

How We Got The Bible (in Greek)

by Clint Brown

Objective: To concentrate on strengthening our faith in the reliability of the Bible by showing how it has been passed down to us through the centuries. God's providential hand can be seen in various areas through the transmission process. I hope to bring these points out in an effort to undergird our faith in the present text of our Bibles (specifically the New Testament text).

I. By around A.D. 100, God had given all the information to man that He was going to give (**Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19; II Pet. 1:3**).

A. Immediately upon completion of these writings, copies were necessary (**cf. Col. 4:16; I Thess. 5:27**).

B. The only means of duplication until the fifteenth century (in A.D. 1454 Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press) was by manual handwriting.

C. It is by these handwritten copies, handed down through the centuries, that we have the text of the Bible today.

D. The "autographs" (the very documents that were penned by the inspired authors, Paul, Peter, John, Matthew, Luke, etc.) have not been preserved for us today. We have *copies* of the autographs. (We will discuss the importance of this fact later.)

II. The autographs were written in the "Koine" Greek language; the universal language of the Roman world in the first century. The earliest copies of these autographs are, therefore, in this original language.

III. We have noticed that Greek copies are the primary source of our Bibles. However, there are other sources worthy of consideration...

A. Ancient Versions – There was not only a need for copies of the Scriptures in the Greek language, but in various other languages as well. (E.g. Syriac, Coptic, Latin, etc.) The ancient *versions* serve as a valuable witness to the New Testament text.

B. Church "Fathers" – Several writings by early Christians have survived the centuries. In personal letters and correspondences these Christians often quoted New Testament passages. These quotations are also an important contribution to our biblical text.

C. Ostraca – Pieces of pottery used by the poor on which to write the Scriptures.

IV. With all these different sources, how well attested is the Bible? Do we have an adequate amount of these sources to know if we now have the original words of the apostles and prophets of the first century?

A. Let's first consider some other writings of ancient history and their witnesses...

1. The History of Thucydides (400 B.C.) – 8 manuscripts
2. Tacitus, a Roman Historian (A.D. 100) – 2 manuscripts
3. Gallic Wars – 10 manuscripts
4. Homer's "Iliad" – 643 manuscripts

B. How does the New Testament compare to these other books of antiquity.

1. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available to us today.
2. Over 2,200 Lectionaries (Books used in worship that cite the Bible).
3. Ancient Versions – 9,000 manuscripts (largely due to the advance of the Roman religion that spread the Latin Vulgate throughout Europe).
4. Church "Fathers" – ca. 36,000 citations – scholars say that all but four verses of the entire New Testament text could be reconstructed from the citations of the early Church Fathers alone!
5. *The New Testament is the best attested book of antiquity by far!* - **(Mt. 24:35)**

V. Remember, these copies, versions, citations, etc. were (until A.D. 1450) *hand written* manuscripts and were therefore subject to human mistakes. Imagine sitting down to copy the entire Bible (or N.T. for that matter) without leaving out a word or possibly duplicating a certain word! Therefore, many different variations are found in the vast array of materials we have. These are sometimes called "Textual Variants." This is why we see "Marginal Notes" in our Bibles today.

VI. How did variants occur?

A. Unintentional Changes – By far the vast majority of variants are unintentional errors by the copyists and therefore the easiest to recognize and correct.

1. Errors of the Eye

a. Wrong word division – The earliest Greek copies were written in *scriptio continua* which were manuscripts that did not contain spaces to divide words. In later centuries however, manuscripts were written in minuscule form (similar to our lower case form) which did contain word divisions. While copying from an early manuscript, a scribe would sometimes fail to divide words properly.

(1) Eg. GODISNOWHERE could be divided as "God is now here" or "God is no where." ISAWABUNDANCEONTHETABLE could be divided "I saw abundance on the table" or "I saw a bun dance on the table."

(2) **I Cor. 16:22** – ????????- could be rendered...

????????? - "Our Lord has come"

????????? - same, or "will come"

????????? - "O Lord come!"

b. If two lines on the same page had a similar ending, the scribe could inadvertently skip from the first "ending" to the second "ending" that had the same letters (**Mt. 25:34-46** contains many of the same words).

