

## **Which Version Can We Trust?**

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### **Part One-A Divine Hand Guiding**

The history of modern language translations of the New Testament is fascinating and yet sometimes poorly understood. What happened to the original New Testament writings as they came from the hands of the apostles? What types of witnesses to the New Testament are there? How did the variants (differences) in the sacred text originate, and to what degree do these affect the teaching of the New Testament? How well attested is the New Testament when compared with other ancient writings? What changes did the printed text effect when it replaced the handwritten copies? What is the nature of the *textus receptus* (the received text)? Why did the "standard text" (which is the basis of modern language translations of the New Testament) replace the *textus receptus*? How did Ellen G. White and Adventists in the past relate to various versions of the Bible? These are questions frequently raised among our people.

Lack of clarity on these and other issues has occasionally generated contesting points of view and bewilderment, especially when one's position regarding a particular version of the Bible has been made a criterion of orthodoxy.

The purpose of this series is not so much to evaluate modern translations of the New Testament (this has already been done),<sup>[2]</sup> but rather to trace the history of the books that now comprise our New Testament from the time of their original composition to the present day. Thus we hope to assist readers in gaining an overall perspective by which to assess modern translations in the light of the text of the New Testament existing at the birth of Christianity.

We will begin with the autographs (for example, the original writings as they came from

the evangelists or apostles) and note the process by which these documents were copied, translated, and quoted by the writers of the church. Then, turning from the era of handwritten copies, we will trace the history of the printed New Testament text. Next we will survey the fortunes of the received text until the appearance of what is known as the "standard text." The series will close with a review of the stand the Seventh-day Adventist Church has taken on versions in the past and how Ellen G. White related to the English language Bible translations of her time.

### **The Earliest Witnesses**

**Autographs and Copies.** Our story begins with the writing, under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, of the documents that now make up our New Testament. It is these particular books and letters that the Christian church came to believe originated, like their Old Testament counterparts, with men who, impelled by the Holy Spirit, spoke the word of God (2 Peter 1:20, 21). Certainly Paul believed that he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 7:40; 1 Tim 4:1), and Peter recognized this fact by claiming that the writings of Paul were on a level with the other inspired scriptures (2 Pet 3:16).

Unfortunately, the original documents did not survive long. Wear and tear, frequent use, and imperial edicts demanding the destruction of the Christian sacred books account for their early disappearance. However, the early believers did not wait long before they made handwritten copies of the autographs and distributed them among the communities of faith (cf. Col 4:16).

Some of these manuscripts (a word derived from the Latin, meaning "written by hand") traveled hundreds of miles shortly after they were written. This is well illustrated by a papyrus fragment that is considered to be the oldest copy of any portion of the New Testament in existence today. This fragment (called Papyrus #52) was found in Egypt and contains only a few verses of the Gospel of John in Greek. On the basis of the style of script used in the

fragment, it has been dated to A.D. 125.

Since the composition of the Fourth Gospel is generally assumed to have occurred in the last decade of the first century A.D. in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor, this scrap of papyrus proves the existence and use of a copy of the Gospel of John in a provincial town of Egypt, about 600 miles distant from its traditional site of composition, only about a generation after the Gospel was written.

As congregations began to incorporate the reading and exposition of the Christian writings into their worship services, the need for copies of the New Testament documents became apparent. Newly established churches probably received copies of the New Testament from their founders or through transcribing their founders' manuscripts or borrowed copies. It would appear that in the earliest period there were no professional copying centers (or scriptoria, as they were called). Hence manuscripts would have been copied privately by hand. But the practice of copying by hand opened the possibility for divergences or differences in readings (called variants) to creep into the text of the manuscripts.

**Versions.** Christianity entered a world in which Greek was the world language. Greek was spoken and understood in the Western Roman Empire as well as the Eastern, and today few would doubt that all the parts of the New Testament were originally written in Greek. The New Testament writers employed the Greek of daily conversation (for example, the Koine or "common" Greek), though its quality varied from the rather polished language of the book of Hebrews to the "Jewish Greek" of the last book of the Bible.

By the end of the second century A.D., however, radical changes had begun to take place in the empire. The Greek language was confined largely to the eastern portion, the area with the greatest concentration of Christian believers up to the middle of the fourth century. It was among these Greek-speaking Christians that copies of the Greek New Testament continued to be transcribed.

As the Greek language became increasingly confined to the Eastern Roman Empire,

however, regional languages began to assert themselves. And since Christianity spread principally among the common people who no longer understood Greek, the need to express the gospel in the local languages of the various geographic regions became compulsory.

