

A Brief Examination of So-Called “Inspired Textual Updating”

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Introduction

Borrowing phraseology from R. C. Sproul regarding depravity, I would say that too many professing evangelicals write and teach as though Scripture is *primarily* the product of human editors—a position that is a clear repudiation of the biblical view of divine authorship as the primary characteristic of Scripture. The irony here is that while we decry the baleful influence of secular humanism on our culture, we are busy adopting secular humanism’s view of Scripture. It is not so much that the secular culture has negotiated away the doctrine of biblical infallibility and inerrancy, as that the evangelical church has done so.¹

New explanations of the old faith are not to be shunned or belittled. There is yet plenty of room for us to learn more from the Word of God. No generation of the Church has had a corner on the truth and no generation has possessed a complete and accurate knowledge of all divine truth revealed in the Scriptures. Any who claim otherwise are doomed to suffocate spiritually from the crushing weight of their own hubris. But, it is equally destructive to abandon the theological anchors that have kept the ship of faith on

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), 20. Sproul’s wording was, “A majority of professing evangelicals agree with the statement that human beings are basically good, a clear repudiation of the biblical view of human fallenness. The irony here is that while we decry the baleful influence of secular humanism on the culture, we are busy adopting secular humanism’s view of man. It is not so much that the secular culture has negotiated away the doctrine of original sin, as that the evangelical church has done so.”

course and safe from the stormy waves of unbelief. It is my opinion that “inspired textual updating,” as described by Grisanti,² poses a significant problem for those who espouse biblical inerrancy and infallibility.

Problems with the Approach

Regarding the Origin of Bibliological Definitions

In the past, biblical scholars have employed the OT and the NT to help determine the definition of terms like “autographa” and “canonicity.” Very few theologians have chosen to put blinders on and to ignore the OT when dealing with the key facets of the doctrine of bibliology. On the contrary, instead of having a background limited to NT expertise, theologians have thoroughly examined the OT before deriving their definitions. A few examples will suffice. In 1659 the venerable John Owen published a very extensive examination of the problems of the texts of both OT and NT in developing one of the classical formulations of bibliology.³ In more recent times, René Pache produced a volume on a more popular level that commenced with a full examination of the inspiration and inerrancy of the OT.⁴ It is unfortunate that some theologians have limited their investigations into the theological formulation of inspiration and inerrancy to works

² Michael A. Grisanti, “Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the OT Canon: The Place of Textual Updating in an Inerrant View of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/4 (Dec 2001): 577-98.

³ John Owen, “Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures; with an Answer to That Inquiry, How We Know the Scriptures to Be the Word of God” and “A Vindication of the Purity and Integrity of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of the Old and New Testament,” in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.*, ed. by William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1853), 16:281-421.

⁴ René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, trans. by Helen I. Needham (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969).

like that produced by the incomparable B. B. Warfield who focused primarily on the Greek NT.⁵

Raising Doubts about Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch

Inspired textual updating claims that past theological definitions of “autographa” do not discriminate between the original document and the final canonical form. The impression is often given that opponents to textual updating fail to recognize the multiple stages in the composition of books like Psalms and Proverbs. All OT books were not composed in a brief period of time by one author. However, it is not wise to evaluate all OT books on the basis of the complex composition of Psalms and Proverbs. These two books are comprised of individual compositions that are shorter equivalents of other single-author works like Ruth, Obadiah, and Jonah. The Psalter is made up of 150 individual compositions from the time of Moses to the time of the post-exilic period. Collecting these single-author literary pieces into a single compilation has its own particular problems. The same can be said of the Book of Proverbs, a collection throughout a history of over 200 years by more than one compiler. Proverbs consists of individual proverbs from a wide variety of authors (not just Solomon). Solomon himself had collected proverbs from all over the ancient world. There is no way that such compilation should be compared to the dynamics of a single-author work like Exodus, for example.

⁵ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. by Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970 reprint of 1948 ed.).

The Pentateuch offers an example of one author's body of material that has historically been accepted as finalized on the plains of Moab by Moses just prior to his death. There is absolutely no indication in any part of the OT or the NT that anyone other than Moses was borne along by the Holy Spirit in the production of the Pentateuch. Those first five books of the OT are consistently referred to as the books of Moses. It is this writer's conclusion that the original Mosaic documents were not incomplete, insufficient, inadequate, or imperfect. They are inspired, inerrant, infallible, and trustworthy. There was no need of editing in order to refine, complete, or "update" the Pentateuch.

