

Textual fluidity as a challenge to inspiration?

A biblical scholar's point of view

1. Introduction

The starting point for this contribution is a double observation. On the one hand, biblical scholars often regard the text of the Hebrew Bible as so “messy” (to be blunt) that when they read systematic theologians discussing the inspiration of Scriptures, they tend to wonder if the latter are talking about other books, or books that do not exist in the universe we inhabit. This “messiness” manifests itself in various ways, including the amount of contradictory discourses contained in the Bible, the conflicting ideological drives that exegetes surmise behind many redactions of biblical books, and the fluidity of the text, which seems to randomly flow in many directions and makes the very object whose inspiration is claimed appear elusive; the latter is the subject of the discussion that follows. On the other hand, systematic theologians may be disappointed by the fact that today, many biblical scholars (even those who are religious) dismiss out of hand the notion that the texts they are studying are inspired; to these exegetes, this notion is simply irrelevant.

Part of the unease felt by biblical scholars is certainly due to the fact that a number of them still think about inspiration in terms that retain some “fundamentalistic” overtones, whereby inspiration implies some problematic idea of inerrancy or some idea of textual fixity, for instance. But we should not rule out too fast the possibility that a number of biblical scholars have ceased to consider inspiration as an operative concept for more serious reasons. I am under the impression that systematic theologians rarely devote much time to discussing the concrete complexity of the Bible which I have just designated by the term “messiness.” These sophisticated thinkers are aware of, and easily accept, the fact that the biblical texts are the fruit of a complicated compositional history, and that the transmission history is complicated too. Yet this merely concerns the *making* of a corpus and its outline, they often argue; it does not change the fact that this corpus was inspired. To take an analogy, biblical scholars involved in synchronic studies, such as narrative criticism, generally don't deny the insights of diachronic studies; they just work on the text “in its final form.” Likewise, systematic theologians rightly leave it to specialists of the historical-critical study of the Bible to discuss the technical details about the formation and transmission of the text; what really matters is that the corpus exists. Yet those specialists tend today to consider that the “messy” aspects of the texts do not merely

belong to their formation; they tell us something of the very *nature* of the texts. Thus, the fact that systematic discussions about the inspiration of Scriptures often seem far removed from the concrete, “messy” reality of biblical texts, does not help those biblical scholars who would like to take the notion of inspiration seriously, or at least to “give it a chance.”¹

Overall, the current situation seems to me to be the following: biblical scholars often regard inspiration as an outdated category, while systematic theologians speak of the text in terms that are too abstract in the eyes of exegetes. Let me specify that I am having this conversation in the framework of Christian theology, not only because this is my own religious setting (as a Protestant), but also because the questions I will raise would not necessarily be pertinent, or be the same, in Judaism, where the Masoretic Text is clearly the canonical form of the Bible.² And yet my own thinking is mainly informed and stimulated by the admirable work of Jewish biblical scholars and historians, to whom I am deeply indebted. Within Christianity, I am dialoguing with Catholic systematic theologians in this contribution because strong efforts have been made and are still being made in Catholicism to articulate formulations of inspiration. The problems I raise would not necessarily be issues for a number of my Reformed or Lutheran colleagues and friends who do not always attach the same importance to the notion of inspiration, if any, or view it differently. As André Birmelé notes, inspiration has little importance in some modern Protestant systematic theologies.³ By contrast, inspiration still looms large in contemporary Evangelical theology, but often (not always) with a tendency to retain a fundamentalistic approach to it.

I must add that in my view, biblical scholars should not claim to be able to forge or modify theological concepts; at best, they can help systematic theologians to have a better grasp of the *phenomena* of the text in the hope that it might help those theologians to refine their own discourse. It is in this spirit that I humbly propose the following thoughts, and I insist on the fact that they are purely exploratory. For the same reasons, I believe that part of my role here is to raise some material and sometimes naïve questions prompted by the concrete interaction with textual fluidity and a concern for the use of the Bible, especially in a liturgical setting. I will first try to give examples of what is called textual fluidity, then explain in what sense biblical

¹ There are exceptions, of course, among which the document *Inspiration and Truth* published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which tackles the issue of the truth of “problematic” texts, and Emmanuel Durand, *Jusqu’où ouvrir le texte? Brève théologie des Ecritures* (Lire la Bible; Paris : Cerf, 2021).

² On this subject, see Norman Solomon, *Torah from Heaven: The Reconstruction of Faith* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 93-112.

³ André Birmelé, “Les références en dogmatique: L’Ecriture sainte et les confessions de foi,” in *Introduction à la théologie systématique*, eds. André Birmelé, Pierre Bühler, Jean-Daniel Causse, and Lucie Kaennel, Lieux théologique 39 (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2008): 57 fn. 29. In particular, he notes that the systematic theologies published by Ebeling and Pannenberg do not include a specific paragraph on the subject of inspiration.

scholars may feel that this reality is not fully represented in classical formulations of inspiration in systematic theology; finally, I will briefly explore several analogies or metaphors used by scholars to grasp the “nature” of the text, in the hope that it may prove stimulating.

2. Textual fluidity and its representation in classical formulations of inspiration

2.1. Textual fluidity: a brief overview

Awareness of the differences between textual witnesses is far from being a recent discovery; to take but one famous example from Antiquity, the correspondence between Augustine and Jerome illustrates the kind of theological discussion that revolved around textual variants. Rather, what has been (re)discovered in recent times is the full extent of this phenomenon. Thanks to the deciphering of the Dead Sea scrolls and to the renewed study of the Septuagint, scholars have come to realize that the biblical text existed in various forms in Antiquity; moreover, they have now a better grasp of the variety of textual changes to which the texts were subjected.

Textual fluidity refers to the malleability of the text in the hand of ancient scribes. Its manifestations are numerous, and varied. They include the replacement of words and phrases by others, the addition or omission of segments of text that may range from a word to entire chapters; and the rearrangement of passages. In other words, alongside the small variants that many of us know thanks to the critical apparatus of editions like the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (now progressively replaced by the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*) or the footnotes of study editions of the Bible, there are many large-scale differences.

