

THIS *TEXTUS RECEPTUS*: A RESPONSE TO MARK WARD'S CRITIQUE OF CONFESSIONAL BIBLIOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

First, I make certain concessions that must be made regarding the differences that appear between the various iterations of the TR. Second, I show that Ward answers his own questions in the very article that asks them. Third, I discuss several apparent misunderstandings evinced by Ward which I believe impair his ability to rightly “summarize” both “Mainstream KJV-Onlyism” and “Confessional Bibliology.” Fourth, I discuss certain foibles which are given little attention but are nevertheless substantive.

INTRODUCTIONS

Recently, rising star, Mark Ward asked the question, Which *Textus Receptus*?² David Otis Fuller, a staunch KJV advocate for his time, once asked a nearly identical question in his edited compilation entitled, *Which Bible?* When I was young, I thought he had written something more like “Witch Bible” when I heard the title for the first time. Sometimes it is better to read for yourself. Anecdotally, Ward is among the most soft-spoken and gentle people you could ever come across. Still, his questions in “Which TR?” are potent but familiar ones for those who hold to a standard sacred text whether that text be the KJV and/or the TR. They are also potent questions for those who hold to the belief that God has preserved His word to the very jot and tittle in a particular document. Given the gravity of his questions, it is important and even

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² Mark Ward, “Which *Textus Receptus*? A Critique of Confessional Bibliology” in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* vol. 25 (2020), 51-77.

necessary that those who hold to a standard sacred text clarify a very specific answer for Ward and those of his persuasion.

As recently as September 6, 2021 Ward declared that the journal article currently under examination has not been answered. After a brief Google search there do appear to be responses to said article from multiple sources and one specific and lengthy response by Vincent Krivda in 2020.³ But perhaps these responses have not yet popped up on his radar screen. So here is to trying again. To begin our journey let me answer Ward's question with this thesis: The Scrivener TR is the answer to the "Which TR?" question as proposed by Ward. Also, let me make one note on terminology. I am going to use the term "standard sacred text" or "SST" proponent to refer to those who hold to the TR only or the TR and the KJV in exclusive combination. My aim in using these terms is to encompass both of what Ward calls the Mainstream KJV-Only position as well as Confessional Bibliology in one neat nomenclature.

Concessions

First, for the sake of our discussion I grant that there are multiple TRs [e.g., Beza, Stephanus, and Scrivener]. Second, I grant that none of those TRs agree on all points in their respective readings. Third, I grant that some form of textual criticism was exercised in the formulation of the kinds of TRs already mentioned. Fourth, I grant, with Ward, that his argument is a "simple one," and as such, I aim to offer clarifications in good faith.⁴

³ (PDF) Which Textus Receptus?! A Response to Mark Ward's Critique of Confessional Bibliology | Vince Krivda - Academia.edu [Accessed: September 2021].

⁴ Ward, Which, 75. "I suspect that TR defenders, when pressed by a very simple argument like that of this paper, will be willing to clarify in good faith."

Immanent Answers to Immanent Questions

Ward observes in his introduction that “Whenever a defender of the King James Version argues that the *Textus Receptus* (TR) is the providentially preserved text of the Greek New Testament, a simple question arises: *Which TR?*”⁵ By Ward’s count there are no fewer than twenty-nine iterations of the TR to which he adjoins this cute quip, “Should *Textus Receptus* perhaps be *Texti Recepti?*”⁶ His question, minus the quip, is a meaningful one. Twenty-nine iterations of the TR are right around the number of Nestle-Aland editions. Ward is right in asking the TR/KJV crowd to answer for the plurality of TR’s given the fact that TR advocates declare that the word of God is settled and “not mutable like the critical texts.” So, what is the answer to Ward’s question? In not so veiled terms, Ward answers his own questions and if not directly, his answers are more than oblique.

First, Ward answers his own question when he writes of Scrivener’s TR, “This 29th and final TR is the one used today by basically all who prefer the TR.”⁷ The answer seems simple and clear enough. By Ward’s own lights the answer to his question, at least for “basically all who prefer the TR,” is Scrivener’s TR. Again, in a later portion Ward admits that “the mainstream KJV-Only movement does have an implicit answer to the question, ‘Which TR?’ There is one edition of the Greek New Testament that it consistently uses in its various educational institutions: Scrivener’s TR.”⁸ Then Ward offers his personal prognostication when he writes, “I

⁵ Ward, *Which*, 51.

⁶ Ward, *Which*, 53.

