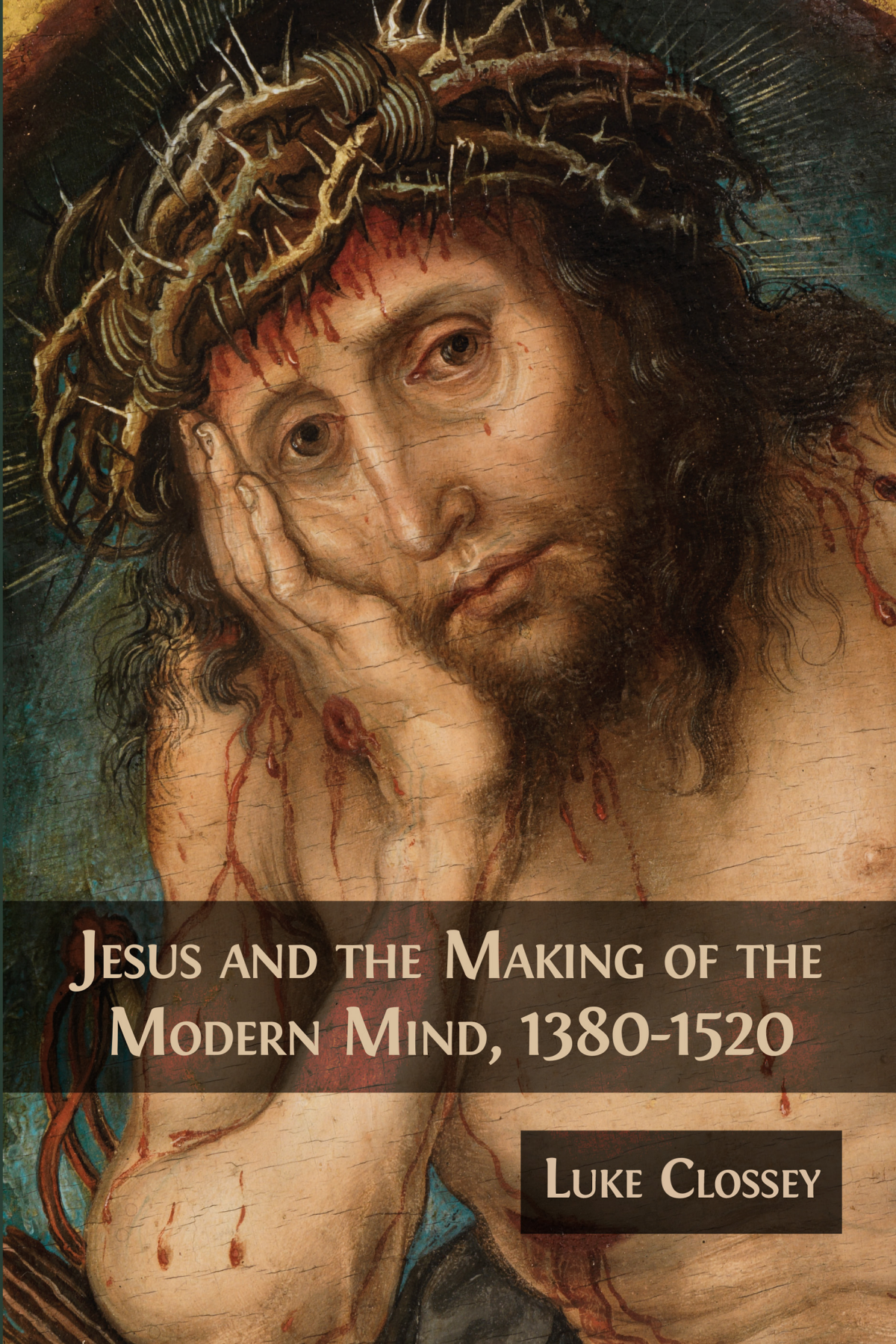

Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520

Luke Clossey

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11. Interpreting Canon

Reading and understanding are not synonyms. How does a Jesus cultist understand scripture? Interpretation clarifies meaning, makes it relevant, and makes it consistent. This is no small feat. Jesus and Muhammad both were interpreters of earlier texts, and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) wrote explicitly of the importance, even the necessity, of interpretation.[1] Interpreters understood difficult passages—such as the bad behaviour of Old Testament figures, or the depravities of its *Song of Songs*—as allegories, or as cautionary tales illustrating how not to behave. Interpretation was rarely an individual attempt to create an individual reading; traditional interpreters sought not their own originality, but the recovery of the original intended meaning.

Despite the Franciscan development of the plain ken, in 1400 the deep ken was still dominant, especially in the Far West (see Appendix B). Christians had a plain-ken awareness that errors could creep into the manuscript tradition, but this awareness did not distract them from their deep ken. In contrast, Muslims already had a plain-ken revolution, peaking around the tenth century, and, by 1400, they were influenced by the plain ken (although still mostly informed by the deep). Why this difference between the groups? Perhaps the Christian canon was more obviously a collection of texts, which made inconsistencies less disturbing, while issues in Qur'ans were more glaring for the Muslims, thus inspiring them towards the plain ken. Perhaps the Far West's greater distance from the Asian Core's scholarship kept the Christians intellectually isolated.

In the fifteenth century, however, both Muslims and Christians become more interested in aspects of the plain ken: historical context, psycho-historicizing copyists and editors, and analyzing collected manuscripts to recover uncorrupted meaning. The first half of this chapter begins with an explanation of each ken's approach to canon. It then presents a history of canon interpretation before our period, highlighting Muslim inclination towards the plain ken and Christian inclination towards the deep. The second half focuses on the fifteenth century,

1 Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldhun's Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 55–56, 72, 163, 242.

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as Muslim exegetes continued to balance both kens while some Christians took up the plain ken more seriously.

Theory of Interpretation

Deep-ken Interpretations

One can approach a text with a deep or a plain ken. We can describe a tradition's authoritative texts as "canon," and in practice the term implies a deep-ken attitude towards those texts. A text viewed as canon typically has four characteristics. Canon is profound: every passage of it has great meaning. Canon is wide: any question finds its answer in it. Canon is moral: its teachings are consonant with traditional morality and decorum. Canon is consistent: it is homogenous both in form (Genesis is of the same stuff as Revelations), and in content (one part cannot contradict another). This is a generalization, and rules will hold more or less true for different examples of canon. The insistence on consistency, for example, was stronger among Christians than among Confucianists, who considered Confucius merely an editor of his classics.

Unless you happen to have a deep-ken attitude towards a canon, these may be difficult to appreciate. Investigating the logic of canon and its four characteristics can help us understand why people would turn to bibliomancy, using scripture—perhaps by turning to a random page—to divine the future: comprehensive, canon must answer your divination question.

Canon sometimes defies the expectations of these four characteristics, but different traditions have developed deep-ken ways of resolving these challenges. One strategy is sometimes called "spiritual reading," to approach the text with the proper attitude. The Qur'an (3:7), for example, warns against the interpretations of readers whose hearts harbour deviation and perversity. Of course, spiritual reading is merely a "solution" only from our plain-ken perspective. This would be like saying a book in Spanish is hard to understand, and the "solution" is to read it as if it were Spanish. For a modern parallel, ask a stand-up comic about the importance of an audience's attitude for their ability to understand his humour. Buddhists could understand a passage of canon as adopting a non-absolute truth for pedagogical purposes (*upāyakosalla*), with a similar concept *quan* 權 in the Confucian tradition. Later Confucianists would reconcile contradictions by attributing subtle modal distinctions to the contradictory passages: they are not talking about precisely the same thing.[2]

2 See Jinfen Yan, "Between the Good and the Right: The Middle Way in Neo-Confucian and Mahāyāna Moral Philosophy," in *Confucian Ethics in Retrospect*

Example: Zechariah 9:9

The easiest way to see precisely how deep-ken interpretation works is to consider an example. Let's use the deep ken to read this line, from Zechariah 9:9: "ecce rex tuus veniet tibi iustus et salvator ipse pauper et ascendens super asinum."

A pro-Latin deep-ken view might understand that this line's meaning would change, for the worse, if (1) it were in English ("Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey"), (2) it were written in an ugly script ("ecce rex..."), (3) you were not a Christian, or (4) you read it on your phone while sitting on the toilet. The meaning is hyper-contextualized (embedded, decentralized, dispersed): it is informed by (1) the language, (2) the appearance, (3) a tradition of interpretation, and (4) the attitude of the reader. The beauty of the context (written in a beautiful script, in a beautiful language, in a beautiful manuscript) reflects, and even participates in, the truth of the text.

Such an insistence on the priority of language implies that it was not an accident that the word "rex" came to be used to refer to a king. It was not the case that people invented a word to describe that man with a crown. *Rex* existed before the first king (see Chapter 17). This verse has deep meaning. We can find in it subtle references to Christian doctrine and to life today. For example, the word *rex* has three letters, which reflects the Christian Trinity. Translating *rex* into the English "king" loses this, as "king" has four letters. Hyper-contextualization thus facilitates deep meaning: language matters. Furthermore, its atemporal nature also facilitates deep meaning, as it allows you to apply it to your life right now by emulating the humility of the king riding a donkey. In the deep ken, this *rex* is *literally* a reference to Jesus. That Jesus lived some half millennium *after* Zechariah is irrelevant. Even though the plain ken's Zechariah had no knowledge of Jesus and no intention of writing about him, for the deep ken the verse has a literal reference to Jesus. The verse can have deep meaning beyond the intentions of its human author, which are largely irrelevant.

The truth of this verse exists outside time; it is atemporal. For the deep ken, truth is eternal and history matters little: every moment in time in history is equidistant from Truth. In some technical sense it may have been written by a prophet Zechariah during the reign of Darius the Great (522–486 BC), but this has little relationship to its meaning. It was, is, and will be true at all times, and for your purposes its most relevant time is *right now* as you are reading it. If you were using your grandmother's recipe to make tortillas, the time of day

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and Prospect, ed. Qingsong Shen, Kwong-loi Shun (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 187–228.

when she wrote down the recipe, or the pen she used, would have no significant implication on how you prepared them today. The context of its being written down is not relevant.

Plain-ken Interpretations

Plain-ken interpretation is more familiar. Because the concentrated meaning is the important part, not the other contexts, we can make it widely available. It has no intrinsic meaning, so we can remove it from its contexts for wider dissemination. Indeed, those contexts are themselves temporal and subject to change—language changes, handwriting scripts change. The plain ken can still find meaning, or learn what the original author intended the meaning to be, but just not discover it already existing within the text. As we have seen in the previous chapter, a plain-ken approach takes the text to be an abstraction, independent of the written page.[3] We can translate a verse into a different language without serious repercussions. You can read it while in the bathroom—maybe that's a better use of your time than scrolling through social media. A Christian and a Hindu can understand a Bible verse equally well, if they understand English equally well…

… and if they understand the historical context equally well. Who was Zechariah? Who was his audience? What genre was he writing in? Was he intending to make a timeless pronouncement, or was he speaking specifically to a contemporary audience about those particular circumstances? In the latter case, we would err in taking his verse as literally applying to our own lives. Thus, the historical context of a verse affects its meaning. We need to understand the historical circumstances and even the psychology of the human author.

Subject to history, plain-ken meaning is fragile and malleable. Just as the circumstances and psychology of the human author is important, so too must we psycho-historicize the many copyists and editors who link the original manuscript, long lost, with the copy of the copy of the copy… of the copy that you are reading now. Copyists and editors, whether accidentally or intentionally, introduce mistakes into manuscript traditions. Instead of searching for deep meaning in a verse, the plain ken values collecting as many manuscripts as possible, and then using them to methodically calculate the original meaning—original to the human author, not to God. Philologically reading the text reveals its history, and understanding its history reveals its philological meaning.

3 Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994), 17.

The plain ken has a powerful sense that time deteriorates meaning. Such a view might allow for contradictions in canon by appealing to the fact that it had been written collectively, over a long period of time, well before anyone considered it canon. The chain of authorities that guarantees meaning may have gone wrong at some point, and so we must "jump the chain," by going back to an earlier, more reliable point.

Comparing the Two Perspectives

This table summarizes the proceeding discussion and organizes the possible divergences between deep and plain kens into three moments: creating, transmitting, and receiving text.

	CREATION OF TEXT	TRANSMISSION OF TEXT	RECEPTION OF TEXT
Deep Ken	intention of divine author	beauty of script and medium	attitude of reader
		tradition of interpretation	
		language of manuscript	
Plain Ken	intention of human author		
	("original") language used by human author		
	historical circumstances of human author	mistakes/ corrections by copyists	

Table 11.1 Determining Textual Truth and Meaning.

It is easy to find humour in the gap between the kens. The *Robot Chicken* television series depicts a stormtrooper taking his daughter to work.[4] For the plain ken, the events of the Star Wars canon take place in historical time, so stormtroopers have children, and go to the bathroom, even if that is nowhere explicit in the canon. In the comic strip *Bloom County* the penguin Opus travels to Antarctica and is surprised to encounter into his neighbour. "Small world," he says. "Small strip," she counters.[5] Bloom County as a canon is a closed world, inhabited not—as

4 "Robot Chicken: Star Wars Episode II," *Robot Chicken*, Cartoon Network (16 November 2008).

5 Berkeley Breathed, *Bloom County* (17 January 1984).

the plain ken would think—by billions of people, but by the dozens who have explicitly appeared in the strip. Like Bloom County is a "small strip" with a limited cast of characters, so too the Bible is a "small canon" with a limited cast of characters. The plain ken relocates the canon into the historical world, with many, many more (mostly anonymous) characters.

In one seventh-century Indian satire, a monk is puzzled that the Pali canon has no passages praising sex and alcohol. He takes a plain-ken approach, by imagining that at some point in history puritanical editors had corrupted the text: "I am sure that those lazy wretched elders must have blotted out from the canonical books the ordinance regarding women and drinking of liquor to spite us, the youngsters." His solution, also, is plain ken: he decides to quest for a manuscript old enough to include the pre-censored passages.[6]

Generally, the deep ken finds meaning in the text through allegory, and the plain ken finds meaning around the text through contextualization. The plain ken is critical rather than exegetical, shallow rather than deep, and considers history, not moral theology, the most important context. For example, consider the recurring observation that some verses appear to be missing from the Qur'an. One Qur'anic exegete explained the omission of a verse in deep-ken terms, appealing to the perfect brevity of the holy text. Another took a plain-ken approach to explain the omission occurring in history, and proposed that a domestic animal probably ate the sheet on which they had been written.[7]

A Brief History of Interpretation, to 1400

To understand how interpretation in the fifteenth-century Near and Far West worked, this section steps back a millennium to offer a broader historical and geographical overview.

The Muslim Plain-ken Quest for Flatness

Interpreters of the Qur'an distinguished between two kinds of interpretation (*tafsir*). On the one hand was interpretation via tradition and community, and, on the other, interpretation via intellect or personal opinion. Tradition preferred interpretation by tradition. Indeed, the word *tafsir* standing alone could be taken to refer specifically to that way of interpretation. A famous hadith quoted

6 Mahendravikramavarman, *Mattavilasa Prahasana*, trans. N. P. Unni (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1974), 78.

7 John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1977), 94–95, 104.

Muhammad as saying, "Whoever talks about the Qur'an on the basis of his personal opinion [*ray*] or from a position of ignorance, will surely occupy his seat in the Fire."[8]

Tafsir was related to the verb *fassara*, to explain, and some scholars specified *tafsir* was about explaining rather than understanding. Since the Qur'an was the most important text, *tafsir* was often exclusively Qur'anic, although other important documents could be subject to it as well. *Tafsir* typically provided a running commentary from the first word of the Qur'an to the last, and this format proved popular in our period. Sometimes, the commentary was literally written in the margins of a Qur'an.[9]

There was a limit to interpretation. Al-Suyuti (1445–1505) noted that the Qur'an itself stipulated (3:7, 39:23, 11:1) that some of its verses were clear, some ambiguous, and some were both. The ambiguous verses (*mutashabih*) precluded interpretation, for their knowledge was restricted to God. Because of the possibility of thus introducing errors, the most cautious scholars of the Qur'an hesitated to do any interpretation at all.[10]

Medievals, Muslim as well as Christian, allowed scripture passages to have multiple senses. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) argued for allowing metaphor in revelation. Sahl Tustari (d. 896) counted four ways to interpret the same passage: the literal (*zahir*), the symbolic (*batin*), the prescriptive (*hudud*), and the spiritual (*matla'*). To try to understand the meaning of figurative language in revelation, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (1009–78) developed powerful tools like spiritual reading and attention to context. Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) asserted that different readers could interpret the Qur'an differently, with all those various interpretations reflecting the text's true meaning: "God knows all these meanings, and there is

8 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1991), 20.

9 Ismail Hakki (d. 1725) includes Hafiz's poems in his *tafsir*. Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), 28, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474464475; Frederick M. Denny, "Exegesis and Recitation: Their Development as Classical Forms of Qur'anic Piety," in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Theodore M. Ludwig (Brill: Leiden, 1980), 91–123 (93); Alan Godlas, "Ṣūfism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 351–60 (358); Andrew Rippin, "The Designation of 'Foreign' Languages in the Exegesis of the Qur'an," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 437–43 (443).

10 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel des sciences coraniques al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān de Ğalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (849/1445–911/1505)*, trans. Michel Lagarde (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 715–44 (ch. 43), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004357112. See Leah Kinberg, "Ambiguous," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), I, 70–73; McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic*, 20.

none that is not the expression of what he wanted to say to the given person." The Egyptian scholar Al-Zarkashi (1344–92) marvelled how "every verse can be understood in 6,000 ways, and what then still remains to be understood is more still."[11]

Slowly but steadily, *tafsir* developed a clear preference for literal or flat (*zahir*) interpretation. Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300–73) said the text had only one meaning, for Allah was not a poet, but wrote clearly and literally. Because the Qur'an insisted, usually, on its own clarity, unclear interpretations were suspect. Generally the *zahir* interpretation had priority unless another verse, a circumstance of fact, or a tradition of the Prophet's companions challenged it. In probabilistic analysis, *zahir* came to refer to the more likely, as in law (between the certain and the speculative) or in the Qur'an itself—as when al-Qurtubi (1214–73) pointed to 61:14's calling Jesus's disciples "*zahir*-ists" because they had the better argument.[12]

The obvious was not always obvious. How did one know which interpretation was the most *zahir*?[13] The most immediate approach was to identify and rely on the best authorities. Pursuing the meaning, *tafsir* took particular interest in the transmission of the Qur'an from Muhammad to and through his followers. Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Ibn Kathir outlined a hierarchy of authorities in interpretation: the Qur'an itself, and accounts of the life of Muhammad, of his companions, and of those companions' successors. Ibn Taymiyya allowed that prophets, even Muhammad, might err, but held that God protected them from continuing to err without correcting themselves.[14]

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11 Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2014), 105; John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 236, 242; Ludmila Zamah, "Master of the Obvious: Understanding Zahir interpretations in Qur'anic Exegesis," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis* (*2nd/8th–9th/15th Centuries*), ed. Karen Bauer (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 263–76 (265–66).

