

# **Bible Versions**

**By Pastor Doug Baker, D.Min.**

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## **Introduction**

First, we should state up front that an actual translation of the Bible is better than a paraphrase. The best translations are based on the original languages of Scripture and seek to translate as close as possible to a word-for-word equivalency, recognizing that it is impossible to do that *completely* because of the nature of languages themselves. A paraphrase is usually based on a translation of the same language, but in any case always seeks to rework the words in order to make them more readable and understandable to the reader. There is a much greater tendency for the interpretations of the paraphrasers to creep into the text rather than to allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves. A third type of Bible is that which attempts to split the difference between a word-for-word translation and its readability. Second, we should make it clear that there is no such thing as a perfect translation of any document into any other language. Some nuances of meaning are bound to be lost at times.

Popular paraphrases include The Living Bible (TLB) and The Message Bible (TMB). Examples of translations that seek to split the difference between a word-for-word translation and readability include the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), the New English Bible (NEB), and the Good News Bible (Today's English Version). All seven of them rely mostly on the Critical Text for the New Testament. More literal word-for-word translations include the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the King James' Version (KJV), and the New King James' Version (NKJV). The first one is based on the Critical Text for the New Testament, while the latter two are both based on the Textus Receptus (Received Text) for the New Testament.

## **Basic Texts for the Scriptures**

### Old Testament

The basic text for the Christian Old Testament depends upon whether you are a Roman Catholic, an Eastern Orthodox, or a Protestant Christian. The official Catholic Bible is the Latin Vulgate, translated by a priest and scholar name Jerome (d. 420) who translated it from the Hebrew (except for the Psalms, which was translated from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced in the third and second centuries B.C.). Official Catholic translations are

based from the Latin Vulgate, although the Catholic Church recognizes some modern English translations as also valid. The Eastern Orthodox Church translates its official Old Testament from the Septuagint, although their members also use the New King James' Version. Finally, most Protestant Bibles translate the Old Testament from the Masoretic Text, which is the basis for Jewish translations of their Scriptures.

For Christian scholars, besides these three basic texts for the Old Testament, there is also the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Bible, the Jewish Targums, and the Dead Sea Scrolls that can be consulted in their Biblical research regarding the Old Testament. The Samaritan Pentateuch was probably written in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. by Samaritan scholars in Aramaic. Samaritans were the descendants of the so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel who were "lost" when most of the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated and taken captive by Assyria to far-away lands in 722 B.C. Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), as the legitimate Scriptures. You may recall the story of Jesus with the woman at the well; she was a Samaritan woman.

The Syriac Bible is written in the Syriac language of ancient Syria and was probably translated from the Hebrew (and Greek) in the first or second century A.D. The Jewish Targums date as early as the first and second centuries A.D. and are Aramaic translations and paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered by a Palestinian Arab shepherd in the caves around the north end of the Dead Sea in 1947, have shed great light on the Hebrew Scriptures. They contain either whole manuscripts or fragments of every Hebrew book of the Bible except Esther and Nehemiah. These three additional resources are used by scholars to attempt to find the meaning of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

## New Testament

There are basically three Greek texts that are the basis of the many translations of the New Testament: (1) the Textus Receptus (Received Text); (2) the Majority Text; and (3) the Critical Text. The Roman Catholic New Testament translations are based on the Latin Vulgate, which in turn was translated from the Greek manuscripts available to Jerome (d. 420), a priest and scholar from southeast Europe before any of the three basic texts existed. We will examine the basic information and arguments regarding all three texts.

### *Textus Receptus*

*Textus Receptus* is Latin for *Received Text* and abbreviated as TR. This text is based on the manuscripts found in Eastern Europe and are therefore called Byzantine manuscripts since Byzantium (Constantinople, modern Istanbul, Turkey) was the center of the Byzantine Empire for centuries until its capture by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The first Greek text based on the known

Byzantine manuscripts was published in 1516, although the first one that called itself the Textus Receptus was published in 1633. The one completed in 1516 was written by Dutch scholar and priest Desiderius Erasmus, who used just eight different manuscripts to produce his text. There are 27 different versions of the Textus Receptus today, but they are mostly based from Erasmus' text and are thus so similar that scholars refer to the Textus Receptus as if it were a single document. They are all based on Byzantine manuscripts no older than the twelfth century. It became known as the Textus Receptus because its authors believed it to be the Greek text that was handed down faithfully and *received* by the Church from God as He miraculously preserved it.

