Ad Fontes, Week Four: From Erasmus to Nestle-Aland

Chapter 3: The History of the Printed Greek New Testament

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Four

The Greek New Testament behind your Bible was built edition by edition over five hundred years, from a rushed print job in Basel in 1516 to a project still under way in Münster, Germany. You will hear it said that modern scholars threw out the church's pure text and swapped in a corrupt one. The real history runs the other way. At every stage the church gained evidence. It never lost it.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: John 18 and P52
10 to 20	Erasmus in a hurry
20 to 28	Stephanus, Beza, and a publisher's blurb
28 to 40	The manuscripts arrive, and Tischendorf at Sinai
40 to 48	Westcott and Hort
48 to 58	Nestle-Aland, UBS, and the edition being built now
58 to 65	Open your Bible to the copyright page
65 to 70	A story of gain, assignment, and closing

1. Report back: John 18 and P52

Last week you read John 18:31 to 38 and pictured the scrap of papyrus that carries those verses from the 100s.

- What struck you about reading words that survive in a copy made within decades of John?
- Did anyone look up the Rylands Library's images of P52 online? What could you make out?

Today we jump more than a thousand years, from hand-copied manuscripts to the printing press. P52 was not acquired until 1920, or identified until 1934. Everything in the first half of today's story

happened without it, and without almost every early manuscript we now have.

2. Erasmus in a hurry

In 1515 the Basel printer Johann Froben hired Erasmus, the most famous scholar in Europe, to produce a Greek New Testament fast. In Spain, Cardinal Cisneros had already printed the New Testament of his great Complutensian Polyglot in 1514 but was holding it back until the rest of the set was done. Froben wanted to be first to market.

Erasmus later said his edition was "precipitated rather than edited." He worked from the small handful of manuscripts on hand in Basel: all late, none older than the 1000s or 1100s, and nearly all of them from what we now call the Byzantine stream. (One Gospels manuscript, Codex 1, belongs to the non-Byzantine "family 1," though Erasmus made little use of it.) For Revelation he had exactly one, missing its last leaf.

Edition	Year	Note
1st	1516	*Novum Instrumentum omne*: Greek beside Erasmus's own fresh Latin
2nd	1519	Retitled *Novum Testamentum*; the edition Luther used for his 1522 German New Testament
3rd	1522	The Comma Johanneum added
4th and 5th	1527, 1535	Further revisions; he kept improving it until he died

Two details that echo to this day

Revelation 22. Remember Week Two: Erasmus translated the missing verses from the Latin back into Greek. That is why the King James reads "book of life" at Revelation 22:19 where every Greek manuscript reads "tree of life."

1 John 5:7 to 8. Erasmus did not print the Trinitarian words in 1516 and 1519 because none of his Greek manuscripts had them. Critics accused him of attacking the Trinity. The story that he promised to add them if a single Greek manuscript turned up is partly legend, but such a manuscript was produced, Codex 61 (the Montfortianus), and it appears to have been made for the purpose. He added the words in 1522 and noted his doubts. From there they passed into the Textus Receptus and the King James. We take this up in full in Chapter 7.

Be fair to Erasmus

He was no careless corrupter. He did the best work anyone could have done in 1515 with what was in Basel, and without his Greek there might have been no Luther New Testament. His edition was a first word, not a last one, and he meant it to be. The church was supposed to keep working.

3. Stephanus, Beza, and a publisher's blurb

After Erasmus, Protestant editors refined his text edition by edition without rebuilding it.

Stephanus (Robert Estienne). A Paris printer who later fled to Geneva. His 1550 edition became a standard for English-speaking Protestants. His 1551 edition did something you use every week: it introduced **numbered verses**. Before that, the New Testament had chapters but no verse numbers. Every time you say "Romans 8:1," you are using Stephanus's divisions.

