

The Validity of the Received Text

by Debra E. Anderson

Much is being said today in an attempt to denigrate the Textus Receptus, the Greek New Testament text upon which the English Authorised Version and other Reformation-era translations were based. Critics believe that there is no single text which can validly claim the title "Received Text", that the text originated in the works of a Roman Catholic priest, that it was produced using only a few manuscripts - these things would all exclude its use as a valid source of translation, and thus any translations based upon something called the Textus Receptus would themselves be invalid.

It must be acknowledged from the outset that these critics' initial claims are true. There is no single Received Text; Erasmus was a Roman Catholic priest to the day of his death; Erasmus used a handful of manuscripts which were readily available to him. However, the matter is not as simple as these critics would have us believe.

First, what is the Textus Receptus? What has been called the Received Text since the middle 17th century is actually a group of printed texts produced beginning in 1516 with the first edition of the text of Erasmus. These texts, produced by Reformation and Renaissance scholars, bear their names: Erasmus, Stephens, Beza, Elzevir. The latest, and currently most used, edition of the Textus Receptus, is that produced by Scrivener in 1894, which is still published by the Society. These texts are based upon varying numbers of manuscripts which were available at the time, but all of these manuscripts have something in common: they were all of the Byzantine text-type. Thus, these texts are nearly consistent, not only with one another, but also with the vast majority of manuscripts of the Greek New Testament which were available to scholars of the Reformation and which are available to scholars today.

Considering our current century, those who advocate the use of the Critical Greek Text also speak in terms of there being one single text. However, there have been twenty-seven editions of the Nestle text, and five (including the 3rd edition corrected) of the United Bible Societies' text. That does not include the texts of Tischendorf, Hort and Westcott in the 19th century. Each of these texts is also built on only a handful of manuscripts, a handful which do not represent the majority of available manuscripts but instead are the only representatives of a group of manuscripts which differ from the majority and amongst themselves. Therefore, regardless of which edition of the Textus Receptus one chooses, he is getting a New Testament which represents the majority of manuscripts available then and now. His Critical Greek Text does not.

Second, the characters of Erasmus and some of the other men who worked on editions of the Textus Receptus are derided, and this may not be without good reason. Erasmus was indeed a Roman Catholic, as well as being a humanist scholar who urged the young prince of his country to follow the teachings of Plato and Augustine. Others may well have had money as the primary goal of their work on the text. However, one thing must be borne in mind regarding the time during which these men worked on their editions of the Textus Receptus. Along with the craving for knowledge which

brought about the production of the Textus Receptus in the first place came a resurgence in the desire to know the God presented in that New Testament. Men sought answers in science, but that science was based upon the Scriptures - Scriptures which men upheld as containing and teaching only truth.

This cannot be said of the period which saw the presumed abandonment of the Textus Receptus and the production of the Critical Greek Text. The 19th century was a time of scientific discovery, but the theories which derived from those discoveries were the result of the abandonment of belief in the truth of the Scriptures. In the minds of many, Darwin replaced God as the revealer of creative history. Study of the Scriptures could validly be divorced from a belief in the God of those Scriptures. Even some Christian scholars turned over the text of their Bible to men who believed it to be nothing more than another ancient book. Man became the source of knowledge and truth.

Third, critics complain that Erasmus used only a handful of manuscripts which were readily available. This is true - at least for his first edition. Erasmus may well have been in a hurry to produce a Greek text to accompany his Latin, and may have been conscious of -- and trying to beat -- the imminent publication of the Complutensian Polyglot.

It should be noted in this regard that the manuscripts in Erasmus' handful were a valid representation of the majority of manuscripts available at the time. In addition, while he may have hurried in his first edition, this was not true of subsequent editions of his text, in which more manuscripts and much more care were used. Other scholars carrying on Erasmus' work also were able to access and spend the necessary time examining more and more manuscripts. In 1707 Mill published a New Testament, using the Textus Receptus as his basis and printing in the margin variants culled from research on hundreds of manuscripts. No doubt they spent as much time and energy as current scholars can claim to spend, and did not have many of the distractions which are common in today's fast-paced, politically correct world.

A question which must be asked of these critics is why they complain that Erasmus used only a handful of manuscripts but applaud the use by current scholars of only three or four manuscripts which, owing primarily to age, are considered to be of more value than the vast majority of manuscripts found throughout the Church of the type used by Erasmus and his scholarly descendants.

God in His mercy and grace has always seen to it that no doctrine is excluded from His Word; critics make an issue of this in attempting to support the Critical Greek Text. And it is true that every doctrine, even those found most strongly in passages omitted by the current Critical Greek Text, is found somewhere else in Scripture. But these other occasions are often truncated and do not express as succinctly the doctrine as does the omitted passage. Where else in Scripture is the Trinity so clearly delineated as in 1 John 5.7-8? And where else in Scripture do we see so simply the tenderness of our Saviour toward sinners as in John 7.53-8.11?

Perhaps using the Critical Greek Text makes scholars feel better, seeing that it is more in accordance with the scientific values of our modern age. But is it more glorifying to God? Argue as we might, that is the most important aspect of any Biblical study.

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