in the Complutensian Polyglott, Beza (notable as the primary text of the KJV translators), and others, the Elzevier brothers of Leiden issued a popular edition in 1624 which was essentially a reprint of the Beza edition of 1563. In a second edition, the Elzeviers hailed their publication in a publisher's "blurb" in the preface as the "textus receptus" (the text which is now received by all). Quite similar to the Beza edition of 1598, it is frequently described in popular publications as the text underlying the KJV. While this is historically not correct, it does represent the text generally followed by KJV. The KJV does depart from Beza 1598 in about 160 passages.¹ In addition, KJV appears to favor Vulgate readings on numerous occasions. Scrivener discusses these passages in an appendix to his Greek Testament of 1881 mentioned above. However, this appendix is omitted from the Trinitarian Bible Society reissue.

In popular literature, the *textus receptus* is usually equated with the Majority text. (Majority text is the term preferred to Byzantine by those who support this textual tradition perhaps because Byzantine implies that Byz. is an edited text in the Westcott and Hort sense. Undoubtedly, "majority" also has an emotional appeal, implying that the majority has a claim to be the best.) Majority text advocates from Dean Burgon to Hodges and Farstad recognize that there are numerous differences between Majority text (hereafter M) and *textus receptus* (hereafter TR). In fact Burgon, who had hoped to produce a new edition of M designated about 150 changes in TR in Matthew alone.² At first sight, the M-TR

¹ See F. A. H. Scrivener, *The Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611)* (Cambridge: University Press, 1910), for a fuller discussion, pp. 59-60 and "Appendix E" (pp. 243-263).

² Edward Miller, executor of the literary remains of Dean Burgon, prepared *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels* (London: George Bell, 1896) for publication after Burgon's death. In his preface, p. 5. Miller says that the 150 changes were suggested in the NT text left behind by Burgon.

differences may seem insignificant, but the cumulation of this line of evidence cuts to the heart of the presupposition of many M/TR advocates who assert the idea of divine preservation of the Bible text. The Westminster Confession (Chap. 7, Section VIII) is frequently cited as a doctrinal statement that asserts the idea that the Bible text was both divinely inspired and divinely preserved:

The Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic, so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.

Yet Don Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, himself a staunch defender of verbal inspiration, argues convincingly that “the argument that ties the adoption of TR to verbal inspiration is logically and theologically fallacious.”³ Douglas Chinn and Robert C. Newman, both avowed Fundamentalists examine and find unconvincing the arguments put forth by TR advocates. They then go on to offer two conjectures which “seem more likely to be the real reasons behind the controversy”: (1) “The use of the KJV has become a tradition in the English-speaking world. Many Fundamentalists have used the KJV all of their lives and would find it very difficult to use another version,” (2) “If it is admitted that there are errors in the KJV text, then people would have to be taught how to evaluate manuscript evidence to determine the best text. Unfortunately, this would require a knowledge of Greek and manuscript history. For most of the common people, such an education is unattainable. Then they would be at the mercy of anyone who claimed to be a scholar. Furthermore, after all of this scholarship, no one, not even a seminary-trained Fundamentalist pastor, would be able to point to a text and say that he now has a perfect copy of every word which was originally inspired by God.”⁴

The same emotional appeal to certainty is the approach of Jakob van Bruggen in his *The Ancient Text of the New Testament*.⁵ He first claims that UBS/GNT is a text of “uncertainty” because editorial committee decisions often were not unanimous. He then promotes the Byzantine (Church) text-type as the only text of primitive antiquity and real “certainty.”

While it may be quite easy to dismiss the logic of the pro-TR/M advocates, it is important to recognize the emotional appeal of certainty. In some areas which have inherited a TR-based translation, the emotional disruption of a critical text cannot be minimized. The TR has become a symbol of faith.⁶ Any proposal to

³ D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate, a Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), p. 68.

⁴ *Demystifying the Controversy over the Textus Receptus and the King James Version of the Bible* (Hatfield, Pa.: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1979), pp.26–28.

⁵ Van Bruggen’s lecture was delivered at the Theological College at Kampen and was published in both Dutch and English. The English edition (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier, 1976) is cited here. He contrasts the old editions of Nestle, a resultant text based on three or four other editions, with the 26th edition which was based on the consensus (“majority-vote”) of the editors as if the former possessed a greater degree of certainty. But he seems to be making a distinction in which there is no real difference. See p. 10.