Theodore Beza. Calvin's successor at Geneva. He owned two ancient manuscripts Erasmus never saw, Codex Bezae and Codex Claromontanus, but he mostly noted their readings rather than following them. His printed text stayed close to Stephanus, who stayed close to Erasmus. The King James translators worked mainly from Beza's 1598 edition, with reference back to Stephanus.

Where the name "Textus Receptus" came from

In 1633 the Leiden printers Bonaventure Elzevir and his nephew Abraham put out a small Greek New Testament from this same line. Their preface told the buyer: "you have the text now received by all, in which we offer nothing altered or corrupted." In Latin, *textum… ab omnibus receptum*.

It was a sales pitch. But the phrase stuck, and "Textus Receptus," the received text, became the name of the whole Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza line.

That is not a knock on the text itself. It is a real and important Greek text, the best that could be done with the evidence of the 1500s. But the name does not mean it was received from heaven or from the apostles. It came from a printer's advertisement. For most of the next two centuries, Protestants simply assumed this printed text *was* the Greek New Testament.

4. The manuscripts arrive

From the late 1600s on, libraries were catalogued for the first time and travelers brought manuscripts west from the Near East. Over two centuries the evidence grew enormously, and careful scholars learned to use it.

Year	Who	What they contributed
1627	Codex Alexandrinus	A 400s Bible given to King Charles I of England by the Patriarch of Constantinople
1707	John Mill	Listed about 30,000 variants. Some panicked. Richard Bentley answered that the variants are what let scholars recover the original: a strength, not a weakness

Year	Who	What they contributed
1734	Johann Albrecht Bengel	A Lutheran Pietist and Bible commentator. Grouped manuscripts into families and gave us the rule “prefer the more difficult reading”
1751 to 1752	Johann Jakob Wettstein	The largest collection of variants to date, and the system of letters and numbers for manuscripts still largely in use
1774 to 1806	Johann Jakob Griesbach	The first major editor to depart substantially from the Textus Receptus on the evidence
1831	Karl Lachmann	Built a Greek text straight from the oldest sources, without the Textus Receptus as a starting point at all

Tischendorf at Sinai

Constantin von Tischendorf, a young German Lutheran, was convinced the most important manuscripts were sitting uncatalogued in monastery libraries. Between 1844 and 1859 he visited St. Catherine’s Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai three times. There he found a fourth-century parchment Bible with much of the Old Testament in Greek and the entire New Testament. He took forty-odd Old Testament leaves to Europe in 1844, saw more on a second visit in 1853, and in 1859 obtained the bulk of it for Tsar Alexander II of Russia. We call it **Codex Sinaiticus**, “the Sinai book.”

It is some eight centuries older than any Greek manuscript Erasmus used. Together with **Codex Vaticanus**, another fourth-century Bible long held in the Vatican Library but only opened to serious study in the 1800s, it changed the field. In many places these old Bibles differed from the Textus Receptus, and the older readings had a strong claim.

Tell the story fairly

Some say Sinaiticus and the modern text were an attack on the church’s Bible by liberal scholars. Tischendorf was a devout Lutheran who believed he was serving the church, and he wrote of his discovery as a providence. The story is not spotless: the way he acquired the manuscript is still disputed, and the monastery has its own account. But an attack on Scripture it was not.

5. Westcott and Hort

In 1881 two Cambridge scholars, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, published *The New Testament in the Original Greek* after nearly thirty years of work. It effectively ended the Textus Receptus as the

basis for serious scholarship.

Hort's theory had two pillars:

1. **Text families.** The manuscripts fall into families. Hort called them Neutral (centered on Vaticanus), Alexandrian, Western, and Syrian. His "Syrian" is roughly what we now call the **Byzantine** text, the stream behind the Textus Receptus.
2. **The Byzantine text is later.** It is not an early, independent witness but a smoothed and standardized form that gradually took over the Greek-speaking East.

