

Is Your Modern Translation Corrupt?

By: James R. White

Summary

King James Version Only advocates argue that all modern translations of the New Testament are based on Greek manuscripts that contain intentional doctrinal corruptions. However, an examination of the most important manuscripts underlying these translations demonstrates that such charges are based more upon prejudice than fact. The papyri finds of the last century, together with the great uncial texts from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., do not deprecate the deity of Christ, the Trinity, or salvation by grace through faith. Modern translations, such as the NIV and NASB, are not “corrupt” but instead trustworthy and useful translations of the Word of God.

Baptist writer William P. Grady, in a chapter titled the “Synagogue of Satan,” writes, “The average Christian is unaware that the manuscripts from which the modern ‘Bibles’ have been translated are Egyptian in origin; more specifically, Alexandrian. This lack of understanding is exacerbated by little or no knowledge of Egypt’s heretical climate at that time. When these factors are appreciated, the weakness and hypocrisy behind the modern revision movement becomes more readily apparent.”¹

The claim that modern Bible translations such as the New International Version (NIV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) are based upon “corrupt” editions of the Greek and Hebrew texts is a common argument of King James Only advocates. Believers who encounter the claims of individuals such as Peter Ruckman,² Samuel Gipp,³ Gail Riplinger,⁴ or D. A. Waite⁵ will often hear that while the King James Version (KJV) is based upon “God honoring manuscripts,” the modern translations are based upon only a handful of heretical, corrupt manuscripts.⁶ They allege that these manuscripts can be linked to every kind of heretical belief, even when those beliefs are contradictory to one another. One will find KJV Only advocates⁷ linking these manuscripts to Arianism, Gnosticism, liberalism, and Roman Catholicism. These manuscripts allegedly deny salvation by grace through faith, the resurrection of Christ, and the existence of hell, and affirm any number of other heresies and errors. Therefore, since nearly all modern translations⁸ are based upon these “corrupt” manuscripts, the translations are also corrupt and should be rejected by all “Bible believers.”

The importance of the topic should not be underestimated. While the vast majority of conservative Christian scholars completely reject the KJV Only position,⁹ the emotionally charged rhetoric of KJV Only advocates causes unnecessary concerns among many believers. It is a sad truth that most Christians have only a vague knowledge of the history of the Bible and almost no knowledge of the mechanisms by which the Bible has come to us today. Issues regarding the transmission of the text over time (the process of copying), the comparison of one written text to another (textual criticism), and translation are not popular topics of discussion or study in the church today. Therefore, the claims of KJV Only advocates are liable to deeply trouble many Christians, even to the point of causing them to question the reliability and usefulness of their NIV or NASB Bibles. When believers are wrongly led to doubt the integrity

of the translation they have used for years, Christian scholars have a responsibility to set the record straight.

Moreover, there is a real desire on the part of many to hold to the “old ways” — the “traditions” of the “good ol’ days” when things were so much better than they are today. Since many believers distrust anything connected with the term “modern,” for them the KJV becomes an icon of what was “good” about the past, and modern translations end up representing everything that is wrong with today’s church.

Is there any weight to the charges being made against the manuscripts used by modern translations? Should one distrust modern translations? Those are the questions we must answer.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1516 a Roman Catholic scholar and priest, Desiderius Erasmus, published the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament. Over the course of his lifetime four more editions would come out, each differing in various ways from the other. It was this Greek text that influenced the life of Martin Luther.¹⁰ Indeed, all of the Reformers¹¹ used this text — a point KJV Only advocates often make. We should point out, however, that their choice of the text was not due to anything other than availability. Erasmus’s text was widely published and relatively inexpensive, and hence was easily obtainable. Textual studies had not yet advanced to the point of even being able to identify different kinds of text types in the underlying Greek manuscripts. Therefore, to attempt to enlist the Reformers as advocates of one particular text type over another is to embroil them in a debate that was not theirs.

