

# **“Some Witnesses Have ...”: The Representation of the New Testament Text in English Bible Versions**

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## **Introduction**

**1.** Quite a few things have changed in (Christian) Bible translation theory and practice in the past 50 or 60 years, but one aspect has remained virtually the same: the way in which versions make reference to text-critical decisions. While the importance of representing textual criticism in Bible translations has been mentioned at times (e.g., Scanlin 1988, Schowalter 1995, Szesnat 2001), a systematic analysis and critique of the way in which English versions present the issues and the textual material involved has yet to be done. In fact, there are hardly any studies of the way particular translations handle textual criticism (Fee 1993 is an exception), and perhaps this is, at least in part, due to the hard labour of reconstructing a translation’s textual basis: after all, Tasker’s helpful edition of the Greek NT as effectively developed by the NEB (Tasker 1964) was a rather unusual work, and not likely to be repeated for the NT in these days of a ‘stable’ Nestle-Aland ‘standard text’. So, all I wish to offer here is an exploratory overview of the representation of ‘the text’ in English versions, based on text-critical indicators (usually footnotes) in the translations, as well as any introductory comments that may be offered.

**2.** For reasons of space, I will concentrate on the New Testament text. The discussion will focus on two versions: the New International Version (NIV) and the Revised English Bible (REB). A further, shorter section will outline trends in other versions, especially the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and the New English Translation (NET). I should like to stress that the choice of the NIV and REB is in a sense somewhat arbitrary, since an analysis of other versions would not, I believe, significantly alter my conclusions. Having said that, the selection does have reasonable grounds: since the NIV and the REB come from different parts of the theological spectrum, and also differ somewhat in terms of their date of origin, I thought it might be useful to show that both share the same fundamental problem (it would have been less useful, for example, to compare the REB with the NRSV).

**3.** In the process of analysing these versions, I will at times pass myself off as an ordinary (or ‘untrained’) reader: that is, someone who does not know anything about the textual transmission of Scripture, canon formation, and so on. Of course, this is a somewhat problematic and subjective procedure, but short of fairly large-scale empirical research, it will have to suffice.

## **The New International Version**

**4.** The New Testament part of the New International Version was first published in 1973 and has since appeared in a variety of editions. There were revisions in 1978 and 1984, none of which seem to have affected the way it referred to the NT text, though occasionally the actual text-

critical decisions changed—hardly surprising given that NA26 appeared in 1979. The NIV was designed as an alternative to the AV/KJV, with a conservative evangelical readership in mind.

### *Preface / Introduction*

5. The preface of the NIV provides few general remarks about the state of the text, and what we do find is mainly about the text of the Old Testament. When it comes to the text of the New Testament, the editors state the following (ix-x):

The Greek text used in translating [the New Testament] ... was an eclectic one. No other piece of ancient literature has such an abundance of manuscript witnesses as does the New Testament. Where existing manuscripts differ, the translators made their choice of readings according to accepted principles of New Testament textual criticism. Footnotes call attention to places where there was uncertainty about what the original text was. The best current printed texts of the Greek New Testament were used ... In the New Testament, footnotes that refer to uncertainty regarding the original text are introduced by ‘Some manuscripts’ or similar expressions.

An “eclectic text”? “Manuscripts”? “Witnesses”? “Original text”? “Best current printed texts”? One has to wonder whom the writers of this introduction wished to address, and what information they wanted to impart. What would the average untrained reader think of this introduction? Clearly, it would be most difficult to understand the statement in the NIV’s preface without basic text-critical training. It does not present the reader with an explanation of basic text-critical issues—in fact, it almost seems as if the preface has a trained exegete in mind, rather than the ordinary reader.

6. Perhaps even more problematic is a claim *implicit* in the preface, namely that footnotes in the NIV are given only if there is “uncertainty” as to the original text. The preface seems to suggest that it is *only* in those cases noted in the NIV that there is any doubt about the “original text”, thus displaying a kind of ‘textual optimism’, to borrow a phrase (Clarke 1997). This is quite misleading, if only because the NIV gives footnotes in many cases where there would be little ‘uncertainty’ among the vast majority of textual critics (e.g., Acts 8:37), even at that time (ie. using NA25).

7. It would perhaps be more to the point to say that an important criterion for discussing text-critical problems in the NIV appears to be whether the Greek text used by the translators deviated from the TR (and hence essentially the textual basis of the AV). This ‘guiding principle’ is to some extent understandable considering the NIV’s theological origins. Nevertheless, at some point we have to ask ourselves: for how much longer should modern bible translations be bound by attempts to explain why contemporary translations differ from the TR? Even if this is deemed necessary, when will it be taken seriously and an attempt be made to communicate this to the reader? As we will see, this is not just a question one has to put to the editorial committee of the NIV.

### *The Format of Text-Critical Notes*

**8.** The NIV offers some 133 text-critical indicators in its text of the New Testament; two of these come in the form of notes *within* the text itself, the rest by way of footnotes. The format of these footnotes is fairly uniform, with few exceptions: variants are introduced as “some manuscripts read / add...”(e.g. Mt 5:22) or “some manuscripts omit / do not have...” (e.g. Mt 12:47). It must also be noted that the abbreviations ‘Mss’ for manuscripts and ‘MS’ for manuscript, which are sometimes used in the footnotes of the NIV, are never explained. This seems odd, since these abbreviations are hardly common outside the academic scene. Later editions of the NIV seem to have converted all “Mss” to “manuscripts” (see also the current NIV website).

