

## Which Bible is Best?

On occasion, a Christian will ask me, “Which translation should I use?” In the past, I usually responded by saying that while some are better than others in my opinion, virtually all of the English versions of the Bible contain the message from God that is useful for our spiritual nourishment. Even today, I believe that for the English speaking Christian, the single most important factor involved in our spiritual nourishment is the attitude we bring to the Word of God. If I am surrendered to Him and seeking Him with all my heart, He will meet with me and provide the spiritual nourishment I need that is available through the Bible.

Having said this, let me now attempt to address the question more specifically. From the outset, I want to stress that the decision concerning which Bible to use is one that should be made by each individual Christian. In order to make such a decision intelligently, you really must spend the time to first understand the issues involved. I don’t recommend making your decision based solely upon what Bible your pastor uses. The more you know about all the issues, the more satisfied you will be with your decision over time. This way, you can avoid spending hundreds of dollars on various Bibles that ultimately just sit on the shelf collecting dust.

Note: For the purpose of this discussion, I am not going to address the question about the Hebrew text used to create the English translation of the Old Testament. Most Christians are primarily concerned with the accuracy of the New Testament writings and they generally spend more time studying it and teaching from it.

### 1. **What Greek text did the translators use when they created their version of the English New Testament?**

Most Christians would not even ask this question but the more I study this subject, the more important this question seems to be. Based upon my studies of this subject, it appears that up until the later 1800’s, most Greek scholars were in general agreement about the Greek New Testament text. The scholars had fewer Greek manuscripts available back then. Also, since that time, some manuscripts have been discovered that were much older. Generally, they compared all the manuscripts available with each other and opted to use the texts that seemed in agreement with each other. When they came across manuscripts that seem to have obvious errors in comparison to the majority of the ones that agreed with each other, they normally did not give them much weight. Nevertheless, they did make decisions, even back then, as to what Greek text seemed most likely to represent the original writings. But in their decision making, they placed much weight on the basis of what the majority of manuscripts had in agreement with each other. For example, if forty manuscripts agreed exactly as to what John 3:16 said word for word, and they came across one that had different wording, they concluded that the different one was not accurate. My example overly simplifies the process but I give it just to get across the basic concept of letting the majority of manuscripts that agree overrule those that seem to be in disagreement. Sometimes, other factors were used in their decision making when it seemed appropriate. But in general, the scholars back then did not have much to disagree about compared to the disagreement that exists about these matters today. The most famous complete New Testament Greek Text compiled on the basis of two manuscripts available at the time was known as the Textus Receptus, put together by a man named Erasmus. This was the Greek Text used as the basis for the King James Bible.

During the 1800’s, more Greek manuscripts were being discovered and some of these manuscripts were much older than the ones that formed the basis for the Textus Receptus. In the later 1800’s, a man named Hort (along with his associate Westcott), believed that since these recently discovered manuscripts were so much older, logic would suggest that they must be more accurate and closer to the originals. He spent many years attempting to convince his scholarly peers that the accepted Greek Text should be revised to reflect some of the differences that the older manuscripts contained. He developed a theory for considering such changes based mainly upon what many believe is pragmatic reasoning in order to arrive at which text is accurate. He believed the following tests should be applied:

-The more difficult reading (between say, two different manuscripts) should be preferred.

-The shorter reading is to be preferred (normally).

-The more verbally dissonant readings of parallel passages is preferred.

-The less refined grammatical construction is preferred.

These tests are obviously subjective and depend upon the man doing the evaluation of the actual text itself rather than hard external evidence.

To some, these tests may seem odd but Hort theorized that over time, scribes probably made slight changes to make the text sound better and harmonize better. He also concluded that some manuscripts should be given more weight than others because of their age and where they were discovered. But one premise that governed his thinking was that the New Testament text should be treated like any other work of antiquity. He did not seem to consider the idea that God was involved in preserving the text. Many scholars now question many of his conclusions about the weighting of manuscripts based upon location and date. Also, even more scholars are uncomfortable letting men make decisions about the text by applying subjective pragmatic reasoning.

As a result of the application of Hort's textual criticism theories, most modern Greek Texts<sup>[1]</sup> have many variations from the Textus Receptus. Most will say that these differences are insignificant but what if these differences are not even correct? Some scholars believe that the entire Hort theory has resulted in an inferior Greek text. They believe that the Hort theory is greatly flawed and destructive. Except for the New King James version, all the **modern** English translations are based upon the Greek text that was developed using Hort's theory.

To demonstrate some of those differences, I will provide actual examples of differences between the Textus Receptus text and the modern Greek texts. To do so, I will use verses from the King James Version compared to verses from the New American Standard Bible. Though both Bibles are in the English, the differences between the verses in English are based completely on the Greek texts used as their basis. Other examples could be given but these are perhaps the most glaring differences. After reading them side by side, you will be able to judge for yourself whether you think that the differences between the Greek Texts are important enough to factor in your thinking process.

