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

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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.

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. 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. 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.

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

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