

Book Review

by James D. Price

Theodore P. Letis. *The Ecclesiastical Text*. The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 6417 N. Fairhill, Philadelphia, PA 19126, 1997. pp. xii + 232.

The author holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of Edinburgh in ecclesiastical history, a M.T.S. degree from Emory University in American church history, and a B.A. degree from Evangelical College in history and Biblical studies. In addition, he has taken graduate classes at Westminster Seminary, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, and Concordia Theological Seminary. He is the director of the Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies and a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Society of Church History.

While the author has impressive academic credentials, one may be concerned about his theological and textual views. Theologically, the author identifies himself as a confessional Lutheran who is "outside of American fundamentalism" (p. 141), and in agreement with "those free from the modern dogma of belief in 'inerrant autographs'" (p. 188). He is critical of American Protestantism generally (pp. vii, 168-72), of fundamentalism specifically (pp. 172-74, 179-81, 199-200), and of independent-separatist Baptists particularly (p. 163). With regard to textual criticism and the text of the Bible, he regards himself as a maverick "working from a post-critical point of reference, . . . I do not readily fit into anyone's category comfortably" (p. xi). What he means by "a post-critical point of reference" is defined in the text of the book; it amounts to a historical defense of the *Textus Receptus* as the authoritative text, based on the authority invested in it by the so-called reformation "Church."

The book contains eight chapters consisting of essays on various topics related to the defense of the *Textus Receptus*, including four book reviews related to the subject. Two appendices follow: one is a collection of complementary peer reviews; the other is a caustic review of James White's book, *The King James Only Controversy*. The book lacks a bibliography and a subject index, both of which diminish its usefulness as a reference source. In addition, it contains numerous careless typographical errors. For example: "a guess lecture" (p. xi), "on ward" (p. 4, n. 7), "outwith" (p. 73), "critical addition" (p. 142), and "the this century" (p. 179).

Letis' defense of the *Textus Receptus*, which he identified as the Ecclesiastical Text, is that the reformation leaders and scholars recognized the *apographa* (the Greek and Hebrew texts used by the reformers) as the infallible and authoritative text of Scripture, having been preserved unaltered from the hands of the prophets and apostles. He stated: "By sacred *apographa* I mean the final referent of Biblical authority in the opinion of the Protestant dogmatians--both Lutheran and Reformed. These are the faithful copies of the originally inspired *autographa*. . . . I mean those copies the Protestant dogmatians regarded as faithful and authoritative copies of the original as opposed to corrupted or inauthentic copies" (pp. 31-32). Here he described the *autographa* as inspired, but later

he gave the distinct impression that he somehow does not regard them as inerrant, or as ever having existed.

He supported this thesis with quotations from representative scholars and authorities from that era. This tactic provided him with an alleged "catholic" consensus that he assumed constitutes the ecclesiastical authority of the Protestant "Church" analogous to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. For Letis, the "Church" provides the *Textus Receptus* with its authority as the infallible Word of God. He asserted: "the Church was seen not only as the vehicle of received orthodox Christology and of the canonical books of the Bible, but also as the 'witness and keeper of holy writ'" (p. 57). Further, he declared that "it was, in fact, ecclesiastical *use* that actually determined the *macro* canon (books) as well as the *micro* canon (the textual form of those books)" (p. 94, emphasis and glosses are his). He holds that the Church's role in "configuring as well as canonising [sic] and transmitting the text of Scripture" is what grants it authority (p. 82, n. 16). He asserted: "as a Lutheran, I speak in terms of a Protestant catholicism" (p. 106). He favorably cited Dean Burgon who said "the Traditional Text of the New Testament Scriptures, equally with the New Testament Canon, rests on the authority of the Church Catholic" (p. 150). He favorably cited Parvis, who said: "The *textus receptus* is the text of the Church. It is that form of text which represents the sum total and the end product of all the textual decisions which were made by the Church and her Fathers over a period of more than a thousand years" (p. 151). Letis seems to regard the authority of the "Church Catholic" as very much like that of Romanism. He confessed: "Within the bosom of Rome one finds, even after Vatican II, a living continuity of dogmatic tradition, ironically, closer in kind to the seventeenth century Protestantism, than are most contemporary expressions of Protestantism" (p. 92).

