

ON THE MAJORITY TEXT

The Text the Church Copied for a Thousand Years

The Majority Text Position, Fairly Presented — and Why I Do Not Finally Hold It

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There is a discipline of honesty that ought to govern how Christians disagree with one another, and the study of the New Testament's manuscripts tests that discipline more sharply than most fields. It is easy to caricature a position you do not hold. It is harder — and more Christian — to state the position the way its best defenders would state it, to grant it the arguments it actually makes, and only then to say where and why you part company. That is the posture I want to keep here, because the question in front of us is genuinely contested among serious, confessional scholars who have spent their careers in the manuscript record and who love the Word of God as much as I do.

The question is this: which Greek text should the church work from? For a century and a half, the discipline mainstream has leaned on the eclectic critical text — the Nestle-Aland and United Bible Societies editions, built variant by variant from the whole documentary record, with weight given to the early Alexandrian manuscripts. But there is a serious minority tradition that says the mainstream has been working from the wrong base text all along, and that the Byzantine textform — the Greek manuscript tradition the church copied for a thousand years, surviving in some five thousand witnesses — has the better claim to represent what the apostles wrote. That is the Majority Text position, and it deserves to be walked carefully before it is set down.

I do not finally adopt it. My own convictions are critical-text and broadly Alexandrian-leaning, held together with a confessional Lutheran reading of preservation that I will get to at the end. But the discipline mainstream does not get to settle a question by acclamation, and when confessional brothers disagree with the mainstream, the disagreement is owed engagement rather than dismissal.

Three positions, not one

Before anything else, three positions have to be pried apart, because lay discussion almost always mashes them together into a single fist.

The first is King-James-Only. This is the claim that the King James Version — or some particular printing of it — is the uniquely, providentially preserved English Bible, that other translations are corrupted, and that the Greek and Hebrew behind the King James are themselves the only reliable forms of those texts. It has popular advocates and a stable lay following in independent fundamentalist Baptist circles, and it has no serious academic defenders. It is not the position this essay walks. Most readers who trust an ESV in the pew and a NASB on the shelf have no King-James-Only convictions to be talked out of. But the position deserves naming, because it is what most people picture when they hear “the Bible should be the King James,” and confusing it with the sober positions below produces unfair caricatures of them. King-James-Onlyism is its own thing.

The second is Textus-Receptus priority. This holds that the printed Greek text behind the King James — the *Textus Receptus* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the editions of Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza, and Elzevir — is the providentially preserved Greek New Testament, and that other base texts depart from that preserved form. It is theologically motivated and academically smaller than the Majority Text position, but it is its more theologically explicit cousin. Its canonical modern statement is Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, with contemporary advocates gathered around the Trinitarian Bible Society and the Confessional Bibliology movement.

The third is Majority Text, or Byzantine priority. This holds that the church should work from the Byzantine textform — the great body of medieval Greek manuscripts — defined as the readings supported by the majority of surviving Greek witnesses. It has two modern editions of standing: the Hodges-Farstad *Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (1982; 2nd ed. 1985), which produces its text largely by counting witnesses; and Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont's *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform* (2005 is the standard edition), which aims instead at the Byzantine textform as a coherent whole, on transmissional and genealogical grounds. Robinson's introductory essay, "The Case for Byzantine Priority," is the most rigorous contemporary academic statement of the position.

The Majority Text and TR-priority positions are related but genuinely distinct — a point worth locking down with one clean example. At most variants they run together; they agree at the longer ending of Mark, the woman caught in adultery, and much else. But they divide at the *Comma Johanneum*, the Trinitarian expansion at 1 John 5:7-8. The TR-priority position prints the Comma, because it is in the *Textus Receptus*. The Majority Text position does not print it — Hodges-Farstad omit it and Robinson-Pierpont omit it — because the Byzantine majority itself omits it. Only a handful of Greek manuscripts before the printing era carry it at all, and fewer still in the body of the text rather than in a margin. That single divergence is enough to show these are two different positions making two different arguments, not one position under two names.

The case for Byzantine priority, at its strongest

Robinson is professor emeritus of Greek and New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he is not a popularizer. He writes for the scholarly community and engages critical-text proponents on their own ground. Anyone who has met the Majority Text position only through King-James-Only polemic will find him a startling interlocutor. His case has several strong pieces, and honesty requires walking the strongest.

First, the argument from liturgical continuity. The Byzantine textform is the form of the Greek New Testament read in the worship of the Greek-speaking church from late antiquity through the fall of Constantinople and beyond — the text embedded in the Byzantine lectionary, the cycles of weekly readings used in the Divine Liturgy for a thousand years. Robinson argues this is no accident. A textual form becomes the lectionary of a continuous worshipping tradition because the congregation recognizes it as Scripture and the liturgy is shaped to it. This is the longest continuous liturgical use of any form of the Greek New Testament — far longer than the Alexandrian text's use in the Egyptian church, which gave way to Coptic translation by the fifth or sixth century. On Robinson's reading, a millennium of lectionary use is an ecclesial vote in the Byzantine text's favor.

