

WILKINSON'S INCREDIBLE ERRORS

By Doug Kutilek

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In the previous issue of Baptist Biblical Heritage (Summer, 1990), we exposed David Otis Fuller's willful concealment of the cult-connection of Benjamin G. Wilkinson, chief contributor to Fuller's popular book, Which Bible? We documented that Wilkinson was a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist, and a zealous missionary, instructor in theology, and college president for this grace-denying cult. Moreover, we brought to light the fact that Fuller knew of Wilkinson's Adventism and cultic heresies, and deliberately withheld that information from the readers of Which Bible? as well as Christians in general, lest they, understandably, reject Wilkinson's views.

We recognize that Wilkinson's grossly errant theology is not sufficient grounds for rejecting his views on the text and translation of the Bible. And this was not our basis for casting aside his writing as unacceptable. As we shall show, not only was Wilkinson's doctrine aberrant, his "facts" and presentation of information were grossly inaccurate, distorted, imprecise, or just plain wrong. From his pen flowed a torrent of misinformation on nearly every subject he touched. This is not hyperbole. As I read Our Authorized Bible Vindicated (hereafter, OABV), I compiled four pages of page references to his errors, and didn't begin to list all the inaccuracies I found.

Errors Even Fuller Couldn't Ignore

Fuller, in reprinting the lion's share of OABV as the major portion of Which Bible? (hereafter, WB; all page references are to the 5th edition), recognized Wilkinson's errors at a number of places and attempted to correct them in unattributed footnotes. (Unfortunately, Fuller left a multitude of Wilkinson's errors uncorrected either because he, Fuller, was unaware that they were errors, or because of indifference to and carelessness with the truth). Among these errors that even Fuller couldn't ignore (and I will only give a sampling of examples) is the remark by Wilkinson,

The translators of the King James, moreover, had something beyond great scholarship and unusual skill. They had gone through a period of great suffering. They had offered their lives that the truths which they loved might live. (WB, p. 258).

Unquestionably, Wilkinson ascribes to the KJV translators a period of suffering and persecution in connection with their translation work. Everyone familiar with the origins of the KJV knows that there is not a shred of truth in this. None of the KJV men were ever persecuted or oppressed for their work in producing the KJV. Fuller recognized this glaring misrepresentation and added a corrective footnote,

This is especially true of the earlier translators who labored in the reigns of Henry VIII and Mary. The King James translators built upon the foundation well and truly laid by the martyrs of the previous century. (Ibid.)

But Fuller did not indicate that the footnote was his, not Wilkinson's, as a check of p. 87 of OABV shows. As a result, the trusting reader might wrongly suppose that Wilkinson here clarified his own assertion. And even though Fuller recognized Wilkinson's error on this point and "corrected" it in Which Bible? (compiled in 1970), within two years, Fuller himself began to believe Wilkinson's manifestly false remark, for in True or False? (compiled, 1973), Fuller declares:

Your compiler is also convinced of another fact. No other single group of men of any version of the Bible has ever suffered for their Faith as did the revisers of the Authorized Version. (True or False?, p. 20).

In context, there is no doubt Fuller is referring to the KJV translators. Fuller would have done well to follow his own earlier and more correct footnote, and had he checked in detail into the sufferings of the Geneva Bible translators, he would have known the utter falsity of his assertion (the reader may see, e.g., William F. Moulton, The History of the English Bible, 5th ed., 1911, pp. 150 ff).

In discussing variations among existing manuscript copies of the Greek New Testament, Wilkinson reveals his own astonishing ignorance by saying,

The large number of conflicting readings which higher [sic; he means lower] critics have gathered must come from only a few manuscripts, since the overwhelming mass of manuscripts is identical. (WB, p. 264)

No one with even the smallest acquaintance with the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament would blunder so badly. Again, take pass uncorrected. In a footnote (again not identified as Fuller's), Fuller rectifies this remark (with some slight distortion of his own):

There are numerous small variations, but the great majority of the documents give support to the Traditional Text and may thus be identified with it. It would be difficult to find even two "identical" manuscripts. (Ibid.)

