

What about the Majority Text?

by **Michael D. Marlowe**

The "Majority Text" is a statistical construct that does not correspond exactly to any known manuscript. It is arrived at by comparing all known manuscripts with one another and deriving from them the readings that are more numerous than any others. There are two published Greek texts which purport to represent the Majority readings -- [Hodges & Farstad 1982](#) and [Pierpont & Robinson 1991](#). The reader may click on the links here to go to brief descriptions of these texts.

What is the Difference between the Majority Text and the Received Text?

The "Received Text" is also not a single text. It is a tradition of printed texts published during the time of the Protestant Reformation, that is, the 1500's and early 1600's. It includes the editions of Erasmus, Estienne (Stephens), Beza, and Elzevir. These texts are closely allied, and are all mostly derived from [Erasmus 1516](#). They are based upon a small number of late medieval manuscripts. The King James Version is based upon the Received Text. The Majority Text is derived from the plurality of all existing Greek manuscripts; but because most of these manuscripts are late medieval manuscripts, there is a family resemblance between the Received Text and the Majority Text. They agree with one another much more than either of them agree with the critical Greek texts published by scholars in the past two hundred years. These critical texts are based upon the oldest manuscripts and versions (from the 100's to the 600's), and agree with one another much more than any of them agree with the Received Text or the Majority Text. And so it is appropriate to say that the texts in question fall into two groups: (1) The kind of text found in the majority of medieval manuscripts (often called the Byzantine text-type); and (2) the ancient type of text which is exhibited in our oldest available manuscripts (often called the "Alexandrian" text-type). I personally do not put much store by the terms "Byzantine" and "Alexandrian," because I think that these terms are prejudicial. They imply that the texts are local products of Byzantium or Alexandria, and this cannot be proven in either case.

On another page on this website I have presented an elaborate statistical comparison of the various texts, showing their degrees of affinity. It is probably more than anyone really wants to know, but readers may now go to that page by clicking [here](#). For our present discussion the most relevant statistics are the number of translatable disagreements of the texts from the Received text:

Hodges-Farstad (Majority Text)	1005
Tregelles (critical text)	3095
Nestle-Aland (critical text)	3323

Tischendorf (critical text)	3498
Westcott-Hort (critical text)	3618

And so the Majority Text has a little less than a third as many differences from the Received text as do any of the critical texts. It does not stand halfway between the Received Text and the critical texts; it is definitely closer to the Received Text -- and yet it differs from the Received Text in about a thousand places, most of them being trivial. For those who wish to examine the differences, they are all translated and listed in the [collation of majority text readings](#) on this site. The Majority Text readings are indicated by the sign "HF" (Hodges-Farstad) in the collation.

These statistics do not however tell the whole story. That is because the Majority Text happens to agree with the Received Text in some very significant verses. By way of example I would mention the "Story of the Adulteress" in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel, and the phrase "God was manifest" in 1 Timothy 3:16, both of which are often treated as key texts in preaching from the King James Version. But when the Story of the Adulteress is referred to in a modern version based upon a critical text, one encounters brackets and footnotes warning the reader that it is a later addition to the Gospel; and at 1 Tim 3:16 one encounters a decidedly weaker text, "He who was manifested." Other examples could be given, but this would take us into a very long excursion here. The point is, many people who are used to the King James Version and who compare it with the Majority Text are pleased to find the agreement in such passages, and this has been no small factor in the popularity of the Majority Text among users of the King James Version.

Do Many Scholars Prefer the Majority Text?

The idea that the majority of existing Greek manuscripts (i.e. the numerous medieval copies) somehow represent the original text better than any of the oldest manuscripts known to us is an idea that is very hard to defend intellectually. One would suppose, even on common-sense grounds, that a consensus of the *earlier* copies is likely to be closer to the original text. Against this, it is said that perhaps all of the early manuscripts known to us have derived from a deviant kind of text which gained currency only in the area around Alexandria, where these very old manuscripts were preserved on account of the dry climate. But this hypothesis fails to account for the readings of the ancient versions (e.g. Latin and Syriac) which frequently agree with the older Greek copies against the later ones. We cannot reasonably suppose that the Latin and Syriac versions were based upon manuscripts that were not circulating in Italy and Syria. And then there are the scripture quotations from ecclesiastical writers who lived outside of Egypt, which likewise often support the earlier manuscripts. It is very hard for a Majority Text advocate to overcome this evidence, and certainly it cannot all be brushed aside with an hypothesis about "Alexandrian" deviations. For this reason, very few competent scholars have argued in favor of the Majority Text.