There are two major arguments by those who believe that the Textus Receptus is the best and only accurate Greek text. First, God must have preserved His original Scriptures from all error of any kind, for He would not otherwise have inspired them in the first place (if He knew Christians were going to corrupt them). This is the foundation for the modern Absolute Inerrancy view of the inspiration of the Scriptures, although not everyone who believes the Textus Receptus is the most accurate Greek text believes in Absolute Inerrancy. Second, based on the first argument, any text that attempts to use rules, no matter how reasonable, to determine the original text is basically on a fool's errand. There is no need to do that since we should believe as an article of faith that God has preserved His Word and we have *received* it. Therefore, by definition the Critical Text and the Majority Text—especially the Critical Text—are corruptions of the Greek text and thus inaccurate and/or worse.

But if the first argument were correct, there should not exist 27 different versions of the Received Text, no matter how few and minor the differences among them. Furthermore, there would be absolutely no errors, even copyist mistakes, in any of the Byzantine manuscripts if this were true. It is certainly true that God has miraculously preserved His Scriptures through the centuries. However, it is just as evident that He did not miraculously keep them free from all errors of a detailed nature. The evidence clearly shows this, and only blind faith ignores that evidence.

The King James' Version (KJV) and the New King James' Version (NKJV) are the two available English Bibles today that base their New Testament on the Received Text.

### *Critical Text*

In 1881 the first Critical Text was published by Brooke Foss Westcott, a British bishop (d. 1901), and Fenton John Anthony Hort, an Irish theologian (d. 1892). They relied heavily on Greek manuscripts that were older and tended to come from the area around Alexandria, Egypt, and were thus called Alexandrian manuscripts, particularly because the Codex Alexandrinus is the most complete Greek text associated with Alexandria, Egypt. It is a complete Christian Bible and is thought to have been copied in the fifth century. The Critical Text is sometimes also called the Alexandrian Text as well. It is also sometimes called the Eclectic Text because it attempts to

harmonize the variant readings from among the many different Greek manuscripts. This first Critical Text ignored all Byzantine manuscripts because the authors viewed them as inherently inferior. This text attempted to harmonize the variant readings of all extant (available) Alexandrian Greek manuscripts by following certain mostly common-sense rules. The most important principle used by the writers of the Critical Text was the belief that older manuscripts were closer to the original autographs than later manuscripts. Therefore, when a particular variant reading represented a plurality of the older manuscripts—dated from the second through the seventh centuries—it was usually the reading chosen for the Critical Text.

The two most important sources of the Critical Text were the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus since they are the two oldest most complete manuscripts of the New Testament yet discovered. [A codex is a manuscript in a book format rather than a scroll.] The Codex Vaticanus is a fourth-century document located in the Vatican Library at least since 1475, the year it was listed in the library's catalogue of books. The Codex Sinaiticus, also dated to the fourth century, was found in 1859 by a German Protestant scholar named Constantin von Tischendorf visiting St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of the traditional site of Mt. Sinai. Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest nearly complete Greek New Testament yet discovered. There are approximately 6,500 variant readings between those two codices. This has led to much criticism by some scholars. Moreover, some have claimed that the Codex Sinaiticus is a forgery by a much later writer, although that is almost certainly not true. Nevertheless, because they are nearly complete manuscripts of the New Testament and much older than the twelfth-century Greek manuscripts which are the basis of the Received Text, they are indeed valuable manuscripts.

The Critical Text versions since the 1881 publication departed in one significant point from the Westcott-Hort Text. While the latter ignored all Byzantine manuscripts as inferior, the subsequent versions, begun by German theologian Eberhard Nestle (d. 1913) and continued by Kurt Aland (d. 1994), another German theologian (and called the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament), use all extant (available) manuscripts to compare with essentially the same rules laid down by Westcott and Hort. The first Nestle Greek New Testament was published in 1898, but nearly 30 updated versions under the auspices of the United Bible Societies have been published. Despite broadening the scope of its Greek sources, the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, now known as the Critical Text, very closely resembles the Westcott-Hort Critical Text.

Some of the basic rules used to attempt to determine the original wording are as follows:

- Older manuscripts are more likely to reflect the original more closely than later ones.
- The quality of manuscripts is more important than their quantity.
- The reading that best explains the other variant readings are closer to the original.
- The best reading is one that is more grammatically correct and fits the context better.

The Nestle-Aland Critical Text also rates the major variant readings as to the degree of probability that they are the original reading.