In fact, a number of variations are a little more substantial among these Byzantine manuscripts than Fuller lets on. D. A. Carson in The King James Version Debate, reports,

It is also a fact that the closest manuscripts within a textual tradition average about six to ten variants per chapter. (p. 68)

This amounts between 1,500 and 2,500 variants in the whole New Testament between the most closely related Byzantine manuscripts, somewhat more for the less closely related ones (in this light, the 5,000 + variants of the Westcott-Hort text from the so-called “received text” are not so imposing). For Wilkinson to affirm that the “overwhelming mass of manuscripts is identical” is a gross distortion of the worst sort, giving a wholly false impression of both the relative extent of Alexandrian variants from the Byzantine text and the relative uniformity of Byzantine manuscripts. Such a mistake should warn us that Wilkinson is not adequately or accurately enough informed to be a safe guide in these matters.

In writing of the Alexandrinus manuscript (a fifth century Greek manuscript copy of the Bible), Wilkinson states,

If the problems presented by the Alexandrinus Manuscript, and consequently by the Vaticanus, were so serious, why were we obligated to wait till 1881-1901 to learn of the glaring mistakes of the translators of the King James, when the manuscript arrived in 1627? (WB, pp. 252-3)

This can only mean that Wilkinson thought that the departures from the received text by these two manuscripts were unknown before 1881, when they were suddenly sprung on the world. Again, no one who has made any investigation of the subject could display such ignorance. Even Fuller could not let this pass uncorrected. Once again Fuller adds a corrective footnote:

During this interval Walton (1657), Fell (1675), Mill (1707), Bengel (1734), Wetstein (1751), Griesbach, Scholz, Lachmann, their successors expressed views of the text similar to those of the 1881-1901 Revisers; but their writings were not given the same wide publicity. (WB, p. 253)

Of course, the view of several of these men, especially Mill, Bengel Griesbach, and Lachmann did receive widespread publicity, though less widespread acceptance than the views of Westcott and Hort, so Fuller is not precisely correct. But what is more amazing is the fact that Wilkinson seems not to know that Alexandrinus is classified as a Byzantine manuscript in the Gospels, and generally supports the traditional text, certainly more so than the other early uncial manuscripts.

Wilkinson asserts:

It is an exaggerated idea, much exploited by those who are attacking the Received Text, that we

of the present have greater, as well as more valuable, sources of information than had the translators of 1611. (WB, p. 250)

So patently false a remark compelled Fuller to footnote once again:

It is true that thousands of manuscripts have been brought to life [sic] since 1611, but it must be emphasized that the great majority of these are in substantial agreement with the Traditional Text underlying the Reformers' Bibles and the King James Version. (Ibid.)

Fuller's footnote doesn't begin to tell the whole story. In reality, the resources available to students of the text of the Greek New Testament today (and also in 1930 when Wilkinson wrote) are very many times greater in every respect than were available in 1611. The contents of only one ancient uncial manuscript were known to any substantial degree in 1611, codex D (6th century) of the Gospels and Acts, some of whose readings had been published by Stephanus in 1550; also some readings of Vaticanus were supplied to Erasmus in 1533 (though apparently unpublished) and a very limited and imperfect collection of its readings was published in 1606 (Frederick Henry Scrivener, A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament, 1861 edition, pp. 97, 88). None of the other ancient and valuable uncial manuscripts--A, Aleph, C, L, W, Theta, etc.--were available. So, too, none of the nearly 90 known papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament (and these papyri are usually the oldest copies of the Scripture portions they cover) were discovered until the late 1800's or later. Similarly, knowledge of ancient translations has grown from very feeble or non-existent in 1611, to great knowledge today. This includes the Latin Vulgate (far more accurate editions are in print today), the Old Latin (all but wholly unknown in 1611), the five Syriac versions (only the Peshitta was in print in 1611), the Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, etc. In addition, the readings followed by the various church "fathers" were in many cases only poorly known and little attended to in 1611. Wilkinson's error, whether due to ignorance or distortion, is monstrous.

