

Greek Manuscripts- Which One is Best?

Eric Francke

Purpose: To be able to critically discern the authenticity of contested verses or word choices made in the different translations

To be able to answer the rising issue of the “King James Only” controversy”.

The real question that needs to be answered regarding different translations is one of manuscript authority. There are several thousand early Greek manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts. There are variant readings in most of them, and there is no doubt that we need to make a qualitative judgment as to which ones are best and most accurate to the autographs. The most numerous family of manuscripts we frequently call the Textus Receptus (although that is not entirely accurate, since the Textus Receptus is properly Stephanus' edited text, based on Erasmus' text from the 16th Century). The so-called "Textus Receptus" is known on a more technical side as the "Byzantine" family, or "Koine". Many scholars say that it originated in the late third or fourth century near Antioch, and became predominant around Constantinople (hence "Byzantine".) The most predominant manuscript in this family is the "Codex Alexandrinus" which is the largest contributing manuscript to the **King James Version**. Other manuscripts that are considered in this family are Codex Ephraemi, and most of The Washington Codex.

The Next Family of Text is the "Alexandrian" (not to be confused with "Codex Alexandrinus") family of text. The primary manuscripts behind this family are the Codex **Vaticanus** and Codex **Sinaiticus**. Both Manuscripts are reputed to be the two oldest manuscripts in existence, and both have only been closely studied and examined in the last 100 years. (a man named **Tischendorf** was first to make them both public). Wescott and Hort, the two eminent scholars, labeled these manuscripts as "uncontaminated" and the most reliable of all Greek manuscripts. It is largely because of the discovery and publication of these two manuscripts that there has been such a diversity and multiplication of Bible versions in the last one hundred years.

In a nutshell:

King James, New King James, and King James II give precedence to Codex Alexandrinus and the Textus Receptus. Some people will refer to these manuscripts as “Byzantine” or the “majority” text.

Most other translations give precedence to Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Sometimes these texts are called “critical texts” or “Alexandrian” texts.

The other families of manuscript are not as significant as these two primary families of text. There are the "Western", "Syriac", and "Caesarean" families, as well as dozens of other groups of codexes and Papyri. It must be noted that even among "families" of manuscripts, there is never 100% perfect agreement from every verse with the other papyri and manuscripts in the family. There are always going to be scribal errors, questionable readings, and interpolations that sneak

into the text over the centuries. Vaticanus and Sinaiticus have their points of disagreement with each other, and the "Textus Receptus" or Byzantine manuscripts have their disagreements. I would recommend to anyone to get a copy of "Gospels Parallels" by Burton Throckmorton which arranges the synoptic gospels in parallel columns, and provides extensive footnotes to show every variant reading in every Greek manuscript for every word in those gospels. No critical doctrinal issue rises or falls on the differences in any of the manuscripts, but since there are general differences which different translations follow in, it is to our benefit to objectively look at which family of manuscripts best reflects the autograph of the New Testament.

When scholars are comparing differences between manuscripts, they use a key where each Codex or Papyrus is represented by a symbol or letter. Most commonly, the symbols are as follows.

- S:** Sinaiticus (4th Century) (sometimes designated by a Aleph)
- A:** Codex Alexandrinus (5th Century)
- B:** Codex Vaticanus (4th Century)
- C:** Codex Ephraemi (5th Century)
- D:** Codex Bezae (6th Century)
- W:** Washington Manuscript (5th Century)
- Ⲙ** Koridethi Group (7th Century)
- P:** Chester Beatty Collection (fragments from 2nd-4th Century)
- R:** Textus Receptus (Edited 16th century, based largely on A, C, D, Vg and others)

In addition to these, there are numerous Syriac fragments (syr), the Latin Vulgate (vg), numerous quotes from the early church fathers from the Second to Fifth Centuries, and other various fragments. .

How Can We Positively Identify the Best Manuscript?

As previously mentioned, every copy we have today has minute differences with every other manuscript. There is not a single Greek manuscript we can point to and say that it is perfectly free from glosses, interpolations, or small defects. For example, the Textus Receptus has a phrase in 1 John 5:7 ("There are three in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, and these three are one") which does not have any original Greek manuscript authority. It was first found in the Latin Vulgate (5th Century) and it made it into Erasmus' text in 1520, (although he omitted it from later texts) and worked it's way into the King James Version.