Almost all modern English translations of the New Testament are based on the Critical Text, including but not limited to the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), and the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB). Also, most students in Christian universities and seminaries use the Nestle-Aland Critical Text in their New Testament Greek classes.

### *Majority Text*

The Majority Text is based primarily on the assumption that a majority, or at least a plurality, of all Greek manuscripts will best reflect the original autographs (original manuscripts, none of which we have available to us). Since the large majority of extant (available) Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are from Eastern Europe and are thus classified as Byzantine manuscripts, the Majority Text (M or MT) is almost identical to the Received Text. Because of this, the Majority Text is often identified as the Received Text, but they are not actually the same text. There are two different published Majority Texts, one published in 1982 by Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad (both of Dallas Theological Seminary) and the other one first published in 1991 by William Pierpont and Maurice Robinson, two American theologians, but which has since been updated.

Critics believe that copyist errors are multiplied by each succeeding generation of scribes perpetuating them by copying the errors and thus passing them along. Advocates of the Majority Text counter that by asserting that scribes can recognize errors and will correct them when they do. The truth seems to be in between these two positions. Errors like misspellings and sentences being cut off in mid-sentence can be easily recognized and corrected. However, other errors are not as easy to spot and may therefore be passed on to each generation of manuscripts. Considering this, a text based on a majority or plurality wording is not necessarily closer to the original. Another weakness of the Majority Text is that it ignored evidence from translations of the New Testament as well as quotations from it in the writings of the Early Church Fathers. Granted, these should not be given the same weight as Greek manuscripts themselves. But neither should they be ignored.

Thus far, the only English translation based on the Majority Text is the World English Bible (WEB), published in the year 2000.

## **The Special Case of the Codex Sinaiticus**

We will take considerable time to talk about the Codex Sinaiticus because of the allegation by some who are King James'-only Christians that it is a nineteenth century forgery and therefore a completely useless document for translation purposes. The story involves a Protestant German scholar named Constantin von Tischendorf (d. 1874) who visited St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of the traditional site of Mt. Sinai on three occasions from either 1844 or 1845 to 1859.

According to Tischendorf, on his first visit to the monastery he discovered some sheets of parchment in a waste basket that were manuscripts of part of the Septuagint. He said the monks there told him they had burned some of the sheets for heat. When he asked to keep the sheets he had found, they gave him a limited number of them. The monks who live there in modern times deny Tischendorf's story about the waste basket and burning of the sheets of manuscripts. Either they do not have good records of the event and are mistaken, or perhaps Tischendorf was lying to cover up the fact that he stole them; we just do not know. In any case, he made a second journey to the monastery in 1853, but his attempts to receive any additional parts of the Septuagint were rebuffed.

But he was persistent and returned in 1859, this time under the auspices of the czar of Russia, who was the protector of the monastery; it was an Eastern Orthodox monastery. When talking to an official at the monastery he was told that the official had an old copy of the Septuagint. What he showed Tischendorf was the Codex Sinaiticus, which contained the Septuagint of the Old Testament and very nearly the complete Greek text of the New Testament. When he asked to take it with him to Cairo, Egypt to study it, he was denied. In Cairo Tischendorf visited a monastery there that was run by the same group of monks at St. Catherine's. The abbot of St. Catherine's happened to be there in Cairo; he gave Tischendorf permission to study the codex several pages at a time. So he sent for it from St. Catherine's and spent about two months, along with assistance from four others who read Greek, in making a copy of the entire text.

Tischendorf then made the suggestion that the monks gift the codex to the Russian czar in return for his help in the election of a new abbot. He was then given the codex to personally deliver it to the czar, who had it published in 1862. It was then that Constantine Simonides (d. 1867 or 1890?), a Greek expert in ancient manuscripts, publicly accused Tischendorf of lying about the Codex Sinaiticus and claimed that he (Simonides) had forged the document himself in 1839 while living at a monastery in Mt. Athos in Greece. A public controversy raged among scholarly circles as a result of Simonides' claim. To bolster his credibility, a purported Greek friend of Simonides, Kallinikos Hieromonachos, wrote a series of letters to the British newspaper which had published Simonides' accusations. Hieromonachos claimed he personally saw Simonides forge the document while in Athos, Greece.

