

Verses with Zero-Support in the Critical Text

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Verses with 'Zero-Support' in the Modern Critical Text of the Greek New Testament

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Editorial Note: Almost all modern versions of the Bible are based on the Nestle-Aland/UBS Greek New Testament, rather than on the Greek Received Text (*Textus Receptus*) which the TBS uses and believes to be providentially preserved since the time of the apostles. The NA text has been pieced together (reconstructed) by textual critics from various sources to create what the editors think might be a close approximation of the earliest text. Some of the verses included in it are created by combining words and phrases from a number of extant sources, acknowledging that these verses have never appeared, in the form as printed in the modern text, anywhere else before. This article examines this serious matter further. While inevitably technical, the implications are of the utmost importance.

Introduction

A significant objection to the reconstructed modern Critical Text of the Greek New Testament has been posed by Dr Maurice A. Robinson for over two decades now, and it has yet to be satisfactorily answered. Robinson is a retired professor from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary who spent over fifty years in New Testament textual criticism and is a well-known advocate for the position referred to as 'Byzantine Priority'.¹

Robinson's objection arose from his close examination of the text and notes of the Nestle-Aland 27th edition (referred to as NA²⁷).² He found numerous sequences, involving one or more verses in the modern Critical Text which have 'zero-support' overall in any extant manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, in ancient versions, or in Biblical quotations in the early Church Fathers. This is because it uses a method called 'reasoned eclecticism' which involves making judgments about differing readings (variants) based on its analysis of available manuscripts and application of the empirical methods of modern textual criticism. As a result, Robinson contended in a 2009 article that this method has, in various places, produced a 'test-tube' text which exists only in the 'laboratory' of textual critics without any historical evidence that such verses, as they appear in NA²⁷, ever actually existed.³

In Robinson's article he lists one hundred and five of these so-called 'Zero-Support Verses'.⁴ He says, 'I demonstrated that the NA²⁷ critical text has at least one hundred and five whole verses whose entire running text as printed did not exist in any known MS [manuscript],

version, or patristic writer [Church Father].⁵ Robinson has also written an unpublished study in which he lists an additional two hundred and ten ‘two-verse segments’ in the NA²⁷ text, beyond the previously cited one hundred and five ‘single-verse’ examples, which also have ‘zero-support’ among extant Greek New Testament manuscripts, versions, and patristic citations (a total of three hundred and fifteen ‘zero support’ verses).⁶ This is the ‘Zero-Support’ objection to the modern Critical Text, which has also been described as a ‘test-tube text’ and even as a ‘Frankenstein text’.⁷

A Closer Look at the ‘Zero-Support’ Objection

In his article, Robinson begins with the observation that though the editors claim only that the modern Critical Text is a ‘working text’, most students, teachers, and scholars assume that it ‘does represent the epitome of New Testament text-critical scholarship’.⁸ Such readers generally assume it ‘should be used and regarded as a quasi-‘original’ text’.⁹

Robinson further asserts that the method undergirding the reconstruction of the modern text violates one of the basic rules for textual criticism, as articulated by Kurt and Barbara Aland in their influential work *The Text of the New Testament*, which states:

Variants must never be treated in isolation, but always considered in the context of the tradition. Otherwise there is too great a danger of reconstructing a ‘test-tube text’ which never existed in any time or place.¹⁰

He notes that the editorial approach to the modern Critical Text is typically to divide each verse into individual units of differing readings [i.e. variant units], and then to seek to determine what scholars deem to be the correct reading for each one, without regard to how these are related to one another in sequence.¹¹

Robinson adds:

The resultant text—even within relatively short segments—becomes an entity that apparently never existed at any time or place.¹²

For Robinson, such readings reflect ‘an inherent problem within the various forms of eclectic methodology’.¹³ He continues,

... because the system works primarily with individual variant units, the left hand has little or no regard for what the right hand may have done in a neighboring variant unit¹⁴ ...

Examples of ‘zero-support’ verses

Robinson provides several detailed examples to illustrate his point.¹⁵

He offers Mark 11.3, in particular, as an illustration,¹⁶ printing it as it appears in the NA²⁷ and making note of the two variant units in the verse using the letters (a) and (b):¹⁷

Mark 11.3 (NA²⁷): καὶ ἔάν τις ὑμ ἵν ε ἵπη· τί ποιεῖτε τοῦτο; (a) ε ἵπατε· ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ χρείαν ἔχει, καὶ εύθὺς (b) α ὑτὸν ἀποστέλλει πάλιν ὥδε.

Here is my translation of the verse as it appears in the NA²⁷ with indicators for the two variant unit markers included:

Mark 11.3 (based on NA²⁷): And if anyone says to you, Why are you doing this? (a) say, the Lord has need of it and immediately (b) he will send it back here.

