

## MODERN VERSIONS AND ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS

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**The Lord Jesus Christ said: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but MY WORDS SHALL NOT PASS AWAY" -- Matthew 24:35**

Modern Versions of the New Testament claim the best and most ancient manuscripts as their authority for a multitude of omissions and changes. This article examines the truth of the assumption that the -- "most ancient manuscripts, are the best."

Modern Versions, have followed to a large extent the Greek Text prepared by Westcott and Hort in 1881. The Text of the Revised Version 1881 was influenced greatly by these scholars and the Nestles Text is a collation of three (3) texts, Westcott and Hort, Tischendorf and Bernhard Weiss.

Westcott and Hort recognised as their supreme authorities, only two (2) manuscripts, Aleph and B, and these are among the five (5) ancient manuscripts appealed to by modern versions.

### HISTORY OF THE TEXT

In 323 AD, Constantine became Emperor of Rome and declared Christianity the state religion. Prior to this time, during periods of persecution, Christians copied and kept the Bible at the risk of their lives. Bibles were burned by the pagans whenever they were in Christendom.

The oldest New Testament Greek vellum manuscripts were probably written during the reign of Constantine in the 4th Century. It has been suggested that Codex B was one of 50 copies which Constantine had made to produce a common Bible, satisfying all factions in Christendom. In the 7th Century the Egyptian, Syrian and North African Churches were largely eliminated by the Mohammedan invasion.

In Rome, Latin early became the sacred language and replaced Greek in the copies of scripture. This influence spread to the North African Provinces of the Roman Empire. At the end of the 4th Century, Jerome stated that there "were as many Latin Texts as there were manuscripts." Hence he was asked by Pope Damasus (382AD) to produce the authoritative Latin Version, which came to be known as the Latin Vulgate.

The Greek speaking Byzantine Empire, preserved from the Mohammedan invasion, continued till the 15th Century, (the advent of printing). It was here, where the original language of the New Testament was spoken, that God preserved for us the majority of the Greek manuscripts.

Just as the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament was preserved among the Hebrew speaking Jews, so the Greek Text of the New Testament was preserved in the Greek speaking Byzantine Empire. Thus the Byzantine Text, the Traditional Text, -- 'The Greek Vulgate' and the Received Text are synonymous terms each describing the 'True Text' as it has held sway in the hearts of Christians from the earliest times. It is in fact the "majority text" -- the text preserved in the majority of manuscripts.

In 1516 AD, the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament was published by the brilliant scholar, Erasmus. It is evidence of the overruling providence of God, that although he used only a few Greek manuscripts, his text is in general agreement with 90% to 95% of the 5,000 or more manuscripts available today! The manuscripts he used, were therefore representative of the commonly accepted text.

It is noteworthy that, though Erasmus had correspondence with three (3) Popes, (Julius II, Leo X and Adrian VI) and spent some time at Rome, he did not use Codex Vaticanus (b) when compiling the first

printed text. (Codex B was the prime authority used by Westcott and Hort whose text is the basis for most modern translations.)

In 1533 Sepulveda furnished Erasmus with 365 readings of Codex B to show its agreement with the Latin Version against the Common Greek Text. It is therefore evident that Erasmus rejected the readings of Codex B as untrustworthy and it is probable that he had a better acquaintance with it than did Tregelles in the 19th Century.

Between 1516-1526 Erasmus produced four (4) more editions of the Greek Text and in 1550 Stephens published a similar text incorporating the valuable verse divisions as they appear in the Authorised Version (A.V.) Beza's ten (10) editions (1565-1611) varied only slightly and his text was reprinted later by Elzevir with very minor modification.

Elzevir's two (2) editions were published in 1624 and 1633. The latter was the first text to be called The Textus Receptus or Received Text. This title arose from Elzevir's statement in the preface to the 1633 edition "Now you have the text received by all." However, the term Textus Receptus may equally apply to the texts of Erasmus, Stephens, Beza and Elzevir.

G.R. Berry Ph.D. in his introduction to the interlinear Greek/English New Testament Zondervan publication refers to Stephens' and Elzevir's editions and states "in the main, they are one and the same, and either of them may be referred to as the Textus Receptus."

Dr. Edward F. Hills states "in all essentials, the New Testament text first printed by Erasmus, and later by Stephens (1550) and Elzevir (1633) is in full agreement with the traditional text (Byzantine text) providentially preserved in the vast majority of the Greek New Testament Manuscripts .... It is from this Textus Receptus that the King James version was made" (Believing Bible Study Page 37).