(1) Omission of words

(2) Repetition of words (probably **Rom. 8:1**)

2. Errors of the Ear – This would have occurred during the "lector" period of duplication. A "lector" would read the text aloud to a group of scribes who would handwrite the copy. This gave rise to many errors of hearing due to words that sounded similar.

a. I Cor. 13:3 - ?????????? – "... give my body *to be burned*..."
or ?????????? – "... give my body *that I may boast*..."

b. I Jn. 1:4 - ????? – "*our* joy may be made full" or ????? – "*your* joy may be made full"

c. Rev. 1:5 - ?????????? – "unto Him that loved us, and *washed us*..."
or ?????????? – "unto Him that loved us, and *freed us*..."

d. We can identify with this even in the English language. Has anyone ever mistaken "deer" with "dear" or "hart" with "heart"?

3. Errors of Judgment in general – sleepy scribes have made several blunders.

a. **II Cor. 8:4-5** – inserted "it is found this way in many copies" as though Paul had wrote it!

b. Copying marginal "notations" into the actual text may account for **Acts 8:37, Rom. 8:1b**, etc.

B. Intentional changes – Some variants are, however, the result of intentional changes though not always from evil motives.

1. Harmonization – an attempt to harmonize parallel passages was a leading cause of intentional changes.

a. **Lk. 11:2-4** – was obviously changed to harmonize with **Mt. 6:9-13**.

b. New Testament quotations of O.T. passages were sometimes changed to harmonize with the O.T. counterpart (**e.g., Mt. 15:8**).

c. **Mt. 19:17** was evidently changed purposefully to agree with the form of Jesus' words as found in **Mk. 10:18**.

d. **Col. 1:14** contains the added phrase "through His blood" that is derived from its original position in **Eph. 1:7**.

2. Historical/Geographical alterations—scribes changed what they thought was an error.

a. "Sixth hour" changed to "third hour" in **Jn. 19:14** to match **Mk. 15:25**. [Actually, John was originally using Jewish time and Mark Roman reckoning.]

b. **Jn. 1:28** – Origen changed "Bethany" to "Bethabara" to remove what he regarded as a geographical difficulty.

3. Doctrinal changes – some were however, intentional doctrinal changes.

a. **Lk. 2:33** – to "preserve" the virgin birth of Christ, scribes changed "His father and mother" to "Joseph and His mother."

b. **Mk. 9:29** – the addition of "fasting" to "prayer." "Fasting" is also added to **Acts 10:30** and **I Cor. 7:5**.

VII. We have mentioned that the only means of copying the Scriptures in the early church was by manual handwriting. By this means we have the many manuscript witnesses to the Bible. *But, probably the most significant date in the history of our Bible is A.D. 1454, when the German, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press.*

A. This date should serve as a "benchmark" of sorts whenever studying the history of our Bible.

B. Remember two very important dates:

1. 1454 – *Printing press invented* – This ushered in a new era of duplication. All dates in Bible History should be viewed in relation to this date. Interestingly, the very first production from the printing press was The Bible (Jerome's Latin Vulgate) in 1456.

[This brought a desire to compile a single Greek text]

2. 1517 – *Protestant Reformation begins* – On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany challenging Eck to debate the errors of Catholicism, thus ushering in a new era in the history of Christendom.

[This brought a desire to have the Scriptures translated into the many extant languages. Until this time the Scriptures (at least in Europe) were primarily in Latin, a language that was not the common language of anyone.]

VIII. With the invention of the printing press in A.D. 1454, men decided to compile a single Greek New Testament.

A. Since mass quantities of identical copies of the New Testament could be easily produced, it became necessary to have a single Greek text.

B. One could either (1) choose a single manuscript from the more than 5,000 extant manuscripts and make that the standard text, or (2) compare *all* of the available manuscript evidence and compile a single text. The latter option would surely be more accurate!

C. Needless to say the method of tedious manual handwriting was soon to pass away as the printing press made its way across the world.