Robert Estienne, better known by his Latin name, Stephanus, continued Erasmus’s work. Theodore Beza, who succeeded Calvin in Geneva, used Estienne’s work. Beza was particularly interested in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, even collecting a few of the more important manuscripts himself. He produced a number of editions of the Greek New Testament.

All of these editions — the five of Erasmus, Stephanus’s text (primarily his 1550 edition), and Beza’s editions — were available to the King James translators while they labored between 1604 and 1611. Since these editions differed at various points,¹² the translators also played the role of textual critics, weighing the various readings and making decisions as it seemed best to them, just as modern editors and translators do. It is important to note that the resultant King James New Testament text did not exist in that exact form prior to 1611. That is, there is no family of manuscripts, or even a single manuscript, that reads *exactly* as the King James New Testament. The translators used an “eclectic” methodology, recognizing that no single manuscript should be elevated to the status of the “standard,” but that each manuscript contained scribal errors of various kinds, and that the true and original text was best sought in the plurality of texts.

A few decades after the publication of the KJV, an advertisement appeared for the printed edition of the Greek New Testament that claimed, as advertisements are prone to do, that it represented the “text received by all.” In Latin this phrase boiled down to the *textus receptus*, and hence an advertising blurb became associated with the Greek texts of the Erasmus–Stephanus–Beza line so that today one will find the phrase used to describe the text from which the KJV was translated.¹³ It is important to note, however, that the *Textus Receptus* (TR) normally used by KJV Only advocates did not exist in 1611. That is, the TR used today is normally the one created

by Scrivener in 1894, which took as its basis the English translation of the KJV, giving the reader the Greek textual choices made by the KJV translators.

The TR was the “standard” text for more than 200 years in most of Europe. While more manuscripts came to light during this time, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a serious challenge to the preeminence of the TR was mounted through the work of Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort. Westcott and Hort recognized the existence of text types or “text families” in the growing number of manuscripts available to scholars, and they asserted that the most common form of the NT text, found predominately in later manuscripts, was the result of an earlier revision. This meant that the TR, in their view, represented a later, secondary form of the text. The earlier, more primitive (and hence more *pure*) form of the text was to be found in those manuscripts that predated this revision.

The TR text generally represents the Byzantine family of manuscripts. The Byzantine text type is by far the majority text type and is to be found in the vast majority of later NT manuscripts. The other text types include the Western, the Caesarean, and the most important, the Alexandrian. The names indicate that these text types are related to geographical areas, though it should not be assumed that all Alexandrian manuscripts come from Alexandria, nor all Byzantine manuscripts from Byzantium.

Modern Greek texts, such as the Nestle-Aland 27th edition and the United Bible Societies 4th edition, which underlie modern English translations and are used most often in college and seminary-level Greek classes, are based not upon just a few texts, but upon *all* Greek manuscripts. Unlike the TR, which was derived from only one stream of the large Byzantine family of texts, the modern texts draw from the entire range of Greek texts. The modern Greek texts also provide extensive textual notes indicating what readings are to be found in which manuscripts. This is important for the person who wants to check the choices made by editors and translators, as well as for the person concerned about alleged “secrecy” on the part of modern textual scholars. Modern Greek texts are open in allowing the reader to examine all the relevant manuscript readings, leading to honesty and accountability.

HOW READINGS ARE DETERMINED

When manuscripts differ from each other, one needs a methodology to determine which reading to include in the Greek text and in any translation derived from that Greek text. Given the fact that no two handwritten Greek manuscripts read *exactly* the same, everyone who engages in creating printed editions of the Greek text or translations into modern languages must struggle with textual diversity. Erasmus did so, the KJV translators did so, and modern scholars engage in the same task. The King James Version is just as much a result of this process of study and examination as any modern text, and those who assert it is somehow above such “human” activities are simply ignoring the facts of history. If KJV Only advocates wish to say that all the decisions made by Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza, and the KJV translators were *perfect*, they need to explain *why*. Simply assuming this won't do.

