

# A Primer on Bible Translations

## Part Two

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In Part One of this series, we examined a brief history of the King James Version, the Greek New Testament of which is based on the Textus Receptus, originally compiled by Erasmus and further edited over the years (today's accepted Textus Receptus is the revised edition made by Robertus Stephanus in 1550). In this article we will look at another major Greek compilation upon which some new translations are made.

The Textus Receptus is based on 7 Greek manuscripts dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. That's well over a thousand years after the original autographs were first penned by the Apostles & prophets. Those 7 Greek manuscripts were, at best, copies of copies of copies, made by people who probably never saw the originals. But we do have much older manuscripts available today, some dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Altogether, today we have 5,309 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, of varying size and quality. Most are copies of copies of copies, and repeat the same flaws found in those from which they were copied. Some are mere fragments with but a few words, while others are extensive texts containing multiple books of the New Testament.

Defenders of the Textus Receptus (and the KJV which is based upon it) argue that using older sources does not necessarily mean better sources. The Textus Receptus has been confirmed to match 95% with older documents discovered since it was compiled. Most of the 5% that does not exactly match amounts to nothing more than minor variations, with virtually no impact on doctrine, interpretation, or application. (There are *some* significant differences.) But if the Textus Receptus is so reliable, why do nearly all the modern translations use different sources, the Westcott-Hort text, the Nestle-Aland text, and the United Bible Society text?

### Westcott and Hort

Brook Westcott and Fenton Hort lived in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and believed that, because the Textus Receptus sources were so far removed (by over a thousand years) from the original autographs, that it was inevitable that errors had been introduced into the manuscripts, that those manuscripts were therefore unreliable, and that older manuscripts would provide a superior foundation for translation. Their Greek compilation was published in 1881 and known as the Critical Text. They were not the first scholars to offer an alternative to Textus Receptus, but theirs was the most pre-eminent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it served as the basis for other compilations and translations.

Rather than using the 7 Greek manuscripts from the 12<sup>th</sup> century that Erasmus used, Westcott and Hort used the much older Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus manuscripts, which were the oldest known large manuscripts at the time.

### Codex Vaticanus

Codex Vaticanus, so named because it is kept in the Vatican Library, is dated to 325-350 AD. It contains both Old and New Testaments, though it is not 100% complete. It includes some

apocryphal books endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church, but does not include the epistles to Timothy or Titus, the book of Revelation, or the latter part of Hebrews. These gaps were filled using other, smaller manuscripts. Yet because it does contain the majority of the Bible, and because it pre-dates nearly all other Greek manuscripts, many believe it is free from most of the scribal errors introduced by later copyists, which were reproduced and spread in the majority of transcriptions. Scholars are divided over the value of this manuscript: some claim it is the best, owing to its ancient age, while others claim it is the worst because it is so different from newer texts. One thing is for certain: it contains several differences from the Textus Receptus.

### Codex Sinaiticus

Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest complete copy of the New Testament written in common Greek; it also includes the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It also includes some apocryphal books. Like the Codex Vaticanus, it was written in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately it was subjected to numerous “corrections” through its early existence, causing some to doubt its reliability. It strongly matches the Codex Vaticanus, and some historians believe the two documents may have been stored together for a while in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was found at a monastery on the Sinai peninsula, hence the name.

### The Critical Text

Westcott and Hort used these two codices in compiling their Greek New Testament. For a short while, their Critical Text was regarded as a landmark. Several other scholars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century published Greek texts that were very similar to theirs, largely matching in departures from the Textus Receptus. The American Standard Version (1901) primarily used the Critical Text as the Greek source for its New Testament.

Though the Critical Text of Westcott and Hort achieved significant fame for being different, and allegedly more accurate, than the Textus Receptus, its fame did not last. Continuing research revealed some weaknesses in their foundational texts, the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus Codices. No major English translation made since World War II has been based on the Critical Text, except the New World Translation made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Before proceeding, let’s summarize what we have learned so far:

1. The Textus Receptus, which was based on Greek manuscripts from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is the foundation of the King James Version.
2. The Critical Text, which was based on the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus from the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, is the foundation for the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Bible, the New World Translation, and the American Standard Version of 1901.

If you use some other translation today, you are probably wondering now what yours is based on! Stay tuned and I’ll cover the Nestle-Aland text and the United Bible Society text in the next article.