

# Scripture: Establishing a Text

**S**CRIPATURE IS WHAT IS KNOWN as “evolved literature.” This term means that the individual books were not written down all at once and then preserved intact, but that as time went on the original text was revisited, revised, added to, corresponding to the ongoing religious experiences of the chosen people. For example, the book of Isaiah contains an opening section from the prophet and then additions in which his disciples—a sort of “School of Isaiah”—expanded his thought and adapted it to new situations in the history of Israel. Virtually every book of the Bible shows evidence of this sort of evolution. Hence it makes no sense to speak of the original autograph (= the book as it left the hands of its author). It’s meaningless when applied to a text that has evolved over centuries. It may be noted here that the New Testament also evolved, for it is a text that formed gradually within the apostolic Christian community, although the process took decades rather than centuries as with the Old Testament. There is thus no single author of any part of the Bible, not even of the letters of Saint Paul in the form that they have come down to us. An instance of the variants in the New Testament comes readily to mind: the ending of the Lord’s Prayer. Protestants generally add a few words to the version we know: “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.” They do so because the Greek copy that Martin Luther translated in the sixteenth century contained this phrase whereas the copy Saint Jerome translated in the fifth century did not. In other words there are different versions of Saint Matthew’s Gospel. Or again, what did the angels sing to the shepherds to announce the birth of Christ? Was it “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men” or “Glory to God in the highest and peace to men of good will”? Both wordings are found in ancient manuscripts, and, not surprisingly, as Catholics we recognize the value of them both.

It is thus presumptuous on the part of scholars to produce what they consider to have been the original autograph of the New Testament. Consider, for instance, the tendentious title of Bruce Metzger’s *The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*<sup>1</sup> or Westcott and Hort’s *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. Metzger defends his position in the “Introduction” to his *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*:<sup>2</sup>

Most commentaries on the Bible seek to explain the meaning of words, phrases, and ideas of the scriptural text in their nearer and wider context; a

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> London, 1975.

textual commentary, however, is concerned with the prior question, What is the original text of the passage?

In the version he helped to edit, modestly entitled *The Greek New Testament*, individual passages are marked {A}, {B}, {C}, or {D} as an indication of how close they are to the “original.” These categories were assigned by a vote of the editorial committee, just as with *The Five Gospels* put out by the Jesus Seminar: “The text of the Greek New Testament is . . . the product of a committee voting on variant readings.”<sup>3</sup> There are today dozens of such editions of the New Testament. About them biblical scholar M.M. Parvis asked a deceptively simple question: Why do we have so many “original” texts of the New Testament? He goes on to say, “When we reconstruct the ‘original’ text, we are not reconstructing but rather we are constructing something that never before existed in heaven or on earth. . . . a text which had never been read in the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

The effect of the search for the original autograph is to cast suspicion on the actual texts that have been used by the Church over the centuries. Their variety and multiple readings indicate that the New Testament has had a history that continued well beyond the apostolic period. It was inevitable that this development would be viewed in some quarters as a corruption. I had a Bible that omitted John 7.53-8.11 (the passage about the woman taken in adultery) on the grounds that it was an addition to the “original” text—as indeed it is. But that’s no reason for rejecting the Church’s recognition that it records an episode in the life of Jesus. An obsession with the original text has extended to entire books of the New Testament, in that later texts such as the pastoral epistles, which were no longer regarded as coming from Saint Paul or even as Pauline, were put aside. This process is described under the heading of “a canon within the canon.”<sup>5</sup> Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians are regarded as containing the authentic thought of Paul, as the hypothetical pre-Gospel text known as “Q” brings us as close as we can get to the historical Jesus. The scholarly fixation on the Gospel in its most primitive form thus takes us beyond the actual text of the New Testament back to the actual words of Jesus himself. It’s only too bad, Borg remarks, that nothing remains of them aside from a few “great one-liners.” There is no room in this approach for Christ’s redemptive death or for the coming judgement or for Jesus’s providing access to God the Father. The truncated version of the Gospels put out by the Jesus Seminar, in which virtually everything is rejected as late, and therefore inauthentic, is thus

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<sup>3</sup> M. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge [PA], 1994).