Most of the textual differences that have attracted charges of “corruption” by KJV Only advocates come from the fact that modern textual scholars believe that certain text types carry more weight in determining a reading than others. That is, rather than simply counting manuscripts to see which reading has more manuscripts on its side, scholars recognize that other

factors must be considered. Most agree that the Byzantine text type, as a whole, is a later form of the text, while the Alexandrian text type generally represents an earlier form. Since the TR, and therefore the KJV, represents a Byzantine form, modern texts will differ at places from the KJV where scholars determine that the KJV's reading comes from a later, rather than earlier, time.

Modern Greek texts do not simply reproduce the entire Alexandrian text type. Instead, each variant is examined as a single unit, with both external considerations (e.g., which manuscripts contain which readings) and internal considerations (e.g., context, determining which reading is most difficult, etc.) being used to determine which reading will be placed in the main text. It is important to note, however, that those readings not chosen are still included in the textual apparatus at the bottom of the page, and at times modern translation committees will choose one of these variants as their main reading, feeling free to disagree with the editors of the Greek text they are relying upon.

WHAT IS "CORRUPT"?

The charge of "corrupt manuscripts," while often made, is far less often defined. What does the term mean? Textual critics use the term to refer to *any* variation from the original text. Hence, spelling the name of the pool in John 5:2 *Bethzatha* rather than *Bethesda* would be called a "corruption" of the text, though such a difference is hardly relevant to the meaning of the text. This is why textual scholar Bruce Metzger can title a work on the subject, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*.

KJV Only advocates, however, do not use the term in this way. Most often they use it to communicate the idea of specific, purposeful, doctrinal corruption or perversion. Any variation from the chosen standard (the KJV) is considered a "corruption." And there are many such variations. But does this make modern texts "corrupt"? Certainly not. In point of fact, if we make the most primitive form of the NT text the standard, the Byzantine text type (and hence the KJV itself) shows evidence of having the largest number of scribal errors, additions, and expansions, and hence would be, in the most accurate use of the term, the most "corrupt" form of text. It all depends on what one defines as the "chosen standard," for the standard determines which texts end up labeled "corrupt."

Textual variations exist. This is a fact everyone must deal with, including every KJV Only advocate who wishes to be honest with history and with himself or herself. But why are there variations? And does the presence of variations make a manuscript "corrupt"?

One of the most important advances in our knowledge of the Greek manuscripts since the days of King James comes from the area of scribal habits. We are able to recognize much more clearly now what kinds of errors people are liable to make when they are hand-copying a manuscript. The largest portion of textual variants in the NT comes from simple scribal errors, not from purposeful "corruption" of the text for theological reasons. For example, even modern writers will engage in the error of *homoeoteleuton* — that is, "similar endings." When copying a sentence, people often skip a word or phrase due to a similar ending appearing later in the line or on the next line. It is obvious that this took place in James 4:12a in the later Byzantine manuscripts. While the earlier texts read, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge," the majority of texts simply have, "There is only one Lawgiver," the term "and Judge" being deleted. The Greek term for lawgiver is *nomothetes*, and the word for judge is *krites*. Notice that both terms

end in the same three-letter cluster, *tes*. A scribe, having written the first term and returning his eyes to his original text, simply caught the *second* appearance of the letter cluster and mistook it for the first. Not realizing this oversight, the scribe continued on, thereby inadvertently deleting the term “judge.”

The same type of error is found at 1 John 3:1, where modern translations (based on the earliest texts) read, “. . .that we might be called the children of God, and we are!” The later texts (on which the KJV is based) have simply, “that we might be called the children of God.” Similar endings are again found in the Greek, the letter cluster *men* this time causing the problem. A scribe simply skipped the small phrase “and we are,” and this reading became the reading of the majority of Greek texts.