Thus by the middle of the third century the Christian church in the western part of the empire (for example, in Italy, Africa, Gaul, and other provinces) became a Latin-speaking church. The medium of communication in correspondence between the churches of Rome and Carthage in North Africa had become Latin by about A.D. 250. In pockets of Syriac-speaking areas, especially in the region around Edessa (now known as Urfa), Christians came to use the Syriac language. Similarly, various Coptic dialects were adopted by monastic orders of Christians in Egypt from the beginning of the third century on.

As the tide turned away from Greek as a world language, translations (also known as versions) of the New Testament writings in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic began to make their appearance. From the end of the second and the beginning of the third century on, we have New Testament manuscripts in the three languages mentioned, with further translations into Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, Slavonic, Ethiopic, and other languages appearing in succeeding centuries. Since these translations of the Greek New Testament originated in distinct geographical areas, they are most useful to the student of the New Testament text in identifying peculiarities characteristic to the manuscripts in the region in which the translations were made.

**Lectionaries.** Following the Jewish custom of reading passages from the Old Testament during the synagogue services, the Christian church instituted readings from the New Testament for Saturday and Sunday services, as well as other occasions. For this purpose the biblical text comprising the Gospels and Epistles was divided into a system of lessons. These reading installments were called lectionaries. Though scholars are still uncertain as to their date of origin, it is generally accepted that they preserve a reading of the New Testament text that is often much older than the actual date of the lectionary itself.

**Citations by the Church Fathers.** Apart from the handwritten copies of the original Greek New Testament compositions or their translations into regional languages, there is also a considerable body of citations from, as well as comments on, the Christian Scriptures by the Church Fathers, the spiritual leaders of the Christian communities. These patristic (the word comes from the Latin *pater*, meaning "father") citations begin with the second century A.D. The significance of these citations is that they witness to the particular type of New Testament texts popular in the geographical regions in which a certain Father lived or traveled.

### **Writing Materials and Style**

**Writing Materials.** The earliest known New Testament scriptures were all written on papyrus, made from the papyrus plant. Today we know of 41 papyruses belonging to the period up to the third/fourth century A.D. They have been preserved in the hot, dry sands of Egypt. Papyrus was the cheapest and most commonly used writing material at the time. In later centuries parchment—a much more expensive writing material made from the hides of young goats, sheep, calves, or antelope—came into use and gradually replaced papyrus.

The earliest parchment manuscript of the New Testament dates from the second/third century. But the best preserved and most famous parchments of the Christian Scriptures are the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus.

Parchment as a writing material for the New Testament documents remained in use until the sixteenth century, when it gave place to paper, which the Chinese had introduced to the Western world centuries before.

**Style of Writing.** Scholars classify the handwritten copies of the New Testament according to writing material and style. During the early church period scribes used one particular type of script for nonliterary and commonplace Greek documents and another for literary works. The literary compositions utilized a script called "uncial," which is an abbreviated form meaning "inch-sized." The early copies of the New Testament were written

in this more formal book-hand style characterized by Greek capitals in which each letter was separate from the other.

However, this book hand began to deteriorate, and by the beginning of the ninth century a script of small letters in a running hand was introduced for the production of books. This cursive style, called minuscule (meaning "rather small"), coexisted with the uncial type of script for about two centuries, after which the cursive replaced the uncial lettering.

Thus the various scripts assist us in dating the New Testament manuscripts in that copies of the New Testament up to the eighth century are exclusively uncials, those from the ninth to the eleventh are partly uncials and partly minuscules, and those from the eleventh century on are wholly minuscules. In fact, the number of later minuscules outnumbers the older uncial manuscripts by more than 10 to 1.

So far, then, we have noted that no autographs of the New Testament writings exist today. The earliest reproductions of the New Testament consist generally of fragmentary Greek manuscripts, of versions, lectionaries, and patristic citations in various languages. All of these were written by hand either on the cheaper papyrus or the more expensive parchment. The earliest manuscripts were written in the formal uncial script; whereas the later minuscules are characterized by a cursive form of handwriting.

With the thousands of handwritten documents, the New Testament is the best-attested body of writings of antiquity. Yet in spite of the multitude of copies from many locations, there are no two manuscripts that are the same word for word. How can this be explained? We will discuss this issue in our next segment.

## **Part Two-"Copying the New Testament"**

The original 27 handwritten autographs comprising our present New Testament are represented by more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts. However, most of these are fragmentary and preserve only a few verses or books of the New Testament. Of this number, more than

3,000, made up of uncials and minuscules,<sup>[3]</sup> contain an uninterrupted text. Another roughly 2,200 are lectionary manuscripts in which the New Testament books are divided into separate paragraphs, arranged according to lesson sequences designed for church worship through the year. In addition to these witnesses, there are an additional 8,000 or so manuscripts of versions supplemented by a multitude of patristic citations (quotations from the early leaders of the church).