⁷ Ward, *Which*, 53.

⁸ Ward, *Which*, 56.

suspect that TR defenders, when pressed by a very simple argument like that of this paper, will be willing to clarify in good faith. They will say, ‘It is Scrivener's TR that is perfectly preserved Word of God.’”⁹ It seems quite clear that Ward answers or perhaps nearly answers his own question. One’s behavior betrays one’s beliefs is a common theme used in dealing with worldviews which are at variance with the Christian worldview and it applies quite forcefully here in “betraying” SST proponents.

Ward admits that Scrivener’s TR is the one used by “basically all who prefer the TR” and is also consistently used in “various educational institutions” associated with some form of the SST position. And after all that he still considers the answer implicit or yet to be answered? Consider for a moment if the terms were reversed. What if “basically all” and “various educational institutions” did not hold to Scrivener’s TR, but said they did? Would Ward accept their testimony then? If your neighbor’s man cave has Detroit Lions memorabilia plastered all over the walls but he never explicitly says the Lions are his team. Does it seem the natural response to go home to your wife and say, “Hmm, I wonder if the Lions are his team? Until he tells me, I am going to withhold judgment.” What if Ward assumed Scrivener’s TR was the answer to his own question? What is the worst that could happen? But perhaps this is a bridge too far for Ward and his ilk. It must be. I believe Ward is genuinely asking this question. It is a good question. If not though, his question seems a bit clickbait-ish seeing what he offers, or by his estimation, what he nearly offers the answer to his own question. Still, if it helps, Scrivener’s TR is the one for this SST advocate.

⁹ Ward, Which, 75.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Ward offers meaningful questions but his summaries of both Mainstream KJV-Only and Confessional Bibliology lack certain necessary addendums. These addendums are: (1) when the Bible speaks concerning itself it is speaking concerning my Bible, (2) both the TR and the KJV are inextricably related especially touching time, process, and product, (3) Ward's specter of special pleading is unwarranted, and (4) there are several things which get little treatment but are nevertheless important for understanding SST proponents.

The Bible Talks About My Bible

Perhaps the greatest and simplest of Ward's misunderstandings is that those who hold to a standard sacred text have a particular belief about the Bible. They believe that when the Bible says something about the Bible, it is saying something about *their* Bible. Yet, in another sense it is not so particular in that Christians hold similar beliefs about other things as well. When the Bible commands that children honor and obey parents; most times the parents believe the Bible is commanding *their* children to perform these moral injunctions and not merely the children of ancient days passed. When the apostle Paul commands that the saint flee fornication, we tend to believe he is commanding more than those addressed in his epistle. He is addressing *us*. When Jesus says that not one jot or one tittle will pass from the law, He is not merely speaking of the Pentateuch written by Moses. He is also including the copies of the copies of the copies which He read from in the Temple. And for those who hold to a SST, the same applies to the NT Greek of the first century and now finally to the Scrivener's TR. In short, the Confessional position holds that when the Bible declares something about itself it is talking about the Bible in which that very declaration appears.

When the Bible states that not one jot or one tittle will pass from the law until all is fulfilled, an SST proponent will believe that about *his* Bible. When the Scripture says that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, the SST proponent believes that *his* Bible is inspired Scripture – all of it. When the Bible says that God’s word is composed of pure words that have been tried in a furnace of fire purified seven times, the SST proponent believes *his* Bible is pure in the way the Bible says it is pure. The Bible does not delineate between pure autographs and variant apographs, but it does speak concerning itself. Just as Christ, the Word of God, spoke concerning Himself and we are called to believe his proclamations. So also, Scripture, the word of God, speaks concerning itself and we are called to believe those proclamations. And as long as the Bible is in the hand of God’s people and the Bible speaks concerning itself, those same people will believe the Bible is referring to their Bible.

Time, Process, and Product

The second misunderstanding, and only second to the one immediately above, is that Ward does not seem to understand the interrelation of process, time, and product touching the formation of the TR. Ward writes, “Consequently, until Scrivener’s work, there was no single edition of the Greek New Testament that perfectly matched the KJV.”¹⁰ Indeed. Ward writes in another place, “Until all the KJV-Only Christians stop professing allegiance to ‘the TR’ and instead choose one TR, they are in principle accepting precisely the same *kinds* of textual variation that occur between the TR and the CT with the exception of two big chunks: John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.”¹¹ Again, Ward’s observations here are true but they seem to advocate

¹⁰ Ward, Which, 53.