As a result of the publicity over the discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus, Tischendorf was approached by Vatican officials who treated him like royalty. Undoubtedly, this appealed to Tischendorf's ego because he showed signs of enjoying the attention. This royal treatment by Catholic officials, who were pleased that a new codex that varied extensively (that is a relative term) from the Received Text (that formed the basis for the King James' Version, a Protestant Bible), is taken as evidence that Tischendorf actually knew the codex was a forgery. His possible lying about the story of the waste basket is additional evidence usually cited as well. Thus these King James'-only scholars seem eager to believe Simonides' side of the story.

However, several good reasons exist to believe the Codex Sinaiticus to be a genuine fourth century document. First, Simonides was before 1862 known as a notorious forger. Since forgery is a lie, a notorious forger is a notorious liar. Second, he had a motive for discrediting Tischendorf, for the latter had earlier exposed him for attempting to sell a number of earlier forgeries all over Europe. Third, all attempts to locate Simonides' friend failed. He either did not exist—in which case Simonides forged those letters—or his friend was mistaken about the nature of the document that he might have seen Simonides forging in Greece. Fourth, the British bibliographer and expert on ancient manuscripts and father of bibliographic analysis Henry Bradshaw (d. 1886) had studied the Codex Sinaiticus and was convinced of its authenticity as a fourth century codex. Bradshaw, who normally stayed out of public controversies, weighed in publicly, accusing Simonides of lying to get revenge on Tischendorf for exposing some of his earlier forgeries. Since then many other scholars have examined the codex and pronounced it genuine.

Finally, in light of these facts, we should consider Aristotle's dictum that a document should be considered genuine and true unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary. Given the facts surrounding the entire story, as well as scholarly examinations of the codex, we conclude that the Codex Sinaiticus is indeed a genuine fourth century manuscript. We might also note that the critics who side with Simonides today seem particularly vehement in their criticism of Tischendorf rather than dispassionate seekers for the truth. Their almost fanatical support for the King James' Version and the Received Text its New Testament is based on also seems to reflect a willful bias in wanting to see Tischendorf discredited.

Today portions of the Codex Sinaiticus are scattered in four different places: (1) the British Library (the largest portion is there); (2) the National Library in St. Petersburg, Russia; (3) the Leipzig Library in Germany; and (4) at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula.

## **Conclusion on the Greek Texts**

### General Information

The large majority of extant Greek manuscripts are of the Byzantine category. That is largely because Greek continued to be the official language of the Church in the Eastern (or Byzantine) Empire for more than 1,000 years after Latin became the official language of the Church in the West. The large majority of extant Greek manuscripts are also from the ninth century onward. The reason for this is that beginning in the ninth century, copyists moved away from uncials (upper-case letters only) to minuscule (lower-case letters only). Moreover, the recopied manuscripts were placed on parchment leaves that were scraped for re-use. The result was that most Greek manuscripts earlier than the ninth century were “deleted,” leaving only about 17 such manuscripts surviving.

Although the Textus Receptus and the Majority Text are not identical, those two texts are much closer in agreement than either one is with the Critical Text. And the older manuscripts that form the most important manuscripts for use in the Critical Text are in much greater agreement with each other than they are with either the Textus Receptus or the Majority Text.

### The Textus Receptus

The Received Text is based on an unbiblical assumption that God preserved the texts of Scripture without error and handed it to the Church as the Received Text. There would not be 27 different versions of the Received Text if that were the case. Neither would there be any variants among the Byzantine manuscripts that are the foundation of the Received Text. Obviously, the variant readings must be harmonized in some way. At the same time, early manuscripts, even those preceding the fourth century (usually papyri manuscripts), confirm the high level of consistency of the manuscripts that form the basis of the Received Text. Therefore, we can be certain that the Received Text is a very good and accurate text even if they are based on manuscripts themselves that are not older than the twelfth century.

### The Majority Text

The Majority Text may properly be understood as superior to the Received Text because it compares much older manuscripts that were unavailable for the Received Text. Its weakness is that it ignores evidence from different translations and from the quotations contained in the writings of the Early Church Fathers (just as the Received Text does).

