

Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls

John Collins at Seventy

VOLUME 1

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The Dream of a Perfect Text: Textual Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy in Early Modern Europe

Ronald Hendel

Variants are arts of the devil.

LAURENTIUS FABRICIUS (1625)

Among John Collins's many virtues is his ability to combine critical scholarship with theological reflection without simplification or compromise. This is a rare talent. Usually theological topics provide an opportunity for scholars to retail well-worn pastoral themes. John consistently surprises by pursuing what he calls critical biblical theology, which "embraces historical criticism as a basis for biblical theology."¹ In this respect John goes against the grain of recent trends in biblical theology, which often regard critical scholarship with suspicion and seek rapprochement with confessional theology and traditional apologetics. His joining of critical scholarship with critical theology is a refreshing counterpoint to these trends.

As a contribution to the project of critical biblical theology, I will address the interplay between philology and theology in what I call "the dream of a perfect text" in early modern Europe. This textual obsession produced monumental effects in biblical scholarship and Christian theology, giving rise to a new critical method and, perhaps ironically, a new doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This was an era when text-critical details were tightly bound with theological disputes, when textual variants were mobilized as weapons in sectarian controversy about heresy and salvation. In this period, as Richard Muller observes, the birth of "the high orthodox doctrine of Scripture was framed by debate over the critical approach to the text."² It may not seem obvious how the problem of textual variants could yield simultaneously the modern method of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible and the modern doctrine of biblical inerrancy. As we will see, mundane textual details had surprising consequences.

1 J. J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in idem, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 11–23 at 22–23.

2 R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725. Vol. 2. Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 372.

This story I will tell has three phases: (1) the rise of early modern textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible in the era of Christian humanism; (2) the intensified stakes of text-critical issues in the Protestant-Catholic controversy after Trent; and (3) the nexus between the rise of the orthodox doctrine of biblical inerrancy and the modern method of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible.³ The story has many more players and details than I can address; hence this is a broad brush account that attends to the major sweep of these mostly forgotten events, which nonetheless still resound in our present academic and theological discourses.

1 Textual Criticism and Christian Humanism

The first work that systematically applied the Renaissance model of textual criticism to the Hebrew Bible was Agostino Steuco's *Veteris Testamenti ad veritatem Hebraicam recognitio* ("The Old Testament Revised to the Hebrew Truth"), published in 1529.⁴ It provides a systematic comparison of textual variants in the Pentateuch—focused on the Vulgate, MT, and the Septuagint, and with reference to the Targums and medieval commentaries—in order to lay the foundation for a corrected edition of the Vulgate Pentateuch. Like Jerome and most of Steuco's contemporaries, he regarded the MT as the unchanging and perfect original text, the *Hebraica veritas*, and he argued for correcting the wayward Vulgate readings accordingly. Steuco was an excellent Hebraist and was well versed in the techniques of classical textual criticism formulated by Italian Renaissance textual critics, most notably Angelo Poliziano.⁵

An example of Steuco's text-critical skill is his discussion of a variant in Gen 14:7, presented in modern form as follows:

3 The textual criticism of the New Testament is less important than the Hebrew Bible in the second two phases of this story; for its importance in the first phase, see D. K. Shuger, "After Allegory: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance," in idem, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11–53; and J. H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

4 Venice: Aldine, 1529; 2d ed.; Lyons: Gryphium, 1531. Pagination is to the second edition. On Steuco, see R. K. Delph, "Emending and Defending the Vulgate Old Testament: Agostino Steuco's Quarrel with Erasmus," in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (ed. E. Rummel; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 297–317.

5 On Poliziano's importance in the history of textual criticism, see A. Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship. Vol. 1: Textual Criticism and Exegesis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 9–44.

שדה MT V (*regionem*) (“field, region”)] שרי* LXX (ἄρχοντας, “rulers”) (graph ד/ר)

Steuco’s astutely observes—following Poliziano’s method—that this is a paleographical variant, triggered by a graphic confusion between *dalet* and *reš*. He writes:

Consider, I urge you, the variety that is discovered even in the Hebrew manuscripts. For without a doubt the Septuagint translators seemed to have read not שדה but שרי with the letter *resh*. For as has often been said, there is the greatest similarity between these two letters. . . . Most certainly then they did not read the word with a *dalet* but with a *resh*. I myself marvel at this variety, and this causes me to suspect that many other things throughout the Bible have been altered.⁶

I note that the Greek reading reflects not only the graphic confusion of *dalet* and *reš*, but also a secondary change of *he* to *yod*, yielding the construct plural form שרי. This two-step development indicates that the variant was more likely a product of a Hebrew scribe than the Greek translator. This observation supports Steuco’s conclusion.⁷ But the main point is Steuco’s “marvel at this variety” as he perceives the possible extent of readings that “throughout the Bible have been altered” by such scribal slips.

Despite his text-critical skills, Steuco presupposes that the MT is a perfect text, always correct, and therefore any variants in the LXX or Vulgate are translators’ or copyists’ errors. This assumption of textual perfection—the equation of one extant text with the “Hebrew truth”—is a philological and historical impossibility. Scribal errors and changes occur in all of the manuscript traditions of the Hebrew Bible, and in any given case it is impossible to forecast which manuscript or version—if any—preserves the best (or to be more precise, the earliest inferable) reading. But the assumption that one text of the Bible was correct and all the others corrupt was widespread in Steuco’s time, and it persists in some circles to this day. It is difficult to think about the

6 Trans. Delph, “Emending,” 309. Steuco, *Veteris Testamenti*, 229: “Animadvertite quaeo varietatem, quae etiam in codicibus Hebraicis reperitur. Nam Septuaginta procul dubio, non שדה, sed שרי per resc legisse videntur. Est enim ut saepe dictum est, maxima inter eas duas literas similitudo. . . . Certissime igitur non dalet, sed resc legerunt. Mirorque ipse hanc varietatem. Eaque res facit etiam ut suspicer, pleraque alia tota Biblia immutata esse.”

7 The Samaritan Pentateuch, which was not available in 1529, agrees with MT in this reading. The Syriac Peshitta, which was similarly unavailable, agrees with the LXX.

Hebrew Bible as a text that is dispersed among many manuscripts and versions, and whose readings, in some cases, are lost forever.

Steuco was a Catholic humanist, which entails certain theological orientations. He occasionally peppered his philological discussions with theological invective against the Protestants, as when he defends the ritual “sacred offices” (*sacris officiis*) in the Bible that provide warrant for Catholic institutions.⁸ He also defended the authority of the Vulgate, which he aimed to improve, not replace. He criticized on theological grounds his colleague Sante Pagnini’s Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible (1527), which could be seen as replacing the Vulgate. Paul Grendler summarizes Steuco’s objection: “[it] gave the enemies of true religion, especially Jews, the impression that Christians were weak in their faith.”⁹ Clearly, textual criticism was bound up with theological affirmations of authority and truth. Textual perfection and power were thoroughly intertwined.

