

The Authority of the Bible

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What about the manuscript sources of the various Bible translations?

Is it true that the most faithful source is the Textus Receptus compiled by Erasmus and used as the basis for the Luther Bible, French Bible, and the King James English Bible?

While at one time this was probably correct, it is no longer the case. In creating the Textus Receptus, Erasmus, although a great scholar, had access to only eight manuscripts, all from the so-called Byzantine family of biblical manuscripts. And the oldest of Erasmus' documents dated only from the ninth century. This meant that his oldest manuscript represented at least eight centuries of copying and re-copying, which allowed substantial opportunity for errors to creep in through accidental miscopying or scribal additions and omissions. However, Erasmus' version was superior to anything else at that time.

This situation no longer applies today. Since the time of Erasmus, Luther, and the King James translators, we have discovered far older biblical manuscripts that date to the fifth, fourth, and in fragments even to the second century. Such sources have at least a 500-year copying advantage over the best manuscript Erasmus consulted. Therefore they offer much less chance of accidental mistakes. Two of these, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, are on display at the present time in the British Museum. Expert specialists have studied them carefully and have found no evidence that someone has tampered with the text.

Based on a huge number of manuscripts, including the most ancient available texts, in the late 1800s two famed British scholars, professors Wescott and Hort, prepared a new composite biblical text, one superior in quality to that of Erasmus. It became the basis of the English revision of the King James Version published in full in 1885. Immediately after its

publication Ellen White began to consult it and often incorporated its readings into her books and articles. Clearly she had no reluctance to use it because of its manuscript base. In 1901 an American version of the 1885 English Revised Version was issued, being a very similar work. It was called the American Revised Version, and Mrs. White made use of it as well, although it too was based on the Wescott and Hort text. A stream of additional translations has followed since 1901, at least 50 in English and many more in other languages, all of them based on modern texts, either of Wescott and Hort or similar. None has used Erasmus' Textus Receptus.

Recently a few Adventists have called for exclusive use of the King James Version (itself last revised in 1769) on the grounds that modern Greek and Hebrew texts have been subjected to possible alteration at the hands of Catholic scholars, whereas Erasmus' Textus Receptus was not. They seem to forget that Erasmus himself was a Catholic scholar. Moreover, the late manuscripts Erasmus used were all drawn from Catholic monasteries, where they had been copied and re-copied over the centuries, so exposing them to very great opportunities to change. Ironically, the most ancient manuscripts used for today's translations were in Catholic hands for 500 years less than Erasmus' manuscripts. One would expect the defenders of the King James Version to take note of this fact if their concern is about possible corruption of the text. These people, although undoubtedly sincere, have failed to take all the evidence into account, and by spreading an alarm about newer versions are doing the cause of Christ a disservice.

There are in fact problems in translations, some significant in the looser "dynamic" translations where translators have taken considerable liberties in departure from a literal reading of the text in order to convey what they believe it really means. Such tactics make these translations suspect as sources for doctrinal belief. Examples of this problem include the New English Bible, Living Bible (actually a paraphrase rather than translation), and Today's English Version, widely distributed by the Bible Societies. But problems with these

translations rest not in their Greek and Hebrew base texts, but with renderings into English that do not follow closely the original readings.

Better modern translations include the English and American Revised Versions, Revised Standard Version, New International Version, and New American Standard Bible (itself a revision of the 1901 American Revised Version). The newly-published New King James Version has adopted numerous improvements that occur in other modern translations, but in doing so has departed from sole reliance on Erasmus' Textus Receptus. Bible readers should select a version based on the most ancient manuscript sources, whose translators are committed to a quite literal translation of the text.