What held and what did not

Held up	Revised since
The Byzantine text as a whole is a later, smoothed stream, not what the apostles wrote wherever it differs from the older witnesses	Hort's family scheme was too neat
The papyri have strongly confirmed the antiquity of the Alexandrian text	Hort's single fourth-century revision (possibly by Lucian of Antioch) has not survived. Early papyri such as P45 carry dozens of readings otherwise found only in the Byzantine tradition, so some Byzantine readings are ancient and each must be weighed on its merits
Mainstream textual critics, evangelical and confessional ones among them, have held it for nearly 150 years	Vaticanus is not as untouched by editing as Hort thought, and modern editions no longer come close to simply printing it

Defenders of the Byzantine text, from Burgon and Scrivener in Hort's day to Maurice Robinson in ours, have landed some real blows, and we will give the Majority Text position a fair hearing in Chapter 13. But the central conclusion, in its narrower form, stands.

6. Nestle-Aland, UBS, and the edition being built now

In 1898 Eberhard Nestle had a simple idea: compare three leading critical editions of his day (Tischendorf's, Westcott and Hort's, and Richard Weymouth's, with Bernhard Weiss's edition replacing Weymouth's from 1901), print what the majority of them agreed on, and note the disagreements at the bottom of the page. The result was a small, cheap, scholarly Greek New Testament that pastors and students everywhere could carry. His son Erwin continued it, and Kurt Aland later joined him, giving us the name **Nestle-Aland**. In 1959 Aland founded the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster, still the center of the field.

Two editions, one Greek text

	Nestle-Aland (NA28, 2012; NA29 in preparation)	United Bible Societies (UBS6, 2025)
Built for	Students and textual scholars	Bible translators around the world
Greek wording	NA28 is the same as UBS5; NA29 will match UBS6	The same as Nestle-Aland (deliberately, since the late 1970s). UBS6 already prints the forthcoming NA29 text
Notes at the bottom	Many variants, in fine detail	Fewer variants, each rated A to D for how certain the editors are (reassessed in UBS6)
Stands behind	The ESV, NASB, CSB, and most modern translations; the NIV and NET make their own decisions but stay close to it	Most modern Bible translations worldwide

The Editio Critica Maior

The “Major Critical Edition,” or ECM, is the most thorough edition of the Greek New Testament ever attempted, and it is being published book by book right now. Where NA28 lists the key variants, the ECM cites every textually distinctive Greek manuscript and a representative sample of the rest, plus early versions and church fathers. The Catholic Letters (from 1997, second edition 2013), Acts (2017), Mark (2021), and Revelation (2024) are out, and a Matthew volume was scheduled for 2026. As each volume appears, the Nestle-Aland text is updated to match. For the Catholic Letters, NA28 already made thirty-four changes from NA27, and UBS6 and the forthcoming NA29 already print the ECM text for Mark, Acts, the Catholic Letters, and Revelation.

The ECM uses a computer-assisted method called the **Coherence-Based Genealogical Method** (CBGM). It measures how closely the texts of the Greek manuscripts the ECM cites agree with one another (more than a hundred of them in the Catholic Letters), then uses the editors’ own decisions at each variant to work out which texts are likely ancestors of which. It is not a magic machine; people still make every decision, and the early versions and church fathers are weighed by the editors outside the computer analysis. We will look at it in Chapter 14. For now, the point is this: the most careful work ever done on the Greek New Testament is happening in our own lifetime, and where the evidence is evenly balanced, the new editions now say so openly.

7. Open your Bible to the front

Every modern translation tells you which Greek text it follows. Look in the preface or introduction at the front of your Bible (sometimes the copyright page). Pair up and fill in the table for the Bibles at your table.

Translation	What the front matter says about its Greek text	Which stream?

