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Westcott & Hort vs. Textus Receptus: Which is Superior?

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The New Testament was inspired by God, and came from the pens of its writers or their amanuenses in infallible form, free from any defect of any sort, including scribal mistakes. However, God in His providence did not choose to protect that infallible original text from alterations and corruptions in the copying and printing process. Scribes and printers made both accidental (usually) and deliberate (occasionally) changes in the Greek text as they copied it. As a result, the surviving manuscript copies of the New Testament differ among themselves in numerous details.

Many attempts have been made (even as early as the second century A.D.) to sort through the manuscripts of the New Testament and weed out the errors and mistakes of copyists, in order to restore the text to its original apostolic form. Those who have made such an attempt have differed one from another in the resources at their disposal, their own personal abilities as text editors, and the principles followed in trying to restore the original text of the New Testament.

The two most famous attempts at restoring the original text of the New Testament are the Textus Receptus, dating from the Reformation and post-Reformation era, and the Greek text of B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, first published in 1881. These two texts were based on differing collections of manuscripts, following differing textual principles, at different stages in the on-going process of the discovery and evaluation of surviving New Testament manuscripts, and, not surprisingly, with often differing results. There is much dispute today about which of these texts is a more faithful representation of the original form of the Greek New Testament, and it is this question which will be addressed in this study: Which is the superior Greek New Testament, the Textus Receptus/"Received Text" or the "Critical Text" of Westcott and Hort?

Any proper and adequate answer given to this question must begin with the matter of definition of terms. First, what is meant by the term "superior"? This may seem an unnecessary question since it might be supposed that all would agree on the answer, namely, the superior Greek New Testament is that one which most closely preserves and presents the precise original wording of the original Greek writings of the New Testament. However, in the rather voluminous popular literature on this issue, some writers have argued that one text or another is superior because it is perceived to contain more proof-texts of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, or some other doctrine. In fact, to make a selection on such a basis is much beside the point. Additional supporting proof-texts of numerous doctrines can be found in various Greek manuscripts or versions, though the readings are beyond dispute not the original reading of the New Testament. "Which Greek text most closely corresponds to the original New Testament?"--this and no other consideration is proper in deciding which Greek text is superior.

Next, what is meant by the term, "Received Text."? This name was first applied to a printed Greek text only as late as 1633, or almost 120 years after the first published Greek New Testament appeared in 1516. In 1633, the Elzevirs of Leyden published the second edition of their Greek text, and that text contained the publisher's "blurb": *textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum*, or, "therefore you have the text now received by all," from which the term *textus receptus*, or received text was taken, and applied collectively and retroactively to the series of published Greek New Testaments extending from 1516 to 1633 and beyond. Most notable among the many editors of Greek New Testaments in this period were Erasmus (5 editions: 1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, 1535), Robert Estienne a.k.a. Robertus Stephanus (4 editions, 1546,

1549, 1550, 1551), Theodore de Beza (9 editions, between 1565 and 1604), and the Elzevirs (3 editions, 1624, 1633, 1641). These many Greek texts display a rather close general uniformity, a uniformity based on the fact that all these texts are more or less reprints of the text(s) edited by Erasmus, with only minor variations. These texts were not independently compiled by the many different editors on the basis of close personal examination of numerous Greek manuscripts, but are genealogically-related. Proof of this is to be found in a number of "unique" readings in Erasmus' texts, that is, readings which are found in no known Greek manuscript but which are nevertheless found in the editions of Erasmus. One of these is the reading "book of life" in Revelation 22:19. All known Greek manuscripts here read "tree of life" instead of "book of life" as in the textus receptus. Where did the reading "book of life" come from? When Erasmus was compiling his text, he had access to only one manuscript of Revelation, and it lacked the last six verses, so he took the Latin Vulgate and back-translated from Latin to Greek. Unfortunately, the copy of the Vulgate he used read "book of life," unlike any Greek manuscript of the passage, and so Erasmus introduced a "unique" Greek reading into his text. Since the first and only "source" for this reading in Greek is the printed text of Erasmus, any Greek New Testament that agrees with Erasmus here must have been simply copied from his text. The fact that all textus receptus editions of Stephanus, Beza, et al. read with Erasmus shows that their texts were more or less slavish reprints of Erasmus' text and not independently compiled editions, for had they been edited independently of Erasmus, they would surely have followed the Greek manuscripts here and read "tree of life." Numerous other unique or extremely rare readings in the textus receptus editions could be referenced.

