

I've decided to address a question about my own academic life in this week's Readers' Mailbag. It involves an issue that comes up a lot, but not in this form.

QUESTION:

Is there a story (post) about your move from textual criticism to other things?

RESPONSE:

I can't remember if there is (though I'm sure someone will tell me!). But I would like to say something about it, since it is an issue that seems to come up a good deal, not usually from people who are genuinely interested in knowing about my academic life per se (as this questioner is), but from critics who aren't at **all** interested, but who want to inform their readers that my books are not written by an expert but by someone who was only trained as a textual critic.

Most recently this was brought to my attention in a comment by the Christian apologist, himself a professional philosopher, William Lane Craig, who told his readers that I had no expertise on the question of whether Jesus' tomb was empty after the "resurrection," since I was trained as a textual critic and wasn't a historian.

I have to admit, I always laugh when I hear something like that. For one thing, Craig knows nothing about my education or training (he certainly, for example, doesn't know what Masters and PhD seminars and examinations I took in my graduate work). For another thing, what would it take for a person to be an expert on the disciples' claims about Jesus' tomb? Does someone need to have a PhD in Empty Tomb Studies?

In any event, first let me make sure we're all on the same page. When someone says that my training and expertise is in "textual criticism," that could be and often is misunderstood by lay readers. Textual criticism does not refer to the analysis and interpretation of literary texts, as many people assume. It is a technical term that refers to the field that tries to decide what an author originally wrote (completely independently of what he actually **meant** or the historical circumstances of his writing).

Textual critics of Shakespeare try to figure out what the Bard actually wrote when he produced Hamlet, given the fact that we don't have his original manuscript but only later ones that are significantly different from each other. So too with textual critics of Milton, and Chaucer, and all the ancient Greek and Latin classics and ... and every author who wrote before the invention of printing (and even after). Textual critics of the New Testament explore the many, many manuscripts of the New Testament to try to figure out what words probably go back to the original authors.

Normally when an academic indicates that another academic is a textual critic, they almost **always** mean that — either with respect, or more commonly (it may be surprising to know from an outsider's perspective), with a roll of the eyes — that the person is a trained technician who can get into the detailed nitty gritty — and is needed for that — but cannot get outside of that. He's the mechanic who can fix your fuel injector, but he's not an intellectual who can write about the historical and economic significant of the invention of the automobile. Of course, most of us who do **not** roll our eyes think that doing the latter is no

better or more important than the former. On the contrary, the former is what we are very much more interested and invested in. And it requires a massive amount of knowledge. My father-in-law was a mechanic, and I couldn't believe what he knew and could do. But in only rare instances would you expect your local mechanic to write a lengthy treatise of the varying roles of automotive technology in Marxist vs. Capitalist societies.

When someone indicates that I'm a textual critic, what they almost always mean (in coded language) is that I'm ONLY a textual critic. I can read manuscripts and decide which ones are more likely original at one point or another, but I have no ability to interpret them, or to reconstruct the historical events that they purport to discuss. That takes completely different skills. So if I make a comment about what an ancient text means, or about the history that lies behind it, I'm just guessing, as someone who is trained as a technician and has no business doing other things.

This may sound like a cynical read - but I can assure you it is right. I had a friend in graduate school who used to give an analogy from one of the other realms I was once passionate about, competitive tennis. He said that textual critics were the ones who strung the rackets; they weren't the ones who knew how to play the game.

This is all pretty funny, and in point of fact, there's something to be said for this view when it comes to a lot of textual critics! I know this for a fact because I personally know virtually all the textual critics in North America and most of the major ones in Europe. They really are passionate about manuscripts and only manuscripts and cognate fields - such as Greek philology - and simply haven't invested any time or energy in fields such as exegesis and history.

So all that is background. For a weird set of circumstances, that's not my background. It'll take another post to explain the fuller story that answers the question that was asked. But for now let me just say something about my education and expertise.

When someone indicates that my training is in textual criticism, I'm always tempted to ask them what they think my Master's and PhD programs were like. I spent three years taking courses for my Masters (five courses a semester) and two additional years of PhD seminars (three very intense seminars a term). I also took a battery of PhD exams before writing my dissertation.

Of all those courses and seminars and exams, how many were devoted exclusively to the study of textual criticism? Here's the surprise. The answer is: None. In my entire five year graduate program of study (prior to my PhD) there was only one-half of one course (in my Masters degree; none in my PhD) that was devoted to textual criticism. And none of my PhD exams.

I had two major foci when it came to the study of the New Testament and early Christianity. By far the main one was the historical exegesis of the early Christian writings, especially the New Testament (by "historical exegesis" I mean the interpretation of the texts in light of their historical contexts and circumstances); the other was the history of the early Christian movement of the first centuries.

Textual criticism was something I pretty much picked up on my own, under the private guidance of arguably the greatest textual critic of modern times, Bruce Metzger. His guidance was invaluable. But it principally involved making suggestions about what to read and write about. Only rarely did we meet - for example, never in a private tutorial or an

independent reading course - to talk about problems in the field of textual criticism. I read massively, he suggest what I might want to think about writing on, he read it, and told me if I was on the right track. My actual training - in which I took courses, seminars, exams - was in other things.

I'll pursue all that in my next post.

If you were a member of the blog, you would get five substantial posts a week on everything connected with the New Testament and the history of early Christianity, each and every week of the year. It's certainly worth the small membership fee. And the entire fee goes to charity. So why not join??



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