

The Christian Research Network And King James' Bible

BY

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In 1911 a book appeared commemorating the three-hundredth anniversary of the publication of King James' Bible of 1611. The title of the book was, *The History of the English Bible*. The authors were the two sons of the 19th century N.T. scholar W.F. Moulton, who had himself worked on the revision committee of the *Revised Version* of 1881, the first ever attempt by the established Church of England to revise the old *Authorized* or *King James Version*. As you might imagine, the authors had a vested interest in painting their father's legacy in this matter in the most flattering of terms. More than this, however, their remarks on this momentous revision event of 1881-5 serve us today as a wonderful benchmark for both evaluating their optimism about the success of the *Revised Version*, by the year 1911; and for assessing the state of the *contemporary* debate surrounding those who, to this day, continue to use the *King James Version* on critical principles and those who opt for more modern options. The following quote is a sample of their rhetoric. Please keep in mind that the following statement was made ninety-one years ago:

"That the Revised Version has, in a quarter of a century, superseded the venerable classic which is now keeping its tercentenary, would be obviously a rash assertion; but to talk of its failure is at least equally absurd. In a large and increasing number of places of worship it [the Revised Version] will be found in the pulpit, as an alternative to that Authorized [or, King James Version], or even alone. Intelligent people are familiar with its rendering, and ignorant prejudice against its more startling changes of text in the New Testament seems to have died away. In the matter of text, indeed, an epoch was marked by the British and Foreign Bible Society's centenary publication of Nestle's edition of the Greek Testament which was almost an official registration of the decrease of the "Received Text." Dean Burgon's thunder rolls no more, and no scholar of any reputation remains to plead for his views. This fact alone, of course, disposes of the only serious attack upon the Revised New Testament."

Now, because there are so many interesting claims found here I want to take just a moment and examine each, discovering in the process how they stand up in light of the contemporary situation.

The authors admit here, in the year 1911, that by their day, the *Revised Version* had made some inroads. It was found along side the *Authorized Version* in some churches, and in

others, it was found to have the sole dignity as *the* pulpit Bible. But they also admit that it had in no way, by that day, “superseded the venerable classic,” that is the *Authorized Version* of 1611. Moreover, we are told that the educated classes were now familiar with its alternative renderings. Furthermore, the rank prejudice against “its more startling changes of text in the N.T. seem[ed] to have died away.” And against just what was all this prejudice unjustly directed?

Well, the most striking change in the *Revised Version* was, of course, the treatment of the last twelve verses of Mark’s gospel as non-canonical, which just happened to contain the resurrection and ascension accounts of Jesus. Was it really mere prejudice that caused the Christian rank and file, as well as the Christian educator, or pastor, to feel alarm at the loss of such material, particularly since Mark’s account is considered to be the very earliest life of Jesus we have? Surely, if we have no resurrection, or ascension here, it leaves some considerable room for doubt about these events being real history. Furthermore, by questioning the authenticity of these last twelve verses one invites the higher critical suggestion that these events were added to the text later, as an after thought, to compensate for the scandal of the defeat of Jesus and his followers jointly at the hands of the Romans and Jewish leaders.

On this point, I fear I must make clear that contemporary scholarship is no longer in agreement with either the *Revised Version*, nor with the Moulton brothers on this point. Bruce Metzger, the undisputed dean of text critical scholarship in America, has made very plain for us the fact that these last twelve verses are, indeed, canonical. Hear his judgment:

*“Already in the second century...the so-called long ending of Mark was known to Justin Martyr and to Tatian, who incorporated it into his Diatesseron. There seems to be no good reason, therefore, to conclude that, though external and internal evidence is conclusive against the authenticity of the last twelve verses as coming from the same pen as the rest of the gospel, the passage ought to be accepted as part of the canonical text of Mark” [emphasis mine] (Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* 1987:269-270).*

Moreover, the undisputed leading authority in Europe on text critical matters in the post-war era was the late Kurt Aland. Again, in his estimation, RV loses and King James wins:

*“The practice of concluding the gospel of Mark at 16:8 [minus the resurrection/ascension] continued to be observed in some Greek manuscripts [only three have ever been found]...although the ‘longer ending of Mark 16:9-20 was recognized as canonical... [emphasis mine] (Aland/ Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 1987), p. 69.*

And yet, the natural descendents of the *Revised Version*, *The Revised Standard Version*, *the New Revised Standard Version*, *the New International Version*, and the most recent addition

in this series, what I call the “*Evangelical RSV*,” better known as the *English Standard Version*, continue to cast doubt on the historicity of this account in their footnotes. And in the case of the ESV, the narrative itself is interrupted to allow the editors to inform the reader that the resurrection in this Gospel is in dispute! This is very unfortunate, indeed.