During the 19th Century, Textual Critics, such as Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Westcott and Hort expounded the theory, that because the vast majority of manuscripts are recent, i.e. later than 9th Century (only 500 to 1,000 years old) they were therefore subject to greater error due to copyist slips. Each scribe was assumed to have repeated the errors of previous scribes and of course added a few of his own. It has also been assumed by some, that scribes altered scripture, almost at will, if their theological views differed from the copies before them. This is simply not true. Such a statement ignores the facts of Textual Criticism and the providence of God in preserving His Word. For instance, the oldest extant copy of the Old Testament Hebrew Text, dates about 900 AD. Yet the same Hebrew text was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls dating about 100 BC -- a gap of 1,000 years without change! The same providential care applies to the New Testament as it did to the Old Testament.

Westcott and Hort could not understand why the Alexandrian manuscripts were not copied in vast numbers as were the Byzantine manuscripts. They propounded the theory that somebody must have produced the Byzantine Text about the 4th Century. Westcott and Hort called it the "Syrian Text." This theory has absolutely no historical foundation. It is a figment of their imagination to excuse them for rejecting the vast majority of manuscripts. Surely such a major recension of the text, if it had occurred, would have been documented in church history. This is especially so, as major doctrinal issues of that period are recorded in considerable detail, e.g. Council of Nicea 325 AD which dealt with the Arian heresy. History is silent about any revision of the Text in Syria, Antioch or Constantinople!!

While Westcott and Hort were introducing their so called "neutral text" to the Revised Version Committee 1881, the true text was strongly defended by such scholars as Dean Burgon and Dr. Scrivener.

**Dean Burgon**, who personally added approximately 400 manuscripts to the list, was a man of massive scholastic ability and intimate personal acquaintance with available manuscripts. His book 'The Revision Revised' is considered a masterpiece in the defence of the Received Text.

**Dr. Scrivener** spent 40 years in manuscript research and in his day (end of the 19th Century) had personally examined more manuscripts than any other scholar. When the R.V. 1881 was translated Dr.

Scrivener, who was on the Committee, fought a running battle with Westcott and Hort for 10 years. Westcott and Hort, who were also on the Committee, endeavoured to incorporate the renderings of a FEW ancient manuscripts, while Scrivener evaluated the testimony of ALL the manuscripts. Unfortunately Westcott and Hort had a sympathetic majority, and decisions were made by vote of the Committee.

### **ARE THE MOST ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS THE BEST?**

**The following evidence will show that:**

1. The oldest manuscripts are not necessarily carefully written.
2. The oldest manuscripts extant are not necessarily copied from oldest manuscript master.
3. The oldest manuscripts were subject to the greatest corruption.
4. The oldest manuscripts are in perpetual disagreement with each other.

### **THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS ARE NOT NECESSARILY CAREFULLY WRITTEN**

Those who have examined the ancient manuscripts, indicate that some of the oldest manuscripts are most carelessly written.

Greek N.T. manuscripts are divided into two groups, UNCIALS and CURSIVES. Uncials are those written in capital letters, while cursives are in lower case letters. Uncial manuscripts are generally considered older than cursive manuscripts although cursive writing was known in pre-Christian times.

UNCIAL manuscripts are generally designated by capital letters of our alphabet, and are referred to as Codex A, Codex B, etc.

Five of the oldest codices are Aleph, A, B, C, and D, and it is upon the evidence of these, and their small company of allies, that the Greek texts of Lachmann 1842-50; Tischendorf 1865-72; Tregelles 1857-72; Westcott and Hort 1881, rely.

In fact Westcott and Hort, who dominated the Revised Version Committee of 1881, accepted what they called a neutral text. Only Codex Aleph and Codex B, in their opinion, preserve this text in its purest form. Of these two, when they differ, B is preferred to Aleph, in which "the scribes bold and rough manner has endured all the ordinary lapses due to rapid and careless transcription more numerous than in B."

Scrivener, Page 289, Volume II.

But how carefully written were these great UNCIALS on which our modern versions are based. Let us look at Aleph, B and D.

Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph) (4th Century) "From the number of errors, one cannot affirm that it is very carefully written. The whole manuscript is disfigured by corrections, a few by the original scribe, very many by an ancient and elegant hand of the 6th Century whose emendations are of great importance, some again by a hand a little later, for the greatest number by a scholar of the 7th Century who often cancels the changes by the 6th Century amender, others by as many as eight (8) different later writers." Scrivener, Page 93, Vol. I.

