

## The Textus Receptus and Modern Bible Translations

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Among Adventists the question of the reliability of Bible translations and especially the question which Bible translation to choose have come up again. In his lectures Walter Veith, a zoologist, claims that the so-called *Textus Receptus* must be chosen on which the King James Version (KJV) and several translations into other modern languages are based. He arrives at this position partly because of certain conspiracy theories, which he espouses, rather than on the basis of a study of the original Greek manuscripts. This has caused some stir and irritation among church members and pastors in various countries. The question is whether it is better for Bible translations to rely on the *Textus Receptus*, which is supported by the majority of manuscripts, or to favor the scientific text (Nestle-Aland). Most modern Bibles are based upon the latter.

Today we have at our disposal a wealth of manuscripts of different ages and of varying quality (about 5,400 for the NT).<sup>1</sup> The autographs are all lost; thus, we must reconstruct the original wording as best as we can, using the manuscripts that are available to us. The publishers of the scientific text of the NT produced an eclectic text, a text not found in one manuscript only. Deviations from this text are carefully listed in the text-critical apparatus.

For the NT we are aware of two main text types: (1) The Alexandrian text (Egypt) whose manuscripts date back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. It is clearly the closest that we can come to the lost originals, and it forms the basis for modern scientific editions. (2) The Byzantine text (Constantinople). As far as we know, this text came into existence in the 4<sup>th</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and became the basis of the later *Textus Receptus* and the KJV. The Byzantine type of text is found in the majority of manuscripts that have been preserved (about 80% of all of the extant manuscripts).<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup> century it was slowly accepted by Greek Christianity.

### I. The History of the *Textus Receptus*

On March 1, 1516, the Catholic humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467-1536) published in Basel the first printed Greek NT, which was to appear in a total of five editions. Erasmus and his publisher Froben were in a great hurry, because Cardinal Ximenes of Spain was at work on his own edition. Since Ximenes obtained papal approbation for publication only in 1522, Erasmus triumphed in this competition.

For the publication of his text, Erasmus relied on six manuscripts that dated from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, being well aware of their inferior quality. None of these manuscripts were complete, and Erasmus changed the Greek text of his manuscripts here and there, frequently according to the Latin Vulgate. The manuscripts that Erasmus used, including annotations made in them, still exist so that his work can be analyzed relatively well.

In 1519 Erasmus presented approximately 1,100 copies of a second edition, which contained about 400 improvements. Martin Luther relied on this version for his German translation of the Bible (1522) as Tyndale did for his English translation (1525).

But Erasmus had also to endure criticism. For instance, he was accused of being an “Arian,” denying the divinity of Jesus, because originally he had omitted a passage from 1 John 5:7-8 that was found in the Vulgate but not in the Greek manuscripts: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (KJV). Starting in 1522, Erasmus printed this longer text, including the Trinitarian formula, but explained in a footnote why he did not consider the wording to be original.<sup>3</sup>

In 1546 the Parisian publisher Robert Estienne (also known as “Stephanus,” 1503-1559) published his first edition of the Greek NT. The third edition, the so-called “Regia” which was released in 1550, became very well known and is sometimes regarded as the standard text for the *Textus Receptus*. However, Stephanus noted that different readings were possible in several places. He was well aware that not everyone unreservedly approved of his text.

Theodor Beza, Calvin's successor, published nine editions of the Greek NT between 1565 and 1604, essentially using Stephanus' fourth edition (1551). Beza, however, modified the Greek text in some places without having any support in printed editions or manuscripts.

Between 1624 and 1678 the Elzevier family of Holland published seven editions of the NT. They mainly used Beza's first edition. In 1633, in the foreword to their second edition they stated: "So you hold the text, now received by all" ("textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum"), from which the term *Textus Receptus* was derived.

