WHY STUDY THE BIBLE IN HEBREW AND GREEK?

Karen Connell
EXTENDED LIFE C.T.M.  www.extendedlifeCTM.org
Introduction

By David Cloud

I believe the King James Bible, as an accurate translation of the preserved Word of God, IS therefore the inspired Word of God. I can hold it up and say “this is the inspired Word of God.” I can say that about any accurate translation of the Scriptures from the right Hebrew and Greek texts into any language.

But I don’t believe the King James Bible was GIVEN BY inspiration of God. I don’t believe the KJV is GIVEN BY inspiration in the way that the original writings of Scripture were. I believe it has DERIVED its inspiration from the text upon which it was based. The King James Bible is an accurate and beautiful translation of the preserved Scriptures and as such is the inspired Word of God—inspired only derivatively, not directly.

I don’t believe this is merely a semantics game; it is an important distinction. The King James Bible is an accurate translation of the preserved Word of God and as such is the preserved Word of God. It is no more than that, and it is no less than that. The King James Version is the inspired Word of God because it accurately translates the text that was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

God chose Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, and I’m not going to say that God made a mistake and that we had to wait until the 17th century before we could have the penultimate Word of God and that English has now superceded everything that came before. The KJV is a wonderful translation, but IT IS a translation. Some would charge that to say such a thing detracts from the KJV. No, the truth never detracts from anything. We want to honor first that which God has honored, and that is the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. We honor translations but only in a secondary sense.

To make myself perfectly clear, let me also say that I believe the KJV is superior to all other English versions—superior in its textual basis, superior in its method of translation, superior in the scholarship of its translators, superior in the time of its translation. BUT THIS IS NOT THE SAME AS SAYING THE KING JAMES BIBLE IS GIVEN BY INSPIRATION OR THAT IT IS SOME SORT OF ADVANCED REVELATION.

Why Study the Bible in the Hebrew and Greek?

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, wrote the following in regard to the importance of understanding Greek and Hebrew when studying the Scriptures: "The languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained." God sovereignly chose to have His Word written in Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament).
Our modern English translations are excellent. Most of the major English translations available today are superb renderings of the original Greek and Hebrew. However, in any translation, not everything that was communicated in the original language can be precisely conveyed in another language. Some nuances do not transfer well from one language to another. As a result, a translation rarely is a perfect rendering of the original. (This is one reason why the Amplified Version was published.)

An example of this is the "aspect" of Greek verbs. English verbs have tenses—past, present, and future. Greek verbs have these same tenses, but they also have what is known as "aspect." Present-tense Greek verbs mean more than the action is occurring presently. A Greek verb can also carry the meaning that the action is occurring continually or repeatedly. This is lost in English unless the aspect word "continually" or "repeatedly" is added to the translation along with the verb. A specific example of this is Ephesians 5:18, "...be filled with the Spirit." In the original Greek, this verse is telling us to continually be filled with the Spirit. It is not a one-time event—it is a lifelong process. This "aspect" is lost in the English translation.

With all that said, the Bible also makes it clear that the Spirit is the author of the Bible and that He will help us to understand the His Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 14:26). You do not have to know Hebrew and Greek in order to understand the Bible. God’s intended message for us is accurately communicated in English. You can have confidence that God can reveal the meaning of His Word to you without your knowing Greek and Hebrew.

Perhaps this is a good analogy: reading the Bible without knowing Greek and Hebrew is like watching a 20" television, while reading the Bible knowing Greek and Hebrew is like watching a 65" LED 1080p HDTV with stereo surround sound. You can understand what is going on with the 20" television, but the 65" LED HDTV with stereo surround sound gives added depth and clarity. With the help of the Holy Spirit, anyone can accurately understand the Bible in English. However, knowing Hebrew and Greek helps to better understand the nuances and richness of the biblical texts.
On a frequent basis we attach a meaning of a word from the Bible based on our own language and culture to a word that is not the meaning of the Hebrew word behind the translation. This is often a result of using our modern western thinking process for interpreting the Biblical text. For proper interpretation of the Bible it is essential that we take our definitions for words from an Ancient Hebraic perspective. Our modern western minds often work with words that are purely abstract or mental while the Hebrew’s vocabulary was filled with words that painted pictures of concrete concepts. By reading the Biblical text with a proper Hebrew vocabulary the text comes to life revealing the authors intended meaning. Below each entry is a number corresponding to the "Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible" entry for the word.