⁶ Eugene A. Nida, “The New Testament Greek Text in the Third World” in *New Testament Textual Criticism, its Significance for Exegesis*, edited Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 375–380.

depart from a TR base in translation may be considered iconoclastic. TR/M advocates are likely to find a sympathetic ear in such situations. Yet the quest for “certainty” in the Greek New Testament text is chimeral. One need only be reminded of the hundreds of differences between TR and M to realize that the degree of certainty some people are looking for is not to be found. Historically speaking, the closest we come to a traditional text of universal acceptance is an amalgam of the Vulgate—TR—Byzantine traditions.

E. F. Hills, one of the staunchest defenders of the KJV base text, senses the necessity to defend the diverse strands that make up the TR by crediting Erasmus with divine guidance in bringing into the Byzantine type manuscripts he used certain Western (Vulgate) readings to restore the divinely preserved Greek text in time for the Reformation!⁷ Such are the lengths some are willing to go in 2n attempt to assure the church that it has at its disposal a translation of *the original* Greek NT in the KJV.

Other advocates of the TR/KJV do not seem to be aware of the problem of TR-M differences. One of the most popular spokesman for KJV, is Jasper James Ray, who wrote *God Wrote Only One Bible*. His checklist of 162 test passages is cited frequently to “prove” which modern Greek texts and English translations have fallen victim to “modern ‘brain-washed’ scholarship.”⁸ The worst offender, according to the 162 test passages, is the NIV, followed closely by the RSV and Nestle.²⁵ Yet in 14 of his test passages the consensus of M reads against TR and in an additional 17 passages a significant portion of M reads against TR.⁹ This means that about 20% of Ray’s test passages lack full M support. (This calculation excludes the 5 items in the list that are translational rather than textual.) In addition, one could counter that TR/KJV has “omitted” two theologically important readings: in 1 Jn 3.1, KJV omits the words of confidence, “and so, in fact, we are” (GNB); in Jude 25, KJV omits the Christologically significant “through Jesus Christ our Lord” from the benediction. KJV advocates will undoubtedly find this argument unconvincing, but it does demonstrate that even a text-type that is characterized by expansion tendencies may have lost some original readings along the way.

Again, let me emphasize what may seem to be a trivial issue regarding TR-M differences by quoting Carson’s 11th thesis:

The Byzantine text-type must not be thought to be the precise equivalent of the TR. This important point is too often ignored. The TR is based on a mere handful of relatively late manuscripts, in comparison with the thousands of witnesses that attest the Byzantine tradition. It is true of course that the TR is based on manuscripts of that tradition and stands fairly close to the broader tradition of which it forms a part; but the fact remains that it does not consider the broad evidence of its own tradition. It is also a fact that the closest manuscripts within a textual tradition average about six to ten variants per chapter.¹⁰

⁷ Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 3rd edition (Des Moines, Iowa: Christian Research Press, 1979), p.199.

⁸ Jasper James Ray, *God Wrote Only One Bible* (Eugene, Ore.: Eye Opener, 1980), p. 32–70.

⁹ The 14 passages are: Mt 12.35; 27.35; Lk 7.31; Jn 20.29; Acts 8.37; 9.5–6; 10.16; 1 Jn 5. 7–8; Rev 1.11; 5.14; 12.17; 14.5; 20.12; 21.24; The additional 17 passages are Mt 9.13; 16.20; Mk 2.17; 12.29–30; Acts 7.37; 24.6,7,8; Rom 13.9; Col 1.14; 2 Th 1.8; Heb 2.7; 11.11; Rev 1.8; 1.9; 11.17; 12.12; 16.3; 20.9.

¹⁰ Carson, *op cit.*, p. 67–68.

The issue is recognized but not resolved in the NKJV. With Farstad as editor-in-chief it seems that the translators ultimately envision a translation of M, the fulfilment of the goal advocated by Burgon a century ago. In the meantime, an updating of the KJV will serve the Christian community that wants this type of translation. There are over three hundred passages in NKJV that adhere to TR but lack M support.¹¹ These places are noted in the extensive footnote system which also alerts the reader to places where TR and M agree against Nestle-Aland and UBS/GNT³ (cited as N-U).