Overstatement

The history of the Hebrew language forms one of the considerations upon which theory of textual updating is constructed.⁶ In the thousand years (ca. 1400-400 B.C.) during which the OT was written and canonized, there are remarkably few changes in the grammar and orthography of classical Hebrew. Did the Hebrew language experience so great a degree of change in those one thousand years that it required textual updating in order for 5th century B.C. readers to be able to understand certain passages in the OT? Where is evidence for such changes? In reality, the Hebrew language was remarkably stable throughout the biblical period. It is a dubious practice to extrapolate the changes in languages with which modern scholars are familiar in the modern era (such as English

⁶ A detailed response to this area will be presented in another paper that will be limited to the historical development of classical Hebrew. It can be demonstrated that the development or evolution of classical Hebrew provides no support for the theory of textual updating. There is a wealth of statistical and descriptive evidence to support minimal linguistic change. And, in the final analysis, none of the examples presented by adherents to textual updating involves any linguistic change.

and even modern Hebrew) and force those observations on ancient languages like classical Hebrew. Due to the widespread development of communication media since the 18th century, many languages of the world have undergone tremendous change. We cannot, however, impose that pattern of change upon classical Hebrew. Until I have the opportunity to write further on this point, I offer the following two observations: (1) Although there have been some very minor changes in biblical Hebrew from the earliest book of the OT to the latest book of the OT, it “has remained substantially the same down the years, undergoing changes that have appreciably affected its vocabulary but not, on the whole, its essential morphological, phonological, or even syntactic structure.”⁷ (2) The existence of textual updating due to linguistic factors is unlikely due to the fact that the biblical text of the Hebrew Bible has preserved without alteration many archaic forms, unexplained terms, and unresolved linguistic difficulties. If textual updating had taken place, why were so many obvious candidates left without updating?

Confusion

How is it possible for a “preliminary” form of any OT book (especially those with single authorship in one lifetime) to still be identified as the “canonical form”? The very definition of the OT canon involves the canonization of the OT in 400 B.C. That which is canonical needs no further activity or editing. Such activity belongs within the realm of transmission, not composition. If the “canonical form” (preliminary or final) requires any modification or editing, it is not yet canonical. Let’s consider in more detail the illogicality and theological inconsistency of attributing canonicity to a preliminary form.

⁷ Angel Sàenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. by John Elwolde (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.

Canonicity requires that the document be God-breathed or inspired. Canonicity does not determine inspiration. The carefully worded definitions of an earlier Clark Pinnock are pertinent to the discussion:

The Bible in its entirety is God's written Word to man, free of error in its original autographs, wholly reliable in history and doctrine. Its divine inspiration has rendered the Book "infallible" (incapable of teaching deception) and "inerrant" (not liable to prove false or mistaken). Its inspiration is "plenary" (extending to all parts alike), "verbal" (including the actual language form), and "confluent" (product of two free agents, human and divine). *Inspiration* involves *infallibility* as an essential property, and infallibility in turn implies *inerrancy*. This threefold designation of Scripture is implicit in the basic thesis of Biblical authority.⁸

The quality of inspiration itself guarantees infallibility (viz., that a particular biblical document is incapable of deceiving the reader—its clarity or perspicuity is guaranteed by the excellence of the wisdom and knowledge of an omniscient Author) and inerrancy (viz., that no falsehood or error was contained in any part of that biblical document). Therefore, there would be no need whatsoever for any textual updating—unless, of course, one were to believe that the divine Author Himself is capable of poor choices in the original wording and could not foresee linguistic and cultural changes. Perhaps someone might argue that such verbal ineptitude would be solely the fault of the human author—in which case, the Holy Spirit would have failed in His responsibility to superintend the prophetic process (2 Pet 1:21).

⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 1.

Textual updating is problematic because it involves the area of theology proper. The very nature of God is denigrated by any necessity for editing or revision. Updating appears to impugn the nature and character of God Himself. It is an inherent contradiction to claim that divine superintendence guarantees inerrancy, but to insist that inscripturation involves some form of editorial revisions before the final canonical form of an OT book. How can editorial revisions be needed if the accuracy and perspicuity had been divinely guaranteed? Is God incapable of knowing the future developments of biblical languages or the cultural and historical currents of the people of Israel throughout the biblical period? Why would the divine Author allow the human author to employ terminology or historical description that would later prove to be misleading (i.e. fallible) or unclear?

