Why the Byzantine Greek New Testament is best

The purpose of this podcast is to announce my short paper telling why I support the Byzantine Greek Text (BT) as the most accurate representation of what the apostles wrote. This has been a major decision for me, because it means that my translation team and I will revise our published Indonesian New Testament by the year 2022.

Here’s the link.

I was not interested, and not even open, to considering the Byzantine Greek text over the ET (Eclectic Text//United Bible Societies Text/Nestle-Aland Text) until I went to meet Dr. Timothy Friberg, who also has worked in Indonesia for as long as I have. Dr. Friberg is the genius who compiled the Analytical Greek New Testament (AGNT), first published in 1985. The AGNT provides more helpful and accurate grammatical parsing of the NT Greek text because it is based on careful linguistic analysis, rather than the traditional Latin-derived parsing. It is therefore used by a majority of trained Bible translators and many others. When Friberg talks about anything having to do with Greek grammar, then people really should listen. He is the one who convinced me about the Byzantine Greek text being the best one, and the best one for us to translate for all audiences.

But especially for someone working in Indonesia, it is so much better to use the Byzantine Text. Here’s why: Muslims believe that their Al-Koran has been unchanged through the centuries, and that the Christian Bible (particularly the New Testament) has been fiddled with. Their belief in the immutability of the Al-Koran is actually incorrect, but they have ample proof that the NT has been fiddled with, because they can point to words taken out of our Bibles in the last 120 years.

In contrast, the BT has been stable through the centuries. It includes most of the words that readers familiar with the KJV miss in modern translations, and it can be translated without the need of any footnotes talking about textual variants.

I have written a short article (linked here in the episode notes) that outlines how the shift happened to translating the ET rather than a better Greek text. I hope that some of my listeners will be interested in that story. Here are a few teaser facts:

- About 120 years ago, Christians were told that earlier manuscripts penned on papyrus and preserved in the dry climate of Egypt (especially around the library center in Alexandria) more likely revealed the authentic form of the words penned by the apostles. Subsequent manuscript finds and analysis over the next century did NOT support the claims that manuscripts of the Alexandrian type form a stream that consistently points to the most authentic text of the NT. What research showed is that Alexandrian manuscripts show sloppy and wild variations because Egyptian copyists freely redacted the texts they copied.
• Wescott and Hort published their Greek NT in 1881. It was based on only two Alexandrian texts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Successive editions were published by Eberhard Nestle (beginning in 1898), who was followed by his son, then Kurt Aland (in the 1950s). All these editions prioritized Alexandrian manuscripts. These editions are known by various names, and I will refer to them as the Eclectic Text. Even though many textual discoveries were documented in successive editions, those discoveries were largely relegated to abstruse footnotes, and the main text still very much followed what Wescott and Hort published. The Christian public was not made aware about the wild variations discovered in Alexandrian manuscripts.

• It has been conclusively shown that Alexandrian copyists shortened the texts they copied. They did the same thing with Homer's poems.

• Sometimes more than one variant are found in one or two verses of the Greek text. I was further convinced about the flawed nature of the ET when I found out that it displays **105 verses where the combinations of variants chosen are not represented in any extant manuscript**. Or if we widen that to two consecutive verses in the ET, we find a further **210 two-verse combinations that are not found in any extant manuscript**. An example in a single verse occurs in John 5:2 where no manuscript has been found anywhere that contains the name spelled 'Bethzatha' and the exact form of the Greek translated as 'at the sheep gate'. To me, **the presence of 315 unsupported combinations represents a fatal flaw in the principles used in compiling the ET**.

• By contrast, the Byzantine Text has stayed stable throughout the centuries. Byzantine manuscripts predominately were found in the wide area which received the original letters written by the apostles, places like Antioch, Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, etc. 95% of the manuscripts containing NT books or fragments or them are of the BT type. This is why the BT is also called the Majority Text. It seems that a majority of ancient copyists believed that this was the text to pass on to following generations, and Alexandrian renderings died out.