Second, the argument from providential preservation applied to the manuscript counts. If God preserved the New Testament, he preserved it in the manuscripts the church actually copied and used — and the church copied and used the Byzantine majority. Some five thousand Byzantine Greek manuscripts survive, against roughly three hundred of Alexandrian character. The disparity is enormous, and on Robinson's reading the disparity is itself evidence. This is not a fallacious appeal to popularity; it is a claim about how the doctrine of preservation ought to interact with the historical record, and it carries confessional weight that Lutherans should feel rather than wave away.

Third — and this is the argument most often missed — the early attestation of Byzantine readings. The popular caricature is that the Byzantine textform is *late*, appearing only in medieval manuscripts. Robinson shows, with detailed citation, that the caricature is wrong. Many Byzantine readings appear in the Old Latin and Old Syriac of the second and third centuries, in Cyprian and Tertullian and other early Latin Fathers, in early lectionaries and liturgical sources. The Greek manuscript record is thin for the Byzantine tradition before the fifth century, Robinson argues, because the Egyptian climate preserved papyrus while the Mediterranean climate did not — a fact about survival, not about the date of the readings. Where Cyprian in the mid-third century, or Tertullian by AD 200, preserves a Latin form of a reading the later Byzantine tradition carries, we have attestation earlier than the surviving Greek manuscripts alone would suggest. The point has real force, and the caricature deserves to die.

Fourth, the critique of the eclectic method itself. The modern critical text is built variant by variant, the editors choosing the best-attested reading at each place. The result is a reconstruction that, in its full sequence of decisions, may match no single surviving manuscript. Robinson presses the sharp point: an editorial reconstruction is not a text the church has ever actually read, whereas the Byzantine textform *is* — a coherent stream embodied in thousands of manuscripts Christians held in their hands and preached from. He

argues the ecclesial weight of a real textual tradition outranks the methodological appeal of a scholarly reconstruction.

To these Hodges and Farstad add a more statistical case: that in a large transmission system where copies beget copies, the original reading at any variant enjoys a head start and tends, over time, to dominate the manuscript pool — unless a deliberate recension disrupts the natural flow. It is a claim about transmission dynamics, developed with mathematical care, and it is not the crude “the majority wins because it is the majority” that critics sometimes reduce it to.

And behind all of it stands Edward Hills, the bridge figure. Hills earned a Th.D. at Harvard in critical textual criticism and then reasoned his way to a theological conviction his discipline did not share: that providential preservation must produce not merely *a* preserved text but *the* preserved text — a single stable target the church can teach, preach, and translate from — and that the *Textus Receptus*, received and used by the whole Reformation world for four centuries, was that form. What Hills gets right is the theological question the academic Majority Text position tends to underplay. What does it mean for the doctrine of preservation that the Protestant church received, translated, catechized, and confessed from this text for four hundred years? That is a real question, and it has confessional force.

Where the position does not carry

I have walked the position as its defenders would want it walked. Now I have to say, as honestly as I have presented it, why it does not finally persuade me. Four considerations.

First, counting is not weighing. The central methodological move of the discipline since Westcott and Hort is that manuscripts are weighed by their genealogical relationships, not counted as undifferentiated votes — because counts reflect copying patterns, not proximity to the original. If the Byzantine textform was standardized early and then copied in enormous quantities through a millennium of Byzantine ecclesiastical scriptoria, the Byzantine majority is exactly what we would expect to find *regardless* of whether its readings stand close to the autographs. The five-thousand-to-three-hundred ratio is a fact about transmission economics — about which manuscripts got copied a lot, in which institutions, with what support. Egypt’s Greek-speaking church gave way to Coptic; the Byzantine world produced Greek manuscripts continuously for a thousand years. The ratio tells us who was copying, not who was closest.

Second, the lectionary argument is partly circular. That the Byzantine text was the lectionary text for a millennium confirms that the Byzantine church preserved and used the

Byzantine text — which is not in dispute. It does not, by itself, show that the Byzantine text stands closer to the apostolic Greek than the Alexandrian text the earlier Egyptian church used. Consider the parallel. The Latin Vulgate was the standard liturgical Bible of the Western church for its own thousand years. By the logic of liturgical continuity, that reception should establish Vulgate priority in textual criticism — yet no one, Robinson included, argues for Vulgate priority, because the Vulgate is a translation of the Greek and its liturgical standing does not make it textually primary against the Greek record. The Reformation's *ad fontes* return to the Greek behind the Latin is a confessional Lutheran touchstone precisely here. The same logic runs, in the inverse direction, against making Byzantine liturgical use into a claim about textual proximity.