We can identify many more examples of simple scribal error in the texts of the NT. The important thing to note is that such errors do not require one to believe in any grand conspiracy theories, nor must one search for some “hidden meaning” behind the variant itself. The Byzantine scribes who did not have the reference to God as judge were not denying that He is just that, nor were they denying 1 John’s statement that we are the children of God *right now* by faith in Christ. Yet KJV Only materials are filled with this kind of reverse argumentation.¹⁴

Another kind of “corruption” of the NT text was purposeful. (Yes, there *are* purposeful corruptions in NT manuscripts.) Almost always these changes are *toward* what would be called “orthodoxy,” not *away* from it. Most often these corruptions come from scribes who were attempting to “help out” the biblical text. Over and over again, for example, one will find scribes trying to harmonize the parallel accounts of events in the Gospels. There was a desire to make Matthew, Mark, and Luke say the *same* thing in the *same* words.

A quick glance at a parallel Greek text of the Gospels¹⁵ provides multiple examples on almost every page. One such example will suffice. In Luke 9:23 Luke recorded the Lord saying that the disciple must take up his cross *daily* and follow Him. Since Matthew and Mark did not include the term “daily,” a large portion of later manuscripts “harmonized” the passage by deleting the phrase from Luke.

Should someone ask, “But how do you know someone didn’t add it to Luke?” we must first point out that the reading is found in the most ancient manuscripts of Luke. Furthermore, why would a scribe try to make Luke *different* than Matthew or Mark? The tendency we find in the texts is to make things *the same*, not different. Those who have spent time in the text of the NT know the truth of this rule of thumb: “The original reading is most likely the one that best explains how the others arose.” If one can easily determine how a particular reading could give rise to the others, that reading gets the weight of the internal evidence on its side. One can then factor in the manuscript evidence so that a final decision can be made.¹⁶ The same thing happens in the Pauline Epistles that bear similarity to one another, such as Ephesians and Colossians. One of the most famous instances of harmonization is found at Colossians 1:14. KJV Only advocates refer to this passage with great frequency. In a recent *Bible Answer Man* broadcast a caller attacked the NIV for “taking out the blood at Colossians 1:14.” In Salt Lake City I encountered a KJV Only advocate who was passing out tracts outside the Mormon temple and who referred to the NIV as the “bloodless Bible,” again citing this passage. When one compares the KJV with modern translations at this point, it certainly *seems* like there is a problem.

KJV	In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:
NASB	in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
NIV	in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Where is the phrase “through his blood”? Here we have another example of how parallel passages can cause scribes to “harmonize.” Note the source of the phrase in the parallel passage in Ephesians 1:7:

KJV	In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;
NASB	In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace,
NIV	In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace

The phrase “through his blood” in Ephesians 1:7 is found immediately after “in whom we have redemption.” Hence, later scribes, possibly inadvertently, inserted the phrase in Colossians as well. In point of fact, the KJV’s reading at Colossians 1:14 is the *minority* reading based upon only a few comparatively late manuscripts. It should be emphasized that all the modern translations contain the phrase at Ephesians 1:7. Why? Because they are seeking solely to translate the Greek text, and the Greek text — the *best* Greek text no matter how one slices it — has this reading. There is no conspiracy, no cut-and-snip methodology occurring in these reputable translations.

ALLEGED DOCTRINAL “CORRUPTIONS”

Are modern translations “doctrinally corrupt”? Some are. The *New World Translation* published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is certainly corrupt doctrinally *and* textually as well.¹⁷ Some translations give evidence of rank liberalism or a less-than-orthodox view of Scripture. But the reputable, scholarly translations used regularly by believers such as the NASB and the NIV are most certainly *not* doctrinally corrupt. The textual variant at John 6:47 helps us demonstrate that the broad spectrum of passages most often cited by KJV Only advocates do not, upon close examination, support their charges of doctrinal corruption. Dr. D. A. Waite of *The Bible for Today* alleges just such corruption in his book *Defending the King James Bible*. He alleges a “**SERIOUS THEOLOGICAL PERVERSION**” (emphasis in original)¹⁸ in modern texts at John 6:47. Note the comparison:

KJV

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.

