

# Text and Textuality

PAUL WELLS

**T**he first issue of *Unio cum Christo* in this pre-Reformation celebration year of 2016 presents the captivating issue of the text of the New Testament. It reminds us of the debt of gratitude we owe for the diligent and painstaking efforts of those who labored to recover the best possible text of Scripture from the distant past after nearly a thousand years dominated by Jerome's Vulgate, which had virtually become the Christian Bible. So familiar is our Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, or the Bible translated into our native tongue, that we easily forget the magnitude of the achievement.

The focus of this issue is primarily on some of the humanists from the time of the Renaissance in Europe whose work contributed to the subsequent translation of Scripture into the vernacular: Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Ximenez, Beza, and many others should not be forgotten, nor should the translators who benefited from their work, including Tyndale, Luther, Olivétan, and Coverdale. Their passion for Scripture fueled the fire that blazed abroad in the sixteenth century, *post tenebras lux*, bringing with it the precious knowledge of Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Scriptures, the formal principle of Christian faith, bind us to Christ as the Word of God; by and through Scripture alone we benefit for salvation from union with Christ (*unio cum Christo!*), via the material principle of justification by faith in Christ alone. These three foundational principles stood alongside two others in the magisterial Reformers' teaching: grace as the whole of God's work and the glory of God as the reason and finality of God's purpose and, consequently, of human life itself.

Remove the *alone* from Scripture, Christ, faith, grace, and God's glory, and something totally different raises its ugly head, the destructive *pluses* or *ands* of all synthesis religion, subtracting from divine salvation by adding

something human. The *plus* invariably collapses into the salvation by works of Roman Catholicism or the humanistic morality of theological liberalism, as well as all forms of semi- or full Pelagianism. Furthermore, remove any one of the analogical five, and the end product is another gospel. This is particularly so in the case of Scripture itself, the formal principle of religion, without which there is no knowledge of Christ, faith, or grace, or recognition of the glory of God. So Scripture is vitally important to Christian faith, and the question naturally follows: *which* doctrine of Scripture can allow Scripture to convey this knowledge of Christ, from a Reformed perspective? To that the Calvinistic Reformation replied consistently with the notion of the self-authentication of Scripture, the witness of the Bible to itself as divine revelation, with the complementary internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Adolf von Harnack was correct when he affirmed that in Protestantism the witness of the Holy Spirit took the structural place of church tradition in the Roman system.

Of course today we look at the Scripture question of the Reformation with different eyes from those of the Reformers. They looked back on a tradition-bound hierarchical institution, described with all its vicissitudes in book IV of Calvin's *Institutes*, a charter of Christian liberty if ever there was one. For the Reformers, finding the text of Scripture through the *ad fontes* approach was a liberation, and it opened a new future full of hope. If the Bible had not been silent in the church preceding their time, as the works of the Aquinases, Bonaventures, and Bernards show, it was certainly muzzled by the institution as the property of an increasingly degenerate clergy. The Reformation, as a return to the original sources, was the opening of Scripture, and it extended most importantly to the laity. No longer a sacred object in a strange language chained in the church, it was unleashed through public reading, proclamation, and debate. So should we continue today, as Kent Hughes reminds us in his article.

Today our take is very different from that of the Reformers, and the tendency is to mute the authority of Scripture with a thousand qualifications. We look back to the Reformation with the perspective of a Bible that has been undermined by criticism, made irrelevant by one-dimensional ideologies, and relativized in a new global situation by competing religious worldviews. One recent analysis has suggested that the Scriptures "died" when their ecclesiastical underpinning was weakened following the Reformation and the rise of confessional conflicts, with the result that its authority became unsustainable. The Scriptures were eclipsed by the "academic Bible" of biblical studies and became a *text*, its status weakened by polemics. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment universities, particularly in

