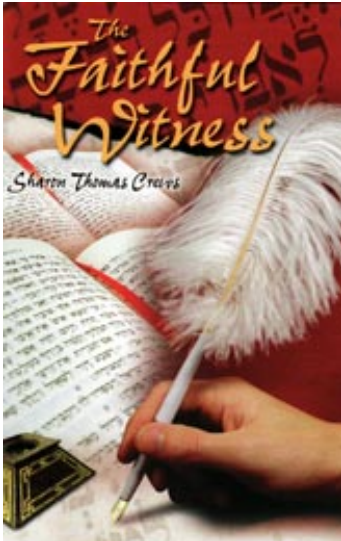


The Faithful Witness



By Sharon Thomas Crews

The Faithful Witness

Have you ever been perplexed by the great number of English Bible versions? Have you wondered which one you should choose as your primary study Bible?

In the span of just a few generations more than a hundred English Bible versions have become available. The King James Version (KJV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), Today's English Version (TEV), New English Bible (NEB), Jerusalem Bible (JB), New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New International Version (NIV) are just a few of the most popular ones in use today.

Each version has strong points and weak points. No version is perfect. But this does not mean that our choice of a study Bible is not important. The Bible is God's chosen medium of communicating with man, and we should use the best version we can find for studying the deep truths of His Word. But which version is most reliable and how can we identify it?

Many scholars evaluate Bible versions following a naturalistic method. We, however, will use a faith-oriented approach that also takes into consideration scholarly evidence. We will compare various versions to the biblical description of the inspired Word of God. The version that best fits this description will be our Bible of choice.

The Word of God is described in several places in the Scriptures. Romans 10:17 provides us with the first notable characteristic: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The inspired Word of God establishes and builds our faith. It is our firm foundation, and as we sincerely study it, our confidence in God and His Word will grow. "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33). He is, however, the "author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2); thus a characteristic of His Word is that it builds our faith.

A second characteristic can be found in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." From this, it is clear that the sacred Word gives a pure account of doctrine and instruction for one's life. It is not adulterated by man's opinions or teachings.

The last characteristic of the Word of God that we will review is found in 1 Peter 1:23: "The word of God ... liveth and abideth for ever." The Scriptures were given by inspiration of God and have been preserved for use by God's people in every age. They have not been hidden away from mankind but have been a visible, convicting, living part of the Christian church. Not only have they abided in the hearts of men, but faithful copies of the Scriptures have been passed on from one generation to another. Time and again both Jesus and Paul affirmed the accuracy of the Scriptures by widely quoting from them. Never did they warn that the Word would be corrupted or lost. Instead Jesus declared, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). Even during the Dark Ages, the Holy Scriptures were not lost. Revelation 11:3, 4 tell us that during the 1,260 years of papal supremacy, the two witnesses—the Old and New Testaments—still prophesied powerfully.

Psalms 12:6, 7 says, "The words of the Lord are pure words. ... Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever." We can clearly see that the Scriptures have been divinely preserved right down to our generation.

In summary, the Bible describes the Word of God as having the following characteristics:

1. It does not cause confusion or doubt, but builds our faith.
2. It is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.
3. It has been divinely preserved and has had an active role within the church throughout every age.

Having set forth these characteristics from Scripture, let us compare the various Bible versions to them.

The Word of God Builds Faith

The first characteristic of the inspired Word of God is that it builds our faith. To one extent or another this is true of every Bible version. Through the aid of the Holy Spirit, points essential to salvation are brought home, and many people can relate their conversions to one Bible version or another. But there is still a broader aspect of this subject that should be examined.

What general effect has the proliferation of Bible versions had on people's faith in the Word of God? Of course this is something that cannot be precisely measured, for there are many factors that influence society. However, we can generally observe the difference between people's attitude toward the Bible today compared to their attitudes when there was only one accepted version.

When the KJV was the primary Bible used, ministers strongly preached from it and laity eagerly committed its words to memory. As a sacred book, it was highly respected. Faith in God and the authority of His Word were paramount.

Today, however, there is quite a different outlook. Faith in God and the Scriptures is at an all-time low. Many people have lost their respect for the Scriptures. Ministers no longer preach the Word, but instead deliver philosophical sermons on the general "message" of Scriptures. And rarely do laity commit Bible texts to memory. An epidemic of ignorance concerning the most basic Bible content is plaguing even churchgoing youth.¹

Have the modern versions contributed to this lamentable condition? Let's consider several ways that modern versions may have encouraged such a situation.

First, there has been wide promotion in recent years of versions using "modern speech." Although these versions are helpful to some people, they lack the dignity that fosters reverence and special regard for the Scriptures. The Bible is an ancient, divine volume, but when it is fashioned like a common book, it gets treated like one. A study of the Good News Bible (TEV) indicated that university students "first devoured it because as they said, it read just like a newspaper. But later they had little interest in going back to it—for the same reason!"²

Second, modern versions have not lent themselves to memorization. When everyone was using the KJV, frequent repetition of the same wording was heard which helped fix it in the mind. Now, however, verses are read from versions which vary so much that they are scarcely recognized as the same passage. People just cannot seem to decide which version to memorize.

Third, when you start using a modern version, it may not be long before you notice differences between it and the more familiar KJV. In turning to Luke 4:8, you will find that when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, His command "Get thee behind me, Satan" is not recorded. There is not even a footnote to mark its omission.