A good example of a significant addition is found in Judges 6. While prophets are virtually absent from this book, a prophet suddenly makes an appearance in Judg 6:8–10:

The Lord sent a prophet to the Israelites, and he said to them, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you,

and gave you their land, and I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live.’ But you have not given heed to my voice.”⁴

Biblical scholars have long surmised that this is an interpolation made to the book by a late scribe, imitating the Deuteronomistic theology. Indeed, this brief passage interrupts the cyclical pattern of Judges, which comprises four stages: (1) the people do what displeases God (cf. v. 1a); (2) God is angry and delivers Israel into the hand of foreigners (vv. 1b-6a); (3) the people endure oppression and, often, call out to God (cf. 6b-7); (4) God sends a judge to deliver them (cf. vv. 11-16). The discovery of a DSS fragment confirms this hypothesis: in 4QJudges^a, there is no space for vv. 8-10, the fragment contains the words “the Israelites cried to the Lord” (cf. v. 7a), then there is a lacuna, and the next preserved words, on the next line, belong to v. 11.⁵

In a number of cases, what we observe is not haphazard variations of the same text, but distinct literary editions. The textbook example is Jeremiah, which existed in two editions:⁶

- a shorter edition, which is attested in Greek in the Septuagint, but was, in its main features, the faithful reflection of a short Hebrew model that already exhibited the same characteristics; we possess small parts of a Hebrew text close to this shorter edition in two Dead Sea scrolls fragments (4QJer^b and 4 QJer^d);
- a longer edition, represented by the MT; here also, a few Dead Sea scrolls fragments (2QJer, 4QJer^a, and 4QJer^c) contain a text close to that edition.

Among the main differences between these two editions is the placement of the oracles against the nations (at the end in the MT but at the middle of the book in the LXX, right after 25:12) and many plusses (about 8000 Hebrew words) in the longer edition. The longest supplement is Jer 33:14-26.

In fact, this phenomenon is more widespread than many people think.⁷ To varying degrees, it concerns Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezekiel, Psalms, Song of Songs, etc. The Book of Esther seems to have existed in at least three distinct editions.

⁴ Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

⁵ See Eugene Ulrich, “Deuteronomistically Inspired Scribal Insertions into the Developing Biblical Texts: 4QJudg^a and 4QJer^a,” in *Houses Full of All Good Things: Essays in Memory of Timo Veijola*, eds. Juha Pakkala and Martti Nissinen (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2008): 489–506.

⁶ For a *status quaestionis*, see Matthieu Richelle, “Jeremiah and Baruch,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint*, eds. T. Michael Law and Alison Salvesen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): 259–84.

⁷ For examples of recent discussions, see for instance Emanuel Tov, “The Nature of the Large-Scale Differences between the LXX and M S T V, Compared with Similar Evidence in Other Sources,” in *The Earliest Text of the Hebrew Bible: The Relationship between the Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Base of the Septuagint Reconsidered*, ed. Adrian Schenker, SBL.SCS 52 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003): 121-144; Ville Mäkipelto, Timo Tekoniemi, and Miika

Another crucial point is that scholars do not regard it as possible anymore to draw a line between composition and transmission of the text. Scribes copying the text in the last few centuries BCE often, in practical terms, acted in the same way as redactors, freely adding to the text and rearranging it. When was Judg 6:8-10 added? Was it added by a redactor or by a scribe? It is impossible to tell, so much so that the distinction between redactor and scribe might lose its pertinence here.

2.2. Basic questions

Against this background, the practical questions that may spontaneously come to the mind of text critics who happen to be interested in the notion of inspiration are: how does this complicated evidence relate to the standard doctrinal formulations about the inspiration of the Scriptures? Is the addition in Judg 6:8-10 inspired? Are the two distinct editions of, say, Jeremiah, both inspired? Do they all constitute “canonical forms” of the same book? Above all, do these questions make sense?

Basically, these biblical scholars may well be under the impression that a number of realities they observe are not represented or mentioned in current systematic discussions on inspiration. These realities include the role played by the scribes/copyists, and the fact that the text existed in a great variety of forms. Textual fluidity may serve as an umbrella term to designate these realities.

Let us consider, by way of illustration, the relevant passage in the magisterial document *Dei Verbum*:

11. Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.(1) In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him (2) they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, (3) they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. (4)

Tucker, “Large-Scale Transposition as an Editorial Technique in the Textual History of the Hebrew Bible,” *TC* 22 (2017): 1-16.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings (5) for the sake of salvation. Therefore "all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text).

12. However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, (6) the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

13. In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature." (11) For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.

This passage has been admirably well contextualized and commented by Emmanuel Durand.⁸ I will certainly not try to emulate him but only make a few modest remarks on what this document does not say. It may be helpful to remember that the discussions in the middle of the twentieth century, and still today, have typically oscillated between two poles that come from old debates from the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries. On the one hand, some theologians still stick to some version of verbal inspiration: they believe that God was involved, even if very remotely, in the process that resulted in the actual wording of the Scriptures; nobody argues today that it happened by dictation, but some theologians envisage some kind of mysterious influence, causation, guidance or supervision. At the other end of the spectrum, other theologians believe that inspiration merely concerns a number of theological *ideas* that found their way in the texts, not their concrete verbal expression. Intermediate positions argue that God has providentially guided the creation of the biblical texts while leaving an important degree of freedom to the biblical redactors in their wording. This sketch merely scratches the surface of a complicated debate, of course.

⁸ Emmanuel Durand, "Relire *Dei Verbum* 11-13 dans son histoire... pour surmonter une fausse division entre exégèse scientifique et théologie," *Transversalités* 145 (2018) : 39-63. See also idem, *Jusqu'où ouvrir le texte?*, 36-60.