## The Critical Text

The Critical Text in use today (the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament) is based on sound rules of harmonizing variant readings. Most, but by no means all, textual scholars view the Critical Text as the closest to the original autographs for a number of reasons—reasons which we believe are reasonable. First, it stands to reason that the fewer times a manuscript has been hand copied, the closer it is to the original. Although the nature of the more obvious copyist errors is such that later copyists should detect them and make the necessary corrections, those copyist errors which are very similar to other variants are not likely to be easily detected and thus are more likely to be passed down to subsequent generations of manuscripts. Second, the Alexandrian text readings tend to be more abrupt and use fewer words, resulting in more difficult readings. That means that later copyists smoothed out several texts, which in turn implies the older manuscripts are closer to the original autographs even though they do not read as smoothly as the later manuscripts do. Third, many of the oldest translations, like the Latin Vulgate and the Syriac, most often agree with the older manuscripts than with the later ones. Fourth, quotations by many of the Early Church Fathers often agree with the older manuscripts rather than the later ones. Finally, several papyrus manuscripts from the second and third centuries also substantially agree with the older manuscripts.

## Final Conclusions

When comparing all three basic Greek texts, we conclude that the Critical Text is probably closer to the original autographs than either the Textus Receptus or the Majority Text. However, the most important fact of all is to note that all of the variant readings among the three Greek texts represent no more than 15 percent. To put it another way, the three basic Greek texts are exactly the same in 85 percent of their contents. And that includes misspellings and different word orders in the Greek, discrepancies which are insignificant. Moreover, none of the variants affect or change a single teaching or doctrine of the Bible.

Given all these facts, there really should be no great fuss made about Bible translations as long as they are actual translations from the original languages. The King James'-only Christians seem unaware of these facts when they insist that it is the only or even the best English translation, although we concede it is a pretty good translation.

## **English Translations**

For actual Bible study, one should use an actual translation from the original Biblical languages, although it is often profitable to compare a translation even with a paraphrase or two when studying the Bible. The seven most popular English translations currently in use as of 2021, the writing of this book, are the following (not in any order of popularity):

- King James' Version (KJV)
- New King James' Version (NKJV)
- New International Version (NIV)
- English Standard Version (ESV)
- New American Standard Bible (NASB)
- Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The King James' Version (KJV) and the New King James' Version (NKJV) are both based on the Textus Receptus. The other five translations are based on the Critical Text.

Given our conclusion that the Critical Text is the most accurate basic Greek text, and that a literal word-for-word translation is the best for an actual study Bible, we make our top recommendations. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is the most literal word-for-word English translation based on the Critical Text available today. For that reason, it is our number 1 recommendation. But if you prefer a translation that is designed for readability while also being as close as possible to a word-for-word translation, then we recommend the English Standard Version (ESV). We also give the edge to the New American Standard Bible because it places most of the words the translators added (for which there is no Hebrew or Greek word in the manuscripts) in italics, whereas the English Standard Version does not. In any case, those are our two top recommendations. But again, the other five translations listed here are also good translations, and we have no quarrel with any of them. In fact, we can use any translation to demonstrate the veracity of all of the Bible's major teachings because the differences among them are not that significant.

### **Ellen White and Bible Translations**

For the reader who is a Seventh-day Adventist, it should be of some interest to learn what Ellen White's attitude was toward Bible translations. In her day there were three *major* English translations of the Bible readily available to American Christians besides the Catholic Douay Version—the Authorized Version (the King James' Version), the English Revised Version (1885), and the American Standard Revision (1901, also called the American Revised Version). The English Revised Version was a revision of the King James' Version, while the American Standard Revision was the first Bible based on the Critical Text of 1881.

In the 2010 edition of *101 Questions About Ellen White and Her Writings*, William Fagal of the Ellen G. White Estate wrote about Ellen White and the different Bible translations on pages 203-207. His findings are that she never wrote anything directly about the merits of different translations. He also quotes her son, W. C. White, as saying that he never remembered her even privately saying anything negative about the new translations—that they were evil or inherently inferior to the Authorized Version. In fact, she used both the English Revised Version and the

American Standard Revision in her writings in addition to the Authorized Version (King James' Version) when they became available.

It is true that Ellen White did not use any version other than the Authorized Version when she preached. But her grandson Arthur White testified that the reason for that was her concern that "the use of the different wording brought perplexity to the older members of the congregation" (White Estate DF 579; *Ministry*, April 1947, pp. 17-18). Given the fact that so many numerous different Bible translations are in use today, we believe that this concern no longer exists.

We recommend that the reader see the document entitled "The E. G. White Counsel on Versions of the Bible" by Arthur White, located at <https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-versions-html>, for further information.

If our rationale showing that the King James' Version should not be viewed as the only accurate or even necessarily as the best English translation is not persuasive, perhaps Ellen White's use of the different translations will be. At least we would ask that you carefully consider her practice as informative for your own attitude toward different translations.