An entirely different criticism of GNT³/N-A²⁶ handling of the majority text is made by Frederik Wisse in *The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence* (Studies and Documents, 44: 1982). The Claremont Profile Method, described in detail here for the first time, promises to provide the means for finding significant variants in the mass of minuscule manuscripts. The appearance of Luke (Part 1) in the International Greek New Testament Project (IGNTP) edition will give scholars an opportunity to evaluate the application and success of the method. Some TR/M advocates may be inclined to take this criticism of N-A²⁶ handling of M readings as well as the use of TR as support for their views. However, such is of course not the case. Collections of the IGNTP are made against TR, not because the editors are convinced of TR's value, but, as Burkitt used to say, TR is "The worst possible text, and therefore the best for collation." (quoted by Kirsopp and Silva Lake in *Mémorial Lagrange*, 1940, p. 257).

Dr. J. Keith Elliott, executive editor of the IGNTP, in two different reviews of *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*, gives this new edition "a cautious welcome for providing a text that deserves to be taken as seriously as NA²⁶."¹² On the other hand, Elliott (1) recognizes that M readings were based on von Soden, which is full of inaccuracies in its apparatus; (2) expresses skepticism about the success of drawing up stemmata, as was done by the authors for John 8.1-11 and Revelation; and (2) rejects Hodges and Farstad's notion that "excellent reasons can almost always be given for the superiority of the majority readings." Generally, other textual critics have been even more critical of Hodges and Farstad's work. A detailed critique of their methodology has been given by Gordon Fee in his review that appeared in *Trinity Journal* 4 n.s. (1983): 107-113. Hodges and Farstad offer a useful presentation of the Majority text which also provides information on significant divisions within the Majority tradition. However, in the opinion of Fee, and most other reviewers, Hodges and Farstad have failed to offer convincing proof that the Majority text most nearly approximates the original text, although it may have preserved some readings of interest along the way.

The recent appearance of the first fascicle of Luke in the International Greek New Testament Project and the wider dissemination of Kurt and Barbara Aland's *Der Text des Neuen Testaments* (forthcoming in English and Italian editions) will provide a useful basis of comparison. The application of the

¹¹ The gospels contain 95 footnotes marking TR/M variants; Acts, 29; the epistles, 72; and, as expected, Revelation contains the highest number of variants, 115.

¹² Elliott's review appeared in the *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 34 (1983): 590-592. Another review, with additional criticisms of detail, appeared in *The Bible Translator* 34 (1983): 342-344.

“profile method” in the IGNTP edition of Luke 1–12 will offer a more balanced evaluation of the Majority text.

Practical implications for translation work

One test of the possible influence of M text advocates on translations other than the NKJV is to examine the changes in textual notes to be made in the 1984 edition of the New International Version. Among more than 900 changes scheduled to appear in future printings of the NIV, nine NT textual notes have been revised. In two cases where NIV currently follows ms B with very little additional ms support, alternative readings are now given (Mt 19.29 and Lk 23.42). This may be construed as a concession to the criticism of M text advocates who believe Westcott and Hort overvalued B. But in both cases NIV continues to follow GNT³ {C} readings. Further, three changes in the wording of footnotes seem to strengthen the criticism of TR readings. Both Jn 5.3b and 5.4 additions are now described as “some less important manuscripts.” The revised footnote at John 7.53–8.11 adds that this passage is also lacking in “other ancient witnesses” (i.e., the Fathers). The footnote to 1 Jn 5.7–8 adds, “(not found in any Greek manuscript before the 16th century).” The M text supporters’ criticism of NIV will certainly not be modified in regard to the new edition, even though some translational changes seem to be theologically more conservative.

There seems to be a greater openness on the part of Wycliffe/SIL translators to consider TR as a base for some translations. John Callow, in his “An Open Letter Regarding Textual Criticism” (*Notes on Translation*, No. 90) says that the M texts are worth considering as an important witness to the original Greek text and leaves open the possibility that the correspondent who prompted Callow’s response can follow the Majority text in his translation work.

It will be important for translators to be aware of the ongoing efforts to promote the Majority text. Specifically, they are likely to be confronted with the question, “Why not use the Majority text (or TR?)” as the result of the promotion of this view in certain conservative circles. In a more general way, it is quite likely that in an age of uncertainty, many will be attracted to the promise of security in a text that is said to promise certainty. It will be important to stress the true basis of certainty and locus of authority in translation work.

A cumulative index to *The Bible Translator* covering the years 1980-1984 is available free to subscribers on request to: Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon SN5 7DG, England. This supersedes the annual indexes for these years. The cumulative index will be updated annually in future.