

The King James Version Debate Book Review

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Introduction

The King James Version Debate by D. A. Carson is divided into two parts, “The Textual Question” and “Nontextual Questions.” In part one, the first four chapters provide a concise and overview of textual criticism. Next, in chapters five through seven, the Byzantine textual family on which the King James Version is based is examined.

Book Contents

PART 1

In the book’s introductory material, the author points out that the Bible lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Modern developments in Bible translation have given rise to an increasing number of English translations of the Christian Scriptures. Modern English Bible versions have received a broad spectrum of reviews, but Carson addresses a particular group which stands in defense of the King James Version (KJV) as the most authentic English Bible and even require the faithful to believe the same. Carson disagrees with the arguments of the KJV only (KJVO) advocates and promises to address several of their concerns in the upcoming pages of the book.

In chapters one through four, Carson introduces his readers to the complex field of textual criticism. Until the invention of the printing press, all copies of the biblical texts were handwritten, each made at different times, in different settings, and for different purposes. As copies were made by Christians, and later by professional scribes, human errors were inevitable. The work of the textual critic is to sort through the now extant 5,000 Greek manuscripts (and 8,000 ancient translations) which are classified as uncials, the more formal manuscripts written in all capital letters, cursive scripts, usually for everyday nonliterary writing, and minuscules, a post-ninth century development of smaller cursive letters, papyri, manuscripts written on less-durable papyrus, and lectionaries, books for liturgical reading.¹ No original autographs exist, only these handwritten copies, and since no two are alike, how is it possible to know which readings are original?

Before answering this question, it is important to become familiar with the nature of scribal errors. Some errors were committed unintentionally due to confusing a word with another similarly sounding or similarly spelled word, skipping to a different place while copying (*homoeoteleuton*), or incorrectly correcting the scribe’s mistakes. Other changes occurred intentionally when a scribe believes his manuscript contains a mistake in wording or grammar or attempted to smooth out a reading by either rewarding it or harmonizing it with another passage of Scripture. These changes would be intentional but

¹ D. A. Carson. *The King James Version Debate: a Plea for Realism*. Grand Rapids: Baker. 17.

not malicious, unlike Marcion's text which removed all references in favor of the Jews. Most textual variants have little or no theological implications, and if they do, "many theologically significant variants can be sorted out quite easily."²

Sorting through this large body of texts is made more manageable by organizing Greek manuscripts into families of related texts-types. Most manuscripts fit into one text-type or the other. The Byzantine text "is the textual tradition which, in large measure, stands behind the KJV."³ The Western text is largely the result of unskilled and careless transmission. The disputed Caesarean text-type was probably brought from Egypt to Caesarea by Origin and closely resembles both the Western and Alexandrian texts. Finally, the Alexandrian text was copied with more skill and its credentials are "far better than its harshest critics will concede."⁴

In chapter four, the author surveys some of the criteria for determining which biblical readings are most likely to be original. To attempt to reconstruct the original text, scholars must weigh all of the external evidence including date, how many manuscripts agree across geographical areas, and the manuscript's "genealogical relationship... to the text-type."⁵ Generally, an older manuscript or manuscript tradition is more likely to be original, all other factors being equal, and a common reading among all manuscripts in one or more text-types is more likely to be original. Scholars also consider the internal evidence. Scribes tended to expound on or harmonize readings, and so a shorter or more difficult to understand reading is generally to be preferred. They also take into account the stylistic considerations of the original author based on his other writings. Using these criteria, the textual critic determines which reading best explains the origin of the others. Carson concludes, that the "vast majority" of the New Testament "may be regarded as textually certain."⁶

In chapter five, the author surveys the origin of the Greek New Testament known as the *Textus Receptus* (TR), from which the KJV was translated. Desiderius Erasmus was the first to publish a Greek edition of the Bible in 1516. The first edition was compiled using a half-dozen Greek manuscripts from the tenth century or later, "none of which contained the entire New Testament,"⁷ and the Latin Vulgate, which he used to harmonize the text and fill in any gaps in the manuscripts. For example, his Greek copy of Revelation was missing the final six verses, and Erasmus filled them in by translating backwards from the Latin into Greek.⁸ Luther's German translation was from Erasmus's second edition, and the third edition conceded to the criticism of other scholars by finally admitting I John 5:7, which he could not previously find in any Greek manuscript. Later revisions of this Greek New Testament were published by Erasmus and others like Robert Stephanus, who first numbered the verses, John Calvin's successor Theodore Beza, and Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, who were responsible for dubbing the text

² Ibid. 24.

