The KJV and the Development of Text Criticism

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Several years ago I was invited to teach an evening class at a liberal arts college in the Midwest. The topic of the session was apocalyptic literature. We read from the book of Daniel using the New International Version. At one point a student asked, "Why are we not reading the Bible in its original language?" I was impressed by this question, especially since some chapters of Daniel are written in Hebrew, while other chapters are written in Aramaic. It took a while before I realized that the student referred to the King James Version.

In a nutshell, the student's comment describes the delicate relationship between modern text-critical studies and the KJV over the past four centuries. The version of the Bible that a faith community uses is the one they consider the Word of God. From a theological and experiential point of view, only the Scripture that believers hear and understand becomes the Word that God speaks. And because the young man had experienced the Bible in his church only in the KJV, he was right to declare that its wording was the original. No one had told him that the Protestant Bible was translated from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Strictly speaking, the KJV is not a translation; it is a revision of older translations. The first of the fifteen rules handed to the committee members read: "1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit."[1] This is in agreement with the information we have about the actual work of the translation subcommittees, the so-called companies.[2]

When Bible translations are revised, they are typically revised in observance of two criteria. First, whenever the modern usage of an expression has changed and rendered the old translation difficult to understand, the wording is adapted to current usage. Second, whenever the source

text changes because of newly discovered manuscripts or because of new methodological insights on how to evaluate the variants, these changes have to be reflected in the translation.[3] The "translators" of the KJV were asked to concentrate on the second task and to only make changes to the wording of the Bishops' Bible where it presented obvious discrepancies with the underlying Greek source text.

The Bishops' Bible was an authoritative edition, approved by the Church of England in 1568 and substantially revised in 1572. It was preceded by the translations of William Tyndale (New Testament, 1526), Miles Coverdale (1535), John Rogers's Matthew's Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539), and William Wittingham's Geneva Bible (1560). All these older translations had also been consulted by the translators of the KJV.[4]

F. H. A. Scrivener compared the KJV of 1611 with the printed editions of the Greek text of the New Testament available at the time.[5] He consulted the editions of the Complutensian Polyglott (1520), Erasmus (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, 1535), Aldus (1518), Colinaeus (1534), Stephanus (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551), and Beza (1560, 1565, 1582, 1589).[6] Scrivener documented 252 variants from the printed text of Beza alone.[7] Obviously, the translators of the KJV had created their own eclectic Greek text, a text that followed neither a specific manuscript nor a specific printed edition.[8]

The printed Greek editions used by the translators of the KJV were based on late Byzantine manuscripts. These manuscripts represented a controlled text authorized for use in the Greek Orthodox Church. The uniformity of these manuscripts created the impression of—as Elzevir in his 1633 edition stated—a "textum ... ab omnibus receptum" (a text accepted by everybody), from which the short designation *Textus Receptus* evolved.[9]

However, that Byzantine editions are identified in the manuscript tradition by their exact wording is a common misunderstanding.[10] Examples of characteristics used by Hermann von Soden (1907) for distinguishing various Byzantine editions are the presence of editorial elements outside the Bible text, such as the form of Eusebius's letter concerning his canons, the titles and numbering of κεφάλαια, the numbering of sections and canons, and the notes marking the lectionary readings.[11] Von Soden's assessment—corroborated by a few proof texts—has been supported by Klaus Wachtel's seminal study of the General Letters in which he evaluated all documented variants.[12]

Another misconception would be to assume that the Textus Receptus is a simple representation of the text in Byzantine manuscripts, when in fact it diverts about eighteen hundred times.[13]

Scribal errors will always happen during the transmission process, and transcriptional mistakes may occur at any time, even during the printing process, without deriving from a specific text tradition.[14] Moreover, editors create new variants. For example, Erasmus put out five revised editions of his text, which were followed by Colinaeus's edition of 1534 that introduced readings from the Complutensian Polyglott and from new collations of manuscripts.[15]

It is therefore not possible to define the Textus Receptus by its exact wording. Rather, it is more helpful to define it by a selection of specific Byzantine readings shared by all printed editions. A short list of such variants include:

1. The doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer in Matt 6:13 ("For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen").
2. The longer ending of Mark (i.e., Mark 16:9–20). Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus end with 16:8. Other manuscripts display a profusion of variants at this point.
3. The story of Jesus and the adulterous woman had been placed in John 7:53–8:11. It is missing in some manuscripts; others have it after John 7:36; 21:25; Luke 21:38; or 24:53.
4. A manuscript of the Byzantine tradition is most obviously recognized by the order of the writings. The Letters of Paul are inserted between Acts and the General Letters, and the Letter to the Hebrews is placed after Philemon. The Textus Receptus follows this order. All extant manuscripts older than the eighth century, however, have—with only few exceptions—Hebrews between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy, and Acts preceding the General Letters.[16]

These variants are so pronounced that they can be identified even in a translation. The textual changes proposed by text critics could hardly be hidden from readers of the KJV.