12 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), 181–201 (198); Norman Calder, "Tafsir from Tabari to Ibn Kathir," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 101–40 (124); Robert M. Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal Sense (ẓāhir, ḥaqīqa) in Muslim Interpretive Thought," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2016), 183–203, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107588554.009; Wael Hallaq, "Ẓāhir," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2002), XI, 388; Zamah, "Master of the Obvious," 266–67.

13 Ignaz Goldhizer, *The Ẓāhirīs: Their Doctrine and Their History, a Contribution to the History of Islamic Theology*, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 117 talks of this issue as a question of "exegetical taste."

14 Ibn Taymiyya, "Treatise on the Principles of Tafsir," in *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 35–43. See McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic*, 17.

Beyond this appreciation of tradition as a safety net, *zahir* could be achieved through two prongs of a plain-ken strategy, a philological interest in the particulars of language and a historical interest in the particulars of context.[15]

Strategy 1: Philology

An Arabic word's consonantal skeleton expressed its basic meaning, and the vowel variations added nuances both subtle and critical, such as subject, object, and tense. The consonants in the Qur'an had remained stable since the time of Uthman, but how to vowel it? Vowels were crucial. An error in vocalization could outrageously alter the text's meaning. To borrow an example from the mischievous eleventh-century al-Abi, moving a dot in 3:192's أَخْزَيْتَهُ *akhzaytahu* to أَخْرَيْتَهُ *akhraytahu* changed God having "annihilated him for good" into God "makes him continuously defecate."[16] Such potential hazards required careful philological attention.

Without written vowels and dots, you could not read the Qur'an unless you already knew how to read it. According to tradition, the caliph sent with the newly canonized canon people who could orally fill in the vowels and consonant points. A variety of textual forms arose, apparently from dialectical differences. Tradition developed a plain-ken explanation for this variety: the Prophet varied vocalization when he recited the same text at different times. The tenth century saw the stabilization of seven textual traditions.[17]

The eighth through tenth centuries saw something like an Arabic philological renaissance. Non-Arabic words and obscure passages challenged the sense of a deep-ken Qur'an and provoked our pioneer philologists. Philology developed into specialized sub-fields, and spilt over for use outside the Qur'an. One branch of philological study focused on discussions of difficult words; another conducted the careful study of the various readings. Ibn Qutayba established canons of interpretation in works such as his *Interpretation of Difficult Qur'anic Passages*.[18]

15 Zamah, "Master of the Obvious," 270.

16 Ulrich Marzolph, "Humor," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, II, 464–65; Harald Motzki, "Alternative Accounts of the Qur'ān's Formation," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 59–76 (62).

17 William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Reception," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 115–42 (116–18).

18 Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Qur'ānic Recitation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), IV, 489–93; Claude Gilliot, "Creation of a Fixed Text," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 41–58 (48–49); Alexander Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 211–34 (212–14).

In attempting to understand the Qur'an, these scholars took a plain-ken approach: Arabic had a history. To understand Qur'anic Arabic, one had to study pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Qur'anic studies thus birthed literary studies. For example, Sibawayhi (ca. 760–96), to understand the "correct diction and usage" of the Qur'an text, turned to early poetry and to the contemporary Bedouin language, considered the most conservative and therefore purest form of Arabic.[19]

Sibawayhi never seriously proposed replacing orthodox readings with those derived from Bedouin pronunciation, but even raising this hypothetical shocked his contemporaries.[20] In the early tenth century, Ibn Miqsam (d. 944) accepted any voweling that was not ungrammatical, but Ibn Mujahid (859/60–936) brought judicial pressure on him to make him recant.[21] Before our period, some scholars were not certain that the Qur'an they had was the same as the deep-ken Qur'an in heaven. Does truth bow down to the Bedouin? Do we use the norms of pre-Islamic poetry to judge the deep-ken Qur'an?[22]

In the eighth and ninth centuries, these philologist pioneers sometimes realized that they might have gone terribly astray. Some piously gave up philology; others counterbalanced possible philological damage by making and donating copies of the Qur'an—with the traditional textual form. Others, like Sibawayhi, continued in their philology but declined to apply their results over and above orthodox tradition (rather like Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), as we shall see below).

A few, like Abu 'Ubayda (728–825), fully accepted philology. Abu 'Ubayda argued that God's decision to express the deep-ken Qur'an in plain-ken Arabic brought divine favour upon that language *in all its varieties*, and he felt free to make use of even pre-Islamic poetry. The language of the Qur'an was identical to the language of the pagan "Bedouins who urinate on their heels." Abu 'Ubayda even historicized the first philologists of the Qur'an: they quoted the Bedouins because at that time those philologists spoke that language. For Abu 'Ubayda and like-minded thinkers, the problems in the language of the Qur'an text were themselves praiseworthy, and part of the overall miracle. We will see this extraordinary impulse, to find the beauty usually restricted to the deep ken even in the conditional and plain, recur in this book. Over time this led to a

19 Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 226.

20 Lothar Kopf, "Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology," *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956): 33–49 (46).

21 Gilliot, "Creation," 50. This is Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Ya'qūb al-'Aṭṭār Ibn Miqsam (d. 944).

22 Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 213–14; Aliza Shnizer, "Sacrality and Collection," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Rippin, 159–71 (165–69), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118964873.ch10

split in Qur'an scholars, between those who deferred to dogma and those who deferred to their own research. For Abu 'Ubayda, however, the deep ken could encompass the seemingly plain.[23]

Strategy 2: History

Because of the emphasis on the literal *zahir*, from after the time of al-Tabari's (839–923) great work *tafsir* became more interested in historical context, especially regarding the history of Christianity. 'Abd al-Jabbar (935–1025) and other Mu'tazilite theologians even argued that the fact that the Qur'an had been heard verbally by Muhammad proved that it was not eternal and must have itself been created in spacetime.[24]

Abrogation (*naskh*)

One way to deal with contradictions in revelation was through the idea of abrogation, which held that God suppressed, or abrogated, an old revelation in favour of a new. The earlier revelation was valid for only a limited period, before the newer verse abrogated it. Thus, one verse, taken in context, could qualify, modify, or cancel a second. For example, 5:90, forbidding wine, abrogated 2:219 and 4:43, allowing wine. The apparent contradiction was in fact a juxtaposition of a major verse with an abrogated verse. Some verses, and even an entire surah, had—according to commentators—been abrogated, removed entirely from the Qur'an, and disappeared.[25]

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23 Ella Almagor, "The Early Meaning of Majāz and the Nature of Abū 'Ubayda's Exegesis," in *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D. Z. Baneth Dedicata*, ed. Joshua Blau, Shlomo Pines, Meir Jacob Kister, and Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 307–26 (310–11, 322); Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 214–15; Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, Langue et Théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Tabari* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990), 78, 96–97, 116–17, 221, 243.

24 Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology," *Muslim World* 66 (1976): 163–88; Mahmoud Seyedy and Ehsan Kordi Ardakani, "Critical Review of the Mu'tazilī Theory of the Creation (Ḥudūth) of the Qur'an in Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār's Opinion, Regarding Imam Reza's Narrations," *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 6 (2019): 328–39, http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v6i4.985; Yasin Ceylan, *Theology and Tafsīr in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization 1996), 136–46.

25 Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 217; McAuliffe, "The Tasks," 187; David S. Powers, "The Exegetical Genre nāsikh al-Qur'ān wa mansūkhuhu," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 117–38 (122); Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Literature

An abrogating verse could have devastating impact on others. Most famous was the Sword Verse (9:5) which, according to some, abrogated over a hundred earlier verses that urged any kind of moderation towards non-Muslims. In the medieval period, over two hundred verses were identified as abrogated, as, for example, by al-Farisi in the eleventh century. Since revelation had direct legal force, abrogation had a direct legal impact on daily life. Misidentifying an abrogation, to take the cancelled revelation as valid and the valid one as cancelled, was dangerous.[26]

Studies of abrogation introduced the topic, and then went surah by surah to consider examples. Typically, they listed the abrogating and abrogated verses, while making notes of any controversies in the selection or categorization. This had been an especially popular genre in the four centuries before our period, and so it was well established by 1400.

Some theologians found the idea of abrogation itself challenging, as it worked against the deep ken's vision of a God who would not change his mind. Its defenders pointed out that the Qur'an itself justified abrogation (2:106, 16:101, 87:6–7). Moreover, the Qur'an implicitly justified abrogation the moment it presented itself as a document composed in time, in history.[27]

Contextualization ("Occasions of Revelation," *asbab al-nuzul*)

Such knowledge of abrogation came from the Qur'an itself, but other sources revealed the context of a revelation, which could be used to evaluate an interpretation. What appeared to be a revelation's true meaning was suddenly less certain when the context was taken into account. The context of a revelation informed, and indeed restricted, the possible interpretations an exegete could apply to it. Thus became necessary expert knowledge of the historical context of the occasions (literally, the "descent") of the revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*). Such context could be useful in resolving questions of which verse abrogated and which was abrogated, as the verse consonate with historical custom would be identified as later and, therefore, as the abrogating one. 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi (d. 1075) initiated *asbab al-nuzul* material as a specific area of study, although he

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of Abrogation: Form and Content," in *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Normal Calder*, ed. G. R. Hawting, J. A. Mojaddedi, and A. Samely (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 213–31.

26 Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 217; Powers, "Exegetical Genre," 119–22, 130.

27 John Burton, "Abrogation," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, I, 11–19; McAuliffe, "The Tasks," 187; Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 217.

took a literal approach, in that he collected all information that was explicitly identified as context by the phrase *nazalat fi* "it was revealed with respect to."[28]

A few scholars went even further, by emphasizing the historical context, or the understood historical context, even if that involved breaking the exegetical tradition. Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Kathir admitted that Muhammad thought the Qur'an could be interpreted, but they insisted on following only Muhammad's interpretations. They wanted to return to the practices of Muslim calendar's first century, and thus elevated hadith given by the Prophet. They were concerned that tradition had become tainted by non-canonical sources—or worse, by sources from a non-Muslim canon. They did not share their contemporaries' enthusiasm for diversity in *tafsir*. Ibn Taymiyya thundered against the extraneous additions that distracted from real meaning. Such scholars attempted to fill in the blank spots in prophetic lives, and thus to provide historical context to deep-ken revelation.[29]

One scholar even looked at the historical context of how the Qur'an was read in his own day. Al-Zarkashi (1344–92) described a plain-ken psychology of reception: "If the listener is a believer, the blissful thrill and the sublime feeling seize him straight away, and his heart feels an unceasing attraction to and love for the Qur'an. And if the listener is a denier, he still feels this thrill in his heart, but it is mixed with something distressing and admonishing that makes his agitation gain the upper hand over the beauty of what he is hearing."[30]

Comparative Canon Study before 1400

Muslims used the Bible negatively and positively, that is, both to point out its corruptions and to collect evidence for the prophethood of Muhammad. The Qur'an praised the Gospels as "full of guidance and light" (5:46). Muslims found references to Muhammad enduring even in the corrupted Gospel, in references to the Messiah, and at Jn 15:26: "When the Advocate comes, whom

28 Stephen Burge, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, the Mu'awwidhatan and the Modes of Exegesis," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts*, ed. Bauer, 283; Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," 277–310 (217); Andrew Rippin, "The Construction of the Arabian Historical Context in Muslim Interpretation of the Qur'an," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts*, ed. Bauer, 179–87; Andrew Rippin, "The Function of Asbāb al-nuzūl in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988): 1–20 (8–9).

29 G. C. Anawati, "`īsā," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Bearman et al., IV, 85–86; Calder, "Tafsir from Tabari," 130; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir," in *Approaches*, ed. Rippin, 46–62.

30 Quoted in Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 44.

I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me."[31]

Because the Christian canon was known to be faulty, Muslim scholars could be more aggressive in their plain-ken approach, without fear of impious consequences. Some scholars understood the extant Greek Gospels as poor translations of the true, original Gospels, which had been written in Hebrew. Scholars developed an impressive critical apparatus in their study of *tahrif*, the falsification of the Gospels. Drawing on Jewish and Christian extra-canonical sources, they picked at contradictions between the Jewish and Christian canons and history, as well as contradictions among the Gospels themselves. They pointed to the appalling immoral behaviour of the Old Testament figures and explained this as manipulation by editors like Ezra.[32]

Let us consider some examples. Muslim scholars consulted multiple translations of non-Islamic canon material as well as the historical development of Judaism. In Andalusia, the Muslim scholar Ibn Hazm (994–1064) launched a plain-ken attack on the Old and New Testaments. He used the dramatic and up-heaving narrative history recorded in the Old Testament to argue that the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, could not have been preserved through this history. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem (587 BC), the written Torah would have been destroyed, and survived only in the unreliable memory of the prophet Ezra. Ibn Hazm explicitly and powerfully argued that the contradictions he found in the Torah and the Gospel showed that they had been profoundly corrupted in transmission. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) argued that the mirror image between Jewish and Christian understandings of Jesus demonstrated that the Christians had artificially created their image of Jesus by flipping around the Jewish image: the Christians "saw that the Jews believed Jesus was a mad magician and a bastard, so they said: 'He is God perfect and the son of God.'"[33]

What version of non-Islamic canons were these scholars using? In the fourteenth century, even Muslim converts born Jewish were inaccurate in their quotation of Hebrew scriptures. Perhaps they were attempting to quote the pre-corrupted original scripture. One such convert was 'Abd al-Haqq al-Islami, active in Morocco at the end of the fourteenth century. He lamented that the

31 Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 63–64.

32 Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), 50–74; Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Some Neglected Aspects of Medieval Muslim Polemics against Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996): 61–84 (64–65).

33 Ibn Ḥazm, *Abenházam de Córdoba y su historia crítica de las ideas religiosas*, trans. Miguel Asín Palacios, 5 vols. (Madrid: Academia de la Historia, 1927–32), esp. II and III. See Goldhizer, *The Ẓāhirīs*, 103–59; Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 138;

Jews had profoundly corrupted their scripture, and "I am going to cast their own stones upon them, and flog them with their own assertions." Indeed, he used Hosea 9:7 (which Jesus seems to quote at Lk 21:22) to attack them: "Because your sins are so many / and your hostility so great, / the prophet is considered a fool, / the inspired person a maniac"—for, later, the Jews did in fact consider Muhammad a fool. Al-Islami used a deep-ken textual analysis that needed the original language to work. The comprehensiveness of canon and the importance of Muhammad suggested that the Jewish scripture itself must have references to him, and al-Islami proceeded to find them. He uncovered the consonant skeleton of "Muhammad" מחמד at 1 Kings 22:35 מְעֻמָּד *mo'omad* ("propped up") and at Hosea 9:6 מַחְמַד *makhmad* ("the pleasant"). Using deep-ken numerology, he calculated that the value of Genesis 1.16's word הַגְּדֹלִים *haggedolim* ("greater") equaled the sum of the value of מחמד and the value (six) of Friday. Similarly, in Genesis 12:9, Abraham's destination "Negeb" had the same value as "Mecca."[34]

A few scholars in the fourteenth century took care in quoting non-Islamic canon; Ibn Taymiyya complained about problems with the Arabic translation of Hebrew canon. Most, however, were remarkably sloppy. Ibn Khaldun was interested in non-Islamic canons, but apparently had no Arabic translations of them.[35]

Apparent contradictions within and among the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur'an prompted especially Muslim and Jewish scholars to consider the historical context for the composition and transmission of scripture. Despite developing these more aggressive and powerful historicizing weapons, Islamic scholars rarely applied them to the Qur'an itself, which was, after all, the touchstone of truth.[36]

Much of this resembles later Christian criticism of the Bible and may indeed have inspired it. To some degree, this happened through medieval Jewish intermediaries. Jewish scholars had developed their own interpretive model that valued the flat meaning, called *peshat*. The Talmudic scholar Saadia Gaon (ca. 892–942), known as the "father of *peshat*," had been influenced by earlier Qur'anic scholarship, and we see parallels between his and ibn Hazm's prioritizing the literal meaning, unless, as each specifies, it contradicted your senses, your reason, another unambiguous verse, or tradition. In northern Iberia, the Jewish scholar Abraham ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–1164) developed similar

34 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 124–25; Haggai Mazuz, "Additional Contributions of 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī to the Muslim-Jewish Polemic," *Al-Qanṭara* 37 (2016): 111–28; M. Perlman, "'Abd al-Ḥakḳ al-Islāmī, a Jewish Convert," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 31 (1940): 177–82.

35 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 125–29.

36 Lazarus-Yafeh, "Some Neglected," 66.

criticisms, in particular finding anachronisms in Genesis and Deuteronomy. Ibn Ezra, who read Arabic and travelled widely, even spending time in Baghdad, might have encountered and drawn from the ideas of Ibn Hazm. A century later, the Christian scholar Raymond Martini (d. after 1284), who had studied Arabic at Mallorca, defended both the Torah and Gospel against Ibn Hazm—but in doing so used the same plain-ken appeal to history. The Torah was not destroyed at the Fall of Jerusalem, he argued, because the Jews going into exile would have physically taken it with them, just as exiled Jews did in Martini's own time.[37] Various European-regional expulsions of the Jews in the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries likely spread this Jewish and Islamic plain-ken text criticism even further. We even have something like a smoking gun in Baruch Spinoza's (1632–77) 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [Theologico-Political Treatise], which explicitly commended Abraham ibn Ezra's work on historical-editorial processes.[38] Muslims invented this kind of plain-ken canon-criticism, and Jews made it available to Christians.[39]

The Christian Deep-ken Quest for Depth

In the medieval period, the high level of plain-ken and philological interest developed by the Muslims towards the Qur'an was not equalled by the Christians towards their own Bible. Where the Muslims had developed a highly sophisticated philological technology centuries earlier, only in the Late Traditional period did the Christians develop something similar.

A Limited Plain Ken

Christian scholars had long had some plain-ken insight into the ability of humans to err, but this had limited impact. Some theologians recognized the possibility

37 Mordechai Z. Cohen, "Emergence of the Rule of Peshat in Medieval Jewish Bible Exegesis," in *Interpreting Scriptures*, ed. Cohen and Berlin, 204–24 (207–10); Gleave, "Conceptions," 184; Harvey J. Hames, "A Jew amongst Christians and Muslims: Introspection in Solomon Ibn Adret's Response to Ibn Hazm," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 25 (2010): 203–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2010.536667; Lazarus-Yafehg, *Intertwined Worlds*, 139–41.

38 Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), chapter 8, explicitly cites Abraham ibn Ezra. See Richard Popkin, "A Late Seventeenth-Century Gentile Attempt to Convert the Jews to Reformed Judaism," in *Israel and the Nations*, ed. Shmuel Ettinger and Shmuel Almog (Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel, 1987), xxv–xxviii (xxxiii).

