

Textual Variants

What to do about differences in the Bible

“My Bible doesn’t say that.”

You are in a serious discussion with someone (a friend or a new acquaintance, maybe a believer or a curious seeker). At some point you find that your Bibles (different translations, or even different editions of the same translation) don’t have the same wording. For example, using New American Standard Bible (NASB) and King James Version (KJV), look up the beginning of the brief letter of Jude in the New Testament.¹

The first part of the verse (Jude 1a) is essentially the same in both translations.

Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, (NASB)

Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, (KJV):

Differences in the nuances between “bond-servant” and “servant” are understandable. There should be little or no disagreement about the meaning of that part of the verse.

But the second half of the verse gets more interesting.

...to those who are the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ: (NASB)

...to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called: (KJV)

Here again, details like word order (the location of the adjective “called”) or the uses of synonyms (“kept” and “preserved”) should cause no concern. If anything, those kinds of variations (along with differences in prepositions – “in” or “by” or “for”) are not surprising for translation between any two languages. In fact, those differences provide opportunities for discussion and probing deeper into what the original author meant.

But what about “beloved” (NASB) and “sanctified” (KJV)? Those are hardly synonyms.

Certainly, an argument can be made for a theological connection, but that doesn’t reconcile the textual question. The words in the original are different but similar enough that confusion is easy to imagine.

ἡγαπημένοις (*hēgapēmenois*, beloved; NASB)

ἡγιασμένοις (*hēgiasmenois*, sanctified; KJV)

One suggestion² is that a scribe was reminded of similar wording in 1 Corinthians 1:2:

To those who are *sanctified* in Christ Jesus...

Whatever the actual cause of the difference, how are we to resolve the discrepancy?

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Jude%201>

² Peter H. Davids, *II Peter and Jude*, *Baylor Handbook on the Greek Testament* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), 2.

Texts and Criticism

Before the invention of the printing press, copies of the Scriptures were made by hand. Eventually there were copies of copies of copies of... you get the idea. Not surprisingly, the copying process was not immune from human fallibility. On occasion, even if rarely due to the care taken by the copyists, an error might be included in the text. Words can get confused, letters transposed. Words with similar sounds or using the same letters can be substituted accidentally. A common word may get left out, or a word might be repeated. (For example, reread this last sentence.)

The goal of translators is to work from the earliest and most reliable text. The older the text (i.e., the actual paper or papyrus and ink), the closer the translator will be to the originals, or “autographs” actually written by the hand of Biblical authors. Since the autographs are not available, the science of “textual criticism” is important in determining the age and dependability of ancient manuscripts. Age of a documents is only one criterion. The style of the lettering, geographic location, comparison with other versions of the same text and other benchmarks are used to isolate possible corruptions of even early texts.

The Received Text

The primary problem with the King James Version and several related translations is the Greek manuscript used for the New Testament. The so-called *Textus Receptus* (“Received Text”) that was used is based on manuscripts written well over a thousand years after the originals. In other words, many generations of copies went into the King James Version. The story of the compilation of a printed Greek New Testament describes a noble goal but severely limited resources.

The first Greek New Testament to be printed (1516) was the work of the famous scholar Erasmus. Not being able to find a manuscript which contained the entire New Testament, Erasmus made use of several manuscripts for various parts of the New Testament; but he relied heavily upon two twelfth-century manuscripts which we now recognize as quite inferior. Lacking a complete copy of the book of Revelation, Erasmus himself translated the last six verses back into Greek from the Latin Vulgate. In other places in his work, Erasmus introduced into the Greek text material which he found in the Latin Vulgate but not in the Greek manuscripts.³

In the intervening centuries since Erasmus and the *Textus Receptus* many significant advances have been made in textual criticism. New manuscripts or portions of the New Testament have been discovered dating to the early fourth century.⁴ Some of the manuscripts were discovered in the mid-1800s (rescued from a bin for starting fires in a monastery!).⁵ Others were found as recently as

³ George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 59-60.

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation; Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 37.

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 61.

the 1950s.⁶ Clearly, modern translations based on these continuing discoveries are better expressions of the inspired words of the original Biblical writers.

Confidence in Scripture

The differences in ancient manuscripts of the Bible should not shake anyone's confidence in the reliability, trustworthiness, authority, infallibility, or inspiration of Scripture.

The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith or practice.⁷

That same observation is confirmed by the earlier scholar J.A. Bengel, cited by George Ladd.

As Bengel concluded, the variants in the text do not affect any essentials of evangelical truth.⁸

Ladd continues,

In spite of the poor text of the *Textus Receptus*, we must recognize that the *Textus Receptus* and the King James Version are indeed the Word of God. In this inspired work, men can hear God speak; they can meet God and be brought into saving fellowship with Him. For three-and-a-half centuries, the King James Version, with its thousands of errors in the text, has been the only Word of God known by millions of believers.⁹

Newer translations provide improved accuracy for the text of the New Testament. Those who choose to continue using translations based on the *Textus Receptus* (KJV, YLT, RYLT, etc.) can benefit from conversations with other believers using modern versions (NASB, NIV, ESV, etc.). Those using the newer editions can benefit from the language, the rhythm, the beauty of the King James Version. The goal is not to judge or criticize different translations. The goal is to use all the resources available to us together to learn from and grow in the Word of God.

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation; Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 37.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they reliable?* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 19-20.

⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 79.

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