Against this background, *Dei Verbum* carefully abstains from endorsing either verbal inspiration or the “contents” inspiration theory. Yet it seems to imply that the inspiration of Scriptures by the Holy Spirit involves God’s agency in the making of the text throughout a *relatively* close supervision, especially in the following sentences:

- “in composing the sacred books, God...”: here, God is the subject of the verb “to compose”;
- the authors “consigned to writing everything *and only those things* which He wanted”;
- “everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit” (grammatically the end of the apodosis in the same sentence, “for the sake of salvation,” qualifies only the apodosis)
- “(...) what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.”

Dei Verbum makes it clear that God’s agency was involved in some way in the making of the inspired writings. It insists on the fact that the biblical books “with all their parts” are inspired. Yet apart from that, it leaves open the issue of the *extent*, so to speak, of God’s supervision in the making of the actual shape of the text. The possibility that God’s supervision influenced or even determined the shape of the text does not amount to a return to the theory of verbal inspiration. The latter theory, at least in its strictest version, postulated a fine-grained determination of the text by God, on the level of the words themselves. But it is also possible to imagine that God’s influence operated on a wider scale, or at a higher level. God may have wanted such or such part of a book to be present in it (a pericope, even a sentence), even though he did not supervise its wording. My point is that ever since *Dei Verbum*, contemporary articulations of inspiration often carefully avoid taking a stance on the issue of the extent of God’s supervision in the shaping of the text, considering this aspect to be beyond our grasp; it remains an open question.

What *has* often been suggested since *Dei Verbum* is that we should speak of “redactors” instead of authors, and also include the believing communities. In addition, a relatively recent shift must be noted. In a recent issue of the journal *Communio*, Olivier-Thomas Venard notes that the Catholic councils claimed the inspiration not only of the humans, but also of the *texts*, or rather the *books*, which exist in different forms.⁹ In the same issue, Olivier Riaudel writes:

⁹ Olivier-Thomas Venard, “L’inspiration des Ecritures – esquisse d’une problématique à la lumière des travaux de François Martin,” *Communio* 41.3 (2016): 70-71.

That which is maintained from age to age is not, therefore, the meaning, it is the text, and a certain number of rules for reading. It is here that we can seek the meaning of biblical inspiration.¹⁰

This focus on the *text* seems to reflect a general tendency in recent discussions. As Durand writes:

The theology of inspiration developed according to three successive models: author, community, and text. It is no longer possible to assume only one human author for each corpus or literary unit of the Bible. We must extend the concept of authorship to biblical editors and to communities who bore the traditions that were written down. Ultimately, it is the canonical text that is inspired.¹¹

Now if God's agency is postulated behind the formation of the text, even in a mysterious way, then we are doomed to encounter "practical" questions such as noted above. Was God somehow involved in the innumerable changes that appear in the manuscript evidence? Are we dealing with *changes to an inspired text* or with *inspired changes*? To put it another way, if a systematic theologian says: "the text is inspired," the biblical scholar might well reply: "which text? I have many texts in front of me, for the same book." Or did God cease to be involved at some point in the textual history of the book? Was or is such edition of a given book inspired? In the same way that theologians have broadened the scope of the human agents, from authors to redactors and communities, should they also include the work of *scribes* and *copyists*?

These may sound like naïve and idle or pointless questions, and of course the issue is not being able to answer them for any given passage. But this is the underlying principle that is interesting. Do we think that God's agency lies behind a part of the textual history, or behind its totality? And why? I would also argue that they are good questions, especially if they bother us by their concreteness. Concrete texts is all that we have, and this is what the believing communities deal with in liturgical settings. As Durand notes, "it is in the liturgical context that inspiration is best perceived and received by the believing community."¹² It is in this context that individual passages are publicly read, and these readings are often followed by responses

¹⁰ Olivier Riaudel, "De l'écrivain inspiré à l'inspiration du texte," *Communio* 41.3 (2016): 57.

¹¹ Durand, "Relire," 62; *Jusqu'où*, 60.

¹² Durand, "Relire," 62; *Jusqu'où*, 60.

like “(this is) the Word of the Lord” (at least in the Catholic and Anglican liturgies). So can we really regard it as indifferent whether individual passages are inspired or not?

Several solutions have been suggested or can be imagined. I will discuss some of them successively.¹³

2.3. Textual fluidity and inspiration as pertaining to ideas

The first conceivable solution would be to give up any concern for the form or shape of the text. As long as we focus on ideas contained in the books, especially in the theory of inspiration based on the contents only, textual fluidity does not seem to be a problem at all. It does not seem to matter much that there existed two editions of Jeremiah, three editions (at least) of Esther, or whether this or that plus in a textual witness is inspired or not. What really matters is the fact that the Bible contains some key ideas, some key message. As long as the changes made by scribes to the text do not remove these ideas from the text or alter them, then it's fine.

What is more, textual fluidity may provide an argument in favor of the notion that inspiration only concerns ideas. Indeed, if there is so much variation among the textual witnesses, then doesn't it show that the wording was deemed unimportant by the ancient scribes? If God himself decided to use such a fragile medium, with fluctuating limits, to communicate his message, then how could the wording be of crucial importance?

However, this view does not avoid raising a number of questions.¹⁴ First, let me note that if the amount of variation among textual witnesses is indeed considerable, this does not mean that the biblical books were wholly transformed without care for the wording. Scholars today distinguish between the reuse and the rewriting a book,¹⁵ and the more limited kind of textual fluidity we encounter in the transmission of many other books. If scribes often felt free to make changes in the text, they nevertheless tried to copy it, to transmit it. Additions made to Pentateuchal laws of Deuteronomy in order to harmonize them with laws found in Exodus, for instance, may impress us in the freedom taken by scribes to supplement the text, but it also

¹³ Part of the complexity of the debate may also be due to some equivocity in the way “inspiration” is used in many discussions. Thus, there are basically two different uses of the word “inspiration”: (a) it can designate the process whereby God is involved in some way in the formation of the text (it *was* written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit); (b) it can designate an enduring quality of the text (it *is* inspired). To make things even more complicated, systematic theologians sometimes consider that the inspiration of the text is fully “realized” only when this text is received through the Spirit by the reader or the listener.