In this connection, it is worth noting that the translators of the King James Version did not follow exclusively any single printed edition of the New Testament in Greek. The edition most closely followed by them was Beza's edition of 1598, but they departed from this edition for the reading in some other published Greek text at least 170 times, and in at least 60 places, the KJV translators abandoned all then-existing printed editions of the Greek New Testament, choosing instead to follow precisely the reading in the Latin Vulgate version. No edition of the Greek New Testament agreeing precisely with the text followed by the KJV translators was in existence until 1881 when F. H. A. Scrivener produced such an edition (though even it differs from the King James Version in a very few places, eg. Acts 19:20). It is Scrivener's 1881 text which was reprinted by the Trinitarian Bible Society in 1976. This text does not conform exactly to any of the historic texts dating from the Reformation period and known collectively as the textus receptus.

Furthermore, a careful distinction must be made between the textus receptus (even in its broadest collective sense) on the one hand, and the majority text (also known as the Byzantine or Syrian text) on the other. Though the terms textus receptus and majority text are frequently used as though they were synonymous, they by no means mean the same thing. When the majority text was being compiled by Hodges and Farstad, their collaborator Pickering estimated that their resultant text would differ from the textus receptus in over 1,000 places; in fact, the differences amounted to 1,838. In other words, the reading of the majority of Greek manuscripts differs from the textus receptus (Hodges and Farstad used an 1825 Oxford reprint of Stephanus' 1550 text for comparison purposes) in 1,838 places, and in many of these places, the text of Westcott and Hort agrees with the majority of manuscripts against the textus receptus. The majority of manuscripts and Westcott and Hort agree against the textus receptus in excluding Luke 17:36; Acts 8:37; and I John 5:7 from the New Testament, as well as concurring in numerous other readings (such as "tree of life" in Revelation 22:19). Except in a few rare cases, writers well-versed in textual criticism have abandoned the textus receptus as a standard text.

The question remains to be resolved: how shall we define textus receptus? It has been customary in England to employ the 1550 text of Stephanus as the exemplar of the textus receptus (just as the Elzevir text was so adopted on the continent of Europe), and so we will follow this custom. For our purposes here,

the term *textus receptus* means the 1550 edition of the Greek New Testament published by Robertus Stephanus.

The Westcott and Hort text is much simpler to define. This is the Greek New Testament edited by B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort and first published in 1881, with numerous reprints in the century since. It is probably the single most famous of the so-called critical texts, perhaps because of the scholarly eminence of its editors, perhaps because it was issued the same year as the English Revised Version which followed a text rather like the Westcott-Hort text.

It needs to be stated clearly that the text of Westcott and Hort was not the first printed Greek Testament that deliberately and substantially departed from the *textus receptus* on the basis of manuscript evidence. Westcott and Hort were preceded in the late 1700s by Griesbach, and in the 1800s by Lachmann, Alford, Tregelles, and Tischendorf (and others), all of whose texts made numerous revisions in the *textus receptus* on the basis of manuscript evidence; these texts, especially the last three named, are very frequently in agreement with Westcott and Hort, against the *textus receptus*.

Likewise, it is important to recognize that the English Revised New Testament which came out in 1881 was not directly based on the text of Westcott and Hort, although in many particulars they are the same. The Greek text followed by the Revisers was compiled and published in 1882 in an edition with the KJV and ERV in parallel columns. It is true that the Westcott-Hort text and the English Revised New Testament of 1881 are rather similar to each other, but they are not identical.

Though the Westcott-Hort text was the "standard" critical text for a generation or two, it is no longer considered such by any one, and has not been for many years. The "standard" text or texts today are the Nestle or Nestle-Aland text (1st edition, 1898; 27th edition, 1993) and/or the various editions of The Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies (1st edition, 1966; 4th edition, 1993). The last two editions of each of these sport an identical text, a new "received text," so to speak. It is true that the Westcott-Hort text is part of the heritage of both the Nestle texts and the UBS texts. Eberhard Nestle originally used as his text the consensus reading of three editions of the Greek New Testament in his day, Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, and Weymouth, later substituting Weiss for Weymouth. The UBS editors used the Westcott-Hort text as their starting point and departed from it as their evaluation of manuscript evidence required.

None of the major modern English Bible translations made since World War II used the Westcott-Hort text as its base. This includes translations done by theological conservatives--the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the New King James, for examples--and translations done by theological liberals--the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the Good News Bible, etc. The only English Bible translation currently in print that the writer is aware of which is based on the Westcott-Hort text is the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In a very real sense, the very question of which is superior, Westcott and Hort, or the *textus receptus*, is *passé*, since neither is recognized by experts in the field as the standard text. However, since modern printed Greek texts are in the same respective families of text, namely the Alexandrian (Nestle, et al.) and the Byzantine (majority text), it is suitable to ask, "which one is superior, i.e., which comes closer to presenting the Greek text in its original form?"

