

Problematical issues with simplistic notions of biblical inspiration. A simplistic view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture, such as that held by many “fundamentalists,” might be that God dictated the Bible to various individuals, who then wrote it all down without any mistakes, and that we have the originals of these documents, in the original languages, of course, and that they have now been printed or otherwise made available to good translators, who have made possible the various Bibles we have in English, etc. The translations may at times be off, or may not reflect the richness and multivalence of the original language (see already the prologue to Sir, verses 15-26, written by the Greek translator of the original Hebrew work), but the originals are always there for further consultation, and then the translations can be made more accurate.

Such a view fails to take into account many problems.¹ First of all, there are no “originals” of any biblical book, what scholars call “autographs,” that is, something written by the same author and not just a copy made by another person. We have only copies of the biblical books. In the case of the New Testament, we are fortunate to have thousands of copies of many parts of the NT; discard the notion that by “copy” we mean a nice complete edition. Even venerable copies, like the famous Codex Vaticanus (a fourth-century C.E. Greek Bible, that is, a Greek translation of the OT and part of the NT), is missing everything after Heb 9:14. So we have many copies, but guess what: when copies were made by hand (not photocopied), mistakes and differences take place, so that we have some situations where it is hard to decide which copy is more faithful to the original (which we don’t have). You should be getting the idea that this indicates that the situation is complicated.

Let me tell you a bit more; I think that there is nothing like raw data like this to make people aware that the good Lord did not make things easy or simple when he communicated himself to us. When we say that the Bible is the Word of God, we should perhaps nuance this by reformulating the phrase as ‘the Bible witnesses to the Word of God’.² The “Word of God” is God’s revelation to us, his self-communication for purposes of our salvation. The biblical texts speak about God, and convey his revelation (but cf. Heb 1:1). But God’s highest and fullest communication was Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The Bible witnesses to Jesus, to God’s salvation finally

¹ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, I.F., states that: “Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations.”

² See the *NJBC*, 65:67-69. One should keep in mind, however, that *Dei Verbum* no. 24 states that “the sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and, since they are inspired, really are the word of God.”

accomplished in him. But in another sense, the Bible “merely” witnesses to God’s Word because all we have are actually witnesses to what God’s biblical Word is, that is, we have just evidence that we need to sift and evaluate and put together in order to determine what God actually said in the Bible. It is this evidence that we call “witnesses.” It is something like what goes on in court, where witnesses get up and testify as to what happened, and the jury as factfinder, or the judge when he has this role in cases without a jury, finally decides what happened from the testimony of the witnesses. Some witnesses are given much greater weight than others; some seem intelligent, trustworthy, with a good memory, and they make sense. Others seem to be bad or less good as witnesses, and their testimony has to be weighed accordingly.

Let me illustrate this. What Bible scholars and translators use are “critical editions” of the Hebrew Bible (HB) and of the NT. These are editions put together by a team of scholars (the “Committee”); usually there is only one such authoritative edition each for the HB and for the NT.³ Each of these editions has a text, in the one case in Hebrew (with some Aramaic), for the OT, in the other case, for the NT, in Greek. This text has been arrived at by a consensus among the Committee as to what the “best or most probable reading” is. This decision is made by analysis of the manuscript copies which witness to the text. So for the text set out in large type and dominating the page, in the bottom of the page there is a corresponding “critical apparatus” which lists (by symbols or identifying letters) the manuscripts which have that very “reading,” that is, which say just that. Now, there may be other manuscripts which “say” something else, but if these manuscripts, and the whole of the analysis, do not seem trustworthy (do not seem to be good evidence for what the original probably had), then they are not taken into account, and in some editions, not even included or listed in the critical apparatus. But in many cases there is a genuine doubt as to what the original said; these are cases where two groups of good manuscripts have two different readings, so that the good evidence is split, and the decision is difficult to make. We are talking mostly about “little details,” thankfully. I don’t want anyone to think that the text of the Bible is all up in the air. But I am trying to convey a sense of what is involved—how much human work, intelligence, effort and decision-making— in putting together a Bible.