The New Testament is better attested by far than any other volume of antiquity, yet despite the large number of witnesses, no two manuscripts are identical in every detail. How can this be? The answer lies in the intricate process of copying and transmission.

With the invention of printing from movable type in the mid-fifteenth century, it suddenly became possible to reproduce an unlimited number of identical copies of a text. Prior to this time, however, scribes had to transmit every document by hand. And all who have ever tried to copy a lengthy piece of written material by hand know only too well how easy it is to introduce discrepancies-technically referred to as "corruptions" or "errors"-into the copy.

As one examines the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, one notices a variety of variations-both unintentional and intentional. Fortunately, however, these do not detract from the Word of God or from its teachings. In the main, such variants are well-meaning attempts by copyists to improve the spelling, grammar, and logical flow of the copies before them.

**Accidental or Unintentional Errors.** Most of the variants in the text arose from *purely* accidental causes. This is understandable when one remembers the circumstances under which the manuscripts were reproduced. A scribe could easily make an error because of faulty eyesight or hearing, or because he was tired or distracted. Thus the same passage in two manuscripts may differ because the scribe mistook a letter or an abbreviation, or even one word for another that looked like it. Such errors could also result from the illegible handwriting of an earlier copyist.

## Easy to Skip

It was easy for the eye of the scribe to pass inadvertently from one word or group of letters to another similar or identical word or grouping of letters, particularly if they stood near each other. In the process, the copyist would accidentally skip over the intervening portion of text between the two groupings of words, thus dropping a portion of the copy.

This may explain the strange reading of John 17:15 in Codex, Vaticanus, which omits the words in brackets from the verse "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them from the [world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the] evil one." The writer's eye seems to have skipped from the first set of three Greek words preceding "world" to the second identical set before "evil one," thus creating a discrepancy in the text. Numerous variations of this kind of mistake have occurred.

The reverse problem occurred when the writer's eye went back from the second to the first group of words, causing him to accidentally copy the intervening words twice instead of once only.

## Similar Words

Confusion also occurred over different words with the same or similar pronunciation. For example, the pronunciation of *ou* and *u* is virtually the same in Greek and may account for the different renderings of Revelation 1:5. Thus manuscripts as early as the third/fourth century carry the verb *lusanti* ("to free"), whereas much later Greek uncials and most minuscules-as well as several earlier versions-carry the verb *lousanti* ("to wash").

The translators of the King James Version followed the Greek text based on the latter reading and thus rendered Revelation 1:5, "Unto him that loved us, and *washed* us from our sins in his own blood. . . ." Other translations (for example, the Revised Standard Version and the New International Version) render the text, "To him who loves us and has *freed* us from

our sins by his blood. . . ."

**Deliberate Changes.** Other divergences in wording arose out of a conscious attempt by scribes to eliminate what they believed were obscurities or problems in the text they copied. As a result, they smoothed out grammatically or stylistically harsh constructions by adding or substituting what seemed more appropriate forms. Other changes were effected in order to clear up historical and geographical difficulties, or because of doctrinal considerations.

Frequently copyists would endeavor to iron out differences between similar or parallel passages. In this process, technically known as "harmonization," the wording of one passage was assimilated to the differing wording in a parallel passage.

Harmonizations are particularly frequent in the first three Gospels. Thus the reading of the (chronologically) earlier manuscripts of Matthew 19:17 ("Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good.") was enlarged in later manuscripts to agree with the words of Jesus reported in Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19. As a result, the later copies read, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

The same process is evident in the Epistles, particularly the letter to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians. Scribes repeatedly introduced into verses of one Epistle words and phrases that originally belonged to parallel passages in the other. An example is Colossians 1:14, which in earlier manuscripts reads, "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." A few later manuscripts expanded this passage by adding the words "through his blood," reminiscent of Ephesians 1:7, and thus rendered the verse as it now appears in the King James Version, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins."

The better a scribe knew his Bible, the greater must have been the temptation to harmonize passages of Scripture in reliance on other similar or parallel passages. Without a doubt, such changes were all done in good faith.

As copies of the New Testament documents increased, scribes sometimes faced the

difficulty of having before them two or more manuscripts that rendered the same scriptural passage differently. What were they to do? Rather than opting for one reading and discarding the other, thus running the risk of missing the original wording, scribes tended to combine the various alternatives in the documents that they were producing. The process of amalgamating originally separate readings is called "conflation."