What is perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the Westcott-Hort text vis-a-vis the *textus receptus*, is the fact that it has firm support from the oldest extant Greek manuscripts, plus the earliest of the versions or translations, as well as the early Christian writers of the 2nd through 4th centuries. Age of manuscripts is probably the most objective factor in the process of textual criticism. When Westcott and Hort compiled their text, they employed the two oldest then-known manuscripts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, as their text base. Since their day, a good number of manuscripts as old and in some cases a century older and more than these two manuscripts have been discovered. With a general uniformity, these early manuscripts

have supported the Alexandrian text-type which the Westcott-Hort text presents. It is true that these papyrus manuscripts occasionally contain Byzantine-type readings, but none of them could in any way be legitimately described as being regularly Byzantine in text. The agreement of some of the papyri with Vaticanus, especially p75 of the early third century, has been quite remarkable.

Of the early versions, the Westcott-Hort text has strong support in the various Coptic versions of the third and later centuries, plus frequent support in the Old Latin versions and the oldest forms of the Syriac, in particular the Sinaitic and Curetonian manuscripts whose text form dates to the second or third century (though there are also strong Western elements in the Old Latin and the early Syriac). Jerome's revision of the Old Latin, the Vulgate made ca. 400 A.D., also gives frequent support to the Alexandrian text. Of early Christian writers before the fourth century, the Alexandrian text has substantial support, especially in the writings of Origen, whose Scripture quotations are exceedingly numerous.

On the other hand, the Byzantine text-type, of which the *textus receptus* is a rough approximation, can boast of being presented in the vast majority of surviving manuscripts, as well as several important versions of the New Testament from the fourth century or later, and as being the text usually found in the quotations of Greek writers in the fifth century and after. The most notable version support for the Byzantine text is in the Peshitta Syriac and the fourth century Gothic version. A second-century date for the Peshitta used to be advocated, but study of the Biblical quotations in the writings of Syrian Fathers Aphraates and Ephraem has demonstrated that neither of these leaders used the Peshitta, and so it must date from after their time, i.e., to the late fourth century or after. Therefore, this chief support for a claimed second-century date for the Byzantine text-type has been shown to be invalid.

On the down side, the distinctively Alexandrian text all but disappears from the manuscripts after the 9th century. On the other hand, the Byzantine manuscripts, though very numerous, did not become the "majority" text until the ninth century, and though outnumbering Alexandrian manuscripts by more than 10:1, are also very much later in time, most being 1,000 years and more removed from the originals. Returning to the specific texts, Westcott-Hort vs. the *textus receptus*: in truth, both texts necessarily fall short of presenting the true original. Obviously, those readings in the *textus receptus* which are without any Greek manuscript support cannot possibly be original. Additionally, in a number of places, the *textus receptus* reading is found in a limited number of late manuscripts, with little or no support from ancient translations. One of these readings is the famous I John 5:7. Such readings as this are also presumptively not original. And if one holds to the "nose count" theory of textual criticism, i.e., whatever the reading found in a numerical majority of surviving Greek manuscripts is to be accepted as original, then the *textus receptus* falls short in the 1,838 readings where it does not follow the majority text.

Besides these shortcomings, others also apparently occur in a number of places where a perceived difficulty in the original reading was altered by scribes in the manuscript copying process. Probable examples of this include Mark 1:2 (changing "Isaiah the prophet" to "the prophets," a change motivated by the fact that the quote which follows in 1:3 is from both Malachi and Isaiah), I Corinthians 6:20 (where the phrase "and in your Spirit which are God's" seems to have been added after the original "in your body," which is the subject under consideration in the preceding verses), Luke 2:33 (changing "his father and his mother" into "Joseph and his mother" to 'safeguard' the doctrine of the virgin birth), Romans 8:1, end (borrowing from verse 4, in two stages, the phrase "who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit"), Romans 13:9 (the insertion of one of the Ten Commandments to complete the listing), Colossians 1:14 (the borrowing of the phrase "through his blood" from Ephesians 1:7), etc.