I actually am having a bit of difficulty coming up with a good example of a hard decision regarding a *significant* textual discrepancy. This is good, because, unless I am even more ignorant than I fear, it means that we have a pretty reliable biblical text (though, again, let no one think it

³ On the Committee sat Cardinal Carlo Martini, S.J., former archbishop of Milan and a renown Bible scholar.

was dictated!). Here are two “little” examples (is anything “little” when what God actually said or wrote is at stake?). In Mark 1:41, almost all Bible translations read that Jesus was “moved with pity” at the sight of the leper. But there are good manuscripts which read that Jesus was “moved with anger” (the *New Oxford Annotated Bible. Third Edition [NOAB]* for example, shows this as a “variant,” the term used in most Bibles for alternate readings—, while many Bibles, such as the *Catholic Study Bible*, don’t even mention it). The Committee of experts debated this, and stuck to “pity,” but at one point gave their degree of certainty here (following established principles of “textual criticism” and biblical exegesis) a “C” grade, not very high for the “Word of God”! With the discovery of new manuscripts, especially the papyri which were not known for a long time, and which are older than the “sheepskins,” the new edition of the reasoning behind these scholars’ decision has upgraded the probability of the reading to “B.”⁴

Here’s a better one. The venerable *Bible de Jérusalem* had a brilliant Dominican, Père Marie-Émile Boismard, in charge of the Gospel of John. Père Boismard, whom I was privileged to meet in Jerusalem, had very unusual views (in the opinion of many scholars, who did not buy them) about the text of the NT. In John 1:13, he chose the reading of Latin manuscripts (which he often preferred), which had the singular, so as to read “who was not born of blood nor of the will of the flesh” (thus referring to Jesus), rather than the plural of all Greek manuscripts (“who were not born,” referring to believers in Jesus). Not even the new editions of the Jerusalem Bible follow Boismard here anymore, but the Bible I use is an older one, and has that unusual reading. The *CSB* (but not the *NOAB* here) mentions the Latin variant. The expert Committee gave the “normal,” plural reading an “A” for certainty.

Let’s come to a more important one. In John 1:18, the reading accepted by the Committee is in Greek “only-begotten God.” This sounds awkward to readers in English and other languages, and may be awkward anyway. Being awkward alone is not a good reason to “emend” the text or prefer another reading; in fact, one of the cardinal rules of textual criticism is *difficilior lectio potest*, “the more difficult (awkward, even nonsensical) reading prevails” (is to be preferred). The reason for this is that we are dealing with copies and copyists; their tendency is to change what doesn’t look or sound right into something more normal, or to make conform what one gospel

⁴ See BRUCE METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. Second Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002 fifth printing), 65-66.

manuscript says with what another gospel says (“harmonization”). Carried to its ultimate consequences, we would have all four gospels be exactly alike!

But in John 1:18, most Bibles add “Son,” or change “only-begotten” to “only Son.” The tendency today in good translation is to let the translation reflect what the often-times obscure original-language text reads, and then try to explain, clarify, etc. in the footnotes: but do not alter the biblical text! If this is done, access to what the Bible really says becomes impossible in translation. Nevertheless, the reality is that these translations are meant to sell, and publishers are loathe to have a weird-looking text that might turn off the typical reader, who often seeks out the familiar and comfortable.

