

# The Conspiracy Behind the New Bible Translations

by  
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This is the first in a series of occasional short essays from the "Professor's Soap Box." It is not intended to be a detailed exposition; rather, it is meant to give you food for thought and to challenge some popular ideas.

## Introduction

The first major English translation of the Bible to appear since the King James (1611) was the Revised Version of 1881. Since then, numerous English translations have sprung up, almost all of which have used a different textual basis from the one found in the KJV. This difference is especially seen in the New Testament. Simultaneously published with the RV was the Greek text of Westcott and Hort, two Cambridge scholars. This Greek text had been in the works for 28 years, coming to light on May 12, 1881. It was accompanied by an introductory volume, which gave the rationale for the choices made.

Westcott and Hort were able to convince the vast majority of New Testament scholars of the truth of their textual choices. Essentially, they argued that the Greek text behind the KJV NT was inferior and late. Of course, as is well known, the Greek text used in 1611 was for the most part based on about half a dozen very late manuscripts (none earlier than the 12th century AD). These manuscripts were used by Erasmus in 1516 when he published the first Greek NT.<sup>1</sup> (We'll discuss this point more in a later essay.)

But these few manuscripts (MSS) came from a much larger pool. In fact, for the most part they looked very much like the majority of Greek MSS of the medieval ages. But Westcott and Hort (WH) said that this majority text was late and inferior. They preferred the five great uncial MSS (known by their letters, Aleph, A, B, C, D), all of which dated from the fourth or fifth century, as well as early versional and patristic evidence. Two MSS in particular, B and Aleph, were favorites of WH. Both came from the fourth century.

How did WH dethrone the *Textus Receptus* and the Greek MSS that stood behind it? They accomplished their task with three arguments: (1) The Byzantine text (i.e., the group of Greek MSS behind the *Textus Receptus*) was not quoted by any church father before AD 325, while the Alexandrian text was amply represented before that period. (2) The Byzantine text was shown to depend on two earlier traditions, the Alexandrian and Western, in several places. The early editors of the Byzantine text *combined* (or conflated) the wording of the Alexandrian and Western traditions on occasion, while nowhere could it be shown that the Alexandrian combined Western and Byzantine readings or that the Western combined readings of the Alexandrian and Byzantine. (3) The Byzantine text, upon closer examination, proved to be inferior in its wording, either by not conforming to the author's wording or moving in a predictable direction (such as by adding clarifying words).

Thus, with these three arguments, WH demonstrated that the Byzantine text was late (the patristic argument), secondary (the conflation argument), and inferior (the internal evidence argument). Although some of the particulars of their overall view have been questioned today, most NT scholars find this general scheme to be a compelling argument against Byzantine superiority. Hence, the overthrow of the *Textus Receptus*.

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus' text went through five editions. Others took up where he left off, but essentially kept the text virtually the same. One of the editions of Theodore Beza, done in the late 1500s, constituted the text behind the King James NT. By 1550 the third edition of Stephanus' Greek text included in the margin textual variants from several witnesses, but the text was still largely that of Erasmus. By 1633 this text had gone through some more minor changes, but was stable enough that the edition published by the Elzevirs was called in the preface the "the text now received by all," or the *Textus Receptus*. Interestingly, this was more publishers' hype than consensus, for many if not most NT scholars had long noted the inherent weaknesses in this text. The text published was thus, even in the seventeenth century, more a text of convenience than one of conviction.

## Conspiracy or Evidence?

What, then, has motivated the vast majority of NT scholars to embrace the earliest MSS as better representing the original wording of the NT? In a word, evidence. WH's argument was solid. Interestingly, in WH's day only one NT papyrus fragment was known. Now, almost 100 have been discovered. These antedate the great uncials by as much as two hundred years! What is most significant about them is that *not one is Byzantine*. But if the Byzantine text was the original, why did it not show up in either patristic evidence or MS evidence until much later? In fact, for Paul's letters, the earliest Byzantine MSS belong to the *ninth* century. The earliest Alexandrian witnesses? Second century.