On the other hand, the defects of the Westcott-Hort text are also generally recognized, particularly its excessive reliance on manuscript B (Vaticanus), and to a lesser extent, Aleph (Sinaiticus). Hort declared the combined testimony of these two manuscripts to be all but a guarantee that a reading was original. All scholars today recognize this as being an extreme and unwarranted point of view. Manuscript B shows the

same kinds of scribal errors found in all manuscripts, a fact to be recognized and such singular readings to be rejected, as in fact they sometimes were rejected by Westcott and Hort (e.g., at Matthew 6:33). What shall we say then? Which text shall we choose as superior? We shall choose neither the Westcott-Hort text (nor its modern kinsmen) nor the textus receptus (or the majority text) as our standard text, our text of last appeal. All these printed texts are compiled or edited texts, formed on the basis of the informed (or not-so-well-informed) opinions of fallible editors. Neither Erasmus nor Westcott and Hort (nor, need we say, any other text editor or group of editors) is omniscient or perfect in reasoning and judgment. Therefore, we refuse to be enslaved to the textual criticism opinions of either Erasmus or Westcott and Hort or for that matter any other scholars, whether Nestle, Aland, Metzger, Burgon, Hodges and Farstad, or anyone else. Rather, it is better to evaluate all variants in the text of the Greek New Testament on a reading by reading basis, that is, in those places where there are divergences in the manuscripts and between printed texts, the evidence for and against each reading should be thoroughly and carefully examined and weighed, and the arguments of the various schools of thought considered, and only then a judgment made.

We do, or should do, this very thing in reading commentaries and theology books. We hear the evidence, consider the arguments, weigh the options, and then arrive at what we believe to be the honest truth. Can one be faulted for doing the same regarding the variants in the Greek New Testament? Our aim is to know precisely what the Apostles originally did write, this and nothing more, this and nothing else. And, frankly, just as there are times when we must honestly say, "I simply do not know for certain what this Bible verse or passage means," there will be (and are) places in the Greek New Testament where the evidence is not clear cut, and the arguments of the various schools of thought do not distinctly favor one reading over another.

This means there will at times be a measure of uncertainty in defining precisely the exact wording of the Greek New Testament (just as there is in the interpretation of specific verses and passages), but this does not mean that there is uncertainty in the theology of the New Testament. Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg has well-stated the theological limits of the manuscript variations in the New Testament,

Although the Scriptures were originally penned under the unerring guidance of the Holy Spirit, it does not follow, that a continued miracle has been wrought to preserve them from all error in transcribing. On the contrary, we know that manuscripts differ from each other; and where readings are various, but one of them can be correct. A miracle was needed in the original production of the Scriptures; and, accordingly, a miracle was wrought; but the preservation of the inspired word, in as much perfection as was necessary to answer the purpose for which it was given, did not require a miracle, and accordingly it was committed to the providence of God. Yet the providence which has preserved the divine oracles, has been special and remarkable....The consequence is, that, although the various readings found in the existing manuscripts, are numerous, we are able, in every case, to determine the correct reading, so far as is necessary for the establishment of our faith, or the direction of our practice in every important particular. So little, after all, do the copies differ from each other, that these minute differences, when viewed in contrast with their general agreement, render the fact of that agreement the more impressive, and may be said to serve, practically, rather to increase, than impair our confidence in their general correctness. Their utmost deviations do not change the direction of the line of truth; and if it seems in some points to widen the line a very little, the path that lies between their widest boundaries, is too narrow to permit us to stray.

To this may be added the testimony of Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, the pre-eminent British authority on New Testament manuscripts at the turn of the twentieth century. In discussing the differences between the

traditional and the Alexandrian text-types, in the light of God's providential preservation of His word, he writes,

We may indeed believe that He would not allow His Word to be seriously corrupted, or any part of it essential to man's salvation to be lost or obscured; but the differences between the rival types of text is not one of doctrine. No fundamental point of doctrine rests upon a disputed reading: and the truths of Christianity are as certainly expressed in the text of Westcott and Hort as in that of Stephanus

Even advocates and defenders of the supremacy of the Byzantine over the Alexandrian text agree in this assessment. One such writer was 19th century American Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert L. Dabney. He wrote,

This received text contains undoubtedly all the essential facts and doctrines intended to be set down by the inspired writers; for if it were corrected with the severest hand, by the light of the most divergent various readings found in any ancient MS. or version, not a single doctrine of Christianity, nor a single cardinal fact would be thereby expunged.... If all the debated readings were surrendered by us, no fact or doctrine of Christianity would thereby be invalidated, and least of all would the doctrine of Christ's proper divinity be deprived of adequate scriptural support. Hence the interests of orthodoxy are entirely secure from and above the reach of all movements of modern criticism of the text whether made in a correct or incorrect method, and all such discussions in future are to the church of subordinate importance.

These sober and sensible judgments stand in marked contrast to the almost manic hysteria found in the writings of some detractors of critical texts who write as though those texts were a Pandora's box of heresy. In truth, all text families are doctrinally orthodox. A dispassionate evaluation of evidence is very much to be preferred to the emotionally charged tirades that characterize much of the current discussion.

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