

Translations and the Text of the Greek New Testament

In years gone by, the topic of the text of the Greek New Testament probably wouldn't even have come up in a discussion of the Bible and its translations. Everyone used the English text of the King James Version, and although most standard confirmation Bibles contained a few alternate 'readings' of the text in their margins, few people noticed or bothered with them. Then along came the new translations of the Bible in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. All of a sudden, careful Bible readers couldn't help but notice a flowering of footnotes prefaced with the words, "Many other ancient manuscripts read..." Perhaps more disturbing still was that these notes pointed out that passages like the ending of Mark (containing the well-known verse, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...") are not found in some ancient manuscripts.

Naturally, these things raise questions in the minds of God's people. "Can I trust my Bible?" "Do those scholars who work with the ancient manuscripts belong to that group of negative higher critics my pastor warned me about—those men who question the truths of the Bible and sit in judgment over it?" "Is the text of the Bible fluid and uncertain?"

In recent times these questions have been reignited in peoples' minds not only by new and revised translations appearing on the market, but also by the sensationalistic antics of agnostics hostile to Christianity such as Bart Ehrman. He tries to disturb the faith of Christians and to bolster the skepticism of atheists by making outrageous statements such as, "[The problems with the text in Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11] represent just two out of thousands of places in which the manuscripts of the New Testament came to be changed by scribes."¹ In addition, he puts his greatest emphasis on the quantity of textual variants ("over 400,000") rather than giving his fullest discussion to their quality. Daniel Wallace discusses why this gives a distorted picture of the truth:

Once it is revealed that the great majority of these variants are inconsequential—involving spelling differences that cannot even be translated, articles with proper nouns, changes in word order, and the like—and that only a very small minority of the variants alter the meaning of the text, the whole picture begins to come into focus.²

Overall, it seems fairly clear that the impression Dr. Ehrman wants to give people is that the text of the New Testament developed in a fluid way and that text we have today has been corrupted by orthodox Christians through the centuries. Nothing could be further from the truth.

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, First Edition. (HarperOne, 2005), 68. These two passages—by far the longest variant readings found in the Greek New Testament—are hardly representative of the issues involved in most textual variants.

² Daniel B. Wallace, "The gospel according to Bart: a review article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (Je 2006): 330.

What I wish to accomplish in this paper, then, is to reassure the hearts of those troubled by these questions. I will briefly discuss the practice of textual criticism of the New Testament and distinguish it from the higher criticism practiced by those who question biblical truth. Finally I wish to focus on two issues that are probably the most germane to our evaluation of Bible translations: the longer ending of Mark and the text of the New King James Version.

The Reliability of the New Testament Text

Perhaps you have heard someone ask the question, “If we only have copies of copies of copies of the text of the New Testament, how can we be sure that the Greek we are reading today was actually written by the Apostles and Evangelists?” The answer is very simple: we have more evidence for the text of the New Testament—literally thousands upon thousands of manuscripts passed down from the ancient world—than we do of any other text from that era. The Greek tragedian Euripides, for example, wrote a play called “Heracles” four centuries before Christ. The text “depends almost entirely on one fourteenth-century [AD] manuscript.”³ Yet no one really doubts that we have the same work of literature that Euripides wrote. With so much more evidence for the New Testament books, why should anyone doubt that God has preserved his Word for us in a truly magnificent way?

Similar things could be said against false claims of a corrupted text based upon a supposed carelessness of the copyists or upon an exaggerated emphasis on the number of textual variants. Upon closer examination, these claims fall to the ground. Ehrman himself dials back some of his more sensational claims by admitting that “most scribes, no doubt, tried to do a faithful job in making sure that the text they reproduced was the same text they inherited.”⁴ In addition, while there are certainly many variant readings, most of them are simply matters of word order or spelling and, in the vast majority of cases, there is simply no doubt as to how the original text read. As Professor David Kuske puts it, “Less than one percent of the text...requires any special study.”⁵ Put positively, there is no real dispute or problem with 99% of the New Testament text!

