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## The Textual Base of the RSV New Testament

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# RESTORATION QUARTERLY

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## Textual Base of the RSV New Testament\*

Neil R. Lightfoot

Fifteen years have passed since the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament was first published in 1946. These fifteen years have been a period of testing for the new version—a period which is not yet complete, nor have its results been clearly established. Fifteen years have tempered loud voices both of praise and opposition into more reserved comments of approval or disapproval. In this period also the final form of the new version has become established, for we now assume that after the 1952 edition there is to be no further alteration of the version.

One urgent need for a new revision of the New Testament lay in the demand for a better Greek text than that provided by the American Standard Version (ASV). It is true that the text of the ASV is greatly superior to a kind of medieval text employed by the KJV; but it is equally true that the text of the ASV still embodies a number of readings which are questionable to more recent textual scholarship.

Since the time of the English revision of 1881 and its American counterpart of 1901, many developments have taken place which have had far-reaching effects on the field of textual studies. Listed briefly these developments are: (1) new discoveries of vellum manuscripts such as the Freer-Washington Gospels (fifth century) and the Koridethi Gospels (ninth century). (2) New discoveries of papyri documents, especially the Chester Beatty group which includes in whole or part the Gospels, Acts and most of the Pauline epistles. These materials date back to the third century or earlier and thus antedate by at least a century the important uncials Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. (3) New advances in the evaluation and use of textual materials. The RSV has profited immeasurably by current re-evaluations of textual theory. In 1881 Westcott and Hort, with their classical edition of a critical Greek text, had focused attention upon the so-called "Neutral" text, but in more recent times other witnesses not of the "Neutral" variety have been subjects of serious study also. Scholars have become increasingly aware of the importance of the "Western" text, since it obviously originated very early and had extensive circulation in both East and West. All of this occasions the conclusion that what Westcott-Hort called "intrinsic probability" has attained a preeminent place in the present field of textual criticism. On this point Frederick C. Grant, a member of the RSV committee, has made an important statement concerning the RSV text itself: "With the best will in the world, the New Testament translator or revisor of today is forced to adopt the eclectic principle: each variant reading must be studied on its merits, and cannot be adopted or re-

\*A paper read at the Biblical Forum at Abilene Christian Lectures, February, 1961.

jected by some rule of thumb, or by adherence to such a theory as that of the 'Neutral Text.' It is this eclectic principle that has guided us (the RSV committee—NRL) in the present Revision. The Greek text of this Revision is not that of Westcott-Hort, or Nestle, or Souter; though the readings we have adopted will, as a rule, be found either in the text or the margin of the new (17th) edition of Nestle (Stuttgart, 1941)."<sup>1</sup> Thus the textual basis of the RSV is acknowledged to be the result of the use of the "eclectic principle."

With this in mind, the question is raised as to the over-all quality of the textual base of the RSV New Testament. What can be said in favor of the RSV's eclectic text? And at what points, if any, is the textual base of the RSV inadequate?

As we seek to make an appraisal of the RSV, let us first notice a few passages which represent a definite gain of the RSV's textual base over that of the ASV. Matt. 21:44 of the ASV reads: "And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust." If one picks up a copy of the new revision, he will find that this entire verse has been omitted from the text of the RSV. On what grounds is this omission to be justified? Chiefly on the authority of Aleph (Sinaiticus), D (Bezae) and the important minuscule 33. Coming to the critical editions of the Greek text we find that Tischendorf likewise has omitted it, while Westcott-Hort and Nestle have placed it in brackets. Hort speaks of this verse as one of an "intermediate class that may perhaps be non-interpolations."<sup>2</sup> Considering the increasing weight that has been given to such omissions in D, the RSV here seems to have presented to the reader a better text.

Another textual gain appears in Mark 10:24. The ASV here reads: "Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!" But the RSV omits "for them that trust in riches" in agreement with B (Vaticanus) and Aleph as opposed to ACD and many Byzantine authorities. Other canons of textual criticism enter in here also, especially the rule that the more difficult is to be preferred. Beyond question the more difficult reading is followed by the RSV. So according to our best information Jesus simply said: "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" (RSV).