³ Ibid. p. 26.

⁴ Ibid. p. 27.

⁵ Ibid. p. 29.

⁶ Ibid. p. 31.

⁷ Ibid. p. 34.

⁸ Ibid.

textum receptum which became “*Textus Receptus*.” The TR stands behind “every European translation until 1881.”⁹

Next, chapter six highlights some of the modern defenses used to support the Byzantine text-type which is the basis of the TR. He summarizes the major arguments of some of the best known advocates of the TR. First, while Westcott and Hort argued for the priority and reliability of the Alexandrian textual tradition and suggested that the Byzantine texts were conflated and therefore furthest from the autographs, today’s defenders of the TR raise the following objections:

1. The Alexandrian family of texts were rejected by the church.
2. The Alexandrian family contains heretical Arian influence.
3. Fourth century codices Sinaiticus and Vatacanus do not represent an earlier textual tradition.
4. The vast majority of extant Greek manuscripts are Byzantine.
5. From the fourth to the nineteenth century the church used Byzantine manuscripts, proving it is God’s divinely preserved Word.
6. Westcott and Hort were heretics and biased.
7. That Byzantine manuscripts were widely used prior to the fourth century, and therefore wore out, explaining why no pre-fourth century witnesses exist.
8. Westcott and Hort’s theory about the origin of the TR is flawed and circular.
9. The genesis of the Byzantine family is obscure not because it is a conflation but because it is primitive.
10. Since scribes did not have desks, an organized conflation of the text was not possible.
11. Historically the Byzantine text has been accepted as valid.

These are some of the theses being presented to many Christian leaders in support of the preeminence of the TR, and according to Carson, most of them are either ill-equipped or afraid to investigate these claims.¹⁰

In chapter seven, Carson presents fourteen theses against the claims of the superiority of the TR and Byzantine text. (1) There is no clear, reliable evidence that the Byzantine text-type existed before the mid-300s A.D. Carson makes the case that nearly all of the Byzantine readings in the ante-Nicene fathers are also found in other text-types, especially in Western texts.¹¹ (2) It is “logically fallacious and historically naïve” to defend the Byzantine text-type on the basis of the majority of extant manuscripts being Byzantine. Along with this statement, Carson refutes the KJVO claim that, since most extant non-Byzantine manuscripts were found in Egypt, they must have originated from there on the basis that there is convincing evidence for the widespread distribution of these manuscripts. The number of extant Greek manuscripts is a cultural accident in that they hail from what was the Greek-speaking world until 1453.¹² (3) It can be

⁹ Ibid. p. 37.

¹⁰ Ibid 42.

¹¹ Ibid 44.

¹² Ibid. 48-50.

demonstrated that the Byzantine text-type is secondary, and (4) the credentials of the Alexandrian text-type surpass all others.¹³

(5) The KJVO assertion that what the majority of Christians in history believed must be true is at the very least an ambiguous statement, and it is not at all helpful to textual criticism.¹⁴ Carson counters that the majority belief is in no way a determining factor in matters of theology or biblical studies. (6) It is “both logically and theologically fallacious” to favor the Byzantine text by appealing to God’s providence in preserving his Word through it.¹⁵ In his sovereignty, God has certainly preserved the Byzantine text, but he has similarly preserved the other text-types as well. (7) It is also fallacious to deny the possibility of conflation of the Byzantine text based on writing practices in the fourth century.¹⁶ (8) Asserting the prominence of the TR and then comparing other text-types to it in order to suggest that the differences are faults is, again, fallacious and is a half-truth. This argument begs the question, presupposing the same facts it supposedly seeks to prove. (9) The charge that non-Byzantine manuscripts lack important theological content is unsubstantiated. The deity of Christ is not presented less in the NIV than in the KJV, but more.¹⁷ (10) When the KJV came on the scene, it was not without its rivals and calls for revision.¹⁸