The most well-known advocate of the Majority text is Wilbur Pickering, who in 1977 published a book on the subject called *The Identity of the New Testament Text*.¹ This book was brought out by a major publisher (Thomas Nelson), and carried a laudatory Forward by Zane C. Hodges, who is also prominent as a Majority Text advocate.² Pickering has a doctorate in Linguistics, but no formal training in textual criticism. Of course it is not absolutely necessary to have formal training in a subject in order to have expertise in it; some men have made themselves experts in textual criticism outside of any formal training (Samuel Tregelles comes to mind). But a lack of academic credentials ought to make us cautious in evaluating their work.

Gordon Fee, who is widely recognized as a competent scholar in the field of textual criticism, has subjected Pickering's work to a close examination in a series of articles,³ and Fee's articles should be read by any student who has read Pickering's book. In my opinion, Fee shows that Pickering's arguments are badly flawed. This view of Pickering's work is also shared by the one scholar who might have been willing and able to defend it successfully, Maurice Robinson⁴

Dr. Maurice A. Robinson, whose doctorate is in Textual Criticism, is by far the most competent scholar who favors something like the Majority text. He is professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Dr. Robinson has as yet produced no general treatise on textual criticism, although he has published several articles dealing with special problems and issues. He has also published a critical edition of the Byzantine Greek text-form⁵ which represents his attempt to reconstruct the earliest form of that manuscript tradition. Dr. Robinson is a frequent contributor to the TC-list academic e-group, and many of his messages will be found in the [online archives](#) of the group. He is currently working on another edition of his Greek text, which he expects to publish in the Spring of 2002. It remains to be seen whether Robinson will produce arguments that adequately address the problems inherent in the "Byzantine Priority" theory which he proposes.

Recommended Reading

Gordon Fee, "Modern Textual Criticism and the Revival of the Textus Receptus" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 21 (1978) 19-33, plus "A Rejoinder," 157-60.

Gordon Fee, "A Critique of W. N. Pickering's *The Identity of the New Testament Text*" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 41 (1979) 397-423.

Gordon Fee, "The Majority Text and the Original Text of the New Testament" in *The Bible Translator*, 31 (1980) 107-18.

Gordon Fee, "The Majority Text and the Original Text of the New Testament" (a revision of the article listed above), chapter 10 of *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*. Third edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pages 290-293 give some incisive criticism of the pro-Majority Text literature.

Michael W. Holmes, "The Majority Text Debate: New Form of an Old Issue," *Themelios*, viii, 2 (January 1983), pp. 13-19.

Harold P. Scanlin, "The Majority Text Debate: Recent Developments," *The Bible Translator*, xxxvi (1985), pp. 136-140.

Kurt Aland, "The Text of the Church?" *Trinity Journal*, viii (1987), pp. 131-44.

Daniel B. Wallace, "Some Second Thoughts on the Majority Text," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, cxlvi (1989), pp. 270-90.

Daniel B. Wallace, "The Majority Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique." In B. Ehrman and M. Holmes (eds.), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. pp. 297-320.

Theodore P. Letis, ed., *The Majority Text: Essays and Reviews in the Continuing Debate*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Institute for Biblical Textual Studies, 1987. 2nd edition (with a new forward), 2000. [Read a synopsis of this book](#).

Internet Resources

- **In favor of the Majority Text:** [New Testament Textual Criticism: The Case for Byzantine Priority](#). By Dr. Maurice A. Robinson. This is the most scholarly article on the web in defense of the Majority Text.
- **Against the Majority Text:** [Some Second Thoughts on the Majority Text](#), [The Majority Text and the Original Text: Are they Identical?](#) and [Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism](#), all by Daniel Wallace at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Notes

¹ See [Pickering 1977](#) in the bibliography.

² See [Hodges and Farstad 1982](#) in the bibliography. Hodges has no doctorate, but for many years he was professor of Greek at Dallas Theological Seminary. For a typical essay by Hodges, see "The Greek Text of the King James Version" in *Which Bible?* Third ed., pp. 25-38. Edited by David Otis Fuller. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1972.

³ See Fee's critique in "Modern Textual Criticism and the Revival of the Textus Receptus" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 21 (1978) 19-33, plus "A Rejoinder," 157-60; "A Critique of W. N. Pickering's The Identity of the New Testament Text" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 41 (1979) 397-423; "The Majority Text and the Original Text of the New Testament" in *The Bible Translator*, 31 (1980) 107-18; and chapter 10 of *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁴ The following comment from Robinson is typical: "I also want to avoid any connection with the utter mess that Wilbur Pickering made out of various scholarly quotes in his 'Identity of the NT Text' book, where he blatantly took passages out of context, misquoted other passages, and misapplied the lot in a poor attempt to discredit the eclectic position." (online message at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tc-list/message/167>)

⁵ See [Pierpont and Robinson 1991](#) in the bibliography.

"[Bible Research](#) > [Textual Criticism](#) > Majority Text