

## The Textus Receptus

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### Introduction

*Textus Receptus*, or "Received Text," (abbreviated TR) is the name we use for the first published Greek text of the New Testament. For many centuries, it was *the* standard text of the Greek Bible. The name arose from the work of the kinsmen Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, who said of their 1633 edition, "Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum" -- "So [the reader] has the text which all now receive." The irony is that the Received Text is not actually a single edition, but a sort of text-type of its own consisting of hundreds of extremely similar but not identical editions. Nor do any of its various flavours agree exactly with any extant text-type or manuscript. Thus the need, when referring to the Received Text, to specify *which* received text we refer to.

If this all sounds complicated, it is because of the complicated history of the *Textus Receptus*. Let's take it from the beginning.

### The Origin of the Textus Receptus

Although printing with movable type was in use no later than 1456, it was many years before a Greek New Testament was printed. This is not as surprising as it sounds; the Greek minuscule hand of the late fifteenth century was extremely complicated, with many diverse ligatures and custom symbols. Cutting a Greek typeface required the creation of hundreds of symbols -- far more than a Latin typeface. Printers probably did not relish the idea. (It is worth noting that the Complutensian Polyglot *invented* a new type of Greek print for its edition.)

It was not until the early sixteenth century that Cardinal Ximenes decided to embark on a Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament -- the famous Complutensian Polyglot. The New Testament volume of this work was printed in 1514 -- but it was not published until after 1520. This left a real opportunity for an enterprising printer who could get out an edition quickly.

Such a printer was John Froben of Basle. Apparently having heard of the Complutensian edition, he was determined to beat it into print. Fortunately, he had the contacts to pull this off.

Froben decided to approach Desiderius Erasmus, one of the most notable (if rather humanistic) scholars of his generation. The proposal appears to have been transmitted on April 17, 1515. Work began in the fall of that year, and the work was pushed through the press in February of 1516.

For a project that had taken fifty years to get started, the success of Erasmus's edition (which contained his Greek text in parallel with his own Latin version) was astonishing. The first printing soon sold out, and by 1519 a new edition was required. Three more would follow, each somewhat improved over the last.

It is sad to report that such a noble undertaking was so badly handled (all the more so since it became the basis of Luther's German translation, and later -- with some slight modifications -- of the English King James Version). The speed with which the book went through the press meant that it contained literally thousands of typographical errors. What is more, the text was hastily and badly edited from a few late manuscripts (see below, [The Text of the Textus Receptus](#)).

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*A part of page 336 of Erasmus's Greek Testament, the first "Textus Receptus."  
Shown is a portion of John 18.*

## The History of the Textus Receptus

Erasmus's first edition was a great success; some 3300 copies of his first two editions were sold. The success of Erasmus's edition soon called forth new Greek testaments, all of them based largely on his. The first of these was published by Aldus Manutius in 1518 -- but although it contained an independent text of the Septuagint (the first such to be printed), its New Testament text was taken almost verbatim from Erasmus, including even the typographical errors. Hence the first truly new publication was Erasmus's own edition of 1519. This featured almost the same text as the 1516 edition, but with the majority (though by no means all!) of the errors of the press corrected. It also features some new readings, believed by Scrivener to come from 3<sup>cap</sup> (XII; classified by von Soden as e: K<sup>x</sup> a: I [K]; c: K).

Erasmus's third edition of 1522 contained one truly unfortunate innovation: The "Three Heavenly Witnesses" in 1 John 5:7-8. These were derived from the recently-written Codex 61, and (as the famous story goes) included by Erasmus "for the sake of his oath." Sadly, they have been found in almost every TR edition since.