If God is true, His Word is true. If God is trustworthy, His Word is trustworthy. However, I would add: if God's Word requires updating, God Himself requires updating. Indeed, in the light of the current neotheism, such a position could find acceptance among its adherents. It is more consistent with neotheism than with classical theism—more consistent with neotheistic handling of Scripture. That fact alone should cause us to step back, take a deep breath, and be willing to re-evaluate the viability of so-called “inspired textual updating.”

Textual updating does not supply a satisfactory explanation of why autographic status should be denied to those books of the OT that were composed by a single author in a brief span of time. Some documents (like Kings) that have extended histories of composition might have reached their final canonical form prior to 400 B.C. Must they await that magical date before they can claim that final, unchangeable status?

The changes in language, culture, and history since 400 B.C. were far greater in number and degree than any such changes from 1400 to 400 B.C. What guarantees that equally problematic wordings and anachronistic statements do not remain in the OT? If God needed to update His Word in that former period of one thousand years, why wouldn't He need to update His Word since that time? The OT is even more susceptible to a reader's misunderstanding today than it ever was in the biblical period. This is a major issue with the theory of "inspired textual updating."

Further confusion is exhibited by textual updating adherents attributing prophetic involvement in the updating process. First, it is not necessary to limit the inscripturation process to prophetic personages in order to create an authentic canon. Jeremiah did not inscripturate the revelation he had received. Baruch did. Baruch received the divine revelation secondhand through Jeremiah's dictation. The Holy Spirit's superintendence was not limited to the writing of a prophet. Second, the biblical prophets were firsthand recipients of direct divine revelation (cf. Deut 18:18; Jer 23:16, 18, 21-22; Amos 7:14-17).⁹ Updaters of the OT (or even of the NT—and what is there to prevent the theory of

⁹ Prophecy was a gift of the Spirit distinct from the office or function of pastor-teacher (Eph 4:11). It was a gift in the category of the miraculous gifts and has ceased (1 Cor 12:10; 13:8). Preaching the Word today is not the equivalent—if it were, then preaching would have to have also ceased. A prophet (OT or NT) also declared or proclaimed the prophetic revelation and instructed believers concerning its content, but those activities are separate from and distinct from the reception of the revelation. Indeed, by our very use of phrases like "the cessation of prophecy," we indicate that direct divine revelation has ceased. The prophets and apostles were "the foundation" of the church (Eph 2:20). That very picture connotes the past existence as well as the revelatory function of both. There are no more prophets and no more apostles. They are no more because there is no more revelation to receive (cf. Eph 3:5). E. J. Young declared that the prophet was one who "believed that he had been the recipient of an objective revelation. . . . that he had received a message which God had given to him" (Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971 reprint of 1952 edition], 175). Indeed, Young makes the point even more emphatically when he says,

updating being applied to the NT?), according to the theory of inspired textual updating, are prophetic persons capable of revising the preliminary canonical form of any particular book. In other words, by the biblical definition of prophet, if Ezra should happen to have been a final updater, God would have given him step-by-step, book-by-book, passage-by-passage revelation for that purpose. This would approximate the multiplication of miracles fallacy.

The greater problem is that such a view would leave the reader with the vision of a divine Author who at the last moment put His final corrective (clarifying) flourishes on the canvas of revelation before it was finally committed forever into the hands of His people. A comparable theory would be to claim that the Creator made some last minute design adjustments in Adam 400 years after his creation in order to make certain his body would be able to accomplish everything the Creator had intended—kind of like a Detroit recall to fix faulty design elements after an automobile has left the production line.

An early form of inspired prophetic involvement in the later history of the text of Scripture is to be found in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (fl. A.D. 387-430). In regard to the problem of chronology presented in the Septuagint version of Genesis 5 (viz., Methuselah living until 14 years after the Flood), Augustine wrote,

“they actually were the recipients of Divine revelation” (ibid., 176). Pieter Verhoef observed that a “classical definition of a prophecy was given by Micaiah ... when he responded ...: ‘As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me’ (1 Kgs 22:14; cf. 2 Chron 18:13)” (P. A. Verhoef, “Prophecy,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, 4:1071-72 [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997]). He even goes so far as to declare that in the schools of the prophets in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho “the subject matter could not have been to teach the prophets how to become a prophet, how to receive the revelation of God, because the content of their messages as prophets could not be learned, but could only be received” (ibid., 4:1073).

