

# The Textus Receptus

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## Introduction

*Textus Receptus*, or "Received Text," (abbreviated TR) is the name we use for the first published Greek text of the New Testament. For many centuries, it was *the* standard text of the Greek Bible. The name arose from the work of the kinsmen Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, who said of their 1633 edition, "Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum" -- "So [the reader] has the text which all now receive."

The irony is that the Received Text is not actually a single edition, but a sort of text-type of its own consisting of hundreds of extremely similar but not identical editions. Nor do any of its various flavours agree exactly with any extant text-type or manuscript. Thus the need, when referring to the Received Text, to specify *which* received text we refer to.

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

## The Origin of the Textus Receptus

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

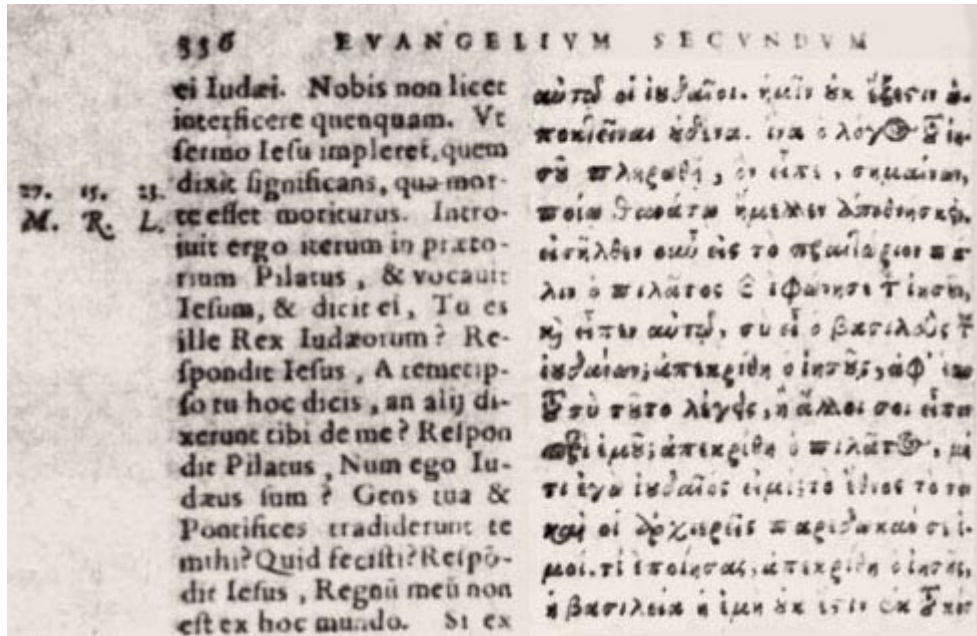
It was not until the early sixteenth century that Cardinal Ximenes decided to embark on a Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament -- the famous Complutensian Polyglot. The New Testament volume of this work was printed in 1514 -- but it was not published until after 1520. This left a real opportunity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

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

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

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

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



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

## The History of the Textus Receptus

Erasmus's first edition was a great success; some 3300 copies of his first two editions were sold. (If that sounds like a small number, recall that there were probably fewer than 300 copies of the Mainz Vulgate, and that editions were usually restricted to 1000 copies as late as Elizabethan times and after.) The success of Erasmus's edition soon called forth new Greek testaments, all of them based largely on his. The first of these was published by Aldus Manutius in 1518 -- but although it contained an independent text of the Septuagint (the first such to be printed), its New Testament text was taken almost verbatim from Erasmus, including even the typographical errors. Hence the first truly new publication was Erasmus's own edition of 1519. This featured almost the same text as the 1516 edition, but with the majority (though by no means all!) of the errors of the press corrected. It also features some new readings, believed by Scrivener to come from 3<sup>cap</sup> (XII; classified by von Soden as e: K<sup>x</sup> a: I [K]; c: K).

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

There followed a great welter of editions, all slightly different (based on such figures as I have

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

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

The next great edition of the *Textus Receptus* is the Elzevir text already mentioned in the [Introduction](#). First published in 1624, with minor changes for the edition of 1633, it had the usual minor variants from Stephanus (of which Scrivener counted 287), but nothing substantial; the Elzevirs were printers, not critics.