¹⁴ Note that if only ideas really matter, it is difficult to see how the classical philological approach to the text, minutiously studying it in its original languages, could matter, as long as the main ideas are satisfactorily conveyed in modern translations.

¹⁵ For these notions, see Molly M. Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism: Scribal Composition and Transmission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

means that the same scribes preserved the text of Deuteronomy they inherited, rather than replacing it.

Second, when we take into account textual fluidity, another problem appears: it is the fact that some textual additions do contain ideas and sometimes introduce new ideas. Let us take Jer 33:14-26 as an illustration. This is the longest addition, present in the Masoretic text, made to the earlier edition of the book, attested by the Septuagint. This passage contains several interesting ideas, including that of an eternal covenant for the Levites, which is a novelty. What do we make of such an idea? Was it, and is it, inspired? Is this an idle question? Yet if we feel free to discount such a passage as unimportant because its contents have no bearing on our theological thinking, then I find it troubling, because there are many such passages in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ The Hebrew Bible does not just contain a few overarching theological ideas such as, in some texts, a form of monotheism, or an overarching narrative arc: the texts also make many historical points (e.g. about the extent of David's kingdom or the historicity of Josiah's reform) and ideological or secondary religious points (e.g. about the respective roles of priests and Levites, or the centralization of the cult). If inspiration only concerns ideas, one may wonder which ideas exactly are inspired.

Furthermore, let us assume that what really matters for the inspiration of a book is only the presence of some key ideas, not the precise form of that book, represented by the list of pericopes and verses it contains. It follows that we could theoretically add a new brief passage containing a theological absurd idea without changing the fact that the book is inspired, since it would not alter the presence of the key ideas just mentioned. Yet it is easy to imagine how the added presence of a theological absurd idea could fit badly with the notion that the book is inspired.

There are other problems with the view that only ideas matter, such as the debatable dissociation between ideas and words, as noted by Venard,¹⁷ but my point here is that taking into account textual fluidity troubles the situation even within the framework of that theory.

2.3. "Everything is inspired"

A second, diametrically opposed solution to the problem discussed here consists in saying that "everything is inspired." All the variants and variations among the textual witnesses could

¹⁶ Note that Jer 33:14-16 is part of the Catholic liturgical calendar; it was read at mass on the first day of Advent in 2021.

¹⁷ Venard, "L'inspiration," 66.

be regarded as part of Scriptures. This view of inspiration would “absorb,” so to speak, all the textual multiplicity. Venard writes:

Can we not try to conceive that “supplementation” is always possible, inherent to every word in its capacity as a word, by discovering, quite simply, the natural and anthropological base of a realistic conception of the inspiration of the Scriptures? That which the theorists of the 1960s and 1970s called the rustle [*bruissement*] of the text, transposed into the Scriptures — from the simple lacuna, to the most illogical passage, via all sorts of textual corruption, accidents, corrections or additions occurring in the transmission of the text — is this not, just as much as the intention of the first writer, the Word of God in its historical communication?¹⁸

This view may prove attractive to text critics, because they are interested in the entire manuscript evidence; even when they are trying to reconstruct the archetype of a book, they are interested in its entire textual history. They consider that variability pertains to the very nature of the biblical books.¹⁹ And they don’t have any criteria for selecting the variants that would be inspired or not, so this view sounds quite “realistic,” as Venard writes. Their task is descriptive, not prescriptive. They often thrive to tell what the earliest reading in a particular verse was, but it does not follow that this should be regarded as the “inspired” form of the verse. More generally, the ideal goal of textual criticism is a comprehensive description of the many instantiations of a text throughout the centuries, and an explanation of its complicated development along various tracks. From a scientific point of view, every variant deserves consideration. A theological view of inspiration that would not privilege one particular form of the text over the others but embrace the entire manuscript evidence would align with this scientific interest in the entire textual multiplicity.²⁰

¹⁸ Venard, “L’inspiration,” 70.

¹⁹ Even during Medieval times, the biblical text was not entirely stable; there were slight variations in the Masoretic Text, and the versions were subjected to changes. Moreover, even in the printing age, and to this day, there exist differences between the various editions of the Hebrew text. They do not print exactly the same text (the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, for instance, is a diplomatic edition of the Leningrad Codex, whereas the Hebrew University Bible is a diplomatic edition of the Aleppo Codex). In addition, there are many typos in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, which can, in a way, be compared to the scribal errors of the past. Overall, the text is not completely stable. Finally, it is well known that there are many differences between modern versions, and even between the successive editions of a given modern version.

²⁰ For a defense of the variance of the biblical text seen as its very essence, see Brennan Breed, *The Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). For a critical assessment, see Matthieu Richelle, “Uncertainty and Undecidability in Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible: Three Epistemic Issues,” in *Congress Volume Zürich 2022*, ed. Konrad Schmid (VTSup; Brill: Leiden, forthcoming).

Moreover, as noted above, biblical scholars have come to realize that it is not possible to draw a line between the composition of the books and their transmission. The same kind of changes that were made during the successive redactions of a book can also be detected in the textual fluidity as attested by manuscripts. Note, in passing, that such a view would therefore involve including scribes among the circle of human agents that have been considered in the theory of inspiration so far: redactors and believing communities.