Despite his conventional theological views, Steuco’s textual criticism had vocal opponents. The scholastic theologians at the universities of Paris, Louvain, Salamanca, and elsewhere resisted the pull of sacred philology. As Erika Rummel comments, “the [scholastic] defenders of the Vulgate Bible argued that it was an inspired text and thus flawless in every respect.”¹⁰ Hence there was no reason to improve its text. Knowledge of the original languages was not necessary—and was indeed an impediment—to its full understanding. As Pierre Cousturier, a theologian at the Sorbonne, fulminated (against Erasmus):

We do not need a knowledge of foreign languages for an understanding of Holy Writ and for this reason it is vain and frivolous to spend time on learning them. Nor is it necessary to learn them for the purpose of producing a new translation of Scripture, for the Vulgate translation is quite sufficient. . . . It is completely insane and smacks of heresy for anyone to affirm that one should sweat over foreign languages for this purpose.¹¹

Linguistic and philological knowledge were a lure to heresy, not a means to textual (or doctrinal) purification. The text’s perfection was guaranteed by

⁸ Steuco, *Veteris Testamenti*, 557, at Num 8.

⁹ P. F. Grendler, “Italian Biblical Humanism and the Papacy, 1515–1535,” in Rummel, *Biblical Humanism*, 227–76 at 247.

¹⁰ E. Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

theology. Textual criticism was beyond the pale, an unthinkable concept except by the “completely insane.” The rhetorical tone indicates the importance of the underlying issues involving the text’s authority for those whose institutional authority derives from the perfect text.

Erasmus, the most acute textual critic of the age, had a different criticism of Steuco’s work. In a letter to Steuco in 1531, he argued that some variants in the LXX, reflecting old Hebrew readings, were superior to the readings in MT. In other words, MT is not in every instance the *Hebraica veritas*. We can infer other superior Hebrew readings. Erasmus supports his philological point with a characteristic polemical thrust, which offers a preemptive defense against the accusation of impiety. He writes:

Now if the Hebrew words are not ambiguous, then one must believe that the Septuagint translators read something different than we have. Indeed is it any wonder if anywhere I follow the Septuagint version, since in a number of places the apostles and evangelists do likewise?¹²

Erasmus crafts his text-critical eclecticism such that his position seems to be supported by the evangelists and apostles. But Erasmus’s philological method was theologically explosive, since it was subversive of the theological authority of the Vulgate and of its orthodox defenders. Yet Erasmus was not a Hebraist, and therefore to Steuco goes the laurel for initiating a new era in the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible.

Erasmus correctly notes that Steuco’s text-critical method is marred by his allegiance to the “Hebrew truth” of MT. He rightly saw that the best readings are distributed among multiple texts. At this time the issue of textual variants was relatively minor, confined mostly to the desire of Christian humanists to improve the Vulgate. But the theological stakes surrounding these text-critical issues were about to shift. The controversies within Christian humanism were eclipsed by the growing Protestant heresy. Textual criticism became an explosive agent in the Catholic-Protestant religious wars.

2 Textual Wars: 1546–1600

In response to the Protestant heresy of Luther and his followers, the Council of Trent issued the following decree in 1546 concerning the authoritative version of Scripture:

¹² Trans. Delph, “Emending,” 316.

This same holy Council . . . ordains and declares that the old Vulgate edition, which has been approved for use in the Church for so many centuries, is to be taken as authentic in public lectures, disputations, sermons, and expositions, and that no one should dare or presume to reject it under any circumstances whatsoever.¹³

The decree was carefully worded to avoid the complicated issue of textual corruptions in the Vulgate and to avoid denigrating the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New.¹⁴ The Council's position was that the Vulgate had been the customary Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for roughly a thousand years, and by long usage was held to be reliable in matters of faith and doctrine. Because it was the traditional text—and thereby linked with Church tradition and authority—it had earned its status as the authoritative text. The decree essentially raised the Vulgate's *de facto* status to *de jure*. The main purpose of the decree was to assert the authority of the traditional Scripture—and, by extension, the traditional authority of the Church—against the Protestants and their bevy of vernacular translations.

Behind the scenes there was controversy over the omissions and ramifications of this decree. The Commission of Cardinals in Rome was highly critical. According to a letter by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese:

In its opinion it would have been better to leave out the chapter on the authenticity of the Vulgate, but since it has been drawn up we must look for ways and means to tone it down, that is, to explain it further, for it is impossible to deny that in many passages the Vulgate departs from the certain Hebrew and Greek text and fails to render its meaning.¹⁵

But the Vulgate decree was not toned down. Its status as “authentic” (*authentica*) was affirmed, notwithstanding its corruptions and variants.

13 Trans. R. J. Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 182. The decree, issued on April 8, 1546, reads: “Insuper eadem sacrosancta synodus . . . statuit et declarat, ut haec ipsa vetus et vulgata editio, quae longo tot saeculorum usu in ipsa ecclesia probata est, in publicis lectionibus, disputationibus, praedicationibus et expolitionibus pro authentica habeatur, et ut nemo illam rejicere quovis praetextu audeat vel praesumat.”

14 See H. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent. Vol. 2: The First Sessions at Trent, 1545–47* (London: Nelson, 1961), 75–98.

15 Quoted in Jedin, *History*, 96–97.

The Protestant critique was severe. In his 1547 pamphlet presenting his “Antidote” to the Council of Trent, John Calvin denounced the Vulgate decree as “erroneous” and “barbarous”:

The sacred oracles of God were delivered by Moses and the Prophets in Hebrew, and by the Apostles in Greek. . . . [Those] who are acquainted with the languages perceive that this version [the Vulgate] teems with innumerable errors; and this they make manifest by the clearest evidence. On the other hand, the Fathers of Trent contend, that although the learned thus draw the pure liquor from the very fountain, and convict the infallible Vulgate of falsehood, they are not to be listened to.¹⁶

Calvin concludes his treatise with the damning conclusion: “The sum is, that the spirit of Trent wished, by this decree, that Scripture should only signify to us whatever dreaming monks might choose.”¹⁷ The textual wars had begun.

The first wave of Catholic responses to Protestant criticism tended to radicalize the Vulgate decree. In his 1558 treatise, *De optimo scripturas interpretandi genere* (“On the Best Way of Interpreting Scripture”),¹⁸ the Dutch theologian William Lindanus (Guillaume van der Linden) revived the Scholastic argument that the Vulgate was *the* reliable text of the Bible. He asserted that the Hebrew and Greek texts had been corrupted by Jews and other heretics, whereas the Vulgate, made from uncorrupted manuscripts, had been faithfully preserved in the Catholic Church.¹⁹

Lindanus recycled the traditional Christian calumny against the Jews—that they falsified Scripture out of hatred for Christianity—and redirected it against

16 J. Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent: With the Antidote” (1547), in idem, *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, (trans. H. Beveridge; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 3:71.

