

The Received Text

A Brief Look at the Textus Receptus

by G. W. and D. E. Anderson

In seeking translations for publication, the aim of the Trinitarian Bible Society is to produce or select versions of the New Testament "whose textual basis is as close as possible to the ... Greek Received" text.¹ "The Society uses the form of the Greek text of the New Testament known as the Textus Receptus or Received Text."²

These statements in the introductory material of the Trinitarian Bible Society are well known to most of our supporters. However, questions have arisen over the years regarding the meaning and purpose of the Society's stance on the Greek text. We would like to examine some of these questions, in the hope of helping our supporters understand better the Society's stand.

What is the importance of the Greek Text?

The question which puzzles some of our supporters is why we need to concern ourselves with the Greek text at all. We have the English Authorised Version -- an excellent Bible in a language understood by millions around the world -- whereas Greek is not a worldwide language and the Greek of the New Testament is known only to a few scholars. So why do we need the Greek text?

God in His providence chose to have the New Testament written in Greek. As the translators of the Authorised Version so aptly wrote, the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New "are the two golden pipes, or rather conduits, wherethrough the olive branches empty themselves into the gold. ... These tongues, therefore, (the Scriptures, we say, in those tongues,) we set before us to translate, being the tongues wherein God was pleased to speak to his Church by his Prophets and Apostles".³ The Westminster Divines, too, recognised the importance of the original language texts, stating that it was these texts, which "being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical",⁴ are to be translated into other languages. It is because God moved men to write His New Covenant Word in Greek that we concern ourselves with the text in this language.

Is there only one Greek text?

No. The various books of the New Testament were written individually and copied to be circulated amongst the churches of the ancient world. In time God moved men to combine these books into a single volume, the New Testament. This volume and its parts were copied and recopied by hand for centuries. Many manuscripts have been found over the centuries in areas of the ancient Greek-speaking world, and a few, less reliable, manuscripts have been discovered in Alexandria, Egypt.

By the time of the development of the printing press in the mid-15th century, there were many handwritten manuscripts available. Over the next centuries, numerous men set about collecting, combining and comparing the manuscripts in order to have one complete Greek New Testament text to print. One of the earliest of these is the text we know of as the Textus Receptus or Received Text.

This work has not stopped, and today scholars are continuing to collect and collate manuscripts in an effort to produce what they believe to be a better Greek text. The most recent of these is the work, based upon the less reliable manuscripts, published through the United Bible Societies; this is commonly called the Critical Text. For a number of reasons, expounded in other publications of the Society (see below), we reject the Critical Text and use the Textus Receptus as the basis for our translation work.

What is the Textus Receptus?

Today the term Textus Receptus is used generically to apply to all editions of the Greek New Testament which follow the early printed editions of Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469?-1536), a Roman Catholic humanist, translated the New Testament into Latin and prepared an edition of the Greek to be printed beside his Latin version to demonstrate the text from which his Latin came. Erasmus used six or seven Greek manuscripts (the oldest being from the 10th century), combining and comparing them in a process in which he chose the correct readings where there were variants. On several occasions he followed the Latin and included some of its readings in his text. This edition was published in 1516. There was great interest in this Greek text, and it is the Greek text for which the volume is remembered. This New Testament was the first published edition of a Textus Receptus family New Testament.

The term was first used, however, to refer to the edition of the Greek New Testament published by the Elzevirs in 1633. The preface to this edition, written by Daniel Heinsius, includes the Latin phrase "textum ... receptum". Because of this, the 1633 edition became known as the "Textus Receptus" or the Received Text. This term has been expanded to include numerous editions of the Greek New Testament which come from the same Byzantine textual family representing the majority of the handwritten Greek manuscripts before the 16th century.

It needs to be remembered that the editions included in this family of Greek New Testaments were printed volumes. The Greek texts which preceded them were all hand-copied manuscripts which were in turn copied from copies for many hundreds of years. No two of the well over 5,000 manuscripts which are known today agree 100% with each other. In other words, the Textus Receptus was not printed from one manuscript alone.

How many editions of the Textus Receptus are there?

There were approximately thirty distinct editions of the Textus Receptus made over the years. Each differs slightly from the others. There have been over 500 printings.

Why are various editions called 'Erasmus', 'Stephens', etc.?

Numerous men during the past four centuries have produced editions of the Textus Receptus; these editions bear their names and the years in which they were published. These include:

- the work of Stunica as published in the Complutensian Polyglot (printed in 1514 but not circulated until 1522);
- the Erasmus editions of 1516, 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535;
- the Colinaeus edition of 1534 which was made from the editions of Erasmus and the Complutensian Polyglot.
- the Stephens editions (produced by Robert Estienne, who is also called Stephanus or Stephens) of 1546, 1549, 1550 and 1551;

- the nine editions of Theodore Beza, an associate of John Calvin, produced between 1565 and 1604, with a tenth published posthumously in 1611;
- the Elzevir editions of 1624, 1633 (the edition known for coining the phrase "Textus Receptus") and 1641.