¹¹ Ward, Which, 76.

for a false choice, a choice between the process [i.e., the tradition of the TR and KJV] and the product [i.e., a specific TR or KJV] of that process. There is another way.

When the Westminster Confession of Faith states that God's word in the Greek and Hebrew "being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies the Church is finally to appeal unto them;" time, process, and product are all present.¹² It must not be overlooked that the WCF is a confession of faith. The WCF is not an argument first. It is statement of religious beliefs, and as such it is fair to begin each statement with something like, "We believe..." Briefly though, it is quite conspicuous that the WCF teaches that the church is to appeal to these authentic words of God in all controversies which crop up in that moment in time because they have been kept pure even in this age *and* because they are inspired. As will be shortly discussed, the Reformers knew there were variants and amendable corruptions in the Greek manuscripts and yet they avoided language like "mostly pure" and "insofar as they comport with the originals." They maintained a confessional stance while at the same time drawing a straight line from "immediately inspired" to the use of these immediately inspired words to settle present controversies.

Time and the TR

The Confession declares that at one point in time God immediately inspired the Hebrew and Greek originals. Then God the Giver performs the work of preserving His own inspired words through His singular care and providence [i.e., special providence]. Usually at this point the critical text position is poised to declare, "But not a single manuscript across the entire

¹² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.8.

known extant manuscript tradition agrees with another in every detail.” This is an undeniable reality, but is it very potent? It is irresponsible to assume that John Calvin, William Whitaker, the Westminster Divines, and Francis Turretin were unaware of the discrepancies present in the extant textual tradition. Consider Turretin for a moment. “We acknowledge,” writes Turretin, “that many variant readings occur both in the Old and New Testaments arising from comparison of different manuscripts, be we deny corruption (at least corruption that is universal).”¹³ Indeed, as Turretin goes on to point out, both Origen and Theodoret of Cyrrhus knew of such variants or corruptions.¹⁴ And still the Westminster Divines and the Reformed tradition as a whole claim God’s immediately inspired words have been kept pure in all ages, and may I say, even in this age. How is such a thing possible?

Process and the TR

The Reformers believed and SST proponents still believe that God’s immediately inspired words remain in the mouths of His people just as Isaiah 59:21 promises. But that is not to say that they have always been between two covers. This is where the process comes into the picture. WCF 1.8 does not claim that “kept pure” must equal between two covers, though it can include this concept and it currently does, as argues the SST advocate. A process brings the word of God between two covers and the process continues to include the element of time. Like sanctification or growing in favor with God and man or the trial of one’s faith, many Christian beliefs take time to find root, especially those beliefs that ask us to change our mind. As time

¹³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* vol. 1, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. trans. George Musgrave Giger 3 vol (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992). 111.

¹⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 111.

goes on, we, through a process of learning, come to know of God's sovereignty, how to love our enemies, and nourish our wives. Time and process are elements in perfecting our beliefs. In the case of Scripture, "perfected" equals the whole of the inspired *apographa* appearing between two covers. Turretin speaks of corrupted texts when he writes of the corruptions as "not universal in all the manuscripts; or they are not such as cannot easily be corrected from a collation of the Scriptures and the various manuscripts." Indeed, the Reformers were acutely aware of corruptions and variants in the manuscript tradition. Still, above all those corruptions and variants stood the Scriptures. Note Turretin's words. He separates the Scriptures from the "various manuscripts." In the Reformed tradition, the Confessional text was not lowered to the level of the "various manuscripts." The Scriptural readings stood outside the manuscript tradition as a separate and privileged source.

The TR as Product

First, collating and correcting take time. The formation of the TR in all of its iterations took time by means of a process. Sanctification demands the same. So, which of the TR's is the word of God? Keeping process and time in tow the answer is the TR for that time and at that place during the process. Ward takes great pains to note the differences between two iterations of the TR. At the time of Beza that iteration of the TR was the word of God. At the time of Stephanus that iteration of the TR was the word of God. And now in the 21st century, the Scrivener iteration is the TR. Each of these TR's constituted a product. Was the believing community at the time of Beza theologically wrong for holding to the TR of that time? No, and the same goes for the saints at the time of Stephanus.

Why? It is akin to one's growth in understanding soteriology. Say at one point a sincere saint holds to a Molinistic view of God's Sovereignty. Say further that he has arrived at this conclusion after scouring all the relevant data and argumentation. In time, through a process of study and discussion he ultimately recognizes that he was wrong and that the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace are the biblical position. He changes what he believes based on the leading of the Holy Spirit through the teachings of Scripture. In the case of the Beza vs Stephanus vs Scrivener, Ward himself admits the differences between the three are largely minor. Simply put, "How did the TR tradition get to the place where it is within the Church?" It grew by the leading of the Holy Spirit in a way *similar* to sanctification.