Similarly, you may find yourself wondering whatever happened to Jesus' call of sinners "to repentance" (Mark 2:17 and Matthew 9:13) or to the last line of the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:13).

Another look at most modern versions uncovers additional perplexities. In the RSV, MV, and NEB, you will find a footnote to Luke 23:34 indicating that some ancient manuscripts omit Jesus' saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Immediately it raises the question, "Did Jesus really say that?" It appears that scholars question it, so why shouldn't you?

A comparison of the modern versions with the KJV reveals over two hundred cases in which a verse's authenticity is seriously questioned either by complete omission or by footnote. The most pronounced of these are John 7:53-8:11 (John's account of the woman caught in adultery) and Mark 16:9-20 (Mark's account of the appearance and ascension of Jesus). Footnotes and marginal readings can be helpful, but is it possible that modern scholarship has overwhelmed the Bible student with a plethora of critical readings varying from version to version?

Later we will look at a major cause of omissions. But for now, it can be postulated that the proliferation of versions has weakened the faith people once had in the authority of the Scriptures.

Soon after the publication of the most popular 19th century Bible version, an article in the Catholic Dublin Review made this startling claim: "The 'Bible-only' principle is proved to be false. It is now at length too evident that Scripture is powerless without the [Catholic] Church as the witness to its inspiration, the safeguard of its integrity, and the exponent of its meaning. And it will now be clear to all men which is the true church, the real Mother to whom the Bible of right belongs." ³

This is a sobering thought. Protestantism itself has no grounds for existence apart from a strong faith in the Word of God. If Protestants stop viewing the Bible as the sure Word of God, in a crisis, what "authority" will they look to?

To summarize our findings, we see that all versions can fit the biblical characteristic of building faith. However, a question arises regarding the effect the proliferation of modern versions has had on people's confidence in the authority of Scripture.

God's Word is Profitable for Doctrine

Our second characteristic of the Word of God is that it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. This important characteristic of the Word of God is conditional upon the reader allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal truth. The Spirit must not be hampered either by one's own bias or by someone else's.

Every Bible version contains bias from its translators; the degree depends on the methods used in translating. The freer the translation, the greater the possibility of bias, and the less reliable the version is for study purposes. A paraphrase, like the Living Bible, is not a good study Bible. A paraphrase is largely an interpretation of Scripture—which by definition must be influenced by the author's personal beliefs.

Dynamic translations like the NEB, TEV, and Phillips are also not recommended as study Bibles. ⁴ These Bibles are translated by giving what is assumed to be the meaning of what the Bible writers wrote. Although they are very readable, you cannot be certain that you are reading any more than the translator's own idea of the passage.

The best method of translation for a study Bible is formal translation.⁵ The KJV, RSV and NASB are examples.⁶ These translations try to convey the meaning of a passage, while at the same time preserving the words of the original. When there is a noun in the original, a formal translation will generally have a corresponding noun in the English, a verb will have a verb, et cetera. While this method may still leave the translation of a few passages obscure or ambiguous, the reader at least has before him a more literal translation of the words of the original. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, he will be able to discern the meaning for himself. The KJV and NASB give us further help by italicizing any words which the translators felt necessary to insert into a passage to make the meaning clear.

Versions translated formally are far less likely to have been influenced by the personal doctrinal bias of the translators and they more closely fit our second characteristic of the inspired Word.

When using various translations to teach doctrine, you will find that some doctrines are more easily taught from one version than another. But all doctrines common to the Christian faith can be found in every version. Generally, however, the KJV presents many doctrines more clearly than other versions. This is especially true of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. It should also be noted that it is much harder to prove the deity of Christ when using modern versions. A short time ago I attended a meeting held by a group of young people who seemed to be avid Bible students. I was amazed to find that they denied the deity of Christ and supported their positions by referring to textual renderings from various modern versions.

Between all the modern versions, you will find that nearly every verse proving the deity of Christ has been altered in one or the other versions. (See 1 Timothy 3:16, Ephesians 3:9, and Romans 14:10,12 in the RSV, NEB, NASB, TEV, NIV, and JB; and Acts 20:28 and Romans 9:5 in the RSV, NEB, and TEV.) It is apparent that there has been a fundamental change in translations since the KJV. With that in mind, we now turn to a discussion of our last characteristic of the inspired Word of God.

Providential Preservation of Scripture

Our final characteristic is the most revealing. It says that the Word of God has been divinely preserved and has had an active role within the church throughout every age. Before we delve into this discussion, it is necessary to gain a little background information.

When looking into the history of the biblical text, we must be aware that the original manuscripts were written in the common languages of their day. Basically, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. The first manuscripts of the Bible, written by the inspired authors, are no longer in existence. Only copies of copies remain as witnesses to their original words. When these copies are compared with one another, several hundred thousand differences can be noted. Most of the variants are misspellings or other obvious errors⁷, but thousands of other variants must be closely evaluated.

To help evaluate variant readings, scholars have divided the manuscripts into text-types, i.e., groups of manuscripts containing similar readings. Throughout the years, scholars have examined the existing manuscripts, considered their various readings, and have constructed their own Greek or Hebrew text which they believe accurately represents the readings of the original manuscripts.

When a translation is to be produced, scholars either choose existing Greek and Hebrew texts from which to translate, or they formulate their own text.