It has been a long-standing objective of modern text criticism to reconstruct the oldest text of the New Testament, that is, a text older than the well-documented late Byzantine editions. As more and more manuscripts were collated, some readings of the Textus Receptus were abandoned. John Mill's edition of the Greek New Testament from 1707, Richard Bentley's

proposals of 1720, and Edward Wells's and Daniel Mace's editions of 1709–1719 and 1729 make substantial changes to the text.[17]

In 1734 Johann Albrecht Bengel produced a critical text from printed editions of the Greek New Testament.[18] He classified variants by sorting them into categories. Category α marked a definite original reading, and category β indicated a reading that he deemed better than the Textus Receptus, but not necessarily the original reading. Like Brian Walton and John Mill[19] before him, Bengel was criticized by those who would not accept that the Christian Bible was handed down with an abundance of variants. An anonymous critic wrote: "If every book-maker is to take into his head to treat the New Testament in this manner, we shall soon get a Greek text totally different from the received one. ... The audacity is unprecedented."[20]

However, that the Greek New Testament was transmitted with a great number of variants was not Bengel's fault. Text critics do not cause variants, they try to resolve them.

The discovery and collation of new manuscripts together with an emancipation of biblical scholarship from the needs of the Christian faith community are manifest in the edition of Wettstein (1751–1752), who more than doubled the number of manuscripts consulted, and finally in the edition of Griesbach, who summarized the extraordinary critical effort of the eighteenth century in his editions of 1775–1777 and 1796–1806. The nineteenth century, finally, saw Lachmann's methodological program, which openly called for unsettling the Textus Receptus and for trying to reconstruct the text used by the church of the fourth century, a goal he thought achievable with the manuscript evidence at hand. But it was Tischendorf with his sensational discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus and his eight editions of the New Testament's text who fulfilled what Lachmann had called for.

Tischendorf's *Editio critica maior* (1869–1872) marks the last time that a printed edition documented all known Greek manuscripts.[21] In its apparatus, it collated and noted one papyrus, 64 majuscules, and a few unspecified minuscules.[22] Today, however, the electronic record kept by the *Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung* in Münster lists not one but 127 papyri, not 64 but 321 majuscules, 2,907 minuscule manuscripts, and 2,450 lectionaries, bringing the total number to 5,805 manuscripts.[23] The vast number of witnesses does result in a vast number of variants. There is quite possibly not one sentence in the New Testament that con-

tains the exact same wording in each of the existing manuscripts. A conservative estimate assumes somewhere between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand text variations.

After Tischendorf, text critics concentrated on the methodological question of how to distill relevant information from the available collations of variants. This is where the two Englishmen, Brooke Foss Westcott and John Anthony Hort, made their mark.[24] Instead of simply gathering data, they concentrated on the question of how to evaluate it. By calling the discipline's attention to two manuscripts, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus, as the most important witnesses of a so-called neutral text, the departure from Byzantine editions together with the Textus Receptus was finally based on firm methodological ground. The British and Foreign Bible Society continued to distribute the Textus Receptus until 1904, when it was finally discontinued.[25]

One more Herculean effort was made by Hermann von Soden that not only describes the manuscript evidence but also provides a theoretical model on how to evaluate it.[26] With its new system of naming and classifying witnesses, however, it created confusion and failed to persuade the guild.

Intriguingly, none of the scholarly editions brought about the eventual fall of the Textus Receptus. Instead, it was caused by a small hand edition, put out by a teacher for his high school students. In it, Eberhard Nestle compared the text of Tischendorf's edition with that of Westcott-Hort. Where these two editions disagreed with each other, he consulted a third edition.[27] Then he printed the majority opinion in the text and the dissenting vote in the apparatus. Nestle's edition was published 1898 by the Württembergische Bibelgesellschaft. The endorsement of a Bible Society eliminated consideration of the Textus Receptus in the church and in academia, from which it never recovered. The textual Greek basis, on which the KJV stood, was now abandoned. It is from the revised Nestle text that almost all Bible translations are made today.[28]

The Textus Receptus has left its mark on the Nestle edition in at least one aspect: As pointed out earlier, the oldest manuscripts present the writings of the New Testament in a different order than the Byzantine editions. Erasmus, however, followed his Byzantine manuscripts and created the order of the Textus Receptus, which is reflected in the KJV. Although the text-critical effort of the Nestle edition was to reconstruct the text of the second century, it arranged the writings in the order of medieval

Byzantine editions: Hebrews follows Philemon, the Letters of Paul follow Acts. Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort, and von Soden in their editions presented the books of the New Testament as they are arranged in virtually all pre-Byzantine manuscripts, such as in the codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus.

The Nestle edition dominates the market, and it is accepted by scholars and Bible translators as the general reference text. In practice, however, just like any eclectic text, the text of the Nestle edition is regularly revised. We have seen twenty-eight revisions in little more than a century, and the next edition is on its way.

