

Sunday, May 10, 2026—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 286 The Origin of the Originals Only Position & Impact of Brian Walton’s Polyglot

Introduction

- [Lesson 285](#) demonstrated that the Reformers and Protestant confessions grounded biblical authority in God’s providential preservation of Scripture, affirming that the church truly possessed the Word of God in the received Hebrew and Greek texts and in faithful translations derived from them.
- Lesson 286 will build upon that foundation by asking a critical historical question: *how was that Protestant confidence in the existing biblical text gradually undermined?* To answer this, we will consider the following points:
 - [Vernacular Languages & The Reformation](#)—the spread of vernacular Bibles and *sola Scriptura* disrupted ecclesiastical authority and provoked a Counter-Reformation strategy that sought to undermine Scripture’s functional authority by attacking its textual certainty.
 - [Origin of the Originals Only Position](#)—Roman Catholic figures such as Richard Simon argued that only the lost autographs were inspired, that copies contained errors and, therefore, that Scripture could not function alone without Church tradition—a concept later absorbed into Protestant scholarship.
 - [Impact of Brian Walton’s London Polyglot Bible](#)—Brian Walton’s London Polyglot publicly displayed textual plurality and fostered a critical, historical approach to Scripture, prompting John Owen’s defense of the received texts and marking a decisive shift from confessional certainty to scholarly reconstruction.

Vernacular Languages & The Reformation

- Ephesians 3:4—to understand “the mystery of Christ” all one needs to be able to do is read the scriptures.
- This simple principle was not lost on the adversary. All he needed to do to keep people ignorant of the mystery and Paul’s unique apostleship was simply to hamper their ability to read about it. Prior to the Protestant Revolution this was accomplished through two primary mechanisms:
 - Extremely low literacy rates
 - Binding God’s word in an elite scholar’s language i.e., Latin

- So even if people could read their native tongue, they lacked the specialized academic training to have access to the Bible.
- The Protestant Revolution reversed both trends that had held sway for the first 1500 years of the dispensation of grace.
 - Literacy rates exploded
 - God’s word was made available in the vernacular languages of the people.
- These trends coupled with the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* converged to create a seismic shift in the established power structure of Europe. The availability of the Bible in the vernacular languages of Europe was the driving force of the Protestant Revolution. In addition, the notion that the Catholic hierarchy was not needed to interpret scriptures created a very serious problem for the Catholic Church.
- Roman Catholic thinkers and theologians immediately began to devise strategies for how to combat the Paper Pope of Protestantism.

Origin of the Originals Only Position

- One of the goals of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation was to call into question the Protestant view of the Bible. Above all, the Jesuits attacked the Protestant belief in *Sola Scriptura* as the following quotes will attest:
 - “Wherever the so-called Counter-Reformation, started by the Jesuits, gained hold of the people, the vernacular was suppressed and the Bible kept from the laity. So eager were the Jesuits **to destroy the authority of the Bible—the paper pope of the Protestants**, as they contemptuously called it—that they even did not refrain from criticizing its genuineness and historical value.” (Dobschutz, 136)
 - “This translation [Unitarian translation of 1869] is a decided help in the great battle against Bibliolatry and the doctrine of verbal and plenary inspiration. Every new version, even if it be not so good as this, aids in overthrowing the power of the **"Paper- Pope" which has ruled Protestantism as with a rod of iron**. Such superstition in an enlightened land, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, seems almost incredible; but it is asserted on good grounds that nine-tenths of the members of Protestant churches in this country believe as implicitly in the infallibility and absolute freedom from error of King James's version as the Catholics of Spain do in the infallibility of Pope Pius IX. and the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary.” (Morse & Marvin, 442)