39 The influence worked in both direction: Jews had a great, and Christians a significant, earlier influence on how *tafsir* developed.

that the Holy Spirit allowed humans involved in the creation and transmission of scripture to make mistakes. Augustine (354–430) knew Bible manuscripts did not always match, and Alcuin of York (d. 804) was pained by the errors in the Latin Bible. Peter Abelard (ca. 1079–1142) suspected copying errors had corrupted the New Testament but did not seem to much care. Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308) allowed that human participants might introduce untruths for a variety of motivations, including under the influence of bribery. In general, scholars were most open to the possibility of errors occurring in copying Bible manuscripts closest to their own time.[40]

An obviously problematic version of the Vulgate was standardized in Paris in the thirteenth century. In reaction, the Dominicans consulted a variety of manuscripts in an attempt to agree on a correct, restored version of the Vulgate, but only to correct recent copying errors; there was no sense that the Vulgate itself might contain errors. Roger Bacon (1220–92), of the rival Franciscan order, pointed out that these corrections just made a bad situation worse, as the multiplication of lists of errors accumulated their own errors as they were copied. Without a technology to reproduce documents uniformly, the thirteenth-century solutions of standardization and correction only added to the chaos.[41]

These half-hearted and haphazard efforts to correct the Latin Vulgate rarely extended to reaching into the Greek texts behind it. Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349), too, knew that the Vulgate manuscripts disagreed, but he did not know Greek, and the disagreements did not encourage him to learn it.[42]

Motivated by their desire to imitate Jesus precisely and historically, in the thirteenth century some theologians, often Franciscan, took a special interest in the historical circumstances of the New Testament and its Greek text. Petrus Comestor (1100–78), for example, located the Gospels within a broader

40 Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Vol. 2: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 8; Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 27, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812202298; Cornelia Linde, *How to Correct the Sacra Scriptura? Textual Criticism of the Latin Bible between the Twelfth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012); Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Wildwood, 1988), 59–63; G. R. Evans, *Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1985), 15–16.

41 Evans, *Language and Logic*, 71; Raphael Loewe, "The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate," in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe, 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1963), II, 146–42.

42 Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), 22; Loewe, "Medieval History," 152.

Roman history.[43] This plain-ken approach met fierce criticism at the time. Peter Cantor (d. 1197) bemoaned the pointlessness of investigating the "vain and superfluous" accidents of history, such as "the locations of places, numbers of years and times, genealogies and technical descriptions of buildings..." The thirteenth century lost interest in the plain ken, and took Peter Cantor's advice to return to "faith and moral doctrine."[44]

A handful of scholars were moving towards treating the Bible as any book, essentially in the plain ken. One thirteenth-century treatise explicitly affirmed that "words are arbitrary." At times, both Nicholas of Lyra and Richard FitzRalph (ca. 1300–60) approached canon content with the plain ken.[45]

Deep-ken Bible: Timeless Symbols

Henry of Langenstein (ca. 1325–97) found proof of deep-ken meaning in the Bible itself, in Jesus's words: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Mt 5:18) and "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (24:35). Thought was above text. Text was fickle in its changing meanings, but the thought, the real meaning, endured.[46]

On similar grounds, John Wycliffe (ca. 1328–84) and his followers strongly resisted the plain ken's vision of the Bible being something like other books. The Bible, Wycliffe argued, was "of infinitely greater authority than other writings" and Jesus "thanks to his vision infinitely excels any of his brothers." Unlike

43 David Luscombe, "Peter Comestor," in *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 109–29 (119).

44 Petrus Cantor, *Verbum Abbreviatum*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1855), CCV, col. 27–28. See Beryl Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools, c.1100–c.1280* (London: Hambledon, 1985), 74, 102–03. For the development of medieval interest in "history" as such, see R. W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 2. Hugh of St. Victor and the Idea of Historical Development," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 21 (1971): 159–79 (163–77).

45 "Commentary on the Barbarismus (attributed to Robert Kilwardby), ca. 1250," in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, A.D. 300–1475*, trans. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 724–34 (730), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199653782.003.0045

46 Henry of Langenstein, "Contra quendam eremitam de ultimis temporibus vaticinantem nomine theolophorum," in *Thesaurus anecdotorum novissimus seu veterum monumentorum*, ed. Bernardo Pezio (Augsburg: n.p., 1721), col. 527–29. See Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002), 178–79.

normal books, the Bible was free from error: if you think you see an error, you are wrong, and you should be more pious and careful when you read it. One manuscript, so sufficiently in line with Wycliffe's thinking that it had once been attributed to him, sniped that the question of how to distinguish the Bible from other books was precisely what "the Antichrist's clerics" ask. In answer, it notes that only "kindred of whoredom seeks signs," an allusion to Jesus's "a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!" (Mt 12:39). Proof of the Bible's exceptionalism lay in the fact that Jesus had left it "to comfort his Church."[47]

Unlike Muslims who so carefully studied how the Qur'an had been revealed in history, through time, most Christians emphasized the uniformity of the Bible, which was pointedly not a historical document. The Bible was united and integral in its content, because a single divine author had inspired the human prophets and evangelists. Each book consonated with the Bible as a whole.

Today, many readers see the Bible primarily as a historical document that also speaks to the present. At the beginning of our period, the reverse was true: the Bible was primarily a present, contemporary, living document that happened to make references to the past. It was ontologically different than other books. Not unreasonably, Henry of Langenstein, for example, was more interested in the moment of cognition in the reader at the time of reading than in the moment of writing many centuries ago.[48]

The Bible was for the resolution of theological arguments—not for study in its own right. Theology, a relatively new concept not appearing as such until the twelfth century, was precisely the study of the Bible—but, by the fourteenth century, theology was less interested in the Bible except as a somewhat underused authority. For fourteenth-century theologians, scriptural events were theological references to their own time, to the fourteenth century. The Bible was less historical than theological, and theology was the discipline that studied the Bible; they read the Bible to understand theology and studied theology

47 John Wycliffe [attributed], "[On the Sufficiency of Holy Scripture]," in *Select English Works*, ed. Thomas Arnold, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1871), III, 186–87; John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols. (London: Trübner, 1905), I, 394. See Stephen Penn, "Truth, Time and Sacred Text: Responses to Medieval Nominalism in John Wyclif's Summa de ente and De veritate sacrae scripturae" (DPhil thesis, University of York, 1998), 153; A. J. Minnis, "'Authorial Intention' and 'Literal Sense' in the Exegetical Theories of Richard Fitzralph and John Wyclif: An Essay in the Medieval History of Biblical Hermeneutic," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 75 (1975): 1–31 (13–15).

48 Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 51–52, 60, 71, 175.

to understand the Bible. Whether theology was about eternal truths or about application to society in 1400, it was not historical.[49]

If the Bible and its content were not historical, what—or better, when—was it, exactly? The deep ken allowed interpreters to find deep meaning in what could have been flat history. The Catalan theologian and sometimes inquisitor Nicholas Eymerich (ca. 1316–99), for example, in a 1377 commentary read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew not as a history of a family tree that stretched back from Abraham to Jesus, but as a discussion of Christology. Similarly, Nicholas of Lyra's commentary on this genealogy offered a poetical and numerical resonance, like a checksum: the 42 generations represented the arithmetical product of 3 (the Trinity) and 14 (the 4 Gospels plus the 10 Commandments). For Lyra, Jesus chose 12 disciples because 12 equals 3 (Trinity) times 4 (Corners of the World). To Eymerich, Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount not just to first-century Palestinians but to persecuted clergy, either atemporally or in Eymerich's own time.[50]

Wycliffe helps us here with explicit justification of such approaches. Wycliffe read the Bible for its eternal and deep-ken truths, truths outside of time and the temporal. They were as close to him in the fourteenth century as they were to people in the first century. If a Bible was historical, it was only because someone was reading and accessing its eternal truths in human time.[51] Against accidental and contingent statements that were not eternal ("I am writing this sentence"), Wycliffe contrasted the statements in the New Testament, which were always true—even before they were written down, even before Jesus said them; Jesus also wrote the Pauline epistles written after his Ascension.[52] There was, therefore, no importance to the verb tenses in the New Testament: "Jesus existed," "Jesus exists," and "Jesus will exist" were all equally true to Wycliffe.

49 Evans, *Language and Logic*, 7, 109; Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 271; Beryl Smalley, "The Bible in the Medieval Schools," in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. Lampe, II, 197–219 (198–99).

50 *Glossa ordinaria*, in Walafrid Strabo [attributed], *Opera omnia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, CXIII, col. 379. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 24–25.

51 Wycliffe, *De Veritate*, ed. Buddensieg, I, 50–51 (ch. 3), 156–58 (ch. 7), 188–90 (ch. 9). See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 162; Beryl Smalley, *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning from Abelard to Wyclif* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1981), 409–12; A. J. Minnis, "Authorial," 1–30.

52 Evans, *Language and Logic*, 113, 155. This is Kynyngham's unsympathetic recapitulation of Wycliff. John Kynyngham, "Secundo determinatio," in Thomas Netter, *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif cum Tritico*, ed. Walter Waddington Shirley (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 47–48. For Paul, see the sermon "Dominica prima Aduentus Domini," in *English Wycliffite Sermons*, ed. Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983–99), I, 475.

Wycliffe's Bible was so timeless that its prophets, in their own lifetimes, might not have understood the true meaning of their own prophecies.[53]

Allegory as a Problematic Interpretative Practice

For centuries, theologians could read the Bible for the literal (plain-ken) and allegorical (deep-ken) senses of its words. Allegorical readings were especially helpful for making obscure or obscene passages clear and useful, and for making passages that superficially were purely historical still relevant to the present and the future—that is, to have the Bible work theologically. The allegorical readings were considered the more important, because they were eternal and more immediately relevant to readers' salvation. The obscurity of the allegorical sense could recommend it as being special, unlike the more accessible literal sense, which Adelard of Bath (twelfth century) described as a "harlot" because it exposes itself indiscriminately to everyone. We are a world away from contemporary Muslim scholars' elevation of *zahir*.[54]

This was not the projection of random interpretation (eisegesis), but the excavation of subsurface meaning in a text, made possible by the Bible's divine author and multiple layers of meaning. A similar deep-ken principle applied to the universe as a whole: because it was created by God, nature itself can have multiple meanings, and a colour, an animal, a number, an event could all enjoy a greater significance (higher, and superior) than their mundane meaning. Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096–1141) insisted that "All nature declares God. All nature teaches the human. All nature generates reason, and nothing in its universe is unfruitful."[55]

However, there had long been hesitation about allegorical interpretation. One medieval commentator, annoyed by an allegory that took the red colour of a sacrificial cow as a reference to the blood of Jesus, complained, "it would be all the same if the cow had been black; the allegory is worthless; whatever

53 John Wycliffe, *Sermones*, ed. Johann Loserth, 4 vols. (London: Trübner, 1887–90), I, 18. See Evans, *Language and Logic*, 17; Peter Øhrstrøm and Per F. V. Hasle, *Temporal Logic: From Ancient Ideas to Artificial Intelligence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 33–38.

54 Thomas Wright, ed., *Biographia Britannica Literaria* (London: Parker, 1846), 97. For an insightful survey of the development of the literal sense out of legal, historical, and grammatical discourses, see John Whitman, "The Literal Sense of Christian Scripture: Redefinition and Revolution," in *Interpreting Scriptures*, ed. Cohen and Berlin, 133–58. See also Alastair J. Minnis, "Figuring the Letter: Making Sense of Sensus litteralis in Late-medieval Christian Exegesis," in *Interpreting Scriptures*, ed. Cohen and Berlin, 159–82.

55 Hugh of St. Victor, "Eruditionis didascalicæ libri VII," in *Opera Omnia II*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, CLXXVI, col. 805. See Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 264.

the colour of the cow, some sort of allegory could be found for it."[56] William of Ockham (1285–1347) complained that interpreters could *finguint* [make up] any allegorical sense they pleased.[57]

For a fictitious example that might not be too great an exaggeration we turn to Geoffrey Chaucer's (d. 1400) Wife of Bath. In the preface to her tale, we can see how she understood the Gospels. She remembered Jesus's pointed reply to the woman at the well, who had denied having "a" husband: "You have had five husbands, and the man who is with you now is not your husband" (Jn 5:18). Oblivious to Jesus's humour and his insinuation, the Wife of Bath had understood the passage as an allegory, and, thus inspired, married five husbands since she was twelve years old (lines 4–6). She had recently been corrected, that it was certainly ("certeyn") better to marry only once, not because she had mis-interpreted a Bible passage, but because she had missed the significance of another: Jesus had only been to one wedding, at Cana (lines 9–13). Note the deep ken's double application: the Gospels only report Jesus attending one wedding, so Jesus had only attended one wedding, and so everyone should marry only once. The wife then cited the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus distributing barley bread, and concluded that this was an encouragement to have lots of marital sex: "In wifehood I will use my instrument / As freely as my Maker has it sent" (lines 149–50). If Jesus had wanted her to remain a virgin, he would have distributed bread of white flour.[58] Chaucer appreciated the dangers of allegorical interpretation.

Henry of Langenstein gave these problems sustained attention. Langenstein explained that the rough and obscure quality of the Biblical text itself encouraged allegorical readings, and that allegorical readings were necessary to pursue the highest goal of reading the Bible. Because of the way(s) language worked and readers read, the meaning of words could be unstable and ambiguous.[59] The real meaning of scripture, Langenstein wrote, was "not to be dragged to that meaning that each and every interpreter presumes for himself." To avoid arbitrary, personal interpretation Langenstein proposed two remedies. The first was tradition, "the traditions of the fathers." The second was "the circumstances

56 Stephen Langton (1150–1228), quoted in Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 261.

57 William of Ockham, *Breviloquim de potestate papæ*, ed. L. Baudry (Paris: Vrin, 1937), 131. See Alastair Minnis, "Material Swords: The Status of Allegory in William of Ockham's *Breviloquium on Papal Power*," in *With Reverence for the Word*, ed. McAuliffe, Walfish, and Goering, 292–310 (301–03).

58 Mk 6 has the feeding of the five thousand, but does not mention the type of bread; Jn 6:13 refers to barley.

59 Henricus de Langenstein, *In prologum bibliae*, Mainz, Stadtbibliothek, Hs I 449, fol. 98va–vb. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 31, 142, 149, 152–53.

of scripture itself": that is, "the meaning of the truth ought to be investigated from people, places, and times; from the situations of speaking, from the ways of speaking the languages or language in which it has been published."[60] Below, we consider both of these solutions, traditions and circumstances.

Viable Alternative 1: Tradition

Tradition had once been an attitude and a way of approaching the Bible, a respectful looking back at the thinkers who came before you, and a reading of the book of eternal truths with centuries of other readers, who could all read with you now because they, like you, were reading eternal truths. In the centuries right before our kickoff, tradition had solidified into a systematic set of ideas.[61]

At the beginning, God was his own authority, and that authority transferred to the Bible he had authored. Then, the Holy Spirit acted as a guarantor, which helped the councils in particular avoid adding new errors to tradition. In the same way, the Holy Spirit guaranteed the preservation of truth during the translation process. Thus, the Vulgate had full divine authority, because Jerome (d. 420) was consonant with tradition when he translated. Although Langenstein urged against bold assertions of the Holy Spirit's intended meaning, he appreciated that divine guarantees preserved meaning even through metaphor: statements about vines were true also when understood to be about Christ. Langenstein noted that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit made the Bible comprehensive with respect to the knowledge necessary for salvation.[62]

A reader could access the intention of the Holy Spirit by interpreting the Bible in consonance with tradition.[63] To understand the real meaning, there must be a "synergy" between the reader, the human author, and the divine author. To access it, the reader needed, in the words of the historian Christopher Ocker, a "well-disposed soul—a soul whose will was habitually trained on God, bent on openness to divine influence, and committed to doing good." Such allegorical

60 Langenstein, *In prologum*, fol. 140va. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 152.

61 Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 76–77.

62 Langenstein, *In prologum*, fol. 232v–3r. See Evans, *Language and Logic*, 9, 24; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 158, 176–78.

63 This comes from Denis, but is still mainstream in our period. Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Genesim*, 5–469, in *Opera Omnia*, 11 vols. (Monstrolii: Typis Cartusiae S. M. de Pratis, 1896), I, 15 (art. 5). See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 154.

reading was prescribed by Langenstein, Wycliffe, and also Matthias of Janov (d. 1393), who made the same point about observing images (see Chapter 15).[64]

Tradition was powerful and omnipresent. It was the reader's atmosphere. It was not a limitation on reading, but a way of making reading possible and relevant. Jean Gerson (1363–1429) knew that the Bible and tradition were consistent, and even Jan Hus (ca. 1370–1415) and Wycliffe read scripture with the intent, perhaps inescapable, of reading it consonant with tradition. Even Langenstein, who explicitly described a process of using empiricism (*per experienciam et discursum ex creaturis*) to understand theological truth, knew that this exploration could never be inconsistent with core traditional teachings.[65] Tradition bounded even empiricism.

This reliance on tradition to have access to true meaning meant the reader, ca. 1400, was less able to access, indeed was less interested in, any historical meaning of the canon. He or she needed to consonate with a long tradition of reading in order to access the deep ken; length of tradition, in a way, approximated the eternal.

Jacques Fournier (ca. 1285–1342), the Antipope Benedict XII, dates from before our period but his commentary on Isaiah 7:14 offers a good example of the relationship between tradition and philology. Fournier knew perfectly well that Isaiah's Hebrew word עַלְמָה *almah* meant "maiden," not "virgin," but he kept the Vulgate's translation *virgo* because it was more accurate than "maiden." He knew this because it was selected by Jerome, and Jerome was a saintly doctor of the Church, who would know Isaiah's true intention. When philology and theology seemed, to us, to butt heads, theology won. This was not in any way truth bowing to tradition; it was tradition guiding us to truth.[66]

64 Wycliffe, *De Veritate*, ed. Buddensieg, 188–90, 202–05 (ch. 9); Matthias of Janov [Matěj z Janova], *Tractatus de Antichristo, Regulae Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, ed. Vlastimil Kybal, 3 vols. (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1911), III, 85–87. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 154–55.

65 Langenstein, *In prologum*, fol. 71vb. See Gustav Adolf Benrath, "Traditionsbewußtsein, Schriftverständnis und Schriftprinzip bei Wyclif," in *Antiqui und Moderni Traditionsbewußtsein und Fortschrittsbewußtsein im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Albert Zimmermann (New York: De Gruyter, 1974), 359–82; Mark S. Burrows, "Jean Gerson on the 'Traditional Sense' of Scripture as an Argument for an Ecclesial Hermeneutic," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Mark S. Burrows, Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 152–72; Helmut Feld, *Die Anfänge der modernen biblischen Hermeneutik in der spätmittelalterlichen Theologie* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977), 60, 69; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 29, 169.

66 Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 165. This is more honest than the sixteenth-century theologians who philologically changed the word, but declined to change the doctrine, which they felt was good enough anyway.

Viable Alternative 2: Human Circumstances

Expansion of Authorship

To understand this second solution, we need to review changes in how the theologians understood causality. Aristotle (384–322 BC) divided causes into four categories and used a bronze statue as an example. The material cause was the bronze, the formal cause was the shape of the statue, the efficient cause was the sculptor or the art of making statues, and the final cause was the statue itself.[67]

This analytical framework was applied to the Gospel. Nicholas of Lyra taught that Jesus was the material cause of the Gospels (since he was their subject), their efficient cause (since he taught the content), and their final cause (since they brought readers to him). Lyra allowed for the human-author to have particular effects regarding the formal cause, seen, for example, in Matthew's focus on Jesus's humanity. Eymerich likewise distinguished among the Gospels, seeing a different emphasis in each, such as Matthew's humanity and John's divinity.[68]

By 1400, the efficient cause had taken centre stage; for a few scholars, mostly English, the other three ("metaphysical") causes had left the theatre entirely. This came with a greater sense that nature had its own necessary processes, and perhaps was therefore predictable. Once the efficient cause had grown so expansive, it was an easy step to identify an equally expansive power, God, who was omnipotent, as the efficient cause of everything. Everything that happened in the universe happened because of God.[69]

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67 Aristotle, *Aristotle's Physics: Books 1 & 2*, trans. William Charlton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 30–31 (II.3; 195b28–196a28).