Questions and Answers about the Bible

Question: "Should I use a paraphrase of the Bible?"

Answer: A paraphrase is a retelling of something in your own words. A paraphrase of the Bible is different from a translation in that a translation attempts (to varying degrees) to communicate as “word-for-word” or as “thought-for-thought” as possible. A paraphrase takes the meaning of a verse or passage of Scripture and attempts to express the meaning in “plain language” – essentially the words the author of the paraphrase would use to say the same thing. The most popular example of a Bible paraphrase would be “The Message” by Eugene Peterson.

Many people use paraphrases as their “reading Bible,” preferring to read straight through as with a novel. This can be particularly helpful in long narrative passages such as found in Genesis, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Then they use actual translations—such as the New American Standard, New King James, and New International Version—for indepth reading and study.

Should you use a paraphrase? A paraphrase of the Bible should not be used as a Christian’s primary Bible. We have to remember that a paraphrase is what the author thinks the Bible says, not necessarily what the Bible says. Eugene Peterson did a fair job on The Message, but there are many passages in The Message that do not accurately render the original meaning of the text. A paraphrase of the Bible should essentially be used as a commentary on the Bible, a way to get another perspective. A paraphrase can be used alongside a Bible translation to give insight into what the Bible means. A paraphrase of the Bible, though, should not be viewed as the Bible, but rather as an author’s idea of what the Bible says and what it means by what it says.
Question: "What is the KJV Only movement? Is the King James Version the only Bible we should use?"

Answer: Many people have strong and serious objections to the translation methods and textual basis for the new translations and therefore take a strong stance in favor of the King James Version. Others are equally convinced that the newer translations are an improvement over the KJV in their textual basis and translation methodology. GotQuestions.org does not want to limit its ministry to those of the "KJV Only" persuasion. Nor do we want to limit ourselves to those who prefer the NIV, NAS, NKJV, etc. Note - the purpose of this article is not to argue against the use of the King James Version. Rather, the focus of this article is to contend with the idea that the King James Version is the only Bible English speakers should use.

The KJV Only movement claims its loyalty to be to the Textus Receptus, a Greek New Testament manuscript compilation completed in the 1500s. To varying degrees, KJV Only advocates argue that God guided Erasmus (the compiler of the Textus Receptus) to come up with a Greek text that is perfectly identical to what was originally written by the biblical authors. However, upon further examination, it can be seen that KJV Only advocates are not loyal to the Textus Receptus, but rather only to the KJV itself. The New Testament of the New King James Version is based on the Textus Receptus, just as the KJV is. Yet, KJV Only advocates label the NKJV just as heretical as they do the NIV, NAS, etc.

Beyond the NKJV, other attempts (such as the KJ21 and MEV) have been made to make minimal updates to the KJV, only "modernizing" the archaic language, while using the exact same Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. These attempts are rejected nearly as strongly as the NKJV and the other newer Bible translations. This proves that KJV Only advocates are loyal to the King James Version itself, not to the Textus Receptus. KJV Only advocates have no desire or plan to update the KJV in any way. The KJV certainly contains English that is outdated, archaic, and sometimes confusing to modern English speakers and readers. It would be fairly simple to publish an updated KJV with the archaic words and phrases updated into modern 21st century English. However, any attempt to edit the KJV in any way results in accusations from KJV Only advocates of heresy and perversion of the Word of God.