IX. Let's look now at the history of the Printed Greek New Testament.

[see Greenlee, *Scribes, Scrolls, and Scriptures*, pp. 44-47]

[*This period covers roughly A.D. 1500-1633*]

A. **Ximenes** – The first Greek text to be printed was actually done by a Catholic Cardinal named Ximenes in 1514. However, Pope Leo X didn't give it the "go ahead" to be made available to the public until 1520. So while this was actually the first edition of the Gk. N.T. to be printed, it was not the first to be put on the market.

B. **Erasmus** – In somewhat of a "race" to be first, a Dutch scholar named Erasmus published his first edition in 1516 (notice that in the very next year the Reformation Movement began). Four more editions followed (1516-1527).

1. Erasmus acquired only about a half dozen Gk. manuscripts from a library in Switzerland. He made comparisons between these manuscripts to determine the final wording of his text. Here are some interesting facts...

a. For most of the text Erasmus made use of but two rather inferior manuscripts, one of the Gospels, and one of the Acts and Epistles. Both primary manuscripts date about the twelfth century.

b. He had only one manuscript of the Book of Revelation that did not contain the last six verses. So he simply translated these verse from the Latin *into* the Greek. Needless to say, these verses contain Greek words that are not found in *any* available Gk. witness!

c. Since **I John 5:7** (the "heavenly witnesses") was not in any extant Gk. manuscript at the time (even the ones unavailable to Erasmus) his text did not include the passage. Since this reading had been in the Latin Bible for centuries, this caused extreme criticism. Erasmus rashly promised to include the passage if it could be shown in any Greek witness. It is now known that a Franciscan Friar at Oxford actually prepared a Greek manuscript for the sole purpose of showing to Erasmus. Erasmus,

unwillingly kept his promise and included the spurious reading in his 3rd edition of 1522. [However, for an interesting point that may falsify the "ready made manuscript" story, see *Metzger*, p. 291.] By a strange quirk of circumstances this 3rd edition became the most popular and was the only one that contained the spurious passage! [And from there it found its way into the KJV.]

2. It is worthy of mention that when later editors began producing other Greek texts, they relied heavily upon Erasmus' 3rd and subsequent editions. His 4th and 5th editions contained numerous improvements in light of further textual evidences but never received the popularity that the 3rd enjoyed.

C. **Stephanus** – Another publisher named Robert Estienne, a.k.a. Stephanus, published four Greek editions from 1546-1551. As mentioned, he relied heavily upon Erasmus. Stephanus' 3rd edition of 1550 became the most popular and is another contributor to the KJV.

[Interestingly, it was Stephanus who supplied us with the verse divisions that we have today. Stephen Langston, Archbishop of Canterbury, supplied us with chapter divisions back in 1205.]

D. **Beza** – Theodore Beza was the successor of John Calvin at Geneva. He is responsible for publishing 9 editions (plus one after his death) [1564-1611]. He relied heavily upon Stephanus' 1550 and 1551 editions (which, in turn, relied heavily on Erasmus). Beza's 1588-89 and 1598 editions were used extensively by the translators of the KJV.

[The *King James Version* of 1611 was ultimately based on these previous editions.]

E. **Elzevir bros.** – Two brothers [actually an uncle and nephew team] of Holland produced seven editions of the Greek text from 1624-1678. Their first edition was drawn basically from Beza's 1565 edition. The most interesting fact concerning the Elzevir brothers is their 2nd edition of 1633 which contained a preface reading stating: "you have therefore the text now received by all, in which we give nothing altered or corrupted." This was written, of course, in Latin, and that phrase "Textus Receptus" (Received Text) became the catchword of this text.

1. Knowing that this text was originally based on only a few, very late manuscripts (compiled hastily by Erasmus) it was not a production in which was "nothing altered or corrupted." [Some of the more notable "alterations" or "corruptions" being the translations of certain passages in Revelation from Latin *into* Greek. And the spurious reading of **I John 5:7-8**, etc.]