68 Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 26; Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 269; Kevin Madigan, "Lyra on the Gospel of Matthew," in *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, ed. Philip D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 195–221 (203), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004476653_015; Minnis, "Figuring," 174; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 28; James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 61–71. This is part of an older and broader interest in the *intentio auctoris*. See A. B. Kraebel, "Middle English Gospel Glosses and the Translation of Exegetical Authority," *Traditio* 69 (2014): 87–123 (100–02), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362152900001926

69 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I, q. 45, arts. 3–4. On these paragraphs see Anneliese Maier, *Metaphysische Hintergründe der spätscholastischen Naturphilosophie* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1955), 273–99; Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986), 3–9; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 127–28;

Thus, by 1400, it was well known that God was the ultimate cause, beyond the apparent mundane human causes. Previously, we had God as the author of the Bible and a sculptor as the cause of a statue. Dividing the efficient cause into the ultimate and the immediate allowed greater nuance. In the case of the statue, God emerged from behind the sculptor's shadow to be recognized as the ultimate cause of the statue, the cause that set the sculptor in motion as an intermediary, and that used the sculptor as an instrument.

The reverse happened with Biblical authorship. God was obviously always the ultimate author of the Bible. To complete the analogy, we have to think about the more immediate authors. Theologians took into consideration the human authors—or co-authors, or ghost authors—of the Bible. God had become the ultimate efficient cause of everything, which allowed for intermediate efficient causes, like human authors and natural laws. Perhaps, in doing so, the theologians planted the seeds of their own destruction—attention to human authors accelerated the process of turning the Bible into a historical document, at least as plain-ken as deep, and thus beyond the realm of theologians.[70]

	OBVIOUS	**SUBTLE**		***historiographical frame***
	cause	**ultimate cause**	**immediate cause**	
bronze statue	sculptor	..... God (increasingly)	sculptor (obviously!)	"secularization of theology" (Funkenstein)
Bible	God	God (obviously!)	..... human authors (increasingly)	"secularization of authorship" (Ocker and Minnis)

Table 11.2 Two Kinds of Efficient Causality.

Before, commentators were interested in the ideas beyond the text, the deep-ken ideas that had immediate application and relevance to the commentators' own times. When they wrote of the text's "intention," they looked to the soul's ability to mine a passage for spiritual depth, and the effects of that depth on the soul. By 1400, however, scholars increased their interest in the human authors and their tendencies, particularities, and historical contexts, as well as (cue the Renaissance) the genres in which they wrote. Human authors had become the immediate efficient cause of scripture, and some of the spotlights turned

Julie Loveland Swanstrom, "Creation as Efficient Causation in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (2019): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq20181128165

70 Minnis, *Medieval*, 28–39, 83; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 128–31, 140–41.

to them... but nobody forgot the true reality of a divine author and deep-ken truths.[71]

Echoing this interest in human authors, some contemporary writers themselves became more likely to sign their own works, perhaps even with the date and place of writings. Gerson did this frequently, Wycliffe rarely, Chaucer never—but it became more common through the century. Like visual artists, Bible commentators became more assertive of their own specialness in the fourteenth century (see Chapter 14). They dedicated their commentaries to important prelates and drew attention to their own names by hiding them ostentatiously in puns in their prefaces.[72]

Expansion of the Literal

Over the three previous centuries this shift of authorship from God to his human ghostwriters accompanied a shift of emphasis to the literal meaning of scripture. As the efficient cause had grown to incorporate a wide range of causality, so too the literal grew and became able to serve the same functions as the old spiritual senses of scripture.[73]

The literal sense had, for centuries, been seen as, in some sense, fundamental. Franciscans already in twelfth century, such as Hugh and Andrew of St. Victor (d. 1175), had pursued the literal and historical meaning of scripture. This position, though rare in the Christian world, was common, as we have seen, in the *zahir* of the Muslims and the *peshat* of the Jews.[74]

The divine/human co-authorship described above allowed the literal sense to play theological roles once primarily assigned to spiritual senses. No fifteenth-century theologian met our modern expectation that the literal sense was precisely that intended by the human author. The literal sense was ultimately given by the divine author, which had no necessary connection with the person or historical circumstances of the human author. Nonetheless, this divine/human co-authorship began to allow some divergence of intentions, where the

71 Wycliffe, *De Veritate*, 124–29 (ch. 6), 135–36 (ch. 6), 156–58 (ch. 7), 185–90 (ch. 9), 202–05 (ch. 9). See Minnis, *Medieval*, 20–01, 49–57; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 129, 141–45.

72 Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity*, 173; Smalley, "The Bible," 202–03.

73 Minnis, *Medieval*, 5.

74 Geoffrey Shepherd, "The English Versions of the Scriptures before Wyclif," in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. Lampe, II, 362–87 (384–85); Evans, *Language and Logic*, 47; Robert McQueen Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 89; Smalley, *Study*, 83–93; Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 267.

literal sense was linked to the human author's intention and the spiritual senses to God's.[75]

In the deep ken, Jesus was *literally* in the Old Testament. Prophecy allowed Old Testament prophets to speak of the future Jesus. Influenced by Aristotle via Averroes (1126–98) and Avicenna (980–1037), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) had already made space for this, insisting that the "literal sense is not the figure itself, but it is that which is figured," that which is represented. Aquinas identified the primary sense (*primum sensum*) with the historical or literal one (*sensus historicus vel litteralis*).[76] Nicholas of Lyra listed thirty-two psalms that literally refer to Jesus, or to the Church which developed after him.[77] He described one psalm in which "the literal sense is about Christ; for the sense is literal which is intended by the writer before all else [*primo*]."[78] In a prophecy of Nathan, God declares that the future King Solomon "will be my son" (1 Chronicles 17:13). Lyra noted that its authority was literally fulfilled in Solomon and Jesus, but "less perfectly" in the former and "perfectly" in the latter.[79] Neither Aquinas nor Lyra were pioneers, but their great influence lets them serve as exemplars of the mainstream.

Langenstein took a similar approach. At Jn 8:56, Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." Langenstein used this verse to explain that Abraham, as a historical figure, literally knew the future and could see Jesus there: "While God simultaneously revealed it as an intellectual vision in the intellect, [Abraham] knew the future time of the New Testament through Christ."[80]

None of these interpreters pursued a strictly *literal* literal meaning, but rather sought the literal meaning intended by the author—God. They did not shy away from allegorically interpreting the Old and the New Testaments. Lollards emphasized the literal sense of the Bible, but in the sense of Lyra which included author-intended allegories among the literal. Thus, they could accept allegorical readings of the Old Testament, the parables, and even the main events of the Gospels, such as the entry into Jerusalem and the three Marys at the tomb.

75 Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 141; Minnis, *Medieval*, 86; Evans, *Language and Logic*, 43.

76 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I, q. 1, art. 10.

77 Wilfred Werbeck, *Jacobus Perez von Valencia: Untersuchungen zu seinem Psalmenkommentar* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1959), 120–21.

78 Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super psalterium* (Paris: Ulrich Gering, 1483), at Ps 118 [117 here].

79 Walafrid Strabo [misattribution], *Prologus secundus de intentione auctoris*, col. 29–34, in *Opera Omnia I*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, CXIII, col. 32. Lyra is explicitly talking of a *duplex sensus litteralis*, which he develops out of the more ambiguous impulses of Aquinas; this became popular as Lyra became popular. See Minnis, "Authorial," 5.

80 Langenstein, *In prologum*, fol. 98rb. Translation from Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 84.

Lollards also compiled some fairly traditional commentarial works on the Bible in the vernacular, with an emphasis on the literal meaning.[81]

This expanded literal sense brought additional attention to intentionality. By 1400, the literal sense was closely associated with the divine author's intention, but this identification was far from total. Langenstein distinguished between meanings intended by the Holy Spirit and unintended meanings—but just because a meaning was unintended did not make it false. Even allegorical interpretations wandering beyond the Holy Spirit's intent could remain true. In fact, Langenstein did not restrict this to the Bible. The fables of the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–AD 17/18), writing a generation or two before Jesus, could be applied to Jesus, and could point to truths about Jesus, although Ovid, who was not a prophet, had no such intention: "Many fables of Ovid and others can be adapted as figures and parables to those things which Christ did. And so, as though allegorically, one explains either certain moral or true meanings to apply, which Ovid never understood when he fashioned the fables in this way." Although such Jesus-truths extrapolated from Ovid were true, Langenstein warned of the great danger in reading Ovid this way: readers who recognize that Ovid-extrapolated Christianity was not intended by Ovid might also decide that Old Testament-extrapolated Christianity was not intended by the Old Testament prophets.[82]

Despite these shifts in understanding and approach, spiritual readings continued. There was constant movement from the literal sense of the words of the text to doctrinal, moral, and eschatological understandings of the implications of the text for the Church. Scholars made elaborate use of spiritual senses in preaching, which suggests that people generally took allegory as persuasive interpretation—although perhaps there was a gap between preacher and audience, or a gap between sermons and "high" theology. Allegorical interpretations were almost universally accepted for rhetorical purposes in sermons. A hostility towards too great a love for the literal continued. Some scholars simply concluded that a focus on the literal was bad because it was like Jewish law, which Jesus had made redundant.[83]

Allegorical readings were still used and respected even by Hussites and Lollards. Wycliffe and the Lollards took up Lyra's definition of literal, the sense

81 BodL MS Laud Misc. 200, fol. 112v; BodL MS Rawl. C. 751, fol. 89r–94v. See Anne Hudson, "Biblical Exegesis in Wycliffite Writings," in *John Wyclif e la tradizione degli studi biblici in Inghilterra* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1987), 61–79 (71–27); Hudson, *Premature*, 248, 258.

82 Langenstein, *In prologum*, fol. 139v–140r. Translation from Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 146–47.

83 Smalley, *Gospels*.

intended by the author,[84] but "literal" truth was a complicated issue for him and them. Some of his followers wrestled with Jesus's ignoring his family in order to continue talking to his disciples, whom he called his "mother and brothers" (Mt 12:46). Taking this literally caught Jesus in a lie, as his disciples, male, could not be his mother, female. One Wycliffite denounced this "scorning" of Jesus's words by scholars who "blabber thus for default of wit," and recommended that they be shipped off to Oxford as punishment.[85]

To sum up, on the eve of the fifteenth century, Christians emphasized a deep-ken approach to scripture. Lyra believed that the Old Testament literally—intended by God—referenced the New Testament, but in an expanded literary sense. Wycliffe saw the Bible as an eternal document, entirely dissimilar to other books. Humans were the efficient cause, but God was the ultimate one.

The Fifteenth Century

Muslim Interpretation: Building on Plain-ken Foundations

The fifteenth century saw a continuation of the Muslim emphasis on deep-plain-ken harmony, or even on a more plain-ken approach. 'Umar 'Abd al-Kafi even reported a traditional chronology, actually going back to the seventh century, that re-assembled the chapters of the Qur'an into the sequence they occurred historically, rather than the usual deep-ken beautiful, order by length.[86] 'Abd Allah al-Tarjuman's (1355–1423) plain ken found the Matthew account of Herod doubtful because of human psychology: a despotic ruler would not have asked the Magi to report back Jesus's location, but would have sent a goon to accompany them.[87] This chapter section surveys fifteenth-century Muslim attitudes towards scripture, looking in turn at philology, history, and comparative canon studies.[88]

84 John Wycliffe, *Postilla super nouum testamentum*, BodL MS Bodl. 716, fol. 162r. See *Opus arduum valde*, which is 126r–216r of Brno, Moravská zemská knihovna, Mk-0000.028, fol. 168rv. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 32.

85 Hudson and Gradon, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, I, 370; II, 280–81; Penn, "Truth," 82–83.

86 `Umar b. Muhammad b. `Abd al-Kafi, *Fi `Adad Suwar al-Qur'an wa-Ayatihi wa-Kalimatihi*, in University of Leiden Libraries, Or. 674, fol. 13v–14r. Suyuti mentions a similar chronology, of traditional origin. See Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche, 1909), I, 59–62.

87 Miguel de Epalza, *La Tuhfa, autobiografía y polémica islámica contra el cristianismo de Abdallah al-Taryuman* (*fray Anselmo Turmeda*) (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 280–83.

88 Kenneth Edward Nolin, "The Itqān and its Sources: A Study of *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī with special reference to *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm*

Philology

As our period began, the traditional philological work continued. In particular, scholars became interested in resolving issues in the Qur'an by identifying words as coming from languages other than Arabic. Al-Suyuti wrote two books on foreign words in the Qur'an. One listed 108 words with origins in 11 languages. Zakariyya al-Ansari (d. 1520) and al-Suyuti both took Coptic as a language essentially different from Arabic, one lending itself to falsehood, but useful as a historical explanation. For example, in 19:24, as Mary was in labour, God "called her from below her, 'Do not grieve…'" Exegetes struggled with the meaning of "from below her," which some identified as a Coptic-language "from within her" that the Arabic had taken up. Mary's "flight" into Egypt endorsed an Egyptian language's appearance in this context.[89]

At the same time, we see a philological interest in seeking out early Qur'anic manuscripts. Ibn al-Jazari (1350–1429), born in Damascus, travelled as a teenager to Egypt and collected manuscripts testifying to multiple readings of the Qur'an. He was immensely influential as a scholar; he travelled with Sultan Bayezid I (ca. 1360–1403) to Nicopolis, was later captured and deported by Timur (1336–1405), and died in Shiraz in 1429.[90]

The most prominent philologist of our period was al-Suyuti.[91] Al-Suyuti paid attention to tradition, to how the Qur'an was collected and transmitted. Al-Suyuti had guidelines, called "canons," for distinguishing among readings, and among textual variants. The main concern, by far, was the existence of attestation (*isnad*) and transmission. To this end, he investigated the *isnad* to evaluate their certainty. Lest we mistake him for a "modern" philologist, he discussed a dubious hadith with Muhammad directly. He had himself consulted Muhammad over seventy times while awake.[92]

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al-Qur'ān by Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī" (PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1968); E. Geoffroy, "al-Suyūṭī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Bearman et al., IX, 913–16; E. Geoffroy, "Zakariyyā'," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Bearman et al., XI, 406; Wiebke Walther, "Ẓāhir," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Bearman et al., XI, 387–88; Rippin, "Construction," 173–98.

89 Rippin, "Designation," 437–42.

90 Anna M. Gade, "Recitation," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Rippin, 481–93 (484); Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (New York: AMS, 1978), 150, 202.

91 See al-Suyuti, *La révélation du coran selon al-Suyt: traduction annotée du chapitre seizième de Ǧalāl al-Dn al-Suyūt, al Itān f 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, trans. Jean-Marc Balhan (Rome: Pontificio istituto di studi arabi e d'islamistica, 2001); Elizabeth Mary Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1975); al-Suyuti, *The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Qur'an*, trans. Hamid Algar (Reading: Garnet, 2011).

92 Geoffroy, "al-Suyūṭī," 915.

Even looking at the number and variety of technical terms al-Suyuti used in his investigations suggests how developed philology had become. *Qira'ah* studied how one could vocalize the consonant skeleton in ways to change its meaning. *Ishtiqaq* looked to how the etymology of a word informed a verse's meaning.[93] Al-Suyuti could easily park obscure verses in the *mutashabih* category, verses of dubious meaning.

Still, al-Suyuti balanced his plain-ken philology with a deep-ken recognition of hidden meaning. He held that accusations of inconsistency or contradiction in the Qur'an were false, ill-intended attacks on its dignity. He used medieval strategies to explain away these apparent inconsistencies as forms of rhetoric. Al-Suyuti talked of "signs" or "concealed allusions" bridging the gap between the literal text and the inner meaning. The difficult non-literal language of the Qur'an was acknowledged and thus justified by the Qur'an itself, as at 29:43 ("And these examples We present to the people, but none will understand them except those of knowledge"). Quoting Jesus, al-Suyuti cited parallels in the Gospel, as at Mt 13:13 ("This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand'").[94]

At times, al-Suyuti's explanations were more plain ken, based on the particularities of human and of language. Some scholars suggested that there might be mistakes in the Qur'an, perhaps due to slips of the pen, or perhaps ungrammatical usage of words. Al-Suyuti insisted that neither was possible. To support this, he mustered evidence gleaned from the tradition and the hadith. The companions of the Prophet were eloquent, and they took care to keep out error as the Qur'an was being preserved. Aisha (ca. 613–78), Abu Bakr (573–634), Uthman (ca. 573–656), and others memorized the Qur'an, and wrote it down—sometimes even in the presence of the Prophet. Apparent errors were not in the Qur'an itself but were odd spellings or variant readings.[95]

History

For many scholars, a problem arose when the kens collided in the contradiction between the deep-ken Qur'an and its revelation in plain-ken history. The Qur'an stipulated that all its parts had not been revealed simultaneously, but had been "spaced distinctly" so that "We may strengthen thereby your heart" (25:32). Al-Suyuti recalled a tradition that explains bit-by-bit revelation as "considerate

93 Burge, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti," 288.
94 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 828 (52). See Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 165, 242–44.
95 Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 221.

for the one to whom it is sent." Still, Qur'an scholars were often uncomfortable with its piecemeal revelation, which apparently lacked the power of deep-ken beauty. Mostly they concluded that this was a skillful means, that the awesomeness of Muhammad and the Arabs encouraged God to communicate the Qur'an in the way that best facilitated its comprehension.[96]

Let us examine how al-Suyuti himself negotiated this. Drawing on its own contents as well as outside hadith sources, al-Suyuti explained that the Qur'an descended—in one piece, at one time—from the preserved tablet to the lowest heaven. At 97:1 the Qur'an acknowledges, "Indeed, We sent it down during the Night of Power." Al-Suyuti shifted the referent of "it" from Gabriel to the Qur'an itself. Gabriel had revealed it, piecewise, to the Prophet from 610 until his death, in serial bursts of some five verses each. As 20:114 advised, "do not hasten with [recitation of] the Qur'an before its revelation is completed to you." Only then did the pristine Prophet transmit the Qur'an to his followers. Thus, the eternal revelation descended once, and was then revealed serially in time. This harmonized Qur'anic assertions of single utterance with the specifications of different times of revelation. Al-Suyuti also distinguished between eternal laws, many of which have never been revealed, and those bound by history, which come into effect only upon their revelation.[97]

Al-Suyuti contrasted this process to the non-serial Gospels—which, like the Qur'an, had been revealed during Ramadan—and indeed to the Torah before them, citing Qur'an 3:3 as evidence. There was a long tradition in Muslim interpretation holding that giving the revelation in one piece to the Jews did not work out well for God, who had to force them to accept it. God was improving the process of revelation by making it happen over a duration of time.[98]

The relationship between Jesus and the Qur'an created a specific challenge that al-Suyuti explored with both kens. It was known that Jesus would judge all humans at the end of time, but Jesus had gone to heaven centuries before the Qur'anic revelation. Was it a problem that the judge would be unfamiliar with the law? Initially, al-Suyuti denied the assumption of the question. To the deep ken, the essence of the Qur'an was, more or less, the same as the essence of the Gospels, and they all necessarily consonated at their cores. His ultimate solution, however, was plain ken: since Jesus never died—and indeed was the

96 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 166 (16); Shnizer, "Sacrality and Collection," 164.