Robinson next describes the textual support for the wording in each variant unit. Variant unit (a) is supported by Codices B (Vaticanus) and Delta, minuscule 2427, and a few Old Latin manuscripts. Variant unit (b) is supported by Codices α (Sinaiticus), D, L, along with minuscules 579, 892, 1241, and a few others.¹⁸ He then points out that the support for the two variant units are ‘mutually exclusive’, so that ‘the verse as printed in the NA²⁷ has apparently zero support from any known Greek manuscript, version, or Church father. Thus, the main text for this verse as printed in NA²⁷ ‘becomes a matter of conjecture’.¹⁹

An additional problem: ‘single-manuscript support’ verses

Robinson also points out that in addition to ‘zero-support’ verses in the modern Critical Text there are also numerous ‘single-manuscript support’ verses.²⁰ He offers John 9.4 in the NA²⁷ as an example. This verse has ‘three sequential variant units’ with the printed text of the verse in the NA²⁷ ‘apparently supported by only Codex Vaticanus’.²¹ Robinson adds:

Thus it is not surprising to find hundreds of similar cases of single-manuscript support for whole verses of NA²⁷ throughout the New Testament.²²

In a footnote, Robinson explains that at the time of the article’s writing his ‘tabulations’ showed ‘more than 180 (current count 190) whole verses in NA²⁷ that have their aggregate support apparently in only one Greek manuscript’, with these manuscripts ranging from various papyri to various uncials.²³ He notes that such ‘single-manuscript support’ verses are more common in longer books, like Matthew (35 such verses), Mark (13), Luke (27), John (24), Acts (15), and Revelation (38).²⁴ The end result is that such ‘sequential variant units’ becomes ‘a *de facto* conjectural text’ from which ‘all other readings are derived. Such a scenario does *not* appear to reflect a proper view of historical textual transmission’.²⁵

The modern text’s transmissional history problem

One of the final points noted above, which Robinson repeatedly stresses in his critique, relates to the lack of evidence for ‘historical textual transmission’ within the modern reconstructed text. According to Robinson there is a significant disconnect or inconsistency when the modern Critical Text claims to be able to approximate the original text of the New Testament (or at least

the so-called earliest available ‘Initial Text’)²⁶ and yet it cannot, in many cases, with respect to these ‘zero-support’ verses, point to extant manuscripts which demonstrate the historicity of these readings in the transmission process.

This is a theme which Robinson forcefully stresses in his article ‘The Case for Byzantine Priority’.²⁷

Robinson asserts,

It is one thing for modern eclecticism to defend numerous readings when considered solely as isolated units of variation. It is quite another matter for modern eclecticism to claim that the *sequential result* of such isolated decisions will produce a text closer to the autograph [text first written by inspiration] … than that produced by any other method.²⁸

In a more recent article on the Byzantine Priority position and the attempt to recover the autographic text, Robinson persists in this critique, noting,

In other words, eclecticism in its ultimate effect sets forth an ‘original text’ that as an entity failed to maintain itself throughout transmissional history. Such an indictment represents the tip of a transmissional iceberg that seriously should call into question *any* likelihood that a text determined eclectically (by whatever means) should represent a putative historical entity.²⁹

According to Robinson, the reconstructed modern Critical Text is not a historically plausible text, because, in many places, it has left no trace in the extant transmissional history.

What about the Byzantine Text?

In contrast to the transmissional problems of the modern eclectic text, in light of its ‘zero-support’ verses, Robinson suggests that the Byzantine or Majority Text holds a much more favorable position, especially demonstrated by extant manuscript evidence from the fourth century forward.³⁰ This text ‘represents a *reasonable inference* based upon the *actual state* of the existing post-fourth century textual evidence, and not upon a hypothetical assertion regarding what one cannot know due to historical ignorance’.³¹

After asserting that the modern reconstructed text is ‘based on conjecture and speculation, and not upon logical inference from actual data’, Robinson observes,

In contrast, within the Byzantine Textform, nearly every verse of the NT steadfastly retains well over 90 percent general agreement among its component MSS regarding its text’.

He goes on to contrast this with NA²⁷ and asks how that text ‘ever could have existed in actuality, let alone have given rise to all other forms of the text while totally losing its own original identity among the extant manuscript base. Lack of perpetuation in this regard strongly suggests a lack of existence.’³²

In contrast to the reconstructed modern Critical Text, the Byzantine Textform, according to Robinson, 'has a demonstrably historical existence: its line of transmission extends from (at least) the post-fourth-century era to the invention of printing'.³³

At this point, it is important to note that Robinson's argument in favor of the Byzantine (Majority) Text, over against the modern Critical Text, is compatible, in many ways, with the argument in favour of the Protestant Received Text (TR) of the Greek New Testament. Robinson himself has noted that his position has much in common with 'even the so-called Confessional Bibliology position that basically favors a form of the printed TR', over against modern forms of eclecticism which favor the 'Alexandrian type of text'.³⁴ Those who hold to the Reformation Text or traditional Protestant Text are indeed co-belligerents with those who hold to the Byzantine/Majority Text in defending passages like the Traditional Ending of Mark (Mark 16.9–20) and the Woman Taken in Adultery Passage (John 7.53–8.11), and in pointing out the problem of 'zero-support' verses in the reconstructed modern text. We also acknowledge, however, that in other areas the Byzantine/Majority text view appears to be inadequate.³⁵

What about the CBGM, the ECM, NA²⁸, and NA²⁹?

