

Article

Do We Need Another Greek New Testament? A Translator's and Student's Look at the Tyndale House Greek New Testament

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**Abstract**

Review of *The Greek New Testament, Produced at Tyndale House Cambridge*. Edited by Dirk Jongkind, Peter J. Williams, Peter M. Head, and Patrick James. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Midway through 2017, a new edition of the Greek New Testament was published. It was produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge, by a team of editors led by Dirk Jongkind and Peter J. Williams, and published by Crossway. My immediate reaction was “Do we need another Greek New Testament?” So, I decided that, for my salute to David Clark, I would review this new edition from the point of view, not of academic scholars, but of translators and students. My questions were:

- Is this new edition more user-friendly for these two groups of users than other critical editions?
- Should I recommend it to my beginning Greek students and the translation teams that I work with?

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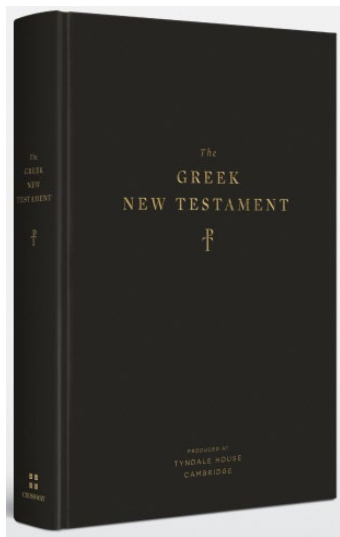
The second of these questions immediately brings to the fore a methodological issue that will become clear in my review. In my experience, translation teams and their advisors overwhelmingly use the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament (UBSGNT), now in its fifth edition, and the same is true for students in theological colleges, seminaries, and Bible colleges in Australia and America. My impression is that academia tends to prefer Nestle–Aland (NA), even though the text of NA28 is identical to that of UBSGNT5. It is the apparatus and textual variants that distinguish the two editions. My preference for UBSGNT5 in this article is not meant to imply any denigration of NA. The choice is purely due to the preferred edition of those in my focus groups.

First impressions

On first impression, the Tyndale House Greek New Testament (THGNT) is a very striking volume (see the image in Fig. 1, left). Its black cover, with gold printing, inside a matching stiff cardboard protective box that acts as a durable dust cover, looks like a Bible. For some communities receiving a translation in their own language, this external appearance is important. This volume certainly looks like a Bible.

When one opens the volume, one is immediately struck by the readability of the text (see Fig. 1, right). The font is clear and precise, with plenty of white space, and big enough not to strain the eyes of students or translators. The page is uncluttered by subheadings, cross-references, and apparatus sigla, and even the verse numbers seem to melt into the background. Except for paragraph breaks where they are placed outside the text in the left margin, the verse numbers are small, raised characters, which are less intrusive than the bold type of those in either UBSGNT5 or NA. As well as having the verse numbers in the left margin, the paragraphs are marked, not by indentation, but by beginning the first line one space to the left of the regular margin (*ekthesis*). The editors (Introduction, 512) claim that this follows “ancient custom” and is “equal in elegance” to modern practice; I take their word on the former, and agree that the structure is easy on the eye.

But it is when first leafing through the volume that one can feel the anxiety level of one’s students rise considerably. First, one finds a Preface, giving a short introduction to the volume, but it is too short to be much help in understanding the principles used in the production of this new edition. For those who need such help—and for a volume like this, it is crucial!—one must wait to the end of the volume, or skip over 500+ pages, to find the “Introduction.” I’m sure the irony of this would not be lost on David Clark! But the discomfort of “losing” the introduction is not likely to match



**ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ
ΚΑΤΑ ΜΑΡΚΟΝ**

1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ·² καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἠσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ· ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἀγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου.³ φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ ἑτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ.