The majority of scholars today have sided with Wescott and Hort in the opinion that Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are the oldest and presumably the most reliable manuscripts. It seems like a pretty obvious conclusion. Scholars assume thus: B (Vaticanus) and S (Sinaiticus) are the oldest copies, their creation is closest chronologically to the original autographs, therefore they must be the most free from scribal error. Unfortunately, this logic is inherently flawed. Even assuming that B and S were copied 100 years or more before A (Alexandrinus) and C (Ephraemi), this does not automatically mean that they are the purest. If A and C were 4th generation (were copies of copies of copies) documents, but had faithful scribes, then they could potentially be qualitatively better than the earlier Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, if they had sloppy or "creative" scribes who had copied them. The real question then, is **"Can we verify which**

family of manuscripts is objectively the most reliable?". It is one thing to try to rely on various scholars' opinions, trying to discern between the genuine and the corrupted readings; but this is far from having essential proof of which family is the "purest", and most representative of the autographs. In answer to this question I have found probably the best evidence by examining the difference between the manuscripts with respect to their harmony, and the writings of the earliest Christian writers.

Where the Manuscripts Differ: The External Evidence

Most of the variant readings between the families of manuscripts are very insignificant. Usually it is merely the insertion or deletion of one word. One such place is found in Luke 21:4. The Authorized Version reads that the widow gave "unto the offerings of God". (lit. treasury of God). The Codex Alexandrinus, and consequently the Textus Receptus have the phrase "ton theon" for "to God". Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus do not have "ton theon" so it is not referenced that the offering went to God in subsequent translations. Did the Textus Receptus add this phrase in, since it is a later manuscript? Scholars have said "yes". Unfortunately for them, we can find this verse quoted by Irenaeus in "Against Heresies" XVIII:4, written in 180 A.D. He says that she "cast all of her living into the treasury **of God**" in agreement with the Textus Receptus. This is strong evidence that the phrase was in his Bible at the time.

Looking at some more significant differences, there has always been some question as to the validity of the ending of the Gospel of Mark. Most modern Bibles will cite that the entire section from **Mark 16:9-20** as missing in "The oldest and most reliable manuscripts" (B and S). This comprises the whole section from the resurrection, the commissioning of the disciples, and Christ's ascension into heaven. However, we again have it quoted as scripture by Irenaeus in "Against Heresies" where he says

"At the end of Mark's Gospel, He says 'So then, after the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God'".

Furthermore, verse 9 is alluded to in Tertullian's Treatise On the Soul (210 A.D.) as well as the overwhelming majority of other Greek manuscripts. It is only conspicuously absent from Clement and Origen (both from Alexandria) and B and S. Since the reading is nearly universal, and is cited as scripture before Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were ever copied, we can be all but sure that the text was in the earliest Bibles.

Another well known difference in the manuscripts is the story of the angel troubling the water by the pool in Bethsaida, for the healing of infirmities (John 5:5). B and S do not have this verse. Tertullian, however, quotes this text as scriptural in his writing "On Baptism", written in 220 A.D. All of this is veritable proof that these sections were actually omitted from Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, rather than being additions to Alexandrinus and the Textus Receptus.

Manuscript Differences: The Internal Evidence

With respect to internal consistency with the rest of the Bible, we could look at **Matthew 1:10**.

B, S, C, ⚡ say "Amos"; **W, ⚡, Vg, and Ferrer Group** say "Amon"

In 2 Kings 21:18 (as well as the parallel account in 2 Chronicles), we see that Amon succeeded his father, Manassah. The Byzantine family of texts therefore, has the text that agrees with the Old Testament.

Luke 4:44 "Judea or Galilee?"

The Matthew account here says that Jesus went about Galilee, teaching in the synagogues. (Matthew 4:23-25). The Markan account to the same thing says that he went throughout all of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:39) The Lucan account of the same incident has dissenting manuscripts. B, S, C, and some syr say "synagogues of Judea." The $\frac{3}{4}$, A, Ferrer, Lake, Vg, all say "Galilee". If it were Judea, that would first of all, disagree with the other two gospels. Secondly, it would cause serious problems. The previous verses put Christ in Capernaum, on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. The subsequent verses (Luke 5:1-11) put Christ on the sea of Gennessaret, which is synonymous with the Sea of Galilee. If the Lucan text were "Judea", as Sinaiticus and Vaticanus suggest, that would mean that Christ made an amazing journey, normally several days there and several days back, instantaneously.

Consequently, it is a fair statement to say that the Textus Receptus (Or, even more accurately Byzantine family or majority text) demonstrates evidence that it is closer to the autographs than the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. This would certainly favor the current proponents of the "King James Only" controversy.

