

I have started to explain what it is translators of the New Testament actually translate. They do not translate just one manuscript or another; they translate what they take to be the “original” text as it has been reconstructed by textual specialists (some of whom are the translators themselves). These reconstructions can be found in printed editions of the Greek New Testament.

To make sense of what the translators actually have in front of them when they are translating, I need to give a brief history of the printing of the Greek New Testament. To that end I will provide in two or three posts the directly relevant material given in my book [Misquoting Jesus](#). I’ve always thought this is unusually interesting information connected to “how we got our Bible.” I start at the beginning, with the invention of printing.

The text of the New Testament was copied in a fairly standardized form throughout the centuries of the Middle Ages, both in the East (the “Byzantine” text) and the West (the Latin Vulgate). It was the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century by Johann Gutenberg (1400-1468) that changed everything for the reproduction of books in general and the books of the Bible in particular. By printing books with moveable print, one could guarantee that every page looked exactly like every other page, with no variations of any kind in the wording. Gone were the days when transcribers would each produce different copies of the same text by means of accidental and intentional alterations. What was set in print, was set in stone. Moreover, books could be made far more rapidly: no longer did they need to be copied one letter at a time. And, as a result, they were made much more cheaply. Scarcely anything has made such a revolutionary impact on the modern world as the printing press; the next closest thing (which may, eventually, surpass it in significance) is the advent of the personal computer.

The first major work to be published on Gutenberg’s printing press was ...

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