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## The Evangelical Quest for the Historical Text and the Jesus Seminar

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*When Jesus told the religious leaders in Jerusalem that when they destroyed the temple he would raise it up in three days, He was misunderstood. He spoke of the temple of His body, but when the religious leaders brought Him before the political powers their claim was that He intended the literal temple in Jerusalem. Whether this was a deliberate misrepresentation on the part of His critics, or the result of their simple lack of a capacity to understand His mode of speech, the Biblical narrative does not state. That His meaning was missed and used to His disadvantage is what we are intended to contemplate.*

*This essay is an exercise in dispelling the many misconceptions stated about me, and my views on the subjects of the composition and transmission of the Greek text of the N.T. These erroneous views attributed to me may be the result of pure institutional politics; or they may just be the result of cross-community misunderstanding. I am a Lutheran and all my critics to date have been fundamentalist Baptists. In either case the results are the same: the dissemination of misinformation both about me and my views. This misinformation is currently found in audio, video, on the Internet and printed media that have appeared since I was invited, a few years back, to speak at a conservative private Christian college, where I shared the results of my twenty years of research on the subjects noted above. If the misrepresentation is merely the result of a discontinuity of point of reference, or because of a lack on the part of my critics to grasp my argumentation and data, I believe the Christian ethic requires of me to be "patient, apt to teach." Furthermore,*

*it is particularly important for me to take this posture for the sake of those following the course of these events with a view to arriving at a more accurate understanding of the subjects under treatment. Hence, what follows is an exercise in clarification predicated on the assumption that I have been misunderstood, rather than purposely misrepresented.*

*In my endeavor to clarify what I have said in my oral presentations and in what I have written, I shall refer nearly exclusively to my own book, *the Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 2000) for the material that I believe will serve me well in setting the record straight regarding my views. Because my book is made up of a collection of separate essays, all of which appeared previously in various academic journals and magazines, one really must work rather hard, I must confess, to arrive at the synthesis within the book which I am certain does exist. As editor, I did align the essays in a logical sequence, each essay building upon another. Unfortunately, however, my critics have chosen to take disparate portions of the essays and arrive at conclusions which are utterly unwarranted in light of the collection as a whole (and at times unwarranted even by the immediate context). Hence, much of my work will involve my pointing my critics to those portions of my book which will unequivocally arrest all misconceptions, if not in the minds of the intransigent perhaps, no doubt certainly in the mind of the more detached reader.*

*Let me state in the broadest terms possible the thesis of my book, as well as a few attendant sub-themes: Believing communities, since the recognition and reception of the Judeo-Christian canon, have always defended the text of Scripture in its extant state, and never, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did anyone begin to make exclusive appeal to the autographic form of these texts, which no longer exist, as*

alone final. Furthermore, this allegiance to the extant text is demonstrable, I maintain, from the apostolic era until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Appeal was always to the statements of Scripture first for support of this belief, as well as to the *regula fide* of the early post-apostolic community for certainty that Scripture was both verbally inspired, as well as faithfully preserved in the sanctioned transmitted copies.

With the arrival of the science of textual criticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, this locus of authority was shifted amongst the orthodox--primarily in the person and work of B.B. Warfield at Princeton Seminary--to exclusively the autographic form of these texts as alone possessing final authority. This took the onus off of the need to defend the extant text, and redirected attention to defending a non-existent, theoretical autographic form of the text. The reason I use the word *theoretical* is because no one can see these autographs to know how they read. Furthermore, these theoretical autographs are deemed "inerrant" (by post-Enlightenment modern 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century definitions). I put "inerrant" in quotes because this, too, was an innovation, since this is not a theological term but one taken from astronomy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, believing communities always referred to the absolute infallibility of the transmitted text. They never made appeal to the inerrancy of the autographic text. My thesis is that this adjustment was both a defection from the historic view of Biblical authority, as well as a defective and overly optimistic alliance with science as an ally of the faith which, it was believed, would restore this now lost "original."

This change to "original text" defense, from "existing text" defense was also fraught with theological implications. Traditional tenets of the Christian faith are invariably brought under fresh scrutiny in this new shift. Theology is substantially affected by this new "quest for the historical—original—text," because one

must now assume (it is not an option) the existing text has been tampered with in a substantial way in transmission from the autographs. That is, if the text that exists has been substantially corrupted so that we must vest ultimate authority only in the original form, then the theology derived from the existent text is now also logically called into question at various points. As the title of Bruce Metzger's important handbook makes clear in the very title: *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. OUP, 1992.)

