



The Majority Text: The Preserved Word of God

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It was August of 1993, and I had an advantage that most Christians would never be fortunate to have. I had trusted in Jesus Christ as my Savior, and now I had eight months of solitude to study His Word. Without the baggage of the religious trappings of men, I was able to dedicate my time to learning about the One who saved me. All I had was a New International Version of the Bible. Even at this early point in my faith, I occasionally noticed that some of the verses were missing. Any investigation as to the reason for the missing verses would have to wait.

A few years into my Christian walk I began to have the opportunity to teach the Bible. It was at this juncture that the issue of Bible translations once again rose to the surface. I began to study the differences in translation techniques and knew that I needed to teach from a formal equivalent translation. I settled on the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Many of the leading Bible teachers were using the NASB and it seemed to be a safe choice for serious study and the teaching of the Word of God. Along my journeys I began to interact with men who held to the King James only position. Choosing not to shy away from the issue, I decided to tackle textual criticism head on. I ordered every book on the subject that I could find. It was during this time that I made an important discovery. I believe the evidence demonstrates that the King James only position is built on faulty logic and factual errors, but there are definitely some strong arguments that bolster the Majority Text position. Since that time, it has become the position that I have held to. While it is not within the scope of this paper to examine every detailed argument for the Majority Text, allow me to posit several reasons this position deserves serious consideration by Christians today.

Defining the Terms

When speaking of the Critical Text or the Majority Text, we need to define the terminology. It is widely understood that:

In more recent times textual scholars have classified the manuscripts into different texttypes from those of Wescott and Hort. They have also departed from such extreme dependence on Sinaiticus (*Aleph*) and Vaticanus (*B*), giving more weight to other early witnesses, such as the papyri. Many scholars are willing to include the Byzantine text in their formula rather than totally ignore this large segment of evidence. In addition to this, modern scholars choose the reading they think best fits the context, and according to what they believe a copyist would be most likely to write. Thus they produce what is essentially an “eclectic text,” that is, one based on choosing individual readings rather than following a certain textual theory (Farstad 1989, 108-109).

Herein is one of the concerns that I have with the Critical Text. On the surface it sounds as if the premise of this textual theory is that the older manuscripts are thought to be closer to the originals. This would mean that the Critical Text is primarily based on two manuscripts, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. Unfortunately, it has become a situation where men sit in judgment (picking and choosing wording from different texts) as they try to honestly discern what they believe the correct reading of God’s Word is. Notably, this can even be seen in the introduction to the New International Version, where the text states, “The Greek text used in translating the New Testament was an eclectic one” (NIV, 1984). The problem with this approach is that:

An eclecticism based solely on internal considerations is unacceptable for several reasons. It is unreasonable. It ignores the over 5,000 Greek MS now extant, to say nothing of patristic and versional evidence, except to cull variant readings from them. ... It follows that it has no principled basis for rejecting conjectural emendations. It has no history of the transmission of the text. Therefore the choice between variants ultimately depends upon guesswork (Pickering Chapter 2).

It is generally agreed that the variants make up a small portion of the Word of God. However, this is surely not a suitable method of discovering God’s revelation to mankind.

In sharp contrast, the Majority Text position teaches, “The readings found in the largest number of manuscripts are most likely to trace back to the earliest copies - the autographs actually penned by the evangelists and apostles themselves. These would have time to multiply the most” (Farstad 1989, 109).

Arguments for the Majority Text

Majority Text advocates believe strongly in the preservation of God’s Word. The Lord Jesus Christ promised the preservation of His Word. In Matthew 5:18 He said, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” The jot refers to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the tittle refers to the smallest stroke of a Hebrew letter. This is significant because not even the smallest letter of God’s Word will pass away during this present age. The end result is that we can have absolute confidence that God’s Word is present within the manuscripts that have been preserved. However, if the Critical Text theory is correct, Christians did not have access to the preserved Word of God until the discovery of both Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. Further, the doctrine of the preservation of God’s Word plays a pivotal role in passages such as Mark 16, where verses 9-20 are said to be in dispute by those that hold to the Critical Text. Many scholars that hold to the Critical Text believe that the original ending of the Gospel of Mark was lost. This is in direct contradiction to the Words of Christ. Therefore, only two other options exist. Either verses 9-20 are a part of the original text (as Majority Text advocates suggest) or the text must end with verse 8. This, however, would be an abrupt ending to the text, and does not seem likely.

In this discussion of textual families, it should be noted that most of the New Testament Scriptures were originally written to churches that were located in a region that would later become a part of the Byzantine Empire, which is where a great number of manuscripts were

found. This included the churches at Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. There is no evidence to suggest that any original manuscript of the New Testament was sent to Egypt, where Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus were found. It stands to reason that the churches of the New Testament faithfully preserved and reproduced the manuscripts that were entrusted to them. These manuscripts testify to the faithful preservation of God's Word in the Majority Text.

Much ink has been spilled by Critical Text advocates who frequently suggest that none of the older manuscripts follow the readings of the Majority Text. This argument only tells part of the story. It is easy to see how Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus survived, given that they were located in such a dry climate. Still, this does not prove that they are accurate reflections of the autographs. Recent discoveries have found, "early papyri" that reflect the manuscripts of the Majority Text (Farstad 1989, 110).

A common misconception that exists is that Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus are in complete agreement and that they unequivocally provide a united testimony of the autographs.

The truth is much different:

As to B and Aleph ... these two MSS disagree over 3,000 times in the space of the four Gospels. Simple logic imposes the conclusion that one or the other must be wrong over 3,000 times - that is, they have over 3,000 mistakes between them. (If you were to write out the four Gospels by hand do you supposed you could manage to make 3,000 mistakes, or 1,500?) Aleph and B disagree, on the average, in almost every verse of the Gospels. Such a showing serious undermines their credibility (Pickering Chapter 6).

Further, Codex Vaticanus includes the Apocrypha. Does this mean we should now include these books in our Bible, even though the early Church clearly rejected them? This same manuscript contains a scribal note next to Hebrews 1:3, complaining about an earlier scribe altering the Word of God. The scribal note states, "Fool and knave, can't you leave the old reading alone and not alter it!" (Hixson 2009, "How We Got Our Bible"). It is hard to believe that this is one of the

two manuscripts that has become the basis for most of the English Bible translations that exist today.

Thankfully, the textual variants only impact a small minority of the New Testament. Every doctrine of the Christian faith is present in both the Majority Text and the Critical Text. Therefore, whatever Greek text we prefer Christians should make it their aim to use a formal equivalent translation for serious study, and be aware of the textual variances and the translation issues.

Bibliography

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