Finally, it should be said that not a single doctrine is affected by that one percent of passages where there may be some doubt as to what the original text was. Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that the ending of Mark (16:9-20) is not authentic. Is there any doctrine that would be affected? No! Would we lack even one Bible story familiar to us? The appearance to Mary Magdalene is fully related in John 20:11-18. Mark’s brief discussion of the appearance to the two disciples (16:12-13) is fleshed out in Luke 24:13-35. The commissioning of the disciples is dealt with amply in four other accounts (Mt 28:16-20; Lk 24:36-49; Jn 20:19-23; Ac 1:6-8). In all this we should again bear in mind that we are looking at an extreme case; most variant readings are hardly more than a single word or a simple phrase in length.

³ Euripides, *Heracles* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1989), Godfrey W. Bond, ed., xxxiii.

⁴ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 107.

⁵ David Kuske, *Biblical Interpretation - The Only Right Way* (Northwestern Pub House, 1995), 48. For a popularly written discussion of textual variants, I would encourage the reader to study the entire chapter.

Is the Practice of Textual Criticism Legitimate?

On the face of it, it just doesn't sound right to a Christian's ear to hear that scholars are practicing "criticism" on the New Testament. "The Bible should be above any human criticism," we think, "It's not right to find fault with God's Word!" Of course this is true. But one should understand that the word "criticism" here does not mean what it usually means in everyday speech. In the scholarly world, it refers to the practice of discernment, of sifting the evidence for or against a certain position. It does not necessarily mean "to call into question" or "to find fault with."

Now the so-called historical-critical method of Bible interpretation *does* involve calling into question the truth of God's Word. This is so not because of any meaning inherent in the word 'criticism,' but because of the basic presuppositions of the historical critics. They approach the Bible as if it were similar to any other document from the ancient past, that is to say: fallible and human. They assume that there may be errors of fact in what the Bible says about history, for example, or differences of opinion among the various biblical writers. The task of the historical critic, then, is to sift truth from fiction, fact from fantasy, history from legend. Naturally this assumption allows human beings to sit in judgment over what they will or will not believe in God's Word. Therefore it is completely unacceptable.

Textual criticism is not like this at all. It does not ask the question, "What is true and what is false about what the Bible is saying?" It only asks, "Which text (of the various possible readings found in different ancient manuscripts) is the correct one?" And it has to ask that question because God has so richly preserved an abundance of evidence from the ancient world. Yet, as we have already seen, the evidence shows variant readings. Manuscripts are not completely identical in every respect. Scholars, then, have to sift through the evidence to determine which reading was the original one. Again it is important to remember that in the vast majority of cases the correct conclusion is not in doubt.

One should really turn the question on its head. Instead of asking, "*Can* a Bible believing scholar legitimately practice textual criticism," one should say, "A careful scholar and student of God's Word *must* practice textual criticism." To do less would be to despise God's gift in that wealth of evidence he has preserved for us from the ancient past!

In fact, the practice of textual criticism is not some new method. It goes all the way back to the Reformation and even prior. One of the hotly-contested texts in Luther's day was the so-called "Comma Johanneum"—1 John 5:7—which reads: "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one." Although this verse is found in the Latin Vulgate (the common Bible of the Middle Ages), Erasmus did not want to put it into his edition of the Greek New Testament because he could not find any evidence for it in the Greek manuscripts available to him. Luther said of the verse, "I and others believe that it ... [was] added by some ignoramus."⁶ Needless to say, 1 John 5:7 did not find its way into Luther's German translation!

⁶ WA 48: 688,15-20 (N0.7101) For more on this verse, and the early reformers' position on it, see Franz Posset, "John Bugenhagen and the *Comma Johanneum*," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 49,

The Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism:

Permit me now to summarize in a very brief way the practice of New Testament textual criticism as we teach it to our future pastors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.⁷ There are two basic kinds of evidence to the New Testament text. The first and most important is the external evidence. By this we mean the ancient Greek manuscripts themselves, the earliest translations of the New Testament into various other ancient languages, and the biblical citations and allusions that we run across in the early church fathers.

