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R. J. Decker and his ‘recommend’

Rodney J. Decker, professor of New Testament at the Baptist Bible Seminary, has written a rather curious *apologia* with regard to the ‘blurb’ that he wrote about the American edition (Baker Academic 2006) of my book, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament. Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (WUNT 167), Tübingen: Mohr 2004. I say “curious” because the text gives the impression that someone put the question to him “Did you write a recommend?” [about Caragounis’ book] to which he replies that it was not intended as a ‘recommend’. However, the fact that no name is given, may alternatively indicate that this is Decker’s rhetorical device in order to absolve himself of his ‘recommend’.

Decker, I suppose, was asked for a ‘blurb’, because Professor Francois Bovon of Harvard, the introducer of the Historical Greek Pronunciation at Harvard, who had promised to write a brief ‘review’ of my book for Baker, was absent and could not be contacted on time.

But whatever be the case with the origin of the title of his disownment, the contents of Decker’s piece raise a very important question. Decker’s ‘blurb’, as it appears on the back of my book, is as follows:

Caragounis proposes that earlier and later forms of Greek are essential to a proper understanding of New Testament Greek. He rejects the current scholarly consensus of synchronic in favor of diachronic, holistic study of Greek as a unified language. As a result, he proposes alternative interpretations of selected New Testament passages and textual problems. *The thesis that Neohellenic (modern Greek) is essential for understanding the language of the New Testament is controversial, and many of us may be skeptical of such claims* [my emphasis], but I am glad to see this work made available in an affordable edition so that its proposals may be more readily evaluated

My interest at present concentrates on the statements that I have Italicized. Decker claims that my thesis is “controversial”. The question, then, is: “For whom is it controversial”? It is not for me! Nor was it for Hatzidakis, or Jannaris, or Kontos, or Mavrophrydis, or Koraës, or Kalitsounakis, or Kapsomenos, etc. etc., that is for scholars of the highest repute, who had mastered the entire Greek language, and were in a position to give authoritative answers to this question.

His second statement “and many of us may be skeptical of such claims” is problematic on several counts. First, it insinuates that I am making claims that are preposterous or dishonest. In either case, these are serious charges. Second, he does not seem to perceive the unscientific nature of his assertion. In order to have an opinion about a certain issue—an opinion that carries validity—one needs to be thoroughly acquainted with the issue itself. Only then is one’s opinion weighty and worth listening to. But when Decker expresses skepticism about the relevance of Byzantine, Mediaeval, and Neohellenic for New Testament Greek, it is important to point out that this skepticism is not based on a knowledge of these periods of Greek. For quite obviously Decker is not acquainted with the historical development of the Greek language, and is, therefore, not in a position to have a scientific opinion about it. All non-Greek scholars, who have taken the trouble to learn Neohellenic, have testified to its importance in understanding ancient Greek, including NT Greek. Decker’s opinion is simply his own private preference. He is, of course, entirely welcome to his own opinion, so long as he does not claim for it scientific validity.

Now the question becomes: Since Decker’s skepticism is not based on a scientific study of the question, on what is it based? Two alternatives seems to present themselves: it may be based on simple prejudice or it may be another instance of Aisopos’ story of the fox and the grapes.

The reader may know that one of Aisopos’ fables deals with a fox that came to a vine that carried its grape clusters high. The fox jumped for the grapes but failed to reach them. He jumped

again without more success. After several more attempts he gave up. As he went away, he muttered to himself: "They were sour, anyway"!

Many years ago I asked a well-known German professor how a certain thesis had been received in Germany. He answered: "There are those who think that if the author of this thesis is right, we must be wrong. So, he cannot be right!"

It is my sincere hope that no colleague in the United States (and elsewhere) shall be hindered by such an attitude from seeing the facts. The relevance of the later stages of Greek for the New Testament has been demonstrated on almost every page of my book with innumerable examples. I hope that no one will allow his/her prejudice to stand in the way, nor follow the example of Aisopos' fox.