And what of this “Nestle Greek Text” versus this “Textus Receptus” referred to by the Moulton brothers? The Nestle Greek text was a kind of “scholars” text that was pieced together in the late nineteenth century and is the kind of text that was used in the production of the *Revised Version*. It was a reconstructed text that the nineteenth-century scholars believed they had recovered, just as is the contemporary Nestle/Aland edition, now in its 27th altered edition. Note the words of Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendal Soulen in description of this “critical text” in their 3rd edition of *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 41-42:

“A critical text is a conjectural reconstruction of a document of which only divergent RECENSIONS are extant; it is therefore a hypothetical text usually based on the one or two best MSS available.”

The Textus Receptus, on the other hand, was the text used in the production of the *King James Version* and all Protestant editions from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a manuscript lineage going back to the earliest emergence of the Nicene Church. The Nestle’s text edition, while a scholar’s conjectural, or suppositional text, was never actually found to have been used by the orthodox church, while the Textus Receptus was the kind of text continuously used by the church in her lectionaries, commentaries, and reproduced in the medieval monasteries during the Middle-Ages. Hence, this Textus Receptus is known as the *Ecclesiastical Text*.

The Moulton brothers in this book of theirs, *The History of the English Bible*, further suggested that because a “Bible society” was now using the Scholars text, over the Ecclesiastical Text, that this now meant that the Church Bible had now come to an end. But how did we get to the place where a *Bible society* dictated to the Church what is Scripture, and what is not (on this see my unpublished lecture: “Contemporary Bible Translations: Anabaptist Victories in the New World”). That, I am afraid, is another story for another time. But has their prediction come true? Has the Ecclesiastical Text been completely replaced by the Scholar’s text? Well, almost, in certain circles. The so-called “New International Bible Society” gave us, about thirty years ago, the *New International Version*, which has, more or less, replaced the King James Bible as the all time best selling English Bible. But the Textus Receptus, or Ecclesiastical Text, is far from dead. Thomas Nelson has produced the *New King James Bible*, which employs the Ecclesiastical Text and which still rivals the NIV. Moreover, the very popular *New Geneva Study Bible* is founded on this *New King James Bible*. Furthermore, with the recent appearance of the *21st Century King James Bible* we have one more edition still employing the Ecclesiastical Text as opposed to the Scholars text. In fact, at this very moment, we

are in the midst of what scholars are calling a “revival” of the Ecclesiastical Text. But more on this in a minute.

One final point from the Moulton brothers. They claimed that Dean Burgon’s “thunder rolls no more” and that this solitary figure was the one man standing in the way of the complete success of the *Revised Version*. Just who was this Dean Burgon and how could he wield so much authority?

Dean Burgon was the most vocal expert to oppose the *Revised Version* on the eve of its birth into the late 19th century world. He did more research on the last twelve verses of Mark’s Gospel than anyone alive in his day and published his results in a book titled: *The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel of St. Mark Vindicated and Established*. As the title makes clear, one always knew where Burgon stood on such issues. But he was not just heat and fury with no light or reason. He was a *bona fide* authority in the field of textual studies. The very testimony to his being the single obstacle to the success of the *Revised Version* is a clear enough indication that the academic community knew there was substance to his rolls of thunder. The absence of such men today might well explain how and why the Bible societies and the NIV have, for the moment, supplanted the Ecclesiastical Text. It seems we have many a blustering would-be-thundering prophet pamphleteer, particularly in fundamentalist ranks, but few willing to become textual authorities to defend the Ecclesiastical Text, such as Burgon was.