17 Ibid., 76.

18 Cologne: Cholinum, 1558. On Lindanus, see V. Baroni, *La Contre-Réforme devant la Bible: La question biblique* (Lausanne: Concorde, 1943), 139–41.

19 The title of chapter 3, book 1, is indicative (Lindanus, *De optimo*, 19): “Hebraicam Lectionem hodiernam non esse germanam & genuinam, sed adulteratam” (“The Hebrew Readings of Today are not Authentic and Genuine, but Adulterated”). Lindanus offers as evidence a fragment of Psalm 13 that he believed had escaped corruption (p. 20 = Leiden Ms. Or. 4725, a twelfth-century Christian Psalter that has some Latin readings retroverted into Hebrew). Benito Arias Montano refuted Lindanus’s analysis in his appendix volume to the Antwerp Polyglot (1572); see now E. van Staalduijn-Sulman, “Where is God? Romans 3:13–18 as an Addition to Psalm 14,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation* (eds. W. Th. Van Peursen and J. W. Dyk; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 106–10.

the Protestants. Interestingly, this calumny (formulated first by Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho*) was originally an explanation for the textual variants between the Septuagint and MT.²⁰ Now it was mobilized in the attack on MT in defense of the Vulgate. Lindanus added a notable scholarly argument: as Elijah Levita had carefully argued in 1538, the vowel points in MT were an invention of the medieval Masoretes.²¹ Lindanus included this argument in his denunciation of MT:

What more harsh could be said against Hebrew codices deformed in various ways by the Jews through the efforts of Rabbis maddened by hatred of Christ, and those Jews who punctuated the Bible who are not trustworthy enough that you may safely believe them?²²

One of the few texts that Lindanus cites as an anti-Christian corruption in MT is the difficult text of Psalm 22:17.²³ The variant is as follows:

כָּאֲרִי M ("like a lion")] כָּאֲרִי 5/6HevPs G (ῥῥῥῥῥ) V (*foderunt*) ("they dug"?) (graph וִי)

The text does not make sense under either reading: "*Like a lion*, my hands and my feet" or "*They dug* (?) my hands and my feet." The Syriac Peshitta translates "pierced," which appealed to Christian readers as a prophecy of the crucifixion. But the textual difference consists of a *yod/waw* variation, which is a simple graphic error.²⁴ The Septuagint rendering (followed in the Vulgate) is probably a guess, based on the Hebrew root כָּרָה/כּוֹר, "to dig." There is no reason to

20 Lindanus, *De optimo*, 28; see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 71–73, 83; and I. M. Resnick, "The Falsification of Scripture and Medieval Christian and Jewish Polemics," *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996): 353–54.

21 Lindanus, *De optimo*, 18; see C. D. Ginsburg, ed. and trans., *The Massoreth Ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita* (London: Longmans, 1867), 121–34.

22 Ibid., 32: "Quid enim contra Hebraicos codices a Iudaeis varie Rabbinorum Christi odio rabidorum opera deformatos dicatur durius, Iudaeos istos punctorum Biblis affictorum auctores non satis fidos, ut eis tuto credas?"

23 Ibid., 29–30. See similarly J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. J. Anderson (3 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–49; Latin original, 1557). 1:373: "[there are] strong grounds for conjecturing that this passage has been fraudulently corrupted by the Jews."

24 As correctly observed by L. Cappel, *Critica sacra* (Paris: Cramoisy, 1650), 257; see below.

impute a deliberate corruption in any version. In my view we cannot reconstitute the original reading.²⁵ It is lost forever.

There is irony in Catholic polemicists arguing for the corruption of MT in favor of Jerome's Vulgate, for it was Jerome who sought to return to the *Hebraica veritas* of MT. But this irony was lost on these religious controversialists. The high stakes in the Catholic-Protestant polemics created contorted positions on both sides.

The most accomplished and influential Catholic polemicist was Robert Bellarmine, whose multi-volume *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos* ("Disputations on the Controversies over Christian Faith against the Heretics of the Present Time") set a new standard of erudition in this debate.²⁶ The first book, *De verbo Dei* ("On the Word of God," 1586), addressed the issue of the Vulgate versus the Hebrew and Greek texts. Bellarmine sensibly dismissed the argument that the variants were due to Jewish connivance. He correctly argued that there are scribal errors in all biblical texts and versions:

The Hebrew Scriptures have not been generally corrupted by the efforts or malice of the Jews; nor, however, are they absolutely intact and pristine. Rather, they do contain some errors, which crept in partly through the negligence or ignorance of the copyists, especially since in Hebrew it is easy to make errors in some similar letters, such as ב and כ; ד and ט; ה, ח,

25 Modern proposals include the root בער, "to be/become ugly" (attested in Ben Sira 11:2, 13:22), whose biform באר means "reproach, despise" in 4QPNaum frag. 3–4, col. 3.4 (see D. Flusser, apud M. Kister, "Some Observations on Vocabulary and Style in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 137–65 at 140–41); and the root ברה, "to be/become short," attested in Akkadian and Syriac (see M. L. Barré, "The Crux of Psalm 22:17c: Solved at Long Last?," in *David and Zion* [ed. B. F. Batto and K. L. Roberts; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004], 287–306). For other recent proposals (in my view, all implausible), see G. Vall, "Psalm 22:17B: The Old Guess," *JBL* 116 (1997): 45–46; B. A. Strawn, "Psalm 22:17b: More Guessing," *JBL* 119 (2000): 439–51; and K. Swenson, Psalm 22:17: Circling around the Problem Again, *JBL* 123 (2004): 637–48.

26 R. Bellarmine, *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos* (3 vols.; Inglestadt, 1586–93). Citations are to R. Bellarmine, *Opera omnia* (6 vols.; Naples: Giuliano, 1856–62). On Bellarmine, see J. de la Servière, *La théologie de Bellarmine* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1908); and Blackwell, *Galileo*.

and ך; ך and ך; and partly through the ignorance of the Rabbis who added the vowel-points.²⁷

This position, however, was aimed against the Protestants; for if the Hebrew Bible was sometimes unreliable, then the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* was flawed. One needed a theological authority behind the text. For Bellarmine, this authority was the Church. The problem of textual errors can only be resolved by an inerrant Church.

Perhaps surprisingly, Bellarmine raised the stakes in this debate by investing the contents of the Bible with more, not less, perfection. This perfection heightened the necessity of the Church's interpretive power. Whereas the Council of Trent had repeatedly referred to the Bible's authority *in rebus fidei et morum* ("in matters of faith and morals/mores"), Bellarmine argued that the Bible was without error in all matters: "There can be no error in Scripture, whether it deals with faith or with morals/mores, or whether it states something general and common to the whole Church, or something particular and pertaining to only one person."²⁸ This expands the traditional concept of biblical authority, which previously—both in Catholic and Protestant tradition—was focused on *fides et mores*.