2. Having said all of that, we should not think for a moment that this text did not contain the whole Word of God that is able to teach us what to do to be saved and what to do to stay saved. We must remember, however, that due to more manuscript witnesses that have come to light in years subsequent to this time have shown that the readings of this text is faulty in many details.

F. With the completion of this period of history, there began a massive search for any N.T. witness that would shed further light on the Greek text.

1. From the libraries of Great Britain, Europe, and the Middle East many manuscripts were retrieved that had since lain neglected in the past.

2. Let's now discuss some of these evidences that have come to light since the days immediately following the invention of the printing press.

[The following period will cover roughly A.D. 1648-1830]

X. New Testament Witnesses and their contribution to textual studies.

A. Since handwritten copies have been made since the original Bible authors penned their inspired works, a sound assumption would be to consider the earliest manuscripts to be the most reliable, since they are nearer the autographs. Though this is not an absolute, "hard and fast" rule it serves as a basic starting point in determining correct readings. The closer a manuscript is to the first century, the less likely it is that errors have crept into the text. Likewise, the later the manuscript the greater the likelihood of variants, all things being equal (though they're usually not!).

B. With this in mind let's look at just a few of the witnesses that are widely considered to be among the most important.

1. **Codex Alexandrinus (A)** – Brought to light in 1627, this is an early 5th century copy of the Bible (with some mutilations). This MS is in the National Library of the British Museum. Many scholars consider it to be 3rd of importance only to the next two...

2. **Codex Vaticanus (B)** – A mid-4th century MS that had lain in the Vatican library for many years until it became known to textual scholars in 1475. However, no one was permitted to study it for about 400 years! From 1843-1866, leading scholars Constantin von Tischendorf and S.P. Tregelles were allowed to look at it for a few hours, but not allowed to copy the MS. It wasn't until 1889-1890 that a complete facsimile was made. Many consider this to be the greatest of Codex ("book-form" instead of earlier "scroll-form") witnesses to the N.T. It remains in Vatican City to this day.

3. **Codex Sinaiticus (a)** – This codex (also mid-4th century) was discovered by Tischendorf at St. Catharine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai on his third visit there in 1859. This very valuable witness to the N.T. is housed in the National British Library.

[The previous manuscripts are sometimes called "The Big Three"]

4. **Codex Ephraemi (C)** – Probably originated in Alexandria, Egypt. Came to light in ca. 1533 and currently resides in the National Library at Paris. This is a mid-4th century manuscript (ca. A.D. 345).

5. **Codex Bezae (D)** – The oldest known bilingual manuscript of the N.T. This is a 5th or 6th century MS written in Greek and Latin. It was found in 1562 by Theodore De Beza at St. Irenaeus Monastery, Lyons, France. Now in the Cambridge University Library where it has been since 1581. Though this MS was known during the time Beza compiled his Greek editions, he didn't make much use of it due to its seemingly spurious readings when compared to the other extant MSS of his day. However, if more light had been available to Beza, he would not have considered this MS to be as spurious as he first suspected.

6. **Codex Laudianus (E²)** – A late 6th or early 7th century MS. The earliest known MS containing Acts 8:37. Tischendorf edited it in 1870.

7. **Codex Regius (L)** – This is an 8th century codex containing the Gospels. Of interest is that it contains two endings to the Book of Mark. The first is a shorter ending at 16:8 that reads:

"But they [the women] reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."

The second ending is the popular vv. 9-20 of most available MSS.

8. For a more thorough consideration of many N.T. MSS, see Geisler & Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pp. 267-285.

XI. These discoveries gave rise to a whole new era in our Bible's history — an organized science known as "Textual Criticism" came into practice. Biblical Textual Criticism is the practice of determining the exact wording of the original text written by the apostles and prophets in the first century. Simply put, these critics consider all the available materials and, by applying principles, determine the original wording. This science has evolved over the past several hundred years with various scholars contributing different principles of procedure. We will not discuss in detail these sophisticated text-critical procedures, but will mention only a few of the predominant names throughout this period of history and some of their contributions.