97 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 143–47 (10–11); 161–91 (16), 669 (42), 1058–59 (62). See Herbert Berg, "Context: Muḥammad," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Rippin, 187–204 (188); Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 36–37, 176.

98 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 165 (16), 194–97 (17), 686 (42), 750 (44), 1066 (62); 1074 (63); Shnizer, "Sacrality and Collection," 164; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 36–37.

last of the Companions of the Prophet—he had opportunities to study the law with Muhammad during the latter's life on earth (hadith testify that the two prophets had met), and later had an opportunity to study the law with Muhammad in heaven.[99]

That the eternal Qur'an could be the result of, and take place within, a historical process created a space for two especially plain-ken tools of interpretation, abrogation and contextualization.[100]

Works on abrogation became less used in our period, as theologians found other ways to reconcile apparent contradictions. Indeed, al-Suyuti reduced the once-long list of abrogated verses to only twenty. A famous case of possible abrogation was the so-called "Satanic Verses." A long-established, but controversial, tradition held that Satan had slipped verses in support of polytheism into the Qur'an, for 22:52 and 53:19 suggested that Muhammad recognized three local Arabian goddesses. 22:52 revealed that they had been included through the efforts of Satan in the earlier, now abrogated, revelation. This was accepted by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli (1389–1459) but denied by Ibn Kathir.[101]

In contrast, contextualization ("occasions of revelation," *asbab al-nuzul*) continued as a major interpretive strategy. Al-Suyuti improved on—in fact, historicized—this approach by looking beyond the presence of specific "it was revealed" wording to include any information that established a direct link to the historical circumstances of the Prophet. He noted that the context of a revelation might or might not be relevant. Depending on context, a revelation could be intended for a certain specific circumstance or could be meant to be generally binding. Potentially, the revelation's context could be critically important, modifying the true meaning of the revelation, and making that meaning immediate and understandable. Repetition of the same revelation within the Qur'an was explained by the possibility of a revelation having multiple relevant contexts; each context could thus generate a unique utterance. Al-Suyuti divided surahs between Mecca and Medina in a way so skillful as to still be in use today.[102]

Al-Suyuti understood that the Qur'an existed within a wider historical space. He argued that not all of the Qur'an was necessarily direct speech from

99 Fritz Meier, "A Resurrection of Muḥammad in Suyūṭī," in *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism*, ed. Fritz Meier (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 505–47 (539).

100 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "An Introduction to Medieval Interpretation of the Quran," in *With Reverence for the Word*, ed. McAuliffe, Walfish, and Goering, 311–19 (316).

101 Shahab Ahmed, "Satanic Verses," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, IV, 531–35; Powers, "Exegetical Genre," 20–23, 118; Rippin, "Exegetical," 219.

102 Burge, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti," 283–84; Rippin, "Construction," 197; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 126, 177.

God. Both 6:104 and 6:114 were Muhammad's voice, 19:64 was Gabriel's ("And we [angels] descend not except by the order of your Lord. To Him belongs that before us and that behind us and what is in between. And never is your Lord forgetful"), and, in 37:164, the angels said, "There is not among us any except that he has a known position." All this al-Suyuti inferred from context, despite the lack of explicit attributions in the Qur'an.[103] Similarly, with a plain ken on history, al-Suyuti suggested that the Qur'an was not comprehensive towards the prophets collectively. Of the 124,000 prophets counted by al-Baydawi in the thirteenth century, al-Suyuti contemplated the many thousands unmentioned, perhaps because their personal circumstances were too modest to make it into the canon, as for example a prophet who was an Ethiopian slave.[104]

Al-Suyuti had a particular interest in the historical circumstances of the seventh century, when the Qur'an was revealed. He provided a historical reason for the choice of Qurayshi Arabic as the language of the Qur'an: since the Quraysh were resident in Mecca, which saw the most diversity of dialects given its commerce and travellers, they were able to construct an idealized Arabic with the best of each dialect. Thus, Qurayshi Arabic was the most able to communicate effectively.[105] When working on lexicography, al-Suyuti restricted what could be known to what had been known at the time, historically, by the Prophet's Companions.[106]

Ultimately, al-Suyuti's Qur'an recognized the human diversity in the reception of the canon. Al-Suyuti expanded the category of direct revelation beyond the Qur'an, to include God's intention, as perceived by humans. He argued that, because multiple readings of the Qur'an were acceptable, and multiple readings created multiple interpretations, then exegesis must make room for multiple understandings.[107]

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103 Quoted by Hanadi Dayyeh, "The Relation between Frequency of Usage and Deletion in Sībawayhi's Kitāb," in *The Foundations of Arabic Linguistics: Sībawayhi and Early Arabic*, ed. Amal Elesha Marogy (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–98 (81), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004229655_005; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 14.

104 Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Rippin, 234–47 (235).

105 Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 94, 104, citing al-Suyuti's المزهر في علوم اللغة العربية [The Luminous Work Concerning the Sciences of Language and its Subfields]. For this issue in the earlier Muslim tradition see Paul E. Kahle, "The Arabic Readers of the Koran," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (1949): 65–71, https://doi.org/10.1086/370914

106 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 267–91 (22–27). See Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 217.

107 Al-Suyuti, *Le parfait manuel*, 105–06 (5), 109–10 (7), 172–74 (16). See Shabir Ally, "The Culmination of Tradition-based Tafsīr: The Qur'ān Exegesis al-Durr al-manthūr of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2012), 7–10, 316–24; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 35–36, 59.

Comparative Canon Studies

The medieval period's arguments drawing from the comparative study of canons endured into and thrived during our period.

Ibn Khaldun wrote of a Qur'anic Jesus that drew on the historical context provided by the Gospel. In particular, Jesus "abolished some of the laws of the Torah" and "performed marvellous wonders, such as healing the insane and reviving the dead." Because of their jealousy of his success, the Jews petitioned emperor Augustus for permission to kill Jesus. Ibn Khaldun's historical sense increased as he sketched the history of the Christian canon and its human authors. Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew, in Jerusalem; later, John, the son of Zebedee, translated it into Latin in Rome. Luke wrote his originally in Latin, as his intended audience was a Roman official. Peter wrote his in Latin and assigned its authorship to his student Mark, whose name that Gospel bears. Ibn Khaldun noted that the four Gospels were not purely revelation, but had the words of the apostles interwoven with the actual words of Jesus. Paying attention to genre, he concluded that the Gospels focused on "sermons and stories," and, relative to the Qur'an, were less concerned with law-giving.[108]

The main innovation of the fifteenth century came in the use of reliable Arabic translations of the other canons. Even as Arabic translations of the Christian Gospels became more available, many scholars had continued to ignore them, relying instead on anti-infidel summaries or completely fabricated verses. Finally, Ibrahim ibn 'Umar al-Biqa'i (1407–80) did something extraordinary: rather than rely on hearsay, he himself read an Arabic translation of the Bible. This was disconcerting enough to encourage al-Biqa'i to write an apology for this approach. His method paid off, as it allowed him to compare precisely and accurately the Qur'anic narratives with their counterpart in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, envisioning the Qur'an as last in a historical sequence of canons. He quoted specific passages to make the comparisons more precise. He also compared the two non-Islamic canons with each other, citing in one instance the same passage in New Testament and Hebrew Bible variations. Al-Biqa'i's candid criticism of other scholars had earned him few friends, and when colleagues saw him using the Hebrew canon, and in some cases considering it more authoritative than Islamic tradition, they piled on attacks against him. They should have bitten their tongues. He won debates against them and obtained fatwas blessing his unorthodox approach. Although al-Biqa'i disagreed with the

108 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1958), I, 476–78 (ch. 3, sec. 31). Note that Ibn Khaldun's New Testament canon differed from the Christians', as he included, for example, the Letter of Clement.

Christians' ideas of Jesus, he made constructive use of the Gospels to poke holes in their Christology. Jesus was the son of God only in a metaphorical sense. He composed his own new diatessaron, in which references to Jesus as the son of God (at Mt 8:29, Lk 6:35, Jn 1:34, 1:49, Jn 5:31–47) disappeared or morphed into orthodoxy, and he omitted the account of Satan's temptation of Jesus.[109]

Christian Interpretation: Inching towards the Plain Ken

Fifteenth-century Christian exegetes did sometimes bring the plain ken to bear on their canon. John Whethamstede (d. 1465), an abbot of St. Albans, took a plain-ken approach to the comprehensiveness of canon: we cannot assume that the Bible includes every important event. The Gospels' not mentioning an event from Jesus's life does not prove that it never happened. History is bigger than the world described by the canon. Augustine reasonably hints that Jesus resurrected more people than the Gospels record, and Jerome describes the sudden destruction of local idols when the infant Jesus arrived in Egypt—even though the Gospels remain silent on events during his time in the south.[110] This is an unusually non-modern use of the plain ken: most historians today would so keenly feel the centuries between Jesus and Jerome as to entirely discount the latter as historically authoritative.

Triumph of the Literal

The weight of innovation in Christian interpretation concerned not the comprehensiveness of the canon, but emphasis on its literal meaning. The fifteenth century saw a growing consensus that the literal sense of scripture was safer, more closely associated with revelation, more verifiable, and more precisely intended by the human author.

By 1400, the literal sense had pushed the others largely off the stage, but the old spiritual senses found ways to survive. Few preachers could resist imaginative allegorical reads in their sermons. As theologians became more interested in the nature of language itself, they found in the literal a space for

109 Walid A. Saleh, ed., *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqāʿī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004168572.i-224. See Lazarus-Yafeh, "The Sanctity," 125–29; Walid A. Saleh and Kevin Casey, "An Islamic Diatessaron: Al-Biqa'i's Harmony of the Four Gospels," in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text Critical and Literary Aspects*, ed. Sara Binay and Stefan Leder (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2012), 85–115, https://doi.org/10.5771/9783956505041-85

110 BL Cotton MS Nero C VI, fol. 58rv.

multiple literal meanings. A text might bear literally non-literal meanings, for the literal sense had expanded its capacity to explain even non-literal speech. Figurative language could be considered a kind of literal language. This was not a simple change in terminology; the old "allegorical" did not simply become renamed "literal figurative." "Literal" located the meaning within the text, not allegorically beyond it.[111]

To read a text literally gained authority because it was the understanding most closely tied to revelation. Gerson wrote that Jesus revealed the literal sense of scripture, which was subsequently confirmed by martyrdoms and miracles. The literal sense was also considered safer. Where theologians had once admitted that certain Old Testament passages had *no* literal meaning—they needed rather to be interpreted spiritually, as their surface literal meaning was unacceptable—Denis the Carthusian (1402–71) held that "every passage of holy scripture has a literal meaning." To get it, one sometimes has to look beyond "what is first signified by the literal words" to find meaning instead in "what is designated through the thing that is signified by the literal words"—that is, the author's intended meaning.[112] Even the most obscure and strange passages could thus be understood literally. Gerson explained that the literal sense is "not only grammatical, nor strictly logical, but is the one which the holy spirit principally intended."[113] Within that literal sense he, like Nicholas of Lyra, could think in terms of a double literal sense, secondly in terms of the prophets' own realities, and firstly in terms of the Jesus reality to come. Gerson explained that "one is called the interior sense, the other the external; one the superficial, and the other the marrow."[114]

111 Evans, *Language and Logic*, 40–49; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 15–21.

112 Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in librum Job*, in *Opera Omnia*, IV, 362–63.

113 Jean Gerson, "De examinatione doctrinarum," in OC, IX, 463; Gerson, "Réponse à la consultation des maîtres," in OC, X, 239–41. Gerson uses the same "ille quem spiritus […] intendebat" language in "Quae veritates sint de necessitate salutis credendae," in OC, VI, 185. See Fritz Hahn, "Zur Hermeneutik Gersons," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 51 (1954): 34–50; Ian Chrisopher Levy, "Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority among Three Late Medieval Masters," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 40–68, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046909991436

114 Jean Gerson, "Allegationes, seu Sententiae LXI Magistrorum in Concilio Constantiensi circa Propositiones Joannis Parvi," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Lud. Ellies du Pin (Hague: de Hondt, 1728), col. 900. See Evans, *Language and Logic*, 42; D. Zach Flanagin, "Making Sense of It All: Gerson's Biblical Theology," in *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, ed. Brian Patrick McGuide (Brill: Leiden, 2006), 133–77 (154–59), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047409076_005; Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 266–67; Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1967), 288–89; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 22, 31.

Jacobus Perez of Valencia (ca. 1408–1490), an Augustinian Hermit exegete, similarly described the Jesus interpretation of the Old Testament as simultaneously allegorical and literal. An "allegorical" explanation of a psalm in terms of Jesus, he "would even more precisely call literal." Another psalm was to be explained "not only literally, but principally allegorically and literally" in terms of Jesus.[115] Hus argued that *all* the psalms refer to Jesus. For example, Ps 111:4 ("He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered") refers, he asserted, to the Eucharist.[116]

Denis worked in a similar way: when Jacob blessed his son ("You are a lion's cub, Judah," Genesis 49:9), the lion literally referred to Judah, and to David, and to Jesus. Many Old Testament passages describe a vine. This literally referred to (*designatur ad litteram*) Jesus, as well as to the Synagogue and the Church. Denis knew that Abraham bound his son Isaac for sacrifice in response to God's instruction, but he also knew that Abraham bound Isaac as a symbolic prefiguring of Jesus's Crucifixion. Indeed, the connections went in both directions, for Denis also linked Jesus's statement (Jn 21:18) that "someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" to Abraham's dressing Isaac and leading him to sacrifice.[117]

Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) also identified the literal meaning with the author's intention. As an example, he considered Lk 1:51 ("He has performed mighty deeds with his arm…") and specified that the literal meaning was not that God performed mighty deeds with his arm, but rather that God was a powerful actor. Moreover, while verbal expressions naturally carried meaning, God used events to carry meaning. He could engineer history, and thus "ordain things in their course that such a meaning can be derived from them." Savonarola was interested in history (plain ken) but fundamentally understood that history to be infused with meaning (deep ken).[118]

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115 Jacobus Perez de Valentia, *Centum ac quinquaginta psalmi Davidici* (Paris: n.p., 1509), fol. 217r (Psalm 101:8), fol. 230r (Psalm 105:5–11). See Werbeck, *Jacobus Perez von Valencia*, 123–34.

116 Jan Hus, *Historiae et monumentorum Joannis Hus atque Hieronymi Pragensis, confessorum Christi*, 2 vols. (Nuremberg: Joannis Montani et Ulrici Neuberi, 1715), II, 387–88.

117 Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Genesim*, in *Opera Omnia*, I, 289, 444. See Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 267; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 22–23, 85.

118 Savonarola, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of the Poetical Method to Christian Souls*, trans. J. W. Binns, in Binns, "Late Medieval Poetics: The Case of Girolamo Savonarola," in *Estudios de literatura, pensamiento, historia politica y cultura en la Edad Media europea*, ed. Manuel J. Peláez (Barcelona: Universidad de Málaga, 1991), 307–39 (330–31). See Alastair J. Minnis, "Fifteenth-Century Versions of Thomistic Literalism: Girolamo Savonarola and Alfonso de Madrigal," *Neue Richtungen*

For the Spanish secular Alfonso de Madrigal, "El Tostado" (ca. 1410–55), the literal sense was historical: it was the "nude history," that is, what the canon "directly" (*immediate*) expressed, without the mediation of clothes. One could find safety in this literal sense because it was fixed and could not be changed to please us. One could, therefore, talk about it in terms of proofs and fulfillment. Consider his treatment of 1 Chronicles 22:10: "He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever." Literally, in the Old Testament context, "son" referred to Solomon. However, in the New Testament, Hebrews 1:5 took "son" as a reference to Jesus—a fulfillment that only works as a proof if the original reference was literal. Therefore, the Chronicles verse must have two literal meanings, not just Solomon but Jesus as well.[119] In contrast, there were no literal references to Jesus in Virgil (70–21 BC), because he had no intention to refer to Jesus.[120]

This is one of several types of approaches to the idea of a double literal sense. For Hus, it was the consonant collaboration of divine and human authors that leads to the multiple literal meanings. The Council of Constance (1414–18) also saw favourable discussion of a *duplex sensus litteralis* [twofold literal sense], one being "mere grammatical sense" and the other the "'true' inner literal sense."[121]

Trial of the Literal

The stakes for literal-sense issues could be high. Paul's assertion that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6) resonated through the centuries, interpreted and amplified by Augustine, who warned that a literal reading of what was intended figuratively was the "death of the soul," for that subordinates the intellect to the flesh, in the way of non-human animals.[122] Thus it had become something of a maxim: to always hold the literal sense in sacred scripture was to kill one's soul.

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in der hoch- und spätmittelalterlichen Bibelexegese 32 (2016): 163–80, https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486595789-012

119 Alfonso Tostado, "Commentaria in Matthaei," in Tostado, *Opera Omnia*, 12 vols. (Cologne: Gymnicus and Heiratus, 1613), X, part 2, 85–86. Lyra used this same verse. In our discussion of Lyra, we referred to his treatment of a similar verse, 1 Chronicles 17:13.

120 Alfonso Tostado, "In Epistolam D. Hieronymi Ad Paulinum Commentarii," in *Opera Omnia*, I, 30. See Minnis, "Fifteenth-Century," 163–80.

121 Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 110; Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 146.

122 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ed. Timothy George (Nashville: B and H, 2022), 88 (3.5.9).

More, or less, was at stake than soteriology. In the course of the French political crisis, the Duke of Orléans was assassinated in 1407 on orders of Duke John of Burgundy (1371–1419), and Jean Petit (ca. 1360–1411) was assigned to defend the murder. He appealed to the concept of equity, an old idea from Aristotle (ἐπιείκεια) that referred to "a correction of the law where it is defective owing to its universality."[123] That is, while "thou shalt not kill" was always a law, in these particular circumstances it failed to be valid. To drive this point home, Petit argued against taking the commandment literally. He thus invoked 2 Corinthians 3:6: "the letter kills, but charity makes alive."[124] Charity dictated that we not cling heartlessly to the literal senses, and a prohibition on murder should not always be taken literally. Gerson condemned this logic, and Duke John appealed Gerson's decision to the pope.