Ever since WH's text and the RV were published, a vitriolic counter-attack has come from KJV circles. We are not here interested in the debate about the English translation *per se*; our concern is over the textual basis, the MSS behind the translation. The attack has taken several forms, including denial of WH's major points, vilification of these early MSS, or vilification of the scholars who embrace them. Our concern in this essay is only with the latter two points. (You may wish to consult my articles on the majority text for a discussion of the first point.)

As for the vilification of the early MSS, John W. Burgon, then Dean of Chichester (southern England), argued that early scribes conspired against the faith. If they did so, they were singularly incompetent in their task, for they left too many things unchanged. (F. H. Scrivener, considered by many KJV fans to be the greatest textual critic of the nineteenth century [partially because he was sympathetic to much of what Burgon was saying] argued against this conspiracy theory.) In fact, they even changed some texts in a misguided attempt at making them more orthodox! Actually, all scribes did this. As is well known, the Synoptic Gospels have many parallels between them. Sometimes the wording is exactly the same between two or more; sometimes there are interesting differences. But *all scribes* at times changed the text of one gospel to conform it to another. If the great uncials conspired against the faith, as Burgon supposed, then why would the scribes of each of these, independently of one another, try to harmonize the gospels?

Take John 4:17 as an example. In this passage Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well. At one point he says to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." To this she responds, "I don't have a husband." Jesus responds, "Correctly you have said, 'A husband I don't have.'" In virtually all Greek MSS, Jesus changed the word order of the woman's statement (putting "husband" first in the sentence, making it emphatic). This was intentional. It is as if he were saying, "Lady, you've got someone at home--but he's not your husband!" But significantly, two early MSS change the wording. The scribes were apparently troubled by the fact that Jesus, though purportedly quoting the woman, did not quote her exactly. It seemed to be an affront to their view of either the Lord's character or the accuracy of the Bible. One of them changed Jesus' words to an indirect quote: "Correctly you have said THAT a husband you do not have." Another changed the *woman's* words to conform to the word order of Jesus' words! Apparently he couldn't imagine the Lord quoting her other than exactly. Hence, the Lord quoted her OK, but she said it wrong in the first place! So her words were changed. These two MSS, Aleph and D, illustrate the piety of the scribes. Their corrections were misguided, to be sure. But they could hardly be charged with conspiratorial motives.

Burgon's view that these early MSS were up to no good is seen to be a prejudiced pronouncement--and one that virtually no NT scholar has since followed (even those who advocate the majority text theory). But what about the other conspiracy theory?

## New Age Conspiracy?

More recently, KJV only advocates have argued that the scholars who produced the WH text and those who embrace it belong to a global conspiracy. They often charge that the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, salvation by grace, etc. is destroyed by these scholars. Some say that a New Age conspiracy is behind the modern translations.

In response, just a few points should be made. First, conspiracy theories are increasing among evangelicals nowadays, and this is a troubling sign. By their nature, conspiracy theories ask the reader to be completely skeptical toward one view while adopting the other, without an examination of the evidence. (One recent book that pushes a conspiracy theory actually has thousands of factual errors and misrepresentations in it, all of which go unchallenged by those sucked in by its aura.) I am reminded of the many popular books I have seen sold in Christian book stores that have a jacket blurb on the back cover: "The Devil doesn't want you to read this!" More often than not, this line is used by an author who has nothing of substance to say and simply wants to get his book sold. Further, it is a haughty claim. The devil doesn't want us to read the *Bible*; but to elevate any merely human production to Satan's hit list of forbidden books is both disingenuous and pompous.

Once the cry of conspiracy is raised, a cloud of suspicion is cast over one side of the issue. It never examines the flimsy basis of its own position, but throws acidic one-liners and *ad hominem* arguments at the opposition. Often, in this particular issue, those who hold the opposing viewpoint are simply labeled as “servants of Satan,” and their translations are called “bastard bibles”!

Mark Noll has recently written a masterful book entitled, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. In it he speaks about how American evangelicals have decided to chuck their brains for the sake of the party line, or for experience, or for emotionalism, etc. But the history of Christianity up through last century was of a different ilk. The Church felt that at least some of its number should be scholars--men and women who dedicated their minds to God, who cultivated the life of the mind. The fact that conspiracy theories about Bible translations are getting readily accepted in several circles indicts evangelicalism. To be blunt, this trend is symptomatic of the dumbing down of Christians in this country. Evangelicals are increasingly holding down the anti-intellectual fort, without engaging in serious debate with others.