The second kind is what we call the internal evidence. The rule of internal evidence is summarized by saying that the reading which can explain all the other readings but is not itself explained by them is more likely to be the correct one. For example, one can understand why scribes may have been tempted to substitute a more easily understood word into the text in an effort to smooth out a word more difficult to understand. It is reasonable, then, to infer that the more difficult reading is likely to be the original since it is unlikely that an ancient scribe would have put something harder to understand in place of a clearer text.

As to the first kind of evidence—the external kind—one might ask the question, “Why not simply count up the number of manuscripts that all have the same reading, and then let the majority win!” While the solution may seem simple and elegant, as C.S. Lewis once said, “Real things are not simple.”

One needs to consider two more questions in assessing the evidence we have. First we must ask, “How ancient is this reading?” We have evidence for the text of the New Testament that goes back to around 100 AD. We also have Greek manuscripts that were copied in the 1400’s. Naturally, the earlier the evidence is, the stronger it is. Second we must ask, “How widely distributed geographically was the reading in the first centuries after Christ’s coming?” We have evidence from all over the ancient Roman Empire: from North Africa, from Gaul, from Italy, from Asia Minor, from Syria, from Palestine, and from Egypt. As a rule of thumb, the more widespread the evidence for a particular reading, the likelier it is to be original. “Early and widespread,” then, is the slogan that our students have memorized as the most convincing evidence of a genuine reading. They learn that manuscripts cannot simply be counted; they must be weighed.

Did the Greek Church Preserve the Best Text?

In this connection, I have sometimes heard the following line of thought from those who favor the King James Version (KJV) or the New King James Version (NKJV). Both of these versions follow fairly closely a form of the Greek text that came from the Greek church in Byzantium. The promoters of this text say, “The Greek church preserved the best text for us over the centuries. These men knew Greek. What’s more, they also knew how to sift the good manuscripts from the bad and they destroyed all the corrupt

no. 4 (October 1985): 245-251.

⁷ For a fuller treatment, see David Kuske, *Biblical Interpretation - The Only Right Way*, pp 47-58; and David Kuske, *The History and Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 1992).

manuscripts that they could.” Some even add this thought, “The Holy Spirit guided the Greek church to preserve the authentic text for us. He blessed it so that now we have far and away more manuscripts of this type than of any other. We should therefore stick closely to this text form and use only translations like the KJV or the NKJV that do.”

While it may sound plausible, this argument has more than a few problems with it. First of all, claims of special intervention by the Holy Spirit need to be backed up from Scripture. Scripture nowhere says that the Spirit was going to keep the Greek church free from error in its transmission of New Testament text. In fact it is hard to believe that while that church was falling into numerous doctrinal errors, the Holy Spirit at the same time was working through it to preserve the authentic Greek text.

It is equally unconvincing to appeal to the fact that this type of text is found in the majority of Greek manuscripts left to us today. Sheer numbers prove nothing. What if I said, “The Windows operating system has more users in China than in any other country”? There are, therefore, more authentic copies of Windows in China than in any other country”? Steve Ballmer, the CEO of Microsoft, suggests that the opposite is true: that for every genuine copy in China, there are nine pirated versions.⁸ In fact, after the Muslim conquest of the rest of the Roman Empire, one would expect more copies to come from Byzantium than anywhere else. After 600 AD, Byzantium was the only place left that was still copying the text of the Greek New Testament!⁹

That’s why we train our pastors to consider all the evidence from every area of the ancient world. While we have a high respect for the Byzantine text tradition, we teach that equal consideration should also be given to early Greek witnesses from all the areas of the Roman empire. The earliest and most widespread reading is to be preferred as the original.

The Ending of Mark

As already mentioned, what might be considered an extreme test case for textual criticism—one that has had a direct and observable impact on our Bible translations—is the ending of the gospel of Mark, to which we now turn our attention.

First we note that every modern version includes verses 9-20, but with some kind of asterisk by it:

Version	Comment
AAT	Footnote: “The two oldest manuscripts lack Mark 16:9-20 but end Mark’s Gospel with v. 8.”
ESV	In Text Note: “[SOME OF THE EARLIEST MANUSCRIPTS DO NOT INCLUDE 16:9–20.]” Text itself is in double brackets: [[]]

⁸ <http://www.neowin.net/news/ballmer-9-out-of-10-copies-of-windows-in-china-is-pirated>. Accessed on 11/19/11.