In Luke 2:43, the modern Greek does not make the same distinction as the Textus Receptus about the true parents of Jesus.

*and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it (Luke 2:43 NASB)*

*And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it (Luke 2:43 KJV)*

In the Textus Receptus, there seems to be a distinction between Mary as the mother of Jesus and Joseph merely being Mary's husband but not the father of Jesus.

In II Peter 2:17, hell is described as something that is forever in the Textus Receptus but not in the modern Greek text:

*These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved (II Peter 2:17 NASB)*

*These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved **for ever** (II Peter 2:17 KJV)*

In Mark 9:44 and 46, hell again is pictured as forever in the Textus Receptus but in the Modern Greek text, this aspect is missing. (But the NASB includes the Textus Receptus idea in brackets with a note that this is not in the earlier manuscripts.)

*where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44-46 KJV)*

*[Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] (Mark 9:44-46 NASB)*

In John 3:13, the Textus Receptus says that the Son of Man is in heaven. This might allude to the idea that God the Son is omnipresent. (The modern Greek text does not include this.)

*No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. (John 3:13 NASB)*

*And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man **which is in heaven** (John 3:13 KJV)*

In I Corinthians 15:47, the Textus Receptus rendering conveys deity of Christ while the modern Greek text does not.

*The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. (I Corinthians 15:47 NASB)*

*The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven (I Corinthians 15:47 KJV)*

In I Timothy 3:16, the Textus Receptus strongly declares the deity of Christ but the modern Greek text does not:

*And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God** was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (I Timothy 3:16 KJV)*

*By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory. (I Timothy 3:16 NASB)*

In I Timothy 6:5, the Textus Receptus teaches that we should withdraw from certain people while the modern Greek text does not.

*and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. (I Timothy 6:5 NASB)*

*Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself (I Timothy 6:5 KJV)*

In Luke 2:14, the modern Greek text seems to picture man differently than the rest of the Bible portrays man.

*“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with **whom He is pleased.**” (Luke 2:14 NASB)*

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14 KJV)*

## 2. Which is the most accurate Greek text?

Because so much time has passed since it was first written, it is difficult to answer this question. But I believe there is enough evidence available for people like you and me to at least become more informed. Having studied this off and on over the years, and especially more lately, I am now convinced that the modern Greek text is based upon faulty pragmatic reasoning of a few men. Below, I will state my reasons without going in to too much detail. Then, I will provide references of resources available to Christians to investigate the matter in a more thorough manner if they so choose.

### *Why the Hort theory is flawed.*

One of the main premises for the Hort theory is that older Greek manuscripts are more likely to be accurate because they were created at a date closer to the original writings. When you accept this premise, you are suddenly faced with a major problem because many variations exist between these older manuscripts and the long accepted Greek text. Not only this, but more variations exist even between the older manuscripts themselves.

On the surface, one might conclude that there are simply more errors in these older manuscripts based on the fact that there are so many variances. If I were living in Hort’s day, I would probably have concluded that these older manuscripts were simply inferior because they were so riddled with variances. I think I would have considered the likelihood that God was watching over the Greek text down through the centuries and preserved them through His Church and that the Church considered these older manuscripts flawed.

Hort actually wrote that the New Testament Greek text should be viewed scientifically and in the same manner one would view any ancient Greek documents. In other words, he assumed that errors were always creeping into the text and being duplicated as manuscripts were copied over time. In his mind, humans make mistakes and these mistakes will indeed impact the integrity of the Greek manuscripts just as can be observed in other ancient Greek writings. Yet, historically, God’s people who reverence Him understand the importance of preserving the original documents because they considered them to be the Word of God.

The Textus Receptus was based upon Greek manuscripts that date much later than the ones Hort valued so much. These later manuscripts were classified as “Byzantine” and thought by Hort to have been purposely edited so that they harmonize better. After all, there were hardly any variations between these later “Byzantine” manuscripts.

He concluded that someone must have purposely edited them. But a major premise of Hort's theory (as he admitted) rests upon the idea that the text contained in the Byzantine manuscripts dates later than 400 A.D. He believed that editing and harmonizing must have taken place over time. But further analysis since the time of Hort has shown that the early Church fathers dating back as far as 100 A.D. quoted from what appears to be, the traditional ("Byzantine") text. This indicates that though the physical "Byzantine" manuscripts are newer than some of the older manuscripts, the text itself dates much older than Hort assumed.

Besides this, one must consider that if these "Byzantine" manuscripts were considered most reliable by the Church, they would have had to keep making copies simply because the older ones would wear out. If the people of God considered them most reliable, they would have been using them the most and with use comes wear. So, they would be forced to make copies as older ones wore out. So, just because the Byzantine manuscripts are dated much later, one should not assume that they do not faithfully represent the originals. It could just as well indicate that they were considered most accurate down through time.