Bellarmino anticipates the objection to his novel expansion by arguing as follows: "In Scripture there are many things which of themselves do not pertain to the faith, that is, which were not written because it is necessary [for salvation] to believe them. But it is necessary to believe them because they were written."²⁹ He further explains his position: "In the Scriptures not only the

27 Trans. adapted from N. Malcolm, "Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea," in idem, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 383–431 at 417; Bellarmine, *De verbo* 2.2 (*Opera*, 1.65): "Scripturas hebraicas non esse in universum depravatas, opere vel malitia Judaeorum; nec tamen esse omnino integras et puras, sed habere suos quosdam errores, qui partim irrepserint negligentia vel ignorantia librariorum, praesertim cum in hebraeo facile sit errare ob literas quasdam simillimas, quales sunt; ך and ך: ך and ך: ך, ך, and ך: ך and ך partim ignorantia Rabbiorum qui addiderunt puncta."

28 Trans. Blackwell, *Galileo*, 31; Bellarmine, *De conciliis* 2.12 (*Opera*, 2.62): "in Scriptura nullus potest esse error, sive agatur de fide, sive de moribus, et sive affirmetur aliquid generale, et toti Ecclesiae commune, sive aliquid particulare, et ad unum tantum hominem pertinens."

29 Trans. Blackwell, *Galileo*, 32; Bellarmine, *De verbo* 4.12 (*Opera*, 1.140): "in Scripturis plurima sunt, quae ex se non pertinent ad fidem, id est, quae non ideo scriptae sunt, quia necessario credenda erant, sed necessario creduntur, quia scriptae sunt."

opinions expressed, but each and every word pertains to faith. For we believe that not one word is useless or not used correctly.”³⁰

As Richard Blackwell observes, this was a new expansion of the doctrine of Scriptural authority:

His remarks expand the concept of “matters of faith” considerably by introducing a startling standard of exegesis, which was new to the debate. We will call this the principle of *de dicto* truth. *The mere fact that something has been said in the Scriptures* makes it not only certainly true but a “matter of faith,” assuming that its meaning is clearly established. The subject matter in the biblical statement is irrelevant. . . . As a result every statement in Scripture, once its correct literal meaning has been established, is a *de fide* truth. And, of course, the power to determine the correct literal meaning is ultimately located in the Church.³¹

As Blackwell notes, Bellarmine’s high view of biblically authorized truth was crucial in his later condemnation of Galileo.³² It also had major consequences in the Catholic-Protestant debate.³³

Previously, the Protestants had not held a doctrine of uniform biblical inerrancy. As Roland Bainton observes, for Luther “inspiration did not insure inerrancy in all details. Luther recognized mistakes and inconsistencies in

30 Trans. Blackwell, *Galileo*, 31; Bellarmine, *De conciliis* 2.12 (*Opera*, 2.62): “in Scriptura non solum sentential, sed etiam verba omnia, et singular ad fidem pertinent. Credimus enim nullum esse verbum in Scriptura frustra, aut non recte positum.”

31 Blackwell, *Galileo*, 105.

32 *Ibid.*, 105–109.

33 Bellarmine was not the only post-Tridentine theologian working out a theory of *de dicto* truth; cf. the Salamanca theologian Domingo Bañez, *Scholastica commentaria in primam partem angelici doctoris D. Thomae* (Venice: Concordiae, 1585), 63–64: “Spiritus Sanctus non solum res in Scriptura contentas inspiravit, sed etiam singular verba quibus scriberentur, dictavit atque suggestit” (“The Holy Spirit not only inspired the things contained in Scripture, but also dictated and suggested every word with which it was written”); cited in U. Horst, *Der Streit um die Autorität der Vulgata: zur Rezeption des trienter Schriftdekrets in Spanien* (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1983), 163. See also A. Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 117: “[St.] Thomas’ theory could have been developed in either a maximalizing or a minimalizing direction. Either one could stress that God really is the principal efficient cause, or one could stress that the human writer really is the instrumental efficient cause. In fact, his teaching was developed in a maximalizing direction and so was turned into the theory of verbal dictation [in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries].”

Scripture and treated them with lofty indifference because they did not touch the heart of the Gospel.”³⁴ Where minor errors occur, as when Matthew 27:9 mistakenly cites Jeremiah instead of Zechariah, Luther responds: “Such points do not bother me particularly.”³⁵ Similarly, in his commentaries Calvin is not bothered by errors in the text where they are unrelated to matters of faith and salvation.³⁶ He acknowledges minor errors without anxiety, as in the contradictions among the Gospels: “It is well known that the Evangelists were not very concerned with observing the time sequences.”³⁷

Calvin and Luther also drew on the traditional doctrine of accommodation.³⁸ Regarding the world-picture of Gen 1–3, Calvin commented, “Moses is by no means to be blamed, if he, considering the office of schoolmaster as imposed upon him, insists on the rudiments suitable to children.”³⁹ In Scripture, God accommodates his discourse in order that it be understandable to uneducated people. As Paul Helm explains Calvin’s concept of accommodation, “It is an accommodation because Calvin believes that such a statement is not strictly true.”⁴⁰ A comparable flexibility occurs, as Brian Gerrish observes, in those “interesting places where Calvin speaks not of the fallibility of the text, but of its historical relativity,” including directives in the New Testament that are no longer relevant, such as “Christian communism, the regulation of usury, and Paul’s directives on masculine hairstyle.”⁴¹ In sum, for the Reformers the Bible’s inerrancy is where it needs to be—on matters of faith and doctrine, and on

34 R. H. Bainton, “The Bible in the Reformation,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible. Vol. 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (ed. S. L. Greenslade; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 1–37 at 12.

35 Ibid., 13.

36 See B. A. Gerrish, “The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority,” in idem, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 51–68 at 62–63.

37 J. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament. Tome I: Sur la concordance ou harmonie composée de trois évangélistes* (Paris, Meyrueis, 1854), 319 (at Luke 8:19): “on sçait bien que les Evangélistes ne se sont pas guères arrestez à observer l’ordre des temps.” Cited in W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121–22.

38 See generally, S. D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

39 J. Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. J. King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847; repr. 1984), 141 (at Gen 3:1); see similarly at Gen 1:5–6, 14–16, 22, 31; 2:8, 10; 3:23.

40 P. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 394.

41 Gerrish, “Word,” 300 n. 76.

historical events basic to the history of salvation.⁴² The doctrine of uniform inerrancy in the literal sense across all details is an innovation of the Catholic-Protestant polemics after Trent.