Luke 24:53 will serve as an illustration. Some early witnesses to this passage read that the disciples were "continually in the temple *blessing* God," while others note that the disciples were "continually in the temple *praising* God." Instead of deciding for one or the other variant, later scribes just put the two readings together and thereby constructed a text that reads, as reflected in the King James Version, "And were continually in the temple, *praising* and *blessing* God."

This tendency to conflate readings, while already present in the earliest period of text transmission, became particularly prominent in later centuries. Copyists most probably reasoned that by copying the various readings the right reading would be preserved. These additions or changes characteristic of *harmonization* and *conflation*, particularly when the expansion assumes a variety of forms, are a strong argument for the secondary form of a particular text.

**Doctrinal Divergences.** Though the early Church Fathers accused the "heretics" and even other Christians of altering the Scriptures to support their individual views, such charges are extremely difficult to assess. While there is some evidence that scribes sought to alter doctrinally inconvenient or unacceptable sayings, or to introduce into the manuscripts proofs for theological tenets, such changes are very rare and generally obvious. They have not compromised Christian teaching.

For example, one scribe in a Latin and Gothic translation of the prologue to Luke imitates Acts 15:28 and seeks to argue that when Luke composed the Third Gospel he also had divine approval. Consequently he expanded the statement in Luke 1:3 ("It seemed good to

me . . . to write an orderly account") by adding after the word "me" the phrase "and to the Holy Spirit."

We also know Marcion, a "heretic" of the mid-second century, systematically removed all references to the Jewish background of Jesus from the Third Gospel. However, no one today accepts the Marcionite tampering with the biblical text.

Examination of the scribal changes reveals that the copyists moved toward a more orthodox, conservative position rather than to theological liberalism. No scribal changes, whether omissions or additions, have been shown to change any doctrine of Scripture in any way.

**Variants Caused by Translation.** Still other variants arose when the New Testament writings were translated from the original Greek into various regional languages. The quality of translation depended on the translator's knowledge of both Greek and the language into which he was translating—as well as on the care that he devoted to the task before him. Often further variants were introduced, compounded by the particular form of the Greek copy the translator used and the divergences generated by earlier transcriptions.

### **Development of Local Text Types**

Though the history of the development of the text during the early centuries of the Christian Era is somewhat hazy and still debated, it appears that by the fourth century a new era began that saw the various texts of the New Testament channeled into discrete text types, with distinctive and recognizable traits.

At least four such text types have been identified, named for the geographical area from which they arose and in which they were more prevalent:

- 1. Alexandrian (associated with Alexandria in Egypt).** Scholars believe that manuscripts that belong to this group are generally characterized by brevity and austerity. In contrast to the Byzantine text type, there is little evidence of grammatical and stylistic

polishing. Given the most recently discovered papyruses of this type, the Alexandrian texts would go back to the early second century A.D.

**2. Byzantine.** This text type is characterized by completeness and lucidity. The scribes who contributed to this text type endeavored to smooth out any harshness of language. They also tended to combine two or more separate readings into expansions of the text (hence *conflations*). Since the copyists also sought to eliminate any differences in parallel passages, they produced *harmonizations*.

Of all the so-called text types of the New Testament, the Byzantine as a whole is the latest chronologically. This type of text was largely preserved in the Byzantine Empire, which continued to use the Greek language after other nations had either limited or abandoned Greek as a world language.

**3. Western.** Though the chronological and geographical origins of the so-called Western text are disputed, it is generally believed that it reaches back to the second century and was in evidence from Egypt west through North Africa to Italy and Gaul (ancient France). The chief characteristic of this text is described as paraphrase. The freedom with which it makes additions, omissions, and substitutions is still puzzling to the experts.

**4. Caesarean.** The debated "Caesarean" text type is believed to date from the early part of the third century. It is considered to have affinities with both the Alexandrian and Western type, and therefore stands somewhat between the two. Though it is called "Caesarean," it may have originated in Egypt, from which it was brought to Caesarea by Origen.

While none of these text types should be seen as monolithic masses or as totally unaffected by other types, they may be recognized, at least broadly, by certain unique family likenesses. As already noted, all of them require a great deal more study, especially the Byzantine, whose text type became popularly accepted and regarded as *the* authoritative form of the New Testament.

However, a new, revolutionary era in the history of the New Testament would begin with the invention of printing from movable type (ca. A.D. 1450). To this we shall turn in our next segment.