The text of the Old Testament has been essentially settled⁸ since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The New Testament text, however, has been the cause of much heated debate. For the past hundred years there

has been a rivalry between two Greek texts—the Received Text⁹ and the Critical Text.¹⁰

The Received Text was derived primarily from the Byzantine text-type and includes texts published by Erasmus, Stephens, Beza, and Elzevir. The New Testament of the King James Version is a translation of this Greek text.

The Critical Text is derived primarily from the Alexandrian text-type and includes such published texts as the United Bible Society, Nestle-Aland, and Westcott-Hort. The New Testaments of most modern versions such as the RSV, TEV, NEB, and NASB are translated from these critical texts.

A Bible version is considered only as good as the text from which it is translated.¹¹ Therefore we must determine which Greek text is superior—the Received Text or the Critical Text. This may sound like an impossible task for someone without a background in textual criticism. But by following the biblical teaching of preservation, we will not find it difficult. The preferred Greek text must be one which has played an active role within the church throughout every age.

The Critical Text has received wide acclaim within the past hundred years, as evidenced by the large number of Bible versions translated from it. As stated above, its readings are largely influenced by the Alexandrian line of manuscripts (or text-type). Out of over 5,000 Greek manuscripts in existence, only a small handful (often less than ten) contain this text-type.¹² However, prominent among these few are two manuscripts which many scholars value more highly than most other manuscripts. They are called Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, and they date a little over 200 years from the original writings.¹³

Sinaiticus was discovered in 1844 by Constantine Tischendorf while visiting St. Catherine, a monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai. He found 43 leaves of it in a basket just before it was to be burned.¹⁴ Several years later he acquired the remainder of the leaves from the monastery, and by 1862 he had published the complete manuscript.

Vaticanus' history is not as dramatic as Sinaiticus. Pope Nicholas V brought it to the Vatican in 1448.¹⁵ For hundreds of years, the Roman Catholic Church guarded it so closely that no Protestant scholar of ability was allowed to study it for any length of time.¹⁶ Those who were granted permission to look at the manuscript were searched to assure they didn't have paper or ink. Then if they were caught looking too closely at any passage, two attendants would snatch the manuscript from them!¹⁷ In 1866, however, the Vatican finally allowed Constantine Tischendorf, under supervision, to copy the manuscript. In 1867 he published it.

Realizing that these old manuscripts contained significantly different readings than those of the Received Text, Tischendorf was jubilant. He believed that his efforts had at last restored the inspired Word of God to mankind after having been lost for 1,500 years.

In Tischendorf's time, the New Testament had been in existence for approximately 1,700 years. The Alexandrian Text had been out of circulation for 1,500 of these years. If the Alexandrian Text is the pure form of the New Testament text, then it would mean that the church was deprived of its benefits for 88 percent of the time since it was written! Such an idea is strangely out of step with the biblical description of the inspired Word of God. The Scriptures have been alive and abiding in God's church throughout the ages. They have never been lost, only to be discovered in a wastepaper basket or lying on a forgotten shelf in the Vatican. In addition, the "benefits" of the Alexandrian Text to the church have been dubious indeed.

Not only does this text-type not meet our biblical standard of accurately representing the Word of God, but it has trouble meeting scholarly standards for accuracy of transcription. Minor differences within text-types are normal; however, the number of variants within the Alexandrian Text is enormous. Not including minor errors such as spelling, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus disagree with each other over 3,000 times in the space of the four Gospels alone.¹⁸ This means that one or the other must be wrong 3,000 times. That averages to a disagreement on almost every verse of the Gospels! It is, in fact easier to find two consecutive verses in which these two manuscripts differ the one from the other, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree.

19

Undoubtedly these manuscripts suffer from scribal carelessness. Vaticanus exhibits numerous places where the scribe has written the same word or phrase twice in succession,²⁰ a clear indication that the writing was not checked. The scribe of Sinaiticus occasionally skipped lines in copying and made so many obvious errors that during the time Sinaiticus was used, ten different readers noted corrections.²¹ However, instead of questioning the reliability of these manuscripts, scholars have accepted many of their peculiar readings. Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are the basis for most of the two hundred omissions from the modern New Testament versions mentioned earlier in this booklet.

For several years the Alexandrian Text was blindly considered to be a pure or “neutral” representation of the original text of the Bible writers. But recent scholarship has confirmed that what has been restored should not be considered the original text, but simply the text that had the highest authority in Alexandria, Egypt in the third century.²² Alexandria, Egypt, an area to which none of the original manuscripts were addressed,²³ has little claim upon our confidence as possessing a pure text. A look into the history of Alexandria, especially during the time these manuscripts are believed to have been produced, is quite revealing.

Alexandria, a great center of commerce and Hellenistic culture, was renowned for its schools of philosophy. Philosophical teachings permeated the community—including the Christian church. Christian “thinkers” regarded Greek philosophy as a tool for understanding and applying Scripture, and like the pagans around them, they started a school which became the main focus and stimulus of their intellectual and spiritual life. The leaders of the school were usually experts in Greek philosophy, and they greatly influenced the theology of the Christians in Alexandria.