⁹ For more on this whole area, see Kuske, *History and Practice*, pp. 62-68.

Version	Comment
HCSB	Footnote: “16:9–20 Other mss omit bracketed text.” Text itself is in single brackets []
NASB95	Footnote: “Later mss add vv 9–20.” Text itself is in single brackets []. The NASB95 is the only version to print in line with the text the other intermediate ending of Mark, which they place after v. 20 and which they put in italics with its own Footnote: “A few late mss and versions contain this paragraph, usually after v 8; a few have it at the end of ch”
NET	Text is in double brackets, with a long footnote that discusses the textual evidence, the other (intermediate) ending of Mark, and the possible explanations for the textual problem. The reason for the double brackets is explained in the following note , “Double brackets have been placed around this passage to indicate that most likely it was not part of the original text of the Gospel of Mark. In spite of this, the passage has an important role in the history of the transmission of the text, so it has been included in the translation.”
NIV11	Line separator + In Text Note: “[The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9–20].” Text itself is in italics.
NIV84	Line separator + In Text Note: “[The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20]”
NKJV	Footnote: “Vv. 9–20 are bracketed in [The Nestle-Aland//UBS text] as not in the original text. They are lacking in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, although nearly all other mss. of Mark contain them.”

In analyzing this table, we should observe that, no matter what version a church or congregation uses, all modern translations call the reader’s attention to the fact that there are some questions involved with the ending of Mark’s gospel. I believe this is an appropriate stance for translators to take. To simply ignore the textual issue is to play into the hands of the Bart Ehrman’s of this world who delight in disturbing peoples’ faith by acting as if these were shameful secrets being swept under the rug by hypocritical and traditionalistic church leaders.

As far as the textual problem itself, I would rate it as somewhat more serious than is apparent from the NKJV’s footnote “nearly all the other manuscripts of Mark contain [the verses]” while I would avoid

what seems to be the near certainty of the NET's statement that the verses are "most likely not part of the original text of the gospel of Mark." Evidence for their omission cannot be blithely ignored, while the evidence for the inclusion cannot be lightly dismissed.

Evidence for the Long Ending of Mark (16:9-20)

This evidence is very easy to sum up. Very many—indeed the majority—of early texts contain the reading. The external evidence is spread out all over the empire, from Egypt to North Africa. There is no question about the fact that, by including these verses, the Byzantine text¹⁰ was preserving a very ancient form of the text of Mark's gospel. The evidence is both early and widespread.

For some, the above consideration largely settles the matter.¹¹ I agree that it is strong evidence. But I must confess that I find the evidence to the contrary still very much worthy of careful consideration. That's why the originality of the long ending of Mark is far from a slam dunk to my mind.

Evidence against the Long Ending of Mark (16:9-20)

This evidence is of two kinds, external and internal.

External Evidence

1. Two very early texts lack the reading: Codex Sinaiticus (ⲛ) and Codex Vaticanus (B). These two codices are highly regarded by all those who practice textual criticism (with the exception of those mentioned above who argue that the Greek church has preserved the best text). Although they both come from the same part of the Roman empire (Egypt), the fact that two such high quality manuscripts lack the verses is not easily explained.

Some for example have pointed to the fact that there is a large gap after the ending of Mark in Vaticanus, indicating a sizeable defect in the text. There are a number of problems with this explanation. First, the space between Mark and the next book is not long enough to accommodate verses 9-20. Secondly, it has been recently discovered that the copyists of Vaticanus had a habit of leaving "two horizontal dots in the margin next to a line of text where a variant occurs."¹² There are no such dots in the margin of Mark 16. Granted, the significance of

¹⁰ That is, the text that formed the basis of Luther's German Bible and the King James Version.

¹¹ Among them, Prof. David Kuske (see his brief essay "Textual Criticism Brief: Mark 16:19-20" in the WLS essay file, <http://www.wlsessays.net/node/1287>). Also John W Burgon's *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*. Sovereign Grace Publishers Inc., 2000, and Bruce Terry, "The Style of the Long Ending of Mark," November 19, 2011. <http://matthew.ovc.edu/terry/articles/mkendsty.htm>.