All that being said, such a “generous” view raises some questions. First, what about scribal accidents? A large part of the textual fluidity we observe in the manuscript evidence is due to scribal mistakes that result in, notably, omissions of words or phrases, or repetitions. If we hold that inspiration included the providential supervision of the transmission history, then, are we to consider that the God’s agency was involved in these scribal blunders? Now the reason why this kind of question may sound ridiculous is the fact that it implicitly rests on the notion that inspiration entails a very close supervision of the work of human scribes, in a way that would be analogous to the one that is supposed with regard to authors in the strictest theory of verbal inspiration. Precisely. My point is that if we hold the view that inspiration embraces the whole of textual multiplicity, then we are concretely talking of many little “uninspiring” variants alongside more significant ones.²¹ If we want to include the entire textual multiplicity in the inspired corpus, then we are theoretically including the work of a scribe who in, say, the first century CE, accidentally omitted a sentence in a chapter, another in a different chapter, and added a few words due to dittographies. If his work was done under the inspiration of God, then this is what we are concretely talking about. And if we say that God was involved in some supervision at such a micro-level (sentences and words), then we are dangerously close to the notion of verbal inspiration in its most “literal” version. In addition, when we focus on these tiny “contributions,” we seem to be far from the connection between revelation and inspiration that a number of theologians postulate; to put it simply, it seems difficult to imagine that the scribe who accidentally skipped a few words did so because he (or she) was a witness to a revelatory event; we are simply dealing with the concrete work of copyists.

Another concern is that including everything in the inspired corpus would mean “validating” all that scribes did as a *fait accompli*. Just because a scribe did this or that at an early period, it would automatically be “canonized,” so to speak. Would Christian theologians reason in the

²¹ This should be nuanced, however, since accidental mistakes at the hands of scribe sometimes result in new, interesting forms of a passage, as I argue in Matthieu Richelle, “Towards a Variegated Approach to Textual Fluidity: Limited Variations, Deliberate Duplication and Creative Scribal Mistake in 2 Kings 10:15-31,” *Henoch* 42/2 (2020): 92-114.

same way with regard to the “unorthodox” changes made to the text of the NT in the first centuries CE? And what would be the *terminus ad quem*, the date after which we would regard variants as not inspired? It seems that any line traced in the sand in this regard would be arbitrary. Then what about the famous variant of the so-called Wicked Bible, the edition of the King James Bible where the printer accidentally (or not?) omitted the negation in “You shall not commit adultery?”

2.4. “Only a part of the textual multiplicity is inspired”

If we remain within the framework of a view that holds that God’s “supervision” or “monotoring” was somehow involved in the shape of the text, the alternative to the previous view would be to assume that inspiration concerns only *some part* of the textual multiplicity. Hence the embarrassing question of the criteria according to which this or that variant was inspired.

An interesting possibility would be to consider those changes that belong to *theological projects*. The revised and updated edition of Jeremiah evidently stems from a well thought-out project. In a similar vein, Adrian Schenker thinks that the MT of Kings represents a new edition stemming out of an earlier Hebrew edition that served as the *Vorlage* for the LXX translator of that book. Schenker considers that this scriptural book exists in two different forms that are both canonical, even though both of them are marked by ideological, political and religious prejudices. It is precisely a “synoptic” appreciation of the book in its dual form that can prevent us to identify the Word of God and any imperfect textual instantiation of the book.²²

The importance of theological projects is further underlined by what we understand of the emic perspective of scribes in the last centuries BCE. Recent research has pointed out that a number of Jewish scribes, especially in the Hellenistic period, regarded themselves as apt, by virtue of a sort of prophetic inspiration, to rewrite authoritative books and improve them.²³

But a focus on ancient theological projects does not account for all the textual variants – far from it. As already mentioned, a huge proportion of textual fluidity is due to scribal mistakes. Moreover, the notion of theological project does not account for all the differences between successive editions of the same book, for instance between the LXX and the MT in Jeremiah.

²² Adrian Schenker, *Älteste Textgeschichte der Königsbücher: Die hebraische Vorlage der ursprünglichen Septuaginta als älteste Textform der Königsbücher*, OBO 199 (Fribourg – Göttingen, Academic Press – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 190-2.

²³ Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting*, 211-22.

In the centuries after the main redaction which gave to the MT its overall shape, and which included a change in the sequence of the chapters (the relocation of the oracles against the nations from the middle to the end of the book), as well as many additions, a number of other changes and *Fortschreibungen* were made. They were not part of the same great project. Were they inspired? Generally speaking, many textual changes, in many books, were made without any concern for an overall theological project. In fact, should we regard any *intentional* change as inspired? Think, again, of the “unorthodox” variants in the NT text.

Yet another theory would postulate that only those changes that belong to forms of the text received in a significant part of the Synagogue or the Church are *de facto* canonical. As Durand notes, canonicity is presented as subordinated to inspiration in *DV* 11:

For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical *because* written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.²⁴

So if we regard the two editions of Jeremiah as canonical because both have been received in Christianity throughout the centuries, should we consider that they are both inspired? That would not necessarily be satisfactory, because even those textual traditions which were widely received subsist in a multiplicity of forms, with innumerable variants in the LXX manuscripts of Jeremiah, for instance. If we hold that both the MT and the LXX editions of Jeremiah are inspired, we are still facing the immense textual multiplicity of the manuscripts that attest these editions, and the problem has only shifted.

2.5. Another solution based on the distinction between the Bible and the Word of God?

Yet another attempt at a solution would be to consider that the shape of the text does not matter much, because a distinction is necessary between the text of the Bible and the Word of God. As Benoît Bourguine reminds us, a simple identification between them would lead to fundamentalism.²⁵ If we follow Barth, it is only when it is proclaimed that the biblical text can

²⁴ Durand, “Relire,” 43; *Jusqu’où*, 40.

²⁵ See his contribution to this volume.

become the Word of God. In some recent formulations, the inspiration of the text is fully realized only when it is received by believing communities animated by the same Spirit who inspired the text in the first place. Maybe some could infer from this that asking questions about the inspiration of the text independently of this reception is “premature,” so to speak?