⁴ Ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ καὶ κηρύσσειον βάπτισμα μετανόας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.⁵ καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ ἱεροσολιμίται πάντες, καὶ βαπτίζοντο ὅτι· αὐτοῦ ἦν τὸ Ἰωρδάνη ποταμὸν ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν.⁶ καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφίν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσθιον ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.⁷ καὶ ἐκείρισαν λέγων· ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου, οὐ σὺ εἰμι ἰσχυρός, κωφεὶς ἴσται τὸν ἡμῶν τὸν υποδοχόμενον αὐτόν.⁸ ἔγω εὐβαπτίστα ὄμῃς ἐν ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὄμῃς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

⁹ Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν ἑκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἔβλεπεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ βεβατίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰωρδάνην ἐπὶ Ἰωάννου.¹⁰ καὶ εὐθὺς ἀναβαῖναι ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν σχιζόμενος τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστέρην καταβαῖνον εἰς αὐτόν·¹¹ καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν· σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

¹² Καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτὸν ἐπέβαλε εἰς τὴν ἔρημον·¹³ καὶ ἦν ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας περιεζήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ στανῆ καὶ ἦν μετὰ τῶν θηρίων· καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι διακονοῦν αὐτόν.

Figure 1. THGNT cover (left); beginning of Gospel of Mark (right). Used with permission.

the sense of panic that new Greek students will feel when they turn to the end of Acts, searching for Romans, only to find James, then Peter, then the Johannine Epistles and Jude. Most new students are still struggling with recognizing the Greek upper case letters, and not being able to find the books of the New Testament where “they should be” may put stress on their blood pressure. Those who have already found the introduction will be relieved to see that Paul has not been accidentally omitted from their volume, but has been placed after the Catholic Epistles to reflect “the strong tendency” of early manuscripts (Introduction, 512). While the decision to present the books in the order that has a strong precedent in ancient times is justifiable, and may indeed have the unintended benefit of forcing students to learn the Greek alphabet better, I question whether the value is sufficient in light of the many other demands on students’ time and attention.

One helpful practice of the older editions (UBSGNT and NA) that THGNT has eschewed is the identification of Old Testament and other quotations. UBSGNT5 usually formats OT poetry in verse form and in bold text (e.g., Mark 1.2-3). If it is a short quote within the flow of the sentence, UBSGNT begins the quotation with a capital letter. NA occasionally uses the verse form of poetry, and consistently prints the quotes in italics. Students find these to be useful pointers, even though they reflect

interpretive decisions of later editors and scholars. As such, it is difficult to be too critical of their omission, but my students may wish that I had stood up more strongly for them.

Principles of THGNT

Good things come to those who wait, and the inaptly named “Introduction” (505–23) sheds some light on the aims and principles followed in THGNT. It behoves a reviewer to hear what the editors had in mind, and why, before being too critical of the result. Unfortunately, in this case, this is only partially possible, because the editors have given notice of “a textual commentary to be published subsequent to this edition [to] give further transparency to [their] editorial reasoning” (506). Thus, some or many of my critiques may be irrelevant when the detailed exposition is published, but I must work with what I have before me.

1. The aim

The editors clearly state their aim in the Introduction: “to present in an easily readable format the best approximation to the words written by the New Testament authors” (505). All the readings chosen will be “contained in at least some Greek manuscripts” (505). This claim is admirable and does not overstate the hope to discover the original words of the author, a desideratum now seen by textual critics to be unattainable.

These Greek manuscripts are not chosen at random. Priority is given to early manuscripts from the fourth to fifth centuries, with the chosen reading found in at least one fifth-century or earlier manuscript. This emphasis on early evidence is good to see.

More challenging is the intention to reflect the “paragraph divisions, spelling, breathings, and accents” of the manuscripts, as well as the “actual words” (505). By all means, aim for the stars, but even the editors recognize that a thorough study of some of these topics is yet to be done. I’d suggest that we hold loosely to what we don’t know.

2. The history

At first sight, the choice of the rather obscure edition of Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (1813–1875) as the base for the THGNT is somewhat surprising. Why not use Westcott and Hort (1881), which is generally recognized as an advance on previous editions? But the editors of THGNT were impressed by “Tregelles’ strong reliance on the testimony of documents and on the principle of proven antiquity” (505–6). In their edition, the THGNT editors

insist that their text had to be “attested in two or more Greek manuscripts, at least one from the fifth century or earlier” (506), reinforcing Tregelles’ principle of textual antiquity.

Given the principle of early witnesses, the text of THGNT, whether based on Tregelles or Westcott and Hort, is likely to qualify as a reliable text for students and translators.