One of the most notable leaders of this school was Origen. Origen studied deeply into Platonism and Stoicism, seeking to harmonize their philosophic principles with the Scriptures. To do so, he allegorized the Scriptures—a process that allowed him to interpret them any way he wished. Further, he questioned the authenticity of certain portions of Scripture that did not conform to his own idiosyncratic beliefs. His teachings not only promoted a critical attitude toward the Scriptures, but they helped breed numerous heresies in Alexandria, including the doctrine of Arianism.²⁴

The Arian controversy centered around the nature of Christ. The Arians taught that Christ was a created being, while the conservatives of the day taught that Christ was eternal, wholly uncreated, and equal with the Father. For over sixty years the controversy raged. Just when it looked as if one side had won, the other side would rise to dominance.

Constantine, the great mixer of paganism and Christianity, was emperor when the controversy began in A.D. 320. More interested in politics than pure religion, Constantine favored whichever side seemed to his advantage. At first, Constantine exiled the Arian leaders, but three years later (A.D. 328), he not only welcomed their return but made one of them his personal advisor.²⁵

It was during this upsurge of Arianism that Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are believed to have been produced.²⁶ Several scholars believe that they may be identified with two of fifty Bibles that Constantine ordered to be prepared in A.D. 331.²⁷ Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were both written on parchments of vellum by talented calligraphers, a very expensive specification included in Constantine's order.²⁸

Constantine called upon Eusebius of Caesarea to be in charge of the preparation of the Bibles. Eusebius is well known as an enthusiastic admirer of Origen, and was inclined to favor the Arians. If such a one was in charge of preparing these manuscripts, it is no wonder the Critical Text—and consequently nearly every modern version—lacks fervent support for the deity of Christ. If Eusebius used any of the critical skills of his mentor, he was likely to dissect the Scriptures, thinking he was correcting them. This may explain some of the omissions characteristic of the Alexandrian Text and likewise of most modern versions.

Other obviously careless omissions in these manuscripts may have been because Constantine's order required extreme haste in accomplishing the work. Repeatedly, Constantine urged Eusebius to press the project with all speed. Corrections would not only be costly but time-consuming, and few were likely made.²⁹

Of course, without further documentation, no one can be certain of the exact history of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. But it seems likely that they were affected by the philosophical schools of Alexandria. Whether through Eusebius, other misguided critics, or one of the countless heretics that Alexandria bred,³⁰ it is apparent that the Alexandrians' attempt to "correct" the Scriptures failed. Within 200 years this text-type fell into discredit and disuse.³¹

It is interesting to realize that several of the omissions and peculiar readings of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were once found only in Roman Catholic Bibles. Dr. Benjamin G. Wilkinson, history professor and late president of Washington Missionary College, has proposed that Jerome, a great admirer of both Origen and Eusebius, transmitted many Eusebio-Origen errors into the Latin Vulgate.³² The Latin Vulgate has been the recognized Bible of Catholics for centuries. The English Rheims-Douay version is translated from it. History is replete with episodes of violence wrought by the Catholic Church against all who did not receive the Latin Vulgate. To deny their Scriptures was to deny the Church's self-appointed authority. When the modern versions began to appear with several readings previously propagated only in Catholic Bibles, Thomas S. Preston of St. Ann's Church of New York was recorded in Dr. Warfields' Collection of Opinions and Reviews as saying, "It is to us a gratification to find that in very many instances they have adopted the reading of the Catholic Version, and have thus by their scholarship confirmed the correctness of our [Catholic] Bible."³³

In summary, we find that the Critical Text hardly fits the biblical description of the Sacred Text. It is based on a text-type that lay idle for 1,500 years except for some renderings retained within the Catholic Church. In addition, the text reflects the Arian views prominent in the fourth century in Alexandria, and it contains numerous omissions likely due to misguided editing and careless copying.

An examination of the Received Text, on the other hand, yields quite a different story. Unlike the small number of manuscripts supporting the Alexandrian Text, the Received Text is derived from the Byzantine text-type which is represented in 80 to 90 percent of all Greek manuscripts.³⁴ That amounts to approximately 4,000 witnesses! Dotted over hundreds of years, these witnesses come from many different places—Greece, Constantinople, Asia Minor, Palestine, Syria, Alexandria, other parts of Africa, not to mention Sicily, southern Italy, Gaul, England, and Ireland.³⁵ This is quite a contrast to the limited locality and time-range of the Alexandrian Text.

Although none of the Greek manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type date before A.D. 400, most scholars agree

that in order for this text-type to be so widespread and predominant among the Greek manuscripts, it had to have a much earlier existence.³⁶ Indeed, distinctive Byzantine readings are found in all of the oldest versions,³⁷ in the papyri,³⁸ and in the Scriptural quotations of the early church fathers.³⁹ In numerous places the Byzantine text-type can be shown to be as early or earlier than any text-type.⁴⁰ It was the authoritative Scriptures of the Syrian church, the Waldensian church of northern Italy, and the Greek Orthodox Church. Wilkinson's study also suggests the Byzantine text-type was the Scriptures of such early churches as the Celtic church in Scotland and Ireland, and the Gallic church in southern France.⁴¹

During the Dark Ages, apostasy seemed almost to swallow up Christendom, but God still had a people with whom His Word would live and abide forever. As the true church fled into the wilderness (Revelation 12:6, 14), it resisted error and clung to the Scriptures. Prominent among these faithful believers were the Waldensians, who used a Latin translation of Byzantine manuscripts dating back to A.D. 157.⁴² Traveling about as merchants and peddlers, they quietly passed on their precious hand-copied portions of Scripture.