When the Bible is translated for the first time into a new language today, it is translated into the language that culture speaks and writes today, not the way they spoke and wrote 400 years ago. The same should be true in English. The Bible was written in the common, ordinary language of the people at that time. Bible translations today should be the same. That is why Bible translations must be updated and revised as languages develop and change. The KJV Only movement is very English-focused in its thinking. Why should people who read English be forced to read the Bible in outdated/archaic English, while people of all other languages can read the Bible in modern/current forms of their languages?
Our loyalties are to the original manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Only the original languages are the Word of God as He inspired it. A translation is only an attempt to take what is said in one language and communicate it in another. The modern translations are superb in taking the meaning of the original languages and communicating it in a way that we can understand in English. However, none of the modern translations are perfect. Every one contains verses that are at least somewhat mistranslated. By comparing and contrasting several different translations, it is often easier to get a good grasp on what the verse is saying than by only using one translation. Our loyalty should not be to any one English translation, but to the inspired, inerrant Word of God that is communicated by the Holy Spirit through the translations (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

**Question: "What are Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus?"**

**Answer:** Our knowledge of the original text of the Bible comes from ancient hand-written manuscripts. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the New Testament was written in Greek. No one has the original articles, but thousands of ancient copies have been discovered. Since these copies are hand-written, there are variations in spelling, word order, and sentence structure among them. Even though those variations do cause some confusion about the biblical text, most of the manuscript readings are in agreement. Out of about 500 pages in the Greek New Testament, the manuscript variations represent only about half of a page.

The majority of ancient manuscripts contain only small portions of the biblical text, like a book or a portion of a book. Among these manuscripts there are papyrus fragments, which are the remains of the most ancient scrolls, and typically represent only a few pages of text. These papyrus fragments have all been discovered during modern archaeological digs. Another group of manuscripts is the Uncials, which use all capital letters and are written on parchment or vellum, which is a smoother writing surface than papyrus, and allows for curved letters. The Uncial manuscripts were written between the 3rd and 8th centuries and were often bound as pages in a book, or codex, rather than a scroll. A few of these ancient codices have survived intact, giving us a solid view of the Bible used by the ancient church.

Two of the oldest complete (or nearly complete) manuscripts are the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. They are both written on parchment, and have a large number of corrections written over the original text.

Codex Sinaiticus, also known as “Aleph” (the Hebrew letter א), was found by Count Tischendorf in 1859 at the Monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai. Portions of the manuscript were found in the monastery dump, and a larger portion was presented to Tischendorf by one of the monks. It is a large codex, with 400 pages (or leaves) comprising
about half of the Old Testament in the Septuagint version and the full New Testament. It has been dated to the second half of the 4th century and has been highly valued by Bible scholars in their efforts to reconstruct the original biblical text. Sinaiticus has heavily influenced the translation work of modern Bible versions. Though it is considered by some scholars to represent an original form of the text, it is also recognized as the most heavily corrected early New Testament manuscript.

Codex Vaticanus, also known as “B,” was found in the Vatican library. It is comprised of 759 leaves and has almost all of the Old and New Testaments. It is not known when it arrived at the Vatican, but it was included in a catalog listing in 1475, and it is dated to the middle of the 4th century. Vaticanus was first used as a source document by Erasmus in his work on the “Textus Receptus.” Because he viewed the text of Vaticanus to be erratic, he seldom followed it when it differed from other Greek texts.

There are varying theories on how these ancient texts should be viewed by modern scholars. On one hand, some believe that the most ancient reading should be followed, as it is closest in time to the original. On the other hand, some believe that the majority should rule. Since there are thousands of ancient manuscripts, they believe we should give precedence to the reading that is represented by the most documents. One issue that is sometimes raised against the majority viewpoint is that many of those documents were written very late (9th-15th century). The answer to this is that many of the early papyrus fragments support the majority reading. Additionally, the question has been raised, “If Vaticanus and Sinaiticus represent the original reading of the text, why are there so few manuscripts that follow their lead?” If they were valued by the early church, you would expect to find many copies made from them, covering a wide period of history. What we actually find is a few early manuscripts which agree with them, but then a disappearance of that text type as we progress through history.