Germany, the critical academic Bible resurrected as an ancient text became the successor to the scriptural Bible. The text was examined outside of the context of adherence and commitment and in such a way as to support a sociocultural project. The Bible was relativized, no longer considered as the Scriptures of the church, and, having lost its universal claim to authority, it became a pawn in the promotion of the tolerance, reasonable morality, and power of the state. The lines of tension that had existed and found resolution in previous eras between faith and reason, theology and science, revelation and history, and sacred and secular were redeployed in the context of a deepening dichotomy.<sup>1</sup>

This description is interesting because it has the merit of showing how, with the Enlightenment, the Scriptures became the academic Bible with limited social and intellectual value that is the blight of today. Biblical scholars in the academy make it a duty to stand apart from the faith of the church and confessional commitments, instead determining what possible interpretations the text might have, with a high commitment to neutrality and scientific objectivity. Their views, whether on questions of historicity, science, or gender equality, filter into the media as new insights, creating the dual impression that the Bible is irrelevant, belonging to a world no longer ours, and that it is susceptible to unrestricted hermeneutical manipulation. Christian belief, now beset by pluralism, is constantly under pressure to update in terms of present social knowledge and plausibility. The church is upbraided to get on board, and when it does so, it becomes obese full of humanistic tolerance and lacking the power of immunization against present ills. So by following the trending academic Bible, the church loses the vitality of a dialectically relevant prophetic message; its positivity to the latest trends distance it from the biblical gospel of God's judgment and salvation. It may well be that the church, remade in the image of present society, has lost any power of immunological rejection, the possibility to say no, and has adopted the *too-much-of-the-same* mentality "that derives from overproduction, overachievement and overcommunication" and that German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls "the violence of positivity."<sup>2</sup>

If the contrast of the lost Scriptures and the "academic Bible become text" of biblical studies is pertinent, some fine tuning needs to be done on it from a Reformed perspective. Firstly, it should not be forgotten that the great achievement of the Reformation was to open the Scripture as God's

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 5.

revelation of good news for humanity. If the later academic Bible became a text in the confines of reason, the Scripture of the church had been set in different confines prior to the revolution of Luther and the return to the sources, its message limited by institutionalized traditions. In that context, the Word of God was as much neutralized by a human factor as it was later by rational scrutiny. The Reformed *sola Scriptura* was an antithetical principle that aimed to bring all human factors under its sway, whether the autonomous intellect or the authoritarian church. Recovery of the ancient biblical texts gave Christianity the chance to realign, after a millennia and a half of existence, with the one Word that does not originate in human experience and culture. The challenge the Reformation issued was the scandal of something that stands over against the normal avenues of human knowledge and achievement, the unique moment of the Word of God made flesh, the only mediator, and with it the witness of the Word to this truth. The confessional struggles after the Reformation were not just differences of opinion; rather, they frequently arose from resistance to the Scripture principle by synthesis theology, either Roman or rationalistic. The struggle was over the supposed insufficiency of Scripture, Jerusalem against Rome and Athens.

Secondly, from a reformational perspective, *tota Scriptura* is the necessary complement of *sola Scriptura*. The Bible is not a random collection of texts, but a book, even if it is made up of all sorts of documents, stories, history, genealogies, law codes, instruction, poetry, future predictions, and proverbial wisdom. The historical reality behind our word *Bible* is ancient and complex. It transcribes the Greek *biblia* (from *biblos*, the inner bark of papyrus), originally meaning “books.” It is found in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in Daniel 9:2: “I Daniel perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.” The word here refers to prophetic writings or scrolls that had come down to Daniel from Jeremiah (25:11), who lived a while before. “Books” passed into Christian usage and came to refer to the Old Testament. By and by, the “books” were recognized as “the Book,” the whole of the Bible as an ensemble. The earliest use of “the Bible” in English seems to be toward the end of the fourteenth century in *Piers Ploughman*, Chaucer, and Wycliffe. Around 1450 Johann Gutenberg began work on a printed Bible using movable type for letterpress, known as the Forty-Two Line Bible. It was finished five years later and was the first printed book.