¹² See David Wallace's essay in Robinson, *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views*. B&H Academic, 2008, (Kindle Location 351). Kindle Edition.

these so-called “umlauts” in the text of Vaticanus is still being discussed,¹³ but one can at least say that it makes it harder to cite the “gap” as evidence of a defective text.

2. These two manuscripts do not stand alone. The most ancient translation of the gospels into Syriac (syr^s) as well as almost all the early manuscripts of the Armenian translation lack the longer ending. In other words, the evidence is more widespread than being simply confined to Egypt.
3. One early translation from North Africa (it^k) lacks 9-20, but adds a different ending that reads, “And all these instructions they reported briefly to those who were associated with Peter. After these things Jesus himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of the eternal salvation. Amen.” It is generally agreed that this “intermediate ending” is a later addition. Only the NASB95 translators even bother to print it. They indicate its dubious nature by printing it after 9-20, and by enclosing it in brackets with a footnote. In any case, this has to be counted as more external evidence against the long ending, thus adding another early witness against it from the western part of the empire.
4. The same might also be said of several Greek manuscripts from the 6th century and later, as well as some manuscripts of the Coptic (Sahidic) and Ethiopic translations which have *both* the intermediate *and* the longer endings—one right after the other. This evidence has to be chalked up against the longer ending, I believe, since it seems most unlikely that two endings can both be authentic conclusions to Mark. Yet the inclusion of both implies that the copyists were unable to decide which one was genuine and which not. At the very least this indicates that there is a significant textual problem here.
5. Finally there is external evidence against from two important church fathers. Admittedly, the evidence from Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339 AD) is contested, since he is speaking hypothetically about various ways one could resolve an apparent contradiction between Matthew and Mark so far as the timing of the resurrection is concerned. Nevertheless what he says about the ending of Mark seems clear enough:

The accurate copies conclude the story according to Mark in the words...“for they were afraid.” For the end is here in nearly all the copies of Mark. What follows is found but seldom, in some copies, but by no means all.¹⁴

Evidence from Jerome (347-420 AD) is likewise contested. He writes that the long ending is found in “scarcely any copies of the Gospel—almost all the Greek codices being without this

¹³See for example Edward D Gravelly, *The text critical sigla in Codex Vaticanus*. ProQuest, 2009. Also consult Wieland Willker’s helpful website dedicated to the subject <http://www.user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Vaticanus/index.html>.

¹⁴As qtd. in David C. Parker, *The living text of the Gospels* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134.

passage.”¹⁵ Though some dismiss this as a mere paraphrase or translation of Eusebius, one is still left with the question, “Why did Jerome translate/quote Eusebius on this point if he disagreed with him?” It is clear from other writings of Jerome that he practiced textual criticism and was aware of differences in the Greek manuscripts he had to work with. People sometimes point to verses 9-20’s inclusion in the Vulgate as proof that Jerome considered them authentic. This is arguable, considering the fact that Jerome experienced a great deal of criticism¹⁶ from those who didn’t like it when his new Latin version differed *by one word* from the old version with which they had become familiar. Perhaps he simply decided to leave his convictions private and to please his public instead.

Internal Evidence

Before I discuss the internal evidence against the longer ending of Mark I would like to say two things by way of introduction. There is some degree of subjectivity involved in assessing the various types of external evidence and assigning weight to the different kinds of witnesses to the text. How much should an early translation ‘count,’ for example, over against a somewhat later Greek manuscript? If this is so, however, there is even more subjectivity involved in assigning weight to the various forms of internal evidence. This leads me to my second point: in a case like this—regarding one of the very few passages over which there is some degree of honest dispute—a person should not expect to find an absolutely certain answer, but only a likely and probable one.