Wilkinson states:

The King James Bible was translated when England was fighting her way out from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. (WB, p. 180)

Of course, this isn't so, as students of English history know. The Church of England was established in 1534, and all the rulers from Henry VIII (d. 1547) through James I (d. 1625) were Protestants in name (at least), except for the brief reign of Mary (1553-1558). In this period, Puritanism arose in England and Catholicism was suppressed. The departure of England from Catholicism was settled long before 1611. Fuller recognized this and softened Wilkinson's misstatement by footnoting:

The KJV was the crowning fruit of a series of translations made in the Reformation period--Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthews, Geneva, and Bishops' Bible. (Ibid.)

One general error that constantly recurs is Wilkinson's equating the Textus Receptus/received text with the Byzantine or traditional text. He does this when he writes of "the Textus Receptus or Constantinopolitan" text (p. 194). Though in general the "textus receptus" editions of Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs, published between 1516 and 1633 (and, strictly speaking, only the last of these can be properly called the Textus Receptus) agree with the Byzantine text (a. k. a. the traditional, majority, or Constantinopolitan text), yet there are numerous and substantial differences. By way of examples, the Byzantine text deletes all of the following verses or parts of verses found in all or some of the Textus Receptus editions listed above: Matthew 27:35, "that it might be fulfilled," to the end of the verse; Luke 17:36; Acts 7:37, "him shall ye hear"; 8:37; 9:5b-6a, "it is hard...to him"; 10:6, "he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do"; 10:21, "which were sent unto him from Cornelius"; 15:34; Romans 16:25-27 (shifted to follow 14:23); Colossians 1:14, "through his blood"; I John 5:7-8, "in heaven" through "in earth"; Revelation 1:8, "the beginning and the ending"; 1:11, "which are in Asia"; etc. In fact, in over 1,000 places, the Textus Receptus does not represent the reading of the majority of surviving Greek manuscripts (Wilbur Pickering, The Identity of the New Testament Text, 2nd edition, p. 237), and in many of these places, the texts of Westcott-Hort, Nestle, et al. do agree with the majority text. To equate the Textus Receptus with the Byzantine text is substantially off the mark and is certainly inaccurate and misleading. Accuracy and precision demand that the distinction between the textus receptus and the Byzantine text be rigorously noted and maintained. Wilkinson does not do his, as Fuller recognized. He footnotes Wilkinson's error:

The title "Textus Receptus" was first given to the Traditional Text by Elzevir in 1633. In these chapters the name is given to the whole body of documents which preserve substantially the same kind of text. (WB, p. 194)

Even Fuller himself confuses the traditional text with the Textus Receptus, as though they were the same.

Numerous other examples of Fuller "rescuing" Wilkinson via footnotes could be mentioned, but we will refrain lest the reader become wearied.

Errors Regarding Ancient Manuscripts

In a work devoted to a discussion of the text of the New Testament, the analysis of ancient manuscripts should display particular care and attention, but such is not the case with Wilkinson. He makes the amazing statement:

...the scholars of Europe and England, in particular had ample opportunity to become fully acquainted by 1611 with the problems involved in the Alexandrinus manuscript. (WB. p. 252)

and in the very next paragraph, notes that this manuscript arrived (in England) from the Middle East in 1627! (pp. 252-3).

In addressing the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus manuscripts, he again throws caution to the wind and claims,

The case with the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus is no better. The problems presented by these two manuscripts were well known, not only to the translators of the King James, but also to Erasmus. We are told that the Old Testament portion of the Vaticanus has been printed since 1587. (WB, p. 253)

A lot of good an Old Testament manuscript will do in producing a printed edition of the New Testament, to say nothing of the fact that Erasmus had been dead for 51 years by 1587! Of course, the Sinaiticus manuscript, first discovered in 1844 and first published in 1859, could not have possibly been known in any way at all to Erasmus or the KJV translators. This is allegedly the work of "a scholar of the first rank with a thorough knowledge of the subjects about which he wrote," to quote Fuller's characterization of Wilkinson (WB, p. 174)!

