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Does the R. S. V. Mutilate the New Testament Text?

By ARTHUR F. KATT

[EDITORIAL NOTE: This paper was written at the request of the Advisory Committee on English Bible Versions. At its meeting on May 6 and 7, 1955, the committee requested its publication in the C. T. M. The author is a member of this committee.]

AN outstanding feature of the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible is the acknowledged and undeniable fact that its New Testament is based on a much better text than was available to the King James translators in 1607—1611 or to Luther in 1522—1545. The R. S. V. New Testament is essentially a translation of the Greek New Testament used in our colleges and seminaries for the past half century, whether it be the world-renowned edition of Nestle, or that of Westcott and Hort, or, still earlier, that of Tischendorf. Thus the R. S. V. provides pastors with an English New Testament text which is in agreement with their own Greek New Testaments, which they have worked with and studied in the seminaries and still use in their studies and preparations. Many of our laymen are perhaps not aware of underlying differences in the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament text, and thus may be inclined to regard certain K. J. V.-R. S. V. differences as grievous faults. Their distrust of R. S. V. will only increase when well-meaning but uninformed persons point out to them these differences and suggest that the R. S. V. is here guilty of mutilating and corrupting God's Word.

Thus there appeared in Gerald B. Winrod's *The Defender* (November and December 1953) several extended articles by Richard England of London, Ontario, entitled "Mutilations of God's Word," in which it is said of the R. S. V. and its translators: "In this blasphemous volume they give strange twists and quirks to known truths essential to historical and evangelical Christianity. They — reject the blood atonement — disparage and deny the

Lord's coming — blot out and erase the true meaning of the Lord's Supper — penknife the Lord's Prayer — oppose the physical proofs of the Lord's resurrection — remove the great commission, 'Go ye' — take away many words uttered from the very lips of Jesus." And what proof is then given for these serious and startling charges? Eighteen examples from the New Testament Gospels are adduced in which there are differences in reading between K. J. V. and R. S. V. On closer examination, however, it is found that Nestle's Greek New Testament (used in Missouri Synod's theological seminaries at St. Louis and Springfield as the basic New Testament Greek text for the past half-hundred years) supports the R. S. V. in every case, Nestle eliminating fifteen of the divergent K. J. V. readings from the text and putting them in footnotes, while bracketing the other three. All of these insufficiently attested variants are found also in R. S. V. footnotes. If R. S. V. is wrong, then our Nestle Greek New Testament is wrong.

The same condemnation is also found in two pamphlets, presently circulated in our circles, viz., *Compare and See* by C. A. Baldwin, Sr., of Chicago, Ill., and *The Eye Opener* by J. J. Ray of Junction City, Oreg.¹ The former points to thirty-one New Testament K. J. V.-R. S. V. differences, based on variants in the Greek text. In all of these R. S. V. has the support of Nestle's Greek New Testament, which eliminates twenty-six of the K. J. V. variants from the text and gives them in footnotes, while bracketing the other five.² The pamphlet *The Eye Opener* bases its arguments almost entirely on variants in the Greek New Testament text and lists one hundred and thirty-nine such K. J. V.-R. S. V. differences. In all of these R. S. V. has the support of Nestle's Greek New Testament, Nestle eliminating 133 K. J. V. variants from the text and relegating them to footnotes, while bracketing the other six. If R. S. V. is wrong, then our Nestle Greek New Testament is wrong.

¹ To these might be added a third pamphlet, *Wresting the Scriptures* by James Cowan of Prince Albert, Sask., very similar in content to Ray's *The Eye Opener*. Almost all of Cowan's passages are listed by Ray, and most of Ray's passages are given by Cowan. Cowan presents at least 102 New Testament passages, in which R. S. V. is condemned for following Nestle instead of *Textus Receptus*.

² The author also lists some half-hundred differences under the heading "Which Is Easier to Understand?" most of these differences resulting from greater R. S. V. accuracy in rendition.

Thus an outstanding virtue of the R. S. V. is regarded as a grievous fault, it being mistakenly assumed that R. S. V. follows a corrupted Greek text and that Bible texts expressing cardinal doctrines have been deliberately removed. The author of *The Eye Opener* clearly expresses this viewpoint in this challenging criterion: "Here's the acid test: Any version of the Bible which omits Acts 8:37 or 'through His blood' in Col. 1:14 evidently has for its foundation a corrupted manuscript" (p. 2). Moreover, it is made to appear that these two "changes" have been made in order to remove from the Bible the significance of the precious blood of Jesus and the confession of His true deity. Such, however, is not the case. These changes are really not "changes" at all, but rather restitutions or restorations, made already in the English revision of the Bible in 1881 and in the American Revision of the Bible in 1901 and found in all modern translations in all languages. The R. S. V. gives references to Jesus' saving blood and to His true deity in many New Testament passages (e. g., Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:20; Eph. 2:13; Rom. 3:25; Rom. 5:9; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 1:18, 19; 1 John 1:7; Heb. 9:12-14; Heb. 13:20; Rev. 5:9; and Matt. 16:16; John 1:49; John 6:69; John 11:27; John 1:1ff.; Heb. 1:1ff., etc.).³

But what about the "acid test" passages, Acts 8:37 and Col. 1:14 "through His blood" (also listed in *Compare and See*)? It so happens that these particular references to Jesus' deity and to His blood are not found in any of the oldest and best Greek manuscripts and appear to be later interpolations. The same is true of other passages and phrases, e. g., the precious passage "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost," which is found unquestioned in all good manuscripts in Luke 19:10, but not in Matt. 18:11 and in Luke 9:56. If R. S. V. is wrong in any of these passages, then our Nestle Greek New Testament is likewise wrong.