### **Part Three-"A New Era for the Bible"**

With the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg, the era of handwritten books came to an end. Now an unlimited number of copies of a document could be reproduced at a rapid rate. The inevitable copying errors, so characteristic of previous centuries when documents were all transcribed by hand, could be virtually eliminated. Identical copies of text now came off the presses. With increased production and resultant reductions in prices, more and more people could afford to avail themselves of at least portions of the Scriptures.

#### **The (Latin) Vulgate a First**

In the Western world of the fifteenth century, Latin rather than Greek was the language of the church. The official Bible was a Latin translation known as the Vulgate, which for the most part was a product of the fourth-century biblical scholar Jerome. Since the Vulgate enjoyed such unparalleled prestige, it comes as no surprise that it became the first Bible to be printed. Published between A.D. 1450 and 1456, it came to be known as the Gutenberg Bible.

#### **The Greek Text of Erasmus**

Sixty years went by before the first printing of the New Testament in the original Greek language. The first to go on the market was that prepared by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus-in 1516.

Regrettably, several features marred the remarkable achievement of Erasmus, not the least of which was the hundreds of typographical errors resulting from the haste of production. In addition, Erasmus confined himself to only those Greek manuscripts available

to him in Basel-a half-dozen minuscules, all representative of the Byzantine imperial text, known for its lateness and expansions. None of the copies Erasmus used dated earlier than the tenth century A.D. The early papyri and uncials available to us today were, therefore, not featured in his work.

Moreover, Erasmus relied repeatedly on the Latin Vulgate. Since the twelfth-century manuscript of Revelation that he was using lacked the last leaf containing the final six verses of Revelation 22, he simply translated Revelation 22:16-21 back from the Latin Vulgate into Greek.

As a result of this heavy dependence upon the Vulgate, there are words and passages in the Greek text of Erasmus that are not found in any known Greek manuscript. Based exclusively upon the Vulgate, these borrowed expressions have been perpetuated in texts that relied on Erasmus-particularly the form that came to be known as the *textus receptus* (received text).

Because of the great demand for it, however, the first edition of the Erasmus Bible was soon exhausted, and another edition was called for. This second became the basis of Martin Luther's German Bible of 1522 and of William Tyndale's 1525 translation into English.

During the decades following Erasmus a number of Greek New Testaments were issued. By and large these texts reproduced the New Testament reflected in the previous editions of Erasmus, thus perpetuating a text based on a handful of late manuscripts of the Byzantine imperial tradition. This means that the text of the New Testament that came to be accepted in the church as standard was that based not on the earliest available manuscripts, but on later (more recent) ones.

During the sixteenth century the greatest influence on the text of the New Testament since Erasmus was exercised by Robert Estienne (better known by the Latin form of his name, Stephanus). His third edition of the New Testament, published in Paris in 1550, was the first Greek New Testament with an apparatus (for example, a collection of variant readings).

Another New Testament published by Stephanus in Geneva was the first to divide a portion of the Bible into chapters and verses. However, the text of both the third and fourth editions of Stephanus was still substantially that of Erasmus.

The King James Version, translated in A.D. 1611, relied on the editions of Stephanus and on that of John Calvin's friend and successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza—a version that also relied heavily on that by Erasmus. This should make clear that the King James Version of the Bible, based as it is on these faulty ancestors, should not be made a criterion of orthodoxy.

### **The Textus Receptus**

Most significant in the seventeenth century among publishers of the Greek New Testament were Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir. The text they reproduced was essentially continuous with that of Stephanus and Erasmus. A statement equivalent to a modern advertising blurb, printed in 1633 in the preface of their second edition, gave rise to the expression *textus receptus*.

The statement read, "Therefore, you now have the text [*textum*] received [*receptum*] by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted." The *textus receptus* did not, therefore, signify that the text printed by the Elzevirs had in some way been received from God, but rather that it represented a text that was virtually identical to the other approximately 160 Greek New Testament editions printed since Erasmus.

The *textus receptus* became the dominant text form of the New Testament for another two and a half centuries, even though it rested on only a few late minuscules, haphazardly selected, and even though it contained readings unsupported by any known Greek witnesses. And having achieved such prestige and dominance, it became the basis for the major translations of the Greek New Testament into our modern languages, including those in English, down to the nineteenth century.

## **Toward a More Accurate Text**

For many years any attempt to improve the *textus receptus* was regarded as tampering with the Word of God. Slowly, however, change began to come. And though Greek New Testaments still retained the received text, divergences in readings were included in lists, technically called an apparatus.

A passion to uncover the most ancient witnesses in order to reconstruct the purest form of the New Testament text consumed scholars such as Lobegott Friedrich Konstantin von Tischendorf (1815-1874). His eighth edition of the New Testament (dated 1869-1872) contained an apparatus that listed all the manuscript evidence known in his time from Greek manuscripts, earlier versions, and patristic citations.