There is much to be learned from examining these and other ancient texts, and they should continue to be highly valued by scholars. While there may be differences in opinion as to how they are to be used, one thing is certain—even with their textual variations, they show us that God has preserved His Word through the ages. We may debate the particular wording in a few passages, but the fact remains that over 90 percent of the New Testament text is unanimously supported by all the ancient manuscripts. In those passages where the proper reading is disputed, there is no major doctrinal change, and we can rest assured that we have the accurate, revealed words of God passed down to us.

**Question: "What are the Dead Sea Scrolls and why are they important?"

**Answer:** The first of the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries occurred in 1947 in Qumran, a village situated about twenty miles east of Jerusalem on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. A young Bedouin shepherd, following a goat that had gone astray, tossed a rock into one of the caves along the seacliffs and heard a cracking sound: the rock had hit a ceramic pot
containing leather and papyrus scrolls that were later determined to be nearly twenty centuries old. Ten years and many searches later, eleven caves around the Dead Sea were found to contain tens of thousands of scroll fragments dating from the third century B.C. to A.D. 68 and representing an estimated eight hundred separate works.

The Dead Sea Scrolls comprise a vast collection of Jewish documents written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and encompassing many subjects and literary styles. They include manuscripts or fragments of every book in the Hebrew Bible except the Book of Esther, all of them created nearly one thousand years earlier than any previously known biblical manuscripts. The scrolls also contain the earliest existing biblical commentary, on the Book of Habakkuk, and many other writings, among them religious works pertaining to Jewish sects of the time.

The legends of what was contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls are far beyond what was actually there. There were no lost books of the Bible or other literature that there was not already other copies of. The vast majority of the Dead Sea Scrolls were simply copies of books of the Old Testament from 250-150 B.C. A copy or portion of nearly every Old Testament book was found in Qumran. There were extra-biblical and apocryphal books found as well, but again, the vast majority of the scrolls were copies of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Dead Sea Scrolls were such an amazing discovery in that the scrolls were in excellent condition and had remained hidden for so long (over 2000 years). The Dead Sea Scrolls can also give us confidence in the reliability of the Old Testament manuscripts since there were minimal differences between the manuscripts that had previously been discovered and those that were found in Qumran. Clearly this is a testament to the way God has preserved His Word down through the centuries, protecting it from extinction and guarding it against significant error.

**Question: "What is the Masoretic Text?"**

**Answer:** The Hebrew text of the Old Testament is called the Masoretic Text because in its present form it is based upon the Masora—the Hebrew, textual tradition of the Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (or Masorites). The Masoretes were rabbis who made it their special work to correct the faults that had crept into the text of the Old Testament during the Babylonian captivity, and to prevent, for the future, its being corrupted by any alteration. They first separated the apocryphal from the canonical books, and divided the latter into twenty-two books, being the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Then they divided each book into sections and verses.

There is a great difference of opinion as to when the Masoretic Text was written, but it was probably accomplished in the 10th -11th century. Several editions existed, varying considerably, but the received and authoritative text is that of Jacob ben-chayim ibn Adonijah, who carefully sifted and arranged the previous works on the subject. It was published in 1524.
Although the existing copies of the Masoretic Text date back only to the tenth century, two other important textual evidences bolster the confidence of textual critics that it is accurate. The first is the successive discoveries of manuscripts at Qumran by the Dead Sea since 1947. These revealed portions of manuscripts several centuries older than any previously known. The second is the comparison of the Masoretic text to the Greek translation called the Septuagint (or LXX), which was written around 200-150 B.C. The oldest existing manuscripts date back to the fourth century A.D. Both the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal an amazing consistency with the Masoretic Text, assuring us that God was indeed divinely and sovereignly protecting His Word through thousands of years of copying and translating.

**Question:** "What is the Textus Receptus?"

**Answer:** The Textus Receptus (Latin for “Received Text”) is a Greek New Testament that provided the textual base for the vernacular translations of the Reformation Period. It was a printed text, not a hand-copied manuscript, created in the 15th century to fill the need for a textually accurate Greek New Testament. As the Christian message was carried abroad, the books of the New Testament were not only taken along, but also translated into the languages of the people to whom the message was given. In the transmission of the text, copies were made, mostly by Christians who were not trained in the art of the task; therefore, not too much attention was given to the correctness of the copies. As the number of copies in the different languages proliferated, it became apparent that many differences and discrepancies were found in the various versions. Eventually, it became obvious that there was a need for someone to bring textual criticism into play.