Special Revelation and Special Pleading

We find Ward's third misunderstanding as he trots out the specter of special pleading. By my lights there are three ways in which he may construe the SST position as guilty of special pleading. But first, a general definition of special pleading may look something like this: person A claims that X is an exception to the rule but person A cannot justify why X is an exception. We find the first of these three ways when Ward writes, "Combs knows that this may sound like special pleading, even to his KJV-Only readers (Why would a perfectly preserved text need purification, and where was that perfect text during the process?)"¹⁵ Ward's accusation of special pleading rests on the material in the parenthesis. As we noted in the prior section, Ward misunderstands the role of time, process, and product in the formulation of the TR and the KJV and he also seems to assume that "kept pure" must necessarily mean between two covers. Certainly, all the books of the NT were not together in one volume by the time John finished his

¹⁵ Ward, Which, 55.

apocalypse, yet every word of God was kept pure. On this first account then, Ward appeals to special pleading here because he has not fully unpacked more salient and basic elements to the overall SST argument. As such, his appeal fails.

The second way Ward may seek to employ the accusation of special pleading rests in the greater thesis of his paper overall. His thesis, or perhaps macro-thesis, is that the TR tradition and the CT iterations suffer from the same text critical maladies. Thusly construed, the TR and the CT are in the same boat. This is kind of like a reverse *to quoque*. Ward writes, “If I can successfully show a TR/KJV defender that TR editions feature exactly the same *kinds* of variants as those that occur between the CT and TR – *if I can show that our views differ in degree and not in kind* - I can perhaps make a small dent in the amount of divisive internet grandstanding in the world.”¹⁶ Except this is not the case and it not the case by Ward’s own honest admission. Earlier in the paper Ward makes clear under his subsection entitled *Missing Sections* that “For the purposes of this article and this argument, however, it must be acknowledged that John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20 make up the lone serious, substantive *kind* of difference that exist between the two textual traditions.”¹⁷ Ward disproves his own macro-thesis in that differences between the CT and the TR are not only those of degree but *also* in kind, one kind – missing sections. Ward’s accusation of special pleading does not fit the definition of special pleading in that he justifies in his own words why the TR is an exception when compared to the CT.

The third way Ward may seek to employ the accusation of special pleading is by conflating special pleading with special revelation as if an appeal to special revelation is special pleading or *vice versa*. With more than a nod to such a conflation Ward writes, “But the certainty

¹⁶ Ward, Which, 77.

¹⁷ Ward, Which, 74.

each group [i.e., Mainstream KJV-Onlyism and Confessional Bibliology] seeks is simply not to be had without some kind of special revelation – or special pleading.”¹⁸ But this has been the SST argument from the beginning. We believe in a dogmatic kind of way that God has kept His immediately inspired words pure in all ages. Most, if not all, believe these words of God are now between two covers. We believe that when the Bible speaks concerning itself it is speaking concerning the Bible in our hand. In short, we believe what we believe about the Bible because the Bible compels us to believe it. This is by nature an argument from special revelation. Special revelation is by definition, exceptional. So, again, the accusation of special pleading fails.

On this point though it is appropriate to point out that this kind of conflation does indeed crop up in evangelical circles. Take for instance the eminent scholar, Daniel Wallace. He declares “I would question whether it is an epistemologically sound principle to allow one’s presuppositions to dictate his text-critical methodology. This is neither honest to a historical investigation nor helpful to our evangelical heritage.”¹⁹ He writes in another place, “A theological *a priori* has no place in textual criticism.”²⁰ Why? According to Wallace, such behavior is epistemologically unsound and dishonest. At this same point it is also appropriate to employ the work of eminent philosopher and epistemologist, Alvin Plantinga. Writing on this issue of presuppositions and special pleading Plantinga observes,

If the believer concedes that she *doesn’t* have any special source of knowledge or true belief with respect to Christian belief – no *sensus divinitatis*, no internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, no teaching by the church inspired and protected from error by the Holy Spirit, nothing not available to those who disagree with her –

¹⁸ Ward, Which, 76.

¹⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, “Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-First Century” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 52, Iss. 1 (March 2009): 79-100. 93.

²⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism” in *Grace Theological Journal* 12 (1992): 21-51. 51.

then, perhaps, she can properly be charged with an arbitrary egoism, and *then*, perhaps, she will have a defeater for her Christian belief. But why should she concede these things?²¹

Indeed, why concede these things? It is not special pleading for a Christian to say that she enjoys the blessings of her heavenly Father in a way that a lost soul cannot understand. Such things are spiritually discerned. In the same manner, it is not special pleading to say that the Bible as a first principle speaks concerning itself and, on that ground alone, the Christian believes what the Bible teaches about itself. All in all, Ward's accusation in the form of special pleading lacks considerable force and scope and should be wholeheartedly rejected.

Burnt Ends²²

First, Ward writes, "Hills and Letis both relate lengthy histories of biblical criticism which promote a guilt-by-association thesis."²³ When you go to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC [and you should go if you have not] you find out that BMW assisted in Hitler's cause. BMW's guilt is not by association. They actually participated in Hitler's worldview. Hills and Letis are merely and pointedly explaining that the history of modern biblical criticism has and continues to participate in an abiblical, ahistorical worldview. Note again the above words of Daniel Wallace.

Second, to paraphrase Ward, "I don't always tell people their Bible contains variants, but when I do, I drink *Dos Grapees*."²⁴ In the realm of Christian belief, and granting Ward's position

²¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 111.

²² Easily the best plate of BBQ you could ever have.

²³ Ward, *Which*, 59.

²⁴ Ward, *Which*, 72. "I do not relish as an inerrantist telling laypeople that the biblical manuscript tradition contains variants."

for a moment, what is the harm? Is a KJV-Only Christian believing too hard or too much about their Bible? Certainly, making the Bible an idol is a sin but that is not Ward's nor my take on Mainstream KJV-Only Christians or Confessional Bibliology Christians. These Christians appear to believe too much about their Bible. I have been defending the King James Version since I was a kid travelling with my dad to churches and watching him make the case and to this day it still baffles me that some Christians cannot let a simple Mid-Michigan farmer believe the Bible he reads is the word of God down to the very word. Apparently, this belief is such a heinous theological crime that said farmer must endure the slings and arrows of fellow Christians in college, grad-school, post-graduate school, and up into his Ph.D. Then finally he gets it from his newly ensconced pastor with a thirty-hour master's degree under his belt. It must be some egregious sin to leverage that kind of time, money, and effort to see such a belief defeated.

Third, at the very end of Ward's paper he asks the following question, "What could be more divisive than telling people who cannot read Greek or Hebrew – and therefore lack most of the capacity necessary to check out the issue for themselves – to disdain each other's Bibles?"²⁵ The answer is, telling people to disdain their own Bible. This is the very thing that SST proponents resist. We would be a long way down the road if every Christian believed their Bible was indeed the word of God in English and all others merely contained large portions of the Bible. Saying the ESV *is* God's word in English is historically, theologically, and logically more consistent than saying the ESV, NIV, NASB, KJV, CSB, and the Message are all equally the Bible.

²⁵ Ward, Which, 77.

CONCLUSION

Mark Ward's paper represents a welcome challenge to the SST position. He is mostly cordial in his presentation and fair with the material. He seeks to understand his opposition and it does not appear that he sees them or treats them as enemies. If the struggle for a standard sacred text is ever to progress in a meaningful manner, we will need a temperament and effort approximating that of Ward's on both sides of the discussion. Certainly, there is a place for professional "ribbing," but the rancor really has no meaningful place.

To Ward's argument in general, his question about which TR is a good one, but it appears he already knows the answer to the question. Perhaps the SST position could be more overt in their declarations on this point for the sake of clarity by saying the words, "Scrivener's 1881 TR." As far as his summaries of Mainstream KJV-Only and Confessional Bibliology, Ward lacks insight into certain theological undergirding principles which are central to the positions he wishes to summarize. Most notably among these is the belief that the Bible tells us about itself and as such we are compelled to believe what the Bible says in this regard. Another is the role of the TR tradition, specifically in terms of time, process, and product. And finally, there is, to paraphrase Abram Kuyper, no square inch of this world where Christ does not say, "Mine." This includes textual criticism. Thus, to exclude Christ's lordship and His elect body from the process of textual work is to practice an idolatrous form of textual criticism. To do so is a kind of idolatrous special pleading.

Overall, Ward's paper provides an adequate Archimedean Point upon which to continue the textual conversation into the next generation and to a profitable end. Until the day of the Lord's return may He find us faithful.