The Elzevir text, which became the primary TR edition on the continent, was the last version to be significant for its text. From this time on, editions were marked more by their marginal material, as scholars such as Mill, Wettstein, and later Griesbach began examining and arranging manuscripts. None of these were able to break away from the TR, but all pointed the way to texts free of its influence.

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

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

## The Text of the Textus Receptus

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

Nor were the manuscripts which came to hand particularly valuable. For his basic text he

chose 2<sup>e</sup>, 2<sup>ap</sup>, and 1<sup>r</sup>. In addition, he was able to consult 1<sup>eap</sup>, 4<sup>ap</sup>, and 7<sup>p</sup>. Of these, only 1<sup>eap</sup> had a text independent of the Byzantine tradition -- and Erasmus used it relatively little due to the supposed "corruption" of its text. Erasmus also consulted the Vulgate, but only from a few late manuscripts.

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

Manuscript	Date	Von Soden Classification (in modern terms)
1 <sup>eap</sup>	XII	e: family 1; ap: I <sup>a3</sup>
1 <sup>r</sup>	XII	Andreas
2 <sup>e</sup>	XII/XIII	K <sup>x</sup> (Wisse reports K <sup>mix</sup> /K <sup>x</sup> )
2 <sup>ap</sup>	XII	I <sup>b1</sup>
4 <sup>ap</sup>	XV	
7 <sup>p</sup>	XI/XII	O <sup>π18</sup>

Not only is 1<sup>r</sup> an Andreas manuscript rather than purely Byzantine, but it is written in such a way that Erasmus could not always tell text from commentary and based his reading on the Vulgate. Also, 1<sup>r</sup> is defective for the last six verses of the Apocalypse. To fill out the text, Erasmus made his own Greek translation from the Latin. He admitted to what he had done, but the result was a Greek text containing readings not found in *any* Greek manuscript -- but which were faithfully retained through centuries of editions of the Textus Receptus. This included even certain readings which were not even correct Greek (Scrivener offers as an example Rev. 17:4 ΑΚΑΘΑΡΤΗΤΟΣ).

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

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

## Addendum I: The King James Version

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

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

Since there are people who still, for some benighted reason, use the King James Bible for Bible study, we perhaps need to add a few words about its defects (defects conceded by all legitimate textual critics, plus most people who know anything about translations). This is not to deny that it is a brilliant work of English prose; it *is* a brilliant work of English prose. But it is not an adequate English Bible.

The first reason is the obvious textual one: It is translated from the *Textus Receptus*. There was no good alternative at the time, but we know now that it is simply a *bad* text. This is true even if one accepts the Byzantine text as original; the TR is not a good representative of that text-form, and is even worse if one accepts any other text form, or if one is eclectic.

The Old Testament suffers the same problem -- in some ways, worse. The Hebrew text had hardly been edited at all when the KJV was translated. Today, with more Hebrew manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, various translations, more ancient commentaries, and a better grasp of textual criticism, we can establish a much better Hebrew text.

The lack of Hebrew scholarship at the time contributed to an even greater problem with the Old Testament: The translators didn't know what it *meant*. Textual damage caused some of the cruxes; others arose from ignorance of classical Hebrew. The translators often had to turn to the translations in LXX or the Vulgate -- which often were just as messed up as the Hebrew. Today, we have more samples of ancient Hebrew to give us references for words; we have knowledge of cognate languages such as Ugaritic and Akkadian, and we have the tools of linguistics. There are still unsolved problems in the Old Testament -- but they are far fewer.

The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the New Testament. Greek never entirely vanished from the knowledge of scholars, as Hebrew did, but the language evolved. At the time the KJV was translated, classical Greek -- the Greek of Homer and the tragic playwrights -- was considered the standard. Koine Greek -- the Greek of the New Testament -- was forgotten; the Byzantine empire had undergone a sort of Classic Revival. People referred to the Greek of the New Testament as "the Language of the Holy Spirit" -- and then sneered at its uncouth forms.