There followed a great welter of editions, all slightly different (based on such figures as I have seen, it would appear that editions of the Textus Receptus typically vary at between one hundred and two hundred places, though very few of these differences are more than orthographic). None of these editions were of any particular note (though the 1534 text of Simon Colinæus is sometimes mentioned as significant, since it included some variant readings). It was not until 1550 that the next great edition of the Textus Receptus was published. This was the work of Robert Stephanus (Estienne), whose third edition became one of the two "standard" texts of the TR. (Indeed, it is Stephanus's name that gave rise to the common symbol "for the Textus Receptus.") Stephanus included the variants of over a dozen manuscripts -- including Codices Bezae (D) and Regius (L) -- in the margin. In his fourth edition (1551), he also added the verse numbers which are still used in all modern editions. The Stephanus edition became the standard *Textus Receptus* of Britain, although of course it was not yet known by that name. (The esteem in which the Textus Receptus was already held, however, is shown by Scrivener's report that there are 119 places where all of Stephanus's manuscripts read against the TR, but Stephanus still chose to print the reading found in previous TR editions.)

Stephanus's editions were followed by those of Theodore de Bèza (1519-1605), the Protestant reformer who succeeded Calvin. These were by no means great advances over what had gone before; although Beza had access to the codex which bears his name, as well as the codex Claromontanus, he seems to have made little if any use of them. A few of his readings have been accused of theological bias; the rest seem largely random. Beza's editions, published between 1565 and 1611, are remembered more for the sake of their editor (and the fact that they were used by the translators of the King James Bible) than for their text.

The next great edition of the *Textus Receptus* is the Elzevir text already mentioned in the [Introduction](#). First published in 1624, with minor changes for the edition of 1633, it had the usual minor variants from Stephanus (of which Scrivener counted 287), but nothing substantial; the Elzevirs were printers, not critics. The Elzevir text, which became the primary TR edition on the continent, was the last version to be significant for its text. From this time on, editions were marked more by their marginal material, as scholars such as Mill, Wettstein, and later Griesbach began examining and arranging manuscripts. None of these were able to break away from the TR, but all pointed the way to texts free of its influence.

Only one more TR edition needs mention here -- the 1873 Oxford edition, which forms the basis of many modern collations. This edition is no longer available, of course, though some editions purport to give its readings.

Beginners are reminded once again that not all TR editions are identical; those collating against a TR must state very explicitly *which* edition is being used.

## The Text of the Textus Receptus

Erasmus, having little time to prepare his edition, could only examine manuscripts which came to hand. His haste was so great, in fact, that he did not even write new copies for the printer; rather, he took existing manuscripts, corrected them, and submitted *those* to the printer. (Erasmus's corrections are still visible in the manuscript 2.)

Nor were the manuscripts which came to hand particularly valuable. For his basic text he chose 2<sup>e</sup>, 2<sup>ap</sup>, and 1<sup>r</sup>. In addition, he was able to consult 1<sup>cap</sup>, 4<sup>ap</sup>, and 7<sup>p</sup>. Of these, only 1<sup>cap</sup> had a text independent of the Byzantine tradition -- and Erasmus used it relatively little due to the supposed "corruption" of its text.

Erasmus also consulted the Vulgate, but only from a few late manuscripts.

Even those who favour the Byzantine text cannot be overly impressed with Erasmus's choice of manuscripts; they are all rather late (see table):

### Manuscript Date Von Soden Classification

(in modern terms) 1<sup>cap</sup> XII e: family 1; ap: I<sup>a3</sup> 1<sup>r</sup> XII Andreas 2<sup>e</sup> XII/XIII K<sup>x</sup> (Wisse reports K<sup>mix</sup>/K<sup>x</sup>) 2<sup>ap</sup> XII I<sup>b1</sup> 4<sup>ap</sup> XV 7<sup>p</sup> XI/XII O<sup>p18</sup> Not only is 1<sup>r</sup> an Andreas manuscript rather than purely Byzantine, but it is written in such a way that Erasmus could not always tell text from commentary and based his reading on the Vulgate. Also, 1<sup>r</sup> is defective for the last six verses of the Apocalypse. To fill out the text, Erasmus made his own Greek translation from the Latin. He admitted to what he had done, but the result was a Greek text containing readings not found in *any* Greek manuscript -- but which were faithfully retained through centuries of editions of the Textus Receptus. This included even certain readings which were not even correct Greek (Scrivener offers as an example Rev. 17:4 AKAQARTHTOS).