- The aims of the Catholic Counter-Reformation were beginning to bear fruit in the 19th century just as resurgence of Pauline truth was getting underway in earnest. The practice of constant revision of the Bible would cause people to question whether they had God’s word.
 - “Revisions at moderate intervals of fifty years, will keep alive the idea of man's limited acquaintance with the **original Scriptures** in all the fulness of their meaning, and prevent superstitious attachment to the letter. Whatever checks bibliolatry is good and profitable.” (Davidson, 2)
- According to Davidson, the way one “checks bibliolatry” i.e., the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, is to remind mankind of his “limited acquaintance with the original Scriptures.” Put another way, how do you know that you really have God’s word, the original autographs are lost don’t you know.
- The notion that the “originals” only were inspired and inerrant originated within the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Philip Schaff, in his 1893 publication *A General Introduction to the Study of Theology: Exegetical, Historical, Systematic and Practical*, states the following in a footnote on page 393:
 - “The distinction between “inerrant autographs ” and errant copies [which possess variant readings] seems to have been first made by Richard Simon (1638-1712), the father of biblical isagogic, to prove the necessity of textual criticism and to silence the attacks of Protestant and Roman Catholic champions for the inerrancy of the existing text of the Bible.” (Schaff, 393)
- Richard Simon was a Roman Catholic monk/priest who sought to counter *sola scriptura* by arguing that only the lost originals were inspired and therefore Catholic tradition was necessary to interoperate scripture. In 1678 he stated the following in the Preface to *A Critical History of the Old Testament*:
 - **“The great alterations which have happened, as we have showed in the first Book of this Work, to the Copies of the Bible since the first Originals have been lost, utterly destroy the Protestants Principle, who consult only these same Copies of the Bible as we at present have them. If the truth of Religion remained not in the Church, it would be unsafe to search for it at present in Books which have been subject to so many alterations . . .**

Those Protestants without doubt are either ignorant or prejudiced who affirm that the Scripture is plain of itself as they have laid aside the Tradition of the Church, and will acknowledge no other principle of Religion but the Scripture itself, they were obliged to suppose it plain and sufficient for the establishing the truth of Faith without any Tradition.

But if we but consider the conclusions which the Protestants and Socinians draw from the same principle, we shall be convinced that their principle is not as plain as they imagine, since these conclusions are so different and the one absolutely denies what the other affirms.

Instead of believing with the Protestants that the shortest and most certain way of deciding the Questions of Faith is to consult the Holy Scriptures, we shall on the contrary find in this Work that if we join not Tradition with the Scripture, we can hardly affirm anything for certain in Religion.” (Simon, Author’s Preface pages unnumbered)

- In the above citation, Richard Simon argued that the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* is undermined by the historical reality that the original biblical texts are lost and that existing manuscripts have undergone many variations and changes. Because Scripture reaches us only through a process of transmission preserved and interpreted by the Church, Simon contended that it cannot serve as a clear, self-sufficient authority apart from Tradition. He challenged the claim that Scripture is “plain” in itself by pointing to the radically different and even contradictory doctrines drawn from the same biblical texts by Protestants and groups like the Socinians. For Simon, this widespread disagreement showed that Scripture requires an authoritative interpretive framework, and he concludes that without joining Tradition to Scripture, it is nearly impossible to affirm religious truth with certainty.
- In 1689 Simon wrote another book titled *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament* from which many similar quotes could be multiplied.
 - “Is it possible (may some say) that God hath given to his Church, Books to serve her for a Rule, **and that he hath at the same time permitted that the first Originals of these Books should be lost ever since the beginning of the Christian Religion?** There have been from the very first planting of the Church, Hereticks who have disputed against the Writings of the Apostles, and therefore it seems to behoove the Divine Providence to **preserve these Originals** at least for some time, from whence these Hereticks might be solidly confuted... Although the Scriptures are a sure Rule on which our Faith is founded, yet this Rule is not altogether sufficient of itself; it is necessary to know, besides this, what are the Apostolical Traditions . . .” (Simon, 30-31)
 - Whereas the Protestants make the Holy Ghost to descend on the Apostles to translate the Gospel of S. Matthew out of Greek into Hebrew: some Catholic Divines on the other side pretend also that the ancient Latin Version of the New Testament hath been inspired. But **it is much more reasonable only to admit this Inspiration for the Originals of the Holy Scriptures**, which have been translated into different Languages according to the necessities and occasions of the Churches.” (Simon, 79)
- In the first passage cited above, Simon addressed an obvious theological objection to his textual criticism: why would God allow the original biblical manuscripts to be lost if Scripture is meant to be the Church’s rule of faith? He argues that while Scripture is indeed a “sure rule,” it was

