

The Bible – a Battlefield

PART 2

When the reformers translated the New Testament, they chose to use other manuscripts than the Latin Vulgate. Do we believe that God lead the Reformation? Do we also believe that He lead the choice of manuscripts? Why, then, are new Protestant Bibles published today which are based on other manuscripts?

The Vulgate

In antiquity Greek was a “world language”, almost as English is today. It is thought that the New Testament was first spread in Greek. It was then translated into local languages, such as in Syriac, Latin, Armenian, Coptic, and Gothic. In the church of Rome Greek was used until the middle of the 2nd century. Then, in the western part of the Roman Empire, Latin translations became more and more common.

“Those who translated the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek can be counted, but the Latin translators are out of all number. For in the early days of the faith, everyone who happened to gain possession of a Greek manuscript and thought he had any facility in both languages, however slight that might have been, attempted to make a translation.” – Augustine (354-430), On Christian Doctrine, 2.16

At the end of the 4th century there were countless versions of the Bible in Latin. Consequently, in 383 AD pope Damasius asked one of the most learned men of his days, Jerome (c.342-420), to make a revision of the Latin Bible which was used in Rome. The work was finished in 405 AD, and the edition was known as *the Latin Vulgate*.

The old Latin translations of the Old Testament were based on the Septuagint, a Greek translation from the 3rd or 2nd century BC. The following years certain other books, known as *the Apocrypha*, had been added. Jerome preferred using the Hebrew text when he translated the Old Testament. Because the Apocrypha were not part of the Hebrew canon, Jerome wanted to exclude them from his edition of the Bible, but he was persuaded to include them. In addition to the 39 books which are found in protestant Bibles, the Vulgate therefore also contains the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Even though other manuscripts also existed, the Vulgate soon became the acknowledged text of Western Europe.

Protestant Bible Editions

In 1516, which was the year before Martin Luther (1483-1546) posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) published a Greek edition of the New Testament. A new edition came in 1519. It was this edition that was used by Luther when he translated the New Testament into German in 1522.

Later Erasmus published three new editions of the Greek New Testament (1522, 1527 and 1535). The two last editions were used by Robert Estienne (Stephanus) (1503-1559) in his Greek New Testament from 1550. This edition is known as *Edition Regia*, “the Royal Edition”. In the 17th century this text was printed again



with the words “*Textum ergo habes, nun cab omnibus receptum...*” (“so you hold the text, now received by all...”) in the preface. The 1550 edition of Stephanus is therefore known as *Textus Receptus* (*the Received Text*). The term *Textus Receptus* is sometimes also used with reference to the Greek New Testament of Erasmus.

Already in the 14th century John Wycliff (1324-1384) had translated the Latin Vulgate into English. At the beginning of the 16th century William Tyndale (1490-1536) made a new English edition, this time based on the Greek Testament of Erasmus. Tyndale’s translation was printed in Germany and then smuggled into England, where it – against the will of the church – was spread among ordinary people. In 1535 Tyndale was kidnapped, and after 1 ½ year in prison he was sentenced to death for heresy. He was strangled and then burned.

As an answer to the Catholic claim that they had given the Bible to the people, and that they were the only one who were capable to interpret it, Tyndale said:

”Do you know who taught the eagles to find their prey? Well, that same God teaches His hungry children to find their Father in His word. Far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them, and if you could, you would burn the Scriptures themselves.”

Tyndale never got the chance to fulfill the translation of the Old Testament, but the work was carried on by his friends. The first complete Bible translation in English was published in 1535. The New Testament and the first five books of the Old Testament had been translated by Tyndale. The rest was the work of Miles Coverdale (1488-1568). Another edition, known as *Matthew’s Bible*, was published in 1537 by someone called Thomas Matthew. This is generally thought to be a pseudonym of Tyndale’s friend, John Rogers (1500-1555). As the first Protestant martyr under Queen Mary I of England, Rogers was burned alive in 1555.

The King James Version

At the beginning of the 17th century there were many English Bible editions. Some of these were considered to be of lesser quality, among others by King James I, who had a personal interest in studies of the Bible and translations. It was therefore determined that a new edition had to be made. About 50 professors of Greek and Hebrew joined the committee, which was organized as six groups: Three groups would work with the Old Testament, two with the New Testament, and one with the Apocrypha. When one group had finished the revision of a book, it would be passed on to the other groups for critical response.

The Old Testament was translated from the Masoretic (Hebrew) edition of Daniel Bomberg (1524/25). The New Testament was based on *Textus Receptus*, and some slightly changed editions of this from the end of the 16th century. The work started in 1604, and in 1611 the completed *King James Version* was published. The Apocrypha were placed between the Old and the New Testament, as had been done with all English Bibles following the Coverdale edition (1535). The first King James edition without the Apocrypha came in 1666.