When Greek language and literature once again began to be studied, Europe awoke as from the dead after 1,000 years of darkness. A revival of learning ensued and God raised up a man to lay the foundation of the mightiest reformatory movement in history. Erasmus was endowed with such a giant intellect that he could do ten hours of work in one. He amazed Europe with his prodigious scholarship. Ten columns in the catalogue of the library of the British Museum are taken up with the works he translated, edited or annotated.⁴³ In addition, he was a prolific writer. A reformer at heart, Erasmus wrote several books that rocked Europe by exposing the ignorance of the monks, the superstitions of the priesthood, and the bigoted, coarse religion of the day.⁴⁴ Of all his publications, however, his crowning work was the New Testament in Greek. This was the first scholarly attention paid to the Greek text of the New Testament in over a thousand years. A later revision of this Greek text became known as the *Textus Receptus* or Received Text.

When Erasmus prepared his Greek New Testament, there were hundreds of manuscripts for him to examine, and his wide travels certainly permitted him to do so. But after much study, he chose to use but a few representative manuscripts. These manuscripts, like the vast bulk of all New Testament Greek manuscripts, were of the Byzantine text-type—the same text-type that had been preserved and used by the church in the wilderness. This was no coincidence. Through the publication of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, God's providence was preparing the way for the many subsequent translations that would guide His true Church as two-thirds of Europe broke away from the Catholic Church in the Great Protestant Reformation.

As the torch of truth was passed on to the Reformation, we find version after version translated from the Received Text. Luther, that great giant of the Reformation, used a Waldensian Bible and Erasmus Greek text (the Received Text) in producing his German translation of the New Testament. Similarly based were Olivetan's French translation, Diodati's Italian translation, and Tyndale's English translation.⁴⁵

When the time was right, God's providence directed for an English translation to be produced that would sum up the best of all ages. With Erasmus' Greek text, several Waldensian-influenced Bibles, and the literary excellence of Tyndale,⁴⁶ forty-seven scholars produced the King James Version of 1611.

The translators of the KJV were men of spiritual integrity as well as outstanding scholars. The general chairman of the project was Lancelot Andrews, one of the greatest linguists of his day. Known to spend five hours a day in prayer, his personal piety was unquestioned. Even the usually arrogant King James had great respect for him. Although these men did not all agree doctrinally, they all had reverent regard for the divine inspiration of Scripture. In addition, the translating was engineered so that no one man would have undue

influence upon any portion of Scripture. Every part of the work was reviewed critically at least fourteen times.

With the Old Testament based on the Masoretic text-type and the New Testament based on the Byzantine text-type, the work was accomplished just in time for it to be carried by our pilgrim fathers to America where for three hundred years it became the “authorized” Scriptures for millions of English-speaking people in the New World. In addition, it has been the Bible of every English-speaking country on the face the globe. It has been the guide of conduct to men and women in every class of life and of every rank in learning and education. So deeply has its language entered into our common tongue, that one probably could not take up a newspaper or read a single book in which some phrase was not borrowed, consciously or unconsciously, from the KJV. The wide and positive influence of the Authorized Version cannot be exaggerated.⁴⁷

The New Testament Scriptures of the early church, the wilderness church, the Reformation church, and the Scriptures of our founding fathers were all in essence the Received Text. The blood of martyrs has been shed over it, nations have been founded upon it, and divine providence has protected it. The Received Text is the Greek text that has played an active role in the church through-out the ages, and as such it best fits our third characteristic of the inspired Word of God.

A Dramatic change in Scholarship

The contrast between the Received Text and the Critical Text is overwhelming, yet the Critical Text has held an honored position in the scholarly world in recent years. The preface to the Revised Standard Version will tell you that since “we now possess many more ancient manuscripts” (i.e., primarily Vaticanus and Sinaiticus), we “are far better equipped to seek to recover the original wording of the Greek text.” It will also tell you that the Greek text of the King James Version “was marred by mistakes.” You may wonder how scholars came to such conclusions about the highly respected authorized version. To understand, we must go back in history about 100 years.

The last half of the 19th century brought many changes to the world. While great truths such as the Sabbath and the three angels’ messages were being proclaimed, grievous errors such as spiritualism, evolution, and Marxism were on the rise. Just as these false movements sought to dethrone God as the creator of the universe, critical scholars were trying to discredit the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Disregarding the providential care of the biblical text, men began to analyze it as they would any ancient piece of literature. Foremost among such men were Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort.

Westcott and Hort were both Cambridge professors well known in the field of textual criticism. These men shared several points of interest, including a fascination with the theory of evolution. But the one conviction that most closely united the two men was a prejudiced animosity for the Received Text. Dr. Hort was only twenty-three years old and had not yet even studied textual criticism when he described the Received Text as “villainous” and “vile.”⁴⁸ In spite of the unorthodoxy of these men, their scholarship has exerted a molding influence upon the distinctive readings of the modern versions.

In 1890 a major revision of the KJV was being considered. By this time, spelling and grammar had changed and many of the Old English words used in the KJV were considered obscure in meaning. Some critics believed that increased scholarship and the recent availability of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus necessitated a revision. Although there was much fear and distrust of revision in the public mind, it was sanctioned under the condition that no changes be made in the KJV except as were absolutely necessary.⁴⁹ Fifty-four men, including Westcott and Hort, were asked to be on the Revision Committee, and they began what should have been a short work.

