# The Debate Over the King James Version – Which Is the Best Translation for My Personal Use

Written by Rick Wade

*Which version of the Bible is the most reliable and authoritative providing me with understanding of God's revelation? Rick Wade provides a balanced comparison of the King James Bible with other more recent translations to help you answer this question for yourself.*

**Introduction: What the Debate is About**

Have you ever been in a Bible study where everyone in the group reads a verse . . . and there are two or three Bible versions being used? Following the train of thought can be difficult when a verse in one version clashes with the next verse in another version.

Since the 1940s, many new Bible versions have appeared on the market: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Living Bible, the Contemporary English Version, The Message, and many more. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the King James was still the dominant version. Today the New International Version leads sales followed by the KJV.(1)

For some people, the multiplicity of versions is a nuisance, but they accept it, believing that it is all a matter of personal preference. For others, however, this is a serious issue; not because of the inconvenience of multiple versions, but because they believe the King James Version is the only

correct version for the church.

These new versions came about because of the publication of a new Greek New Testament about a century ago. Defenders of the primacy of the KJV were very vocal in their opposition to the new Greek text and the new English versions which followed its publication. This issue is not as big today, but it remains problematic for some Christians. Thus, a discussion of the King James/modern version debate is useful with a focus on the New Testament, for that is where the main concerns lie.

This debate is argued on two levels. On one level, the focus is on the King James itself (remember that our English versions are translated from Greek texts). Some simply believe that this particular translation is the best one. They see a certain majesty in its language, and they appreciate its important role in the history of the church. It has served the church well, so there is no need to begin confusing things by bringing in all those other versions, they believe.

There are some Christians, however, who go further than that. They believe that the KJV is not only the *best* version; they insist that it is the only valid English version. Newer translations of Scripture do not reliably convey God’s truth. Some arguments for this side are little more than angry diatribes which are often circular. For example, some say that since the new versions differ from the King James, they are bad versions. The supremacy of the KJV is simply assumed.(2)

Although arguments from tradition and style can be powerful, there might be other considerations which outweigh them. A significant problem with the KJV, of course, is the language. People who did not grow up using the KJV have a hard time understanding it. Some of its words are no longer in use, and the antiquated forms of many words impede the understanding of the text. Over time they can learn to understand it, but without any more compelling reasons than tradition and style, it is hard to see why they should bother.

On another level, this debate focuses on the Greek manuscripts from which the English versions are translated. Some “King James only” proponents believe that the Greek text underlying most of the newer versions is corrupt. As we will see, they present some good arguments for their position.

Because the Greek text is the critical issue in this debate, it will be the focus of our examination of the debate (we will not get too technical!). To set the stage, we will begin with a brief history of the King James Version.

## A Brief History of the King James Version

Many of us have heard the joke about the King James Version: “If it was good enough for the apostle Paul, it is good enough for me!” Paul, of course, was fifteen and a half centuries too early for the KJV. The New Testament writers wrote in Koine Greek, the language of the common man in the first century A.D. The first complete English Bible was not produced until John Wycliffe produced his in the fourteenth century. He translated from the Latin Vulgate which was the most widely used version at that time.

The next major step in the development of the English Bible was Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament published in 1526 and portions of the Old Testament published later. Tyndale’s version was significant because it was translated from a newly published Greek New Testament rather than from the Vulgate.

After Tyndale’s, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible. In 1611 the King James Version was published to provide a Bible which could be used by both Anglicans and Puritans. Marginal notes reflecting any particular theological bias were removed, and the language used was that of the people.

I noted earlier that Tyndale used a Greek text for his translation. The first published Greek New Testament appeared in the year 1516. It was edited by Erasmus, a Dutch scholar. Erasmus had at his disposal no more than six Greek manuscripts (we have thousands at our disposal today). These manuscripts were part of what is called the *Byzantine* text family.

Although Erasmus' edition provided a great boost to the study of the New Testament, it had a number of problems. For one thing, none of his sources had the last six verses of the book of Revelation, so Erasmus translated from the Latin Vulgate back into Greek! Thus, in his text "several words and phrases may be found that are attested in no Greek manuscript whatsoever."(3) In the first two editions of his New Testament, Erasmus left out I John 5:7 because it did not appear in any of his Greek manuscripts. That verse reads: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." This omission created a furor, so he promised to include the verse in a later edition if it could be found in any Greek manuscript. One was brought forward, and, although Erasmus did not think the text was genuine, he kept his promise and included the verse. It is now believed to have been a very late and unreliable manuscript, and some think it was forged to include the verse.(4)

Erasmus' Greek text was reworked and reprinted by others including Robert Estienne who divided the text into verses. Theodore Beza then built upon Estienne's work, and his Greek text provided one of the major foundations for the King James Bible. The term *Textus Receptus*, or Received Text, came from a blurb in another Greek text produced in the early seventeenth century by the Elzevir brothers. This title is still used in connection with the King James, and it is one you will see again in this article.

