



Quaker Universalist Voice

The History of the Biblical Text: Which Manuscripts Go Into the Bible?

by J.M. Spears

Luke's Passion (Luke 23) and Resurrection (Luke 24) narratives do not include verses 23:17, 23:34a, 24:12, 24:36b, 24:40, 24:51b and 24:52a. Some of these verses can be found in some other translations*. Why do English translations of the Bible differ in the verses included? Aren't more verses better than fewer verses?

There is no existing original text for the original Luke text. The Passion and Resurrection narratives in Luke are NOT the same in all of the ancient Greek texts of Luke that have survived to today. There are important differences among these manuscripts. Scholars have undertaken the task of deciding which manuscripts seem to be closest to the original text of Luke and the rest of the New Testament.

Because there are variations among the remaining manuscripts, choices and decisions must be made about the use of the many existing ancient manuscripts, in order to arrive at one text from which modern language translations can be made. This question of the Luke text needs to be answered whenever translating a passage into English or seeking to explain or understand it. The history of the text itself is important for our understanding of the Bible.

All parts of the New Testament were originally written in Greek, the world language of the time. At first, each of the 27 books of the New Testament was a separate literary unit. Not until after 300 CE (in the common era) were the books even grouped together in collections of writings. However, none of these original documents of the Bible exist today. Only copies exist and most of these existing copies are clearly copies of copies. The existing ancient copies of the original texts differ from one another.

In the earliest days of the Christian church, individual letters and gospels were written to meet the needs of a particular audience. In the absence of printing, carbon paper, or photocopiers, copies were penned by hand to meet the increasing demands for a text and to extend each document's influence among the churches. The church's primary interest was not to restore the original text, but to obtain a good text.

The text of the documents changed with time. Inevitably, these handwritten copies would contain differences from the original primarily due to accidental causes, such as a mistaken word or letter, a miscopy, an omission due to the eye jumping a line, or twice copying words. Hand copying is hard work and prone to error in lengthy passages, due to defective eyesight, fatigue, interruptions, or disinterest.

Other differences among copies resulted from deliberate attempts to smooth out grammatical and stylistic awkwardness in the text and to avoid apparent obscurities of meaning by adding or substituting a word or phrase, often from a parallel passage of another gospel. This is the process of harmonization. Through this process, many different forms of the Greek text developed among the copies.

Additional differences were created when the Greek texts were translated from Greek into other languages. Between 100 and 300CE, Christian churches were introduced into Syria, North Africa, Italy, and Egypt. Congregations desired scriptural writings in their own languages, producing Syriac, Latin, and Coptic translations. After 300 CE, the same process produced translations in Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian, Arabic, Nubian, and Anglo-Saxon. The accuracy of all of these translations depended on the translator's familiarity with both Greek and the other language, the care and time taken in the translating, and the quality of the copy of the Greek text used.

Over many years, this translation process produced differing local and regional groups of texts, which were conserved as well as changed, in subsequent copies. Particular passages developed sometimes passionate support, like the King James' translation of John 3:16 has even today.

These peculiar local text groups can be identified today with particular geographical localities, by comparing these translations to quotations of these same passages in the writings of Church Fathers and Mothers, who were known to have lived in those geographical areas. Later, these peculiar regional texts became mixed, as the texts traveled to other localities in wider and wider areas. In this process, there grew up several distinctive kinds of texts of the same gospels and letters. Scholars seek to unravel these puzzles in pursuit of the common underlying Greek text.

The Alexandrian Text, from the Alexandria, Egypt area in the years 100-200 CE, is now considered by scholars to be a best text in preserving the original. It is brief, austere, and lacking evidence of style polishing. The two major existing copies of the Alexandrian Text are codex Vaticanus and codex Sinaiticus from the years 300-400 CE.

The Caesarian Text, from Egypt and Caesaria, was used by Eusebius, Cyril, and the Armenians in the third century CE. It shows a consistent elegance of expression.

The Byzantine Text, perhaps from Syria in the sixth century CE, was the latest of the several distinctive texts, showing attributes of completeness, lucidity, and harmonizing of parallel passages among the gospels. The best existing copy is codex Alexandrinus, which was long considered THE authoritative text of the church. It was the most widely circulated text until after the advent of printing by Gutenberg in the 16th century CE. The Authorized, or King James' Bible of 1611*, and all modern translations down to the 19th century, were based on this Byzantine Text.

The introduction of fast, cheap Bible printings by Gutenberg in 1450 in the West, ended hand copying, bypassed the Alexandrian Text, and circulated the Byzantine Text as the standard text, since it was more readily available in the West. In the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, Erasmus combined several forms of the Byzantine Text manuscripts, borrowed from libraries and friends, since one complete Greek manuscript was not available to him. Erasmus made his own small changes in linking these manuscripts. His printed Greek text was so popular that a second printed edition was quickly demanded in 1519, in which many typographical errors were corrected from the first edition. This second edition by Erasmus was used by Martin Luther and Tyndale for their translations into German (1522) and English (1525). In these mass printings, the basic Byzantine Text triumphed in the West for a long period, despite the availability of older, differing manuscripts.

The quality of the Greek text printings began to improve further after Erasmus. Variant readings from other manuscripts became available to scholars even in the 15th century CE. But, the corrupted Byzantine Text provided the basis for almost all translations into modern languages until the 19th century CE.

By the 19th century CE, scholars had assembled much new information regarding the many early Greek manuscripts and began to apply the criteria developed in editing texts in classical Greek. In the 20th century CE, with the discovery of several new New Testament manuscripts, which were older than any known earlier texts, scholars could produce a more accurate wording of the original Greek documents.

The Bibles in English in our hands are translations of a Greek text that were put together through the best efforts of many scholars to identify and assemble the best Greek manuscripts. The Luke translations provided here are based on the Greek New Testament text as edited and published by the scholars of the United Bible Societies.

***Note on the King James Bible:**

The King James Version of the Bible in English includes all of these omitted verses. The New international Version includes 24:12, 36b, 40, 51b, and 52a. Today's English Version (Good News) includes 24:12, 36b, 40, 51b, and 52a. The Revised English Bible (1989) (the revised version of the New English Bible) includes only 23:34a, with a footnote indicating that some witnesses omit it. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) (corrected edition, 1979) includes 24:12, 36b, 40, and 52a, which are put in brackets to indicate the doubtfulness of the manuscripts. The RSV also includes 23:34a and 24:51b, which have footnotes indicating that other ancient authorities omit them.

For further reading consider:

- B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Introduction) (United Bible Societies 1971)
- K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1987) pp. 48-71.
- D. Hannah, "New Testament Manuscripts", 6 Bible Review 1 (February 1990) pp. 7-9.