All these editions more or less offer the *Textus Receptus* which essentially goes back to the first edition of Erasmus. Therefore, in reality one single *Textus Receptus* does not exist.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Revelation 22:19 and the *Textus Receptus*

According to the *Textus Receptus*, Revelation 22:19 reads: "God shall take away his part out of the *book* of life." There is no extant Greek manuscript from the time before Erasmus that uses this wording. All of the older manuscripts read "*tree* of life." How did the wording "book of life" come into existence? When Erasmus worked on his Greek NT, he had at his disposal only a single Greek manuscript of Revelation. Unfortunately, this copy lacked the last page containing the final verses (Revelation 22:16b-21). Erasmus did not take time to procure a complete Greek manuscript of Revelation. Instead, he translated the then-in-use Latin Vulgate text of Revelation 22:16-21 back into Greek. His translation differs substantially from the text found in the manuscripts. There are words in Erasmus' text that today are not found in a single Greek manuscript. Whoever considers the *Textus Receptus* to be the inspired original text of the NT has to believe that the original Greek text of the NT was unknown until the year 1516 and must accept the Catholic priest and humanist Erasmus as an inspired writer of the New Testament. Here is a list of different versions of Revelation 22:19:

### *Version*

New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1995

Revised Standard Version (RSV) 1971

New International Version (NIV) 1984

New English Translation (NET) 2005

American Standard Version (ASV) 1901

English Revised Version (ERV) 1885

New King James Version (NKJV) 1982

King James Version (KJV) 1611

### *Rev 22:19*

"... God shall take away his part from the *tree of life* . . ."

"... God will take away his share in the *tree of life* . . ."

"... God will take away from him his share in the  
*tree of life* . . ."

"... God will take away his share in the *tree of life* . . ."

"... God shall take away his part from the *tree of life* . . ."

"... God shall take away his part from the *tree of life* . . ."

"... God shall take away his part from the *book of life* . . ."

"... God shall take away his part out of the *book of life* . . ."

In more than ten places in Revelation, Erasmus offers text forms that cannot be found in any manuscript today (e.g., Revelation 4:4; 5:14; 18:5). These facts should persuade everyone that the *Textus Receptus* is not identical with the original text of the NT.

## III. Arguments in Favor of and Against the *Textus Receptus*

The following is a compilation of the most important arguments in favor of the *Textus Receptus* (in italics) and their corresponding counter arguments:

- (1) *The Textus Receptus is the text of the reformers.* As much as we value the work of the reformers, they were not perfect. The idea that God entrusted the correct Greek text to them only is an assumption which cannot be proven. The originator of this text was a Catholic priest.
- (2) *The Textus Receptus is literally inspired and inerrant.* Adventists respect the reliability of God's Word, although they do not advocate the theory of inspiration by dictation. Inspiration always refers to the original writings, not to the processes of copying and translating.