A very significant difference between the ASV and the RSV is found in Luke's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The KJV and ASV represent Jesus as receiving a cup, returning thanks, taking bread, giving thanks, and then speaking of the cup again (Luke 22:17-22). The RSV, however, omits the following words: "which is

<sup>1</sup>*An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (Chicago: International Council of Religious Education, 1946), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), p. 176 (Introduction and Appendix).

given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And likewise the cup after supper, saying 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' " (vs. 19b-20). The result is that instead of the ASV's order of cup, bread, cup, the RSV simply reads cup, bread. The verses in question (19b-20) do not appear in such earlier authorities as D, nor in the Old Latin and Old Syriac (Sinaitic and Curetonian) versions. Westcott-Hort classed this passage in a group of "Western non-interpolations";<sup>3</sup> thus both Westcott-Hort and Nestle put it in double brackets. Hort, in his "Notes on Select Readings," has devoted several paragraphs of discussion to this variant.<sup>4</sup> He points out that both the short and the long readings present difficulties: the short resulting in a changed order of the institution of the bread and wine, and the long dividing the institution into two parts with the bread episode in the middle. Nevertheless the latter alternative is regarded as more serious and thus the former is to be preferred. Hort sums up the evidence for the short reading as follows: "These difficulties, added to the suspicious coincidence with 1 Co xi 24 f., and the transcriptional evidence given above, leave no moral doubt that the words in question were absent from the original text of Lc, notwithstanding the purely Western ancestry of the documents which omit them."<sup>5</sup> The RSV has followed the judgment of Westcott-Hort and Nestle. For the reader this is an important gain. No longer does he have to ponder the problem of Jesus' receiving the cup, followed by his taking the bread and then by his taking the cup again; nor is the reader faced with the task of explaining one of the cup references as part of the Passover meal, although both references may have equal application for the Lord's Supper observance.

The RSV's rendering of Rom. 8:28 is a distinct textual improvement over the ASV. The RSV reads: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." The ASV followed the KJV: "all things work together for good." The RSV adopts this new reading on the MS evidence of BA and P<sup>46</sup>, as opposed to Aleph, CDG and a number of Byzantine MSS. The difference between the ASV and the RSV is slight but very meaningful. According to the ASV "all things" are working themselves out for good; but in the RSV "God" is the subject who is working in everything toward good. The RSV's rendering stresses the sovereignty as well as the providence of God—"in everything God works for good."

Other important passages where the RSV departs from the ASV text on the authority of B-Aleph-Chester Beatty, or some of its combinations, may be found in Matt. 17:22; Mark 15:44; Luke 12:39; 15:16; John 5:2; 8:16; 9:35; Acts 18:7; 19:39; Rom. 4:1; 1 Cor.

<sup>3</sup>Other Western non-interpolations not included in the RSV text are Matt. 29:49; Luke 24:3, 6, 12, 36, 40, 51, 52.

<sup>4</sup>Westcott-Hort, Appendix, p. 63f.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

1:4, 14; 2 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 3:6; 6:2; 1 John 2:10; 2 John 8; Rev. 21:3.<sup>6</sup>

The textual base of the RSV is not always so well attested as might be indicated by the examples thus far cited. At a number of points the RSV's text-base is weak and lacks the support of the best manuscript authorities.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly this is due to the subjective element of the eclectic text, the critic feeling free sometimes to reject the witness of certain more reputable manuscripts. We will now turn our attention to several points at which the textual base of the RSV is not well supported.