1. The first piece of internal evidence is the sudden and un signaled shift in subject between the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9. After ending with the women’s fear (εφοβουντο γαρ), verse 9 continues the narrative with a nominative participle (αναστας) referring to Jesus (though not by name). He is suddenly placed in the center of the story as its subject. While Jesus was certainly mentioned prior to this, “the events [of the narrative] have primarily surrounded the women who have come to the tomb.”¹⁷ Now it is not unusual for Mark to refer to Jesus by nominative participles and by third person verbs without mentioning him by name. This is true, however, when he has been the subject of the discourse all along. The text as it stands has the ‘feel’ of a kind of patch or seam.
2. In this brief section, there are at least sixteen words that are found nowhere else in Mark. Most of them, no doubt, can be accounted for as necessitated by the new and different subject matter. But it is a little harder to see why Mark should break from his habits in this section to use terms different from what he normally uses elsewhere to talk about the same thing. It is

¹⁵ As qtd in Wallace, Maurice Robinson et al., *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views* (B&H Academic, 2008). (Kindle Location 391). Kindle Edition

¹⁶ Augustine took him to task because his translation had caused a riot in Tripoli!

¹⁷ Travis B. Williams, “Bringing method to the madness: examining the style of the longer ending of Mark,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 3 (2010): 401.

also a little harder to see why he fails to use in this section the syntactical constructions and connectors he uses elsewhere in his gospel.¹⁸

3. Mary Magdalene is identified with what sounds like a phrase you would use to introduce someone you were speaking about for the first time: “the one from whom he had cast out seven demons” (v. 9). The difficulty arises when you notice that this is not the first time she has been mentioned in the gospel. Even more, this is not the first time she has been mentioned in the immediate context (see v. 1).

I hasten to note that there are answers for every one of these difficulties. That’s where the subjectivity comes in. How does one truly assess style? What weight should a person give to any one of these examples? They give me pause, however, not so much because any one of them—taken by itself—clinches the matter, but rather because of the cumulative effect these examples have. One will find individual words and expressions that appear to be outside the norm of Mark’s style in almost every section of Mark’s gospel. It does appear unusual, however, to find so many in a single section of his gospel.

Perhaps the strongest form of internal evidence is the consideration mentioned earlier (on page 4). Which reading explains the other readings, but is not in itself explained by them? It is fairly easy to see why someone would want to supply an ending to a gospel that would otherwise end in the words “And they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid (εφοβουντο γαρ).¹⁹ We can fairly easily picture how the lack of a satisfying ending could give rise to two attempts to bring the gospel to a less open-ended conclusion. It is much harder, however, to explain why someone would want to excise a longer and fuller ending in favor of ending Mark’s gospel with the women’s fear and silence.

Conclusions on the Longer Ending of Mark’s Gospel

So what is the answer? Does the longer ending “belong” or doesn’t it? On the one hand you have very strong external evidence, both early and widespread, for its inclusion. On the other hand you have significant external evidence and some fairly strong internal evidence that the Mark 16:9-20 was added later by someone else.

Quite frankly, my whole purpose in this section has not been to prove things one way or another. I don’t think that’s possible in any case. This is one of those questions that are likely to vex the minds of Bible readers for many years to come. I am convinced that Bible believing scholars can justifiably hold either opinion. In any case, my present concern has to do with differences between Bible translations. Some people might feel that the formatting and footnotes in the NIV11 (and in others who arrive at a

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 405ff. Examples of words like this include πορευομαι to indicate movement from one place to another; elsewhere in the gospel Mark prefers the compound forms of this verb. Examples of missing constructions and connectors include things like Mark’s affection for the historical present. It is not evident in this section, nor is his common use of ευθως and παλιw. See the referenced article for more examples like these.

¹⁹ Although examples have been produced, it is quite rare to find a book that ends in γαρ.

similar judgment) put the whole translation under a great big question mark. After looking carefully at the evidence, I don't see how someone can responsibly make that case. Translators have to make tough judgment calls sometimes, and this is one of them.

I therefore end this section where I began. I believe it is entirely appropriate for translations to call the reader's attention to the fact that there are some questions involved with the ending of Mark's gospel. For this reason, I cannot see why anyone should become too greatly exercised over the NIV11's having done so. Given the nature of the evidence, I might prefer it if translations did not tip their hand too much in either direction. Perhaps the NIV11 errs in this respect. Nevertheless, evidence for the verses' omission cannot be blithely ignored, while the evidence for their inclusion cannot be lightly dismissed.