A grueling ten years later, the committee introduced to an astonished public what amounted to a totally new translation based upon a Greek text different than the Received Text. The Revised Version of 1881 made 36,000 changes in the English of the KJV, and nearly 6,000 in the Greek text.⁵⁰ Shortly before the Bible was released to the public, Westcott and Hort published their own critical text of the New Testament. This Greek New Testament was drawn from Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and in essence was the Greek text that had been used by the Revision Committee for translating the Greek into English.⁵¹ It then became evident that Westcott and Hort had exercised disproportionate influence over the Revision Committee.

Most people were unaware that Westcott and Hort had, under pledge of secrecy, circulated among the Revision Committee copies of their own edition of the Greek New Testament.⁵² Eloquently expounding upon the methods they had used to compile their text, they overwhelmed the other members of the committee. Their methods gave preferential status to Vaticanus and Sinaiticus,⁵³ and have since shaped the thinking of all who approach textual criticism.⁵⁴

One of the most misleading of their rules declares that the oldest manuscripts contain the preferred reading. Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are about 100 years older than any of the existing Greek manuscripts supporting the Received Text. However, age does not guarantee purity. In fact, some of the earliest manuscripts were very corrupt. History records that during the century following the completion of the New Testament, manuscripts suffered the greatest abuse.⁵⁵ It was during this time that a number of heretics are known to have made corrupted copies of the Scriptures. Even while Paul was alive, someone was passing around false manuscripts (see 2 Thessalonians 2:2). The age of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus is no criterion for considering their readings to be pure. In fact, it can be the basis of questioning their reliability. These manuscripts could have only survived because they were little used. The dry climate of Egypt and the sturdiness of vellum are not sufficient to explain their survival. Reliable manuscripts of the Scriptures ultimately disintegrated from continual use while these manuscripts were preserved by disuse. One must question why they were not used when copies of the Scriptures were so precious and few.⁵⁶

Like the theory of evolution, Westcott and Hort's theory contained a missing link. They had to explain why the majority of manuscripts support the Byzantine readings of the Received Text and not the Alexandrian readings of the Critical Text. Realizing that it was absurd to insist that a variety of scribes, separated by time and space and working independently, would all "alter" their manuscripts so as to produce the uniform readings of the Byzantine text-type, Westcott and Hort devised a theory. They theorized that in the fourth century an official ecclesiastical command had been given to adopt a standardized form of the Greek text. They reasoned that the Greek text, thus propagated, contained many errors. This theory became known as the Syrian Recension.

Although scholars accepted the theory for a short time, its error was soon exposed and refuted. There is absolutely no historical evidence of such an official revision of the Greek text. Even if such a theory were true, it assumed that men who were only 200 years from the originals were so ignorant they couldn't recognize the correct manuscripts to use as authority. Strangely enough, today, nearly 1,900 years from the originals, scholars feel better able to judge than they could. Sir Frederick Kenyon, a pioneer in the field of papyrology and for many years director of the British Museum, summed it up when he wrote, "Is not the whole theory artificial and illusory, the vain imagining of an ingenious mind, like so many of the products of modern criticism, which spins endless webs out of its own interior, to be swept away tomorrow by the ruthless broom of common sense?"⁵⁷

When the theory of the Syrian Recension crumbled, Westcott and Hort's scholarly treatise was left without a foundation. Yet scholars still refused to recognize the providential hand of God in the spreading of the Received

Text. With no suitable explanation of why the Byzantine text-type is found abundantly in Greek manuscripts from all over the world,⁵⁸ most scholars still cling to the framework of textual criticism set up by Westcott and Hort. Thus, the most popular editions of the Greek text today—Nestle-Aland and UBS—vary little from the Westcott-Hort text.

However, uncertainty prevails as more and more scholars recognize the weaknesses of the Alexandrian Text and of Westcott and Hort's scholarship⁵⁹ that has so molded the science of textual criticism. In Westcott and Hort's day, it was believed that the original text of the New Testament had been virtually reconstructed. But today many scholars have come to consider this a well nigh impossible task.⁶⁰

While others despair, we can have assurance that the same text the church used through the ages still most accurately reflects the original writings of the New Testament. And that text is today known as the Received Text.

Which Version?

Having faith that God has preserved His Word in the church throughout the ages leads to the acceptance of the Received Text as the most reliable Greek New Testament. But for those who cannot read Greek, a translation is necessary.

Looking over the English Bible versions available, you will find that the only versions using the Received Text as the basis for the New Testament are those of the King James tradition.⁶¹ Foremost in this tradition is the KJV itself. As we have seen, for over 300 years the KJV has built the faith of its readers, it is a formal translation profitable for studying doctrine, and both its Old and New Testaments are based on text-types that have been providentially preserved through the ages by the priesthood of believers. Truly, it best fits our biblical description of the Word of God.

This does not mean, however, that the KJV is a perfect translation. One weakness is its readability.⁶² Although this difficulty has often been exaggerated by detractors of the KJV, it is true that its English has not been updated since 1769. Thus it contains archaisms. This is not a problem for those who have grown up reading the KJV, but its language may discourage others. For those who struggle with the English of the KJV, the New King James Version⁶³ is to be recommended.