**9.** In some instances, other indications are given with regard to the number of mss concerned: “a few” (e.g. Mt 27:35); “many” (e.g. Jn 13:32); “one” (only in Acts 10:19 and Heb 10:38); or “other” (only Acts 10:19). In some cases, temporal qualifiers are added: “some late manuscripts ...” (e.g. Mt 5:44); “some early manuscripts...” (e.g. Mk 6:14). In one instance, the variant reading is cited as being supported by “some less important manuscripts” (Jn 5:3). In another, also unique case, namely the *Comma Johanneum* (1 Jn 5:7-8), more detailed information about external evidence is given (reference to vulgate mss; Greek mss after the 16th century; etc.); presumably this is because of the, historically speaking, considerable dogmatic implications of this passage. One wonders though what the ordinary reader is to make of the information given: since no real introduction to textual criticism and the state of the NT text is offered, the reader’s imagination is bound to run wild.

### *The End of Mark and the Pericope de Adultera*

**10.** This fairly uniform format changes somewhat in respect of the two large-scale variation units of the New Testament: the end of Mk, and the *Pericope de Adultera*. With regard to Mk 16, the NIV prints the text of 16:1-8 normally. The following verses (9-20) are then separated off by means of a short horizontal line. A note printed in a smaller point size than the rest of the text is inserted in the text itself, followed by the text of vv. 9-20 (though excluding the ‘shorter ending’ of Mk). The rather terse note reads: “The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.”

**11.** When looking at Jn 7-8 in the NIV, one notes a similar phenomenon: the text of Jn 7:53 -8:11 is again separated from the main body of the text by means of short horizontal lines (one each above and below the passage). The text-critical comment is once again inserted in the text itself and reads: “The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11.”

**12.** Once again, the NIV’s treatment of these text-critical problems must be bewildering for the untrained reader. What do concepts like ‘manuscripts’ and ‘witnesses’ mean? Why are they important? What are ‘reliable’ or, for that matter, ‘unreliable’ mss? What is one to make of the statement that “the earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have” a particular passage? “Well, how did the passage get into some of the manuscripts?”, I hear alert readers ask. Clearly, there will be no answer for the ordinary reader in the NIV. This is particularly surprising given the origins of the NIV: a version that attempts to offer an alternative

to the AV / KJV would surely need to explain such serious departures from the AV's text base to keep its readers 'on board'. Yet there is only silence from the NIV translators.

### *Unusual Representation of Textual Evidence*

**13.** In a number of cases, the NIV's description of external evidence is unnecessarily simplistic, if not misleading. A typical example is Heb 10:38, where the NIV states in a footnote: "one early manuscript *But the righteous*". Yet apart from "one early manuscript" (a reference to P<sup>13</sup>?) this reading is supported *inter alia* by the so-called Majority Text. Regardless of what one thinks of the value of the Majority Text in modern textual criticism, it is surely questionable whether the mss support for this reading should be summarized in this fashion. Another example of curious representation of text-critical matters is 1 Thess 3:2, where the NIV translates "Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow-worker". A footnote states: "some manuscripts *brother and fellow-worker*; other manuscripts *brother and God's servant*." This selection is strange given that there are several other variant readings here, including the form that the TR / AV chose ("and servant of God and your fellow worker").

**14.** Once or twice the textual variant is reported in ambiguous ways. Acts 13:18 (translated as "he endured their conduct for about 40 years in the desert") sports a footnote after 'conduct' which reads: "Some manuscripts *and cared for them*". The reader might therefore think that the variant reading is "he endured their conduct and cared for them for about 40 years in the desert", whereas the translators presumably wanted to refer to the variant "and he cared for them for about 40 years in the desert". The footnote at 2 Pt 2:13 is a similar case.

**15.** Other problematic textual notes include texts like Phil 1:16-17, where the phrase "some late manuscripts" seems to refer to the first corrector of Codex Claromontanus, as well as Codex Athous Laurensis, and the Majority Text (unless of course the NIV translators treat the Majority Text as a single witness). Luke 3:33, at least, is handled a little better: the footnote reads "some manuscripts *Aminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Arni*; other manuscripts vary widely", which seems a little more to the point.

**16.** While all these examples may seem trivial at first, such treatment of text-critical problems points to the basic problem of *how* text-critical problems should be represented. What is implied in the NIV is that the *age* of the mss is the most crucial aspect of textual criticism. But, quite apart from the importance of internal evidence (even if one is not a proponent of radical eclecticism), external evidence hardly works that way. The NIV, perhaps unwittingly so, implies an extraordinarily simplistic view that 'early' mss equal 'reliable', 'faithful', or 'accurate' scribes—somewhat akin to the desire of 19th century source critics of the New Testament to find the oldest gospel in the New Testament, assuming that it would necessarily be more 'accurate', or 'reliable', than the others. In this sense, it represents a simplistic, indeed naive, 'search for origins'. On the whole, this gives a rather erroneous impression, if only because it was precisely in the earliest stages of textual transmission that the scribes who copied the New Testament experienced the greatest freedom to alter the text quite deliberately (cf. Aland & Aland 1989; Ehrman 1993; Parker 1997).