Codex Vaticanus (B) (4th Century) "One marked feature is the great number of omissions which induced Dr. Dobbin to speak of it as an abbreviated text of the New Testament. He calculates that whole words or clauses are left out no less than 2556 times." Scrivener, Page 120, Volume I.

This explains why the modern versions have omitted so much of the scripture -- a fact which is not always apparent due to the practice of grouping verses.

It will also explain charges by some critics that the Received Text is conflate (i.e. a text expanded by the inclusion of readings from different sources). Once Codex B is adopted as the final authority, any text which does not maintain the omissions of B, must be conflate... but only as it compares with B!

Codex Bezae Graeco-Latinus (D) (5th or 6th Century) "The manuscript has been corrected, first by the original penman and later by 8 or 9 different revisors." And again: "No known manuscript contains so many

bold and extensive interpolations (600 in ACTS alone) countenanced, where they are not absolutely unsupported, chiefly by the Old Latin and Curetonian Syriac Version." Scrivener, Pages 128 and 130, Volume I.

The Curetonian Version is recognised as a corrupt Syriac version, while the second century Peshitta, called the "Queen of Versions," was the commonly accepted Syrian version. The Peshitta is in agreement with later Greek manuscripts, and provides a vital link between the text used by the Early Church Fathers and the Received Text.

It has been suggested by Dr. Rendel Harris, that Codex D may even have been a translation back to Greek from a Latin translation.

### **THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS EXTANT ARE NOT NECESSARILY COPIED FROM THE OLDEST MASTER MANUSCRIPT**

Manuscripts were hand written on various materials until the 15th Century. (Printing was invented in 1450 AD). Many manuscripts were written on vellum. This was a fine skin of goat, calf or antelope and was extremely durable. Copies in quite reasonable condition are available today dating back to about 350 AD, i.e. 1,600 years old! Since print-replaced hand copying in the 15th Century, we can assume that even the latest manuscripts are at least 500 years old, while many from the 900 AD period are nearly 1,100 years old!

The life expectancy of a manuscript was far greater than our paper books. Many 70 year old books have deteriorated today to a condition where they cannot be read without damage.

If the average life of a vellum manuscript was 350 years, (allowing for wear) it would only require four at the most copies from the day of the apostles to the advent of printing.

It therefore, does not automatically follow, that a manuscript written in 350 AD was copied from an older manuscript than one copied in 500 AD.

Furthermore, a 200 year difference in the age of manuscripts is not substantial when we realise that the assessments of age are only based on the estimates of scholars who at times are in sharp disagreement.

The style of writing is the main criterion for age: Quote "The style of writing adopted in the manuscripts . . . forms the simplest and surest criteria for approximating the date of the documents." (Scrivener, Page 29, Volume I). We must remember that the practice of dating manuscripts did not begin till the 10th Century so that the age of all manuscripts prior to this time, are estimates based, in the main, on changes in style.

The difficulties encountered by scholars in putting an accurate date on an ancient manuscript are illustrated by the following quote: "The Herculean papyri, buried from 79 A D downwards MAY PROBABLY BE A CENTURY OLDER STILL . . . Hence from three to four hundred years must have elapsed betwixt the date of the Herculean rolls and that of our earliest Biblical (N.T.) manuscripts. YET THE FASHION OF WRITING CHANGED BUT LITTLE DURING THE INTERVAL!" (Scrivener, Page 33, Volume I).

While some experts estimate the date of Isaiah A of the Dead Sea Scrolls, at the first or second century BC, G.R. Driver contends that they date about 73 AD... a difference of 248 years.

Allowing for differing styles of the scribes, we must therefore agree that dating of early manuscripts is extremely difficult. Perhaps a tolerance of + 100 years would be reasonable in many cases.

### **THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS WERE SUBJECT TO THE GREATEST CORRUPTION**

Differences in manuscripts fall into well defined categories. The majority of these are scribal slips of a minor nature such as spelling errors, punctuation, missing one line or word, placing in a word which sounds like the true word, repetition, transposition, etc. Only very few of the approximately 5,000 manuscripts can be said to have been changed by deliberate corruption.

After classifying 18 out of 20 ways that manuscripts vary, Dr. Scrivener states: "The great mass of various readings we have hitherto attempted to classify are manifestly due to mere inadvertance or human frailty,

and certainly cannot be imputed to any deliberate intention of transcribers to tamper with the text of Scripture."