Regarding Vaticanus (designated "B"), Wilkinson claims that Erasmus had full access to this manuscript through friends in Rome. He states:

...he was in correspondence with Professor Paulus Bombasius at Rome, who sent him such variant readings as he wished. (WB, p. 253)

As authority for this information, Wilkinson cites "S P. Tregelles, On the Printed Text of the Greek Testament, p. 22" (WB, p. 253, note 22). Beyond being an imprecise presentation of the book's title (the correct title is, An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament), the page in question gives a somewhat different picture. Erasmus didn't request readings, only a reading: I John 5:7.

Erasmus requested his friend, Paulus Bombasius, at Rome, to examine the Codex Vaticanus for him as to this passage (emphasis added); and accordingly, in a letter, dated Rome, June 18, 1521, he sent him a transcript of the introductory

verses of both the 4th and 5th chapters
of St. John's 1st article.

Wilkinson further records that another correspondent sent Erasmus a number of selected readings from B, and adds,

But Erasmus, however, rejected these variant readings of the Vatican manuscript because he considered from the massive evidence of his day the Received Text was correct. (WB, p. 253).

This absurd statement is not documented, as indeed it could not be, being wholly false. That Erasmus did not revise his Greek New Testament on the basis of these readings is true, but not surprising. First, he had received such a flood of criticism for not including I John 5:7 in his first two editions as to make him reluctant to risk more criticism by introducing major changes into his text. Second, only one edition of the Greek New Testament was issued by Erasmus between 1533 (the year he was sent the Vaticanus readings) and his death in 1536, i.e., the fifth edition of 1534. It was a virtual reprint of the 1527 edition, differing from it in as few as four places, according to one estimate (see Scrivener, A Plain Introduction, etc., p. 298). Beyond these considerations, it is known that Erasmus agreed with the Vaticanus evidence on I John 5:7, and as I have pointed out elsewhere, Erasmus suspected that the doxology to the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:13), the ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20), and the account of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) were not all original parts of the New Testament, and in every one of these cases, B and Erasmus were in agreement against the textus receptus. Erasmus believed, in summation, "the only way to determine the true text is to examine the early codices," which, of course, would include Vaticanus (see my booklet, Erasmus, His Greek Text, and His Theology, p. 8, where I give my documentation: Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, pp. 135-137). Rather than believing the received text was correct, Erasmus almost certainly, if alive today, would use a Greek New Testament like that of Nestle or the United Bible Society's text.

Errors Regarding Ancient Versions

Wilkinson, writing in 1930, opted to follow the discredited opinion that the Peshitta Syriac version of the New Testament originated around 150 A.D. This view, common before 1900, is universally rejected today by informed writers because of research into the Bible text used by prominent Syrian Christian leaders Aphraates (d. 367 A.D.) and Ephraem (d. 373), as well as considerations regarding the Old Syriac version discovered in the 1800's. The evidence proving a 2nd century date impossible for the Peshitta favors a date between 373 and 431 A.D. (see Bruce M. Metzger, The Early Versions of the New Testament, pp. 56-63, for a detailed discussion).

Wilkinson declares that the Peshitta generally follows the received text (WB, p. 198), a statement true only if one is being very general. The Peshitta does not include Luke 22:18, 19; John 7:53-8:11; Acts 8:37; 15:34; 28:29; I John 5:7; etc., and differs in many other particulars from the received text. As D. A. Carson has pointed out in The King James Version Debate,

the textual affinity of the Peshitta to the Byzantine tradition has regularly been overestimated: the close work that has been done on some parts of it (especially Mark and Galatians) reflects Byzantine readings only about 50 percent of the time. (p. 112).