• Some of you will have heard about the Textus Receptus, which is the 1516 Greek text compiled by Erasmus that became the basis of the KJV NT. In my article I show briefly why the BT is far superior to the Textus Receptus.

• Just as succeeding editions of the ET basically played ‘follow the leader’ since Wescott and Hort’s 1881 publication, so modern translations have played ‘follow the leader’ since the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901. Translations that followed ASV’s lead include RSV, NASB, GNT, NIV, CEV, NLT, NET, and ESV. The prefaces of all these translations claim that the translators were following the ET, but in reality all of these only followed it around 72% of the time. In doing this, it is clear that the translators took the lazy and safe path, rather than themselves examining the textual evidence. There is no evidence that the ASV translators were super-scholars who made consistently excellent decisions about the Greek text. They (or some of them) played it safe and went with KJV-like readings in some places, but then seemingly by whim they (or others of them) went with poorly-supported textual variants in other places that were sure to anger readers— like leaving out words from the Lord’s

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2 For proof of this assertion, see Playing ‘Follow the Leader’ in Bible Translation.
Prayer. One after another, succeeding generations of translators of newer translations have simply following the lead of the previous popular translations, all the while keeping up an appearance of scholarship by including misleading footnotes that say, “Some manuscripts add the words …” By not following the their declared Greek text consistently, all the translators of the above listed Bibles have shown that they really did not respect the ET to be faithfully showing the content of the original autographs. If Bible translators don’t follow the ET faithfully, then what justification can be found to claim that it is the best available representation of what the apostles wrote? What Greek text will we, the Christian public, choose to follow? It doesn’t make sense to create a new edition of the Greek text based on what translators have actually translated since 1901!

● The assertions above are supported by hard evidence in my January 2019 article: Playing ‘Follow the Leader’ in Bible Translation.

The Eclectic Text is basically dead. One might compare it to the theory of evolution. Experts from multiple scientific disciplines have repeatedly announced that evolution can no longer be maintained as a viable theory. (And many of the scientists are scratching their heads as to how to replace it, because they absolutely will not entertain returning to believing in the creation of the world.) In a similar way, seminary professors who have long taught the superiority of earlier Alexandrian manuscripts are not even open to looking at articles that might change their view. Someone has observed that just when a popular theory or philosophy has lost logical credibility, that is just when people become more bone headed about it. I hate to say it, but support for the BT will need to come from ordinary conservative Christians who care about God’s Word and His reputation, and who are willing to look at the evidence.

● In my article, I discuss English translations of the BT. The most available literal translation of the BT is the World English Bible, and I prefer the British Edition.

● Unfortunately, I find that there is no translation of the BT done in a more meaning-based manner. There is no BT-based version like the NIV or the NLT. My firm belief is that every believer should have access to at least one good literal translation and one good meaning-based translation. When a literal translation leaves the reader wondering if their understanding of a verse is correct, they need to be able to open a meaning-based translation to find their answer. ALL the false cults that have ever sprung up from the year 1600 to the present based their teaching on literal translations where the meaning of their favorite passages was hard to understand and open to multiple interpretations. My particular desire is to allow for meaningful audio recordings of a New Testament translated from the BT. Literal translations from ancient Greek cannot ever express things in a natural and easy-to-understand way in modern English. The two languages are too different. As someone who has made two complete recordings of the whole Bible, I refuse to record a verse in a translation where I know that the listener who is not following the

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3 To be more accurate, the footnotes should read, “The vast majority of manuscripts contain the words …”
written text will misunderstand it. That’s why my podcast notes give little tweaks I have made to even the GNT and NLT.

If there is a group out there currently trying to make a good readable, meaning-based translation of the BT, I want to join them. If no group or organization has started to do this, then I will start and I call on interested parties to join me. So starting next year, I want to make a series of podcasts reading the results. I hope that this modest beginning will lead to more faithful Bible translations for the Christian public in the future.

- Please pray for this effort.