Moreover, the difference in numbers that we find between the Hebrew text and our own¹⁰ constitutes no disagreement about this longevity of the ancients; and if any discrepancy is such that the two versions cannot both be true, we must seek the authentic account of events in that language from which our text was translated.¹¹

Thus far, Augustine has chosen to focus upon a greater problem, the longevity of the antediluvians. But, having deployed a slight misdirection, he then returns to the problem of the text that must be resolved by appealing directly to the Hebrew original behind the old Greek translation. Then comes the part of his argument that sounds much like “inspired textual updating”:

Though this opportunity is universally available to those who wish to take it, yet, significantly enough, no one has ventured to correct the Septuagint version from the Hebrew text in the very many places where it seems to offer something different. The reason is that those differences were not considered falsifications,¹² nor do I think that they should be in any way. Rather, where no scribal error¹³ is involved, and where the sense would be harmonious with the truth and would proclaim the truth, *we should believe that they were*

¹⁰ Viz., the Septuagint.

¹¹ Philip Levine, trans., *Saint Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans: Books XII-XV*, The Loeb Classical Library 414 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988 reprint of 1966 edition), 491 (xv.14).

¹² Or, “corruption of the text” as represented by a more recent translation in Henry Bettenson, trans., *Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976 reprint of 1972 edition), 620. The Latin is *mendositas* meaning “errors, inaccuracies, mistakes.”

¹³ Latin, *error* meaning “error, mistake, deception.” Whereas *mendositas* is related to *mendum* (“bodily defect or blemish”), *error* is related to *erro* (“to wander, stray, or rove”). The two words are virtual synonyms. Augustine does not appear to be making a technical distinction in this context.

moved by the divine Spirit¹⁴ to say something differently, not as part of the service that they did as translators, but exercising the freedom that they enjoyed as prophets.¹⁵

Disunification of the Canon of Scripture

Textual updating adherents do not necessarily eliminate the NT from the Scriptures, but they are normally so focused upon the OT and have presented a theory that is seemingly contradicted by the very existence of the NT, that the viewpoint raises the following question: Why should the OT be treated separately from the Bible as a whole? Separation of the two testaments in the matter of canonicity is not an adequate explanation for ignoring the NT. My point is that there must be a more all-inclusive view of the canon that is peculiarly Christian or post-NT, or we fail to adequately recognize the unity of the canon. Had the revelation of the divine will for mankind really ceased in 400 B.C.? It is obvious even to adherents of textual updating that the answer to that question is a resounding “No.” So why shouldn’t textual updating be extended until the completion of the NT? Would such an extension provide another way to resolve the difficulties that arise with the NT’s use of the OT? The NT could be understood as updating the OT to make it more understandable to readers living in a vastly different cultural, historical, and linguistic environment. I bring out these questions and points, not as a means of offering

¹⁴ Latin, *divino spiritu*. It is translated “Holy Spirit” in Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 1, ed. by Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 122.

¹⁵ Levine, trans., *The City of God*, 491 (emphasis mine). I am certain that Dr. Grisanti does not agree with Augustine’s position on the Septuagint, but the argumentation is strikingly similar.

support for “inspired textual updating,” but as a way of exposing the inconsistencies of that theory.

Canonicity is not a topic of theological discussion for the OT or the NT in isolation. Canonicity must be attributed to the Scripture as a completed whole—Scripture was not complete until the close of the NT. There are not two different Scriptures, only one. The Word of God does not consist of one testament to the exclusion of the other. If the 400 so-called “silent years” between the close of the OT and the earthly ministry of Christ were sufficient reason to theorize a cessation to divine revelatory activity, then the equally silent period of 400 years between Job and Moses could also be treated as a cessation of revelatory activity. The Book of Job could be viewed as the first canon to reach final form. (Of course, I am not suggesting that we go to such an extreme—but, the logic of textual updating is similarly inconsistent.)