(11) The Byzantine text-type is not equivalent to the TR.¹⁹ Here Carson states that the TR consists of just a few of the thousands of now extant Byzantine manuscripts. (12) Another fallacious argument used by KJVO advocates, is that accepting the TR means recognizing the inspiration of every word in Scripture.²⁰ The claim that God preserved his every word in the TR is refuted by the facts that no two Byzantine manuscripts are perfectly identical, and the TR itself contains readings found in no Greek manuscripts.²¹ Carson argues that acceptance of the Bible’s verbal inspiration does not necessitate the inevitable adoption of the TR. The Scripture does not promise to protect future copies of itself from mechanical errors. Older manuscript traditions reflect fewer errors, and the expectation and ambition of textual criticism is to eliminate errors by ascertaining the original as much as possible.²²

(13) Here Carson particularly attacks the slanted argumentation of KJV advocates, stating that their tactics are misleading and should not be accepted by Christians who claim to love truth.²³ Their arguments are often logically flawed. Westcott and Hort are often demonized and their contributions to biblical scholarship are rejected along with their critical methodology. Carson goes on to express his frustration with these

¹³ Ibid 51-2.

¹⁴ Ibid 54.

¹⁵ Ibid 55.

¹⁶ Ibid 57.

¹⁷ Ibid 62-64.

¹⁸ Ibid 66.

¹⁹ Ibid 67.

²⁰ Ibid 68.

²¹ Ibid 69.

²² Ibid 74.

²³ Ibid.

flawed argumentation practices. Yet, he concedes that not all KJV defenders share the same level of intolerance, and he welcomes genuine debate on textual issues. However, such debates should be characterized by brotherly love.²⁴ (14) Therefore, the author concludes that acceptance of the TR should not be made mandatory for accepting the orthodoxy of other Christians and receiving them into fellowship.²⁵

PART 2

The least sizable section of the book is “Part 2” in which the author addresses nontextual issues related to the insistence of the superiority of the TR and KJV. First, Carson presents six preliminary statements in which, after stating that the KJVO debate is restricted to the New Testament, he shares some considerations about translations being neither equal nor perfect.²⁶ Some who defend the KJV, and therefore the TR, on nontextual grounds do so in addition to their textual arguments, while others do so because they find textual arguments inadequate to support the TR.²⁷ Still others hold on to the KJV for purely personal reasons, being unconvinced by any of the KJVO arguments. Carson clarifies that he does not endorse all modern versions but applies the same standards of textual criticism to them as well. He favors the NIV, which at the time of the book’s writing was still in progress.²⁸

Next, the author addresses seven common arguments used to support the preference of the KJV on nontextual grounds. Some argue that the KJV is simply a better translation than modern versions. However, translating the New Testament from Greek to English involves many complex semantic, idiomatic, and syntactical implications which are often ignored by KJV defenders.²⁹ The goal of translation is not to produce the most “literal” word-for-word rendering plausible, but to provide a rendering whose meaning is as close as possible to the meaning of the original.³⁰ To Carson, the NIV is the best available translation of the New Testament.³¹ Some argue that the KJV has withstood the test of time, surviving 350 years of use, but this argument fails because the KJV had not yet contended with the modern versions which are both more accurate translations and based on more reliable manuscripts.³² Some suggest that the KJV is more reverent in its use of “thou” with reference to God, but Carson illustrates how evangelicals are perfectly comfortable addressing God in familiar terms while leaving the obscure, archaic terms of the KJV in the past.³³

It is argued that the KJV is better because it uses “Lord” and “Christ” more often than other versions. Carson is unable to see how this is more honoring to Jesus, as the

²⁴ Ibid 75.