In the end, the Council of Constance took up the matter: could the literal meaning ever be insufficient? At Constance, the supporters of the murder, the Burgundy/Petit faction, had to show that the literal did not always work. They pointed to examples of obviously figurative language, asserting, for example, that Jesus did not literally come to earth to bring a sword (Mt 10:34). Following Duns Scotus, they argued that context could help sort the figurative from the literal. In the other direction, Jn 15:1's "I am the vine" could have been meant literally—perhaps odd to think that Jesus was literally a vine, but no more odd than transubstantiation. However, the verse's completion said to Jesus's disciples, "you are the branches." The impossibility of disciples literally being branches proved that Jesus was not literally a vine, although he could have been. Following Nicholas of Lyra, the theologians for the defence argued that some Old Testament commandments might have been literally true in that period, but in the course of history had become figurative. Finally, to avoid denying the literal sense of scripture, they appealed to the idea of a double literal sense. The higher of the two literal meanings was true, and we should not cling to the lower literal meaning; that is, the author's intent was true, but we should not depend on the particular words employed to express it.[125]

On the other side, Gerson and the critics of the murder held that the literal sense was always true. They admitted that it was wise to be careful

123 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 99 (V.10 1137b.27).

124 Enguerrand de Monstrelet, *Chroniques d'Enguerrand de Monstrelet*, ed. J. A. Buchon, 12 vols. (Paris: Verdière, 1826), I, 285.

125 Gerson, "Allegationes," in *Opera Omnia*, col. 805, 810, 891. See Karlfried Froehlich, "'Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One's Soul': The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," in *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. E. Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 20–48 (27–29, 35–37).

about clinging too tightly to the particular words of the literal sense, but their opponents' mistrust of words was so totalizing, they protested, that any word could be interpreted to have any meaning, even meanings that were ungenuine or blasphemous—as Jean Petit himself did in justifying this murder. Allowing this eroded the power of the Bible, for, Gerson noted, Jesus said in Mt 5:18 that "not an iota… will pass from the law." Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 was saying that the *letter* kills—not the literal sense, but the bare words themselves. Gerson's team admitted that the bare words could not be taken at face value: that would mean a verse like Lk 9:62 ("No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven") would absurdly and unfairly introduce a deadly professional hazard into the work of farmers. One still needed to find the figurative-literal meaning, by taking into account tradition, rhetoric, and context.[126]

The two sides were not so far apart: one was making a distinction between a higher and lower literal sense, the other between a verbal meaning and an actual meaning within the literal sense. Still, the Duke of Orléans died in the narrow gap between the two.

The verdict went in Burgundy's favour. At Constance, fifty-one agreed with the plain-ken view that the literal was not necessarily sufficient, defeating the twenty-four voices in opposition.[127] Particular exceptions could exist, and its literal truth could degrade over time.

Rhetoric of the Literal

Any scholar trying to understand the literal meaning of canon implicitly answered the fundamental question: was scripture exceptional, or could it be treated like any other work of literature? While the fifteenth century consistently appreciated its uniqueness, in the seventeenth century, mainstream scholars began to accept that the Bible was not exceptional—the great revolution in the study of scripture. The first steps towards that revolution occurred in our period, for some of our scholars took the study of rhetoric in classical literature and applied it to the Bible. Renaissance scholars were interested in ancient rhetoric, and thus more attuned to figures of speech (which could all be safely found in the literal sense), to questions of the subject of a text, and to the nature of the arguments (enthymeme, syllogism) being made. Such criticism of narratives of scripture were common in the ancient world (as in Porphyry, Julian, and Celsus), and thus the recovery of classics led to a more critical attitude towards the Bible.

126 Gerson, "Allegationes," in *Opera Omnia*, col. 928, 945, 967.
127 Froehlich, "Always to Keep the Literal Sense," 27–29, 37–48.

With the rising Renaissance interest in classical rhetoric, readers became more attentive to the texts themselves, and more optimistic that, through texts, readers could connect with writers and know the literal sense of the words. With some hesitation and debate, this approach could be applied even to the Bible, which previously had been more about the eternal truths beyond the text. Gerson extolled the power of rhetoric to reach the meaning of the obscure language of scripture in a way old-fashioned logic could not. "The literal meaning of Sacred Scripture must be understood not according to logical or dialectical force," he urged, "but rather by the expressions usual in rhetorical sermons and by tropes and figurative expressions which common use carries on, with consideration of the literal circumstances from what comes before and after." For Gerson, the Bible "has—like moral and historical knowledge—its own logic, which we call rhetoric." Rhetoric taught the recognition of figures of speech. This, in itself, was a tremendous step towards thinking of the Bible as similar to other kinds of literature, that could or must be read as such—but exclusivism remained dominant.[128]

Savonarola objected vehemently to this treating of canon as poetry.[129] Scripture, to have a spiritual sense, must rest on a historical foundation while reaching meaningfully towards some event, foreseen and foreordained as the intended meaning. Canon required metaphor to be meaningful. In contrast, with poetry, metaphor was purely superfluous, a cheap form of mundane "delight." Poetry was "puerile," sleazy, and toxic; "we sacrifice to demons […] by too freely listening to their words." Here, Tostado echoed Savonarola, with stronger language: poetry was merely an "ugly woman wearing others' makeup." Savonarola further associated poetry with what we would call the plain ken. It was about particularities, none of which have a deep-ken consonance with a generalization beyond their diversity of details.[130]

128 Jean Gerson, "De sensu litterali Sacrae Scripturae," in OC, III, 334. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 110–11, 165–66; Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998), 266–69; Michael H. Shank, *Unless You Believe, You Shall Not Understand: Logic, University, and Society in Late Medieval Vienna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), 111–38.

129 Here, I draw especially from his "Opus perutile de divisione ordine ac utilitate omnium scientiarum" (1491).

130 Savonarola, *On the Advantages*, 321–23; Tostado, "Commentaria," 88. See Ralf Georg Czapla, *Das Bibelepos in der Frühen Neuzeit: Zur deutschen Geschichte einer europäischen Gattung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 240–50, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110263770

Christian Interpretation: Historicizing Manuscripts

1400 saw readers approaching the Bible with greater caution, but little of this was philological. Gerson probably never consulted multiple manuscript sources of a text, let alone puzzled out guidelines on which, of conflicting manuscripts, to prefer. The old principles devised by Augustine and Roger Bacon prevailed unquestioned: that older was more authoritative than newer, that a variation found in many manuscripts trumped a variation found in few. Christian manuscript philology developed only once the theology and philosophy created a space for it.[131]

These ventures would inaugurate a new era of studying Greek in the Far West. In 1397, Manuel Chrysoloras (ca. 1350–1415) moved to Florence and began the first regular instruction in Greek in Renaissance Italy. Of course, Greek had continued to be used in the Byzantine Empire, and so the Near West saw no giant linguistic gap between the read text and the original text—and no giant productive shock when that gap was overcome. John of Ragusa (Ivan Stojković, d. 1443), who had fought against the Hussites at Basel, had been sent by that Basel Council to Constantinople, whence he returned with four dozen Greek manuscripts.[132]

Alongside Greek studies, with the Renaissance we find a more sustained and enthusiastic embrace of philology. Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), Chancellor of Florence, encouraged the collection of texts for comparative purposes. In 1428, Giovanni Lamola (d. 1450), working on an old and error-riddled codex of Cicero (106–43 BC), found value in those errors: "Better to rave with that old one than to know with those careful ones." Still, there was little systemization: Renaissance editors did not identify their manuscript sources nor identify what were their own conjectures.[133]

131 Evans, *Language and Logic*, 71; Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity*, 29, 49.

132 Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (New York: St. Martin, 1970); Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 1–103; Donald R. Kelly, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1970); A. Cataldi Palau, "Jean Stojković de Raguse (†1443): L'influence des ses manuscrits dans la diffusion de la culture byzantine en Suisse et en Allemagne," *Annuaire de l'Université de Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski": Centre de recherches slavo-byzantines "Ivan Dujčev"* 96 (2011): 93–132; Ian Thomson, "Manuel Chrysoloras and the Early Italian Renaissance," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 7 (1966): 63–82.

133 *Epistolario Guarino Veronese*, ed. Remigio Sabbadini, 3 vols. (Venice: la Società, 1915), I, 642. See Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 22–23; Christian Jacob, "From Book to Text: Towards a Comparative History of Philologies," *Diogenes* 47 (1999): 4–22 (9–10).

Although he did not specifically work on Jesus texts, we must mention Angelo Poliziano (1454–94)[134] as a key figure in the development of plain-ken philology in the Far West. With Poliziano, the Far West had, unarguably, caught up with Core philology. First, Poliziano removed a criterion: he went back to the first step of the authority chain that could be reasonably relied on, and built from that. How? Imagine a set of closely related sources A′, A′′, A′′′ and a significantly different source B.

> A′ = Surprisingly, the cow mooed the lawn.
> A′′ = Astonishingly, the cow mood.
> A′′′ = Amazingly, the cow mooed lawns.
> ...
> B = The cow owned a house with a lawn in the suburbs, and once a month mowed.

Which was more likely to be correct? Traditionally, Christian scholars would go with A, as being more numerous. Taking genealogy into account, Poliziano's insight was weighted, and the A-variations counted as a single source, compared to B. Priority was no longer clear. Source A no longer gained greater authority due to its greater progeny. Source A and Source B were now weighted the same.

Poliziano also created a new criterion: his great discovery, or re-discovery, was the principle *lectio difficilior potior*, that the more difficult text is the more powerful one. Manuscript copyists and editors act in history, as humans, with human psychology, and would be more likely to clean up confusion than introduce new confusion; therefore, the more confusing passage was less likely to have been polished, and was more likely to be original. The ugly was true. Clarity implied intervention. Editors (mis)correct apparent errors, which was annoying, since the errors "preserve some fairly clear traces of the true reading which we must restore. Dishonest scribes have expunged these completely from the new texts." From the deep ken, a polished manuscript could be beautiful. From the plain ken, it might well be too good to be true. History was thus brought to bear on text criticism; texts were understood to have existed in history. Reaching far back in tradition, Poliziano found in Cyprian (d. 258) an ally against tradition, quoting, "Custom unsupported by truth is long-lived error." Hoping to impress the Medici, Poliziano developed and popularized this principle.[135]

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134 Grafton, *Defenders*, 47–75; L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968), 119–21, 128–29.

135 Angelus Politianus, *Opera*, 3 vols. (Lyons: Sebastian Gryphius, 1539), I, 484, 612. This translation is from Grafton, *Defenders*, 58. See Cyprian, *Opera Omnia*, Corpus

We can better understand Poliziano's idea using earlier Eastern examples from which he may have indirectly borrowed. In early-tenth-century Kashmir, the scholar Vallabhadeva was an expert on Kalidasa's *Raghuvaṃśa* [Lineage of Raghu], a five-century-old text that had proliferated widely in India, creating a bewildering number of inconsistent manuscripts. How to choose which manuscript was oldest? Against our expectations, Vallabhadeva preferred the manuscript with the most odd and obscure (*aprasiddha* अप्रसिद्ध) passages.[136] Similarly, in China two centuries later, perhaps independently from Vallabhadeva, the scholar Wu Yu 吳棫 (ca. 1100–54) most valued texts that were *jiqu-aoya* 詰屈聱牙, "query-curling and tooth-twisting."[137] Why? To these scholars, as to Poliziano, a manuscript that was straightforward and polished was suspicious. You and I are probably sympathetic to this rule and to the plain-ken sensibility behind it. The plain ken accepts and values apparent errors as guarantees of authenticity, because truth is stranger than fiction. A recent dissertation announced in its preface that "the mistakes contained herein provide evidence that this is my own original work."[138]

Lorenzo Valla

Poliziano's contemporary Lorenzo Valla was the great Jesus philologist of the century. Valla was painfully aware of the problem in the history of manuscript transmission. Noting Jerome's similar concerns, already in the fourth century, Valla reasoned, "if within just four hundred years those streams were flowing so muddily from the source, it is evident that after a thousand years—for it has been almost as many between Jerome and the present—this stream, never having been cleaned, has in some parts amassed filth and slime." Valla understood that Jerome could make mistakes in choosing one Greek manuscript over another, and that he could make mistakes in translation.[139] Valla's highly

Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 3 (Vienna: Geroldi filium, 1868) 806–07. Here, Cyprian is following Tertullian, and commenting on Jn 14:6, where Jesus identifies with *veritatis*.

136 *Vallabhadeva's Kommentar (śāradā-Version) zum Kumārasambhava des Kālidāsa*, ed. M. S. Narayana Murti (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1980), 27. See Sheldon Pollock, "What Was Philosophy in Sanskrit?," in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015), 114–36 (121).

137 葉國良, 宋人疑經改經考 (Taipei: 國立臺灣大學出版委員會, 1980), 49.

138 Richard Oakes, Jr., "The Cross of Christ: Islamic Perspectives" (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2013), xxi.

139 Lorenzo Valla, *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, ed. Alessandro Perosa (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), 6. See Christopher S. Celenza, "Lorenzo Valla's Radical Philology: The 'Preface' to the Annotations to the New Testament in Context," *Journal*

unusual solution to this squalid stream was to turn to the Greek manuscripts, which revealed problems in the Vulgate text.[140]

First, Valla ruled that the Vulgate was inaccurate in its translation of the Greek. Take 1 Corinthians 15:51, for example: the Vulgate had "we shall all rise, but not all of us will be changed." The Latin differed from the original Greek, twice, and each difference loomed large over questions of Jesus's Resurrection. The Greek had "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." Valla explained the corruption by looking to Jn 5:28–29 ("all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life"), which suggested that everyone would be dead ("in the tombs") before resurrection. Here, Valla was not looking for a theological answer in the John verse, but instead used it to explain a plain-ken response: the copyist who introduced the corruption wanted to make the verse in Corinthians consonant with the verse in John.[141]

Valla psycho-historicized copyists in other examples as well. They smoothed out, incorrectly, correct readings that were *difficilior*, more difficult to understand. They modified the tenses of verbs in Mt 21:26 in order to make the prophecy consonant with the first-century setting.[142] Valla came across several Vulgate manuscripts that removed "false" from "prophets" in Lk 6:26, radically changing the text's meaning; here, he again imagined a copyist who was influenced by the "prophets" in 6:23, where they were mentioned without "false." Mt 17:2 described the transfiguration of Jesus, when, according to the Vulgate, his clothing became as white as *nix* [snow]. The original Greek, however, instead compared the whiteness to φῶς *phos* [light], and Valla suspects the original Latin translation *lux* [light] evolved into *nix*, perhaps due to the two words' similar appearances—"lu" and "ni" can appear manuscripts identically as three

of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 42 (2012): 365–94 (380–82), https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-1571912; Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 35.

140 On Valla, see Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 32–69; Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo e teologia* (Florence: Instituto Pa lazzo Strozzi, 1972), 353–58; Luce Giard, "Lorenzo Valla: la langue comme lieu du vrai," *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 4 (1982): 5–19; Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship*, 32–33; Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009); Debora Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 17–21, 47–48; David M. Whitford, "The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (2008): 26–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/ren.2008.0027; Lorenzo Valla, *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, ed. Alessandro Perosa (Florence: Sansoni, 1970).

141 Lorenzo Valla, *Annotationes in Nouum Testamentum*, in *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1962), I, 869; Valla, *Collatio*, 212–13. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 55–56.

142 Valla, *Annotationes*, I, 818; Valla, *Collatio*, 63.

short vertical strokes—or perhaps in consonance with the same discrepancy present in Mk 9:3.[143]

Valla's second criticism of the Vulgate was that it was inelegant and ungrammatical. The Vulgate was sometimes too literal in its translations. Lk 1:79 in the Vulgate used an infinitive (*illuminare*) after a gerund (*dirigendos*), an order Valla found stylistically offensive. Mk 4:41's *alteruter* was used by the Vulgate as reciprocal ("each other"), but Valla found no one else before the fifth century using it in this way. Its classical meaning was, rather, disjunctive ("either one or the other").[144]

At times, this was philology without the plain ken. Valla was reading the text against a deep-ken sense of how Latin, always, should be—not taking into account changes in time, or among cultures: he was annoyed by Mt 2:4's *principes sacerdotum* [chief priests], since *pontifices* [pontiffs] was more elevated—imposing Latin normative terms on Jewish culture. Similarly, he discovered that the Vulgate omitted a final clause ("for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever") from the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:13), which the Greek manuscripts preserved—in this case, however, he did not allow for the historical nuance necessary to realize that the missing clause was actually a late importation from the Greek orthodox liturgy. Here the Latin reflected the original better than the Greek, but for the ahistorical facet of Valla's philology any Greek manuscript was better than any Latin manuscript.[145]

More often, Valla made creative use of the plain ken's sense of history. His sharpest philological critiques were to expose texts as not being authored by their nominal authors. The most famous was the Donation of Constantine. According to the Donation, the Emperor Constantine gave to the pope authority over the patriarchal sees at Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. Valla, however, objected to this idea: "How in the world—this is much more absurd, and impossible in the nature of things—could one speak of Constantinople as one of the patriarchal sees, when it was not yet a patriarchate, nor a see, nor a Christian city, nor named Constantinople, nor founded, nor planned!" Valla noted that the Donation of Constantine had consonance with neither the language nor the culture of that Emperor's fourth-century world. Valla unravelled the Donation's

143 Valla, *Collatio*, 55. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 43; Celenza, "Lorenzo Valla's Radical Philology," 378.

144 Valla, *Annotationes*, I, 825 (Mk 4), 830 (Lk 1); Valla, *Collatio*, 102 (Lk 1:79). See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 50; Celenza, "Lorenzo Valla's Radical Philology," 374–75; Jacques Chomarat, "Les Annotations de Valla, celles d'Erasme et la grammaire," in *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle*, ed. Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel (Geneva: Droz, 1978), 211–12.

145 Valla, *Annotationes*, I, 806, 810 (Mt 2, 6). See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 45–46; Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, 19.

description of the imperial clothing as "the purple mantle and scarlet tunic" by understanding it as a concatenation of two Gospel verses: "Because Matthew [27:28] says 'a scarlet robe,' and John [19:2] 'a purple robe,' this fellow tries to join them together in the same passage."[146]

We can contrast that with less plain-ken engagement with the Donation. For example, John Whethamstede (d. 1465) defended the Donation against Reginald Pecock (ca. 1395–1461): Whethamstede listed many sources testifying to the truth of the Donation, but did not care that none of the sources were from the period of the Donation. Similarly, although neither Mark nor Matthew mentioned it, the self-destruction of local idols in Egypt upon the Infant Jesus's arrival was certainly true, Whethamstede held, because Jerome had taken the incident seriously. The plain ken would be perplexed by both arguments.[147]

Like a bull in the church library, Valla exposed, by demonstrating spurious authorship, a number of other Jesus-related texts. The Apostles Creed, as a result of poetic-numerical analysis, had long been associated with Jesus's disciples: each of twelve disciples had written one of the Creed's twelve articles, with deep-ken numerical consonance. Valla demonstrated that the Creed was created by the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century. Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned that the eclipse occurring at the death of Jesus (Mt 27:45) also occurred in Athens, but no Greek sources confirm this; Valla concluded, then, that this text's author was a later writer, now known as Pseudo-Dionysius. Because Jerome did not use the Vulgate when he quoted from the Bible, Valla argued, he was unlikely to be its translator.[148]

Thus, Valla was one of the first (excluding many Greeks) to supplement the study of Latin manuscripts of the Vulgate (he used four) with a return to Greek manuscripts (he used at least seven). He was the first person in the Latin Far West to really work with the New Testament's Greek in over a millennium. He never, however, attempted to do his own Greek translation or to systematize the variants he found.[149]

Valla did little more than challenge authorship, and otherwise mostly conserved tradition and sometimes repaired its failings. He offered, rather than formally proposed, changes to the Vulgate. Although Valla used his philology to push against the more reaching ideas about confession and predestination, he did

146 Lorenzo Valla, *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine*, trans. Christopher B. Coleman (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1922), 15, 94–95, 103–17.