This is an unavoidable implication for the late "original text only" defense, which is not a little ironic for fundamentalists who espouse this modern theory: In their misplaced confidence in science's ability to reconstitute an "inerrant" original, they have inadvertently opened the door to call into question the certainty of various tenets of the Christian Faith itself as traditionally found in the "corrupt" extant text of the Bible! Also, another unacknowledged implication is that the discipline of lower criticism is now also invested with the authority to "reconstruct" this original, a discipline that its own practitioners admit is anything but a true science.

Hence, the so-called Jesus Seminar has made radical claims about what can and cannot be believed about what Jesus did and taught. This they base first of all on the uncertainty of the existing text, the same premise from which fundamentalists begin in their "quest for the original text." The Jesus Seminar just comes up with a different version of the "original" than do the fundamentalists, but the premise is the same: the existing text is corrupt and the orthodox Church was responsible. Warfield was the first confessional Reformed academic to make this claim and fundamentalists influenced by him, on his quest for the "original text," naturally enough deny that this is the case, as would Warfield, but the denial is arbitrary—the facts

speaking for themselves. Let the Jesus Seminar explain:

*“The search for the real Jesus begins with a modern critical edition of the Greek New Testament.... In spite of all these amazing discoveries [within the discipline of N.T. text criticism], the stark truth is that the history of the Greek gospels, from their creation in the first century until the discovery of the first copies of them at the beginning of the third, remains largely unknown and therefore unmapped. The establishment of a critical Greek text of the gospels is only the beginning of the detective work. To unravel the mysteries of the nearly two centuries that separate Jesus from the earliest surviving records, scholars have had to examine the gospels with minute care and develop theories to explain what appears to be a network of complex relationships.”* (**The Five Gospels: A Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus**, The Jesus Seminar [New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993], pp.8; 9).

Hence, what I have been saying for many years now is certainly true: the first step in the quest for the historical Jesus, is the quest for the historical text, begun by Warfield. Prior to Warfield’s day confessional folk implicitly relied on the judgment of the post apostolic church to account for that gap and for the resultant, transmitted form of the Greek N.T. The Jesus seminar make clear, as did Warfield before them, that what they wanted was not the text of the Church—which they no longer trusted—but a “scholar’s” text:

*“[This] Scholar’s Version is free of ecclesiastical and religious control, unlike other major translations into English, including the King James Version.... The Scholar’s Version is authorized by scholars.... The appearance of the version authorized by King James in 1611 continued and advanced the tradition of translations into English, and it*

*also put the English Church on a firm political and cultural footing. The King James Version helped to canonize Shakespearean English as the literary norm for English speaking people everywhere. It also united English speakers worldwide (**The Five Gospels**, pp. xviii; xvii).*

The Jesus Seminar know that it is the ecclesiastical decisions made by the Nicean Church regarding the sanctioned form of the Greek N.T.—what Burgon was happy to call the “Traditional Text”—that they are consciously and deliberately countering (as found in the Authorized Version) with their own scholar’s text. Again, Warfield was the first to give permission to traditional Calvinists to engage in this initial quest, and it is he who openly advocated the first “scholar’s text” and so by-passed the A.V. and the early ecclesiastical textual decisions that the Jesus Seminar now want to replace with their own. That Warfield is lionized by a generation that neither appreciates the damage he accomplished, nor his contribution to the Jesus Seminar, is an indictment on contemporary Evangelicals (and those who consider themselves the “truly Reformed”) that they can little appreciate much less remedy.

#### About the author

IBTS is pleased to bring you this article by Theodore P. Letis. Dr. Letis is the leading academic proponent for the traditional texts in the tradition of E.F. Hills and J. W. Burgon. Dr. Letis is Director of the Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies. He is past President of the University of Edinburgh Theological Society and is currently a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Society of Church History. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in Ecclesiastical History and an honors M.T.S. (magna cum laude) from Emory University in American Church History. His essays have appeared in journals such as, *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, *Christian Arena*, *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, *Reformation*, *The Churchman*, and *The Journal of Higher Criticism*. He has authored and edited several books including: **The Majority Text: Essays and Reviews in the Continuing Debate** (1987, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000). **The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind**, (2000 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), and **A New Hearing for the Authorized Version**.