## The Revised English Bible

**17.** The REB, first published in 1989, is a substantial revision of the New English Bible. For various reasons, it has never gained much popularity, in spite of positive reviews by many critics. It does not make any direct claims as to its theological provenance; evangelicals will probably regard it as ‘liberal’, though it had broad support among a wide range of churches in Britain.

### *Preface / Introduction*

**18.** The preface of the REB only mentions one of the issues related to the problem of the Greek text, in connection with the verse numbering used in the REB:

The traditional verse numbering of the Authorized (King James) Version is retained in The Revised English Bible for ease of reference. Where the Authorized Version contains passages which are found in the manuscripts on which that version rests, but which are absent from those followed by The Revised English Bible, these passages are reproduced in footnotes, in order to explain the gaps in the verse numbering.

**19.** While the comment is to be appreciated in principle, it is bound to be confusing (“missing verses? Manuscripts? “). Still, the reader finds more detailed information in the three introductory sections for the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament; I cite from the New Testament section (p. iii):

The transmission of the text has not been altogether straightforward, and there is no scholarly Greek text of the New Testament which commands universal acceptance at the present time. Those who prepared the first draft of The New English Bible New Testament usually started with the text originally published by Eberhard Nestle at the end of the Nineteenth century. The translators considered variant readings on their merits and, having weighed the evidence, selected for translation in each passage the reading which, to the best of their judgment, seemed most likely to present what the author wrote. In assessing the evidence, the translators took into account (a) manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek, (b) early translations into other languages, and (c) quotations from the New Testament by early Christian writers. These three sources were referred to as ‘witnesses’.

**20.** Later on, the REB’s introduction to the New Testament also mentions that the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland, published in 1979, became “a major point of reference for those engaged in the revision” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it is stated that textual research as published in scholarly literature (research “which is continuing all the time”; *ibid.*), was also used, in addition to Nestle-Aland, by then available in its 26th edition (*ibid.*):

The revisers have drawn attention in footnotes to *variant readings which may result in significant alternative understanding or interpretation of the text, and in particular to those readings which were followed in The New English Bible, but which now seem to the revisers to be less probable than those used in this revision*. They are well aware that their judgment is provisional, but they believe the text they have adopted to be an improvement on that underlying earlier translations [emphasis added].

**21.** As far as I am aware, this is the most detailed introduction to the state of the text of the New Testament that can be found in available English editions of the New Testament (excluding the NET Bible; see below). It tries to explain, *inter alia*, that there is no consensus among scholars with regard to the Greek text of the NT; it comments briefly on the types of (external) evidence used in the process of textual criticism; it explains the term ‘witness’ used in the footnotes of the edition; and it notes why certain passages have footnotes attached to them which mention certain textual variations.

**22.** Yet the REB’s introduction still leaves the untrained reader with many questions. Why is the state of the text of the Greek New Testament unsatisfactory in the first place? Why is there no consensus among scholars? What is the basic nature of textual criticism of the NT? Such unanswered questions will continue to hamper the understanding of the text-critical footnotes in the REB’s translation of the New Testament.

### *The Format of Text-Critical Notes*

**23.** The REB offers some 166 text-critical indicators in its text of the New Testament; all of them are footnotes. The format is usually “some witnesses *add / read ...*” or “some witnesses *omit ...*”; sometimes this is changed to “some witnesses *insert ...*” (emphasis added). One wonders why these operative terms were used. It is hardly likely that they will be understood as synonyms by untrained readers (though it would seem that the editors used them as such); at the very least, the terms are tendentious when left unexplained.

**24.** The number of mss that read a particular variant is also indicated in a rather arbitrary manner: for instance, the same word (“some”) is used to indicate (a) as few witnesses as Codex Bezae, some Old Latin versions and a handful of patristic sources (Lk 3:22), and (b) as many as the Majority Text, some uncials and a papyrus (Mk 9:29). However, in contrast to the NIV, the relative age of mss is hardly ever mentioned. The format of ‘some witnesses add’ (etc.) hardly ever changes (but see Gal 2:4-5: “or, following some witnesses...”). In a few cases, the number of mss implied is identified: “most witnesses read ...” (Jn 7:52); “one witness” (Jn 19:29). Specific grammatical information is given in one instance (Jn 20:31: “witnesses read different tenses, some implying *continue to believe*, others *come to believe*”).

**25.** In very few instances do we find something approaching internal evidence. In Acts 11:12, the footnote reads “some witnesses add *making no distinctions*; others add *without any misgiving*, as in 10:20”. At Mk 14:65, a footnote states: “*some witnesses add* Who hit you? *as in Matthew and Luke*.” However, the REB translators / editors do not explain why this information on the text of Mt and Lk is relevant for textual criticism, which limits the usefulness of such text-critical indicators for the untrained reader.