But why should there be any differences between the sixteenth-century Greek New Testament (used by Luther in 1522 and by the K. J. V. translators in 1611) and the Greek New Testaments universally acknowledged and used by all reputable Bible scholars today (Nestle, Westcott and Hort, etc.)? The answer is an inter-

³ Cp. also Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1, where R. S. V. gives us the very strongest expressions concerning the deity of Jesus to be found anywhere in the New Testament but not found in K. J. V. or in Luther!

esting and fascinating story, which should be well known to all pastors and familiar to all Bible teachers and counselors. The following facts should be remembered:

1. The original Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, written by the divinely inspired writers nearly two thousand years ago, are no longer in existence (as far as we know). Written on papyrus or other perishable materials, they presumably soon went the way of all things perishable. They were likely used up, worn out, destroyed or lost. Meanwhile copies had been made and were being made in great number, many of them no doubt in Apostolic and post-Apostolic times.

2. For nearly fifteen hundred years, until 1516 to be exact, all copies of the Greek New Testament were written by hand.

3. To err is human, and in spite of the greatest care exercised by copyists, it was only natural and to be expected that copyists' errors should gradually creep in, some quite unintentionally, others perhaps deliberately with the good intention of correcting what were thought to have been errors of former copyists. This "human" element of error in Bible transmission accounts for the variants which came into existence in increasing numbers in the course of time, in the course of nearly fifteen centuries of hand copying.⁴

4. While handwritten copies of the Greek New Testament were made throughout the Middle Ages, the medieval Western Church, satisfied with the Latin translation (the so-called Vulgate, done by Jerome in the early fifth century, generally accepted by the church by the seventh century, exalted by the thirteenth century, and finally made exclusively official in the sixteenth century, 1546) did not concern itself overly much with the care and preservation of old Greek New Testament manuscripts.

⁴ In spite of thousands of New Testament variants, no Christian doctrine was ever lost or affected by them, under God's providence. The tendency of erring copyists was usually to add to the text certain Scriptural, orthodox thoughts, needlessly strengthening it, borrowing from parallel and other passages certain Biblical phrases. "As might be expected, there are many variant readings, about 150,000 of the New Testament text, but in 95 per cent of these instances the correct reading is not difficult to establish, and in 95 per cent of the remainder the variants are of no importance as affecting the sense. 'In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among ancient prose writings' (Westcott and Hort)." *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, "Manuscripts of the Bible," pp. 651, 652.

5. With the Renaissance and the Reformation came also an awakened interest in ancient languages, in Greek and Latin classics, and in the Greek New Testament.

6. Thus Erasmus of Rotterdam, reputed to have been Europe's outstanding Greek scholar in Luther's day, published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, using whatever manuscripts were readily available to him at the time. In his haste to get into print he relied largely on manuscripts of the 12th to 14th centuries, none earlier than the 10th century.

7. It was this Greek New Testament of Erasmus (second edition, 1519) which Luther used for his German New Testament translation (1522).

8. A somewhat later, relatively slight revision of Erasmus' Greek New Testament by Stephanus (1550), Beza (1565—1605), and Elzevir (1624), eventually crystallized into what then became known as the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text), which held sway as a sort of "authorized" Greek New Testament until the end of the nineteenth century.

9. Tyndale in 1525 worked with Erasmus' Greek New Testament (third edition, 1522), and of Tyndale's English translation our K. J. V. is largely but a revision. The K. J. V. translators (1607 to 1611) used the Greek text of Erasmus, Stephanus, and Beza, the latter two having made but very slight use of two manuscripts older than those used by Erasmus (Codices D and L, 6th and 8th centuries).⁵

10. It was not until the nineteenth century that archaeological research brought to light much older Greek manuscripts in any great number and textual criticism put them to effective use with a view to restoring a more reliable Greek text. Tischendorf, one of the trail blazers, discovered the famous Codex Sinaiticus (1844 to 1859), found in an ancient cloister on Mount Sinai, a fourth-century manuscript, very, very precious. Codex Alexandrinus, a fifth-century manuscript, had been discovered already in 1627, too late for the K. J. V. (1611), and not put to really effective use

⁵ "Though he had available what we know to be much better manuscripts, Beza followed the text of Erasmus, which was based on late and corrupt medieval manuscripts" (*Introduction to R. S. V. of New Testament*, p. 15).

until two centuries later. Codex Vaticanus, perhaps the most valuable of all Greek codices, is a fourth-century manuscript, which came to the Vatican in Rome in the 15th century, but was not given to the world until 1889—1890, when complete photostatic copies were made. A very large number of other old Greek manuscripts, and even more ancient papyri fragments of the New Testament (second and third centuries), have come to light, all within the last century.