This hypothesis has two serious problems. The first is that the concept of a Protestant Catholic Church is purely theoretical, not actual. It is true that there was some degree of doctrinal consensus among the various groups of reformers, but there never was a formal council of delegated representatives of the various Protestant groups who met together to canonize a common confession of faith, let alone to canonize the text of Scripture. If there had been such an ecclesiastical council, Letis, the historian, would have cited the documentation--he provided none. The second problem is that there never was a consensus regarding the precise identity of the *Textus Receptus*. In the reformation era, numerous editions of the Greek and Hebrew Bibles were printed, each differing from all others in a variety of details, and each being used by various reformation authorities. In Europe, the 1633 edition of Elzevir came to be widely accepted as the authoritative text, whereas in England, Robert Steven's third edition (1550) became the popular authority. The King James translators did not follow one particular printed edition, but selected readings from several different editions, depending on the preference of the individual translators. Although the differences among the editions are relatively small, there never was an official consensus. So Letis has postulated a hypothetical "Church" that canonized a hypothetical text.

Letis attacked the practice of textual criticism, whether of the traditional form or of the Majority Text variety, as having originated from an erroneous view of inerrant *autographa* (the autographic texts of the prophets and apostles). He cited with approval

various scholars who question the possible existence of the *autographa*. He favorably referred to "many studies suggesting there never was one original" (p.151), and he favorably cited F. F. Bruce, who wrote "There was no autograph of the Epistle to the Romans in the proper sense" (p. 151)--of course, Bruce was referring to the technicality that the Apostle Paul actually dictated the book to Tertius his stenographer. Likewise he favorably cited others who deny that the *autographa* were ever authoritative. For example, he cited Charles Briggs: "Such autographs the Church and the Synagogue have never known" (p. 69), even though Letis admitted earlier in the text that Briggs "was called up on heresy charges and suspended from the ministry in 1895" (p. 65). Letis referred to the autographic text as "a theoretical *autographic exemplar*" (p. 67, emphasis his) and as "mythical autographs" (p. 88, n. 11). With such uncertainty about the actual existence of original autographs and of their form and content, one may wonder how Letis could have referred to them as inspired.

Letis attributed the introduction of the term "inerrant autographs" to B. B. Warfield in the late 1800's, saying "Warfield . . . posited the inerrant autograph theory" (p. 10). Letis regarded Warfield's view of "inerrant autographs" as a significant paradigm shift from the earlier reformation view of "infallible *apographa*"; he asserted that "Warfield shifted authority from the *apographa* to the *autographa*" (p. 57, see also pp. 48, 67). He further stated that "it is my conviction that Warfield himself represented a paradigm shift at Princeton, away from the tradition of Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge. In this I think it right to refer to Warfield's paradigm as the first '*neo-orthodoxy*'" (pp. 87-88, emphasis his).

Letis gave the distinct impression that the reformation "Church" regarded the *apographa* as more authoritative than the *autographa*. Somehow the *apographa* are infallible and authoritative, but the *autographa* were not inerrant. In order to justify this conundrum he cited selected quotations from the dogmatists, and ignored statements from the Church fathers and the Reformers that placed final authority in the *autographa*. For example, here is what Augustine wrote to Jerome on this topic:

"On such terms we might amuse ourselves without fear of offending each other in the field of Scripture, but I might well wonder if the amusement was not at my expense. For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the Ms. [manuscript] is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of in truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error. Far be such arrogance from that humble piety and just estimate of yourself which I know you to have, and

without which assuredly you would not have said, 'Would that I could receive your embrace, and that by converse we might aid each other in learning!'"[*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Works, Second Division, Letter 82 (to Jerome A.D. 405) Chapter 1, paragraph 3.]

Again, here is what John Calvin had to say about a difference between an Old Testament passage and a New Testament reference to it: "'These are the names of the children of Israel.' He recounts the sons and grandsons of Jacob, till he arrives at their full number. The statement that there were but seventy souls, while Stephen (Acts 7: 14) adds five more, is made, I doubt not, by an error of the transcribers. . . .But that the error is to be imputed to the transcribers, is hence apparent, that with the Greek interpreters, it has crept only into one passage, while, elsewhere, they agree with the Hebrew reckoning. And it was easy when numerals were signified by marks, for one passage to be corrupted. I suspect also that this happened from the following cause, that those who had to deal with the Scripture were generally ignorant of the Hebrew language; so that, conceiving the passage in the Acts to be vitiated, they rashly changed the true number." [*John Calvin Commentaries: Genesis* on 46:8]. Thus, it is quite obvious that the reformers and Church fathers regarded the *autographa* as the final authority and without error, even though they may not have used the term *inerrant*.