<sup>4</sup> “The Goals of New Testament Textual Studies,” *Studia Evangelica*, 6

<sup>5</sup> “Canon” here means the list of books contained in the Bible.

the logical outcome of a process that began with a commitment to the original autograph as solely inspired.

Once the text of the Bible has, in one way or another, been provided and translated, the experts are called upon again, this time to tell us what it means. They are eager to assume this heavy responsibility and confident that they can do so: “The historical study of Jesus is assigned no less a role than the validation or invalidation of a given version of Christian proclamation as really Christian.”<sup>6</sup> These scholars have thus constituted themselves into an arbitrary and self-appointed magisterium that prides itself on not requiring of its members any “ideological” commitment to Christianity but simply a Ph.D. “in relevant areas of gospel research” with an attitude that is “as a whole on the sceptical side.”<sup>7</sup> Instead of the traditional text we are now to receive from the experts a thoroughly worked-over collection of documents, one of which—the Gospel of Thomas, “The Fifth Gospel”—we have not read or considered before.

With the development of the scientific study of the Bible, the believer has lost any confidence he may once have had in approaching the sacred text on his own. For Scripture has come to be regarded, like many other things, the privileged domain of the scholar. Ours is the age of the expert, in religion as in every other area of life. The Jesus Seminar is described as:

the child of two parents: The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the Enlightenment, which began about a century later. The Reformation emphasized the authority of the Bible (in contrast to church tradition), and thus gave to its study an importance that it has not had for over a thousand years. The Reformation also saw the Bible translated into popular languages, thereby making it widely accessible. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon reason and scientific ways of knowing, engendered a revolution in knowledge. . . . Within the worldview of the Enlightenment, both sacred authority and supernatural causation were rejected, and instead the effort was made to understand everything within a natural system of cause and effect.<sup>8</sup>

In consequence, Christianity is reduced to nothing more than a sentimental feeling for, since reason on its own cannot attain spiritual reality and would eliminate the very notion of a revelation from above, religion is reduced to an observable

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<sup>6</sup> Borg, *Jesus*.

<sup>7</sup> This is how Borg describes the Jesus Seminar

<sup>8</sup> Borg, *Jesus*.

psychological phenomenon which makes a spiritual realm “imaginable” for some people.

Catholicism has a ready answer to this challenge in the conviction that Scripture and Tradition cannot be separated. They were united in the formation of the Bible itself, in its communal origins over millennia for the Old Testament and decades for the New. The Bible is the product of what we mean by Tradition, in that these texts were lived before and as they were recorded. Similarly, the canonization of Scripture was the result of the Bible’s functioning within the Church, which was led to recognize the inspiration of the writings that formed and informed Christian worship. We need simply to reflect on these facts to see that scriptural inspiration, like canonization, was a charism of the entire community and not the prerogative of a few men. The text has had a history before and after its canonization that is the work of the Spirit in presenting and preserving the Gospel of Jesus. The history of the Church is best described as an ongoing commentary on the sacred text. This approach allows us to recognize the incontrovertible fact that the New Testament goes beyond the actual words of Jesus Christ—there is no need for a naïve literalism—and at the same time accept the truth of this extension. It is thus incomprehensible to me that a Catholic biblical scholar could adopt the Seminar’s approach to Scripture, and by so doing introduce into the Church a whole range of difficulties which should be peculiar to fundamentalists, scholarly or religious. Typical of this crippling attitude is the remark of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.:

I don’t know what people mean by the “spiritual” sense of scripture. “Spiritual” in this usage can be a weasel-word at times. People employ it in all sorts of ways. Sometimes it even includes the “accommodated” sense, a sheerly arbitrary use of a text to illustrate or support some idea. . . . In defence of it, people have said to me: “Oh, he’s using the ‘spiritual’ sense.” The trouble is, what is the control over a usage like that?<sup>9</sup>

The answer to his question is simple. Control is exercised by the Catholic Tradition as it is found in the liturgy, devotion, spirituality, and the formal teachings of the magisterium. They provide a Catholic with the freedom to apply Scripture to every situation without doing violence to its fundamental historical meaning.✚

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<sup>9</sup> “Scripture, the Soul of Theology” *America*, 172.16(1995)10.