Stephanus is best remembered for his edition of 1550. It followed the Erasmus editions of 1527 and 1535 and was the first edition to include marginal variant readings, which were collated from fourteen manuscripts and the Greek New Testament of the Complutensian Polyglot. It became one of the best known editions of the Textus Receptus. Called the "Royal edition", it was very popular in England and is still published today in the United States in the form of an interlinear which is sometimes referred to as the "Berry" text. This is a misnomer because George Ricker Berry simply added the "Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament" and a chapter entitled "New Testament Synonyms" to the edition of the Stephens 1550 text.

One of the most important editions of the Textus Receptus is the Beza edition of 1598. This edition, in addition to the Stephens 1550 and 1551 editions, was used as the Greek basis of the Authorised Version of 1611. Beza collated and used numerous Greek manuscripts and printed editions in his work, and incorporated Jerome's Latin Vulgate and his own Latin and Greek text along with textual annotations.

Are the variations between the editions of the Textus Receptus significant?

No. These variations include spelling, accents and breathing marks, word order and other minor kinds of differences. As it is stated in the preface to the Trinitarian Bible Society edition of the Textus Receptus, "The editions of Stephens, Beza and the Elzevirs all present substantially the same text, and the variations are not of great significance and rarely affect the sense".⁵

Which edition of the Textus Receptus does the Trinitarian Bible Society print?

In the latter part of the 19th century, F. H. A. Scrivener produced an edition of the Greek New Testament which reflects the Textus Receptus underlying the English Authorised Version. This edition, published posthumously in 1894, is currently published by the Society.

How does the Scrivener edition differ from the other editions of the Textus Receptus?

F. H. A. Scrivener (1813-1891) attempted to reproduce as exactly as possible the Greek text which underlies the Authorised Version of 1611. However, the AV was not translated from any one printed edition of the Greek text. The AV translators relied heavily upon the work of William Tyndale and other editions of the English Bible. Thus there were places in which it is unclear what the Greek basis of the New Testament was. Scrivener in his reconstructed and edited text used as his starting point the Beza edition of 1598, identifying the places where the English text had different readings from the Greek. He examined eighteen editions of the Textus Receptus to find the correct Greek rendering, and made the changes to his Greek text. When he finished he had produced an edition of the Greek New Testament which more closely underlies the text of the AV than any one edition of the Textus Receptus.

How many differences are found between the Scrivener text and the Stephanus and Beza texts?

There are approximately 190 differences between the Scrivener text and the Beza 1598. There are 283 differences between the Scrivener text and the Stephanus 1550. These differences are minor, and pale into insignificance when compared with the approximately 6,000 differences -- many of which are quite substantial -- between the Critical Text and the Textus Receptus.

What is the position of the TBS regarding the Textus Receptus?

As formalized in the amendment to our Constitution in 1992, it is our aim to "produce or select versions whose textual basis is as close as possible to the Hebrew Masoretic and the Greek Received texts underlying both the English Authorised Version and translations of comparable standing made from these texts into other European languages at the time of the Protestant Reformation". This statement continues our long-held belief in the superiority and excellence of the Textus Receptus. We look to God to help us continue this testimony in the coming years of the new millennium.

Where does this leave us today?

We can have the confident assurance that the Word of God as it is found in the Textus Receptus New Testament is a trustworthy representation of the text as originally given. God has provided that many generations of believers have printed editions of the Greek text and Bibles translated from them. For the most part, the Textus Receptus follows the Greek manuscripts which were in widespread use for centuries. God continued to preserve His New Testament by guiding His people to use a text which, although in a printed form, nevertheless is God's holy Word from eternity. May Christians reject the modern Greek texts and the versions which follow them and use the Textus Receptus Greek New Testament and the Authorised Version, which God has blessed for many centuries!

¹ The Constitution of the Society, p. 1.

² An Introduction to the Society's Principles, p. 3.

³ The Translators to the Reader (London: TBS, 1998), pp. 24-5.

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8.

⁵ The New Testament: The Greek Text Underlying the English Authorised Version of 1611, p. ii.

The Society publishes several articles dealing with the Koine Greek New Testament, which are available from any of our offices. These include:

A Textual Key to the New Testament (No. 100)

Why 1 John 5.7-8 is in the Bible (No. 102)

"God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3.16) (No. 103)

What today's Christian needs to know about the Greek New Testament (No. 104)

Authenticity of the Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel according to Mark (No. 106)

The Lord Gave the Word (No. 111)

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