

# A Primer on Bible Translations

## Part Three

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In Part One of this series, we examined a brief history of the King James Version, the Greek New Testament of which is based on the Textus Receptus, originally compiled by Erasmus and further edited over the years (today's accepted Textus Receptus is the revised edition made by Robertus Stephanus in 1550). In Part Two, we reviewed the Greek compilation by Westcott and Hort, known as Critical Text, which is based on Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, two of the oldest and most complete Greek manuscripts; the Critical Text is the Greek source for the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation and the 1901 American Standard Version. In this article we will consider a newer Greek compilation known as the Novum Testamentum Graece (NTG).

Since there are over 5,300 ancient Greek manuscripts in existence today, with numerous variations, the task of re-creating an accurate compilation is challenging. To determine the correct rendering, scholars devised a method known as *critical apparatus* in which they compare all variations, weigh the evidence, and choose the reading that is most likely to be correct. This method separates Greek variations into two categories: the preferred (most likely to be correct) reading becomes part of the Greek text, and the alternate readings are compiled into the *critical apparatus*, which is basically a collection of footnotes. Today's NTG is in its 28<sup>th</sup> edition; editors over the years have updated the preferred text and the *critical apparatus* as new information has become available.

### History of Novum Testamentum Graece

Eberhard Nestle published the Novum Testamentum Graece (Latin for "Greek New Testament") in 1898. He worked from Greek compilations by Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort, and Weymouth. Where they all agreed, he retained their text; where they differed, he retained the reading supported by two of the three, and annotated the alternate reading in the *critical apparatus*. His son, Erwin, carried on his work after Eberhard's death. The glaring weakness of Nestle's text was that he did not review original Greek manuscripts, he simply derived his compilation from other compilations. That changed in the 1950s when a new editor took over.

Kurt Aland improved upon Nestle's NTG by comparing ancient Greek manuscripts *and* the writings of early church fathers who quoted from first and second century manuscripts. The 25<sup>th</sup> edition (1963) of NTG reflected the results of this improved method. But the 26<sup>th</sup> edition, published in 1979, went even further. Rather than simply retaining the reading based on majority support, Aland weighed the evidence for each manuscript and determined which readings were *most likely* to be accurate. Because Aland worked on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> editions of Novum Testamentum Graece and the United Bible Society's (UBS) Greek New Testament, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> editions (1975/1993), their Greek texts match today.

### History of the UBS Greek New Testament

The United Bible Society's Greek New Testament first appeared in 1966 and was a revision of Westcott-Hort's Critical Text. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition was significantly different from the Nestle-Aland version, as the editors employed a different priority and method in choosing the preferred

reading over the variations. As scholarship improved and new manuscripts became available, the UBS version began to converge with the Nestle-Aland version. Aland himself made significant contributions to the UBS version. Though the retained Greek texts are identical now, their presentation and *critical apparatus* are different, as they serve different purposes. The UBS Greek New Testament is intended for translators, that they might render an accurate English translation. The NTG is intended for scholars engaging in research.

### Latest Editions of Novum Testamentum Graece

The 27<sup>th</sup> edition of NTG did not change the Greek text, it only revised the variant readings in the *critical apparatus*. The current edition, the 28<sup>th</sup>, includes further updates, some formatting changes, and is available in both print and digital versions. More information is available about the NTG at the website of the publisher, the German Bible Society: <http://www.nestle-aland.com/en/home/>.

### English Translations Today

Most English translations today are based on Nestle-Aland's NTG. The following is a list of several such translations, ranked in order of how faithful they are to the NTG, and the year published (the ranking here does not imply translational accuracy; a higher rank means it depended more heavily on the NTG, while a lower rank means the translators referenced other sources as well):

1. New American Standard Bible (1971)
2. New American Standard Update (1995)
3. New American Bible (1970)
4. English Standard Version (2001)
5. Holman Christian Standard Bible (2003)
6. New Revised Standard Version (1989)
7. New English Translation (2005)
8. Revised Standard Version (1952)
9. New International Version (1978)
10. Revised English Bible (1989)

In summary, rest assured that the 5,309 Greek manuscripts available today make it possible for experts to compile a highly reliable Greek New Testament that contains both preferred and alternate readings, giving translators an excellent source from which to produce the English New Testament. If we have such a reliable Greek source today, why do we have so many different translations? We'll answer that question in the next article when we explore translation methods. Thanks for reading, and feel free to ask questions!

*The information contained herein is derived from scholarly resources available in books and online.*