Protestant theologians responded to Bellarmine's innovation in kind, affirming the uniform inerrancy of Scripture for their own apologetic ends. The most distinguished Protestant response to Bellarmine was by William Whitaker, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. His 1588 *Disputatio de sacra scriptura; contra huius temporis papistas* (translated as *Disputation on Holy Scripture, Against the Papists*) was widely influential among Protestant and Catholic theologians.⁴³ As a counterpoint to Bellarmine's nesting of the Bible's inerrancy with the Church's, Whitaker emphasized the sovereignty of an inerrant Scripture: "Scripture is as it were the queen and mistress which ought to rule and govern human infirmity, and to which our whole intellect, all teaching, every thought and opinion, should be conformed in dutiful submission."⁴⁴ He agreed on the high perfection of the Bible, but rejected the interpretive authority of the Church. The Protestant high doctrine of biblical inerrancy was formulated as a polemical rejoinder—an inverse echo—of the Catholic position. Whitaker avers: "Say they, the church never errs; the pope never errs. We shall shew both assertions to be false in the proper place. We say that scripture never errs."⁴⁵

Whitaker extended the inerrancy of Scripture to include the detailed perfection of the Hebrew text. He argued that the Vulgate is a tissue of scribal and translational errors, while the Hebrew Bible is unblemished. He responded point by point to Bellarmine's examples of scribal errors in the MT, arguing that in each the Hebrew is correct.⁴⁶ For example, in the case of Psalm 22:17, he argues that there is no error in MT, since "the Masorites themselves affirm that it was so written [as בארו] in some corrected copies," and he cites

42 I do not mean to imply that the Reformers had a consistent view of inspiration or Scripture. Luther could also say, "Gott ist in allen seinen Worten, ja Syllaben" ("God is in every word, every syllable;" *Tischreden* no. 1983). As Gerrish comments (*Old Protestantism*, 177): "Neither of them [Luther and Calvin] had a comprehensive theory of religious language: Calvin's principle of accommodation, for instance, was used chiefly as a problem-solving device, to be rolled out only when needed."

43 Cambridge: Thomas, 1588; Eng. trans., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849; pagination from the latter. On Whitaker, see P. Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 58–66, 93–115; Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 107–108.

44 Whitaker, *Disputation*, 663–64.

45 *Ibid.*, 476.

46 *Ibid.*, 158–60.

others who have seen such copies.⁴⁷ With similar erudite arguments, he counters Bellarmine's other examples of corruptions in MT (at Isa 9:6; Jer 23:6; Ps 22:17; Ps 19:5; and Exod 2:22).⁴⁸ I submit that Whitaker is wrong on Ps 19:5, where קִיָּם ("their line") in MT is a simple corruption of קוֹלָם ("their voice"), as reflected in the Greek ὁ φθόγγος αὐτῶν (cf. Ps 19:4).⁴⁹ However, Whitaker has the better argument in the other instances.

Whitaker concludes: "These then are the passages which Bellarmine was able to find fault with the originals; and yet in these there is really nothing to require either blame or corrections."⁵⁰ The only textual change he acknowledges is the shift from the old Hebrew script to the square script at the time of Ezra. Hence his affirmation that we possess the original text of the Hebrew Bible: "We must hold, therefore, that we have now those very scriptures which Moses and the other prophets published, although we have not, perhaps, precisely the same forms and shapes of the letters."⁵¹

Whitaker held that the Hebrew Bible in the MT is inerrant in all things, including text and vocalization. The perfection of the text supported a perfect divine discourse. Here we see the leveling of the whole Bible to a state of perfection. The previous distinction between "matters of faith and morals/mores" and matters unconnected to salvation was no more. It was all one divine discourse, each word dictated by God and necessarily true.

The textual wars put at risk the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which entailed the clarity, self-sufficiency, and self-interpreting quality of Scripture. The orthodox Protestants mounted a defense behind a uniform doctrine of inerrancy, including the sense, the words, and even the vowels of the Hebrew text.⁵² Amandus Polanus enunciated the mature orthodox doctrine in his *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* ("System of Christian Theology"):

47 Ibid., 159. As the translator notes, Whitaker is referring to the *Masora magna* at Num 29:9, בארי ידי ורגלי בארו כתיב. This *masora* is in the Second Rabbinic Bible, which was Whitaker's authority; see M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, ed., *Biblia Rabbinica: A Reprint of the 1525 Venice Edition, Edited by Jacob Ben Hayim Ibn Adoniya* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1972), 364.

48 The latter involves a harmonistic expansion in some MSS of LXX, Syr, and V, which supplies the birth and naming of Moses's second son, Eliezer, harmonized from Exod 18:4. Whitaker correctly observes that this is a secondary plus.

49 This scribal error may be described as a near-haplography of וָלִי; see the commentaries.

50 Whitaker, *Disputation*, 160.

51 Ibid., 117.

52 On the controversy over the age of the vowel points, see R. A. Muller, "The Debate over the Vowel Points and the Crisis in Orthodox Hermeneutics," in idem, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 146–54.

The Old Testament Scripture was transmitted by God through the prophets, not only with respect to the sense, but also with respect to the words, and therefore also with respect to the vowels, without which the words cannot be clear.⁵³

The perfection of Scripture goes all the way through. In all of its details, Polanus proclaims, “Sacred Scripture . . . is infallibly certain.”⁵⁴

Polanus’s colleague, the Hebraist Johannes Buxtorf, affirmed the truth and purity of the Hebrew text in his edition of the *Biblia Rabbinica* (1619): “We have left the Hebrew text in the most ancient truth of its purity and substance. . . . It is impious either to add or remove anything, or to change it in any way whatsoever.”⁵⁵ Buxtorf eschewed textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible because it clashed with his orthodox commitments. For Buxtorf and the orthodox Protestant theologians, the attribution of error of any kind opened a theological abyss. As Laurentius Fabricius wrote in a letter to Buxtorf in 1625, “Variants are arts of the devil.”⁵⁶

3 Sacred Criticism and Its Discontents: 1620–1680

The Catholic scholar Jean Morin, who produced the *editio princeps* of the Samaritan Pentateuch, acidly described the Protestant problem concerning the Hebrew text: “If mistakes abound in that which is the only foundation of their faith, this faith is certainly completely ruined and absolutely sterile.”⁵⁷ This is, in retrospect, a clear exaggeration. However, orthodox Protestant

53 Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* (Hanover: Aubrii, 1615), 486: “Quia Scriptura Veteris Testamenti est a Deo per Prophetas tradita, non tantum quoad sensum, sed etiam quoad verba, ac proinde etiam quoad vocales, sine quibus verba nulla constare possunt.” On Polanus, see H. Faulenbach, *Die Struktur der Theologie des Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1967), and on this passage, 110.

54 Polanus, *Syntagma*, 17: “Sacrae Scripturae . . . est infallibiliter certa.”

55 Quoted in S. G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 227 n. 111: “Textum Hebraeum in antiquissima & verissima sua puritate & substantia . . . reliquimus. Impius enim, quisquis ei aliquid vel addiderit vel detraxerit, aut quovis modo in eo quid mutaverit.”