The Text of the New King James Version

In the preface to this popular translation, the translators set ambitious goals for themselves. After declaring their desire to preserve the King James Version's legacy of "precision," they go on to say, "[The] principle of complete equivalence seeks to preserve *all* of the information in the text, while presenting it in good literary form."²⁰ These are some fairly lofty claims, particularly when it is evident that the translation in many places preserves more information than the original text contained in the first place.

They do this by adhering closely to the Byzantine form of the Greek text which the KJV translators used in 1611. Now this is certainly not to fault the KJV men. After all, the Byzantine text form was the best text available back then. But it does sound a little strange to my ears to hear how the NKJV justifies this approach today. After a helpful discussion of the various schools of thought in textual criticism, they conclude, "Today, scholars agree that the science of New Testament textual criticism is in a state of flux."²¹ This leads into the following statement:

Because the New King James Version is the fifth revision of a historic document translated from specific Greek texts, the editors decided to retain the traditional text in the body of the New Testament and to indicate major Critical and Majority Text variant readings in the popup notes.²²

There is a great deal less flux in the practice of textual criticism these days than this statement would indicate. The number of scholars who would see the text underlying the old KJV as the most accurate or precise would be decidedly few. Most evangelicals today follow an eclectic approach in textual criticism, an approach long advocated by those who teach this subject at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We do not deny the worth of the Byzantine or Majority text's readings. But we do not give them special weight either, especially when evidence to the contrary is both early and widespread. The NKJV's justification

²⁰ *The New King James Version*. 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²¹ *The New King James Version*. 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²² *The New King James Version*. 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Note: this quotation comes from the Logos Electronic Version. The print version preserves the variant readings in marginal notes.

for preserving the Majority text in their translation seems to be that they did it for the sake of tradition and to preserve the historic form of the old King James in the new. So much is this so that the NKJV preserves the “Comma Johanneum” (1 Jn 5:7) in their text! You will recall what Luther said of it.

Contrast their attitude with the attitude displayed by Dr. William Beck:

Every manuscript and fragment is a flame of the Spirit’s fire...to match this vast evidence for the truth, God wants us to have a passion for it, to use all the best evidence from the manuscripts, dictionaries, and grammars as light on the text and to search with burning hearts for its exact meaning.²³

Dr. Beck said it well. And he was speaking directly to the point that there was something particularly sacrosanct about the text underlying the King James Version. Again, this is precisely why we train seminary students to consider *all* the evidence, and to seek that reading of the text which is the earliest and most widespread.

But someone may respond by pointing to the fact that the NKJV includes the major variants in the margins and (in electronic versions) in pop-ups. Isn’t this the best of both worlds? Well, no. One should not have to consistently scrounge around in the margins or click on pop-ups to find a more accurate reading than the one represented in the actual text of the translation itself. I also suspect that, unless individual readers have a particular interest in variant readings, they will simply ignore the footnotes and marginalia and deal with the text that is in front of them.

In the estimation of the Translation Evaluation Committee, the NKJV is seriously flawed—whatever else its strengths might be—not only because of its numerous archaisms,²⁴ but because of the inferior text preserved in the body of the translation. Finally, how accurate can a translation be that renders words that aren’t there?

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Perhaps we might long for simpler times when no one needed to bother themselves with variant readings. But that is not an option. Both because of the Bart Ehrman’s of this world and out of a proper zeal for the truth, translations need to fairly represent the evidence when there is some question about a particular text. Nor is this a matter that pastors can simply ignore when equipping their people to assess translations. Yes it can get complicated. Yes it can get technical. But issues like these deserve more than a sound bite answer. Simple solutions may sound appealing, but real things are seldom simple. As pastors educate their people about the significance of variant readings, let them above all emphasize the wonderful providence of God in preserving the text of the New Testament and the fundamental reliability of that text. To this end, I have written this little paper. I pray it serve that purpose!

²³ William F. Beck, *The Holy Bible: An American Translation* (Osage Beach: Lake Printing Company, 1976).

²⁴ Many translators refer to the type of English used in the NKJV—so removed from the common usage of today—as “Biblish.”

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For Further Reading

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