

Theodore P. Letis

Replies to His Critics

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 misconceptions stated about me, and my views on the subjects of the composition and transmission of the Greek text of the New Testament. These erroneous views attributed to me may be the result of pure institutional politics; or they may be the result of cross-community misunderstanding. I am a Lutheran and all my critics to date have been from other communities. 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 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 20 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

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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.

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* (Philadelphia: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997) 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 19th 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 19th 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 19th 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* 19th and 20th 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 19th 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."