When Erasmus published the second edition of his New Testament in 1519, he added to the prefatory material an apologetic tract entitled *Capita argumentorum contra morosos quosdam ac indolentios*, summary arguments against certain captious and boorish people. It answered the objections of conservative theologians who had condemned Erasmus' undertaking in principle, insisting that to change the Vulgate text was to undermine the authority of Scripture and thus the church. Although these critics were concerned mainly with changes that had doctrinal implications, they also objected to stylistic modifications of the text. A considerable portion of the *Capita* was therefore devoted to discussing the literary qualities of the Vulgate and the necessity of improving its Latin.1

In the opinion of Erasmus' critics the Word of God had no need of rhetorical embellishment. Erasmus' desire to improve the biblical idiom demonstrated a lack of respect for God as the inspirational source of Scripture, for the apostles and evangelists as the messengers of his word, and for Jerome as the translator. At the bottom of their objections, however, was the larger question whether one ought to approach Holy Writ, or any religious tract, as a piece of literature and, in this context, whether philologists had a right to interfere in matters traditionally considered the domain of theologians.

Literary criticism of the Bible was of course nothing new in Erasmus' time. Among the Latin Church Fathers Jerome had been the first to confess a distaste for the biblical language. A skilful stylist himself, he found the biblical idiom barbarous: *Sermo incultus horrebat* (Ep. 22.30). Its salutary content, however, made up for its stylistic deficiencies, he said, counselling his correspondent Paulinus not to be deterred from reading...
Scripture by its unrefined diction, its *vilitas verborum* (Ep. 53.9). In Jerome’s opinion, then, any esthetic loss was outweighed by spiritual gain.

Augustine, too, found it pertinent to raise the question whether the evangelists “should be considered merely wise or also eloquent” (*De doctrina Christiana* 4.6.9). In his opinion they did possess an eloquence suited to their task. He found in their writings a certain rhetorical appeal and concluded that “none of the points which one has learned to consider important in the schools of the grammarians or rhetoricians is missing in these divinely inspired authors” (*ibid.*, 4.20.41). He saw merit in the use of rhetoric in a religious context, justifying it as a means of effectively defending the truth. Good men, he said, should “engage eloquence on the side of truth” since evil men used it “to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error” (*ibid.*, 4.2.3). Like Jerome, Augustine ranked content above form. What was “solecism” after all, he asked, but writing according to rules different from those of one’s predecessors; and what “purity of speech” but preserving the custom of ancient speakers? To show great concern for such matters argued weakness of character: “The weaker men are, the more they are offended [by solecisms]; and they are the weaker, the more they want to appear learned” (*ibid.*, 2.13.20). In communications between man and God, it was sincerity not grammar that was at issue.

Among the early Greek Fathers Origen was the first to draw attention to the artless style of the Bible. He made references to the solecisms found in it and described its diction as “lowly and despised among non-Christs.”

Concern over how the word of God was expressed was less pronounced, though not completely absent, in the Middle Ages.

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2 *PG*, 14, 185A: τῆς εὐτελοῦς καὶ εἰκαταφρονήτου παρ’ Ἐλληνικὲς λέξεως; compare *PG*, 13, 825B: τὰ σολοκοιδῶς εὑρήμενα . . . συγχώνει τῶν ἐνυγχαλωντα.

3 *PG*, 14, 833A (extant only in the Latin version): *elocutionibus interdum confusis et minus explicitis utitur*, a verdict cited by Erasmus in his *Annotations* on Romans 1, note 14.