However, though Tischendorf's citations are considered to be total and accurate, he was aware of only 64 uncials, one papyrus, and only a few minuscules. By contrast, we have today cataloged 257 uncials, 93 papyri, and 2,795 minuscules. This is evidence of the more accurate knowledge we can now have of the original documents of the New Testament.

But with the research and publications of Tischendorf and his immediate predecessors, and with the flood of new materials that became available in the nineteenth century, a change in the form of the New Testament text became inevitable. A new era was about to commence.

## **A New Era Dawns**

Two Cambridge scholars, Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828-1892), collaborated in producing the epoch-making work on the New Testament in the nineteenth century. Building on the analytical work of scholars before them, and making full use of the material Tischendorf had provided, these two Englishmen published a monumental Greek text of the New Testament in 1881, consummating 28 years of research.

They examined each variant in the New Testament text in an effort to discover the most

probable reading. They examined the relationship of manuscripts to one another, concluding that the *genealogy* of the manuscripts is more important than their number. Thus they encouraged the grouping together of manuscripts by genealogy or family likeness, proposing several methods by which to trace such genealogy.

In a related effort to arrive at the original text, Westcott and Hort suggested that witnesses that were considered to be trustworthy in clear-cut cases deserve to be given greater weight even where the evidence was ambiguous. Again, numerical strength was not as important as genealogy, and these two scholars endorsed the principle that witnesses to the New Testament text should be weighed rather than counted.

These principles led them to make the boldest break with the past yet. Though some previous Greek editions of the New Testament had somewhat timidly sought to break loose from the received text, the work of Westcott and Hort ended the long reign of the *textus receptus*. Their edition of the Greek New Testament rested on an application of textual analysis in the evaluation of variant readings, rather than on a few late minuscules chosen somewhat randomly.

## **Reaction**

Given the centuries-long popular acceptance of the *textus receptus*, it was no surprise that churchmen became alarmed that these scholars should totally reject the claim that the *textus receptus* was the original text of the New Testament. Opponents labeled their efforts both bad theology and bad textual analysis, and called for a Greek text based on the wording of the majority of the more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts, regardless of their age or textual quality.

Opposition also came when the translation committee of the English Revised Version of 1881-1885 adopted as their underlying Greek text a form that agreed substantially with that

prepared by Westcott and Hort. Similarly, the producers of the American Revised Version of 1901 relied largely on a text similar to that of the two British scholars.

### **Expanding Knowledge**

Further study, research, and discoveries of manuscripts since 1881 have challenged several of the conclusions of Westcott and Hort. New manuscripts of the New Testament, especially papyri older than some of the documents previously available, have surfaced, throwing new light on the New Testament text.

Nowadays, some scholars believe the genealogical method has its limitations, and several modern versions of the New Testament (for example the Revised Standard Version and New International Version) are more eclectic or selective in their choice of readings. Consequently, editors pay less attention to questions of date or families of witnesses and no longer follow one text type slavishly. Instead they concentrate on individual readings and assess them on their own individual merits.

A hundred years after Westcott and Hort, and several editions of New Testament texts later, the major editions of the Greek New Testament have cut themselves totally loose from the *textus receptus*. The reader of a Greek New Testament today faces what the scholarly and popular press designates the "standard text." This text is published by the United Bible Societies (which include American, Scottish, German, Dutch, and British Bible Societies).

By and large, the standard text is identical to the Greek text associated with the names E. Nestle and K. Aland, which has dominated the scene for 80 of the past 100 years. But the text of Nestle and Aland was designed primarily for the textual technician. Thus the standard text came into existence, at least in part, in response to a more general need felt since the mid-1950s for a Greek New Testament that would meet the requirements of several hundred Bible translation committees around the world. It rests on an extensive and ongoing review of all Greek manuscripts as early as the second century, of versions, and of the citations of New

Testament citations of the Church Fathers.

Readers of the Greek standard text will notice that there are omissions of complete verses<sup>(4)</sup> or shorter units<sup>(5)</sup> with which they had been familiar in the past. These longer or shorter units had been included in virtually every edition and translation since Erasmus.

Modern language translations are increasingly adopting the practice of the United Bible Society's text or that by Nestle and Aland Greek, eliminating verses, phrases, or words that were inserted into the biblical text under the influence of the Byzantine textual tradition. This practice has proved troublesome for many who have come to accept these additions as an integral part of the Word of God, even though they were introduced into the biblical text simply by well-meaning copyists. Their removal is considered blasphemy.