A couple of more examples. Piety and even theology is a good thing, but do you want someone’s piety or theology to get in the way of your biblical text? In other words, instead of reading the word of God, you would be reading x’s pious additions or theological explanations *in the very text of Holy Writ!* One famous example is in 1 John 5:8, where Latin manuscripts or authorities (sometimes the biblical text is witnessed-to in the quotes of Church Fathers) add “and they are three who testify in heaven, father, word and spirit.” Many editions based on the Vulgate included these added words, but they are relegated to a footnote in Bibles today. Notice I did not capitalize “father,” etc. This is to point out that the manuscripts we have been talking about are certainly not punctuated, and do not even have spaces between words, which are all in capital letters (in the oldest manuscripts), and contain shorthand ways (or abbreviations) of writing certain key words. So the grammar or grammatical construction of certain verses is debatable, as in John 1:3 (see the footnote here in *CSB*). And as far as the HB is concerned, we have an even more problematic situation: the original Hebrew text was purely consonantal, with no vowels. Vowels were added many centuries later —as even later came division into chapters and verses for the Bible— by the “Masoretes,” scholars steeped in the tradition, but nevertheless not inspired (or should we extend inspiration to them?). So oftentimes in very difficult passages which seem to make little sense, scholars are prone to emend the Masoretic Text (MT) by revocalizing, using different vowels than those in the MT. This gives you a further idea of the issues involved in producing an English Bible. Additionally, we know of a classic eighteen instances where the Hebrew scribes changed the original purposely to avoid inappropriate speech about God or for other theological motives.⁵ Although not on this list, Deut 32:8, in the MT, reads “according to the

⁵ See *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 262-263.

number of the sons of Israel.” Bibles today read “according to the number of the sons of god,” based on copies of this passage in Qumran and other sources. This indicates that the scholars believe that the reading of the standard Hebrew text, the Masoretic text, represents a change from the original reading of the Deuteronomic author. The Masoretes, probably following rabbinic tradition, considered that a reference to “the sons of god” was polytheistic (which it originally was, at least “sort of!”), so they changed it to the nonsensical “sons of Israel.” The LXX already interpreted “sons of god” as “angels,” and this is what it reads. Another example is in Job 2:9, where Bibles have Job’s wife saying “Curse God and die,” whereas the MT reads “bless God and die” (you can see why the change: the sense of propriety of the Masoretes).

Finally, a word about “interpolations” in the text that seemingly cannot be removed. An interpolation is something added to the original, stuck in there. It is easy to spot when one can compare early, good manuscripts with the later, bad ones (this is not a rule, one can be early and bad or late and good, but normally, the closer to the time of the original, the better and the less time there was for alterations, etc.). But sometimes we are almost positive that there is an interpolation but have absolutely no manuscript with which to support removing it. A good example is in 1 Cor 4:6, which most Bibles try to make sense of, but which certainly appears to include a scribal “gloss,” that is, an added explanation which is not from St. Paul. The Greek original would say “These things, however, brethren, I have applied to myself and to Apollos for your sake, so that by us you may learn, so that no one over (another) one be puffed up against the other.” According to a great scholar, John Strugnell, a copyist left out the “no” and later wrote it over the letter “a” in one of the Greek words. A later (rather meticulous) copyist saw fit to gloss (explain) the text he was copying by writing in the margin “the ‘no’ has been written over the ‘a’.” Still later, as the manuscript was being read for copying (many manuscripts have been thus copied, by dictation, and you can imagine the errors that may result, although it is a lot faster to copy like this), the gloss was read and found its way into all the manuscripts we know of. And so our Bibles try to find ways to translate the passage as it exists, usually as “do not go beyond what is written,” which is at best a hopeful conjecture.⁶ With this, we can leave the problems of textual criticism aside. We get the idea that there is no such thing as a neat, clean, dictated text that is all very clear

⁶ See JOHN STRUGNELL, “A Plea for Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament, with a Coda on 1 Cor 4:6,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 (1974) 555-558. Earlier, ANDRÉ LEGAULT dealt with this, in “Beyond the Things that are Written,” *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971), 227-231.

and that we simply have to translate. And we may think the Bible is difficult enough in translation, but, actually, all translations are already interpretations which a translator who is often also a scholar has come up with to smooth out and make sense of what is very often a difficult, very hard or impossible to understand original-language text. In these instances, recourse is had to ancient translations, especially the LXX and Latin versions, and to others as well. Oftentimes the LXX translators had before them an earlier version of the Hebrew than that reflected in the MT; this is an instance of a translation being more reliable than a version in the same language as the original language.