However, Bourguine also reminds us that a complete disconnect between the letter and the Spirit is problematic. Theologians keep talking of the inspired text even when they do not have in view its reception; they do not argue that the text considered on its own is “partly inspired,” or “inspired to an incomplete degree.” And, of course, if a passage is absent from an edition of a book that is used in a particular tradition, nobody in this tradition will preach about this text. Conversely, if a passage is a plus in an edition, it may serve as a basis for preaching. Thus the shape of a book partly determines its use in the proclamation, and, therefore, its reception.

In the end, textual fluidity raises concrete questions that may lead us to take more seriously into account the question of the form of the text. And yet, as I have tried to show, easy solutions do not seem satisfactory. Thus, it remains to be seen if there are more than dead ends here. Perhaps the complexity highlighted by textual fluidity is just the final proof that any definition of inspiration must remain vague. Adding “scribes” to the list of human agents involved in the inspired creation of the text, alongside redactors or believing communities, might prove problematic. Whereas it is desirable to include the work of redactors, doing the same for the people involved in the transmission history of the book might be too broadly inclusive. The trouble, for biblical scholars, is, again, that it is not possible anymore to draw a line between the work of redactors and that of scribes.

One could also wonder whether it makes sense to ask if a particular passage, or a particular form of a text, is inspired. Traditionally, theologians speak of inspired *books*. As we have seen above, recent discussions have been characterized by a shift from *book* to *text*. Yet one may argue that when some theologians speak of the inspiration of the text, they are talking of the text (of a given literary work) considered *as a whole*, not as a set of inspired pericopes. Hence perhaps the possibility of approaching inspiration in a very general way, as an attribute pertaining to the book or text as a whole? One could, for instance, argue that the sole fact that a book mediates the Word of God, or some message, suffices to qualify it as “inspired.” However, would that not entail reverting to the “contents” theory of inspiration, which has its own problems, as noted above?

A way forward might be to consider recent discussions on the conceptualization, or even the ontology, of “books,” a topic to which I now turn.

3. Analogies and metaphors to help conceptualize inspiration

As we have seen, recent discussions by theologians focus on the *text* as the object of inspiration. Yet the fluidity of the text makes the conceptualization of its inspiration more difficult. Scholars often have recourse to analogies and metaphors to approach this problem. The question I would like to raise in this section is whether some recent discussions on the conceptualization of books in ancient Judaism could not help refine our conceptualization of their inspiration.

3.1. The Incarnation analogy

A common approach, at least since *Dei Verbum*, is the Incarnation analogy discussed and revisited by Durand.²⁶ I find analogy fruitful and helpful. One of its implications is that the “fragility” of the text is *to be expected*. It is not a “bad surprise” that would challenge the notion of inspiration in itself. Another implication is that this “fragility” is not a huge problem for theology. The fact that the text has fluctuating limits only affects it at its margins; it does not change the existence of an inspired text.

That being said, like every analogy, the Incarnation model also has limits; it does not claim to be able to capture the entirety of the phenomenon it sheds light on. For instance, it does not solve the question of the possible inspiration of the textual variants or of their canonical status. I can also imagine that the notion of a kenosis of the “divine word,” that is translated into a “human word,” might prompt questions such as: does this “divine word” exist independently of the human words we have?²⁷

In addition, I find it interesting to note that textual fluidity is sometimes approached as a manifestation of the “precarity” or “fragility” of the inspired text (as in the Incarnation analogy), and sometimes as a fruit of positive theological activity, that is, of redactional activity motivated by theological reflection (in agreement with the conception that a number of ancient scribes had of their own work²⁸). Admittedly, as Durand rightly notes, the “complexity” of the textual composition and transmission is not a “degeneration” of the human word; it is there from the start. Yet the language of “precarity” is striking. This raises the question of whether the fluidity

²⁶ See his contribution to this volume.

²⁷ Durand, *Jusqu’où*, 94-96.

²⁸ See also Bourguine’s contribution to this volume.

of the text is regarded as an inevitable limit or flaw of the text as a medium of communication, a problem to be dealt with or to live with, or whether it should be envisaged as a sort of *positive* dimension of the text. Or perhaps both alternately, depending on the situation.

Be that as it may, what I would like to do in what follows is to explore other possible analogies or, perhaps, metaphors, which will have their own limits but which might shed some light on the problem I am discussing.

3.2. The vitality of Scriptures

Hindy Najman's approach, based on the notion of "vitality of Scriptures," might prove stimulating here.²⁹ Without abandoning the distinction between canonical and non-canonical works, she argues that in the Second Temple period, scriptural authority was understood in a way that went beyond these boundaries. Taking her cue from Walter Benjamin's discussion on the "life and continuing life of works of art," she argues that

(some) texts have an excess of vitality that expresses itself in the fact that they provide the basis for new texts. For example, they give rise to emulations that purport to "say the same" as the original scripture although they are self-evidently different. Thus Jubilees and the Temple Scroll claim to "say the same" as various pentateuchal texts, speaking in the voice of Moses, or in the voice of the angel dictating to Moses, or even in the voice of God.

Far from contradicting the authoritative status of scripture, texts such as Jubilees and the Temple Scroll—and the "apocryphal" texts of the Melitians—arise precisely from that authority. To acknowledge certain texts as scriptural is to recognize them as possessing an excess of vitality, more life than ordinary texts, and it is the nature of life to generate life, to sustain and reproduce itself. Insofar as scripture is authoritative, it is also generative.³⁰

Maybe we could, in turn, take our cue from this discussion about the vitality of Scriptures that manifests itself in a sort of overflow beyond the canonical boundaries, to consider, by analogy, that textual fluidity is another manifestation of this vitality, within the boundaries. The vitality of the Scriptures did not only result in the production of new works that did not find their way into the canon; it also translated into an excess of vitality at their own margins. When

²⁹ Hindy Najman, "The Vitality of Scripture Within and Beyond the 'Canon'," *JSJ* 43 (2012): 497-518.

³⁰ Najman, "Vitality," 516.