### *The End of Mark and the Pericope de Adultera*

**26.** The REB prints Mk 16:1-8 and both the intermediate and the longer ending of Mk in the body of the text; the former separated from the short ending at v. 8 by a new paragraph, the latter by new paragraph and a blank line. A footnote which refers to the last word of v. 8 reads: “*at this point some of the most ancient witnesses bring the book to a close.*” With reference to the shorter

ending of Mk, a further note states: “*some witnesses add this passage, which in one of them is the conclusion of the book.*” Finally, a footnote linked to vv. 9-20 explains: “*Some witnesses give these verses either instead of, or in addition to, the passage And they delivered ... salvation [i.e. the intermediate ending] (here printed before verse 9), and so bring the book to a close. Others insert further additional matter.*”

**27.** All of this is rather ambiguous; the reader will immediately want to know: ‘so what is the text of the Mk?’ How and why did these additions arise? Also, this is one of the very rare instances where the REB indicates the age of some of the mss; but how is the reader supposed to evaluate that? While the most basic textual state of affairs is reasonably well reported, the ordinary reader is surely left with a great deal of confusion, especially since the text of all endings is printed in the body of the text.

**28.** A completely different practice was adopted with regard to the *Pericope de Adultera*, where one might have expected a similar scenario. The REB is the only English version I can think of (if we do not count its predecessor, the NEB) which does not print Jn 7:53 -8:11 in the text of Jn itself. A footnote refers the reader to the end of the gospel of Jn, where this passage is printed as a kind of ‘appendix’ to Jn. In connection with this appendix, a further footnote states: “*This passage, which in most editions of the New Testament is printed in the text of John, 7:53 -8:11, has no fixed place in our witnesses. Some of them do not contain it at all. Some place it after Luke 21:38, others after John 7:36, or 7:52, or 21:24.*” Again, this ‘explanation’, while more detailed than in the NIV, is hardly satisfactory; the reader is left with questions such as: why does the pericope have no ‘fixed place’ in the mss? What does that mean for the ‘authenticity’ of the passage? If the implication is that Jn did not have this pericope, how did it get there in some of the mss? One might also add: if we take such a radical step as this one, is there not an obligation to begin explore the theological issues raised by this? After all, the pericope remains (quite rightly, in my view) in mainstream lectionaries.

### *Unusual Representation of Evidence*

**29.** There are numerous cases in the REB where one wonders why a particular set of variant readings has been chosen: that is, why the number of variants has been limited to those actually cited (e.g., Mk 8:10, 8:26, Lk 2:11). Of course, no Bible translation can be expected to cite all existing variations, or even all really important ones. Perhaps a better way to put it would be the solution chosen in Lk 22:19 (and other rare instances) where the note states “and other variations ....” Nevertheless, the REB’s rationale of choosing which text-critical problems are to be reflected is not always clear, in spite of the comments made in the Preface. For instance, why mention the Latin variant reading *Elizabeth* instead of *Mariam* in Lk 1:46? No mention is made of the fact that internal grounds are the only reason for entertaining a reading with such weak mss support (three old Latin versions and a few church fathers): how is the reader to understand the significance of this?

**30.** There appears to be a minor mistake in the REB note on Jn 7:53 - 8:11: the REB states that the pericope may be found, *inter alia*, “after [John] 21:24”. However, according to both GNB3/4 and NA26/27, this insertion of the pericope, as witnessed by f1 and Armenian versions, appears not after Jn 21:24 but after 21:25. As in the case of the NIV, there are a small number of other minor misrepresentations of text-critical evidence, but they do not need to occupy us further.

**31.** There are a few cases in the REV that ought to be noted as a potentially positive feature: for instance, although the decision to add the variant reading in Col 4:15 (the text of the REB reads “Nympha … her house”; the footnote states: *some witnesses read Nymphas … his house*”) was presumably due to the fact that the AV read the masculine form, it is still to be welcomed that this kind of a variant is indicated at all. A minor explanatory comment could surely be given in the footnote as well to note the social and theological reasons for this variation. The same would go for the infamous case of Rom 16:7, where the REB translates “Junia”, and then produces a footnote that offers the alternative “*or Junias*”, though the editors do not think it necessary to explain that one is a female and the other a male name. (By way of contrast, the NIV reads “Junias” in Rom 16:7 but “Nympha” in Col 4:15, and there are no footnotes / comments in either case.)

## Preliminary Conclusions

**32.** The introductory discussion of text-critical evidence in the NIV strikes me as superficial and, at times, misleading, not to mention largely unintelligible for the untrained reader. The format of the notes / footnotes that mention text-critical problems is difficult to understand, especially without a proper introduction to the issue. In the case of the REB, the introductory information is relatively detailed and certainly much more helpful than the information provided by the NIV. However, there are a number of areas which still remain problematic, such as the very basis of textual problems. Most importantly, the lack of clarity in the text-critical indicators (i.e., footnotes) in the REB is counter-productive and tends to produce the same results for the untrained reader as the NIV does.

**33.** Textual criticism as represented in the notes of the NIV appears to rely on external evidence alone, and then only with regard to ‘age’ and ‘importance’. Obviously, this is a highly problematic representation of the basis of text-critical decisions. Furthermore, the reference to the number of texts that have a particular reading (‘few’, ‘some’, ‘many’) and to age (“early”, ‘late’) seems arbitrary and sometimes misleading. In quite a few cases the way in which text-critical evidence for variations is described is either ambiguous or plainly wrong. Textual criticism as reflected in the REB is also represented as if it relied mostly on external evidence. This feature of both versions is particularly ironic given that readers ‘without Greek’ are more likely to grasp *internal* evidence, given some training, whereas external evidence is much more likely to remain a closed book due to its highly specialised nature.