3. The principles

Scribal tendencies. THGNT actively recognizes that all variants listed in any critical apparatus are themselves part of other documents. Therefore, the scribal tendencies of those documents need to be taken into account when assessing the value of readings taken from them before using those documents to judge readings in the initial document under examination. Thus, ideally, a full examination of the text of Document X needs to be done before confidently applying readings from it to Document Z. THGNT attempts to allow for this by understanding the textual nature of Document X and assigning less weight to those variations that show evidence of regular and well-known scribal practices.

I have long been a proponent of the ideal where each manuscript or document used in the critical examination of the biblical text should have been subjected to a rigorous examination itself. Even though this remains an unattainable goal for myself, I remain an optimist that this “unattainable” goal might one day be reached. THGNT is one small step on the way.

The advantage of this approach for translators and students is that THGNT has made many of their decisions for them. This reduces the clutter on the page, and removes some of the elements of doubt that a reference in a critical apparatus engenders, even if UBSGNT5 gives it an {A} classification. Note the quiet sigh of relief from our translators and students. Nevertheless, I think we can generally accept the judgments of the Tyndale House team and the resulting reliability of their text. This is a definite plus for the new edition.

But, unfortunately, every silver lining has its cloud! In going through this process, THGNT predigests the relevant information and presents its decisions as established readings. In many cases, the student is not even made privy to possible alternate readings. So I think that the student who has an interest in text criticism and wants to develop a career as a text critic may find herself short-changed by not having ready access to the broad range of evidence that an edition like UBSGNT5, for example, provides.

Spelling. Most students brought up on UBSGNT will be surprised to learn that their text has been doctored, and its spelling standardized (511).

THGNT points out that this has been done with movable *nu*, which Koine Greek allegedly uses in profusion. The Tyndale House team note that the lack of the *nu* is “far better attested” (508) than previously thought. Our beginning student of NT Greek is now left in even more confusion about when and how this letter is used.

More disturbing for our student is the use in this new edition of *epsilon-iota* to represent long *iota*; thus, γίνομαι sometimes appears as γείνομαι, and γινώσκω as γεινώσκω (509). One of my students used to complain that her brain was exploding because of everything she had to learn. To add the need to understand both the γίν- root and the γείν- root as one and the same might, I fear, have ended up rather messy!

To make things worse, these spellings are not consistent in the New Testament. Although γείνομαι is used in Mark and Luke, it is only used in a few verses of John, and some, but not all, of Paul. The Tyndale House team admit that these spellings are not consistent in the manuscripts and make no claim that they go back to the first documents, yet they justify the inclusion of such spellings because “they are often widely attested in the earliest manuscripts” (508). I am not convinced of the benefit of including such inconsistent spelling, especially in a text for non-specialists. Historical precision is a worthy goal, but where the evidence is rather thin, flexibility may be the better policy. And the team confessed to having a “bias . . . towards conventional spellings” where they had doubts about the readings (510).

Readability. This was identified as a major criterion in THGNT. For that reason, the editors chose to use lower case despite the fact that the early manuscripts, which they identify as most important, used majuscules. They also avoided upper case letters wherever possible, except for proper names and the opening words of paragraphs, in contrast to UBSGNT’s use of capital letters to introduce quotations.

An interesting result of this principle is the consistent use of lower case for χριστός “Christ.” All the instances of χριστός are printed with lower case, even where it is likely that “Christ” is used as a proper noun. In Paul, it is moot how often that word is used as a proper noun, and how often as a common noun. The editors admit that they probably, at times, did not capitalize the term when it is used as a proper noun, but they chose to be consistent with lower case to avoid making the exegetical decision required (511). They are at pains to stress that their use of lower case should not be taken in any way to preclude the word being used as a proper noun.

I cannot be too critical of this decision, because there are distinct advantages in making each reader and interpreter wrestle with the implications of the decision for themselves. But there are some instances where scholarship

is generally agreed that *χριστός* is probably a proper noun (for example, in the Pauline usage “Christ Jesus”), and it is a bit of a surprise that the editors should lack the courage to act in this instance, even though they boldly made the decisions for us in other places.