With the acceptance of modern language translations in the practice of English-speaking churches, the KJV has lost the dominance it once had. However, Bible societies tend not to remove passages known to readers of the KJV that, from a scholarly point of view, were not part of the original text of the New Testament. Instead of following the critical decisions of the Nestle edition, Bible agencies place passages like the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman in brackets and add footnotes such as: "The most ancient authorities lack..." (NRSV at John 8:11). And because the verse numbers of the KJV are continued through the spurious additions, few readers will notice that the text is no longer part of the New Testament.

The largest contribution the KJV made to the development of New Testament text criticism was its claim on the cover sheet that it was "Newly Translated out of the Originall Greeke." This made it easier to communicate to the wider public the simple goal of the discipline of text criticism: to try to get closer to the first edition of the New Testament, the archetype from which all extant manuscripts derive. At the same time the statement endorses future editors to revise their translation if the "Originall Greeke" text changes; and just as the translators of the KJV revised the Bishops' Bible, it opens the door wide for modern translators to revise the KJV.

Notes

1. "Bancroft's Rules to Be Observed in the Translation of the Bible," in Olga S. Opfell, *The King James Bible Translators* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1982), 139–40; David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

2. Norton, *Textual History,* 12.

3. See, for example, International Council of Religious Education and Luther Allan Weigle, *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (Chicago: International Council of Religious Education, 1946).

4. Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 67–129. Cf. Bancroft's rule 14.

5. Frederick Henry Ambrose Scrivener, *The New Testament in the Original Greek according to the Text Followed in the Authorized Version, Together with the Variations Adopted in the Revised Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881).

6. Ibid., 648. For a brief history of the oldest printed editions of the New Testament, see Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3–11.

7. Scrivener, *New Testament in Original Greek*, 648–56.

8. See John R. Kohlenberger, "The Textual Sources of the King James Bible," in *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible* (ed. David G. Burke; Society of Biblical Literature Biblical Scholarship in North America 23; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 51.

9. Quoted from Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 6.

10. Kohlenberger ("Textual Sources," 51–52) provides selected readings where KJV differs from the Textus Receptus.

11. Hermann von Soden, *Die Evangelien* (section A of part 2: *Die Textformen*, of vol. 1: *Untersuchungen*, of *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments in ihrer ältesten erreichbaren Textgestalt hergestellt auf Grund ihrer Textgeschichte*; Berlin: Arthur Glaue, 1907), 719–20.

12. Klaus Wachtel, *Der byzantinische Text der katholischen Briefe: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der Koine des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).

13. James R. White, "A Critique of the King James Only Movement," in Burke, *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 211–12.

14. So-called transcriptional probability; cf. B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (2nd ed.; London: Macmillan, 1896), 22–30.

15. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 6.

16. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25. The doxology printed at the end of the Letter to the Romans (Rom 16:25–27) in the Textus Receptus is found after 14:23 in Byzantine editions.

17. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 9.

18. Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Hē Kainē Diathēkē: Novum Testamentum Graecum* (Tübingen: Cottae, 1734).

19. Brian Walton, Wenceslaus Hollar, and Pierre Lombart, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta Complectentia Textus Originales, Hebraicum, cum Pentateucho Samaritano, Chaldaicum, Graecum* (6 vols.; London: Roycroft, 1657); John Mill, *Novum Testamentum Graecum, cum Lectionibus Variantibus MSS* (Oxford: 1707). Walton and Mill registered over thirty thousand variants documented in some hundred manuscripts. See also Brian Walton, *In Biblia Polyglotta Prolegomena* (Leipzig: Weygandianis, 1777).

20. John Christian Frederic Burk, *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of John Albert Bengel, Prelate of Wurtemberg* (London: Gladding, 1842), 237.

21. Constantin Tischendorf, ed., *Novum Testamentum Graece: Ad Antiquissimos Testes Denuo Recensuit, Apparatum Criticum Omni Studio Perfectum Apposuit Commentationem Isagogicam Praetexuit Constantinus Tischendorf* (8th ed.; 3 vols. in 5; Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient, 1869–1894). See esp. vol. 3 by Caspar René Gregory, *Prolegomena* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1894).

22. Tischendorf relied heavily on previous printed editions for the selection of minuscule readings. Two decades later Caspar René Gregory lists and describes 2,080 minuscules; he has personally seen about 200 more and estimates the number of extant minuscules exceeding 3,000. See *Prolegomena* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1894), 453: "Scilicet in hoc catalogo sunt codicum duo milia octingenti. Exstant autem plus quam tria milia, ducentos enim alios ipse vidi."

23. Online: http://intf.uni-muenster.de/vmr/NTVMR/ListeHandschriften.php.

24. Westcott and Hort, *New Testament in Original Greek.*

25. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 19.

26. Von Soden, *Schriften des Neuen Testaments.*

27. At first Weymouth's 2nd ed. of 1892, and after 1901 Bernhard Weiss's edition; see Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 19.

28. Contemporary advocates for the Textus Receptus often argue from a faith-based position and are unimpressed by the scholarly debate. See White, "Critique." An expression of this approach is the edition put out by the Trinitarian Bible Society (White, "Critique," 212) that used the KJV to reconstruct the text of the Greek NT, treating the text-critical decisions made by the translators of the KJV as an act of divine inspiration.