56 Letter to Buxtorf, August 24, 1625; quoted in Burnett, *Hebraism*, 237, n. 167: “Variae sunt artes Diaboli.”

57 Letter of 1653; quoted in D. Barthélemy, *Studies in the Text of the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 23.

theologians and scholars agreed in the main with this proposition. Thus, when Morin published his *Exercitationes ecclesiasticae in utrumque Samaritanorum Pentateuchum* ("Ecclesiastical Engagements in the Samaritan Pentateuch," 1631), in which he argued that the Samaritan Pentateuch was older than and superior to MT, turmoil ensued.⁵⁸ Morin's chief argument was paleographical: the Samaritan text is written in old Hebrew script, which preceded the Aramaic script used in MT. This script chronology is correct, but the inference that the Samaritan text is necessarily older than MT is not. In any case, Morin joined his philological argument to the old calumny: the Protestants were using a Hebrew text corrupted by the Jews.⁵⁹

The solution to the quandary of variants—now including old Hebrew variants from the Samaritan text—was meticulously detailed in Louis Cappel's *Critica sacra, sive de variis quae in sacris Veteris Testamenti libris occurrunt lectionibus* ("Sacred Criticism, or on the Various Readings that Occur in the Sacred Old Testament") completed in 1634 but not published until 1650.⁶⁰ Cappel was a Protestant Hebraist, but more importantly a brilliant philologist who had absorbed the latest methods of textual criticism as practiced by Joseph Scaliger, Isaac Casaubon, and their students.⁶¹ As Steuco had done a century earlier, Cappel put textual criticism of the Hebrew on a new scholarly level. Cappel collected and analyzed the many variant readings in the MT (including parallel texts and the *ketiv/qere*), the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint and other versions (Targums, Peshitta, Vulgate) and argued that one should use all of these sources in an analytically rigorous way to reconstitute the original text. His reasoning is exemplary:

58 J. Morin, *Exercitationes Ecclesiasticae in utrumque Samaritanorum Pentateuchum* (Paris: Vitray, 1631); see R. T. Anderson and T. Giles, *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An Introduction to Its Origin, History, and Significance for Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 154–59.

59 Morin added an eccentric wrinkle, arguing that Kabbalistic exegesis motivated many of the scribal changes.

60 Paris: Cramoisy, 1650. On Cappel, see F. Laplanche, *L'Écriture, le sacré et l'histoire: Érudits et politiques protestants devant la Bible en France au XVII^e siècle* (Amsterdam: Holland University Press, 1986), 181–290; B. Chiesa, *Filologia storica della Bibbia ebraica* (2 vols.; Brescia: Paideia, 2002), 356–75.

61 See Laplanche, *L'Écriture*, 91–100; Grafton, *Scaliger*; 176: "Scaliger transformed the art of criticism. He showed that a critical edition could not rest on a genealogical examination of the extant manuscripts alone. Rather, it had to rest on a reconstructed history of the textual tradition; and where the oldest manuscripts were no longer extant, errors in the surviving ones and even literary evidence had to be called into play. He had thus arrived at the fundamental insight of nineteenth-century German critics . . . who made Scaliger's method the accepted one."

It is not possible to define with certainty which Codex should be preferred to the other. . . . That is to say, the arguments cannot be derived from extrinsic factors, but are intrinsic and inherent. . . . [T]he reading is undoubtedly better and preferred, which in itself produces a truer sense, plainer, more suitable, consonant, commodious, more coherent in its consequences and antecedents, and closer to the writer's mind and scope of instruction.⁶²

Cappel here rejects the concept of one manuscript as the perfect text, and formulates the principle that internal factors—including style and contextual fit—are the criteria that govern the text-critical evaluation of variants and conjectural emendations. In his book, Cappel invents the modern method of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. He clearly enunciates the hermeneutical orientation of critical scholarship: “We are not here contending with authority, but with reason.”⁶³

Cappel granted that the Hebrew Bible was a sacred and authoritative text. In this he was a perfectly pious Protestant. However, he correctly maintained that it was humanly transmitted, and therefore susceptible to scribal errors, which it was the task of the textual critic to detect and, where possible, correct. This injected a human dimension into the biblical text that was unsettling to the orthodox. Further, it meant that theologians had to cede some of their authority to scholars. Both points were resisted. The Protestant orthodox now had to contend not only with Catholics, but also with a Protestant scholar who elevated reason to an unprecedented position. Correcting the text of Homer or Cicero was one thing, but correcting the Word of God was something new and different. As Muller observes, “It seemed now as if the textual underpinnings of the Reformation’s *sola scriptura* were being chipped away from within the ranks of the Reformed.”⁶⁴

62 Cappel, *Critica*, 303: “Cum itaque hac ratione certo definiri non possit uter Codex alteri sit praeferendus. . . . quarenda nempe sunt argumenta non extrinsecus assumpta, sed intrinseca & insita. . . . Ea nempe lectio indubitato melior est, atque praeferenda, quae sensum parit in se veriore, planiore, aptiore, concinniore, commodiore, consequentibus & antecedentibus magis cohaerentem, menti & scopo scriptoris propiorem atque congruentiorem.” See Chiesa, *Filologia*, 364–65.

63 Ibid., 396: “Non enim hic auctoritate sed ratione pugnamus.”

64 Muller, “Vowel Points,” 149.

In some respects this rift replays and deepens the previous clash between scholastics and humanists. The former saw no use for languages when studying Scripture, because the Holy Spirit was sufficient. A century later, no one contested the value of knowing the languages. That battle had been lost. Bellarmine and Whitaker were arguing about the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. So now were Cappel and his opponents, both Protestant and Catholic. Since his position impugned the authority of the Vulgate and Church tradition, Rome placed his books on the *Index of Prohibited Books*. The Protestant response was even more intense.

Buxtorf's son, Johannes Jr., also an eminent Hebraist, described Cappel's book as "most pestilential poison" in his critique, *Anticritica: seu Vindiciae Veritatis Hebraicae: Adversus Ludovici Cappelli Criticam quam vocat Sacram, eiusq. defensorem: Quibus Sacrosanctae Editionis Bibliorum Hebraicae Autoritas, integras, & sinceritas, a variis eius strophis, & sophismatis* ("Anti-Critica, or Vindication of the Hebrew Truth against the Criticism called Sacred by Louis Cappel and his Defenders, by Whom the Sanctity of the Authoritative Hebrew Edition of the Bible, Complete and Sincere, [is Impugned] by his Various Tricks and Sophistry," 1653).⁶⁵ The orthodox had a learned champion, but the polemics were stronger than the philology.

The harsh orthodox response to Cappel's work was codified in a doctrinal confession issued by the Swiss Reformed Church in 1675, the *Formula consensus ecclesiarum Helveticarum* (usually referred to as the Helvetic Consensus Formula).⁶⁶ It reads in part:

The Hebrew original of the OT which we have received and to this day do retain as handed down by the Hebrew Church... is, not only in its consonants, but in its vowels... not only in its matter, but in its words, inspired by God. It thus forms, together with the original of the NT, the sole and complete rule of our faith and practice; and to its standard, as to a Lydian stone, all extant versions, eastern or western, ought to be applied, and wherever they differ, be conformed.... Therefore, we are not able to approve of the opinion of those who believe that the text which the Hebrew original exhibits was determined by man's will alone, and do not hesitate at all to remodel a Hebrew reading which they consider

65 Basel: Regis, 1653. The quote is from the dedication: "pestilentissimum Venenum." On Buxtorf's response to Cappel, see Laplanche, *L'Écriture*, 299, 307–13.