A related issue is the THGNT team’s decision to remove most of the *iota* subscriptions, except those found in the dative singular forms of nouns, on the basis that the later minuscule manuscripts rarely contain them (and, of course, they are not found in the majuscules). They even claim that part of the rationale for doing so is to help students (512). My students will no doubt applaud that decision, but it seems to run counter to what the editors argued in other instances where the practices of manuscripts have been followed even when THGNT’s preferences and decisions are decidedly anti-pedagogical in their effect. I am confused!

Order of the books. I have already noted that the placement of the books does not follow the traditional order. THGNT presents the books in the following order: Gospels, Acts, the Catholic Epistles, the Pauline corpus, Revelation. This reflects the fact that, in ancient manuscripts where all or most of the books are present, the order is not uniform, but there is a “strong tendency to place the Catholic Epistles immediately after Acts” (512).

It is of interest to be aware of the order of the books in ancient collections, but is it significant in a modern edition? I fail to see how students and translators will benefit from having a text that disturbs the traditional order.

Paragraphs. THGNT has tried to reflect paragraph divisions that are found in early manuscripts, which often differ markedly from modern editions and translations (512). In doing this, the new edition is very different from UBSGNT5, whose Discourse Segmentation Apparatus relies on five critical editions between 1881 and 2012, and eleven modern translations, ranging from 1984 to 2008 (see the introduction of UBSGNT5 [2014], 51–56).

The approach taken in THGNT is useful because it provides guidance on the way early scribes understood the text. Given that modern translators and students often give little credence to the paragraph breaks when it suits them, THGNT should be a valuable corrective, and provide some discipline to these interpreters of the New Testament.

Apparatus. A quick look at almost any page of THGNT reveals the familiar structure of a critical apparatus. The entries are generally not as frequent as those in NA, or as long as UBSGNT5. Each entry is identified by a superscript chapter and verse before the word or words under examination; then the evidence that supports the reading in the text is listed, followed by other variants. As one would expect, the papyri come first, then the majuscules,

and finally the minuscules. In contrast to the other major editions we have been using for comparison, lectionaries, versions, and patristic evidence are not included. In line with the priority the editors give to early witnesses, the “apparatus give[s] extensive information about papyrus and majuscule witnesses” (516).

This preference for papyri and majuscules is laudable, but it is somewhat surprising to then be told that minuscules 69 and 1424 are also cited “whenever they are available” (516). The justification for this, namely, that they are “diverse and significant,” is hardly convincing, and we may need to wait for the publication of the planned textual commentary to assess the validity of this decision.

A few further reflections on the apparatus are called for. In contrast to UBSGNT5, it seems that no attempt was made to provide comprehensive evidence on the readings or the variants: “the apparatus merely provides some of the evidence for the decision” (516), although further evidence is promised in the future textual commentary. Again, this is not helpful to the budding text critics in our colleges and seminaries. And, on the level of readability, the lack of indication in the text referring the reader to the bottom of the page means that the evidence in the apparatus is likely to be ignored more often than not. In addition, even if one has consulted the apparatus, it is not easy to find the datum under discussion in the text. Here the cleanness of the text, which is very desirable, has the effect of making use of the apparatus considerably more difficult. The THGNT is not helpful for the serious budding scholar!

A final question in this section: why is the Gothic letter \mathfrak{P} not used for papyri? This is familiar to those of us who have already worked in textual criticism, and is not hard for new students to learn. And it has a touch of class lacking in the plain upper case roman P, which runs the risk of being confused with the majuscule *Codex Porphyrianus*, P(025)! The familiar siglum for papyri is no harder to print than what THGNT has chosen.

4. Assessment

So, is this *the* edition for students and translators? It certainly has its good points. Its open, clear print and uncluttered pages make it easy to read. The priority it gives to readings from the earliest manuscripts is fundamental to NT study. The attempt to follow the paragraph breaks and orthography found in early manuscripts, even when they diverge from modern canons, and the commitment to reflecting the varying order of NT books in the early church are laudable for their authenticity. It is good for students to know everything is not as cut-and-dried as it sometimes appears. More importantly, the edition’s recognition of the need for a detailed understanding of

the text-critical quality of the manuscripts from which variant readings are mined is a significant advance. And the textual decisions made on the basis of this relieve both students and translators of having to solve text-critical questions before they are ready to do so. These “predigested” decisions about readings are likely to be much better than most students or translators are able to make, probably better than most of their teachers as well. There is a lot to recommend THGNT.