147 BL Cotton MS Nero C VI, fol. 56v–58v. See E. F. Jacob, "*Florida Verborum Venustas*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 17 (1933), 274–78.

148 Lorenzo Valla, *Antidoti in Pogium* and *Apologia pro se & contra calvmniatores*, in *Opera Omnia*, I, 360–61, 800; Valla, *Annotationes*, I, 837 (Lk 16) See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 47, 50, 65.

149 Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 47.

not push too far.[150] Valla presented himself, and I believe understood himself, not as an enemy of the Bible but as its protector. When Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) denounced Valla's methods as "darts cast" at Jesus, Valla snarled that he sought not to "declare war on Christ," but to serve him. Valla's *Adnotations* skipped the 1 Corinthians issue on the Resurrection, and refused to pursue the corruption at Lk 1:29 that he had noted elsewhere, "lest I appear to doubt reliance (*fide*) on scripture."[151] In 1444, Valla was summoned before the Inquisition of Naples after he questioned the traditional authorship of the Creed and the Abgar letter. Although Valla characterized the Church itself as unversed in the matters he was discussing, he agreed to believe whatever the Church believed.[152]

In dedicating his *Annotations to the New Testament* to Pope Nicholas V (1397–1455), Valla framed his work as answering a papal claim: "And you, Nicholas V [...] owing to your unbelievable zeal for the Christian religion, seem without even saying so to order those learned in Greek to find those places in the New Testament where, like certain places in a temple, it is 'leaking', so to speak; and then to report those places back to you." He claimed a new authority in a plain-ken way. Around 1450, he defended his translation against Bracciolini thus: Valla did "not correct Sacred Scripture, but rather its interpretation, nor am I being insulting in this, but rather pious. Nor do I anything other than convey a better translation than the prior translator, so that my translation, if it is true, would be called Sacred Scripture, not his."[153]

Desiderius Erasmus

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) represents a major shift towards recognizing and valuing historical contexts.[154] Earlier authors had shown some interest in

150 Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 64.

151 Valla, *Antidoti*, I, 341, 830. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 56, 64–66.

152 Luigi Amabile, *Il Santo Officio della inquisizione in Napoli narrazione con molti documenti inediti*, 2 vols. (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1892) I, 77. English scholarship has incorporated a quite brash translation of this source: e.g., "He could not resist adding that it was quite true that she knew nothing" (Grant, *A Short History*, 101). Actually, the Italian is ambiguous: Valla could be saying that the Church is ignorant of, or ignores, the matter.

153 Lorenzo Valla, *Antidotum Primum: La prima apologia contro Poggio Bracciolini*, ed. Ari Wesseling (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1978), 112. See Celenza, "Lorenzo Valla's Radical Philology," 365, 380.

154 The literature on Erasmus is immense. See, in particular, Peter Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus: Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 18–19, 186, 238–39; Heinz Holeczek, *Humanistische Bibelphilologie als Reformproblem bei Erasmus von Rotterdam, Thomas More und William Tyndale* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); Greta

the world of the historical Jesus. Denis the Carthusian used local Jerusalem agricultural geography to find a "probable" interpretation for a Gospel passage. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) created his prediction for the return of Jesus by studying Jewish calendrical knowledge and periodization.[155] Erasmus was more consistent in this approach, and applied it more broadly.

Influenced by Valla, Erasmus made use of philology, but he tended to look more at phrases than at individual words and valued capturing nuance rather than being technically correct. In 1509, Erasmus began to collect and collate manuscripts of the New Testament, using among others those brought back by John of Ragusa; Erasmus had great faith in scripture but doubted scholars' ability to interpret it ("conjecture").[156]

Erasmus wanted to jump the chain of authorities: He had a suspicion of recent tradition, and an enthusiasm for the early days. He praised the English scholar John Colet (1467–1519) for "trying to bring back the Christianity of the apostles, and clear away the thorns and briars with which it is overgrown." Recognizing that dogma was historically conditioned, Erasmus reflected that "I could have the same opinions as the Arians and Pelagians if the Church had accepted what they taught."[157] Poking fun at tradition, Erasmus mentions a story of a priest who, over a number of years, had misread the liturgical word *sumpsimus* ("we have taken") as the non-existent word *mumpsimus.* Corrected,

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Kroeker, *Erasmus in the Footsteps of Paul* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662698; Friedhelm Krüger, *Humanistische Evangelienauslegung: Desiderius Erasmus von Rotterdam als Ausleger der Evangelien in seinen Paraphrasen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986); Hilmar Pabel and Mark Vessey, ed., *Holy Scripture Speaks: Studies in the Production and Reception of Erasmus' Paraphrases on the New Testament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Hilmar Pabel, "The Prince of Peace: Erasmus' Conception of Jesus," in *The Unbounded Community: Papers on Christian Ecumenism in Honor of Jaroslav Pelikan*, ed. William P. Caferro and Duncan Fisher (New York: Garland, 1996), 127–48; Albert Rabil, Jr., *Erasmus and the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1972); Erika Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 156–60; Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, 19–25.

155 Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Genesim*, in *Opera Omnia*, I, 445. See Brian Ogren, "The Forty-Nine Gates of Wisdom as Forty-Nine Ways to Christ: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus* and Nahmanidean Kabbalah," *Rinascimento* 49 (2009): 27–43 (32).

156 Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 59; E. J. Kenney, *The Classical Text: Aspects of Editing in the Age of the Printed Book* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 76.

157 Erasmus, "Erasmus to Willibald Pirckheimer, 19 October 1527," in *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1906–58), VII, 216. Translation from C. Augustijn, "The Ecclesiology of Erasmus," in *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. Joseph Coppen, 2 vols. (Brill, Leiden, 1969), II, 153. See J. A. Froude, *Life and Letters of Erasmus* (New York: Scribner, 1948), 48.

the priest decided the mistake had gone on too long to change now and declined to replace the "old" *mumpsimus* with the "new" *sumpsimus*.[158]

We can see this from another perspective by looking at his critics. In opposing Erasmus, the theologian Martinus Dorpius (1485–1525) appealed to tradition:

> It is not reasonable [*consentaneum*] that the whole church, which has always used this edition [the Vulgate] and still both approves and uses it, should for all these centuries have been wrong. Nor is it probable [*verisimile*] that all those holy Fathers should have been deceived and all those saintly men who relied on this version when deciding the most difficult questions in general councils...[159]

With this approach to tradition, Erasmus argued for a number of specific policy changes based on plain-ken philology. Erasmus called for the moderation of Lenten rules, preaching rooted in scripture, and better instruction and preparation for the Eucharist. He used philology to show that Jesus told his hearers to *repent*, not (as the Vulgate ran) to "do penance," thus undermining support for the sacrament of confession. Erasmus accepted that Bohemia's Utraquists should be allowed to select their own priests, in part because it had once been normal, historically.[160]

The New New Testament

Like his attitude to tradition generally, Erasmus recognized the goodness and reliability of the original scriptures, and hoped to correct corruptions that had entered the manuscript tradition. Erasmus knew that even though the Bible itself held no errors, they could creep into its manuscripts.

Erasmus's most enduring contribution to the Jesus cult was his edition of the Greek New Testament. This was accidental, for his intent was to do a new Latin translation. To defend this against monogamous lovers of the Vulgate, he also worked up a Greek text, corrected against multiple manuscripts. Erasmus

158 Erasmus, "Erasmus to Henry Bullock, August 1516," *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen and Allen, II, 321–29.

159 Martin van Dorp, "Martin van Dorp to Erasmus, c. September, 1514," in *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen and Allen, II, 14. English translation from *The Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 298–445* (1514–16), trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson, *Collected Works of Erasmus* [*CWE*] 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 21 (ep. 344).

160 Erasmus, "Erasmus to John Slechta, November 1, 1519," in *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen and Allen, IV, 113–19. See Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 3–4; David Wright, "The Reformation to 1700," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, ed. John Rogerson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 198–99.

wanted an updated, usable Latin New Testament so that more people could use it, and included the Greek to give his Latin greater weight. This is why he called it in early editions the *Novum Instrumentum* [The New Instrument]—his focus was updating the Latin Vulgate. Thus, Erasmus was less a Greek specialist than a reformer trying to make the canon more accessible—a limited version of the impulse behind vernacular translation. He similarly prepared his *Paraphrases* with the intent that the Gospels become available to "the farmer, the tailor, the stonemason, prostitutes, pimps, and Turks." Again, drawing from history, Erasmus insisted on the possibility of translation sufficient, with the help of commentary, to preserve essential meaning: "the evangelists did not fear to write in Greek just because Christ spoke Aramaic. The Romans were not afraid to translate the apostolic speech into Latin, that is, to set it forth for the indiscriminate multitude."[161] In the *Paraphrases*, Erasmus updated the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary (Lk 1:28) to decrease the awesomeness and increase the human. Erasmus himself described the salutation as an "amorous greeting."[162]

Erasmus used six partial manuscripts, all relatively recent, from the previous six centuries. The Vulgate still played a role. When Erasmus suspected corruptions in the Greek manuscript corpus he used instead the Vulgate. He even translated from the Vulgate back—or indeed for the first time—into Greek to make additions to those manuscripts. In one case, however, he found a Greek manuscript was likely corrupted precisely because it consonated with the Vulgate.[163]

Let us consider Mt 27:9, which attributed to Jeremiah a quotation that was in fact from Zechariah. Why? Erasmus suggested that was the error either of Matthew or of a later scribe. Perhaps Matthew quoted from memory and erred. Alternatively, Erasmus suggested this could be from some lost apocryphal

161 Erasmus, "Paraphrase on Matthew," in *New Testament Scholarship: Paraphrase on Matthew*, ed. R. D. Sider, trans. D. Simpson, CWE 45, 17. See Paul Botley, *Latin Translation in the Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti, and Desiderius Erasmus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2008), 115–63; William W. Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (1996): 35–53; H. J. De Jonge, "Novum Testamentum a Nobis Versum: The Essence of Erasmus's Edition of the New Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984): 394–413; Evans, *Language and Logic*, 78; Wright, "Reformation," 198–99.

162 From "Ave, gratia plena" to "Ave et gaude, virgo gratiosa." Erasmus, "Apologia ad Monachos quosdam Hispanos," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Jean Leclerc, 10 vols. (Leiden: Lugduni Batavorum Vander 1703–06), IX, col. 1084.

163 Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 233–37.

passage of the Old Testament. We have to adopt a variety of approaches, Erasmus advised, just as Jesus used a *varietas* of tactics in the Gospel.[164]

Careful reading of the Bible text allowed Erasmus to poke at theology. He found no evidence in scripture that Jesus's words matched those spoken by priests when celebrating the Eucharist. He noted that in Greek the word "God" had the definite article, but not the word "son," a finding that would later have major anti-Trinitarian implications. In 1 Corinthians 11:24, Paul recalls the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. In the Vulgate they are "receive, eat, this *is* my body" (emphasizing simultaneous speaking and consecrating). In the original Greek, however, they more resemble "receive, eat this my body" (suggesting that he was speaking and giving something that had been previously consecrated).[165]

Erasmus, suspicious, omitted the Johannine Comma (1 Jn 5:7–8) from his first and second editions. A now debunked story recalls that in response to criticism he agreed to include the Comma if a single manuscript would testify to its inclusion. A Franciscan at Oxford produced such a manuscript, and although Erasmus suspected it had been produced only after he had issued his challenge, he included the Comma in his third edition. In fact, he did indeed obtain a copy of a Greek manuscript that had the Comma, but no evidence suggests that he thought it had been produced to meet the alleged challenge. He rather believed that it had been produced during the Council of Florence-Ferrara (1438–45) to align with the Vulgate.[166]

Erasmus's New Testament was hugely successful. Knowing of the simultaneous work on the Complutensian Polyglot Bible in Spain (see below), he rushed his first edition, which he later called "precipitated rather than edited"; it was riddled with errors. His observation that sacred texts were bestsellers, that "the world goes crazy for them," applied no less to his own work. Dozens of pirated editions appeared in the major publishing cities of Europe. His fourth edition, in 1527, the most famous and enduring, took advantage of the Complutensian Polyglot's text, which was, for the most part, superior to what he had been using. That edition included the Vulgate, facilitating the comparison

164 Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus*, 144; Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, 27–28; Erasmus, "Annotations," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Leclerc, VI, col. 139–40; Erasmus, "Ratio verae theologiae," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Leclerc, V, 92–93.

165 Erasmus, "Apologia ad Monachos quosdam Hispanos," col. 1015–94; Erasmus, "Annotations," col. 205, 243, 716.

166 Henk Jan De Jonge, "Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 56 (1980): 381–89 (383) knows of no mention of this promise before Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Cadell, 1823), 107–08. See also Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 101.

of that text with Erasmus's new Latin. Critics approved of the Greek text—given the widespread ignorance of Greek they were passing judgment more on the idea than on any specifics in the text itself—but Erasmus's Latin stirred up controversy.[167]

History and Intentionality

Erasmus distinguished between the essential, deep-ken meaning of Christianity and the plain-ken context in which it was delivered. He noted that "there are some [passages] which pertain to the disciples and those times; there are others for all times. Some things are conceded to those times' affections; a few are laughed at ironically."[168] This made knowledge of historical circumstances necessary. Knowing history, like knowing languages, improved the accuracy of translation.

This distinction, far from consigning history to the rubbish heap, allowed Erasmus to use it in his interpretation. He still created a historicizing space in which to interpret scripture. In Mt 26:45, Jesus advises his disciples to "sleep and rest"—when they were already asleep. A long tradition explained this oddity through allegorical interpretation. Erasmus, however, broke with this tradition: "it's possible the speech of Christ has some irony." Moving beyond Valla's focus on the words themselves, Erasmus expanded on the "dictionary definition" of *salutaveritis* (Mt 5:47), "to greet," to include a kiss and an embrace, because in the past that was a part of Jewish, Greek, and Roman culture (*mos*). Allegory was replaced by nuance (intentionality), and theology shifted to an imagined human lived experience and social praxis.[169]

In contrast to the historical Jesus, who used simple and clear language, "today" theologians employed "newly coined expressions" and "strange sounding words." Jesus never referred to Aristotle, nor used abstract exoticisms like "primary and secondary intentions" or "quiddities."[170] Erasmus described

167 Erasmus, "Erasmus to Nicholas Ellenbog, April, 1516," *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen and Allen, II, 226; Erasmus, "Erasmus to Francis Asulanus, March 18, 1523," O*pus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen and Allen, *V, 253. See* Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 234–35; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 102–03.

168 Erasmus, "Methodus [1516]," in *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Annemarie and Hajo Holborn (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1964), 158. See Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 58–97.

169 Erasmus, "Annotations," col. 33, 136. See Mt 26:45. Of course, Erasmus still appreciated the importance of allegory. See Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, 34–35 and Grant, *A Short History*, 102.

170 Erasmus, "Methodus," 155. See Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 67.

the language of the New Testament as "how waggoners and sailors talked then." Any infelicities might offend modern ears, but "in those days it was advisable to write like that."[171] Since we are only able to work with a Greek approximation of Jesus's exact words, we need to understand language and context to be able to jump from that approximation to Jesus's own meaning. "If Christ's sayings survived in Hebrew or Syriac, handed down, that is, in the same words in which he first uttered them," Erasmus fantasized, "who would not love to think them out for himself and to weigh up the full force and proper sense of every word and even every letter? At least we possess the next best thing to this," the Gospels.[172] In another passage he marvelled, "now if we would learn from the historians' writings not only the location, but the origin, mores, institutes, cultic practices, and genius of the nations where the actions of the apostles happened, or to whom they wrote, it is amazing to say how much light, and even life, would be added to the reading."[173]

This historicizing attitude powerfully shapes Erasmus's Jesus as a person in historical time. Erasmus thus emphasized Jesus's humanity—his human nature suffered under the fear of death, a fear expressed in tears. There were limits on the ways Jesus could be human. Erasmus was amused by Colet's understanding of a Jesus so full of an inhuman love as to overcome his own suffering; he teased Colet by mocking an even more human simile, comparing this transcendent Jesus to "blind" lovers "amid the darkening gloom and biting winds of a freezing night, they burn with passion; sleepless nights cannot weary them, hunger cannot touch them, and trysts with ghosts and goblins hold no terrors for them." Erasmus, instead, linked Jesus's suffering and his love in a mutually reinforcing relationship: "As his sorrows were heaped up like a pile of kindling the inextinguishable flame of his love burned ever brighter."[174]

Erasmus's 1523 treatment of Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 310–67) illustrates how, in his eyes, tradition could itself be historicized, as well as his intellectual caution more generally. Erasmus had to defend the very nature of his investigation into a saint's writings: "Reverence is the due of ancient authors, especially those authors who are recommended by the sanctity of their lives." However, "this reverence does not exclude a critical reading of them." Here Erasmus sought "to emend the text of ancient authors which have been corrupted in various

171 "Erasmus to Adrian VI, August 1, 1522," in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1252 to 1355, 1522 to 1523*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, CWE 9, 149 (ep. 1304).

172 Erasmus, "To the Reader," in *Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 298–445*, trans. Mynors and Thomson, 203–04 (Allen and Allen, *Opus Epistolarum*, ep. 373).

173 Erasmus, "Methodus," 153–54.

174 Erasmus, "A Short Debate Concerning the Distress, Alarm, and Sorrow of Jesus [Disputatiuncula de taedio, pavore, tristicia Iesu]," in *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, trans. Michael J. Heath, CWE 70, 43, 60–66, 80.

ways through fault of the times and copyists," and through "the rashness of half-learned and foolhardy men." Looking at Hilary's writings, he first noted extensive later editions, and realized that typically copyists had edited out Hilary's mistakes in not teaching the divinity of the Holy Spirit because they did not believe ancient theologians could make mistakes; they thought they were restoring the text to its original truth. Hilary and the subsequent copyists of his work disagreed on whether Jesus felt pain, and the copyists changed any text that they perceived as errors. Each human, "however learned and keen-sighted he may be, on occasion stumbles and gropes blindly." Only scripture was free from error. Erasmus also noted that Hilary's historical context influenced his writing.[175]

In another work, Erasmus explained that the Church itself developed through time: "Now the church has passed through its infancy, its coming of age, its maturity, and perhaps its old age as well; and further, although there is such a great variety of epochs and countries." Because of this variability of time and places, Erasmus criticized those who did not adapt their standards of evaluation to the historical moment: "Some examine all writings by the standards of the present age, thus showing themselves at one and the same time ungrateful towards those worthy of their gratitude and hurtful to themselves."[176]

Erasmus saw this same history, with the plain ken, and possibility of error even in the first century, even in the Evangelists, despite their inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Each Gospel author had a distinct role. In the *Paraphrases*, Erasmus had Matthew explain that he put the oral tradition into writing to protect it and stabilize it, and predict—using Erasmus's future knowledge—that someday the written will be more respected than the oral. Erasmus saw Luke as a historian acting in time to make decisions about the reliability of various sources available to him. Themselves existing in history, these human authors could make mistakes. Even Jesus's first followers were just "men, who were ignorant of certain things and errored in some things."[177]

Critics charged that Erasmus impiously and incorrectly rendered the Bible a human artifact. One of his opponents, disapprovingly, captured the essence of the Erasmian plain ken well: "You seem to suggest that the evangelists wrote

175 "Erasmus to Jean de Carondelet, January 5, 1523," in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1252 to 1355*, trans. Mynors, 246–49, 274.