**34.** In both versions, the text-critical problems that are mentioned are very often related to variations from the TR / AV, although in some cases other variants are mentioned even though the AV / TR agrees with the text translated. The REB also has some footnotes where it disagrees with its predecessor, the NEB. On the whole, neither version offers a uniform system for choosing variants that are mentioned in the notes.

**35.** On the whole, the NIV leaves much to be desired in its ‘explanations’ of text-critical problems that seriously affect the text of the New Testament. The REB, though somewhat better than the NIV (largely due to its much more detailed introduction) does not do any better in its ‘explanations’ of text-critical problems indicated in footnotes. On the whole, there is effectively little difference between the two for the ordinary reader.

## Recent Trends

**36.** As pointed out above, it is my contention that other modern English Bible versions hardly do any better than the NIV or REB. It would require a minor monograph (and a rather tedious one at that!) to offer the detailed discussion necessary to substantiate this claim. I do not intend to write such a book, and all I can do here is to request evidence to the contrary.

**37.** On the whole, it would seem that virtually all translations follow the kind of pattern we have seen in the NIV and the REB. Perhaps it is worth mentioning, for example, that the “Today’s New International Version” (TNIV), published in 2005, made no changes in respect of the way in which the state of the text is indicated to the reader (though some individual footnotes have changed). Other translations exhibit even more minimalist approaches: the Contemporary English Version (CEV), for instance, has even shorter comments on the text of the NT which at times can be quite misleading. For example, the preface states (1995: xi):

Bible translators do not have the privilege and luxury of working from the original manuscripts of either the Old or New Testament. Indeed, there are numerous difficult passages where decisions must be made concerning what word or words actually belong in the text, and what these words may, in fact, mean. At such places, the best a translator can do is to give what seems to be one possible meaning for the difficult text and to indicate this by a note, which was also what the King James translators did: “... so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not clear, must needs be good; yea, is necessary, as we are persuaded.” Fortunately, these “words and sentences of that difficulty and doubtfulness” do not in any way leave unclear the central message of the Bible or any of its major doctrines.

Not only is this passage very vague, it also likely to confuse the reader in respect of translation difficulties and textual problems. The use of endnotes in the copy of CEV I used does not help either: yes, it does it help the stated aim of the CEV to produce a version that reads easily (and comes across well when read aloud), but the disadvantage of this approach is that it shunts off all notes into a back-section, where few readers will bother to look.

**38.** The only English translation that takes a radically different approach is the New English Translation (NET): here the overt intention is to offer a veritable flood of information in footnotes, including text-critical information. No wonder the catchy slogan “The first translation that explains itself” appears on the title page: an allusion to the Reformation phrase, *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres?*

**39.** Of course, discussing the NET Bible is a tricky affair since, at least in principle, it is constantly evolving. I began working on an early printed version of the NET New Testament (9.206), and then consulted what is currently offered on the website of the publishers (last checked on March 28, 2006).

**40.** Compared to the NIV or REB, the NET Bible has much more detailed information about the text in the preface and in appendices. For example, the preface states:

As for the Greek text used in the NET Bible New Testament, an eclectic text was followed, differing in several hundred places from the standard critical text as represented

by the Nestle-Aland 27th edition (each of these differences are indicated by a double dagger [‡] preceding the text-critical note). The translators who prepared the initial drafts of individual New Testament books made preliminary decisions regarding textual variants, and these were then checked and discussed by editors and a textual consultant. Where there are significant variant readings, these are normally indicated in a text-critical note [tc], along with a few of the principal witnesses (Greek manuscripts, ancient versions, and patristic writers) supporting the variants. While this listing of manuscript evidence is not intended to be exhaustive, readers familiar with the major witnesses will find this feature useful in making brief evaluations for themselves, sometimes with the aid of the textual apparatus in Nestle-Aland 27th edition of the Greek New Testament.

**41.** Later on in the preface, we find a brief comment on the textual footnotes:

The “text-critical notes” [tc] discuss alternate (variant) readings found in the various manuscripts and groups of manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. These notes can indicate historically important readings, exegetically significant readings, or readings accepted by the translation that are different from standard critical editions.... For the New Testament, in cases where the translation follows a different reading than that found in NA27, a text-critical note [tc] preceded by a double dagger (‡) explains the major options and defends the reading followed in the translation.

One wonders though who is actually being addressed here: if the addressees are readers capable of studying the UBS GNT or Nestle-Aland, why is the first part of the paragraph deemed necessary? Indeed, why would a trained reader want to read this mass of text-critical comments, many of which are rather obvious for the ‘initiated’? On the other hand, if the intended audience is the untrained reader, the preface is odder still. “Eclectic text”? “Standard critical text”? Why do we have different “texts” at all? Questions aplenty.

