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A RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

This paper explains the policy of Wycliffe Bible Translators on the Hebrew and Greek texts on which Bible translations are based.

All of us in Wycliffe Bible Translators have a deep concern that the message of the Scriptures should be faithfully transmitted. It is a top priority that the translations we work on should be as faithful as possible to the original text in every detail, communicating the message accurately and clearly. Our members all believe in the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures and are committed, as God enables us, to translating the message without change or distortion.

For the Old Testament, our translators follow the standard Hebrew (Masoretic) text of the Old Testament. This is the text established by the Masoretes, Hebrew scholars who worked between the sixth and eleventh centuries A.D, who did much careful study to achieve a standard text, working from earlier manuscripts. When Hebrew scribes copying this text realized that an earlier copier had made an error, they would nevertheless faithfully copy the text as it stood – not daring to modify the sacred text. In the margin, however, they would write what they believed to be the correct reading. The very fact that they behaved in this manner gives us great confidence in the scrupulousness with which they copied the Old Testament Scriptures.

Concerning the Greek text of the New Testament: None of the original manuscripts, written by the author, has survived, so the Greek manuscripts that we have are all copies. The early Greek New Testament manuscripts were copied by hand many times (further copies being copied from copies). In the course of copying, occasionally a scribe miscopied a word, or omitted a word or a line, or even added a phrase. In fact, of the 5000 early Greek manuscripts that exist, experts tell us that there are no two that are identical in every detail. **But although there are many small differences, there are very few that make a difference to the meaning and none which crucially affect any basic issue of Christian doctrine.** It is amazing to see how God has wonderfully preserved the integrity of the text over the centuries.

The King James Version is based on the *Textus Receptus*. This is an eclectic text compiled by scholars in the late sixteenth century. Scholars, notably Erasmus, Beza and Stephanus, studied the limited number of Greek manuscripts available to them at that time, which dated mainly from the 11th to the 13th century. Where there were different readings in the manuscripts, they carefully made a decision on which seemed to have been the author's original text. After several revised editions, a text was published which contained in its preface the statement that this was now the *textus receptus*, i.e the received text, accepted as authoritative.

Some of the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts, however, have only been discovered or become available to scholars during the last one hundred and fifty years. Some of these newly discovered manuscripts date back to the third and fourth centuries A.D. There is no question as to the authenticity of these manuscripts. Scholars agree that they are genuine.

Recent scholars have done the same thing that Erasmus and Stephanus tried to do, namely to look at *all* the manuscripts that are now available and to try to discern what the author's exact original wording was. In doing so they have taken into account a combination of factors, including the number of manuscripts that have a certain reading, and the date and distribution of the manuscripts. For example, if a certain reading is found in many manuscripts that are widely distributed, this is strong evidence that this was the original reading.

Textual issues are judged by whether the evidence indicates that certain words (or letters) in the text were written by the original author or whether something has been added later, or changed, by a copyist. For example, words that occur in almost all of the earliest Greek manuscripts, and which occur in many manuscripts, can be judged to be original. The great majority of the New Testament text has this degree of certainty.

Much study has been done by many careful and godly scholars. Amongst them were Nestle and Aland and the Nestle-Aland text has become widely accepted. This text takes into account the more recently discovered manuscripts and this is the main reason for the differences from the *Textus Receptus*. Eminent believing scholars of the highest reputation among conservative evangelical Christians agree that the additional manuscript evidence that has now become available to scholars should not be disregarded.

Some questions still remain, however, and research continues. There is no evidence or likelihood that any major change in the Scriptural text will result from this further research. It might very occasionally be that in a very few passages, a reading that now appears in a footnote will later become the recommended reading in the text.

Today the main alternative text to the Nestle-Aland is the *Majority Text*. The *Majority Text* is based on the principle that the reading found in the largest number of manuscripts is the right one. This does not take into account other factors such as the date of the manuscripts, their relationship, or their geographical distribution (whether the manuscripts that have a certain reading all came from one region, or whether they were found in widely distributed locations). In some areas, especially the Byzantine area, Greek was the language used in the churches and so a lot of copies of the Scriptures were made in that area (in contrast to the Western area, where Latin was more widely used). Often many copies were made from one source manuscript – if that source manuscript had a certain reading, all the copies made from it would have this reading too. For this reason most scholars feel that the criterion of the number of manuscripts that have a certain reading is not sufficient alone; it has to be weighed with other criteria, such as date, geographical distribution, and the relationship between manuscripts.

Any significant alternative textual readings are noted in most major language editions of the Bible in footnotes (e.g. “some ancient manuscripts read. . .”) These footnotes are limited to places where the difference in the Greek texts could make a difference of meaning in the English translation.

For a basic introduction to this whole topic, I recommend one of the following:

Carson, D. A. 1979. *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Greenlee, Harold. 1985. *Scribes, Scrolls and Scriptures*. Eerdmans.

Holmes, Michael W. 1989. ‘New Testament Textual Criticism’ Chapter 2 in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, edited by Scot McKnight. Baker Book House.

White, James R. 1995. *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations?* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany house Publishers.

On the issue of which texts translators should follow, our Wycliffe policy statement is as follows: “Where there are alternative textual readings in the Bible manuscripts, the translation should follow the best available original language texts. No reading which is not well supported by manuscript evidence should be followed.”

On passages such as the Gospel of Mark chapter 16:9-20, and the Gospel of John chapter 7:53 – 8:11, all our translations include these verses.

Most of our translation personnel are not textual experts, and so follow the text that is generally accepted to be the standard recommended by scholars in this field, namely the Nestle-Aland text, 26th or 27th edition. This is also the text provided in the United Bible Societies 3rd and 4th editions of the Greek New Testament.

If translators feel there are good reasons for following an alternative textual reading at any point, they need to show strong evidence from the Greek manuscripts for this. In places where there is a significant question on a textual issue, a footnote may be included to explain the alternative possibility, as is done in English Bibles.

In making these decisions careful consideration is given to the convictions of church leaders in the area where the translation is being made. For example, if church leaders in the area prefer to follow the *Textus Receptus*, this may be done. Footnotes giving the translation of the readings recommended in the Nestle-Aland text should, however, also be included.

All those involved in Bible translation need wisdom from God in making the right decisions, in textual matters and in the many other problems of translation. Translating is a great challenge and heavy responsibility. It is also very thrilling to see people who have never before heard God’s Word in their own language listening or reading and coming to know the Truth. Please pray that God will guide each one who translates. Our goal is to pass on the wonderful message of the Gospel in all its truth.