176 Erasmus, "Erasmus to Nikolaus von Diesbach 6 July 1527," *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1802 to 1925*, trans. Charles Fantazzi, CWE 13, 205.

177 Erasmus, "Paraphrase on Matthew," 15–16; Erasmus, "Paraphrase on John," in *Paraphrase on John*, ed. Robert D. Sider and Jane E. Phillips, CWE 46, 14–15 [Jn 1]; Erasmus, "Annotations," col. 476 [Acts 10:38]; Erasmus, "An Exposition of Psalm 33," in *Expositions of the Psalms*, ed. Dominic Baker-Smith, Emily Kearns, and Caroline White, CWE 64, 294–95.

like ordinary men, in that they wrote this in reliance on their memories and failed to inspect the written sources, and so for this reason made a mistake."[178] Erasmus replied that the Holy Spirit was "present" in the evangelists "so far as pertained to the business of the Gospel," but "in other respects he allowed them to be human none the less." Because the core meaning remained safe, such minor errors did not matter. Erasmus concluded, "I deny that the presence of some mistake must needs shake the credit of the whole of scripture."[179] Indeed, like the simplicity of Jesus's language, the Gospels' inconsistencies make their endurance more impressive and invite us to "examine a hidden mystery." First, we consider the possibility of a copyist error. If that has been ruled out, then "the apparent absurdity is signalling to us to examine a deeper mystery"—that is, this was intentional. If we cannot solve it, it is our fault, not scripture's. We then need to become more knowledgeable or "ask the Lord to open the hidden treasure for us."[180]

At the end of the day, Erasmus, like Valla, was still powerfully bound by tradition, and not that unwillingly: he used both tradition and theology to understand the Bible. Many readers were unhappy with Erasmus's decision (in the second, 1519 edition) to translate the Word (Λόγος) of Jn 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God") as *sermo* [speech] instead of the usual *verbum* [word]. He did employ philology to demonstrate Λόγος's lexical ambiguity, but developed a supporting argument based on theology (a *sermo* is longer than a *verbum*, which makes it consonate better with Jn 12:50 ("So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say"). Additionally, the Church Fathers in Christianity's first centuries used *sermo*. "In all things," Erasmus holds, "one must submit to the judgment of the Church." This phrase, however, he followed with his own "however," a word that made room for this new plain-ken appreciation of history.[181]

178 Johann Maier von Eck, "Johann Maier von Eck to Erasmus, February 2, 1518," in *Literary Writings and Educational Works*, ed. A. H. T. Levi, CWE 45, 289–90 (Allen and Allen, *Opus Epistolarum*, ep. 769). See Rummel, *Erasmus's Annotations*, 123–42.

179 Erasmus, "Erasmus to Johann Maier von Eck, May 15, 1518," in *Literary Writings and Educational Works*, ed. A. H. T. Levi, CWE 6, 28 (Allen and Allen, *Opus Epistolarum*, ep. 844).

180 Erasmus, "An Exposition of Psalm 33," in *Expositions of the Psalms*, ed. Baker-Smith, Kearns, and White, 294–95.

181 Erasmus, "Annotations," col. 335–37, 716; Erasmus, "Apologia tres ad Notationes Eduardi Lei," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Jean Leclerc, 10 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), IX, col. 259.

Cisneros and Nebrija

We end with a late and complex case of Biblical scholarship. The Franciscan Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436–1517) was the most distinguished prelate in Spanish history. He was regent, inquisitor general, and confessor to Queen Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504); perhaps he inspired her to expel the Jews. He founded the Complutense University, edited and printed the Mozarabic missal and breviary for Toledo, and funded the Complutensian Polyglot. His reforms in the late 1490s emphasized frequent Communion even for the laity and knowledge of the cross, creed, and paternoster.[182]

Cisneros had little patience for a slow, persuasive conversion process: when the Archbishop of Granada had translated canon passages into Arabic so the ex-Muslims could read them themselves, Cisneros complained about "casting pearl before swine," or before Christians too new in their faith to appreciate the canon. Bibles were meant to be read by the wise people learned in Latin—and ideally in the original Bible languages. Cisneros wanted students of theology to be able to read Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, unlike in Paris, which had no such language requirements. Vernacular translation, according to Cisneros, was dangerous and even ridiculous in this "elderly, calamitous, and deplorable age of the world, when the minds of the common peoples have degenerated so far from the purity they had" in the first century. Among his household, which included a jester and a dwarf, he had a man with a mental disability who would recite scripture, badly, to Cisneros as a form of entertainment.[183] This might have echoed and reinforced his aversion of having scripture in the hands of unfit readers.

Those few who should read scripture, Cisneros thought, should read accurate scripture. Cisneros was concerned that over the centuries Aristotle had distracted Christian scholars away from the Bible, and rendering the clergy ignorant of truth and the laity unable to practice it. The Bible had become far from Christians' lives. Taking his inspiration from Origen, Cisneros decided to collect all available important texts to publish a reliable Bible that would allow

182 Erike Rummel, *Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain's Golden Age* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 24; José García Oro, *Cisneros y la reforma del clero español en tiempo de los Reyes Católicos* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1971), 336–39.

183 Alvar Gómez de Castro, *De rebus gestis a Francisco Ximenio* (Alcalá de Henares: Andreas de Angulo, 1569), fol. 32v–33r. See Karl Josef von Hefele, *El cardenal Jiménez de Cisneros y la iglesia española* (Barcelona: Diario, 1869), 346; Rummel, *Jiménez*, 33, 54, 106.

the recovery of Jesus's teachings, by which all wisdom came to humans.[184] The Complutensian Bible's prefaces eventually emphasized maximizing accuracy despite the errors of copyists, though no translation could be perfect, especially when the original language was Jesus's.[185]

The membership of the editorial board, as well as their duties, is not fully clear. The Cretan Demetrius Ducas (ca. 1480–1527), who had worked in humanist publishing in Venice, probably was responsible for the Greek text. Antonio de Nebrija (1444–1522), the foremost humanist scholar in Spain, had spent a decade preparing notes for a critical edition of the Bible. Those notes had been seized by the Inquisition, who, Nebrija believed, felt intimidated by his philological investigations. Cisneros, the head inquisitor, was positively enthusiastic about the project, and protected Nebrija. Nebrija insisted that problems in scripture involving words' meanings belonged to the portfolio of philologists. He outlined his methodology explicitly: consultation of Greek manuscripts to resolve contradictions among the Latin manuscripts. Nebrija gifted Cisneros with a list of "fifty" (really forty-nine) scriptural textual problems which demonstrated problems in orthography (e.g., Lk 15:8–10, Jn 5:2) but were solved by consulting the Greek. For example, in Mt 1:19 he explains *traducere* following Valla. It is not certain if Nebrija knew Valla, but Nebrija was making Vallaesque answers to problems not known to have been taken up by Valla (for example, Mk 5:41 "rise up gazelle" should be "little girl, rise").[186]

The partnership did not endure. At least by the middle of 1515, Nebrija had to resign: Cisneros wanted to create the best possible Vulgate, but Nebrija wanted to improve upon the Vulgate itself. Cisneros's goal involved a limited plain ken, applied to the transmission of the Vulgate but not to its creation. The idea was not to use Greek manuscripts to correct the Vulgate (although they did flag some potential problems), but to overcome the "ignorance and negligence" of copyists. Nebrija also wanted an appendix explaining names that was correct rather than traditional. As a parting gesture Nebrija leaked the news, alarming to the orthodox, that Greeks and converts from Judaism were editing scripture.[187]

184 Gómez de Castro, *De rebus gestis*, fol. 37r–37v. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 73.

185 *Vetus testamentum multiplici lingua nuc primo impressum*, 6 vols. (Alcalá de Henares: Academia Complutensi, 1514–17), I, fol. iiir.

186 Nebrija's method did make some mistakes, as in accepting one Greek manuscript's fixing a discrepancy by identifying "son of Jonah" (Mt 16:17) with "son of John" (Jn 21:15–16), on Cisneros's suggestion. Antonio de Nebrija, *Apología*, trans. Baldomero Macías Rosendo (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2014), 58–66, 101–77. See Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 77–86.

187 *Vetus testamentum*, fol. iiira; Antonio de Nebrija, "Epistola del maestro de Lebrija al Cardenal," *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, 8 (1903): 493–96.

On 10 January 1514, the first edition of the Greek New Testament was printed—but not published, a milestone Erasmus's edition reached first; only in 1520 did the Complutensian edition of Cisneros obtain a license to be bound and sold. The Complutensian editors boasted that they used the *vetustissima simul et emendatissima* [simultaneously most ancient and correct] manuscripts available, and likewise the most eminent linguists.[188]

An Enduring Deep Ken

As we have seen throughout the chapter, despite the Muslim appreciation of the plain ken and the Christian movement towards it, a great deal of deep ken remained. Al-Zarkashi numbered the Qur'an's surahs, verses, words, and letters, delighting in the longest surah (2) and verse (2:282), the shortest verse (89:1, 93:1), and the longest word (فَسَيَكْفِيكَهُم *fasayakfikahum*). For all his plain-ken inclination, al-Suyuti had interests that reflect the deep ken, as in his own counting the number of letters, words, verses, and surahs in the Qur'an. His *Itqan* [Precision] mentions some verses, almost two dozen in particular, that have *fadail* [merit] associated with them in the form of *baraka* [supernatural benefit], ranging from protection in this world to paradise in the next (see Chapter 8).[189]

Christians, of course, were even more ready to maintain the deep ken. Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) understood the Bible's truths as outside of time, and cited Isidore of Seville's (d. 636) argument that the Bible used the past tense for future events "because things that are still future to us, have already happened according to God's viewpoint in eternity."[190] Paul of Middelburg (1446–1543) remembered Jesus's claim that "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish," so Jesus himself "will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40), and imagined a Jewish rabbi walking back from Jesus's tomb ready to accuse him of lying for not laying the full three days in the tomb.[191] One Armenian tradition saw Christ in the Old Testament

188 *Vetus testamentum*, fol. iiib, iiiira. See Gómez de Castro, *De rebus gestis*, fol. 37v–38v.

189 Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "Inscriptions in Art and Architecture," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 163–78 (178); Burge, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti," 281, 291–92; McAuliffe, "The Tasks," 188; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Exegetical Sciences," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Rippin, 403–19 (408–09).

190 Christopher Columbus, *The Libro de las Profecías of Christopher Columbus*, trans. Delno C. West and August Kling (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991), 103. The original is Isidore of Seville, *Sententiarum libri tres*, in *Opera Omnia VI*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, LXXXIII, col. 584. Columbus incorrectly identified this as chapter 25.

191 Paul of Middelburg, *Pavlina de recta Paschae celebratione* (Fossombrone: Petrus, 1513), a.ii.v.

since Abraham's tree was the cross, and Noah's ark's window the wound in Jesus's side. Grigor Tatevatsi (1346–1409/10), wrote that "The ram of Isaac was hanging from the sabek tree, which has two branches, and is the true type of the Cross of Christ."[192] Here, the intentionality behind the equivalences is only with God, not with humans. Epiphanius the Wise (d. 1420) retold Jesus's Parable of the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), but smoothly substituted the "people of Perm" for the "workers" of the original.[193]

Because of God's ultimate authorship, the deep ken understood that the canon was comprehensive, that it contained the answer to any question a reader could pose. Wycliffe had argued that "because God speaks all truth, it is evident that his saying it is the first cause of all external truth." Wycliffe noted that Jesus was the *proximus auctor* [proximate author] of canon, which was an expression of his *sententia* [intended meaning]. Because Jesus was supreme, canon was also supreme, *autentica* and *credenda* [authentic and to be believed]. Other writings might also be true, Wycliffe continued, but they were true only as long as they consonated with canon.[194] Noting the comprehensiveness of scripture for ecclesiastical governance, Gerson pointed out that an incomplete Bible would mean that Jesus would have been an "imperfect legislator."[195] This attitude echoed in Joan of Arc's comment that Jesus had a true canon, inaccessible to humans, that was fully comprehensive. When someone exulted that "Such deeds as you have done were never seen, their like is not to be read in any book," she explained that "My Lord has a book in which no scholar has read, how perfect soever he be in scholarship."[196]

The most interesting argument regarding canon comprehensiveness comes from Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444). One issue that puzzled Bernardino was why Jesus never explicitly criticized homosexuality. We might think of possible answers before turning to Bernardino. Maybe Jesus did not disapprove. Maybe he did disapprove, but never got around to condemning it. Maybe, thinking with the plain ken, his condemnation was lost in the manuscript tradition. In contrast, Bernardino knew that homosexuality was bad, and that Jesus condemned all bad things—that is, because canon was comprehensive,

192 Vrej Nersessian, *Treasures from the Ark: 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art* (London: British Library, 2001), 69; Grigor Tatevatsi, *Oskep'orik* (n.p.: Tparani Abraham Dpri, 1746), 398.

193 Dmitrij Ciževskij, *History of Russian Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 178.

194 John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols. (London: Trübner, 1905), I, 378; John Wycliffe, *Trialogus*, trans. Stephen Lahey (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2013), 190–94 (3.31); John Wycliffe, *Trialogus*, ed. Gotthard Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon, 1869), 238–43, esp. 239 (3.31). See Ian Christopher Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 54–91.

195 Jean Gerson, "Sermo habitus Tarascone coram Benedicto XIII," in OC, V, 74.

196 Willard Trask, ed., *Joan of Arc in Her Own Words* (New York: Turtle Point, 1996), 59.

it must contain criticisms of all behaviours that ought to be criticized. These are his starting points. He was no plain-ken exclusivist, so he came up with an ingenious explanation, apparently taken from Jerome. The first Christmas Eve, every man inclined towards homosexuality dropped dead, out of respect. Thus, homosexuality did not exist during Jesus's life, and therefore there was nothing for him to condemn.[197] In a way, this is a kind of historicizing, using dogmas to conclude context, instead of vice versa.

Some deep-ken critics attacked plain-ken moves. Some complained about the Wycliffites' excess literalism: "Oh miserable Wycliffe! and miserable Wycliffites! who thus battle not for the meaning of divine Scripture, but for their own, that they desire it [their own meaning] to be the meaning of holy Scripture." That critic compared the Wycliffites to children who used Jesus's statement "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (Revelation 22:13) to conclude that he was the first letter and the last letter of the alphabet.[198] In Bohemia, more mainstream critics concluded that radicals who took literally Jesus's telling temple elders that "prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Mt 21:31) would not welcome anyone into their sect who was not a sex worker, "not even the smallest little girl, who would have to be violated and fornicate with them if they were to accept her."[199] Such information was likely obtained under torture, and plain-ken historians today suspect its veracity, but it nonetheless illustrates a mainstream logic.[200]

Envoi

The two kens normally coexisted in a single person's perspective. Wycliffe was happy to have the Bible translated into English (plain ken), but asserted that the tense of verbs in the Gospel had no relevance because their meaning was

197 Bernardino, *Le prediche volgari*, ed. Ciro Cannarozzi, 3 vols. (Florence: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1940), II, 278–79. A similar idea occurs in Antoninus of Florence, *Summa theologica* (Venice: Johannis de Colonia and Johannes Manthen de Gherretzem, 1477), fol. 203r and in Johannes Herolt, *Sermones Discipuli de tempore et de sanctis* (Strassburg: n.p., 1484), fol. 41rv. See Franco Mormando, *The Preacher's Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 127; Pietro Agostino d'Avack, "L'omosessualità nel Diritto Canonico," *Ulisse* 7 (1953): 680–97. Bernardino also argued that a homosexual unrepentant at age thirty-three was beyond saving, a deep-ken reference to Jesus's lifespan on earth. See Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 146.

198 Thomas Netter, *De hæresibus antiquorum*, in *De Sacramentis*, ed. Bonaventura Blanciotti (Venice: Bassanesius, 1758), col. 236.

199 "Adamite Articles (ca. 1421)," in Martin Pjecha, ed., "Hussite Eschatological Texts (1412–1421): Introduction and Translations," in *Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts*, ed. Lionel Laborie and Ariel Hessayon (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 23–83 (82), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004443631_003

200 Pjecha, ed., "Hussite Eschatological Texts," 34.

timeless (deep ken). Al-Islami used the Christian Old Testament in Hebrew, the language it was originally, historically written in, because he wanted to do numerological analysis of the Hebrew letters—a plain-ken approach to a deep-ken strategy. Abu 'Ubayda defended his plain-ken philological investigations by appeal to the deep ken: God's expression of the revelation in Arabic, with all its plain-ken imperfections, made that language perfect. Just as the Japanese *wabi-sabi* 侘寂 aesthetic values flaws, the deep ken can sometimes find value in plain-ken imperfection.

With the Renaissance we see a much clearer philological criticism, but one still sharply limited by theology and tradition. Scholars corrected and challenged, but still defended the Bible, and held off from making direct attacks on it. Perhaps they were being politic; perhaps their minds simply did not tend in such directions. History was the key to correction. Philology was a form of therapy, to restore texts.[201]

This entire process proved revolutionary. An interest in a literal sense of scripture allowed patriarchs and prophets to know about Jesus, because as historical figures they really did know about Jesus. This was a crucial step from a relatively free allegorical sense allowing the exegete a large and blank canvas, to the dominance of the historical and plain ken by 1800. In the later Late Traditional centuries, we next lose Mosaic authorship, and then Jesus's own position becomes imperilled. Once Alfonso de Madrigal and Savonarola acknowledge that the literal canon was verifiable, their intellectual descendants could question whether it was also falsifiable. History is doing something here, but the emphasis on the literal comes prior to and without historicization. As shifting to the literal gave interpreters less flexibility in working with difficult Old Testament passages, they were forced to discover new wiggle room in historical particularism, that idea that the writers' original historical context could affect interpretation in 1400. We also should remember the importance of the printing press's creating the possibility of accurate critical editions, translations, and commentaries.[202]

The plain ken need not be secular, nor atheistic. We have seen that God could intend for copyists to make errors. The Holy Ghost could guarantee that those errors were not significant. Even if Zechariah's *rex* does not literally refer to Jesus, that prophecy can still be inspired by God, and fulfilled by Jesus's riding a donkey into Jerusalem centuries later.

201 Jacob, "*Florida Verborum Venustas*," 17.

202 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1979), 329–67; Evans, *Language and Logic*, 43; Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, 271.

Today, our modern perspective is massively, although not entirely, informed by the plain ken. Conversational English uses "literally" to mean "figuratively," its exact opposite. A perfectly healthy speaker might claim to have "literally died last night." This grates the plain-ken ear, but remember that from the deep-ken perspective Zechariah literally referred to Jesus five centuries in advance. Brahmins in ancient India and these English speakers today participate in a vision of language and truth that the plain ken, at best, dismisses as "poetry."