## Westcott and Hort

I noted earlier that the more substantial arguments for the "King James only" position focus on the Greek texts underlying the different versions. There are four significant issues in the debate involving these texts which I will develop: the science of textual criticism, the number of Greek manuscripts available, the history of the Greek texts, and the dates of the manuscripts.

Before getting into the debate itself, it will be helpful to mention the historical event which brought the debate to a head, and to introduce a central element in New Testament textual studies.

Between the thousands of Greek manuscripts available there are differences of one kind or another (although there are not any which effect doctrinal matters). Certain Greek manuscripts share enough similarities that they are believed to have come from the same source. Each of these groups is called a text *family* or a *text-type*. There are four text families which are generally agreed upon by scholars. The manuscripts which were used to produce the Textus Receptus (and later the King James Version) were of the Byzantine family. The other three text families generally agreed upon by scholars are the Alexandrian, the Caesarean, and the Western.(5)

The fundamental debate between scholars in the King James/modern version controversy is over the question of the most accurate Greek text family or families. Which of the four families, if any, most accurately represents what the New Testament authors wrote? The Byzantine text was the dominant Greek text from about the eighth century until the end of the nineteenth century.(6) In 1881, however, two scholars named Westcott and Hort published a new Greek New Testament which relied more on other text families than on the Byzantine family. Their Greek text became the basis of the New Testament portion of modern Bible translations.

Westcott and Hort evaluated the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament according to the principles of *textual criticism*. This is the science of the study of ancient texts, the originals of which are lost. Based upon their studies, they argued that the Byzantine text was *not* the closest to the original writings as the King James advocates claimed. It seemed to have combined readings from other text families, and some readings appeared to have been modified for greater clarity and understanding. Thus, they believed it was at least two steps removed from the original writings. Also, they found no clear evidence of its existence in the writings of the early church fathers, and there are no copies older than the fourth century. Those who agree with Westcott and Hort believe that the Byzantine text was produced in the fourth century probably in an attempt to give the church one New Testament (there were a number of different Greek texts being used at the time). Other text families, on the other hand, appear to have more original readings and *are* quoted by the early church fathers, and are thus closer to the originals. So, the conclusions drawn from the application of textual criticism along with the ages of the manuscripts led them to believe that the most accurate Greek text is to be found by drawing from all the Greek text families, especially the Alexandrian family.(7)

Supporters of the Byzantine or Received Text responded that it was inappropriate to use naturalistic methods of study such as textual criticism on Scripture. They said that this amounts to elevating man over God in determining what the Bible says.(8) They also argued that the vast numbers of Byzantine manuscripts along with the centuries of history behind this text family should not be set aside on the basis of a few manuscripts discovered relatively recently. They insisted that the Spirit of God would not allow His true word to lie dormant so long while the church was being guided by inferior texts.

## Textual Criticism

As I noted above, those who argue for the Byzantine or Received Text say that it is improper to subject the Bible to the scrutiny of textual criticism. The Bible, being the inspired Word of God, is unique. One begins with it as inspired and then accepts what it says.

But those in the Westcott-Hort tradition note that we cannot simply shut our eyes to the fact that there *are* differences between the various Greek manuscripts, even those in the Byzantine family. Even those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture recognize that the original writings of the New Testament were inerrant, not the copies. It is our responsibility to apply the most sound principles we know of to determine what the original manuscripts said. This is the aim of textual criticism.

So, how does textual criticism work? Differences between Greek manuscripts are called variants. There are several causes of variants. Some are accidental, such as misspelled words or repeated or reversed words. Some resulted from a scribe not hearing a dictation correctly. Also, deliberate changes seem to have been made to bring passages in different Gospels into harmony or to make a doctrinal point clearer.

What are some examples of differences between the Greek texts which show up in our English Bibles? One example is the Lord's Prayer as it is recorded in Matthew and in Luke. In the KJV the two versions are almost identical, while in the NIV the prayer in Luke 11 is significantly shorter than that in Matthew 6. Most scholars believe that, at some point in history, a scribe added to the text in Luke to make it agree more with Matthew.

The last half of Mark 16 is a lengthy section which is disputed. The KJV retains verses 9 through 20 while the NIV includes the passage with a note saying it is not found in the

most reliable early manuscripts. Scholars who believe it should be excluded also note that the style and vocabulary are very different from the rest of Mark.(9)

To add one more, in the KJV, three verses in Mark 9 (44 ,46, and 48) are identical: “Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” The NIV puts verses 44 and 46 in footnotes and notes that *some* manuscripts include the phrase. Since each verse follows a reference to hell, it is very possible that a scribe simply repeated the warning to strengthen the message.