In fact, one should logically question the older manuscripts. Most of them were discovered in northern Africa, away from the area where the Greek language flourished the most. By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, very few people in northern Africa continued speaking Greek. On the other hand, in the general area where the Byzantine manuscripts were found, Greek continued to be spoken much longer. So, logically, the people of God that actually spoke Greek would more likely be the ones making the copies when necessary. The person who speaks Greek has a much greater likelihood of making a good copy of the Greek manuscripts than someone who does not speak it fluently. So, if people in Africa had to make copies without the benefit of speaking Greek fluently, many errors would more likely be made. (Try making a copy of a Greek document yourself long hand to prove this.)

In addition, one should ask, why were such old manuscripts even in existence at all? If they were being used, they would have disintegrated long ago. Isn't it possible that these were not being used because God's people preferred better, more accurate manuscripts that eventually did wear out. Perhaps these manuscripts sat on shelves in the same way a New Word Translation would sit on a Christian's shelf (not be used) today. (The New Word Translation is the Bible that Jehovah's Witnesses use and it is riddled with errors. So, a Christian would only keep one around to look at if needed for reference.)

Bottom line, a growing number of Greek scholars have rejected Hort's premise about the dating of the text contained in the Byzantine manuscripts. If Hort's premise is flawed, then why would we want to discard a rendering that a majority of Greek manuscripts agree upon and insert a different rendering from one or two of these older manuscripts? And who is qualified to even determine such things?

To his credit, Hort at least realized how dangerous it is for men to make such decisions. So, he developed a list of guidelines mentioned previously to help in the decision making. Here are those guidelines again:

- The more difficult reading (between say, two different manuscripts) should be preferred.
- The shorter reading is to be preferred (normally).
- The more verbally dissonant readings of parallel passages is preferred.
- The less refined grammatical construction is preferred.

In light of all the things we now know, and especially if you believe that God has been watching over His Word all along, these guidelines actually open the floodgates for errors to enter into the Greek text.

***Why not let the "Majority" of renderings that agree with one another guide us?***

Hort's subjective, pragmatic approach often ignores the fact that so many manuscripts agree with each other and then inserts a rendering that does not agree even though only one or a few manuscripts include that rendering. And using his guidelines, we will end up with a text that will actually harmonize less with itself.

But if you believe that God cares about His Word and is involved with preserving it, wouldn't it seem much more appropriate to think that if you have a majority of manuscripts agreeing together about a rendering, then it is most likely the correct rendering? Why let a couple of manuscripts that disagree with the majority overrule the majority? Using this "majority agreement indicates the preferred rendering" approach, scholars have compiled a Greek text called the "Majority Text." This Majority Text happens to agree with the Textus Receptus for the most part. The more notable variations occur in the book of Revelation. (Erasmus did not have Greek manuscripts for all of the book of Revelation when he compiled the Textus Receptus so he translated the Latin back into Greek to complete the work for a very small portion at the end of Revelation.)

The early Church did not have a printing press. As a result, they relied upon careful men to make handwritten copies. Because they revered God, they paid close attention to what they were doing believing they were making copies of His Word. In addition, they made many copies of the original documents very soon, if not immediately after they were written. Some of the N.T. authors actually specified that their letters be read in various churches. The best way to do this was to make a few copies at once so that this command could be carried out. It is likely that many, many copies of these original documents existed within months after they were written, not years. Therefore, since so many accurate copies existed of each document, it is most logical that a majority of manuscripts would continue to agree with each other over time.

I believe that men like Hort and many others since his time have unintentionally caused unnecessary toil within the Church by opting for a subjective, flawed approach to developing the modern Greek text that most of the modern translations used as the basis for translation.

If you wish to study this in much greater detail, I highly recommend a book by Wilber N. Pickering called, "The Identity of the New Testament IV." But be warned, that it is very technical and a very slow read.

### **3. Once you know which Greek text is most accurate, now you can decide which English version would be the closest to the original writings.**

Because they are based upon a flawed Greek text, I believe the modern English translations (except for the NKJV) are inferior in representing the original Greek text. While the King James Version is not perfect, I believe it better represents the original Greek text simply because I believe that the Textus Receptus better represents the original Greek text. The only modern translation that follows the Textus Receptus (as well as notations where the Majority Text differs though rarely) is the New King James Version (NKJV). The preface of the NKJV states their purposes for following the Textus Receptus in favor of the critical modern Greek text. It is a short, but good explanation that addresses some of the same concerns that I have stated above.

I would also recommend that when using study tools and on-line helps, Christians should try to use the ones that are based upon the Textus Receptus or Majority Text and the King James Version in English. For example, using the computer version of Strong's concordance, you can do a word study in the use of Greek words in the Textus Receptus rather than using the concordances based upon the modern Greek texts. I recommend the Blue Letter on line web site for the many tools that will allow you to study words found in the Greek Text using the KJV and Strong's as the basis. See the link here: [Blue Letter Bible](#)

[1] There are two notable exceptions: the Hodges-Farstadt edition, and the Robinson-Pierpont edition, based upon the Majority Text. (I personally use the Robinson-Pierpont edition of the Majority or Byzantine Greek Text as the basis for my reading and study of the Greek.)