You see, Burgon knew that if the Scholar’s Text prevailed and the Church was made to give up the earliest resurrection account, it would just be a matter of time before one after another of the basic tenets of Christianity would be up for renegotiation. While it may not be perfectly obvious to everyone today, the fact that such topics as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, the ordination of women, etc., are, at this very moment, being debated at all, in so-called evangelical circles, can be directly attributed to the fact that when we look to *contemporary* editions of the Bible, we receive a progressively less and less certain sound on these subjects, and others (note the current discussion over the Oxford Annotated edition of the NRSV that some see as giving ground to the legitimacy of same sex activity). The most recent example of this is the NIV so-called “Inclusive Language” edition of the Bible (now called in its current incarnation, *Today’s New International Version*). The conservative evangelical scholar, J.I. Packer said the following regarding this “feminist” edition of Scripture:

“Adjustments made by what I call the feminist edition are not made in the interests of legitimate translation procedure. These changes have been made to pander to a cultural prejudice that I hope will be short-lived”

James Dobson made a similar assessment.

Do keep in mind that the same committee that gave us the NIV, also produced this feminist edition as well. This, I say, is the result of the unprecedented situation in which we find ourselves in today: “Designer Bibles,” produced for profit by the corporate world, with no ecclesiastical or theological constraints, with the end result being the exchange of the Ecclesiastical Text, for the Scholars text, which the Moulton brothers were so keen to celebrate the beginnings of in 1911. I wonder what their assessment would be today if we could bring them back to account for their judgment.

Dean Burgon, an opponent of the revision of 1883-5, made his own prediction. Let the reader decide who was the true prophet, Burgon or the Moulton brothers?:

“Whatever may be urged in favour of Biblical revision, it is at least undeniable that the undertaking involves a tremendous risk. Our A.V. is the one religious link which at present binds together ninety millions of English-speaking men scattered over the earth’s surface. Is it reasonable that so unutterably precious, so sacred a bond should be endangered, for the sake of representing certain words more accurately – here and there translating a tense with greater precision – getting rid of a few archaisms? It may be confidently assumed that no revision of our A.V., however judiciously executed, will ever occupy the place in publick [sic] esteem which is actually enjoyed by the work of the translators of 1611 – the noblest literary work in the Anglo-Saxon language. We shall in fact never have *another* ‘Authorized Version’” (*Revision Revised*, p. 113.).

Powerful words, indeed, and a small indication of what the Moulton brothers feared about the intensity of Burgon’s rhetoric. But were they accurate when they said that “no scholar of any reputation remains to plead for his views”? Well, in 1911, that was nearly the case.

Surprisingly, however, in 1979 Professor Eldon Jay Epp, one of the leading authorities in text critical studies referred in the prestigious *Journal of Biblical Literature*, to “a revival of the almost century-old view of J.W. Burgon.”

Also, the late Professor Kurt Aland of the German Institute for the Study of New Testament Text Criticism also questioned in 1987 in the *Trinity Journal*, “who in German-speaking countries today would seek to revive the arguments of the 18th century orthodoxy?... and yet in the United States Burgon is enjoying a considerable revival.”*

Part of this revival is coming out of Yale University. Brevard Childs, recently retired Old Testament Professor from Yale, has recently given Burgon qualified endorsement in the following words:

* This revival must never be confused with a Baptist fundamentalist organization that has co-opted Burgon’s name and distorted his views beyond recognition. Go here for information on this organization: <http://www.holywordcafe.com/bible/ecctext/index.html>.

In spite of the excessive rhetoric, Burgon sensed that a theological dimension of the textus receptus [the Ecclesiastical Text] was not being properly handled in the critical approach.... He queried whether the Holy Catholic Church could have been misled from its inception by its use of a corrupt text. Could one discount the continuous witness from antiquity, the church fathers, the versions and lectionaries for a discarded text (Sinaiticus) which a German found in a waste basket?(The New Testament as Canon Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 523-524).

And so you see there is some degree of our coming to our senses on this most vital issue as many are now returning to the Ecclesiastical Text and the *Authorized Version* which is based upon it. Burgon's thunder, indeed, rolls again.