66 See M. I. Klauber, "The Helvetic Formula Consensus (1675): An Introduction and Translation," *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 103–123.

unsuitable, and amend it from the versions of the LXX and other Greek versions, the Samaritan Pentateuch, by the Chaldaic Targums, or even from other sources. They go even to the point of following the corrections that their own rational powers dictate from the various readings of the Hebrew original itself—which, they maintain, has been corrupted in various ways; and finally, they affirm that besides the Hebrew edition of the present time, there are in the versions of the ancient interpreters which differ from our Hebrew text, other Hebrew originals. Since these versions are also indicative of ancient Hebrew originals differing from each other, they thus bring the foundation of our faith and its sacred authority into perilous danger.⁶⁷

This is a repudiation of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, because any change to the text—“corrections that their own rational powers dictate from the various readings”—creates a double problem: it elevates human judgment and rational inquiry to a place unreachable by theology, and it defines the Bible as an imperfect source of salvation. This is impiety or worse, which “bring[s] the foundation of our faith and its sacred authority into perilous danger.”

The Helvetic Consensus Formula was the last orthodox Reformed confession. As Muller observes, “the level of dogmatic detail . . . manifests, if nothing else, the profound trauma experienced by the orthodox theories of the inspiration, interpretation, and authority of Scripture in the face of a rising tide of textual and historical criticism of the Bible.”⁶⁸ Even the vowel points were sacrosanct, for, as Muller notes, “If the vowel points were in fact a late invention [as Cappel had confirmed], then tradition had invaded Scripture!”⁶⁹ Moreover, the invading tradition was Jewish. If the authority of the Bible rested on the veracity of medieval Jewish Masoretic sages, then the “foundation of our faith” was indeed in peril. If the vowel points were a late addition, the Hebrew Bible was perspicuous only if Jewish tradition was reliable. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* rested on tradition after all. The orthodox response was an extreme Masoretic fundamentalism, buttressed by a rejection of text-critical scholarship.

67 Ibid., 115–16.

68 Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 92.

69 Ibid., 94. See further J. Joosten, “Le débat sur la vocalisation massorétique de la Bible d’Élie Levita à Louis Cappel,” (forthcoming), where he emphasizes Cappel’s distinction between the vowel signs (which are medieval) and the vocalization tradition (which is ancient). The importance of this distinction was generally lost in the heat of Catholic-Protestant controversy.

However, the Helvetic Consensus Formula was never actually a consensus. Many Swiss divines refused to sign, and it was eventually withdrawn.⁷⁰ It was the high mark of biblical inerrancy in Protestant orthodoxy, but it quickly faded into obscurity.

A revised version of inerrancy, formulated by the Swiss theologian Francis Turretin (François Turretini), became instead the orthodox standard. Many of its arguments remain in place today in conservative evangelical doctrine.⁷¹ In his *Institutio theologiae elencticae* ("Institutes of Disputational Theology," 1675–1685),⁷² Turretin presents a detailed defense of inerrancy which takes into account the existence of variants in the MT manuscripts. He does not concede much to Cappel, but he modifies the extreme Masoretic fundamentalism of the Helvetic Consensus by granting a limited validity to textual criticism.

Turretin grants that scribal errors happen, even in MT. But God has prevented their proliferation to the point that the original is unrecoverable. Because of this divine providence, textual criticism can recover the original, inspired text of Scripture. He writes:

70 See M. I. Klauber, "The Demise of Reformed Scholasticism and the Abrogation of the Helvetic Formula Consensus of 1675," in idem, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1994), 143–64.

71 The current standard, the 1978 "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," blends Turretin's views with those of the nineteenth-century Princeton theologians; see http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf. Interestingly, Article 16 explicitly denies these historical roots: "We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism." (The latter clause refers to the nineteenth-century Princeton theologians' response to German biblical criticism.) This denial of the historical roots of the modern doctrine of inerrancy is remarkable. On the relationship between Turretin and the Princeton theologians, see the nuanced comments of M. A. Noll, "Introduction," in idem, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 28–30; see also Ronald Hendel, "The Fundamentals," in idem, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 186–95.

72 3 vols.; Geneva: Tournes, 1679–1685. Cited from F. Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio theologiae elencticae* (ed. and trans. J. W. Beardslee; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981). On Turretin, see also R. A. Muller, "Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic: Francis Turretin on the Object and Principles of Theology," in idem, *After Calvin*, 137–44.

Although we attribute absolute integrity to Scripture, we do not hold that the copyists and printers have been inspired, but only that the providence of God has so watched over the copyists that, although many errors could have entered, they did not, or at least they did not enter the codices in such a manner that they cannot easily be corrected by comparison with other copies or with [other parts of] Scripture itself. So the basis of the purity and integrity of the sources does not rest on the inerrancy of human beings but on the providence of God.⁷³

For Turretin, textual criticism is valid because it is fully *sacred* criticism, superintended by divine providence. God limits the extent of error, such that it may be easily remedied and the perfect text restored.

But Turretin makes an important caveat. Only variants in manuscripts and printed editions of MT are valid evidence for the original Hebrew text. The variants in the Samaritan Pentateuch and the old translations (Septuagint, Vulgate, etc.) are deviations from the Hebrew original. Here Turretin maintains the exclusions detailed in the Helvetic Consensus Formula. He denies the possibility that “discrepancies between the old versions and the present Hebrew text were variant readings of Hebrew manuscripts different from ours.”⁷⁴ Textual criticism is an inner-MT affair.

As a consequence of the efficacy of a (limited) textual criticism, Turretin maintains that the Catholic critics of *sola scriptura* are wrong. The existence of textual variants does not make the Hebrew Bible an imperfect vessel of faith. Through the restorative effect of an orthodox *critica sacra*, the Bible retains its inerrant authority:

The question is whether the original text, in Hebrew or in Greek, has been so corrupted, either by the carelessness of copyists or by the malice of Jews and heretics, that it can no longer be held as the judge of controversies and the norm by which all versions without exception are to be judged. The papists affirm this; we deny it.⁷⁵

Turretin accepts the legitimacy of a limited, inner-MT textual criticism that restores the perfection of the original text.