Compared to the deficiencies of the Greek text⁶⁴ followed by most modern versions, the weaknesses of the KJV⁶⁵ are very minor. The New Testament of most modern versions is based on an Egyptian text rejected by Christendom 1,500 years ago.⁶⁶ While we can acknowledge the good points of modern versions and appreciate their usefulness for reference and commentary,⁶⁷ there is no more reliable English study Bible than the KJV. The KJV translators not only provided an accurate English translation⁶⁸ of the best manuscript tradition, but they masterfully rendered the English in a literary style befitting the dignity of Sacred Writ.⁶⁹ Although publishers have hoped to multiply their profits by producing a version which would replace the KJV, it still remains the most trusted Bible for the majority of English-speaking Christians.

As we stand in these last days of earth's history, our faith in the Word of God must be strong. We must confidently turn to the Scriptures for guidance and be able to present its saving truths to others clearly. While other versions often make the most relevant truths ambiguous, the King James Version resoundingly affirms them. No other version speaks so convincingly of last day issues. Certainly there was a divine purpose at work in the production and preservation of such an authoritative transcript of Holy Writ. As we study the Holy

Scriptures, may each of us individually be assured that “the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:8). And may we accept its wondrous truths not only intellectually, but make them a dynamic, meaningful part of our everyday lives.

NOTES

1. “Bible Illiteracy Plagues Youth,” Group, (November/ December, 1984), P. 27 as quoted in Ted Letis, “An Open Letter to the International Bible Society and the Zondervan Corporation,” (April 29, 1985).
2. The New Testament Student and Bible Translation (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1978), p. 155 as quoted in Letis, “An Open Letter.”
3. “The Revision of the New Testament,” Dublin Review, VI (July-October, 1881), p. 144.
4. Don F. Neufeld, “Supernatural or Human Beings?” Review and Herald (February 10, 1977), p. 14.
5. Gerhard F. Hasel, Understanding the Living Word of God (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assoc., 1980), p. 104.
6. JB and NIV are also considered formal translations but are admittedly freer, less literal. (See Hasel, pp. 104-105.)
7. Wilber N. Pickering, The Identity of the New Testament Text (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1980), p. 16. 8. The Masoretic Text has been recognized as the most carefully preserved and transmitted Hebrew text-type. (See Hasel, pp. 92-93.)
9. Also known as the Textus Receptus, Traditional Text, Greek Vulgate, Ecclesiastical Text, Syrian Text, Koine (Common) Text and often used synonymously with Majority Text.
10. I am using the term Critical Text to refer to the majority of Greek texts produced in recent years. These texts as a whole differ from the readings of the Received Text.
11. Sakae Kubo and Walter Specht, Which Version Today? (Washington, D.C.), p. 8.
12. Pickering, p. 16.
13. Bruce M. Metzger, The Text of the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 47.
14. Metzger, pp. 42-43.
15. Ira Maurice Price, The Ancestry of Our English Bible, 12th ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 150.
16. Ibid. 17. Frederick Kenyon, Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 202.
18. Herman C. Hoskier, Codex B and Its Allies (2 vols.; London: Bernard Quaritch, 1914), II, p. vi.
19. John Burgon, The Revision Revised (London: John Murray, 1883), p. 12.

20. F.H.A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (2 vols.; London: George Bell and Sons), II, p. 120. Also Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951), p. 308, states that Vaticanus is “disfigured by many blunders in transcription.”
21. F.C. Cook, *The Revised Version of the First Three Gospels* (London: John Murray, 1881), p. 172. Also Burgon, p. 13.
22. George Salmon, *Some Thoughts on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1897), pp. 52, 155. Also Ernest C. Colwell, *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, Vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 54 says “The Beta text-type (Hort’s ‘Neutral’) is a ‘made’ text, probably Alexandrian in origin, produced in part by the selection of relatively ‘good old mss.’ but more importantly by the philological editorial know-how of Alexandrians.”
23. Pickering, p. 111.
24. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 147-152.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-158.
26. Cook, p. 244.
27. T. C. Skeat of the British Museum has suggested that Vaticanus was a “reject” among the fifty copies. (See Metzger, pp. 47-48.)
28. Cook, p. 164.
29. Cook, pp. 161-162, 170.
30. Edward Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 4th ed. (Des Moines: The Christian Research Press, 1984), p. 134 writes, “Egypt during the early Christian centuries was a land in which heresies were rampant. So much so that, as Bauer (1934) and Van Unnik (1958) have pointed out, later Egyptian Christians seem to have been ashamed of the heretical past of their country and to have drawn a veil of silence across it. This seems to be why so little is known of the history of the early Egyptian Christianity.” Hills also suggests that Gnostic and docetist influences explain many of the peculiar readings of the Alexandrian Text. (See pp. 136-138, 143.)
31. Hoskier, p. 9.
32. Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (Washington, D.C., 1930), pp. 19-22.
33. Dr. Warfields *Collection of Opinions and Reviews*, Vol. II, p. 21 as quoted in Wilkinson, p. 229.
34. Pickering, p. 116.
35. Pickering, p. 142.
36. Pickering, p. 119.
37. Hills, pp. 172-175, 186-188. (Predominating in the Syriac Peshitta and Gothic.)