The King James Version was not actually a new translation, but rather a revision of *the Bishop’s Bible* (1568), which was a revision of *the Great Bible* (1539), which was a revision of *Tyndale and Coverdale* (1535) – which was based on the Greek New Testament of Erasmus. The King James Version soon became the leading English Bible edition, and probably the most important Protestant Bible.

Gunpowder Treason Plot

In 1605, one year after the work of the King James edition had started, a group of English Catholics tried to murder King James I. The plan was to blow up the House of the Lords during the opening of the Parliament on the 5th of November. The plot was discovered and prevented. Guy Fawkes, who was responsible for the explosives, was arrested and executed. Several Jesuit priests shall have been involved in the planning of the plot. The event illustrates the tension between Catholics and Protestants in those days.

Different Greek Manuscripts

Until the end of the 19th century, practically all Protestant Bible translations were based on Textus Receptus. However, in the 19th century some changes took place among academic Bible researchers. As a result modern Bible editions now differ from the early Protestant editions in many places.

Since Erasmus published his Greek New Testament, many Greek manuscripts have been discovered. These are in many ways different, for instance in what is included in a particular Bible verse or in a chapter, which words have been used, the order of the words, etc. Based on similarities between the different manuscripts, some researchers have divided them into three groups, or text-types:

- 1) *The Alexandrian text-type* – where we find some of the oldest preserved manuscripts
- 2) *The Byzantine text-type* – where we find the majority of all preserved Greek manuscripts
- 3) *The Western text-type* – which has the form we find in the old Latin editions

Textus Receptus belongs to the Byzantine text-type. Different sources give different numbers, but something between 80-95% of all manuscripts belong to this group. Also the New Testament of the Greek-Orthodox Church from 1904 is Byzantine. Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad have made an eclectic Greek edition of the New Testament based on the most common readings of the younger Byzantine manuscripts. This edition is called *The Majority Text*. A comparison between Textus Receptus and the Majority Text has revealed about 1800 differences. About 1000 of these are noticeable in translations. However, these differences are small. Neither can it be taken for granted that the Majority Text is the correct Byzantine reading. It is only a reconstruction, based on the main tendencies of several manuscripts.

Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus



The oldest preserved writings of the New Testament belong to the Alexandrian text-type. These readings are also found in some Coptic manuscripts (Egypt). Throughout the centuries few copies have been made from the Alexandrian group, in contrast to the Byzantine text-type, which exists in hundreds of copies. This will not be discussed in greater details here, but it might indicate that the Alexandrian manuscripts were less acknowledged in the past.

One of the most important manuscripts in the Alexandrian group is the so-called *Codex Sinaiticus*, dated to the 4th century AD. This manuscript was found by Constantin Tischendorf (1815-1874) in 1844 in a waste-basket in St. Catherine's Monastery, an Orthodox monastery at the foot of what is now known as Mt. Sinai in

Egypt. The manuscript contains approximately half of the Old Testament in the way of reading known from the Septuagint, the Apocrypha, the whole New Testament, and two other books (the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas).

The oldest known manuscript is *Codex Vaticanus*, also from the 4th century AD. This manuscript is said to have been stored in the Vatican library since the mid-15th century. Except from a few Apocryphal books and some pages, the C. Vaticanus is said to contain the whole Septuagint and most of the books of the New Testament. Many now consider C. Vaticanus to be the best Greek manuscript.

When C. Vaticanus and C. Sinaiticus were published in the 1860s, the Byzantine text-type, and especially Textus Receptus, was severely criticized. The following decades several new Greek New Testaments were published, based on C. Vaticanus and C. Sinaiticus. The most well-known of these are the edition of Tischendorf, and the edition of Wescott and Hort. These were not very different, as they were both based on the same manuscript. Tischendorf, however, emphasized C. Sinaiticus, while Wescott and Hort favoured C. Vaticanus.

Which One Is Most Like the Original?

There is no preserved original manuscript of any of the books of the New Testament, only copies. The question is therefore: Which of the text-types is closest to the original? This is one of the questions which the textual criticism tries to answer.

Since the 19th century the most popular argument has been that the oldest manuscripts are the best. The phrase “oldest manuscripts” refers in particular to C. Vaticanus and C. Sinaiticus. This argument might at first seem logic, but still we should ask: Does the fact that something is old necessary mean that it is correct?

Both C. Vaticanus and C. Sinaiticus are dated to the 4th century AD. This means that there are about 300 years between them and the original! The question is then: How long does it take for an error to occur?

