

# Why the Received Text of the New Testament Is Better

Eric V. Snow, sermonette, June 20, 2009, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UCG

Are the experts always right? Can a majority of scholars be wrong in their area of expertise? Are all consensuses of scientists true? Sometimes, a majority of experts in their area of expertise can be wrong, such as most biologists are about the theory of evolution. The Church of God has many, many teachings that a majority of academics, scholars, and theologians would reject. In particular, we believe the Received or Byzantine text of the Greek New Testament is the best text type. But for many decades, a solid majority of scholars studying the New Testament's Greek text believe that the Westcott-Hort or "Critical" text is better than the Received or Byzantine text. But in fact this scholarly consensus is wrong.

**S.P.S. Today I will show why the Received Text is more reliable than the Critical text.**

**Let's first explain why this teaching matters.**

John 7:53+

Did God inspire this or not? Did the Apostle John write this? Did a later scribe make up the story of the woman caught in adultery?

After all, why does our church in its own publications normally quote from the New King James Version? Our parent organization, before it switched to the NIV, had done the same thing. One reason why the Church of God historically preferred to quote from the KJV and (later) NKJV for establishing doctrines is because they use the Received or Byzantine text of the Greek New Testament. But the great majority of scholars of this subject claim the Westcott-Hort or Critical text is a more reliable version of the original copies, or autographs, of the New Testament.

Now, the translators of the printed Bibles sitting on our laps had to use printed Greek New Testaments to do their work. In turn, these printed Greek New Testaments depend on textual experts studying, collating, and analyzing hundreds of handwritten medieval and ancient copies of the New Testament copied over the centuries in order to figure out what was written originally. Almost all of these handwritten books

or fragments fall into two textual families. The King James Version and New King James Version are among the very few Bibles that use the Received or Byzantine Text for the New Testament. Almost all modern translations, such as the RSV, NIV, and NASB, use a version of the Critical Text. The New Testament of the British Revised Version was published in 1881. Although rarely used today, this translation was a big deal back then: The Chicago Tribune and Times both printed the entire New Testament in its pages two days after it was published in America. 200,000 copies sold in one week in NYC alone the week after publication. The 2 men who dominated the committee that translated the Revised Version were Fenton John Hort and Brooke Foss Westcott. Invented theory to explain why other text type was much more common, that the church deliberately sat down to change the text ("Syrian Recension," but no historical proof for this theory has ever been found. Fundamentally, their text for the New Testament varies little from the more recent Nestle-Aland and UBS printed Greek New Testaments used commonly in seminaries today.

So why do scholars typically believe the Critical text is better? They will say that because its manuscripts are older, they are more reliable. For example, the two most important manuscripts for the Critical text are Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, which were hand copied in the fourth century, a century or more before the Roman Empire fell. Other notable papyrus fragments and sections of the New Testament go back a century further. And **on average** (“a priori”) the older the manuscript, and the closer a copy is to the original writing, the more reliable it will be: After all, as scribes copy other copies, and then later generations of scribes copy their copies, mistakes increasingly happen. This argument sounds good. So what’s the problem with it?

1. The great majority of Greek manuscripts (around 80% to 95%) are of the Byzantine text type. On average (“a priori,” before experience) what’s found in the great majority of handwritten copies is a correct version of the original than what’s found in a small minority of handwritten copies.

2. The Eastern Greek church that preserved the Byzantine text was less apostate doctrinally on

average than the Egyptian church was. The Greek church had more Sabbath-keeping, Passover-observing “hold outs.” We in the Church of God should deem these men to be more careful in preserving the word of God than the ancient Catholics living in Egypt, who so often upheld questionable doctrines that even later Catholics would object to. Origen is an example, who believed in reincarnation. He helped to cause the Arian heresy, which started in Egypt, and claimed the Word (who later became Jesus) had a beginning.

Mark 16:9+

Should these verses be in your Bible?

3. The early quotes of the Received Text by early Catholic writers show how ancient this text was. Centuries before Sinaiticus and Vaticanus were copied, these verses appear in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century old Latin translation and Aramaic translations of the Greek. Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all cite them up to two centuries earlier. So then, consider the bad logic for removing these verses from the Bible: Because these two 4<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts omit them, they should be omitted from your Bibles.

But if early Catholics were quoting them up to two centuries earlier, they existing long before these two major manuscripts were copied. Furthermore, the copyist of Vaticanus knew something was missing, for he left an empty column at the end of Mark where they would fit! Verse 8 is also a very bad place to end the book anyway, since it wouldn't say anything about Jesus' resurrection.

4. Fewer textual variations within Majority Text, despite it has many more copies, than in Critical Text, which has very few copies by comparison: This points to scribal carelessness, that the Greek church did a better job on average than the Egyptian church. They would have chosen better manuscripts to start with also.

Egypt's arid conditions helped preserve manuscripts that otherwise would have rotted in a more humid climate. It took a lot more work collectively to preserve the Bible elsewhere.

**Use only if have time:**

[In the ancient world, the Greek philosopher Plato believed the people of an ideal city-state

should be ruled by an elite group of philosopher kings. That's because they would know better than the ignorant rabble (i.e., average people) about how the government should be run.

But Lord Salisbury (1830-1903), one of the prime ministers of England during her height of power during the Victorian age, once generalized: "No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you never should trust the experts. If you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome: if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent: if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wine diluted by a very large admixture of insipid common sense."]

**[Use if have some time: Academic consensuses can be wrong:** We know that most scientists in the biological sciences believe in evolution, but they are wrong. We know that most social workers believe corporal punishment (i.e., "spanking") is child abuse, but they are wrong. We know that almost all professional historians would laugh at the United States and Britain in Prophecy, assuming they didn't call it racist first, but they are wrong. And, of course, almost all professional theologians in the world's

seminaries and religious colleges would laugh at the idea that the doctrines of a certain high school drop out and self-described business failure are better than their own.]

**So now, in conclusion:** Although a majority of scholars believe otherwise, the Byzantine or Received text is clearly more reliable than the Westcott-Hort or Critical Text. The Byzantine text has many more copies backing it. They were copied more accurately on average. So once again, a majority of the academic experts are wrong!