never intended to function in isolation. From Christianity's earliest days, heretics contested apostolic writings, and the mere existence—or loss—of original manuscripts did not settle these disputes. For Simon, this shows that Scripture alone is insufficient; certainty in faith also requires knowledge of apostolic Tradition, which preserves and explains the meaning of Scripture beyond the physical texts themselves.

- In the second passage, Simon rejects both Protestant and some Catholic claims that translations of Scripture (such as Matthew's Gospel in Hebrew or the Latin Vulgate) were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. He insists that inspiration applies properly **only to the original writings of Scripture**, while translations were produced later for practical pastoral reasons and vary according to historical circumstances. This reinforces his broader argument: since believers rely on later copies and translations rather than inspired originals, Scripture must be approached through historical study and guided by the Church's tradition, not treated as a self-sufficient, immediately transparent authority.
- In short, Simon argues that because original manuscripts are lost and translations are not inspired, Scripture cannot function as an autonomous rule of faith; it must be joined with apostolic Tradition and the Church's authority to provide doctrinal certainty.
- The historical evidence suggests that Roman Catholic thinkers, such as Richard Simon, sought to attack the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* based upon the notion that only the "originals" were inspired, the originals are lost and, therefore, the traditions of the Catholic Church are necessary to interoperate scripture. This served to plant a seed that would later be used to undermine the Protestant view of the Bible.
- Richard Simon sought to attack Protestantism by seeking to undermine one of its foundational tenants. His approach was to call into question the Protestant understanding of scripture by bringing up the absence of the "first originals" and "errors" or variants that were present in the copies. Thus, the tradition of the church is needed to tell us what the scriptures teach. This tactic of using the originals first utilized by Simon would be codified in Protestant Doctrinal statements in the 19th century; but, mark well, the notion does not appear in the great Protestant Confessions of the 17th century that we studied in Lesson 285.

Impact of Brian Walton's *London Polyglot Bible*

- Brian Walton's *London Polyglot* (1654–1657) was a massive, six-volume scholarly Bible designed to present the biblical text in multiple ancient languages side by side, so readers could directly compare them and study Scripture in its historical depth. For the Old Testament, it typically printed Hebrew at the center, alongside:
 - the Greek Septuagint

- the Latin Vulgate
 - the Aramaic Targums
 - the Syriac Peshitta
 - Arabic, Ethiopic, and Persian in certain books
- For the New Testament, it included:
 - Greek
 - Latin
 - Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, and other ancient versions
 - It also included an extensive critical apparatus: variant readings, annotations, philological notes, and cross-references as well as supplementary volumes with prolegomena, grammars, lexicons, and lists of manuscripts and versions.
 - Walton intended the *Polyglot* to restore Scripture to its “primitive and original lustre” by exposing readers to the full range of ancient textual witnesses. Rather than enshrining a single authoritative text, it emphasized textual plurality, historical transmission, and comparative study, placing the original languages directly in the hands of educated readers. This made it one of the most important monuments of early modern biblical criticism and a key catalyst in debates over scriptural authority, certainty, and preservation within Protestantism.
 - In Lesson 285 we touched upon the role that Brian Walton’s 1657 *London Polyglot Bible* played in making the public aware of the issue of textual variants in the extant Greek copies. John Owen, one of the Reformed Dogmaticians responded by publishing his essay, *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scriptures*, in 1659. Owen objected to
 - “. . . Walton’s naked display of every variant to the N.T. text . . . Walton’s list of textual variants that took up as many pages in Walton’s Polyglot as did his entire N.T. text. . . this constituted both a crisis and a scandal: a crisis because this left the impression the very wording of the N.T. was great in doubt, a scandal because Walton had indiscriminately published this for the world to see.” (Letis, 41)