Over the past century and a half, the koine has been rediscovered, and we know that the New Testament was written in a living, active language. This doesn't affect our understanding of the meaning of the New Testament as much as our increased knowledge of Hebrew affects our understanding of the Old -- but it does affect it somewhat.

In addition, there is the translation style. The KJV was created by six separate committees, with relatively little joint effort and a relatively small body of prior work (this was 1604, after all; the committee from Cambridge couldn't just buzz down to Westminster for the afternoon, e.g.). This meant that there wasn't much standardization of vocabulary; a word might be translated two or three or even half a dozen different ways. Sometimes, of course, this was necessary (as, e.g. with  $\text{AN}\Omega\Theta\text{EN}$ , "again," "from above" in John 3:3, 7, 31 -- a case where the KJV translators seem, ironically, to have missed the multivalued meaning). But it is generally agreed that that KJV used various renderings for solely stylistic reasons; their translation was meant to be read aloud. They produced a version that was excellent for these purposes -- but, in consequence, much less suitable for detailed study, especially, e.g., of Synoptic parallels, which can look completely different when the KJV renditions are set side by side.

Plus the committee was under instructions to stay as close as possible to the previous standard, the so-called Bishop's Bible, which in turn had been created based on the Great Bible. And even *it* was derived largely from Tyndale's work. The Great Bible had been created some 75 years earlier, and Tyndale in the decades before that -- not long in ordinary terms, but this was a time when English was evolving fast. This heritage means that a number of the features -- e.g. the use of you/ye/thou/thee/thy/thine -- was actually incorrect even by the standards of the time, and its influence came to produce a truly curious effect: "Thou," initially the second person singular pronoun, (as opposed to "ye," the plural form, loosely equivalent to the American Southernism "y'all") was briefly a form used to address a social inferior, and then, under the influence of the KJV itself, treated as a form of address to one deserving of high dignity. This is genuinely confusing at best.

Finally, the KJV does not print the text in paragraphs, but rather verse by verse. Readers can see this, but it's one thing to know it and another to really read the text in that light.

To be fair, the translators were aware of most of these problems. The preface, in fact, urges "the Reader... not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily." The Old Testament, according to Alister McGrath, contained 6,637 marginal notes, most of them variant readings (more notes than many modern translations, we should observe). But I have yet to find a recent printing of the KJV which includes its marginal notes, let alone its preface. (I'm told there is one -- or at least a reprint of an allegedly-exact nineteenth century reprint -- but it's an expensive edition you won't find in ordinary bookstores.)

And, of course, since the time of publication, the language of the KJV -- already somewhat antiquated in its time, based as it was largely upon Tyndale's translation -- has become entirely archaic.

In an aside, we might note that, at the time of its publication, the KJV was greeted with something less than enthusiasm, and for the first few decades of its life, the Geneva Bible remained the more popular work; the Geneva edition (unlike the other pre-KJV translations) remained in print for more than thirty years after the KJV was published. During the Commonwealth period (1649-1660), there was talk of commissioning another new translation. It wasn't until the KJV became quite venerable that it somehow assumed an aura of special

value -- even of independent canonicity.

Quite simply, while the King James Bible was a brilliant work, and a beautiful monument of sixteenth century English, it is not fit to be used as a Bible in today's world.

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

The phrase "The New TR" is sometimes applied to editions which threaten to dominate the field of textual criticism. Thus the edition of [Westcott & Hort](#) was a sort of "New TR" in the late nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century the name is sometimes applied to the [United Bible Societies](#) edition. In terms of number of copies printed this description of the UBS text may be justified -- no complete new edition has been issued since its publication -- but no reputable textual scholar would regard it as the "final word."

Another sort of "New TR" is found in the Majority Text editions of [Hodges & Farstad](#) and Robinson & Pierpont. These are attempts to create a true Byzantine text (as an alternative to the TR, which is a very bad Byzantine text), but they have received relatively little critical attention -- less, probably, than they deserve (though few would consider them to contain the original text). Thus they cannot be considered truly "received" texts.

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