We need to remember, however, that such omissions (or additions) are never vital to Scripture. And if they were not found in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, which themselves were extensively distributed, it is most likely that these portions were not part of the original New Testament as it came from the apostles' text. Therefore, their omission now cannot negatively affect the New Testament text. Moreover, there are often parallel passages elsewhere in the New Testament, and within the same textual tradition, that already include the wording omitted in a particular passage. In other words, the teachings of Scripture have not suffered because of these omissions or expansions.

### **Two Important Questions**

First, to what extent do the divergences in the text divide and therefore diminish the authority of the New Testament? Second, to what degree do fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith rest on disputed readings?

In response to the first question, we need to keep in perspective the total picture regarding variants. Significant variations occur very rarely. Most variants are the result of chance or normal scribal tendencies. The fact is that the amount of agreement between

editions of the Greek text (particularly those published during the past century) is far greater than has been suspected. These attempts to approximate the original wording of the New Testament writings assure us that *the variants in no way jeopardize the overall witness of the New Testament.*

As regards the second question, *the variants do not endanger doctrine.* Sir Frederic Kenyon, a former director and librarian of the British Museum, after discussing variations of the New Testament text, says:

"It is true (and it cannot be too emphatically stated) that none of the fundamental truths of Christianity rests on passages of which the genuineness is doubtful. . . . No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading. . . . It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain. Especially is this the case with the New Testament."<sup>[6]</sup>

The number and variety of witnesses to the New Testament make the New Testament scriptures the best attested documents of antiquity. Despite the number of variants, most of which are trivial and devoid of any theological significance, God's message to humanity is constant and trustworthy. The substance of the New Testament is certain, and none of the fundamental truths of Christianity rests on a disputed reading.

#### **Part Four-"The Proliferation of Bible Versions"**

Did Ellen G. White make use of any version of the Bible other than the King James? Has the Seventh-day Adventist Church ever taken a position on the question of modern translations?

The first major revision of the Bible, following the organization of the Adventist Church, was the English Revised Version, published between 1881 and 1885.

It is significant that during the 1880s as that version was being introduced to the public, the *Review and Herald* issued several articles designed to acquaint its readers with the

progress, reception, and value of the English Revised Version, as well as its relationship to the King James Version. Generally the articles were reprints from other journals. However, they also contained favorable reactions by prominent Adventist writers to this new revision of the Bible. Adventists, one would assume, were generally comfortable with this version, the underlying Greek text of which was substantially that prepared by Westcott and Hort.

After the American Revised Version was published in 1901, however, lively debate arose over the benefits or otherwise of this new revision. Finally, on March 20, 1930, the General Conference Committee took an action relative to the merits of both the King James Version of 1611 and the American Revised Version of 1901. The decision of 1930 was confirmed by another General Conference Committee action of June 1, 1931. It implored the constituency to avoid controversy over the use of versions. The committee action included the following advice:

The reasonableness and soundness of the General Conference Committee's action (of March 20, 1930) to the effect that these two versions (the 1611 King James and the 1901 American Revised) shall serve us without discrimination are amply seen in the situation which has developed from this controversy within our ranks. . . .

We further record our conviction that all our workers, ministers, teachers, authors, editors, and leaders should rigidly refrain from further participation in this controversy, leaving all free to use the version of their choice.

We also appeal for the sincere cooperation of all our workers in endeavoring to preserve the unity of our people.

### **New Concerns Spark Deeper Study<sup>[7]</sup>**

Following the publication of the Revised Standard Version from 1946 to 1952, concerns were expressed in the Adventist Church particularly about the rendition of certain passages

that, it was feared, could potentially affect Adventist doctrine and Adventist prophetic interpretation. In response, the General Conference appointed a committee, known as the Committee on Problems in Bible Translation, to study the scriptural passages concerned.

This group submitted its report to the General Conference Committee in January 1954 and received authority to publish its findings. Subsequently, another decision was made to expand the report to include additional material dealing with subjects such as the biblical manuscripts, versions, problems of translation, and the principles and problems of biblical interpretation. Finally, *Problems in Bible Translation* was issued by the Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1954.

*Problems in Bible Translation* recognizes that Bible translations stand in need of revisions for a variety of reasons. These include recent discoveries that impact on our understanding of the biblical world as well as the need to speak the ever-changing language of the people.

For example, findings in archaeology after 1870 enriched our understanding of Bible lands and times beyond anything known previously. The discovery of numerous portions of Scripture as well as of official papers and letters of ordinary people dating from Bible times significantly improved our knowledge of the biblical languages. To this should be added the fact that since the nineteenth century, scholars were given access to previously unknown ancient and almost complete manuscripts of the Bible.