11. For the past century and a quarter learned textual scholars have made most careful and tediously exacting comparisons of all Greek New Testament manuscripts available. Their combined studies have traced many later copyists' errors to their earlier sources. In general, the principle is followed that the later the manuscripts, the greater is the possibility of their containing copyists' errors, while the earlier the manuscripts, the less the possibility of their containing copyists' errors. Thus almost all scholarly editions of the Greek New Testament for the past hundred years or more (Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Alford, Wordsworth, Westcott and Hort, Weiss, Eberhard and Erwin Nestle, von Soden, Souter, Vogels) give preference to the more ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts (the so-called "uncials" before the tenth century—nearly 200 in number—particularly the "big three" of the fourth and fifth centuries), and attach less importance to the far more numerous later manuscripts (the so-called "minuscules" of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries).

12. And so it is that the very latest and best editions of the Greek New Testament today represent the text of the very oldest Greek manuscripts, whereas the Erasmusian Textus Receptus of the time of Luther and the K. J. V. represents the text of Greek manuscripts copied fully five to ten centuries later. William Carey Taylor, in *The New Bible—Pro and Con* (pp. 7, 8), says of Erasmus and his Greek New Testament:

His Greek texts were of the poorest, and far distant from apostolic times. But it set the style, and with some later but very inadequate changes became known as the Textus Receptus, a sort of "authorized" original. It was copied till the modern era of Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, and the Nestles, who gave us texts much nearer to Christ and the apostles in time, purity, and certainty.

These critical texts are the basis of most modern versions, and of much improvement in the R. S. V. Intelligent Bible students will rejoice in all this. . . .

The pamphlets *The Eye Opener* and *Compare and See* are distributed among pastors and laymen alike with fanatical missionary zeal.⁶ Readers are asked to make comparisons between K. J. V. and R. S. V. which will prove to be eye openers. But these pamphleteers are blind leaders of the blind. The textual integrity and reliability of the R. S. V. cannot be determined by comparing it with another translation; only a comparison of the translation with the very best Greek text can result in a valid evaluation. All competent Biblical scholars, liberal and conservative, agree that not the Textus Receptus of the sixteenth century (still given in Berry's Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, though with all variants noted), but texts such as that of Nestle, Westcott and Hort, etc., presenting the fourth- and fifth-century Greek texts, must form the basis for making and comparing modern (and older) translations. If our church were to publish a new English New Testament translation of its own, it would no doubt be based on Nestle's Greek New Testament or its equivalent. If the R. S. V. is wrong in the instances cited above, then Nestle's Greek New Testament is also wrong, for the latter supports the former.

"Compare and See!" the reader of Baldwin's pamphlet is told. But unless he is capable of comparing R. S. V. and K. J. V. with the best Greek New Testament available today, he is not in a position to "compare and see." He must either learn Greek, or else be guided by those who know Greek. Thus this business of "comparing and seeing" becomes by necessity the particular duty and mission of pastors and professors who specialize in or are familiar with New Testament Greek. Others, unless they are willing to learn Greek and make the comparisons themselves, will have to rely on qualified specialists in this matter, particularly those who are Greek New Testament scholars. A certain degree of confidence and trust on their part is required. Luther and the K. J. V. committee produced only human translations, using the best Greek

⁶ *Eye Opener*: "5,000,000 missionary partners are needed to help distribute these folders to other Christians in all parts of the world!" *Compare and See*: "Sent free into all parts of the world as free-will offerings come in."

manuscripts that were available to them. Christians have been trusting them that they did their work well, and so they did. So they will have to do also with the new translators and with those qualified to pass judgment on their work.

The R. S. V. is not a perfect translation, even as the K. J. V. is not a perfect translation, but the R. S. V. is based on a much better New Testament text than the K. J. V. Whatever inaccuracies or errors it contains should be charitably pointed out and scholarly proofs submitted to the translators. Further improvements will be made. The R. S. V. translators request that critical reactions be in their hands by the summer of 1958, so that they can then consider them when they meet in 1958, 1959, and 1960. A revision of the R. S. V. is to appear in 1962. Criticisms with scholarly proof should therefore be sent as soon as possible to Synod's Advisory Committee on English Bible Versions, as requested in the *Lutheran Witness*, February 15, 1955.⁷

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⁷ The following tracts and pamphlets, defending the R. S. V. against unfair criticism and presenting its advantages may be secured gratis from the committee singly or in quantities: *An Open Letter and Scholarship, Education, and the Bible*, both by Luther A. Weigle, chairman of the R. S. V. translation committee; *A Genuine Joy*, by Clovis G. Chappell; *How Do They Understand the Bible?* by the undersigned. Address requests for this material to the secretary of the Advisory Committee on English Bible Versions, the Rev. Oscar E. Feucht, 210 N. Broadway, St. Louis 2, Mo.