Modern Translations (here NASB)

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.

Modern translations do not contain the phrase “on me” at this verse, causing Dr. Waite to comment, “To make salvation only a matter of ‘believing’ rather than solely, as Christ said in this verse, ‘**believing on Me,**’ is truly ‘**ANOTHER GOSPEL**’! If you were trying to lead someone to Christ with the NIV or NASV, using this verse, they could ‘believe’ in anything and still have ‘everlasting life’ — whether in Santa Claus, in the Easter Bunny, in the Tooth Fairy, in Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, or in any of the false world religions!” (emphasis in original).¹⁹

Accusations of preaching “another gospel” are quite strong. But does the accusation have merit? Not at all. The NASB and NIV are brimming with the phrase “believe in me.” Just a few verses before John 6:47 (in v. 35), the NASB reads, “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who *believes in Me* shall never thirst’” (emphasis added). And in the immediate context of John 6, v.40 reads, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and *believes in Him*, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (emphasis added). Other places in John where the phrase appears in modern translations include John 7:38, 11:25-26, 12:44, and 46. If the modern translations are trying to preach “another gospel,” why do they include all these references that contradict this “other gospel”? What’s more, how do they explain the many places where the KJV has the simple phrase “believe,” such as at Mark 9:23 and Romans 1:16 and 10:4? Is the KJV guilty of teaching “another gospel” because it does not have the specific phrase “in Him” or “in Christ” at these places? Of course not.

As we have seen all along, the modern translations are simply translating the text before them, and in this case the phrase “in me” is not found in the most ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Later scribes most probably inadvertently harmonized the phrase “believe” with the more common “believe in me,” resulting in the KJV reading. There is no perversion here. Instead, this is one of literally hundreds of examples that could be presented from the text of the Gospels that show the tendency of scribes to utilize the most common way of saying things, often resulting in this kind of harmonization. Anyone who thinks that the lack of the term “in me” at John 6:47 somehow alters the gospel itself has an extremely strained view of how one determines the gospel message from the text of Scripture.

A little patience and a little study will reward the diligent student with answers to all of those passages cited by KJV Only advocates regarding alleged doctrinal “corruption.” In each case the reputable modern translations will be cleared of the charge.

Many other examples could be examined that confirm that modern translations such as the NASB and NIV, far from being corrupt, are in fact the best examples of faithful English translations of the best Greek texts we have available to us. The Christian who studies, memorizes, and obeys the Scriptures as he or she finds them in modern English translations can be confident in the text he or she uses. While the KJV remains to this day a venerable translation,

those who attempt to make it *the* standard to the detriment of more readable (and in many instances more accurate) modern versions are in serious error.