- Recall from the previous Lesson that Owen “argued that the polyglot gave material support to the Roman Catholic position by leaving the impression,
 - “the original [language] copies of the Old and New Testament are so corrupted (“ex oro tuo, serve nequam”) that they are not a certain standard and measure of all doctrines, or the touchstone of all translations. . . . Of all the inventions of Satan to draw off the minds of men from the Word of God, this decrying the authority of the originals [the *apographa*] seems to me the most pernicious (Owen 1850—53:285).” (quoted in Letis, 41)
- Theodore P. Letis cites Richard Kroll regarding the significance of the London Polyglot:
 - ““critical method [that] served at once scholarly, epistemological, and political purposes, forming an early Arminian and Latitudinarian assault on Catholic and Puritan claims to absolute certainty” (Kroll 1986:21). This was a continuation of the Erasmian project begun with the publishing of his critical edition of the Greek New Testament, which was “an avowed part of his desire to recall the Church to its pristine origins and to permit the individual to make probable judgments for himself” (Kroll 1986:11). Brian Walton, the editor of the Polyglot, had clearly declared in the preface that “Now care is taken that every private man may have [the original texts], and use them as his own” (Kroll 1986:21).”

That Walton clearly saw his project as a furthering of Erasmus’ is stated quite explicitly in his reply to John Owen, in Walton’s *The Considerator Considered* (1659):

This is no new thing, that endeavours to promote the public good should be thus [poorly] rewarded; for in former ages we find, that those who laboured most about the sacred oracles of God, to restore them to their primitive and original lustre, and to wipe off that dust which by injuries of time and ignorance or negligence of transcribers was contracted, and so to transmit them pure and incorrupt to posterity . . . have yet been aspersed and slandered, their labours calumniated, and their aims perverted. . . . Erasmus’s extraordinary pains in publishing the Greek Testament by comparing ancient Copies and Translations, was sufficiently railed at by some friars and ignorant zealots, as if he took upon him to correct the Word of God; as appears in his preface to his Annotations of 1535. . . (Walton 1821:3—4).” (quoted in Letis, 42-43)

- Taken together, the above citation depicts Walton’s *Polyglot* as extending an Erasmian, critical approach that subtly but significantly reshaped Protestant bibliology, especially ideas about certainty, authority, and the role of the individual interpreter.
- The key impact lies in how Walton understood and defended his project. Like Erasmus, Walton explicitly saw himself as “restoring” Scripture to its original condition by comparing ancient manuscripts and translations and exposing the historical layers that had accumulated over time. This was not presented as correcting God’s Word, but as removing the “dust” added by transmission, ignorance, and scribal error. By doing so, Walton aligned biblical authority less with a single, fixed textual form and more with a historically reconstructed original accessible through scholarly labor.
- At the same time, Walton’s Polyglot redistributed interpretive authority. His insistence that “every private man” should have access to the original texts meant that Scripture was no longer mediated primarily through an authorized version or a single confessional framework. Instead, Protestants were encouraged to engage directly with textual plurality and linguistic complexity. This fostered a model of interpretation based on comparison, probability, and judgment, rather than doctrinal certainty derived from a supposedly self-evident text.
- As Kroll emphasizes, this had broader consequences: Walton’s work contributed to an Arminian and Latitudinarian challenge to both Catholic infallibility and Puritan claims of absolute biblical clarity. While remaining deeply committed to Scripture, the Polyglot made it harder to argue that Protestant doctrine rested on an unambiguous, stable textual foundation. In this sense, Walton’s Polyglot did not undermine Scripture’s authority outright, but it recast Protestant bibliology in more cautious, historical, and non-dogmatic terms, continuing Erasmus’ legacy of reform through critical scholarship rather than confessional certainty.
- Dr. Letis also chronicles Owen’s response to Walton:
 - “In response to the claims of the editors employed in the Polyglot, that certain translations had greater authority at times than did the common Greek and Hebrew texts, Owen defended the *apographa*:

Let it be remembered that the vulgar copy we use was the public possession of many generations that upon the invention of printing it was in actual authority throughout the world with them that used and understood that language, as far as anything appears to the contrary; let that, then, pass for the standard, which is confessedly its right and due, and

we shall, God assisting, quickly see how little reason there is to pretend such varieties of readings as we are now surprised withal (Owen:366).