38. Colwell, pp. 48-49. Also Gunther Zuntz, "The Byzantine Text in New Testament Criticism," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, XLII (1942), p. 55.
39. John Burgon, *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels Vindicated and Established*, completed by Edward Miller (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), pp. ix-x cites Miller's investigation regarding the witness of the patristic quotations. (Also see Pickering, pp. 65-76 for discussion concerning this.)
40. H. Sturz, *The Byzantine Text-type and New Testament Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1984), pp. 53-131.
41. Wilkinson, pp. 24-40.
42. The Italic Version. (See Wilkinson, p. 35.)
43. Hills, p. 196.
44. Wilkinson, p. 53.
45. Wilkinson, p. 40.
46. Ibid.
47. Kenyon, *Our Bible*, p. 307.
48. "Hort organized his entire argument to depose the Textus Receptus. While still a student at Cambridge, twenty-three years old, Hort clearly indicated in a letter the identity of the villain: 'I had no idea till the last few weeks of the importance of texts, having read so little Greek Testament, and dragged on with the villainous Textus Receptus. ... Think of that vile Textus Receptus leaning on late Mss.; it is a blessing there are such early ones. ...' (December 29 and 30, 1851)" Colwell, p. 158 quotes Hort's letter published in Arthur Fenton Hort, *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort*, I (London and New York, 1896), p. 211.
49. H.F.D. Sparks, *On Translations of the Bible* (London: the Athlone press, 1973), p.7.
50. Edmund Beckett, *Should the Revised New Testament be Authorised?* (London: John Murray, 1881), p. 37.
51. Metzger, p. 135.
52. Luther Weigle, *The English New Testament* (New York & Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), p. 96. Also Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, p. 24.
53. Kenyon, *Our Bible*, p. 204.
54. Colwell, p. 106.
55. Metzger, p. 201.
56. Pickering, p. 129, Kirsopp Lake, R. P. Blake and Silva New, "The Caesarean Text of the Gospel of Mark," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 21(1928), pp. 347-349 suggests that scribes "usually destroyed their

exemplars when they had copied the sacred books.”

57. Kenyon, *Our Bible*, p. 173. Colwell on p. 106 records, “Kirsopp Lake described Hort’s work as a failure, though a glorious one.”

58. Pickering, p. 97.

59. Pickering, pp. 31-97.

60. Including such scholars as Rendel Harris, Conybeare, Kirsopp Lake, G. Zuntz, H. Greeven, R. M. Grant, K. W. Clark, Frederick Kenyon, and K. Aland as quoted in Hills, pp. 66-67.

61. Includes KJV, NKJV, and KJVII. The latter, however, is no longer readily available.

62. This is not to suggest that translations should be written in colloquial language. Contrary to a commonly held view, the New Testament was not written in the uncultivated dialect of the market-place. (See Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* , p. xiii.) Neither was the original KJV written in the contemporary English of its day. (See Hills, pp. 218-219.)

63. The NKJV is an excellent compliment to the KJV.

64. The Greek text is of primary importance in choosing a Bible version. See Kubo and Specht, *Which Version Today?*, p. 8. Also Alex Roberts writes “It is of the utmost vital importance to be assured of the trustworthiness of the text.... Without this everything else must be comparatively worthless.” Alex Roberts, *Companion to the Revised Version of the English New Testament* (London and New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1881), p. 34.

65. Of lesser significance than readability are a few places where the KJV could have been more literal in a consistent translation of verb tenses and articles.

66. Pickering, p. 136. Also Hoskier, p. 9.

67. There are places where modern versions more clearly and in a few cases, more accurately translate the same Greek found in the Received Text. (The NASB is particularly helpful due to its consistently literal renderings. See Kubo and Specht, *So Many Versions?* , p. 338.)

68. “Making the King James Version Even Better,” *Adventist Review*, July 5, 1979, p. 13 says of Dr. Arthur Farstad, New Testament editor of the NKJV, “He admitted that he had been biased by his studies at various seminaries in the direction of accepting the view that the KJV contained numerous inaccuracies in translation. He now has reversed this conviction, concluding instead that the initial KJV translators worked with extreme accuracy, selecting valid options in the Greek text.” [Emphasis supplied.] Also John Skilton wrote “[The A.V.] is a conscientiously close translation. While not a literal, word-for-word rendering which is insensitive to English idiom and style, it is faithful to its text and is remarkably successful in conveying the sense of that text into good English.” John H. Skilton, “The King James Version Today,” in John H. Skilton, ed., *The Law and the Prophets* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974) p. 104 as quoted in Letis, “Hugh Broughton Redivivus,” *The Majority Text: Essays and Reviews in the Continuing Debate*.

There have not been significant advances in the understanding of biblical Greek since the KJV was translated. The discovery of secular papyri has not been as beneficial in Christian word study as once hoped. (See Turner,

pp. xii-xiii.) Also Cadbury commented, "It would be a mistake to exaggerate the extent to which such revised judgments of the language can be actually recorded in translation. ... Improved knowledge of the original is often mainly a matter of slight nuances ... than such as to necessitate one English rendering instead of another." Henry J. Cadbury, "The Vocabulary and Grammar of New Testament Greek," in An introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament (The International Council of Religious Education, 1967), p. 105 as quoted in Letis, The Majority Text.

69. Skilton, p. 107 as quoted in Letis, The Majority Text says "The Authorized Version had a remarkable sense of appropriateness, felicity, and effectiveness of expression. It had the instinct and feeling of genius for music and rhythm. It could discover the 'inevitable' word or phrase for a given context. Its style admirably reflected the dignity, majesty, and sublimity of the original."

Visit www.amazingfacts.org for free Bible study resources!