I say “margins,” this is of course to be understood as a figurative trope; in actuality, it does not only designate supplements at the beginning or the end of the works or their pericopes; the growth and variations within the text are also concerned; they also represent an excess that overflows the main “body” of the text; they are “marginal” unless they amount to a rewriting that results in a new work, like Jubilees.

Because the canonical works were regarded as authoritative, and because they were “generative,” they prompted the scribes who copied them to “update” them and change them in various ways. On this view, textual fluidity is not an inevitable and negative aspect of the text, it is the manifestation of an intrinsic quality of the literary works in question: their vitality, their generativity. Fluidity is, so to speak, an organic aspect of the text. It is not a feature of the text not a bug. Perhaps this could encourage us to think of the biblical books not merely as “discrete” entities and fixed objects, but as entities subjected to processes. It might be interesting to draw an analogy with the difference, stressed by François Jullien, between the ontology in Western thinking, based on the “being” and favorising a “static” approach, and the focus on “processual” realities in China.³¹ I am merely suggesting here that our conceptualization of the biblical works as fixed books does not render justice to their “dynamic” dimension and their generative character.

Of course, the approach I am imagining here has limits. It mainly concerns variants that were intentional or at least spontaneous; it is hardly adequate for including scribal mistakes; it concerns additions, it is less clear whether it concerns omissions (whether accidental or intentional). But, in contrast to theories criticized above because of similar limits, this approach may cover more than just editorial projects or theological rewriting. It may also account for little fluctuations that arose spontaneously when the vitality of the text prompted its tradents to make adjustments and add supplements here and there.

Further, while the notion of vitality may help us understand that variability belonged to the very “essence” of the biblical works, it does not solve the problem of the possible inspiration of variants or their canonical status. Nevertheless, in a Christian perspective, I imagine that a connection might be drawn between this “life” and the action of the Holy Spirit. If so, should this lead us to consider the fruit of the vitality, including at least part of the textual variants, as inspired? Returning to Najman’s discussion about the canon, it is interesting to note that recognizing that the vitality of Scriptures exceeds them to the point of leading to the creation of new works does not necessarily imply that these new works are canonical. Can we reason

³¹ François Jullien, *La pensée chinoise: En vis-à-vis de la philosophie*, Folio essais (Paris : Gallimard, 2015), 21-4 ; see also his reflections on the notion of *évasif* (173-84).

the same way with regard to textual fluidity? Are there variants that are due to the vitality of Scriptures (and perhaps to the Holy Spirit) but not inspired, and/or non-canonical? Or should we consider that another mode of inspiration pertains to them, the same way as various modes of inspiration are certainly relevant to different literary genres?³² Or perhaps it is the question of a sort of “gray area” that is raised here.

Another point that would be worth discussing is the fact that there was a virtual end to the phenomenon of vitality, insofar as the text was largely frozen at some point – not entirely, since there are slight differences even within the medieval manuscripts of the Masoretic family, and there are still variations in the editions of the Hebrew Bible, or of the Old Testament, today.³³ Yet it seems clear that after the first century CE, the variations in the Hebrew text were very limited, and this is a striking phenomenon from the point of view of *longue durée*. Should we consider that the vitality of Scriptures is then “taken up” by its reception (although reception was already at work within the biblical corpus)?

3.3. “Books” and other metaphors

It may be possible to go further and to problematize the very notion of “book.” In her important work entitled *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, Eva Mroczek notes that “book” is an anachronistic concept when it is applied to the work of Jewish scribes during the late Second Temple period. She takes as examples Psalms, Jubilees and Ben Sira. Psalms is attested in 11QPsalms^a, a long scroll from the first century CE, in a form that differs widely from the MT form we know, both with regard to the order of the psalms, and with the list of poems: ten psalms are not found in the MT. This is not an “eccentric” scroll; other Psalms scrolls exhibit different sequences of psalms.³⁴

In Mroczek’s view,

no book of Psalms as such exists in early Judaism. Instead, there are a variety of collections that preserve psalms and psalmlike compositions, in various lengths and arrangements, for pedagogical, exorcistic, interpretive, and liturgical purposes” (...) “psalms are not conceptualized as a ‘book’ prior

³² See John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2004).

³³ See above, fn. 19.

³⁴ See also Eva Mroczek, “The Hegemony of the Biblical in the Study of Second Temple Literature,” *JAJ* 6 (2015): 35.

to the New Testament and rabbinic texts. Instead, they are imagined as an open genre, a heavenly archive that is only partially reflected in the extant texts.³⁵

Mroczek rightly notes that textual fluidity is also a striking aspect of Ben Sira. Even in that case, where an (actual) author is clearly identified, it is impossible to reduce the textual fluidity to reconstruct an *Urtext*: the literary work exists in different editions with a complicated relationship between them. More than that, Mroczek shows that this textual multiformity is in line with Jesus Ben Sira's project; he compares himself, in his authorial work, to "a canal from a river:"

As for me, I was like a canal from a river,
like a water channel into a garden.
I said, "I will water my garden
and drench my flower-beds."
And lo, my canal became a river,
and my river a sea.
I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn,
and I will make it clear from far away.
I will again pour out teaching like prophecy,
and leave it to all future generations. (Sir 28:30-33)

Mroczek argues that "Ben Sira does not understand his work as a 'book' in the sense of an original and final written composition, but as the malleable and necessarily incomplete continuation of a long tradition of revealed wisdom."³⁶

At the same time, Mroczek's approach is much more subtle than a mere rejection of the concept of "book" as anachronistic. Instead, she notes that "book" can be used as one metaphor among others:

³⁵ Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

³⁶ Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*, 93.