**42.** The appendices in the NET Bible do not alter that impression. Appendix A (on principles of translation) briefly reports that the BHS text was used for the Old Testament, and the New Testament text “was decided by the textual consultant” with the resulting Greek text “to be published at a later date”. To my knowledge, this Greek text has not yet appeared in print, but it is interesting that the NET NT has now been published by the *Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft* as a Greek-English diglot, using the NA27 Greek text. This tallies with the introduction to the current internet edition of the NET Bible to the extent that it states that text-critical footnotes have been re-worked to conform to the nomenclature of Nestle-Aland. Whatever the nature of the matter, it is not going to help the ordinary reader.

**43.** The NET Bible also sports a four-page “Introduction to Principal Manuscript Evidence for the Greek New Testament” in an appendix. This is an attempt to note the basics of textual criticism by presenting material which consists of conventional academic views on external evidence. It is, of course, mostly incomprehensible to the untrained reader, but more importantly, it has remarkable gaps: for example, brief lists of the ‘main’ papyri, uncials and minuscules are given, mentioning their text-type, but what text-types *are* is never explained. Once again, one wonders what kind of reader the NET Bible translators have in mind.

**44.** The same impression is created by actual text-critical indicators in the text. Text-critical footnotes are too numerous to count; most operate at a level approaching the complexity of

Metzger's *Textual Commentary* (1994) or standard historical-critical commentaries. The *Pericope de Adultera* and Mk 16:9-20 are printed in the text, but (in the print edition) they are set in a smaller font and enclosed in double brackets—yet the significance of that is also not explained.

**45.** I should like to stress that it must be appreciated that the NET Bible is trying to go a new path. Its 'Study Bible'-like format, encouraged by the power of the internet to make virtually unlimited texts available at relatively low costs (to those who have access!) offers new possibilities for the representation of the text of the NT. Such a venture must surely be applauded and supported. Given its theologically rather conservative base, many critics are bound to differ when it comes to the actual practice of its principles, but that is inevitable in any version, whatever its theological tendency. What the NET Bible lacks in my view is a clear focus on a target group. For the untrained reader, the information is overwhelming in terms of detail, and is more likely to lead to some confusion; for the trained reader, it is perhaps often superfluous, although some might argue that it conveniently gathers and evaluates text-critical information, supplementing Metzger's commentary (1994).

## Some Suggestions

**46.** I hope that this essay has demonstrated how and why English Bible translations generally fail to convey an appropriate sense of the state of the Biblical text. Regardless of the date or doctrinal provenance of a translation, English versions quite uniformly offer essentially confusing text-critical indicators in the text; they do not demonstrate a consistent policy in their discussion of text-critical matters; and they do not introduce matters in a way that is understandable for the ordinary reader.

**47.** As I pointed out in the introduction, this essay has concentrated on the New Testament; treating the Old Testament or the Jewish Bible as well would require much more space. This is an issue that would be well worth exploring though since there are indications in the versions that the treatment of the Old Testament is more complex, even though they exhibit the same difficulties for the ordinary reader as their representation of the text of the New Testament. For example, if we compare the text-critical notes on Genesis in the REB and the NIV, we find some curious matters worth following up upon. The difference in numbers is not necessarily an indication of anything (the NIV has about 21, the REB approx. 30), but it is interesting that they hardly ever offer comments on the same textual issues: in Gen, they only appear to agree at 4:8 (MT omits "let's go out into the field/country"); 18:22 (reference to the *tiqqun sopherim*); 32:31/32 (Penuel/Peniel variation); and 49:10 (several variants in MT and other mss). Not that it is necessarily easy to recognise a text-critical note: for example, the NIV's note on 49:10 ("or until Shiloh comes; or until he comes to whom tribute belongs") is hardly recognisable as a text-critical note. The REB's note on this verse is not that much better ("or, as otherwise read, Shiloh comes"). Yet more intriguing would be the question as to whether the translators of various versions had different ideas about the relative status of MT and other mss traditions. Of course, this would be rather laborious to work out since an analysis of the text-critical footnotes themselves would be insufficient. Still, this would be something particularly interesting in the context of the contemporary debate on whether we are looking for a single 'original text' or multiple textual traditions in the first instance (see the overview of the issues as exemplified by

current text editions in Ulrich 2004:16–18, or the popularising debate between Sanders 2000 and Hendel 2000).

**48.** Incidentally, it is interesting to note here that most ‘Study Bible’ editions have nothing or very little further to offer. For example, the *Oxford Study Bible* (Suggs *et al.* 1992) provides a number of introductory essays, but none on the text. James Sanders’ essay on the canon does touch on textual matters, but only fleetingly. The *HarperCollins Study Bible* (Meeks & Bassler 1993) has no special introductions but additional footnotes, which offer hardly any additional information on the state of the text of the Bible. Considering the impressive scale of some of these ‘Study Bibles’, such an omission is rather startling.