Again, Calvin had this to say about the authority of an ecclesiastical body over Scripture: "A most pernicious error has very generally prevailed; viz., that Scripture is of importance only in so far as conceded to it by the suffrage of the Church; as if the eternal and inviolable truth of God could depend on the will of men. With great insult to the Holy Spirit, it is asked, who can assure us that the Scriptures proceeded from God; who guarantee that they have come down safe and unimpaired to our times; who persuade us that this book is to be received with reverence, and that one expunged from the list, did not the Church regulate all these things with certainty? [*Calvin's Institutes*, Book I, chapter 7, trans. Henry Beveridge reprint in 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 1:68-69].

Now one might forgive Letis for being over zealous for the traditional text in assuming that the autographic text indeed has been flawlessly preserved in the *Textus Receptus*; and one might suppose that he really believes that the autographic texts were without error (inerrant), even though he vociferously attacked the expression "inerrant *autographa*." After all, he admitted that "in reality a post-critical advocacy of the Ecclesiastical Text is a theological decision, not a text critical one" (p. 145, n. 18). However, that forgiveness would be a hasty concession because of the approach to the text that he actually approved--namely the so-called canonical view of Brevard Childs and the view of orthodox corruption advocated by Bart Ehrman.

One must not assume that Letis just misunderstands Childs' position, because he devoted an entire chapter (chapter 4) to a discussion of Childs' view which he labeled "A Window to a New Paradigm." This label is surprising, because he rejected Warfield's so-called "new paradigm" in favor of the old so-called "ecclesiastical paradigm." Now all of a sudden he prefers a "new paradigm." But he explained Childs' approach as an attempt to "reappropriate the Protestant dogmatists in a post critical milieu" (p. 93). However, when one examines Childs' canonical paradigm, it is hard to suppose that it corresponds

with that of the dogmatists. He described Childs' first step as beginning "with the final ecclesiastical form of a Biblical textual standard" being "fully informed that no *ur* text [that is, the autograph] is necessarily discoverable" (p. 102). He then quoted Childs' view of how the canonical text came into existence, stating that "Israel's traditions arose early in its history and extended in different ways throughout the oral, literary, and redactional stages of growth of the material until it reached a fixed form of relative stability" (p. 104). With this explanation, one can understand why Childs would take a post-critical stance and not try to discover the autographic text--he doesn't believe it ever existed: it just grew! Finally, Letis indicated why he prefers Childs' paradigm: "The canonical approach takes seriously all aspects of Biblical criticism" (p. 106). Presumably that means that Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis should be taken seriously. No wonder Letis disdains fundamentalism.

Finally, Letis mentioned what he considers "the most important book written in textual critical studies in the past fifty years" (p. 224), Bart Ehrman's *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1993). Ehrman's thesis is that the early forms of the New Testament texts were far less orthodox than the current forms because scribes in the second, third, and fourth centuries altered the text to make it conform to the "orthodox" form of theology that took shape in the generations succeeding the apostolic age. Thus Ehrman proposed that reliable records of the facts about Jesus' birth, baptism, deity, miracles, and resurrection do not exist in the current Greek texts. Like Childs, Ehrman believes that the Biblical texts have no *autographa*, but that they grew from oral traditions that went through various stages of redactions. Ehrman added the dimension of corruption by later "orthodox" theology.

Letis accused Warfield's search for inerrant autographs of opening the door to the quest for the historical Jesus (p. 80). On the contrary, it is the influence of scholars like Ehrman who have laid the foundation for such inquiry. Letis clearly accepts the textual views of Childs and Ehrman, so it is no wonder that he distances himself from Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. He rejects the idea of inerrant autographs because he evidently thinks they never existed, and, therefore, a textual critical search for those texts is a vain enterprise. He must be satisfied with a text that grew out of multiple redactions of traditions and that was ultimately canonized by an ecclesiastical authority. It is hard to reconcile this description of the origin of the *apographa* with Letis' earlier description of them as "the faithful copies of the originally inspired *autographa*" (p. 31). How can that process of human origin result in an authoritative infallible text? Can an ecclesiastical body of fallible men produce such a text? Such ideas are unacceptable to fundamentalists.