Thus, to call ancient texts “books” is not to make a historically indefensible faux pas. It is to do the work of metaphor: to make them at home in our own imagination, and to ascribe to them the power, mystery, and anxiety that the “book” holds for us. But perhaps this metaphor’s descriptive power has been exhausted, and now, rather than being satisfied with how it can help us speak about ancient texts, we are more conscious of and troubled by what it cannot help us describe.³⁷

Thus, Mroczek considers a number of possible other metaphors: archives, database, projects... She suggests regarding the biblical works as “multigenerational projects that enabled their own expansion and were not necessarily intended or received as original or complete.”³⁸ Her approach is fascinating, although one may wonder if it is relevant for all the works that comprise the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the case, she brings into a debate an aspect that must be integrated into our understanding of the scribal work in the Second Temple period.

When it comes to reflecting on the possible implications of these considerations for our present discussion, it might be objected that the latter considerations only concern early periods, prior to the canonization process and the fixation of the text. After all, the shift to books *did* happen at some point during the first millennium CE, and it is books that the Masoretes left us, or, more precisely, splendid codices. So while it is interesting to realize that in the late second Temple period, Jewish scribes did not regard the works they were writing and copying as books in the sense we give to this word, this does not change the fact that what we have now are books.

The problem, however, is that Mroczek’s observations concern the period during which the works in question were “written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,” according to a classical Christian formulation. To put it another way, the works in question were not conceptualized as books precisely during the period when the inspiration is supposed to have taken place,³⁹ whereas our conceptualization of their inspiration is largely based on their conceptualization as books. It seems that at least some works that *were* not inspired *as books* are now regarded as inspired *as books* (not to mention the fact that the books are gathered in a single corpus, the Bible). Accordingly, we are trying to conceptualize inspiration from within a paradigm that was not current at the time when the biblical works were written; our etic perspective differs from the emic perspective of ancient scribes. Hence a question: should this change something in the way we conceive and speak of the inspiration of Scriptures?

³⁷ Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*, 11.

³⁸ Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*, 13.

³⁹ Here, of course, I am only talking of the inspiration of the texts insofar as it concerns their writing, I do not consider the notion of inspiration of their reception.

Perhaps this could confirm that the shift from *book* to *text* in recent discussions is a good move. That said, as I have tried to show, “text” is not an easy notion to manipulate. Moreover, it is not clear either that Jewish scribes conceived of their work as the production of a *text*. Text does not capture the dynamic highlighted by Mroczek.

I find it interesting to note what Mroczek herself writes about the metaphor of project:

Perhaps we may also consider the concept of text as *project*, which brings human agency and a sense of ongoing development and use back into the production of texts. The presence of textual variants and diverse configurations of psalms is no longer a problem to be solved – no longer to be studied as deviations from a preexistent “book” to which we compare them. Instead, they are part of the very shape of early Jewish literary expectations before that “book” emerged as such.⁴⁰

Like the Incarnation analogy, and like the approach based on the vitality of Scriptures, this approach shows that textual fluidity is *to be expected*. It does not answer the question of inspiration or the canonical status of the variants, though. However, like the “vitality” approach, Mroczek’s perspective allows us to see that variability is an integral part of the work of ancient scribes. On this view, it may be more difficult to justify the exclusion of textual variants from the sphere of inspiration.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have tried to show that current formulations of the doctrine of inspiration do not seem to integrate a number of dimensions of the biblical texts that exegetes, especially text critics, observe in their daily frequentation of these texts. Let me summarize the main points of my discussion:

(1) Recent formulations have seen some progress insofar as they now prefer to speak of “redactors” rather than “authors.” Textual fluidity raises the question of whether we should expand this to scribes and copyists. The problem is all the more acute in that the frontier between redaction and transmission vanishes: these realities overlap and it is often difficult to say whether a textual change is the work of a redactor or of a scribe copying an already

⁴⁰ Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*, 41.

authoritative work. Likewise, the distinction between scribes and copyists is difficult to maintain for early periods.

For this reason, integrating “scribes” into the number of actors involved in the making of the inspired text seems desirable. On the other hand, however, it might lead to complications, as it seems to imply that every textual variant is inspired. Are textual variants merely changes made to an inspired text, or inspired changes? Should we consider that part of the variants are inspired, and if so, on what criteria? I have tried to show that these questions are worth asking but difficult to answer.

Another way to look at the same problem is to say that the realization of the amplitude of textual variation may raise anew the question of the “canonical form” of the biblical books, which has never been entirely settled in the Christian traditions.⁴¹ The variety of textual forms is greater than previously known. Saying that both the MT and the LXX are inspired would not solve the problem, because each of them, but above all the LXX, is a label that designate texts that concretely exist in innumerable forms. In addition, we know, thanks to the Dead Sea scrolls, other textual forms of the texts.

Faced with the difficulties, it may be tempting to maintain some ambiguity and be content with saying that each “biblical book” is inspired *as a whole*. Yet I am in favor of pursuing the conversation and the exploration, be it only for liturgical concerns (arguably, it does matter to know whether a text read during a service is “inspired”).

(2) Another relatively recent shift in discussions involves a focus on the text, rather than on the authors, redactors or books. As we have seen, text(s) is still an elusive notion. Analogies and metaphors are helpful to try and approximate the realities that we often designate by terms such as books or texts. The Incarnation model has proved its utility and remains helpful. Other approaches used by biblical scholars and historians may be worth exploring by theologians: I briefly explored that of “vitality” of Scriptures, and that of “project.” The latter approach is part of a qualification of the usefulness of the category of “book” for the very period when the biblical works were written. Here again, I suggest that these are interesting directions to explore further in future discussions.

⁴¹ On this notion and its relationship to textual criticism, see Matthieu Richelle, “Critique textuelle et ‘forme canonique’ du texte de l’Ancien Testament,” in *La formation des canons bibliques, A voix haute: Conférences de l’IPT* (Lyon : Olivétan, 2021): 49-77.

In the end, although textual fluidity is not necessarily a challenge to the *notion* of inspiration,⁴² it may serve as a stimulus to rethink *formulations* of this doctrine.

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⁴² See, again, his contribution to this volume.

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