**49.** The only exceptions I am aware of are (1) the *Jewish Study Bible*, which sports a five-page section on the text of the Hebrew Bible (Berlin & Brettler 2004), which I will leave aside here since it has nothing to say about the New Testament (not surprisingly!), and (b) the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, which sports a seven-page section on textual criticism and the state of the text (my thanks to J. R. Adair at this point for referring me to the NOAB). Coogan and Perkins (2001) define key terms, indicate reasons for variation units, explain the use of versions, external and internal evidence, and offer separate sections on the specific issues raised by the text of the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament. On the whole, this is quite useful as an introduction for the ordinary reader. There are a few occasions where (presumably) space did not appear to allow for what seem to be significant matters; for example, they do not mention the history of the *textus receptus* and its relation to the Authorised Version, which would seem rather important considering historical and contemporary use. Nevertheless, the NOAB section on the text of the Bible is the exception to the rule: it stands to reason that as long as even ‘Study Bibles’ do not discuss the state of the text, ordinary Bible translations are even less likely to do so.

**50.** In any case, all of this takes me beyond the scope of this short essay. Rather than dwell on all this rather negative criticism, I should like to make a few constructive points as well. After all, it is easy to criticize existing translations; but could it actually be done any better? I do not think that this will be easy; nor is likely that a solution will be found which satisfies everyone (how would one define: ‘better’? for whom?). Nevertheless, some basic ideas come to mind.

**51.** One of the cardinal rules of all Bible translations ought to be kept in mind in respect of the state of the text of the New Testament / Bible as well: translations must be appropriate for the specific target audience envisaged. Therefore, a ‘first translation’ into a language not previously served with a translation of Scripture is possibly not the best vehicle for the kind of intricate detail provided by the NET Bible. However, the issuing translation team needs to research carefully what access to other translations the average reader of the intended version may have had in the past *and* present, for it is in relation to those translations that any new one will be considered. Cultural factors also play a role, such as the often complex interplay of orality and literacy. But these considerations are perhaps less relevant for versions like the NIV and REB, which compete with multiple other versions on the huge, and rather saturated English-language Bible market. At the same time, and by way of contrast, we should also continue to create translations which are perhaps even more radically ‘minimalist’ than translations like the GNB or CEV: no information may be better than a little, and often misleading, information.

**52.** Once we begin to think about how exactly we might go about introducing text-critical matters into Bible translations, we will have to consider a number of important and difficult issues which cannot all be discussed here. Two fundamental matters come to mind, though.

**53.** Firstly, we cannot get around an introduction to the text of the Bible. Of course, there are several problems associated with introductions, forewords, or prefaces to a Bible versions, not least the basic questions “who reads them anyway?” Perhaps the style in which an introduction is written has something to do with this. Introductions ought to be clear and concise, and intelligible to those who have not been initiated into the arcane mysteries of the academic study of theology. They should express why textual criticism is necessary, and indeed inevitable; they also need to make it clear what the rationale for their footnotes is (e.g., the choice of variants to be discussed). It would make sense to have a separate introduction on the text of the OT, Apocrypha, and NT, and guide the reader to them.

**54.** Secondly, text-critical indicators in the text have a crucial role to play in alerting readers to the very existence of the textual problem. The individual case is probably less important here than the indication of the bigger picture, perhaps with the exception of rather well-known issues such as the ending of Mk and the *Pericope de Adultera*: such texts obviously need a proper discussion in any English translation today. The REB’s solution to the problem of the latter ought to be seriously considered for *both* of these texts (just as the same decision is routinely taken for texts like Acts 8:37), in spite of, or rather, because of the significant theological issues raised by this. In fact, in all such cases where entire verses or pericopes are omitted, reference could be made to an appendix where a fuller discussion, which should involve not only the technical, text-critical matters but also some of the theological issues involved, may be added. Again, it is of great importance that the text of all text-critical notes is concise yet intelligible. Taken together with the introductory notes in the preface or introduction, such footnotes need to be able to convey to the reader something of the nature of the text they are reading. It is important that versions show uniformity in treatment of variants, and in the terminology used. Switching between terms like ‘authorities’, ‘manuscripts’, and ‘witnesses’ is not helpful; the same goes for ‘have’, ‘read’, ‘insert’, and so on.

**55.** Endnotes, as for instance those in the CEV, are not likely to be helpful as most readers tend not to refer to a note if it means turning several pages to locate the appropriate text (especially if that is printed in a minute font). In my experience, even reading footnotes has to be explicitly and repeatedly encouraged among many students. At the same time, the reader must be able to distinguish clearly between notes and text (cf. Naden 1982); one thinks of the difficulties already raised by (leading) headings in different Bible versions, and how they are taken as ‘part of the text’ by many a reader.

**56.** One innovative example is the format of the German *Luther-Bibel* of 1984, which prints each verse as a paragraph, where any notes immediately following that verse are printed in a markedly different font and size. Yet the downside of that approach is that it disrupts the flow of the text. Further detailed research is needed to study how ordinary readers (in different cultural contexts) actually perceive and deal with notes, texts in margins, different fonts, text in inset boxes, etc.: just what is the ‘message’ that comes across when we make use of these tools?

**57.** Whatever details are provided, one should also keep in mind what kind of trained personnel is likely to be available to explain possible difficulties. If local theologians are not taught the basics about the text of the Bible at universities, colleges and seminaries, it makes little sense to place serious information in new versions. In other words, the basic insights of modern textual criticism need to come back into the theological curriculum: not only for students in advanced Biblical training, as Ehrman rightly insists (1997), but also, and in fact *especially* in contexts where students no longer learn the biblical languages (Szesnat 2006). Ellingworth makes the point that the ‘whole church’ must be involved in the process of decision-making with regard to text-critical issues: not so much in respect of individual variation units, but in view of the underlying theological assumptions and implications (1995:120, 122). This, however, can only be done well if ‘the whole church’ is informed enough to make such decisions, and that can only take place if local theologians (usually pastors and priests) are informed enough themselves to help disseminate such knowledge.