Third, the distinctively Byzantine readings tend to appear later. Robinson is right that many Byzantine readings have early versional and patristic support — but the readings that matter for this debate are the *distinctive* ones, where Byzantine disagrees with both Alexandrian and Western. There the pattern reverses. Take the three Christological texts often invoked: the readings at John 1:18, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Acts 20:28 that distinguish the Byzantine tradition are not attested in the early versional or patristic record at the level the older readings are. The great fourth-century uncials preserve the older readings a century and a half before the distinctively Byzantine ones begin to dominate. So Robinson's early-attestation argument carries for the *common* Byzantine readings, where Byzantine and Alexandrian agree — and does not carry for the *distinctive* ones, where they disagree. That distinction does the decisive work.

Fourth, preservation does not adjudicate among textual streams — at least not on the Lutheran reading. Hills, and to a lesser degree the academic Majority Text position, treats providential preservation as if it points to one stream: the *Textus Receptus*, or the Byzantine majority. The confessional Lutheran reading is more cautious. Pieper, Robert Preus, and the post-Reformation Lutheran dogmaticians locate preservation in the manuscript tradition *as a whole*, not in any single stream or printed edition. Preservation is the promise that God's Word does not pass away; it is not a guarantee that some particular recension is uniquely free of the ordinary process of copying. On this reading the *Textus Receptus* is part of the preserved tradition, the Byzantine majority is part of it, the Alexandrian text-type is part of it, the versions and the Fathers are part of it — and the doctrine affirms the church's reception of God's Word across the whole record while leaving the textual judgment at each variant to the ordinary tools of the discipline. The Majority Text appeal asks the doctrine of preservation to do work it was never formulated to do.

Taken together: the position has a coherent internal logic and real arguments made by serious scholars — and, on the weight of these four considerations, a methodological case that does not carry against the broader eclectic reasoning of the discipline. It is unper-

suasive, not unserious. Those are very different verdicts, and keeping them different is most of the point.

The Lutheran posture

I want to land this the way it has to be landed, because the people whose position I have walked are not abstractions. Robinson is a working scholar whose decades in the manuscripts produced a printed Greek New Testament many of us own. Hodges shaped two generations of preachers. Hills was a serious critic who came to a conviction his discipline did not share and spent his life articulating it with care. These are confessional Christian brothers whose disagreement with me is methodological, not doctrinal — and the distinction matters enormously.

It is methodological because the doctrines of the faith are identical across the textual streams. The deity of Christ is not in dispute between confessional Lutherans and confessional advocates of the Majority Text — even where the Byzantine readings register slightly weaker at the Christological texts, the doctrine stands on the whole scriptural witness. The Trinity is not in dispute; the very editors of the Majority Text omit the *Comma Johanneum*. Justification, the two natures of Christ, the means of grace — none of it hangs on the outcome of the textual-stream debate. The question between us is only this: which Greek text best represents the apostolic autographs? And the answer, whichever way an editor leans, leaves the faith standing. The Christian faith does not ride on a textual decision.

So the church received what the church wrote. The apostles wrote in Greek; the church received their writings in many languages and through many manuscript streams; and textual criticism is the church's grateful labor of hearing the apostolic word through the catholic record of its transmission. God preserves his Word not in any single stream but across the breadth of that record — the second-century papyri, the great fourth-century uncials, the Byzantine majority of the medieval centuries, the *Textus Receptus* of the Reformation, the critical edition refined in our own day — confirmed by the Latin and Syriac and Coptic versions, located in time by the Fathers from Cyprian to Chrysostom to Jerome, held in confession by the church in many tongues, and received by Lutheran confession as the inspired Word of God in its catholic and apostolic reception. That inheritance is broad, and the Majority Text position narrows it to a single stream. The narrowing is methodologically motivated; so is the broader holding. The doctrines that stand on the New Testament are not the issue between us.

The Majority Text position's deepest concern — that confessional Christians not lose confidence in the Greek text the church has received — is a concern I share entirely. Where I

differ from Robinson and Hodges and Hills is over *which* text the church has received and *how* preservation runs through the record. I hold that the church has received the apostolic word through the whole Greek manuscript tradition in its breadth, and that this is exactly what God's faithful keeping of his Word looks like across twenty centuries. That is not a smaller confidence than the Majority Text position's. It is a larger one.

Lord Jesus Christ, your Word is the word that endures forever. Forgive us where we have spoken disrespectfully of brothers and sisters whose love for your Word has produced judgments we do not share. Give us patience to engage their actual arguments, confidence to hold the judgments we believe to be sound, and humility to remember that you have preserved your Word across the breadth of the manuscript tradition, so that no single stream exhausts the catholic record. And give us joy in knowing that the New Testament we read in our pew Bibles is the apostolic word, given to the church, preserved by your Spirit, and sufficient for our salvation. Amen.