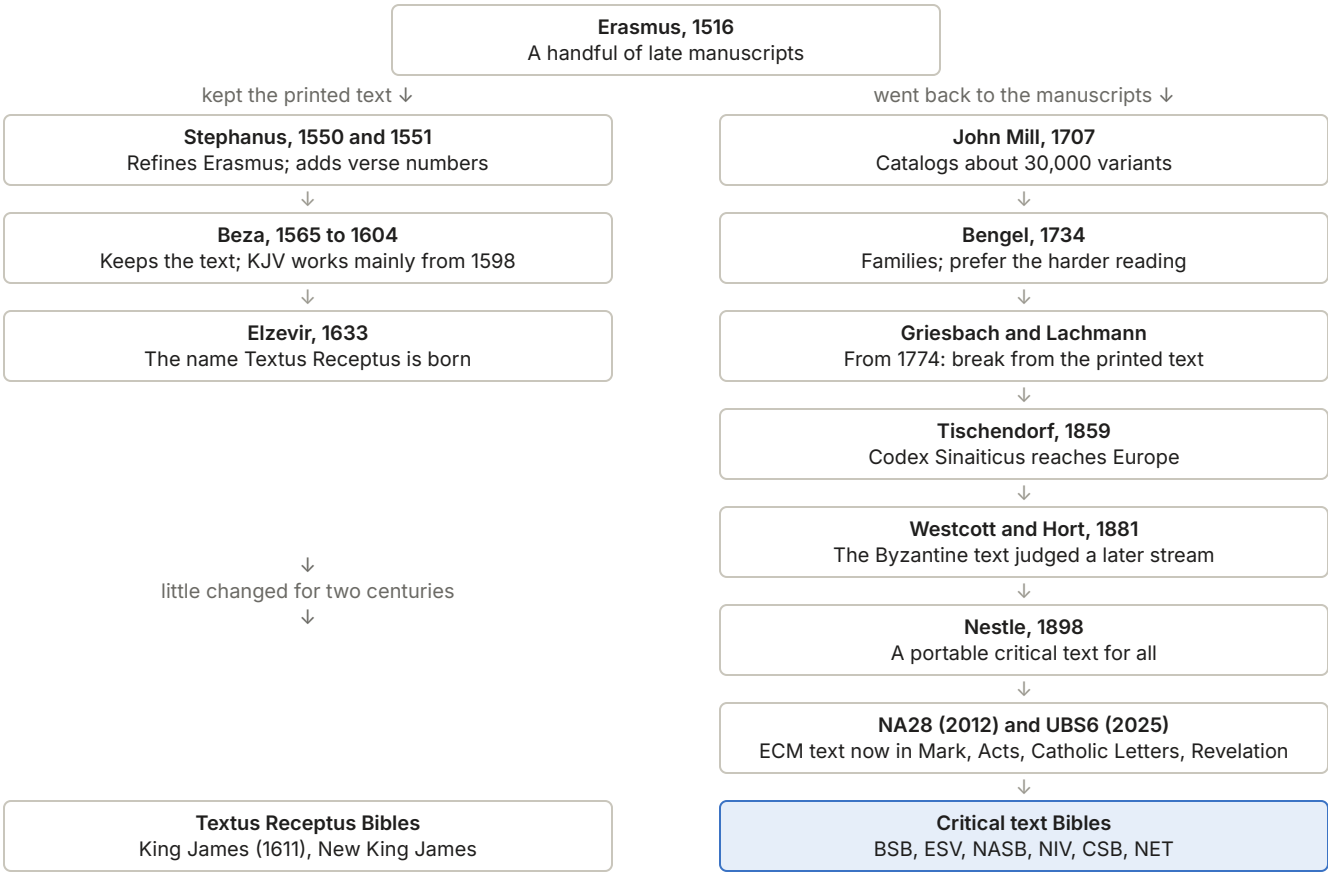
What you should find. Most modern translations (ESV, NASB, NIV, CSB, NET) name the Nestle-Aland or United Bible Societies Greek text. If you brought a BSB, read its preface and report what it says. The New King James names the Textus Receptus, and many NKJV editions footnote where the critical text and the Majority Text differ. The King James itself does not name a Greek edition, because in 1611 there was only one printed stream to use.