**58.** Sometimes it seems as if dealing with textual criticism is deliberately avoided by Bible translators. Obviously it would be interesting to speculate on the reasons for this. Space, and therefore costs, may be one factor in this: unless one is printing a large Study Bible, I would not be surprised to hear the argument that *any* introduction to textual criticism in a Bible takes up valuable space. Personally, I am not convinced that this is a valid argument since textual criticism is so fundamental to the project of Bible translation; furthermore, Bibles are large books already, so a few pages more will not make such a huge difference as to become a real cost factor. Another reason for avoiding text-critical explanation might well be that, certainly until very recently, NT scholarship has become a little complacent about textual criticism: although we really all know better, there is a tacit assumption among non-specialist textual critics that the NT text is really ‘settled’. After all, there have been no changes to the text presented in the standard critical edition of Nestle-Aland for more than a quarter of a century.

**59.** Or is the reason of a more subtle theological nature? After all, discussing textual criticism can be unsettling for those of particular theological persuasions. As one of my students once told me: “I don’t like textual criticism because it makes me doubt the Bible”. Certainly, raising questions about the nature of the text, including the vexed question of whether textual criticism is all about the ‘original text’ (e.g., Epp 1997), is potentially problematic for some. Perhaps that is the reason why even Coogan and Perkins’s article in NOAB (2001) did not even mention such a question.

**60.** What continues to puzzle me though is the uniformity of this picture across different kinds of translations. Why is it that a translation like the REB, which after all makes such radical decisions as to place Jn 7:53 - 8:11 in an appendix to John, really fares no better in the way in which it mentions textual decisions than, say, the NIV? On the other hand, we do now of course have the (so far) singular exception of the NET Bible, which goes to extraordinary lengths to include textual matters. A conservative theological position (to use a rather broad category) is obviously no *absolute* reason to avoid talking about the text of the NT, at least for some. Of course, the nature of the text-critical discussion of variations in the NET Bible, and in fact the decisions taken in respect of individual variation units are (at least on cursory examination) quite in line with, in this case, a certain type of conservative evangelical theology. The same goes for the lack of an introduction that would discuss the state of the text. But all of that is only to be expected: particular translations represent particular theologies, and that is fair enough in and of itself.

**61.** Nevertheless, I cannot help but think that there is an element of deliberate avoidance in the uniformity of the picture across the board of English versions of the NT. After all, if we do not mention the difficulties of the text, we do not have to worry about how to answer the difficult questions that will come to us. We have seen this already with the decision of the REB to remove the *Pericope de Adultera* from John without any indication to the reader how one might approach this theologically. Just what is the effect of this?

**62.** No doubt some will say that it is the responsibility of Christian scholars in particular to protect the ordinary reader from wild speculation which may threaten the faith of the reader: see the discussion of Ehrman's recent book, *Misquoting Jesus* (Ehrman 2005), by Daniel Wallace (quoted in Witherington 2006). While this rather seems to assume that there is only one kind of (fragile) faith, I can understand this concern, up to a point. We do have to be careful about how we introduce matters of textual criticism if only because the church has always been rather quiet about this, and for most Bible readers this can be a bit of a shock. On the other hand, the current practice of Bible translations, i.e., not to offer any sensible information at all, supports only one particular kind of theological position vis-à-vis scripture, and generally continues to foster ignorance.

**63.** It seems to me, then, that the current state of affairs in Bible translations needs to be rectified, even though it is bound to result in conflicting practices. After all, even scholars on the same translation committee will not always agree on the theory and practice of textual criticism; it is hard enough to come to a workable compromise (one thinks of Metzger's summaries of the committee discussions in his *Textual Commentary*; 1994). We are currently at a point where the very purpose of, and challenge posed by textual criticism is by no means agreed upon among textual critics: when Petersen (1994) re-opens the discussion as to the goal of text-critical discussion; when Adair (1998) stresses the theological and canonical implications of textual criticism; when Epp questions the usefulness of the search for an 'original text' (1999); or when Parker uses the evocative expression 'scripture is tradition' (1997), we are not likely to see such lines of thought emphasised in places like the NIV or NET Bible. But perhaps it does not matter so much at this point what kind of theological slant is given to textual criticism in English versions, as long as different English versions with various theological perspectives continue to exist. What matters is that translation committees and publishers do not continue to ignore this issue.

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### ***Abbreviations***

AV (= KJV): Authorised Version (“King James Version”)

BHS: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*

CEV: Contemporary International Version

GNB/TEV: Good New Bible / Today’s English Version

ms / mss: manuscript(s)

MT: Masoretic text

NA27: Nestle-Aland’s *Greek New Testament*, 27th ed.

NEB: New English Bible

NET: New English Translation

NIV: New International Version

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

REB: Revised English Bible

RSV: Revised Standard Version

TNIV: Today’s New International Version

TR: *textus receptus*

UBS GNT4: United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*, 4th ed.