In Matt. 16:2, 3 the RSV retains a passage which is highly questionable. The RSV reads: "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but cannot interpret the signs of the times." Here the RSV is supported by such manuscripts as C and D, yet the most important uncials (B and Aleph) decidedly oppose it. The Greek editions of Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort and Nestle all reject this passage: Tischendorf and Nestle have it in brackets while Westcott-Hort has it in double brackets. Westcott-Hort finds it necessary to give but little time in discussing this variant. Hort writes: "Both documentary evidence and the impossibility of accounting for omission prove these words to be no part of the text of Mt. They can hardly have been an altered repetition of the parallel Lc xii 54, 55, but were apparently derived from an extraneous source, written or oral, and inserted in the Western text at a very early time.<sup>8</sup> The RSV finds its text at this point directly opposed to our best manuscript evidence and our latest editions of the Greek text. The new translation would have been a better translation here if it had parted company with the time-honored KJV and ASV.

Another reading which rests on uncertain ground is found in Luke 22:43, 44. The RSV reads: "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." The RSV retains this reading in agreement with D, a number of Byzantine MSS and the text of Tischendorf. Westcott-Hort and Nestle place double brackets around these verses on the basis of BA and other authorities. Again, what is apparently a later interpolation is retained in the text of the RSV.

1 Cor. 11:24 presents an interesting case. The KJV based on medieval manuscripts had read: "This is my body, which is broken for

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<sup>6</sup>This is part of Frederick C. Grant's list of variants adopted by the RSV (cf. *Introduction*, p. 42). Thirteen passages in Grant's list do not vary from the ASV and therefore are not included.

<sup>7</sup>Many of these points are small yet are important in evaluating the textual base of the RSV.

<sup>8</sup>Westcott-Hort, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

you." With an increased knowledge of the science of textual criticism the ASV emended the KJV text and read: "This is my body, which is for you." An unusual circumstance came to light with the publication of the RSV New Testament in 1946: the RSV had returned to the KJV as opposed to the ASV by putting the word "broken" back into the text. The RSV's desire to conserve the KJV had gone to such an extent that it had led the revisers to accept the reading of Aleph<sup>3</sup>G and the Byzantine group of MSS in preference to ABC, Aleph and the critical texts of Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort and Nestle. Obviously this was a glaring mistake. In the 1952 edition therefore this is changed to read: "This is my body which is for you." "Broken" is noted as an alternative in a footnote.

In summary, what does all this mean? Careful study of the new translation in comparison with the KJV and the ASV reveals that the RSV unquestionably rests on a better Greek text than its predecessors. Indeed, the greatest objection to the KJV—with all of its archaisms and other shortcomings—is that it was translated on the basis of later, imperfect manuscripts. Even the English and American revisions which far excel the KJV are based on a text with medieval characteristics. All of this is of primary importance because no translation is better than the Greek text which it represents.

The text of the RSV stands as an approximation of the texts of Westcott-Hort and Nestle. Conceiving this Grant says: "It was a part of our commission to take into account the progress of modern Biblical research. This most certainly includes textual research or criticism. We have endeavored to discharge this part of our commission as faithfully as we could. And it is really extraordinary how often with the fuller apparatus of variant readings at our disposal, and with the eclectic principle now more widely accepted, we have concurred in following Westcott-Hort. Not that we agreed in advance in favor of Hort—quite the contrary, there was no such unanimity; our agreement is really a tribute to Westcott-Hort, which is still the great classical edition of modern times."<sup>9</sup> Allen Wikgren characterizes the RSV text as follows: "The R. S. V., then, may be said textually to have made a cautious advance in the direction of the Hort Text. Generally speaking, this also represents an improved text, not because the oldest text is necessarily to be defined as Alexandrian but because rational criticism was also to some extent a determining factor in the choice of readings."<sup>10</sup> This is a fair appraisal by Wikgren. The textual base of the RSV is indeed "a cautious advance in the direction of the Hort text," or as we have said an approximation of Westcott-Hort and Nestle. And if at times the RSV is not always the "oldest Bible," it is at least the "oldest" of the authorized Bibles!

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<sup>9</sup>Grant, *Introduction*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>Wilken Paul Wikgren, "The Revised Standard New Testament," *The Study of the Bible Today and Tomorrow* ed. by Harold R. Wiloughby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 387.