If all this makes you nervous about the accuracy of your Bible, it is important to note that textual criticism is used on all documents for which the originals no longer exist. New Testament scholar J. Harold Greenlee noted that, with respect to the Bible, “No Christian doctrine . . . hangs upon a debatable text.”(10) This conflict provides no fodder for critics of Christianity who might ask how we can know what the Bible really says. We can be confident that we have a highly accurate text, especially given the number of New Testament manuscripts available and the antiquity of some of them.(11) As one writer has said, “It is well to remember that the main body of the text and its general sense are left untouched . . . textual criticism engages in turning a magnifying glass upon some of the details.”(12)

## Other Issues in the Debate

In addition to the question of textual criticism, questions regarding the number of manuscripts, the historical dominance of the Byzantine text, and the dates of the manuscripts still need to be considered.

First is the matter of the *number* of manuscripts. Between eighty and ninety percent of existing manuscripts are of the Byzantine family and are in remarkable agreement. This fact is not in dispute. King James supporters say that the few

manuscripts to which Westcott and Hort gave preference cannot override the witness of the vast majority of manuscripts in existence which are of the Byzantine tradition. It is normal to expect that the oldest manuscript will have the most copies.(13) In response, those who follow Westcott and Hort point out that hundreds of copies could have been made from one defective text while a better text was not copied as often. The copying of New Testament texts was not as carefully monitored as the copying of the Old Testament text by Jewish scholars. As we have seen, errors were made and changes were deliberately introduced. Simply finding a lot of manuscripts which are in agreement is not enough. To illustrate their point, they ask whether one would rather have one real $100 bill or five counterfeits.

A second issue is the *preservation* of the text through history. Supporters of the Received Text ask why God's Spirit would allow the church to be under the authority of a defective text for almost 1500 years. Textual critics respond that this argument exaggerates the issue. They do not consider the Byzantine text to be a "'bad' or heretical text; it presents the same Christian message as the critical [or Westcott-Hort] text."(14) Again, there are no doctrinal differences between the Greek texts. Members of the Byzantine family are used along with members of other text families to determine what the true reading of a passage should be. The major text families are neither absolutely corrupt nor absolutely perfect. Text critics must use all the available resources to determine what the original documents said.

Finally, the *dates* of the manuscripts are important in this debate. Textual critics point out that church fathers before the fourth century "unambiguously cited every text-type *except* the Byzantine."(15) If the Byzantine text-type comes directly from the original writings, one would expect unambiguous quotations of it from the beginning. They also point out that there are no Byzantine manuscripts older than the fourth

century, whereas there *are* copies of other text families older than that.

In response to this, King James supporters note that the New Testament manuscripts began to be altered very soon after they were written. Eusebius, the ancient church historian, reported that heresies sprang up early after the turn of the second century, and proponents of these heresies sometimes altered Scripture to accord with their beliefs.(16) Thus, antiquity is not the crucial test. That there are no copies older than the fourth century can be explained by the fact that the material manuscripts were written on was fragile; it's reasonable to conclude that the early copies probably wore out through frequent handling.

## Summary and Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, those who support the King James/Received Text tradition emphasize the number of manuscripts, the church's history with the Byzantine text, and God's interest in preserving His Word, whereas those following Westcott and Hort say that the variants in the manuscripts – even between those in the Byzantine family – prove the need for the textual criticism of the New Testament. The results of their analysis along with the ages of the manuscripts leads them to believe that the Byzantine family is just one text family that can lead us back to the originals – or close to it – but it is not the one best text family.

So, which way should you go on this debate? If you are concerned about the issue, I suggest that you study it more. The texts cited in the notes will give you a place to start. If not, I would recommend using a version that is as close to the Greek text as possible while being understandable to you. But whichever version you choose, be very sure of your arguments before insisting that others use it, too. It seems to me that, with all the difficulties we face in our often hostile culture, we should not erect walls between Christians

on the basis of Bible versions. We are not taking God's Word lightly here. We are simply calling for a more well-reasoned discussion and for the rule of love to govern the debate.

**Notes**

1. *Marketplace*, Christian Booksellers Association, May, 1998.

2. An example is the pamphlet by J. J. Ray, *The Eye Opener* (Junction City, Oregon, 1953).

3. D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 34.

4. Ibid., 35.

5. F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* 3d ed., (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1963), 185.

6. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 61-62.

7. To be more precise, while Westcott and Hort gave the greater weight to the Alexandrian text over the Byzan- tine, they gave even greater weight to the manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus which they considered to be "neutral texts." Later, sympathetic scholars grouped these two with the Alexandrian family. See Carson, 41.

8. Edward F. Hills, "The Magnificent Burgon," in *Which Bible?*, 5th ed., David Otis Fuller, ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 101-105.

9. Greenlee, 133.

10. Ibid., 68.

11. In addition to the Greek manuscripts, also available for study are ancient lectionaries, various translations into other languages, and the writings of the early church fathers. See Greenlee, pp. 44-58.

12. Ibid., 17.

13. Zane C. Hodges, "The Greek Text of the King James Version," in *Which Bible?*, 37.

14. Greenlee, 81.

15. Carson, 47.

16. Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 215-216. See also Benjamin G. Wilkinson, “Our Authorized Bible Vindicated,” in Which Bible?, 190-193.

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