- (3) *The Textus Receptus goes back to the early Christians.* The oldest available sources of the majority texts reaches back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. John Chrysostom († 407) cited the Byzantine text of his time and is its oldest witness. However, the Alexandrian text type is 200 years older. Biblical quotations of the earliest church fathers are always closer to the modern scientific text than to the *Textus Receptus*.
- (4) *The damp climate of the Mediterranean area limited the durability of the good manuscripts of the Textus Receptus to 150 or 200 years. The dry, hot climate of Egypt made it possible for some of the bad Alexandrian manuscripts to survive there. Because of their many defects and their corruption through heresies they were later no longer used.* It is extremely improbable that only the “bad” manuscripts remained intact and that all of the allegedly “good” ones disappeared. After the division of the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Greek increasingly became the language that was used in the Eastern Empire only. This fact explains why there and at a relatively late date the majority text became important. In addition, the Mediterranean region is not damp and warm, but dry and warm. Even today many ancient manuscripts remain in Greece (e.g., Athos) and Italy (e.g., Rome).
- (5) *There is Gnostic influence in the Alexandrian text type, while the Byzantine text is theologically orthodox.* One of the first great heretics, Marcion, came originally from Asia Minor. It is thus incorrect to conclude that Asia Minor and Greece guaranteed orthodoxy. On the other hand, the bishop of Alexandria excommunicated Origen, thus upholding orthodoxy. Later, in the Christological dispute, the Alexandrian Athanasius demonstrated again that Egypt adhered to healthy theological positions. The idea that the findings in Egypt imply that the manuscripts were also written there cannot be proven and is not likely.
- (6) *The great faithfulness in the transmission of the Textus Receptus is proven by the startling uniformity of the text.* Differences are found in the manuscripts of the Byzantine text types. The editions of the *Textus Receptus* differ from each other as well.
- (7) *The Textus Receptus forms the majority of the manuscripts.* If it is true that the majority equals the truth, we should all become Catholics. Does a mistake become right when it is multiplied a thousand times? Furthermore, we would have to fall back to the Latin translation of the Vulgate. After all, there are about 8,000 extant manuscripts of the Vulgate, whereas there are only about 5,400 of the Greek NT. On the other hand, until the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the Alexandrian text formed the majority. If one takes into consideration translations of this text type into other languages, then it is still the prevalent type. The quantity or sheer number of manuscripts should not be used to determine their quality.
- (8) *The Jesuits and the Catholic Church proved to be the greatest opponents of the Textus Receptus.* While Erasmus himself was a Catholic priest, the Bible believing Protestant Bengel (1687-1752) as well as Tischendorf (1815-1874) criticized the *Textus Receptus*. For centuries the text type of the *Textus Receptus* was handed down through the Greek-Orthodox church. Is the Greek-Orthodox church more reliable as a guardian of the original text than the Roman Catholic Church is? The greatest care is demanded with regard to all conspiracy theories.
- (9) *The precursors of the modern editions, Westcott (1825-1901) and Hort (1828-1892), were spiritualists.* In 1881 they published an edition of the Greek NT which created a sensation among scholars. It was attacked from many quarters, but on the whole it was received as the closest approximation to the original text of the NT. Their text laid the ground for the later editions of Nestle and Aland. Although the allegation that they were spiritualists could not be proven by historical examination, “King James Only activists” constantly perpetuate this idea.

#### IV. Differences

The differences between Bible translations based on the *Textus Receptus* and those following the eclectic text are not grave. Only very few passages are of greater significance. One estimates that 98% of the text of the NT reveals no appreciable variations. Champions of the *Textus Receptus* have often taken the differences too seriously.

- (1) *The Textus Receptus and Christological names.* One argument against modern editions is that they leave out Christological names and titles or shorten them. It is partly true that some names or titles of God are absent in modern scientific editions, but the *Textus Receptus* also contains verses in which a name or title of God is lacking

or is abbreviated, e.g., John 12:1: “where Lazarus was, whom *Jesus* raised from the dead.” Here the *Textus Receptus* has omitted the name “Jesus.” Nobody can prove that the versions of the *Textus Receptus* reflect precisely the original text. Longer versions could easily be later extensions of the copyists.

- (2) *John 6:47*. It is argued that the theology of John 6:47 has become distorted because “on me [Jesus]” is missing in the phrase dealing with believing. The KJV contains the old rendering: “He that believeth *on me* hath everlasting life.” Of course it is vital to believe in Jesus, but this fact becomes very clear in the context, regardless which text type is used, because “on me” is stated explicitly in John 6:35; 7:38; 11:25-26; 12:44-46. Conspiracy theories cannot plausibly explain why all of the other verses were not immediately changed to insure the success of the shorter rendering. If intentional manipulation had been planned, this would have had to happen much more systematically.
- (3) *Passages in modern Bibles that clearly demonstrate the divinity of Jesus*. Some biblical passages dealing with the divinity of Jesus, e.g., 2 Peter 1:1, are clearer in modern Bibles than in the *Textus Receptus*:  
    “...through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ” (KJV).  
    “...through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (NIV).
- (4) *No change in theology*. There are no textual differences that could be used as a real argument in favor of a changed theology. Always when the scientific text is a little shorter than the *Textus Receptus*, the omitted phrases can be found relatively easily in other biblical passages. Example: Colossians 1:14, “In whom we have redemption *through his blood*” (KJV). In modern Bibles the phrase “*through his blood*” is absent but is found elsewhere, e.g., in Ephesians 1:7.
- (5) *Theologically doubtful wordings in the Textus Receptus*. There are instances in which the majority text is problematic. The *Textus Receptus* of John 5:3-4 reads: “For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had” (KJV). This text is missing in modern Bibles or is relegated to the footnotes. However, the KJV reading results in an alarming theology: God is arbitrary, rewarding the strong and punishing the weak. Interestingly, Ellen G. White also calls this text into question (DA 201). She explains the text as portraying popular tradition, and she clearly does not believe in a divine work. The claim that the *Textus Receptus* is more orthodox cannot be substantiated.