Second, if there really is such a conspiracy, then why do the majority of evangelical, Bible-believing seminaries and Bible colleges use modern translations and the Greek MSS behind them? If the faithful wish to find fault with the beliefs of these schools, then they should attack head-on their beliefs, rather than that they use the wrong Bible. But the issue is always the same: wrong Bible must mean, by implication, wrong beliefs. But the beliefs are not examined.

Third, let me camp on this doctrinal issue a bit. What doctrines are at stake? Is the deity of Christ? Surely not. Evangelicals embrace the deity of Christ, regardless of which Bible they use. And they find verses in their translation to back it up. Some studies in fact have shown how the deity of Christ is better supported in the NIV, NASB, etc. than in the KJV. How about the virgin birth? Again, no. Evangelicals embrace that. One of the best defenses of the virgin birth was written by the founder of Westminster Seminary, Gresham Machen, a man who did not think that the MSS behind the KJV were the best. How about inerrancy? The Trinity? Salvation by grace? Justification by faith? You name it, whatever the evangelical doctrine--it is not compromised by these new translations or the MSS behind them. This is the real issue. What doctrines are changed if we change our Bibles? Westminster Seminary still follows the Westminster Confession; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School still embraces its strong doctrinal statement, as does Dallas Seminary its statement. Grace Seminary, Talbot, Western, Denver, Capitol, etc. Yet, the vast majority of the faculty at these schools use the modern translations and the ancient MSS that stand behind them. Where is the cause and effect relationship between new translations and heresy?

Now, to be sure, conspiratorialists can find heretics who use these modern translations. That is beside the point, however. Why? Because an equal if not greater number of heretics can be found who embrace the KJV. (In the 1800s, in fact, the KJV became the ping-pong ball in English debates over the deity of Christ. Those who argued for the deity of Christ appealed to the Greek text, since the KJV translators had not accurately translated some of the passages.) This is similar to what Peter says in 2 Peter 3:16: “Some things in [Paul’s] letters are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures.” The real issue is whether thoroughly orthodox folks can be found standing behind these modern translations. Yes, they can, and predominantly so. The faith delivered once for all to the saints is not in danger from these new translations. The real danger is in deflecting Christians from our mission in life, to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a dying world, compassionately, and *clearly*.

So, is there a conspiracy today? My answer may surprise the reader: yes, I believe there is. But the conspiracy has *not* produced these modern translations. Rather, I believe that there is a conspiracy to cause division among believers, to deflect our focus from the gospel to petty issues, to elevate an anti-intellectual spirit that does not honor the mind which God has created, and to uphold as the only *Holy Bible* a translation that, as lucid as it was in its day,

four hundred years later makes the gospel seem antiquated and difficult to understand.<sup>2</sup> It takes little thought to see who is behind such a conspiracy.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the arguments sometimes heard is that the nonbeliever cannot understand the gospel. 1 Cor 2:12-14 is cited as proof of this statement. The KJV is thus held up as the best Bible because nonbelievers cannot easily understand it! This argument refutes itself, however. First, this is a perversion of 1 Cor 2:12-14; that text essentially says that the nonbeliever does not understand because he does not *welcome* the gospel. His problem is one of volition more than cognition. Second, if this argument were true, then we might expect a *new* believer suddenly able to comprehend Elizabethan English. But that is not the case: new believers have just as difficult a time understanding the KJV as nonbelievers. Third, why is it that unbelieving Shakespearean scholars have little difficulty understanding the words of the KJV? Fourth, by way of analogy: the NT was written in *Koine* Greek or “common” Greek. It was the language of the day--easily understood from Athens to Rome, from Carthage to Jerusalem. Should not our modern translations also be easily understood? To be sure, some of the *concepts* are not easily grasped, even for mature believers (Peter said as much about Paul’s writings). But why make the language a stumbling block? The cross alone should be the stumbling block. It is sufficient.