Needless to say, the invention of the printing press with movable type in the mid-fifteenth century revolutionized the world of literature. The first Bible to be printed in 1456 was the Latin Vulgate. This was also known by the Gutenberg Bible. Bible scholars at that time were little concerned about the Greek text of the New Testament; the Latin Vulgate was their Bible.

Then in the late fifteenth century, the Greek language—unknown for hundreds of years—was recovered in the West, the geographical area of the Latin Church. With the rediscovery of Greek and its inception as the language of the people, the Latin Vulgate translation was subjected to a critical examination in comparison with the Greek original. Scholars discovered numerous mistranslations or outright errors in the Vulgate. This provided a reason for printing the New Testament in its original language, Greek.

**Erasmus**, a 15th-century Dutch theologian, working at great speed in order to beat to press another Greek New Testament being prepared in Spain, gathered together what hand-copied Greek manuscripts he could locate. He found five or six, the majority of which were dated
in the twelfth century. Working with all the speed he could, Erasmus did not even transcribe the manuscripts; he merely made notes on the manuscripts themselves and sent them to the printers. The entire New Testament was printed in about six to eight months and published in 1516. It became a best seller, despite its errors, and the first printing was soon gone. A second edition was published in 1519 with some of the errors having been corrected.

Erasmus published two other editions in 1527 and 1535. Stung by criticism that his work contained numerous textual errors, he incorporated readings from the Greek New Testament published in Spain in later editions of his work. Erasmus’ Greek text became the standard in the field, and other editors and printers continued the work after his death in 1536. In 1633, another edition was published. In the publisher’s preface, in Latin, we find these words: “Textum ergo habes, nun cab omnibus receptum,” which can be translated as “the [reader] now has the text that is received by all.” From that publisher’s notation have come the words “Received Text.” The Textus Receptus became the dominant Greek text of the New Testament for the following two hundred and fifty years. It was not until the publication of the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament in 1881 that the Textus Receptus lost its position.

The reason for its losing its prominent position as a basis of biblical textual interpretation was the inception of textual criticism. Influential scholars paved the way for the acceptance of a critical text. The work of Westcott and Hort brought about the final dethronement of the Textus Receptus and the establishment of the principle of a critical text. However, the Textus Receptus is not a “bad” or misleading text, either theologically or practically. Technically, however, it is far from the original text. Yet three centuries were to pass before scholars had won the struggle to replace this hastily assembled text with a text which gave evidence to being closer to the New Testament Autographs.

Many consider the King James Version of the Bible to be the crown of English Bibles. Even at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Greek text used in preparing the KJV was the Textus Receptus. Both Luther and Tyndale translated the Scriptures into their vernacular languages using the same basic Greek text. Luther used the second edition of the Erasmus New Testament, and Tyndale utilized the third edition.

Regardless of one’s position on the Textus Receptus, it is evident that it had great influence on preserving God’s inspired Word through many centuries. Textual criticism of the Scriptures is so evidently important that all scholars and students of the Word of God need to utilize its principles in order to fulfill the biblical mandate, “Study to show yourselves approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

**Question:** "Who was Desiderius Erasmus?"

**Answer:** Desiderius Erasmus (1466—1536) was a Dutch theologian and the scholar behind
what is now known as the Textus Receptus. In a day when the only Bible available was the Latin Vulgate, Erasmus sought to produce a textually accurate Greek New Testament. To that end, he compiled several handwritten Greek manuscripts and oversaw their printing in 1516.

Erasmus was ordained as a Catholic priest at the age of 25 but was granted a dispensation from his religious vows that enabled him to accept the post of secretary to the Bishop of Cabrai. In 1495 Erasmus attended the University of Paris and earned his Doctor of Divinity at Turin University, Italy, in 1506. Between 1510 and 1515, Erasmus taught at Queens College, Cambridge, England.