Wilkinson repeatedly asserts that the Old Latin translation is Byzantine in text, and that the Bible of the medieval Waldenses was made from the Old Latin instead of the Vulgate. Neither of these assertions is true. However, a detailed refutation of Wilkinson on these points must await a later issue, due to considerations of space (the curious reader may wish to consult A History of the Baptists, by Thomas Armitage, p. 295). [See also the article, "The Truth About the Waldensian Bible and the Old Latin Version," by Doug Kutilek].

Other Sundry Errors

On p. 190, the date of the Counsel of Trent is given by Wilkinson as 1645, exactly a full century too late. Such a mistake (yes, it is in Wilkinson's original work, OABV, p. 15, and is not a printer's error in WB) in a book that claims to address historic events is inexcusable. The date, it is true, is part of a quote from a book by A. P. Stanley. Not having access to that book, I cannot be sure that the original mistake is not Stanley's but if it was, Wilkinson -- and Fuller, too -- if he knew anything at all about church history, should have caught the mistake immediately, which he obviously did not (the dates of the counsel are correctly given in bold face heading in the middle of p. 235 as 1545-1563).

We are told matter-of-factly by Wilkinson that "Wycliff's translation of the Bible into English was two hundred years before the birth of Martin Luther" (WB, p. 221). Again, Wilkinson missed the truth by a mere one hundred years. Wycliff's translation is universally dated in the 1380's, and Luther's birth was in 1483; therefore, "he doth greatly err."

We are given the undocumented assertion (p. 228) that Tyndale went to Cambridge to learn Greek at the feet of Erasmus. F. F. Bruce corrects this error when he writes,

Erasmus left Cambridge in 1514, and Tyndale probably did not arrive there before 1516 at the earliest. (The English Bible, 1st ed., p. 27).

In discussing the collecting of variant readings from various Greek manuscripts, Wilkinson repeatedly confuses higher and lower criticism as though they were one and the same (see WB, pp. 265-268, 290, for some examples). Only someone very poorly acquainted with these two distinct disciplines would confuse them, yet Wilkinson (and Fuller as well) does so. (For a careful differentiation, see my article, "David Otis Fuller's Deceptive Treatment of Spurgeon Regarding the King James Version").

Wilkinson's caricaturing and distortion of Westcott and Hort's doctrinal views (WB, pp. 277-282) must be noted. I have addressed these matters elsewhere, and so direct the reader to that treatment (see Erasmus, His Greek Text, and His Theology, pp. 14ff).

On p. 279, Wilkinson remarks, "WESTCOTT writes to Archbishop Benson, November 17, 1865," when in fact, according to the original source quoted, the letter was to J. B. Lightfoot and was written September 27, 1865. Such a demonstrated inability to accurately transcribe information does not engender confidence in the reliability of other information given. Fuller here erroneously gives the footnote as, "Ibid., Vol. II, p. 50" when the reference, correctly recorded by Wilkinson in OABV, p. 152, note 6, is "Idem, Vol. I, p. 251."

In passing, I cannot help but note Wilkinson's condemnation of one of the Revised Version's translation committees because eleven of its members "were fully determined to act upon the principle of exact and literal translation" (WB, p. 292)!

Wilkinson misses the mark when he states (WB, p. 310) that the 13th chapter of Daniel, found in the Douay (Catholic) translation, "does not exist in the King James." Of a truth, all the apocryphal books, including Daniel 13, were included in the original KJV of 1611, though in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments, not directly attached to or interspersed among the canonical 39 books of the Old Testament as in the Douay.

Informed readers will be surprised to learn (WB, p. 315), that the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai is a "Catholic Monastery." Of course, it is not Catholic at all, but the oldest monastery of the Greek Orthodox Church (see Guy P. Duffield, Handbook of Bible Lands, p. 122). The Greek Orthodox are the same people who brought us the Byzantine text. A small error? Perhaps, but "the little foxes spoil the vines." (Fuller recognized Wilkinson's mistake and added a corrective footnote).