73 Turretin, *Doctrine*, 62–63 (§5.10).

74 Ibid., 140 (§12.8).

75 Ibid., 113–114 (§10.3).

But there remains a problem. What if textual criticism does not always succeed in restoring the original text? What if one cannot determine whether a *waw* or a *yod* is correct in a given reading? Turretin gives no ground to this objection. For the orthodox, the text must be perfect, and therefore if errors exist, its perfect state *must* be restorable. God's providence is the causal nexus that ensures this end. But there remains a hint of anxiety in Turretin's emphatic response to this problem:

Unless unimpaired integrity is attributed to Scripture, it cannot be regarded as the sole rule of faith and practice, and a wide door is opened to atheists, libertines, enthusiasts, and others of that sort of profane people to undermine its authority and overthrow the foundation of salvation. Since error cannot be part of the faith, how can a Scripture which is weakened by contradictions and corruptions be regarded as authentic and divine? Nor should it be said that these corruptions are only in matters of little significance, which do not affect the fundamentals of faith. For as soon as the authenticity of Scripture has been found wanting, even if it be in a single corruption [of the text] that cannot be corrected, how can our faith any longer be sustained? If corruption is conceded in matters of little importance, why not also in others of more significance?⁷⁶

All error must be uprooted, else Scripture loses its "unimpaired integrity." Atheists and libertines are at the door, and not a single unremedied textual corruption can be conceded. Turretin's orthodoxy requires an inerrant text. If it cannot be achieved, then chaos ensues. In this weighty formulation of Reformed orthodoxy, textual criticism carries a heavy load. It must be hedged by divine providence in order to reproduce a perfect text.

4 Conclusions

The dream of a perfect text in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a story worth telling—although I have only sketched the highlights—because the discipline of biblical scholarship still works largely within the conceptual space carved out by these controversies. In particular, the modern discipline of textual criticism and the orthodox Protestant doctrine of biblical inerrancy have a shared origin in early modern arguments about textual variants in the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 60 (§5.7).

Hebrew Bible. Since then, textual criticism has become institutionalized as a non-theological practice, and most theologians are unaware of its inner workings. Yet the empirical *realia* of texts and variants were once central in theological discourse, providing a fulcrum for deep rifts in early modern culture. The conceptual changes were long lived.

As Muller observes, approaches to the biblical text were affected by many factors, including the return to the sources (*ad fontes*) in Renaissance thought and the loss of the multiple figural senses of Scripture:

The alteration of approach to the text brought on by the combination of Renaissance and Reformation mastery of ancient languages with the loss, over many centuries, of the *quadriga* [the four senses of Scripture] and related “allegorical” patterns of exegesis, pressed hard against the received doctrines.⁷⁷

As a consequence of the rise of scholarship and the loss of Scripture’s figural senses, the orthodox were hard-pressed to defend their traditional doctrines. The rise of a concept of uniform inerrancy of the plain sense was a response to these and similar forces. As Cardinal Bellarmine asserted, biblical authority and truth now extended across every verse, irrespective of its relation to faith and morals. The Protestant orthodox seconded this doctrinal innovation. Muller writes:

The orthodox response . . . included the insistence that ‘there is nothing in Holy Scripture of no importance’ and that even in relatively minor details, the Holy Spirit had preserved his ‘amenuenses’ free from error, leading them ‘always and in all things . . . into a most certain, unfailing, and constant truth.’⁷⁸

This response was new to the Post-Tridentine era. It was not wholly discontinuous with previous views, but was a heightening beyond the previous insistence on inerrancy in matters of faith and doctrine. The Catholic-Protestant controversy, based in part on the problem of textual variants, yielded the high doctrine of biblical inerrancy. As Philip Benedict sums up, “Controversy with Catholicism and the need to defend established positions had produced the

⁷⁷ Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 523.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 306, quoting Johannes Hoornbeeck.

doctrine of the literal inerrancy of the biblical text.”⁷⁹ Text-critical issues were at the center of these fraught discourses about the perfect text.

“Clearly,” Muller observes, “certainty had to be grounded somewhere—and the options offered were the individual exegete, the church and its tradition, and the Bible.”⁸⁰ The assertion that the Bible is absolutely inerrant in all details betrays the anxiety of the Protestant orthodox in their desire for certainty. Their view of biblical authority—and of their own authority as theologians—was threatened by the claims of textual critics, Catholics, and other heretics. Their defensive response was to intensify the doctrine of *sola scriptura* to the point that every word, construed as a plain fact, must be immune from error.

Ironically, this position was mirrored by those on the opposite side of the theological spectrum. The freethinkers of the early Enlightenment turned the orthodox position into an argument *against* Christianity. If any detail in the Bible is in error, they argued, then the whole system fails. Jonathan Swift ridiculed this position in his 1708 pamphlet, *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*.⁸¹ His satirical critique applies equally to the high orthodox doctrine of inerrancy. The following anecdote hinges on a textual variant in the New Testament, the Johannine Comma in 1 John 5:7–8, which is a late scribal insertion referring to the Trinity. Swift writes:

The freethinkers consider it [the Bible] as a sort of edifice, wherein all the parts have such a mutual dependence on each other, that, if you happen to pull out one single nail, the whole fabric must fall to the ground. This was happily expressed by him, who had heard of a text brought for proof of the Trinity, which in an ancient manuscript was differently read; he thereupon immediately took the hint, and, by a sudden deduction of a long *sorites* [a string of syllogisms], most logically concluded, Why, if it be as you say, I may safely whore and drink on, and defy the parson.⁸²

79 P. Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 301.

80 Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 307.

81 J. Swift, *An Argument to Prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England May, as Things Now Stand, be Attended with Some Inconveniences, and Perhaps not Produce Those Many Good Effects Proposed Thereby* (1708), in *The Works of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (Edinburgh: Donaldson, 1774), vol. 1, 225–41.

82 *Ibid.*, 239–40.

This outcome is what the freethinkers hoped for and the orthodox feared. If the masses found errors in the Bible they would “defy the parson.” But it is a ridiculous attitude in either case. The Bible is not a system of logical propositions, which is falsifiable by a single error. It is a different kind of book.

The dream of a perfect text is simply that, a dream. None of our texts are perfect, and textual criticism is not an inquiry that yields perfect results. It is a historical and philological discipline whose results are always corrigible, subject to refinement and further argument and analysis. This is why critical editions need to be redone periodically. Our techniques do not guarantee perfection, only probable or warranted arguments. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is not superintended by divine providence. Cappel’s position, that textual criticism is a human enterprise based on reason and scholarship, has weathered the orthodox attempt (by Turretin and others) to subordinate it to a theological standard of perfection.

Textual critics do what we can, but it is wrong to expect or demand a perfect text. If a doctrine of biblical inerrancy requires a perfect text, then this requirement cannot be met by textual critics or a modern critical edition. We live in a world where perfection is a passing dream, and uncertainty—Heisenbergian or otherwise—is our epistemic condition. This is not a negative, since perfection is arguably boring. In textual criticism as in life, as Wallace Stevens writes, “The imperfect is our paradise.”⁸³

83 W. Stevens, “The Poems of Our Climate,” in idem, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems* (ed. H. Stevens; New York: Vintage, 1972), 158. My thanks to Jan Joosten for valuable comments, and to Ellen Oliensis for help with some tangled Latin.