1. Introduction

In the familiar text of John 8:57 we read:

The Jews then said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old.
How can you have seen Abraham?” (NEB)

The question is somewhat surprising since in the preceding verse Jesus says,

Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; he saw it and was glad.

The patriarch was mentioned as the person who saw. It would, therefore, have been more logical if the interlocutors had asked: “How can Abraham have seen you?” As a matter of fact, commentators often understood the question in this sense without altering the words. Hugo Grotius, for example, writes: “Solet fieri, ut qui nos videt, eum et nos videamus. Sensus est: tu et Abraham alter alterum consiperceritis.” More recent interpreters mention the unexpected change of subject but ascribe it to the usual misinterpretation on the side of the questioners in the Gospel of John: “The language of our Lord is again misquoted and in this occasion the misquotation completely misrepresents the thought.”

This may be a realistic approach of the problem, but it does not fully satisfy an alert reader.

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1 I use the edition of C.E. de Windheim, Hugoii Grotii Annotationes in Novum Testamentum Edito Nova (Halle, Orphanotrophium Bibliopolium, 1769), 1040f. (“It is quite normal that we too see him who sees us. The meaning is: ‘Did you and Abraham behold each other?’”)


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2. The Conjecture of Harting

In an 1880 contribution to the Royal Academy of the Netherlands, the Mennonite clergyman Dirk Harting made a strong plea for the correctness of what was then en vogue in the Low Countries, “Conjectural Criticism.” John 8:57 was one of the test cases for his conviction that one should not follow the majority text, which in this case reads:

καὶ Ἄβρααμ ἔδρασεν;—“And you have seen Abraham.”

He stated that the reading ἐδρασεν of Codex B was a clear indication that the Greek text ought to be emended. This reading of B was treated as an obvious flaw of the scribe in the large edition of the Codex Vaticanus by Kuenen and Cobet: they mentioned the reading in their introduction but corrected it in their reproduction of the text. Harting, however, found in this reading the occasion for his conjecture. He pointed out that the next word in the text was εἶπεν. So he speculated as the original text:

ΚΑΙΑΒΡΑΑΜΕΩΡΑΚΕΣΕΕΠΙΕΝ, i.e. καὶ Ἄβρααμ ἔδρασεν σε; Εἶπεν κτλ.

This would mean that the original text said: “. . ., and Abraham has seen you? Said he. . ..” The copyist overlooked one E, and so the reading of Ms. B was created. This reading in its turn led scribes to change the E into an A in order to make sense of the question. From his observations one may conclude that Harting had made the conjecture shortly after 1860. When he wrote his article he could refer to the fact that

Herbert & Peter Lang, (1976), 232-233, however, rejects the idea of a “Missverständnis” (vs. H. Leroy, Rätsel und Missverständnisse, Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesteilgaben [Bonn, Hanstein, 1960], 83-84), and favours the idea of “Unverständnis” as a theme of the author of this Gospel.  

D. Harting, “Bijdrage tot de vaststelling van den tekst der Schriften van het Nieuwe Testament,” in: Verslagen en Mededelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde II.9 (Amsterdam, Müller, 1880), 46-70, espec. 67-68. This conjecture is mentioned by J.M.S. Baljon, Novum Testamentum Graecæ (Groningen, Wolters, 1898), 273 app.; J.M.S. Baljon, Commentaar op het Evangelie van Johannes (Utrecht, Van Boekhoven, 1902), 169; W.C. van Manen, Conjectural-Kritiek toegepast op den tekst van de Schriften des Nieuwen Testaments, Verhandelingen Teylers N.S. IX:1 (Haarlem, Bohn, 1880), 136 (not at p. 219, where we should have expected it); see on Harting’s speech for the Academy and the criticism of Kuenen, ibid., 104-106; W.H. van de Sande Bakhuyzen, Over de toepassing van de Conjectural-Kritiek op den tekst des Nieuwen Testaments, Verhandelingen Teylers N.S. IX:2 (Haarlem, Bohn, 1880), 313 (in a Naskrift).

B* actually reads EOPAKAE; see below.

A. Kuenen—C.G. Cobet, Novum Testamentum ad fidem Codicis Vaticanii (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1860), CX (Prefatio).