It is stated (WB, p. 316) that with the KJV translated in 1611, just before the Puritans left England for America, they brought it with them to America. Fuller's footnote identifies these travelers to the New World as the "Pilgrim Fathers" who sailed on the Mayflower, who arrived here in late 1620. If Fuller is correct about Wilkinson's meaning, then they both are in error. None of the Mayflower occupants were Puritans, and furthermore, the Pilgrims brought, not the KJV, but the Geneva Bible dating from 1560.

The Pilgrims brought the Geneva Bible with them on the Mayflower to Plymouth in 1620. In fact, the religious writings and sermons published by the members of the Plymouth colony suggest that the Geneva Bible was used exclusively by them in the colony's earliest days. (The Geneva Bible, a facsimile of the 1560 edition, 1969, Introduction by Lloyd E. Berry, p. 22).

The chronicler of Plymouth Plantation, William Bradford, generally quoted the Geneva Bible in his account, not the KJV (Samuel Eliot Morrison, ed., Of Plymouth Plantation, 1952, Introduction, p. xxiii).

In parts of OABV which Fuller did not reproduce in WB, Wilkinson kept up his usual performance. On page 209, he condemns the Revised Version for not following the Latin Vulgate at John 14:2; on p. 216, he criticizes the Revised Version for rendering I Corinthians 15:4 literally; and on p. 253, he misapplies Psalm 12:6-7, incorrectly presuming the verses are a promise of Divine preservation of the Scriptures, when in fact they are a promise of Divine protection for persecuted saints of v. 5. (I established this latter interpretation as certainly correct in "A Careful Investigation of Psalm 12:6-7," The Biblical Evangelist, 17:21, October 14, 1983. See also the commentaries of John Gill and Franz Delitzsch).

Conclusion

I do not pretend that this is anything close to an exhaustive listing and analysis of Wilkinson's errors in OABV or those parts in WB. So abundant are they that to address them all would require a work at least five times longer than the present article, and more. However, these examples are adequate to demonstrate beyond honest cavil the wholly unreliable nature of Wilkinson's writings. Even Fuller, Wilkinson's advocate and re-publisher, was cognizant to some not inconsiderable degree of his inaccuracy, and sought to mask it with numerous footnotes. Beyond his concealing Wilkinson's cultic doctrine, Fuller did a gross disservice to conservative Christianity by passing off as authoritative -- "an excellent work," to use Fuller's own phrase -- a production so marred and defective in every way. Instead of helping resolve the text and translation controversy, Fuller, by virtue of his republication of Wilkinson, has created (again to use Fuller's own words) "such profound confusion in Christian circles" (WB, p. 174). He has gotten for himself such a blot on his escutcheon as shall tarnish his reputation as long as his memory shall endure among the living.

In numerical analysis, Wilkinson's polynomial is a specific polynomial which was used by James H. Wilkinson in 1963 to illustrate a difficulty when finding the root of a polynomial: the location of the roots can be very sensitive to perturbations in the coefficients of the polynomial. The polynomial is. Sometimes, the term Wilkinson's polynomial is also used to refer to some other polynomials appearing in Wilkinson's discussion. Wilkinson's incredible errors. By Doug Kutilek. [Originally published in Baptist Biblical Heritage, Vol. I, No. 3; Fall, 1990].

One general error that constantly recurs is Wilkinson's equating the Textus Receptus/received text with the Byzantine or traditional text. He does this when he writes of "the Textus Receptus or Constantinopolitan" text (p. 194). Wilkinson's career has proceeded in a dynamical way, too. She now approaches her roles as a researcher, teacher and mentor very differently than she did when she was starting out. During her undergraduate years at Harvard University in the 1980s, there were no female professors in the math department, causing her to doubt whether she would ever belong in the ranks of top-flight mathematicians.