From a covenantal Reformed perspective, the “books” of Scripture are not just “texts” randomly pieced together to make a job lot. According to the Scriptures themselves, the texts witness to God’s redemptive work in

history to save his people and are inspired by the Holy Spirit to that end. Their existence is not just punctual, as if the Bible existed because of a series of historical one-offs, but as part of the great and mysterious working of divine providence. The Scripture exists as a unity that depends on “the being and moral government of God,” “God’s relation to the world,” and “the immanence of God in all his creatures and his concurrence with them in all their spontaneous activities.” Consequently, the Scriptures

although composed by different human authors on various subjects and occasions, under all possible varieties of providential conditions, in two languages, through sixteen centuries of time, yet they evidently constitute one system, all their parts minutely correlated, the whole underlying a single purpose and thus giving indubitable evidence of the controlling presence of the divine intelligence from first to last.<sup>3</sup>

Just as inspiration depends on divine providence, so providence expresses Lordship. The Scripture comes to us as God’s Word, and when revelation is complete, it is a whole with constituent parts, as God intended. *Tota scriptura* means that the parts contribute to the meaning of the whole and that the whole gives meaning to each of the parts. Scripture is not the end product of canonization, but the recognition of a canon is a consequence of inspiration in the context of God’s covenant salvation of his people, as the articles on canon here underline. Considered outside of this matrix, the academic Bible of biblical studies no longer functions as Christian Scripture with a unified message, even if it yields some insights into its parts from a limited perspective. The specter of a “gnostic bible” for the initiates lurks around the corner. Considering the Bible as text, as a collection of texts, or as isolated pericopes, is an impoverishment as far as the vast perspectives of the Christian Scripture and its witness is concerned.

Finally, the academic Bible of biblical studies is a poor thing next to the Christian Scripture as God’s witness to salvation in Christ. In a certain respect academia has fashioned a different Bible from the inspired Scriptures of Christian confession, just as a church that no longer confesses Christian truth is no church in the biblical sense. The prime postulate of critical studies is that the Bible is like any other human book and must be approached as such. The rise of biblical scholarship and criticism, it is invariably affirmed, made necessary a new doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, and the old doctrine disappeared for ever. The history of the doctrine

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<sup>3</sup> Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979/1881), 8, 9, 30.

of inspiration over the last few centuries shows repeated attempts to keep something of the divine while affirming the unilateral humanity of the texts and treating them as such. So the form of Scripture was distinguished from the content, the dead words were contrasted with living acts of revelation, inspiration was reformulated as limited, or the Spirit was said to lead the people of God without any direct influence on their witness to that experience. Often inspiration was claimed for the Bible because in some way or other it “inspires me.” All this falls short of Reformed theology’s dual authorship of Scripture and divine accommodation to humanity.

Like any book, the Bible has two sides, one that is seen, which is the result of a process of production, and one that is unseen, the hidden world behind it made up of the lives of the authors, their thoughts, their experiences, their observations, and their whole witness to the mighty acts of salvation. A book has no existence apart from this “outer” side, which can take many forms. The words penned depend on what goes on behind the scenes. In the case of Scripture, this is the domain in which God works with the human authors of his Word, accommodating himself to their persons and situations, yet without compromising the truth to be revealed in human words. Both sides of the Scripture as a book are important. Its outer aspect may seem much like any other book. Yet it is different because of “special revelation” and the unseen factors that have gone into its making—the biblical claim that God was speaking through his chosen witnesses to express his Word. Above all, the Bible centers on the person of Jesus Christ and, as God’s inspired Word, has as its correlate the incarnate Word.

Therefore, when approaching the Bible one must consider not only its human form but also how it was inspired, how God spoke his Word through his witnesses, and what and who were “behind” it. It is not the antiquity of the texts that makes them interesting, because myths and metaphors are thought provoking à la Ricoeur. It is the fact that God chose to speak his Word by “breathing” it. So those who labored in service to the text of Scripture in the sixteenth century are to be honored, as we seek to do in this issue, because they contributed to bringing the Word of God down to us in written form, and with it the Savior of whom it witnesses by Spirit and in truth.