These and other factors necessitated revisions of certain points in Bible translations. The resulting revisions contributed to more accurate renderings in English and elimination of words, phrases, or verses that had once been taken for granted as Scripture but not found in the ancient manuscripts that had recently become available.

Moreover, since living languages change, later revisions cannot merely repeat the familiar, but sometimes archaic, words or phrases of earlier translations. Revisions are obliged to speak the idiom of the day if they are to be relevant to a changing society. With this in

mind, the committee concluded that we should not expect a final or last-word revision that might exclude other translations.

In the light of the position taken by the church previously, the Committee on Problems in Bible Translation saw no need to comment on the merits or demerits of the Revised Standard Version. The committee recognized it as another version, having as much value as other Bible translations.

### **Ellen G. White's Position**

This position on the use of Bible translations by the Adventist Church comes as no surprise when one reads the writings of Ellen G. White. She was acquainted with the process of text transmission, and did not hesitate to use modern language translations. She knew that changes in wording had been introduced by copyists and translators over the centuries. To those among her readers who were overly concerned about possible mistakes in the copies or translations of the Scriptures she responded:

"This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purpose of God."<sup>[8]</sup> Her own practice was, "I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible."<sup>[9]</sup>

It is significant that Ellen G. White quoted from the English Revised Version soon after its publication and later also from the American Revised Version when it became available. She cited from both the text and marginal readings of the versions and, according to her son, W. C. White, instructed her literary assistants to quote from these translations whenever their renderings were preferable.

Apart from the English Revised Version and the American Revised Version she also

used the wording of several other less known translations. In the publication of *The Ministry of Healing* in 1905, Mrs. White employed 10 texts from the English Revised Version, more than 50 from the American Revised Version, two from Leeser, four from Noyes, and more than 10 marginal renderings.

By comparison to her use of the King James Version, her quotations from the other versions were sparing. Concerned for the older members who were unaccustomed to any but the King James Version and therefore might be perplexed to hear a different wording, she advised her son, W. C. White, that it would be better not to use the Revised Version from the pulpit. She feared that such a practice might introduce questions into the minds of the hearers as to why the revisers had changed the biblical text and why these alterations were being used by the speaker.

It is evident, then, that Ellen G. White did not hesitate to use versions other than the King James Version. At the same time she revealed a pastoral concern for those who all their lives had heard or read only the King James Version and knew nothing about the transmission of the New Testament. She did not condemn the revisions, nor did she make the use of the King James Version a criterion of orthodoxy.

Acquainted with the history of the New Testament text and following the example of Ellen White, the historic position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been to recognize value in the various translations and to leave its members free to use the version of their choice.

While we may be grateful for these translations designed to meet a variety of needs, the profusion of versions has also caused some bewilderment. In years gone by, the use of one version aided memorization and reading of Scripture by the whole church, whereas the present multiplicity of translations has limited such practices. One solution to this problem might be for individual churches to agree on a particular version to employ for public use. Copies of the designated version could be made available by the churches for their communal

use without inhibiting the use of other translations.

As long as our understanding of the biblical world changes, and as long as language continues to be dynamic, we cannot expect a final or exclusive translation of the Scriptures. The King James Version is one among many translations of God's Word through which the Lord unfolds His love and purpose for a lost world. The English versions stand alongside hundreds of translations of the Bible into other languages through which God shares His message with humanity. Ultimately, the desire to hear God speak to us is far more important than debates about which particular English version of the Bible we should use.

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- [1]. Reprinted from the Adventist Review, September 6, 13, 20, 27, 1990.
- [2]. See S. Kubo and W. F. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth Century English Versions of the Bible*, rev. and enl. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).
- [3]. *Uncial* and *minuscule* are terms that describe the type of script in which documents of the New Testament were copied. *Uncial* describes an early script used in the early copies of the New Testament, while *minuscule* represents a much later script, prevalent from the early ninth century A.D.
- [4]. E.g., Matt 17:21; 18:11; 23:14; Mark 7:16; 9:44, 46; 11:26; 15:28; Luke 17:36; 23:17; John 5:3b-4; Acts 8:37; 15:34; 24:6b-8a; 28:29; Rom 16:24; 1 John 5:7-8a.
- [5]. E.g., Matt 5:44; 6:13; Luke 4:4, etc.
- [6]. Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, rev. by A. W. Adams (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1958), 49-55.
- [7]. For this section I am indebted to the publication of the Committee on Problems in Bible Translations, *Problems in Bible Translation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954).
- [8]. *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, 16.
- [9]. *Ibid.*, 17.