The result is a text which, although clearly Byzantine, is not a good or pure representative of the form. It is full of erratic readings -- some "Caesarean" (Scrivener attributes Matt. 22:28, 23:25, 27:52, 28:3, 4, 19, 20; Mark 7:18, 19, 26, 10:1, 12:22, 15:46; Luke 1:16, 61, 2:43, 9:1, 15, 11:49; John 1:28, 10:8, 13:20 to the influence of 1<sup>cap</sup>), some "Western" or Alexandrian (a good example of this is the doxology of Romans, which Erasmus placed after chapter 16 in accordance with the Vulgate, rather than after 14 along with the Byzantine text), some simply wild (as, e.g., the inclusion of 1 John 5:7-8). Daniel B. Wallace counts 1,838 differences between the TR and Hodges & Farstad's Byzantine text (see Wallace's "The Majority Text Theory: History, Methods, and Critique," in Ehrman & Holmes, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research, Studies & Documents*, Eerdmans, 1995. The figure is given in note 28 on page 302.) This, it should be noted, is a *larger* number than the number of differences between the UBS, Bover, and Merk texts -- even though these three editions are all eclectic and based largely on the Alexandrian text-type, which is much more diverse than the Byzantine text-type.

Thus it will be conceded by all reputable scholars -- even those who favour the Byzantine text -- that the Textus Receptus, in all its various forms, has no textual authority whatsoever. Were it not for the fact that it has been in use for so long as a basis for collations, it could be mercifully forgotten. What a tragedy, then, that it was the Bible of Protestant Christendom for close to four centuries!

## Addendum I: The King James Version

Authorized in 1604 and published in 1611, the King James version naturally is based on the TR. When it was created, there was no demand for critical editions. (Though in fact the original KJV contains some textual notes. These, like the preface, are usually suppressed in modern versions, making the version that much worse than it is. In addition, editions of the KJV do not print precisely the same text. But this is another issue.)

Even accepting that the KJV derives from the TR, and has most of its faults, it is reasonable to ask *which* TR it is based on. The usual simplistic answer is Stephanus's or Beza's. F.H.A. Scrivener, however, who

studied the matter in detail, concluded that it was none of these. Rather, it is a mixed text, closest to Beza, with Stephanus in second place, but not clearly affiliated with any edition. (No doubt the influence of the Vulgate, and of early English translations, is also felt here.) Scrivener reconstructed the text of the KJV in 1894, finding some 250 differences from Stephanus. Jay P. Green, however, states that even *this* edition does not agree entirely with the KJV, listing differences at Matt. 12:24, 27; John 8:21, 10:16 (? -- this may be translational); 1 Cor. 14:10, 16:1; compare also Mark 8:14, 9:42; John 8:6; Acts 1:4; 1 John 3:16, where Scrivener includes words found in the KJV in *italics* as missing from their primary text.

### **Addendum II: The "New TR"**

The phrase "The New TR" is sometimes applied to editions which threaten to dominate the field of textual criticism. Thus the edition of [Westcott & Hort](#) was a sort of "New TR" in the late nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century the name is sometimes applied to the [United Bible Societies](#) edition. In terms of number of copies printed this description of the UBS text may be justified -- no complete new edition has been issued since its publication -- but no reputable textual scholar would regard it as the "final word." Another sort of "New TR" is found in the Majority Text editions of [Hodges & Farstad](#) and Robinson & Pierpont. These are attempts to create a true Byzantine text (as an alternative to the TR, which is a very bad Byzantine text), but they have received relatively little critical attention -- less, probably, than they deserve (though few would consider them to contain the original text). Thus they cannot be considered truly "received" texts.