Finally, we need to respond to one key protest that might be lodged against Robinson's objection. This protest would be that Robinson's objections were raised against the text of the NA²⁷ edition which was printed in 1993. Just three decades after its publication, the methodological approach of modern textual criticism has shifted significantly.

The twenty-first century saw the development of a new computer assisted method, the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM), at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF) in Münster, Germany, and then the launch of the so-called *Editio Critica Maior* (ECM), a vast multi-volume series, offering a complete scholarly revision of the modern Critical Text.³⁶ In 2012 the NA²⁸ edition was published, replacing the NA²⁷, and applying the CBGM/ECM text to the catholic (general) epistles (James to Jude). The NA²⁹ edition is anticipated soon, applying the CBGM/ECM text to Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Eventually (perhaps by 2030), should the ECM series continue, the entire modern-critical Greek New Testament will be completely revised.

The question then arises as to whether Robinson's critique is outdated. Reasoned eclectic advocate Peter J. Gurry has, in fact, made just such a claim, suggesting that, 'The real problem with Robinson's claim is methodological. He has not used the right tools for the job'.³⁷ Gurry says that he 'spot-checked' three of the verses (Mark 11.3, Acts 2.7, and Acts 27.8) cited by Robinson as 'zero-support' verses in the NA²⁷ against the ECM data. He reports that changes have been made, and declares he is 'optimistic', because the CBGM and ECM 'show promise' that they will be able to answer Robinson's objection.³⁸ A closer look at Gurry's analysis of these three examples, however, shows that Robinson's objection is hardly nullified. For Acts 2.7, for example, Gurry merely suggests it might be shifted from a 'zero-support' to a 'single-

manuscript support’ verse, and then only if a spelling difference is ignored and the first two words in the single supporting manuscript (P74) are assumed, even though it is ‘fragmentary’ (the first two words for this verse are missing in P74).

For Acts 27.8 Gurry says the text has ‘changed slightly’ in the ECM but does not explicitly explain how.³⁹ Aside from these problems and others with Gurry’s analysis, there are the other one hundred and two verses yet to be checked. Most importantly, Gurry makes no mention of the fact that the example verses he cited from Mark 11.3, Acts 2.7, and Acts 27.8 are still printed exactly the same in the current NA28edition. Even in the general epistles where the CBGM/ECM has already been applied some of Robinson’s ‘zero-support’ verses have been unaltered. One example of this is Jude 15.⁴⁰

More significant is the fact that Gurry fails to address Robinson’s overall argument that the focus on isolated variant units, apart from other sequential variant units, constitutes a serious methodological problem for the modern reconstructed text. Gurry ignores Robinson’s explicit statement, in his 2009 article, that the ECM of the general epistles ‘do not address the zero-support issue’.⁴¹ He adds that ‘once the ‘best’ reading has been established within any variant unit … the methodological task proceeds to the next sequential variant unit without regard for decisions made in the previous unit’.⁴² In a recent article on the INTF blog, Dr Marie-Luise Lakmann, one of the ECM editors, explains the ‘verse by verse’ work of the ECM team ‘in four stages: regularization of the variants, establishing variant units, determining the order of the variants, and post-editing and correcting the apparatus’.⁴³ It is this focus on ‘establishing variant units’, in isolation from other sequential variant units, that Robinson suggests leads to ‘zero-support’ or ‘single manuscript’ support verses. Robinson concludes his analysis of the modern critical ‘test-tube’ text by declaring it to be a ‘wrong methodological approach’:

The resultant text—pieced together from disparate variant units—ultimately reflects a series of readings that lack genuine historical existence, as well as even a plausible transmissional existence.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Robinson’s exposure of ‘zero-support’ verses in the modern Critical Text reveals a significant flaw in its overall reconstruction method. In places it appears to be a ‘test-tube’ text or even a ‘Frankenstein text’, only conjured up in the offices and at the computer work stations of imaginative and industrious scholars. There is no little irony in the fact that many of the same scholars who so frequently decry the Received Text for its inclusion, at a few points, of readings with only currently minor or scant extant external support, are so willing to embrace a text which, with some frequency, includes verses which have ‘zero-support’. It seems that modern textual criticism of the Greek New Testament, after more than a hundred and fifty years of speculation and reconstruction, has led only down a blind alley. The time is right for returning, with confidence, to the traditional Protestant text of Holy Scripture.

► Endnotes

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