Short comings with the King James Version

Despite the fact that King James version seems to have better manuscript authority, there are numerous problems with the 1611 Authorized Version. The most obvious is that of **anachronisms** and outdated language. It must be recognized that there can really be no such thing as a perfect word-for-word translation of any language out of the original tongues. Each word carries a subjective meaning to it's hearers, that comes from the precedent of it's usage. Over the course of time, languages change and certain words come into use, while others go into disuse. One example that might be cited from the King James Version is the text from II Thessalonians 2:7 which talks about how

only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

Referring to how "he" (possibly the Holy Spirit) will restrain the Antichrist. When the King James was penned in 1611, everyone understood that this phrase "he that letteth" meant "he that holds back". "Let" in modern usage, however, has virtually the exact opposite meaning. It would be now be understood to mean "to allow". No where else in the Authorized Version is that Greek word (Katecho) used in this sense. Everywhere else it is translated as "detain", "keep", "hold" or a synonym. This fact doesn't threaten the unadulterated truth of God's word, or challenge the concept of inerrancy, but it just means that the Authorized Version now conveys something in our culture that is not what the original autograph says. Just to make things even more confusing, (since we are talking about "letting" and "allowing"), in one well known text, the Greek word to allow (aphete) is translated as "suffer" (Suffer the children...Matthew 19:14).

Ninety percent of the time this Greek word is used, it is translated with an English word that means "not to hinder" "permit" or "let alone". Clearly the intent of this verse is the same, but our modern usage equates the word "suffer" with infliction, discomfort or pain. I recently saw a TV news magazine program on the plight of children in Eastern Europe. The segment in question was titled "Suffer the children", the title being borrowed from these words of Jesus. Unbeknownst to the producer of the program, Jesus wasn't talking about suffering children at all. He was saying "permit the children". The same English word "suffer" is used for over a dozen Greek words in the Authorized version, with the meaning variously "to allow" (Matt. 8:21; Greek: Epitro), "to endure" (Matt.17:17 Greek: anechomai), and actual physical suffering (Matt.17:12 Greek: Pascho), as well as numerous other instances. This is one example where the Authorized Version comes up short as far as clearly expressing meaning of the Greek text. When you are consolidating numerous different Greek words, each with their own particular meaning into one English word that carries only one meaning today, then a tremendous amount of significance to those words has been lost.

The bottom line is that nobody speaking English on this continent uses those words, "suffer" and "let", with those meanings. When was the last time you said "Suffer me to buy a cup of coffee for you" meaning "allow"? When have you ever told anyone that some obstacle was "letting" you from your goals, meaning that it was hindering you? I would bet that you don't. Numerous other words could be cited. How about the use of the word "charity" in the Authorized Version for the Greek word "Agape" (See 1 Corinthians chapter 13). In Elizabethan English, "charity" may have expressed the sentiment of "selfless, unconditional love". In modern English, however, it is a non-profit altruistic organization. Consequently, it is valid to reevaluate the choice of words in not only the Authorized Version, but any translation according to the culture one is in.

Another such example is the King James' use of the word "Easter" in Acts 12:4. The word "Easter" did not originate till millennia later, and its origins is likely from the Teutonic goddess "Oester", whose spring festival was celebrated by Germanic tribes centuries later. It is impossible for Herod to have been observing "Easter". The celebration in question is the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the word in question in the biblical text is "Pascha" or "Passover" (Strong's #3957).

Previously mentioned was the insertion of 1 John 5:7, into the KJV. Although it is certainly orthodox theologically, it still does not belong there as it was not in the original manuscripts.

In conclusion, it could be said that the Greek manuscripts behind the Byzantine family of texts, the primary codexes supporting the Authorized version (KJV), are likely the most reliable, as being compared with the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus manuscripts. This does not, however, automatically support the idea that the Authorized version has some type of "special inspiration" or that other versions with variant readings are "perverted" or tools of some "new age" conspiracy, as has been asserted by some recent popular authors and speakers. The essence of the Word of God is not affected by the comparatively minute difference between the manuscripts.

Historically, the pattern that God has revealed with respect to His Word is that it should be commonly readable, as well as accurate. The earliest books of the Bible are in Hebrew, which, at the time, was the common tongue of the Israelites. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which was the most universal language for the audience of the time. It was not written in Attic Greek, which would have only been understandable to the academics, nor in Hebrew, although that was still the “sacred” tongue of the Hebrews. Applying these principles today, we can say that it is not consistent with God’s revelation to become fixated on a certain language or cultural standard with respect to the transmission of His word. Both Jesus and the apostles, when quoting the Old Testament, saw no problem with alternating between the Aramaic or Greek Septuagint versions in their quotations. Even in their day, there were variant readings in the Old Testament manuscripts, yet they saw no need to pontificate which Old Testament manuscript between them was truly “inspired”. God’s word is still God’s Word. If any translation expresses the truths of God’s word clearly to its listeners, it carries the inspiration of God. It is a mere “shibboleth” to be dividing the body of Christ over the semantic distinctions that, in almost every case, carry no eternal import. The only matter of our concern is that every individual, from the plough boy to the Ph.d, from America to Zimbabwe, hears the words of God in the common vernacular tongue, framed in a language that they can understand.