²⁵ Ibid 78.

²⁶ Ibid 82.

²⁷ Ibid 83.

²⁸ Ibid 84.

²⁹ Ibid 85-87.

³⁰ Ibid 90.

³¹ Ibid 97.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid 97-8.

argument suggests.³⁴ For those who claim that the KJV is easier to memorize than other versions, Carson declares their claim completely subjective and probably only true for those who are already accustomed to the KJV.³⁵ Some suggest that the KJV is better for reading in public, but this argument, similar to the one immediately above, is easily resolved by introducing the entire congregation to a newer version.³⁶

Still others merely prefer the KJV without appealing to any arguments. Carson expresses great respect for them, confessing that he too began with the beloved King James Bible. Although the majority of congregants in a group might prefer the KJV, it is important to acknowledge younger Christians who might not be so familiar with it and attend to their needs for hearing and understanding Scripture. If the leaders reject all other versions, then the young Christians will inevitably encounter them on their own, without guidance.³⁷ Young Christians need clear, ready access to the nourishment of God's Word.

Carson concludes by stating that the church must continually reform itself.³⁸ Central to all reformation efforts is the Word of God. Finally, the author praises the efforts of all who attempt to make the Scriptures more accessible.³⁹

Reaction

Carson's arguments are grounded in solid textual critical principles and a ready acceptance of reality. His guided tour through the halls of New Testament textual criticism provides a valuable crash course for Bible readers who might not be familiar with the field. Next, he addresses the KJVO advocates in a professional and constructive manner. The author avoids condescending reactions toward foolish arguments, and he provides careful critique of the better ones. The book's subtitle, "A Plea for Realism," is especially fitting as Carson seeks to inform his readers what is happening in the world of biblical scholarship and openly examines the KJVO arguments in light of those realities.

The arguments of the KJVO crowd are evidently circular. Essentially, they assert that the TR is the Word of God because it is the Word which God preserved in greater numbers than all other manuscripts, and the apparent conflation cannot be a conflation because no one can add to God's Word, which he preserved. Carson thoroughly addresses the controversy by bringing to light some of these faulty methods of argumentation employed by the KJV's defenders.

Some who assert that the KJV is the best English translation do so by claiming that the older, Elizabethan-style English was more precise than modern English. The fact that many of today's Bible readers find its words archaic only accentuates their point that

³⁴ Ibid 99.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid 100.

³⁷ Ibid 101.

³⁸ Ibid 103.

³⁹ Ibid.

we have done away with these “better” words and have substituted them for vague, less suitable ones. I would like to have read Carson’s response to this argument under his shorter “Nontextual Questions” section. However, it is possible that Carson was not aware of this argument.

His conclusion that the acceptance of the KJV should not be a criterion for orthodoxy is well substantiated throughout the entire book. He relentlessly exposes the many holes in the insistence of those who require their Christian brothers and sisters to use the KJV alone or be deemed a heretic. Such an extreme stance may have the appearance of ultraconservatism, but in reality it is both presumptuous and unfounded. May his plea be heard by those who value truth as it inevitably corresponds to reality.

Conclusion

Throughout this book, Carson’s desire for people to have access to the Word of God in its purest and clearest form possible is evident. The first five chapters open up the minds of his readers to the vital task of textual criticism. It is both a daunting and a glorious task, daunting because of the magnitude of the materials which must be examined, sifted, and weighed, and glorious because of the majesty of the treasures with which the textual critic is privileged to work. Questions which scrutinize the task of textual criticism are good, and Carson deals with them thoroughly and respectfully in chapters six and seven. Finally, in the concluding chapters Carson reaches out to the die-hard KJV “fans,” sharing with them the common roots of the KJV, and inviting them to open their eyes to the needs of their fellow Christians to devour the Bible in the nourishing language of today. Carson’s noble quest has successfully produced an exceptional and indispensable presentation of an opposing view to that of the KJVO advocates.

Notable Quotation

“Just as no translation is perfect, so also no translation is perfectly objective.” (90)