But, as can be seen from my comments in the review above, some of these “positives” are double-edged swords. For the serious user of THGNT, the lack of comprehensive evidence supplied about the variants is a cause of concern. While they give “extensive information about the papyrus and majuscule witnesses,” along with minuscules 69 and 1424, the editors confess that “the apparatus merely supplies some of the evidence for the decision[s]” they made (516); further evidence is promised in the future textual commentary. This is hardly satisfactory, as it forces users to lay out additional cost and effort to get what they might be excused for expecting to get from the edition itself. Compounding this defect is the fact that combining two separate bodies of evidence complicates their use markedly. Is the extra effort required worth it, I wonder? Although UBSGNT also has a separate volume of textual commentary, its extensive citation of the evidence within the text volume itself is well ahead on this.

The lack of evidence from lectionaries, patristic authors, and versions has not been justified. Except for the early patristic authors, it may be possible to justify their exclusion on the basis of their lack of antiquity, but it would be good to have this argued.

Some other elements are less significant. The different order of the books is not user-friendly for students, nor are the decisions made on spelling, due to the inconsistency of the result. The consistent use of lower case with *χριστός* is confronting as well as challenging, but students and translators should be able to adjust to it. They should also be able to adjust to the removal of the helpful practices of UBSGNT and NA of identifying OT quotations, and including cross-references and section headings; again, these are helpful, but not crucial, items that have been omitted. While the removal of many of the sigla certainly contributes to the legibility and flow of the text, it adds to the effort needed to use THGNT for serious textual study.

The decision

Finally, the time to formulate a recommendation has come. It was not possible to make a general recommendation because of the wide variety of

positives and negatives identified, so I decided to make the recommendation based on the receptor group, that is, who the users are and what they are going to use the edition for.

Despite not being user-friendly in some ways (e.g., order of books, unusual spellings, absence of helps), I think that THGNT should be recommended to students, translators, and pastors whose main interest is to consult the New Testament in its original Greek. Like its main competition (UBSGNT5 and NA28), the reliability of the text is assured by the focus on early documents. This is of prime importance and outweighs all other considerations.

THGNT's clear and legible print, free from footnote markers and other sigla, makes it a pleasure to read, and if text-critical issues are not important to the reader, the absence of such distractions is a bonus. Even the "predigested" decisions that have been incorporated into the text with no acknowledgement are probably a bonus for the target group, because the competence of the THGNT team to make good text-critical decisions doubtless far exceeds the ability and experience of almost any student, translator, or pastor.

All of these factors will hopefully encourage these users to consult the Greek New Testament more frequently, which is a goal dear to the heart of every Greek teacher.

On the other hand, the lack of transparency in the apparatus and the restrictions on its scope do not make THGNT ideal for textual critics, or those whose exegetical work on the New Testament requires detailed work on the variant readings. So, for these users, I'd imagine that it would sit on the bookshelf, rarely consulted.

Unfortunately, this recommendation allows one group of potential users to "slip through the cracks." How will new students develop a feeling for, and love of, text criticism by using THGNT alone? It may be necessary for teachers to identify people with such interests and skills, and encourage them to buy and use one or another of the "older" editions, and provide them with specialized guidance. Although important, this group is likely to remain a small group.

An epilogue

I have been remiss not to have mentioned this before, because it might have a significant impact on the uptake and success of THGNT—the price! My copy, purchased through bookdepository.com, cost AU\$35, considerably cheaper than UBSGNT5, which was about AU\$90 when I bought it some years ago. But a further attraction of THGNT is found on the dust cover, where a highlighted feature is "Lifetime guarantee." I was unable to find out

the details of what this guarantee covers, but presumably it at least covers the binding falling apart (which some Bibles have done, even before the day of dedication). But for translators in the South Pacific, will it cover being lost overboard from a canoe, or for students in Russia, will it cover being left outdoors in the winter snow? David Clark served as a consultant in both these areas. It's probably wise to ask before you buy! As they say, "caveat emptor," which dynamically translated means "the buyer should check it out for herself!"