In 2 Cor. 2:17 Paul shows that corruption of God’s Word was a problem already in his days (the mid-1st century AD). Also, the church historian Eusebius (263-339) states that heretics already at the beginning of the 2nd century AD had changed the Scriptures to support their own beliefs and doctrines. A manuscript being older than another is thus *no* guarantee that it contains less error.

Still, this is the argument that is used again and again – the modern Bible editions are based on the *oldest* manuscripts, and are *therefore* most reliable. But there is really *no* scientific reason for this claim, nor is it a natural law. Rather it could be described as a propaganda technique (as we might see from the quotations of Hitler and Goebbels below, her included to show the principle, not the content or ideology).

“By means of shrewd lies, unremittingly repeated, it is possible to make people believe that heaven is hell and hell heaven. The greater the lie, the more readily it will be believed.” – Adolf Hitler

“The most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is borne in mind constantly - it must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over.” – Josef Goebbels

The Greek New Testament of Today

The great influence of C. Sinaiticus and C. Vaticanus is largely due to two men by the names of Brook F. Wescott (1825-1901) and Fenton J. A. Hort (1828-1892). In 1881 they published their own edition Greek New Testament. Their aim was to supply clergy, schools and others with a Greek New Testament which did not contain what they saw as errors from the Byzantine text-type (see Hort, *Life*, Vol.I, p.250). And many think they succeeded in this. In the preface of a new edition of their New Testament from 2007, Eldon Jay Epp writes: "...their text represents a final and finely refined triumph over the *textus receptus*." (p. xv).

One reason why Wescott and Hort gained such influence is the use of their text in the so-called Nestle-Aland editions of the Greek New Testament. The first edition was published by Eberhardt Nestle (1851-1913) in 1898. He then compared the Greek edition of Tishendorf with the edition of Wescott and Hort. When these disagreed, he compared them with a third edition (first Weymouth, and later Weiss). He then chose the reading supported by the majority. The edition of Nestle gained much influence when *The British and Foreign Bible Society* (an ecumenical Bible society) chose this edition instead of *Textus Receptus* in 1904.

Later Nestle published eight new editions of the Greek New Testament. After his death in 1913 his son Erwin Nestle (1883-1972) continued the work. Since the 21st edition (1952) Kurt Aland (1915-1994) has been a co-editor. The editions are therefore known as Nestle-Aland.

In 1955 *The United Bible Societies* was established as a union of five Bible societies from different countries. The purpose was to publish a new Greek New Testament. Kurt Aland was one of four people who were invited to carry out the task. The resulting edition, which was a revision of Nestle's text from 1927, was an eclectic text, i.e. a reconstruction based on different manuscripts. It was published in 1966. A new edition followed in 1968. Now Cardinal Martini had joined the committee, which thus included five persons (see Part 1).

The same committee was behind the UBS's 3rd edition (1975), which is recommended in the *Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible* (see Part 1). Being content with the result, Aland chose to use the same Greek text in the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland (1979). The Greek text has remained unchanged in the USB's 4th edition (1993) and the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland (1993). However, in both editions changes have been made in the textual apparatus which among others included removing some of the oldest manuscripts which supported the Byzantine text-type.

PHOTO: Kurt Aland visits pope John Paul II, 1984. From Wikimedia Commons, credits to: *Felici Roma*, not related to this article.
See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Aland



Conclusion

Ever since the 1st century AD the Bible has been a battlefield. For centuries The Catholic Church fought to prevent ordinary people from gaining knowledge about the teachings of the Bible. The book was prohibited and those who tried to spread it were persecuted. Yet, the Church was not able to suppress the Word of God. The Reformers stood up as critics of the doctrines and the practices of the Church – based on what they themselves could read in the Bible, and they shared their knowledge with others.

When the Reformers translated the Bible into peoples' mother tongues, they chose to base their translations on other manuscripts than the Latin Vulgate, which was the only edition recognized by the

Church. The Catholic Church tried to prevent the spread of these Protestant Bibles, but it failed. Protestantism was promoted by the increasing number of Bibles.

Since the 19th century the battle against the Bible has changed its form. Punishment and threats are no longer used to fight the manuscripts that were used by the Reformers. Rather we find academic arguments and a quiet, gradual change of the Bible translations. Early in this process the arguments were promoted by people who *publicly* claimed to be Protestants, but who were still supporters of the Catholic Church (such as Wescott and Hort, more about them in Part 3). Their goal was to annihilate the Textus Receptus. In the 20th century we can see how they to a large extent have succeeded.

The purpose of the modern Bible editions is to promote unity between the churches – or to quote the Second Vatican Council: “*the RESTORATION of unity among all Christians*”. The Counter-Reformation never ended, and the Bible is an important field of the battle.