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NOTES

¹William P. Grady, *Final Authority* (Schererville, IN: Grady Publications, 1993), 73. ²See *The Christian's Handbook of Manuscript Evidence* (Pensacola, FL: Pensacola Bible Press, 1990). ³See *The Answer Book* (Shelbyville, TN: Bible & Literature Missionary Foundation, 1989). ⁴See *New Age Bible Versions* (Munroe Falls, OH: A. V. Publications, 1993). ⁵See *Defending the King James Bible* (Collingswood, NJ: The Bible for Today, 1992). ⁶In this article we focus primarily upon the New Testament text, as the majority of allegations of “corruption” are aimed at Greek New Testament manuscripts rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. ⁷It is vital to note that we use the term “KJV Only” to represent only those who believe the KJV alone is the God-honoring English translation today. There are many differences among those who attack modern translations. Men such as Samuel Gipp (a student of Peter Ruckman) attack those who defend the Greek text (known as the Textus Receptus, or “TR”) that underlies the KJV rather than the KJV text itself. In answering the question, “What is the difference between a ‘Textus Receptus Man’ and a ‘King James Man?’” he writes, “A ‘TR Man’ gets his manuscripts from Antioch and his philosophy from Egypt” (*The Answer Book*, 78). In the same way, those who defend the TR attack those who go so far as to invest the KJV translation with “divine preservation” or even the status of “advanced revelation.” Dr. Theodore Letis has identified the position many of the more radical KJV Only advocates have as “cultic” in these words: “Anyone who ascribes the inspired characteristics of the Hebrew Bible or the greek N.T. to an English Bible and anathematizes everyone who does not agree with them is a cult. These tend to be...highly separatistic and unlearned Baptists.” (Internet post from the “Theonomy-L” mailing list, dated Friday, June 16, 1995.) ⁸The New King James Version (NKJV) is based upon the same texts used in the translation of the original 1611 KJV. Despite this fact, KJV Only advocates attack the NKJV with as much fervor as they do the NASB and the NIV. ⁹It is important to differentiate the KJV Only position and the related “TR Only” position (which asserts the superiority of the *specific* Greek text used by the KJV translators) from the “Majority Text” theory proposed and defended by men like Zane Hodges, Art Farstad, and Maurice Robinson. The Majority Text theory, while commanding a rather small minority of scholarly support, is far removed from the position taken by people such as Peter Ruckman and Gail Riplinger. ¹⁰It was from this text, for example, that Luther recognized the vast difference between the Latin Vulgate’s “do penance” and the Greek’s “repent.” ¹¹This is not to say that none of them made corrections or changes to the text. Calvin, for example, disagreed with Erasmus’s text in a number of places. ¹²For examples, see pp. 63-70 in this author’s work, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995). ¹³There are actually as many as 100 different *texti recepti*, so to speak, each one differing in small matters from the others. ¹⁴An excellent example is provided by Gail Riplinger, author of *New Age Bible Versions*. The cover of her book claims, “The Greek manuscripts, critical editions, lexicons and dictionaries behind the *new* versions are examined, revealing their occult origins, contents, and yet unreleased material — a blueprint for the Antichrist’s One World Religion and government.... Documented are the thousands of words,

verses, and doctrines by which new versions will prepare the apostate churches of these last days to accept the religion of Antichrist — even his mark, image, and Lucifer worship.” Riplinger claims that “all new versions, based on a tiny percentage of corrupt Greek manuscripts, make the fatefully frightening addition of three words in Revelation 14:1” (p. 99). A comparison of the KJV with modern texts indicates that the KJV is missing the emphasized words: “The Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had *his name and* his Father’s name written on their foreheads.” Riplinger writes of this alleged addition, “Will the unwary, reading Revelation 14:1 in a recent version, be persuaded that the bible sanctions and encourages the taking of ‘his name’ on their forehead *before* they receive his Father’s name?” (p. 100). A familiarity with the critical apparatus of a Greek text would have saved Riplinger from concern about such conspiracies, for in point of fact it is only a “tiny percentage” of all Greek manuscripts that *do not* contain the phrase. It fell out in a small number of manuscripts due to the repetition of the Greek phrase *to onoma* and the Greek term *autou*. Again, there is no need to look for “conspiracies” when a normal scribal error of sight is a far more logical and rational explanation.¹⁵ Kurt Aland has provided such a tremendously helpful tool, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985).¹⁶ I hasten to remind the reader that Erasmus and the KJV translators used similar reasoning. Hence, the KJV’s readings were arrived at in the same way. For example, in citing a textual variant at Matthew 20:22, Erasmus correctly noted that the phrase in question was most probably borrowed from Mark 10:38, even though retaining it in his text. Modern textual critics agree, and have placed the reading in footnotes.¹⁷ I note only in passing the fact that the NWT, though ostensibly following the 1881 W&H text, deliberately deletes the word “me” at John 14:14, despite its presence in the W&H text, so as to avoid having another reference of prayer to Christ. This is blatantly obvious “textual criticism on the basis of theology.”¹⁸ Waite, *Defending the King James Bible*, 158. ¹⁹Ibid