[*This discussion follows Geisler & Nix, pp. 386-393 and Greenlee, pp. 48-54.*]

A. **John Mill** – In 1707, John Mill produced what was basically a reprint of Stephenus' 1550 text. However, of interest is Mill's addition of some 30,000 variants from ca. 78 MSS. His edition had a "critical apparatus" containing notes from MSS (as well as other versions and quotations from church "fathers") not known prior to this time. This bulwark event provided future scholars with a broad basis of established textual evidence. Still, Mill was harshly criticized for "tampering" with the "Received Text."

B. **J. A. Bengel** – The German, Bengel published his edition in 1734, where he made a few changes in the TR. Fearful of castigation, he relegated these changes to the apparatus. He gave two helpful contributions to the science of textual criticism:

1. He arranged the increasingly available MSS into two groups according to similar variations in different witnesses. (We will notice that these "text-types" will be further elaborated upon by later scholars.)

2. And he formulated a commonly approved canon of criticism that says, "*The difficult reading is to be preferred.*" This is so, Bengel believed, because a scribe would be more likely to simplify a "difficult" reading in a text, rather than to make a reading more difficult.

C. J. J. Wettstein – This textual scholar published forty years of study in a 1751-52 edition that contained the first apparatus to designate the uncial MSS (the earlier, all-capital lettered copies) with capital Roman letters (A,B,C,D), and the minuscule MSS (the lower-case copies of later centuries) with Arabic numerals (e.g., 22, 128, 1058). He also provided a principle of criticism that says, "*manuscripts must be evaluated by their weight, not by their number.*"

D. J. S. Semler – In 1764 Semler reprinted Wettstein's work. Of interest is the fact that Semler followed Bengel's manuscript classification system, but carried it farther naming three classes: Alexandrian, Eastern, Western, reflecting somewhat the geographical region from where these manuscripts are believed to have originated.

E. J. J. Griesbach – One of the most important names in this period of history is that of Griesbach who laid the foundation for all subsequent work on the Greek N.T. He identified three "text-types" as Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine. He is also responsible for developing about 15 canons of criticism. He first published his findings in 1775. It is commonly conceded that Griesbach's approach to textual criticism was characterized by caution and candor.

XII. The previous period evinced a definite effort to "replace" the Textus Receptus with a more reliable Greek text. However, the roots ran deep (as they still do today) with the adherents of the TR which slowed the acceptance of a revised text based on more reliable evidence. Hostility toward anyone who published a Greek text which in any way abandoned the TR ran high. This is seen in the fact that most editors relegated the preferred readings, when they differed from the TR, to the apparatus. Of course, those who dared to incorporate their new findings into the text itself were usually denounced and largely ignored. Indeed, the TR still held sway in public opinion.

A. Karl Lachmann – The first real break from the passionately accepted Textus Receptus came when the German, Karl Lachmann published his Greek New Testament in 1831. This was the first edition completely independent of the TR and based solely upon the application of textual criticism. A few earlier editors incorporated text critical variants into the TR, and were castigated (e.g., Edward Wells from 1709-1719). However, after Lachmann published a thorough explanation of the principles used in his work, this first "critical text" enjoyed a popularity its forerunners never did.

B. Constantin von Tischendorf – One of the most noted scholars in the science of textual criticism is Constantin von Tischendorf. He is responsible for making available to the world more than 40 manuscripts of the New Testament. His most important discovery was **Codex Sinaiticus (a)** which he found in the Monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of

Mount Sinai in 1859. Tischendorf produced eight editions of the Greek Testament from 1841-1872 based on all previous discoveries. His 8th edition was most popular although it is believed that he relied too heavily on the newly discovered Sinaiticus. It is difficult to overstate Tischendorf's contributions to the world of textual criticism. History reveals that his efforts further strengthened the acceptance of the "critical text" in place of the TR.

C. S. P. Tregelles – Worthy of mention is the name of Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. While Lachmann and Tischendorf were converting the continent to the critical text, Tregelles was busy in England establishing the superiority of the "textual critical method." He published one edition in six parts from 1857-1872.