The Alexandrian School however, is recognised as one of the greatest sources of corruption, and it is Alexandrian influence which permeates some of the oldest manuscripts (particularly Vaticanus B, Sinaiticus Aleph) upon which the modern versions are based.

Scrivener states: "it is no less true to fact than paradoxical in sound, that the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within 100 years after it was composed: and that Irenaeus and the African Fathers, and the whole Western, with a portion of the Syrian Church, used manuscripts far inferior to those employed by Stunica, Erasmus or Stephens, thirteen centuries later when moulding the Textus Receptus."

By the science of textual criticism it is possible to identify where copyist slips have occurred. This is done by comparing the available documents. The probability of all the scribes spelling the same words incorrectly, omitting the same line, word or verse, is extremely remote. Especially when we realise that manuscripts varied in size and in the number of columns used. Thus the line endings would be different and the same visual traps would not apply to each scribe. Also many slips could be detected by subsequent scribes and corrected after parison with other manuscripts.

The only safe approach to textual criticism therefore is to use ALL manuscripts irrespective of age, and not to be limited to a FEW ancient manuscripts.

### **THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS ARE IN PERPETUAL DISAGREEMENT**

If we were to believe that the manuscripts became more corrupt each time they were copied, we would therefore expect the oldest to be the best and also to be in greatest agreement with each other.

**THE FACT IS THEY ARE NOT** -- as the following quote will show: "Ought it not, asks Dean Burgon, sensibly to detract from our opinion of the value of their evidence, (Codex B and Codex Aleph) to discover that it is easier to find two consecutive verses in which the two manuscripts differ, the one from the other, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree? .... On every such occasion only one of them can possibly be speaking the truth. Shall I be thought unreasonable if I confess that these perpetual inconsistencies, between Codex B and Aleph -- grave inconsistencies and occasionally even gross ones -- altogether destroy my confidence in either?"

#### **Or as Scrivener writes:**

"The point on which we insist is briefly this: that the evidence of ancient authorities is anything but unanimous, that they are perpetually at variance with each other, even if we limit the term ancient within the narrowest bounds. Shall it include, among the manuscripts of the Gospels, none but the five oldest copies of Codex, Aleph A B C D? The reader has but to open the first recent critical work he shall meet with, to see them scarcely ever in unison, perpetually divided two against three, or perhaps four against one."

The following figures provided by Kirsopp Lake and his associates (1928), demonstrate that Codices Aleph, B and D are in greater disagreement among themselves than they are with the Received Text!

#### **In Mark Chapter II alone--**

Aleph, B and D differ from the Received Text 69, 71 and 95 times respectively. B differs from Aleph 34 times B differs from D 102 times D differs from Aleph 100 times.

Hoskier, who studied the differences between the texts of Aleph and B, lists the following differences in the 4 Gospels.

Matthew 656 differences Mark 567 differences Luke 791 differences John 1,022 differences

Total for four (4) Gospels 3,036 differences.

In the light of the facts stated above it is clear that we cannot have confidence in any modern version or Greek text which rejects the concordant testimony of the vast majority of manuscripts in favour of a small company of ancient, but discordant witnesses.

### **TWO STREAMS OF MANUSCRIPTS HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED**

The foregoing comments serve to show that the claim of some modern translations and paraphrases, that the oldest manuscripts are the best, is altogether based on a wrong foundation.

Dr. D. Otis Fuller, in his book "WHICH BIBLE," has shown that Christians of all ages have recognised that two streams of manuscripts have always existed.

The muddy stream of the corrupt text, including the Western family (characterised by interpolations), and the Alexandrian family (characterised by omissions) has flowed through channels such as Origen (who denied the deity of Christ) Eusebius, Jerome (who produced the Latin Vulgate), and in the last century, through Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Westcott and Hort.

The pure stream of the New Testament has flowed to us through the Received Text, which Dr. D. Otis Fuller tells us: "had authority enough to become either in itself, or by its translation, the Bible of the great Syrian Church, of the Waldensian Church of northern Italy, of the Gallic Church of Southern France, and of the Celtic Church in Scotland and Ireland, as well as the Official Bible of the Greek Church (BYZANTINE TEXT)." The reformers stood firmly by the Received Text, Luther's German Translation and Tyndale's magnificent English Translation were from it. When 47 scholars translated the Authorised Version in 1611, by Divine Providence the Received Text was used.

Manuscript discoveries since 1611 have NOT altered the picture. The number increased to 3791 in 1881, and since then to about 5,000, BUT STILL ABOUT 90% AGREE WITH THE RECEIVED TEXT!

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