The Background of the Greek New Testament

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The Greek text from which the Authorized or "King James" Version of the New Testament was made is known as the "Received" Text or Textus Receptus. This form of the Greek New Testament was the standard text of the Christian Church for a thousand years prior to the appearance of the Authorized Version. Beginning with the publication of the Revised Version in 1881, however, recent English versions, including the American Revised and the Revised Standard versions, have been based upon a form of the Greek text which differs appreciably from the Textus Receptus by various omissions, changes, and a few additions. These changes, for the most part, are minor details; but there are instances where a phrase or passage is in question, as well as instances where a variant, though small, is important.

For an understanding of the transition from the Greek of the Authorized Version—the Textus Receptus—to the form of the Greek text now commonly accepted, some understanding of the history of the Greek New Testament is necessary. It should be recognized that this story is none too clear at a good many points. Nevertheless, a working hypothesis may be offered as a basis for the understanding of the background of the Greek New Testament.

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No one seriously claims that any of the original manuscripts of the New Testament are known. These "autographs," as they are called, almost certainly perished during the early days of the church. Since we do not possess the originals, our knowledge of what the New Testament writers actually wrote is necessarily secondary. The first, and most important, source is actual Greek manuscripts of the New Testament or portions thereof. Of the 4000 extant manuscripts, the latest were written as late as the invention of printing; while the two oldest, designated Codex B and Codex aleph were probably written as early as the fourth century. Some portions and fragments of manuscripts are dated as early as the first part of the third century. Manuscripts written in uncial, or modified capital, letters come from the second through the tenth centuries; while those written in minuscule letters, a sort of "literary long-hand," come from the ninth century up to the time of printing. Most Greek manuscripts are written on parchment, or vellum. The very earliest uncial fragments, however, are on papyrus; while paper began to be used about the thirteenth century and had entirely replaced parchment by the end of the fifteenth century. A third type of Greek manuscripts are lectionaries—lesson books containing portions of the New Testament selected for reading in church services. No lectionaries are known which were written in the earliest manuscript period.

The second principal source of knowledge of the Greek text is the versions of the New Testament. Translation of the New Testament into other languages was the natural outgrowth of missionary ac-

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1 This article is based upon a paper of the same title read by the author at the University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, Lexington, April 23, 1948. It is a semi-popular survey rather than an advanced or technical presentation.
tivity; and the New Testament seems to have undergone translation before it was a century old. The earliest versions, which are therefore the most important for the text of the New Testament, are the several Latin (the Old Latin and the Vulgate'), Syriac (principally the Sinaic, C ura tonian, Peshitto," and the Palestinian Syriac lectionary), and Egyptian versions (principally the Sahidic and Bohairic). It is not, of course, the language of the version itself which constitutes its value, but rather the light which the version throws upon the Greek text from which the version was made. While a version will obviously be of no assistance in some types of variants, such as spelling, it may be very helpful in others. A version, for instance, would be of no help in deciding between the variants κράββατον and κράββατων. On the other hand, in 1 Tim. 3:16 there is a variant between ὁ ἐφανερώθη and θεὸς ἐφανερώθη ("who was manifested" and "God was manifested"). These variants may be traced back to the uncial manuscripts, where θ̣ was written OC and θ̆ was abbreviated θ̇C. These variants, so similar in Greek, would be respectively qui and deus in Latin, so that it can easily be determined from which Greek reading either Latin reading is derived.

The third principal source is, by its very nature, fragmentary, but is nonetheless of definite value in reconstructing the history of the transmission of the Greek text. This source is the quotations from the New Testament which are found in the early Christian writings, particularly those of the Church Fathers. If no ancient manuscripts of the New Testament were known at all, it would still be possible to reconstruct practically the entire book from the multitude of quotations which are found in the patristic writings.

Versions and patristic quotations have a valuable contribution to make to the knowledge of the Greek Testament, provided certain obvious cautions are observed. It must be ascertained, first of all, that the reading of the quotation or version as it now stands has not itself suffered change from the way in which it was first written; then it must be decided whether the original quotation, or reading of the version, was intended to represent the Greek accurately rather than loosely. If these tests can satisfactorily be met, the fact that a given version or Church Father's quotations use a given set of variants indicate to some extent a place and an approximate date at which those variants were known and accepted.