How is it, therefore, that a publication coming out of the U.K. takes an entirely different approach to this subject in its Spring 2002 issue of the *CRN Journal*? In five essays and one review, the topic of the Authorized Version of Scripture is taken up with a smugness and self-assured superior tone that rivals that of the Moulton brothers above. Is this a legitimate response to the revival of the Ecclesiastical Text? Not at all. It never even engages the debate. Instead, this magazine addresses a parallel movement from within the highly separatist movement of American Baptist fundamentalism. But what is most unfortunate in

this is that the editor and authors of these articles leave the impression that the irresponsible, near cult like advocacy of the Authorized Version from within this subset of American Christianity, is the exhaustive expression of *any* advocacy whatsoever. That is, this publication deliberately leaves the impression that the profoundly ill-informed, emotionally driven public advocacy of the historic Bible of the Church of England by American fundamentalist Baptists, is the only community attempting to say anything in favor of this classic English Bible. Hence, in a conscious, fallacious, straw-man fashion, the impression is left that if anyone makes a public defense of either the Ecclesiastical Greek New Testament (so-called Byzantine text, or Textus Receptus), they must needs be a part of this "KJVOnly" cult. This is all rather embarrassing for these contributors, to be perfectly honest. This is like saying that those who enjoy listening to Wagner are all neo-Nazis at heart; or all those who like Shakespeare, or Milton, are patriarchal and oppressors of women because those authors wrote when white European men dominated higher educational institutions. Are the following quotes from KJVOnly cultists?

"It will probably be a long time before any English translation excels the *King James Version* with respect to the much desired quality of *literalness* (in the sense of faithful reproduction – no more, no less – within the bounds of good expression...)"

This is Professor Edward L. Miller in a negative review of the NIV as found in the *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (July-October 1979): 307-31.

How about this statement?:

“We have as a rule used the King James Version in translations, our reasons for doing so must be obvious: it is the version most English readers associate with the literary qualities of the Bible, and it is still arguably the version that best preserves the literary effects of the original languages.”

This is R. Alter and F. Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 7.

And what of this statement?:

“There is...no possibility of considering the literary impact of the Authorized Version apart from the Bible in general.... [T]he Authorized Version owes to the original its matter, its images, and its figures.”

This is C.S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 3.

Now, were someone to read only issue 14 of the *CRN Journal*, without any other perspective on the issues of modern translations, or the merits of the AV, it would be reasonable for them to conclude that all three of these above statements were made by KJVOnly fundamentalists.

Hence, the publishers of this journal have not done a service, but rather a disservice to its readers.

Part of the problem with why this rather one-sided treatment is found within the covers of this popular publication, is that not one of the contributors is anything like an authority in either the fields of N.T. text criticism, or translation philosophy. They are, instead, mostly British Evangelicals, or American fundamentalists (e.g., D. Kutelik and D. Wallace are the latter). Hence, while addressing what to them appears to be a troublesome group, the KJVOnly cult—and so they are—they have felt impunity in leaving the impression that *anyone* who advocates the Ecclesiastical Text even in critical and thoughtful terms, weather Brevard Childs from Yale, or E.F. Hills, or even myself, (none of whom are ever acknowledged); or who might favor the A.V. because of its faithfulness to the original languages, or because of its preferred literary qualities—such as the above authorities do on that subject—must, therefore, be part of this American fundamentalist cult! How very unfortunate that they did not use better judgment. Now they must bear the scorn of fairer and better minds.

Finally, the real purpose of this issue of *CRN Journal* being dedicated to such a narrow project is to be found in the final installment—a review of the *English Standard Version* of

the Bible, which is based on the *Revised Standard Version*, which is copyrighted by the National Council of Churches. This just mentioned point of copyright is never brought to the attention of the reader by the reviewer, Rev. Ligon Duncan III. That the ESV is at least 91% the RSV has been admitted by the publishers of the former. That the RSV was utterly condemned as an altogether liberal bible by perhaps the most learned O.T. scholar ever to hold a seat on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, Professor O.T. Allis, is also never mentioned by Mr. Duncan, though, he, too, is supposed to be a conservative Presbyterian (for more information on this please contact our Institute at the web address below). Perhaps this is because Mr. Duncan is neither an authority in the field, nor someone offering a detached assessment of this work. Rather, he is a pastor of a large Presbyterian Church in the United States, which is spearheading a campaign to adopt this ESV as the next great corporate bible of the Evangelical world, now that the NIV has been turned over to the feminists.

In short, this issue of the *CRN Journal* is a poor example of politics and marketing masking itself as scholarship. Let the reader beware.

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