## V. *Ellen G. White*

Ellen G. White wrote about Erasmus: “Wycliffe’s Bible had been translated from the Latin text, which contained many errors. [...] In 1516, a year before the appearance of Luther’s theses, Erasmus had published his Greek and Latin version of the New Testament. Now for the first time the Word of God was printed in the original tongue. In this work many errors of former versions were corrected, and the sense was more clearly rendered” (GC 245).

E. G. White does not say that all mistakes were eliminated. She knew that, regrettably, mistakes also crept into the process of copying biblical texts: “Some look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?’ This is all probable [...] All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.” (ISM 16) “I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible; yet when copies of it were few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition” (EW 220-221).

E. G. White quoted from the *English Revised Version* (ERV) and the *American Revised Version* (ARV 1901, also known as the *American Standard Version* [ASV]), both of which are based on the Westcott-Hort Greek text of the NT.<sup>6</sup> According to her son, W. C. White, she gave her secretary specific instructions to use the version that best reflected her ideas. In her book *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), she took ten biblical texts from the ERV, more than fifty from the ARV and a few texts from other versions. That proves that she did not limit herself to the KJV. When she later made

important statements about inspiration (*I Selected Messages* and the introduction to *The Great Controversy*), she did not warn against new translations. Evidently she saw in them no threat whatsoever to beliefs and theology.

#### VI. *Seventh-day Adventists and Modern Bible Translations*

Because Adventists treasure Scripture it is to be expected that they are concerned with Bible translations as they are based on different text types.<sup>7</sup> When the ERV appeared, a number of substantial articles were published in the *Review and Herald* commenting favorably on this new translation while being fully aware of the fact that it departed from the KJV.

Following a lively discussion among Adventists, official statements from the General Conference were presented in 1930 and 1931. They held that the KJV and the ARV could be used among Adventists, regardless of the differences. None of the employees should unnecessarily aggravate the discussion and each Adventist should be free to decide in favor of one or the other translation.

When new English translations appeared, the General Conference once again saw it necessary to come up with a statement (1954). The church justified the necessity for new translations with two arguments still valid today: first, new archaeological discoveries enrich our understanding, and, second, each living language is in constant fluctuation. Bible translations must take this into account.

The Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (BRI) published several articles in the past suggesting not to rely on the KJV only because it is not based on the best manuscripts.

#### VII. *Summary*

The academic world as well as many Adventists favor the scientific Greek text as a basis for modern Bible translations. Of course, it is possible that in case of new manuscript findings a fresh assessment of one or the other reading in modern scientific editions has to be made. Nevertheless, the current scientific editions can be trusted, and supporters of the *Textus Receptus* should be aware of the weaknesses found in their favored text.

The differences in both text types are minor and, therefore, should not undermine our confidence in the transmission and the validity of the biblical text. It is neither scientifically legitimate nor pastorally advisable to deny modern and carefully rendered Bible translation their right to exist.

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<sup>1</sup>For details see Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>However, most of them come from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and later.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1993), 715-716.

<sup>4</sup>[Http://www.bible-researcher.com/title.html](http://www.bible-researcher.com/title.html) provides a complete list of all the differences in older and newer editions of the Greek NT.

<sup>5</sup>See [http://www.kjvonly.org/other/wescott\\_&\\_hort.htm](http://www.kjvonly.org/other/wescott_&_hort.htm).

<sup>6</sup>For more details see <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/kjvonly.htm> and <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/whitebible.htm>.

<sup>7</sup>See <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/Which%20Version%20Can%20We%20Trust.htm>.