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The early history of the Greek New Testament was in certain respects different from that of most classical literature. Most of the books of the New Testament were written, not as literature or for literary purposes, but rather as private or semi-private writings. In the second place, the expectation of the imminent return of Christ and of the end of the age would hardly encourage the preservation of the writings of the New Testament for the coming centuries. Finally, whereas the works of the classical writers could be copied by professional scribes and corrected by official library copies, the copying of the New Testament manuscripts would be done largely by non-professionals. There would therefore be less opportunity to set up or retain an official text. Indeed, the manuscripts belonging to churches, which would most nearly represent a local official text, would be the very manuscripts most likely to be confiscated or destroyed in persecutions. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that within the very early period of the transmission of the New Testament a multitude of variations had arisen in the text. There would be more opportunity for comparison of readings of manuscripts within a given community, however; and certain groups of variants and characteristic readings can be identified with certain localities in the Mediterranean world.

With the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire in 325, the period of appreciable variation in the
text of the New Testament was at an end; for it then became possible to have carefully written, easily accessible manuscripts. This, together with the reverence in which the New Testament was now held, gave rise to a standardized text from which new manuscripts were copied and toward which old manuscripts tended to be corrected. This standardizing process probably continued for four centuries or so, for the need of complete verbal agreement of all manuscripts was doubtless not too keenly felt. If the second and third centuries comprised the period of divergence of manuscript readings, the fourth through the seventh might be called the period of the convergence of readings. During this period, manuscripts exhibiting the variant readings of various localities would tend to be either corrected to the standard text or else set aside and not officially used. This correction of manuscripts, incidentally, would rarely be complete; with the result that many manuscripts would come to have a text which was a mixture of the older local text with the more obvious elements of the standardized text, and would pass along this mixed text to any manuscripts copied from them.

How completely this standard text became the recognized Greek text of the New Testament is pointed out by Sir Frederic Kenyon in his very readable book, The Story of the Bible. Kenyon states that 96% of the extant manuscripts of the Greek New Testament are later than the eighth century, and of these only a handful show any substantial variation from the standard text—that is, contain an appreciable amount of readings from the old local texts from which the standardized text was made. This standard church text, commonly designated the Byzantine text, the text of practically all the later Greek manuscripts, naturally became the text which was used in the early printed Greek New Testaments. Due to human frailty, so long as the New Testament was handed down only in handwritten form, even this standardized text would vary slightly from manuscript to manuscript. But with the printed editions it became possible to produce a completely standard text. The Byzantine type of text, in the form in which it became the accepted Greek text of the New Testament, became known as the Textus Receptus; and it is this form of the Greek New Testament from which the Authorized Version was made. This form of the text remained the accepted Greek text until well within the past century.

The first printed Greek New Testament was edited by Erasmus and was published in 1516, based upon a few manuscripts, none very ancient, which Erasmus happened to have. The Textus Receptus, or Received Text, as it is commonly used today in England and America is the edition of Robert Estienne (Stephanus) of 1550; while in Europe it is the 1633 edition of Elzevir. These latter two editions are almost identical, and they in turn differ only slightly from the edition of Erasmus.

About a century after the first Greek New Testament was printed, there began the series of discoveries which ultimately displaced the Textus Receptus from its dominant position. As early as 1627 an ancient codex of the Greek Testament reached England as the gift of Cyril Lucar, patriarch of Constantinople. This manuscript, the now famous Codex Alexandrinus (Cod. A), proved to have been written about the fifth century, and was therefore much older than any other known manuscript. Moreover, it was found to contain many readings at variance with the Received Text—readings whose age demanded that they somehow be accounted for. The impact of Codex Alexandrinus upon Biblical scholarship was such as to inaugurate, slowly but with increasing momentum, a search for and the publication of the text of ancient New Testament manuscripts—a search which is still continuing. This search proved highly rewarding, both in the recovery of ancient manuscripts and in revealing ancient readings in some of the later manuscripts; but for two centuries the results of this search were limited to listing variant readings as

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a critical apparatus to the Textus Receptus, without attempting to change the text itself.