Erasmus produced a version of the New Testament in both Greek and Latin. It was a bestseller. His second edition (1519) of the Greek text was used by Martin Luther in his German translation of the Bible. The third edition (1522) was used by William Tyndale for the first English New Testament. It was also the basis for the 1550 Robert Stephanus edition used by the translators of the Geneva Bible (1599) and the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible (1611). In 1527 Erasmus published a definitive fourth edition, with parallel columns of Greek, Latin, and Erasmus’ notes. The final edition (1535) did not contain the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus dedicated his work to Pope Leo X and regarded his production of a Greek New Testament as his chief service to the cause of Christianity.

After Erasmus’ death, another edition of his New Testament was published in 1633. The publisher’s preface said, “Textum ergo habes, nun cab omnibus receptum” (“The [reader] now has the text that is received by all”). From that publisher’s notation has come the term “Received Text” or “Textus Receptus.” Erasmus’ work was the dominant Greek text of the New Testament for the next 250 years. It was not until the publication of the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament in 1881 that the influence of the Textus Receptus waned.

During the Reformation, Erasmus was of two minds. He was critical of the abuses within the Catholic Church and called for reform, but he kept his distance from Martin Luther and continued to recognize the authority of the Pope. Erasmus wanted to introduce humanistic enlightenment into the Catholic Church without breaking with Rome. Erasmus declined to support Luther on the basis that to do so would jeopardize his position as an independent scholar and lessen his influence within the Church to introduce reform.

To begin with, there was mutual respect between Erasmus and Luther, but Erasmus later condemned the conduct of the new evangelicals of the Reformation and expressed concern that Luther was setting himself up as the sole interpreter of Scripture. In some ways, Erasmus was caught in a cross fire, each side accusing him of siding with the other.

Between 1524 and 1527, Erasmus and Luther engaged in a bitter dispute over free will. From this exchange came Luther’s famous On the Bondage of the Will. Erasmus debated with other theologians and humanists (those who study the humanities), and, although he
opposed abuses within the Church, he usually came down squarely on the side of Catholic doctrine.

Erasmus was respected as a classical Latin and Greek scholar and became known as “Prince of the Humanists.” He is best known as a Dutch Renaissance humanist, social critic, teacher, and theologian. He described the Reformation this way: “Luther was guilty of two great crimes; he struck the Pope in his crown, and the monks in their belly.” And his comment on Luther’s influence: “By burning Luther’s books you may rid your bookshelves of him, but you will not rid men’s minds of him.” Both comments show Erasmus had an astute grasp of the realities of his times.

Throughout the tumult of the Reformation, Erasmus sought to avoid outright conflict while still upholding traditional Roman Catholic doctrine. His middle-of-the-road approach angered scholars in both camps, and the Church of Rome was disappointed that Erasmus failed to sacrifice himself in defense of the Church.

**Question: "What is the Majority Text?"**

**Answer:** The Majority Text, also known as the Byzantine and Ecclesiastical Text, is a method of determining the original reading of a Scripture by discovering what reading occurs in a majority of the manuscripts. As the Greek New Testament was copied hundreds of times over 1500 years, the scribes, as careful as they were, occasionally made mistakes. The vast majority of these mistakes are in misspellings, or in whether "the" or a preposition occurs. It is important to remember, though, that no doctrine of the Christian faith is put into doubt by these textual questions. The testimony of the thousands of manuscripts over 1500 years is entirely consistent on all the key issues of the Christian faith.

It is vital, though, that our Bibles are as accurate as possible. The accuracy of the manuscripts plays a large role in determining the accuracy of the translation. While the presence of a the is not usually vital to the meaning of a verse, there are times when it can be. This is where the science of “textual criticism” comes in. The goal of textual criticism is to examine all of the available manuscripts, and by comparison and contrast, to determine what the original text truly was.