Against the claim there is a superior original language text underlying certain translations, Owen argues for

the purity of the present original copies of the Scripture, or rather copies [*apographal*] in the original languages, which the Church of God doth now and hath for many ages enjoyed as her chiefest treasure (Owen:353). [emphasis mine]” (quoted in Letis, 43)

- John Owen’s response to Walton’s *Polyglot* defends the authority and reliability of the *apographa*—the existing Hebrew and Greek manuscript texts long received and used by the Church—against claims that superior or more authentic readings lie behind certain ancient translations. Owen argues that these commonly received texts have functioned as Scripture for generations and therefore possess legitimate, providential authority. By insisting on the purity and sufficiency of the present original-language copies, Owen rejects the notion that Scripture must be restored through critical reconstruction or appealed to lost originals. His position reflects a Reformed commitment to divine preservation and doctrinal certainty, in direct opposition to Walton’s Erasmian, critical approach, which Owen believed exaggerated textual variation and threatened confidence in Scripture as a clear and sufficient rule of faith.
- In both *The Ecclesiastical Text* and his recently published doctoral thesis *From Sacred Text to Religious Text* Dr. Letis treats Walton’s *Polyglot* as a watershed event in Protestant attitudes toward Scripture. Walton’s *Polyglot Bible* (1657) marked the decisive Protestant encounter with textual plurality by publicly displaying the scope of manuscript variation. In doing so, it served to undermine the Protestant conviction that the Hebrew and Greek texts functioned as a providentially preserved sacred text. The *Polyglot* fostered a new historical consciousness about the development of the New Testament text, transforming Scripture into a scholar’s reconstructed object rather than a given sacred deposit. Protestant figures such as John Owen recognized the danger immediately, fearing that certainty in doctrine would collapse if certainty in the texts were lost. Letis therefore concludes that Walton’s *Polyglot* did not merely advance biblical scholarship but initiated the long process by which the Bible lost its sacred text status and became a religious text subject to historical reconstruction.

Conclusion

- In Letis’s analysis, Walton’s *Polyglot Bible* fits squarely within the early modern desacralization [the process of removing the sacred, holy, or mystical aura from something, rendering it secular

or ordinary] of Scripture, a process that begins not with Enlightenment rationalism or higher criticism but with lower (textual) criticism itself. Before Walton, Protestants had relocated sacrality from the Latin Vulgate to the Hebrew and Greek texts, which they regarded as providentially preserved and verbally authoritative. Walton did not challenge this theology explicitly, but by publicly and systematically displaying multiple manuscript traditions and numerous textual variants, his *Polyglot* made textual plurality unavoidable. This fostered a new historical consciousness in which Scripture was encountered not as a single, fixed ecclesial artifact but as a text with a complex transmission history, thereby destabilizing the conditions necessary for its functioning as a sacred text.

- According to Letis, the decisive effect of the *Polyglot* was a shift in authority from ecclesial reception to scholarly reconstruction. Once textual variation became central rather than marginal, the determination of the “original” text depended on philological judgment rather than confession, and sacred fixity gave way to methodological probability. Orthodox Protestants such as John Owen immediately recognized the danger, fearing that uncertainty in the text would undermine doctrinal certainty itself. Letis therefore situates Walton as a crucial transitional figure: not a skeptic or theological radical, but a catalyst who institutionalized the data that made desacralization irreversible. In this way, the *Polyglot* helped transform the Bible from a verbally sacred text into a historically reconstructed religious text—capable of conveying religious truth, but no longer sacrosanct in its precise wording.

Works Cited

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