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The half-century beginning with the year 1830 marks the struggle for revision of the Received Text in the light of what was by then a considerable body of readings which gave evidence of being more nearly the original reading than the corresponding readings found in the Textus Receptus. Many scholars worthy of mention contributed to the establishment of a better text; but the epoch-making work largely through which the struggle was consummated was the joint labor of two English clergymen, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort. Building upon the foundations which earlier scholars had laid, Westcott and Hort published an edition of the New Testament which set aside the Textus Receptus in favor of a text which they felt represented practically the original words of the New Testament. It is worth noting that both these scholars were on the committee which produced the Revised Version of the New Testament; and their new edition of the Greek Testament, almost ready for publication, was considerably used in the English version.

It was Westcott and Hort's theory of the transmission of the text, however, rather than their edition of the New Testament, which has ranked their work as the outstanding contribution in the history of textual criticism. They advanced the theory that the original wording of the New Testament had been preserved almost exactly in what amounted to the consensus of the two fourth century manuscripts, Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (Codd. B and al. eph), which are the oldest and best manuscripts. This consensus they called the "Neutral" text. Another small group of manuscripts and versions they designated the "Alexandrian" text, a scholarly revision made at Alexandria. A third text-type they based primarily on Codex Bezae and (Codd. D and Dz), which together include most of the New Testament and which contain some rather striking and characteristic readings. Together with these they lumped a miscellaneous assortment of variants and designated it the "Western" text. The standardized Byzantine text, which they called the "Syrian" text, was represented by practically everything else, including almost all of the later manuscripts, versions, and quotations. Westcott and Hort maintained that this standardized text had been produced from the other text-types, by a process of conflation of readings, selection of the readings of one and another of the texts, by smoothing over difficult wordings and abrupt transitions, etc. They therefore concluded that no reading of the Textus Receptus could be correct unless it was given by one of the earlier texts. The readings of the Neutral text, moreover, would almost always be preferred to any other evidence.

Textual criticism will forever be indebted to Westcott and Hort for their part in establishing these better readings—designated a "critical" text because it is established by principles of textual criticism—as the accepted Greek text of the New Testament. Nevertheless, in the half-century since the publication of their work certain modifications have had to be made in their theory, due to further research and discoveries. One of the most significant of these is the isolation of what appears to be a new text-type, partially from Westcott and Hort's "Western" text. This new text is now commonly designated "Cæsarean" because it seems to have been used by Origen and Eusebius in Cæsarea. Developments leading up to the establishment of this text include the discovery of similarities among the following: two families of minuscule manuscripts, headed respectively by Codex 1 and Codex 6; an uncial manuscript of uncertain date; part of Codex W; the minuscule codes 28, 565, and 700; the Chester Beatty papyrus P45; the Georgian, Armenian, and the Palestinian and the Gospel quotations from the writings of Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and
part of Origen's writings. The Caesarean text itself may now need to be divided into two texts, centered around family 13 and Codex Θ respectively, with the former group native not to Caesarea but possibly to the Fayum region of Egypt.

A second modification of the theory of Westcott and Hort is the combination by most scholars of the so-called Neutral and Alexandrian texts, under the designation "Alexandrian." This is due to a feeling that the two do not represent separate text-types but merely degrees of faithfulness to a single text-type. The designation, or at least the implication, of the term "Neutral text" has largely been discarded. It is felt that no one or two single manuscripts can claim to have preserved all of the original words of the New Testament in complete accuracy.

In spite of these modifications of theory, however, a variant attested by the Alexandrian witnesses including the codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus is almost always accepted as the best reading, and the text as reconstructed by Westcott and Hort still stands essentially approved.

The so-called Western text, in addition to losing part of its tribe to the Caesarean, has been subjected to much further study, particularly to account for its many peculiar additions in Luke and Acts; but a full explanation of its origin and these readings is yet to be given.

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There are some thousands of variants within the manuscripts of the New Testament. The sources of these variants are the 4000 extant manuscripts of the Greek text and 9000 manuscripts of various versions—a number far in excess of the manuscripts of almost any classical writer. These manuscripts carry the text tradition back to within two or three centuries of the original writings, which is far closer than in the case of most ancient literature. This mass of variants make it probable that the search for the exact original words of the New Testament will be "an eternal approximation toward an unrealizable ideal"; but on the other hand the probability is very small indeed that any real part of the text should be completely lost from this excellent body of witnesses. Moreover, the two most widely divergent manuscripts of the New Testament would show a verbal agreement of approximately 90%. We may therefore agree with Kenyon that "the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God."*

*Ibid., p. 144.