The Majority Text method within textual criticism could be called the “democratic” method. Essentially, each Greek manuscript has one vote, all the variants are voted on by all the manuscripts, and whichever variant has the most votes wins. At first glance, the Majority Text method would seem to be the most likely to result in the correct original reading. The problem is that the Majority Text method does not take into account two very important factors: (1) The age of the manuscripts, and (2) the location of the manuscripts.

**(1) The age of the manuscripts.** The more times a manuscript is copied, the more likely it
is that errors will occur. A first-generation copy—one that was copied directly from the original—is very likely to be closer to the original than a tenth-generation copy (a copy that was copied from a copy, from a copy . . . from the original). Manuscripts from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries should be far closer to the originals than manuscripts from the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. The problem is that the majority of the manuscripts are from the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. To illustrate, let’s say there is a man named James Smith. Let’s say you are attempting to discover James Smith’s middle name. Who would be a better source, James Smith’s one thousand great-great-great-great-grandchildren, or James Smith’s son? Of course it would be James Smith’s son. Similarly, a 2nd- or 3rd-generation copy of the New Testament is far more likely to be correct than a 12th- or 13th-generation copy.

(2) The location of the manuscripts. The vast majority of Christians through the centuries have lived in western and eastern Europe. For cultural, theological, and political reasons, the western and eastern churches split. The western church became the Roman Catholic Church while the eastern church become the Orthodox Church. A few centuries after the start of Christianity, the western church began using Latin as its primary language. The eastern church continued using Greek as its primary language for another thousand years (and in some places, even to today). Textual critics have discovered that the manuscripts discovered in one part of the world tend to be very similar to other manuscripts from that part of the world, likely due to originating from the same source. Since the eastern church continued using Greek as its primary language for 1000+ years longer than the western church, there are significantly more Greek manuscripts that were discovered in eastern Europe than in western Europe. And, these eastern Greek manuscripts (the Byzantine manuscripts) are all very similar to each other. When the Majority Text is applied, this results in the eastern manuscripts having far greater weight than the western manuscripts. However, if the thousands of Latin manuscripts from the western church were thrown into the Majority Text “equation,” the results of the voting would be far more balanced, and would actually tilt away from the eastern / Byzantine reading.

Perhaps another illustration will help. Let’s say that there are two copies of a document, document A and document B, with minor differences between them due to copying mistakes. Document A is copied 100 times, while Document B is copied three times. If you used the Majority Text method, the Document A copies would have 100 votes, while the Document B copies would only have 3 votes. The Document A copies would win every vote. However, since Document A and Document B are both first-generation copies of another document, Document A and Document B and their "descendants" should be given equal weight in determining the most likely original reading.

The principles of age and location, then, result in “the majority rules” not being the best method in textual criticism. What, then, is the best method? The best method would seem to be taking into account all factors: majority, age, location, difficulty of the reading, and which variant best explains the origin of the other variants. This method is known as the
“Eclectic Text” or “Critical Text.” Other than the King James Version and New King James Version, all of the modern English translations are based on the Eclectic Text. Most assume that the King James Version and New King James Version are based on the Majority Text. This is not correct.

The King James Version and New King James Version are based on the Textus Receptus. The Textus Receptus is very similar to the Majority Text, but there are in fact hundreds of differences between the Majority Text and the Textus Receptus. The Textus Receptus was compiled and edited by Erasmus in the 16th century. Erasmus used several Greek manuscripts, which were eastern / Byzantine in nature. This explains why the Textus Receptus is very similar to the Majority Text. However, Erasmus by no means had access to all of the Greek manuscripts, so there was no way he could develop a true Majority Text. The Textus Receptus is based on a very limited number of manuscripts, all of them eastern, and all of them dating to around the 12th century. As a result, compared to the Eclectic Text and the Majority Text, the Textus Receptus is far less likely to have the most accurate reading.

To summarize, the Majority Text is a method within textual criticism that uses the “majority rules” to determine which variant is most likely to be original. While the Majority Text method does result in the most likely original reading in most instances, it should not be employed universally or exclusively. There are many other important factors in determining which variant is most likely to be original. ii

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i http://www.greatpreachers.org/peter_ruckman.html
ii http://www.gotquestions.org/