D. B.F. Westcott & F.J.A. Hort – By far the most popular edition of the so-called "critical text" was produced by a team of British scholars, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort. They published 28 years of detailed scholarship in two monumental volumes in 1881. One volume contained the New Testament text; the other described, in minute detail, the methodology employed in their work. This work served to crystalize the superiority of the "critical text" because of their deliberate thoroughness and the tedium incorporated in their procedures.

1. Westcott and Hort were consulted heavily during the production of the *English Revised Version* of 1881 which was the cousin and forerunner to the later *American Standard Version* of 1901. This marked the first of the English versions to use the "critical text" as the basis for their translations. All subsequent English versions (except the New King James Version) are based on Greek texts other than the Textus Receptus.

2. It is generally conceded that Westcott and Hort relied too heavily on "the Big Three" manuscripts (Codex Sinaiticus (a), Codex Vaticanus (B), and Codex Alexandrinus (A)), Vaticanus being relied on most. The critics of the textual critical method, though few, have argued against the Westcott & Hort tradition – and with notable success – because of their illicit dependence upon these few manuscripts. [See Metzger, pp. 135ff, pp. 290ff.]

E. Eberhard Nestle – Textual criticism into the twentieth century produced several editions of the Greek New Testament. Among the most popular are 27 editions of Eberhard Nestle's *Novum Testamentum Graece* printed from 1898-1993. This preserves the text of the Westcott & Hort era while taking into consideration newly discovered New Testament manuscripts and papyri of the twentieth century. **Kurt Aland** converged on the work in 1952 (21st ed.). Aland also produced four of his own editions called *The Greek New Testament* from 1966-1994. Both works are available through the United Bible Society.

XIII. The history of the transmission of the Greek New Testament through the past twenty centuries has resulted in primarily two prominent printed Greek Texts: The time-honored "Textus Receptus" and the "Critical Text" of the enlightenment era. While these two separate texts differ from each other in several places, we must remember that either text will teach us God's will for our lives. We can learn what to do to be saved, and how to stay saved through a study of either. Since no major

doctrine is based upon a single passage of Scripture, the variants that are extant are of relatively minor importance.

A. As further proof of the obvious providential hand of God in the preservation of the sacred Scriptures, more recent discoveries of Greek witnesses have solidified the reliability of the Biblical text. Let's notice some of the recent papyri discoveries of the past 100 years.

B. **P52 – John Rylands Fragment** – the earliest known copy of any portion of the New Testament was discovered in 1920, but remained unnoticed until 1932. This fragment of John's gospel measures just 2 ½ by 3 ½ inches but constitutes a huge discovery. Dating ca. A.D. 117-38, this witness contains only portions of John 18:31-33 on one side, and 18:37-38 on the other, but forever falsifies the once popular liberal view that John's gospel wasn't penned until ca. A.D. 160.

C. **P45, P46, P47 – Chester Beatty Papyri** – These important witnesses date from ca. 200, and contain most of the New Testament. Their discovery was announced in 1931 by Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum. The papyri were said to have come from jars taken out of an Egyptian graveyard and were acquired by Chester Beatty.

1. One manuscript (P45) contains portions of thirty leaves of the Gospels and Acts.
2. Another (P46) contains the vast majority of the Pauline epistles. Interestingly, Hebrews is situated immediately following Romans.
3. The last (P47) is a significant portion of the Book of Revelation (9:10-17:2).

D. **P66, P72, P75 – Bodmer Papyri** – Published in 1956, these early documents contain, among many other pieces of literature (Biblical and non-Biblical), the earliest known copy of Jude, I Peter and II Peter (in P66) and the earliest known copy of Luke (in P75). These papyri date from ca. 175-225.

E. Altogether there are approximately 97 known papyri witnesses to the New Testament, all testifying in unison that God has preserved for us his eternal word (Mt. 24:35)! We can be assured and reassured that we have available to us the sacred Scriptures that are able to make us wise unto salvation. May God help us to study them in view of eternity, and as the words that will judge us in the last day.