You now know what those names mean, and which century's Greek stands behind which English Bible.

8. A story of gain

The popular story says modern scholarship took something away from the church. The history says the opposite.

Two streams flow from Erasmus; one went back to the manuscripts



The printed Greek New Testament, 1516 to today

The left stream stayed with what Erasmus could find in Basel. The right stream kept going back to the sources as they came to light, and it stands behind nearly every modern Bible.

Erasmus had a handful of late manuscripts. We have nearly six thousand, including dozens of papyri from the 100s and 200s. Every century since 1516 has added evidence and sharpened method. Where the modern text differs from the Textus Receptus, it is because more evidence has shown us the older reading. Those are gifts, not corruptions.

Back to the load-bearing distinction

Inspiration attaches to the autographs. Preservation attaches to the whole manuscript tradition. So no printed edition is "the preserved Bible": not Erasmus 1516, not Stephanus 1550, not the Textus Receptus, not Westcott and Hort 1881, not NA28. Each is a witness, some weightier than others, to the text God has been keeping all along.

We confess the same Scripture our fathers confessed. We simply read it from a Greek text more carefully grounded than any they held. That is the gift of providence in our generation.

For discussion

1. Before today, where did you think the phrase "Textus Receptus" came from? Does its origin in a printer's advertisement change how it sounds to you?
2. Beza owned ancient manuscripts but kept printing the familiar text. Why might a faithful scholar make that choice? What did it cost?
3. Tischendorf and Bengel were Lutherans. Does it surprise you that believers, not skeptics, did so much of this work?
4. If a friend says, "the modern Bibles are based on the Vatican's manuscripts," what would you tell him from today's history?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Complutensian Polyglot. A Spanish multilingual Bible whose New Testament was printed in 1514, before Erasmus, but released later.

Codex Alexandrinus. A 400s Greek Bible that reached England in 1627; one of the first great manuscripts known to Western scholars.

Codex Vaticanus. A 300s Greek Bible in the Vatican Library, opened to serious study in the 1800s.

Byzantine text. The form of text found in the great majority of Greek manuscripts, dominant in Greek copying from about the sixth century. The Textus Receptus stands in this stream, though it differs from the Byzantine majority in some 1,800 places.

Text family. A group of manuscripts that share a common line of descent and so share characteristic readings. Scholars now often prefer the looser term "textual cluster."

NA28. The 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2012). Its text stands behind most modern translations; NA29 is in preparation.

UBS6. The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 6th edition (2025). Its text will be the text of NA29, and its notes are built for translators, with each decision rated A to D.

ECM. The *Editio Critica Maior*, the major critical edition now being published book by book in Münster. It cites every textually distinctive Greek manuscript and a sample of the rest, with early versions and fathers.

CBGM. The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method, developed in Münster and used in the ECM. It compares the Greek manuscripts pair by pair and uses those agreements to test, variant by variant, which reading most likely gave rise to the others. Versions and fathers are weighed separately.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 4, "How Textual Critics Actually Work." We move from history to method: how a decision between two readings actually gets made.

Do this one thing. Finish the table from section 7 for every Bible in your house. If a friend or relative has a different translation, check theirs too.

Bring. Your Bible, your finished table, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. Erasmus meant his edition to be a beginning, not an ending. What would it look like for the church to hold its best work humbly, as a first word and not a last one?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for Erasmus and his rushed deadline, for Stephanus and his verse numbers, for Beza, for the Elzevirs and their famous sales pitch. Thanks be to God for Bengel and Lachmann, for Tischendorf at Sinai, for Westcott and Hort at their desks in Cambridge, and for the people in Münster who are, this very week, making the Greek behind the next generation's Bibles a little clearer. The work is not finished. And all along, the Word has been doing its own work in the meantime.

"but the word of the Lord stands forever." 1 Peter 1:25 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.