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Laurentius Valla: Renaissance Critic and Biblical Theologian
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A Critique: "Two Levels of History"
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Laurentius Valla (1407—1457): Renaissance Critic and Biblical Theologian

We must not condemn the language, grammar, dialectic and other arts of the Gentiles. Did not the apostles write in the Greek language? Rather it is their dogmas, religions and false opinions about virtuous works which make us the laughing stock of heaven.¹

When Laurentius Valla penned those words, he was writing the first scientific treatise on Latin grammar since John Duns Scotus. Leonardo Bruni died in the same year Valla's treatise appeared. The year 1444 marks the return of Renaissance scholars to a philological analysis of classical texts. This method, which Valla soon applied to Biblical study, revolutionized medieval Biblical scholarship in the century before Trent. Valla's purpose was to revitalize Catholic faith. Protestants and Catholics still owe their fresh awareness of Scripture to the labors of Valla.

I. TASK OF THE RENAISSANCE SCHOLAR

A. Gramm Garner

A glance at the self-awareness of their task by Renaissance scholars helps one understand the relation of Renaissance philology to Reformation theology. One cannot read bonae litterae as a fascination for rhetoric alone.² Nor can one dismiss this phrase of Erasmus as a covering for a wicked heart, as though rhetoric were a vehicle of fascist propaganda and somehow undemocratic. It was not only bad style against which the humanists railed, but inaccuracies of the text as well.

It is not by coincidence that the Renaissance authors speak of studia humanitatis, the humanities (sic), emphasize the human relevance of certain problems, and are inclined to praise the dignity and excellence of man. Nevertheless, we should resist this temptation as best we can. If we have understood the meaning of Renaissance humanism in its own historical setting, we can also see why it should involve a certain emphasis on man, and thus be 'humanistic' in the modern sense of the word. However, if we take this emphasis on man as a starting point, we shall never understand the phenomenon of Renaissance humanism as a whole.³


Renaissance scholars gained a new perspective of God, man, and the world. Man and the world were realities to the medieval peasant. The Burkhardtian thesis that the Renaissance rediscovered these is misleading. Valla’s return to origins rearranged the map of phenomena.

Philological exigence was not an accidental or formal aspect of Humanism but a constituent element. The need for discovering texts and restoring them to their authentic form by studying and collating the codices was accompanied by the need to discover the authentic meaning of poetry or the philosophic or religious truth they contained. Without philological research there was no Humanism, properly speaking, but merely a general attitude in favour of the defense of Classical culture, which can be found in all epochs and is therefore not characteristic of any particular one.4

One learns from a reading of the sources that philosophical defenses of symbolism and allegory were completely undermined by a philological penchant for the real and literal. It is not surprising that traditional doctrines were in danger. The extent to which philology undergirded thought patterns of reform has not been adequately described. For Catholic reformers before 1546 much remains to be said.

As long as we realize that Christian humanism represents only one strand within the broader picture of Renaissance humanism, we may very well choose to study it further, and there actually is much room for further research on the religious element in Renaissance humanism, and on its impact upon the theology of the period. We need more work on the religious ideas of the humanists, and also on their Biblical, patristic and historical scholarship as it affected the theology of the Reformation period, and finally on the humanist background of the sixteenth-century theologians.5

The “audacity of Valla” can be effectively seen only against the scenery of humanistic method and purpose.6 Theology was one academic discipline affected by philology; law was another.7 As Linton Stevens has shown for legal studies, the

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5 Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Studies on Renaissance Humanism during the Last Twenty Years,” p. 19. A subsequent paper will describe in detail the impact of Verona-Padua-Venice on Italian Catholic reformers.

6 J. H. Whitfield, Petrarch and the Renaissance (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1943), pp. 116 to 143. “The Audacity of Valla,” p. 123: “Valla’s constant procedure is from the concrete to the abstract. It is one which has been formulated as philosophical questions arising from philological decisions.”

practice of philological analysis led to formulation of "a new philosophical conception of the relationship of legal principles to the moral status of the individual in relation to society." If the purposes were not always moral, the method was singularly and effectively employed in all areas of study. Stevens might well have been describing the new Biblical and patristic study.

The *mos Italicus* ignored historical criticism in its interpretation of separate passages of the *corpus Iuris*, which was considered as a code of existing law. The *mos Gallicus* attempted to clear away the incrustations of the glossators and to reinterpret the Roman law in the light of historical institutions with the aid of philological criticism.9

Obstacles in the path of returning to classical or Christian antiquity were formidable. Valla's brilliant treatise on the Latin language appeared in 1444.10 Not only did the lack of "scientific" grammars and lexical aids make it difficult to learn the classical languages, but the expense of acquiring a suitable library also prohibited widespread acquaintance with the new learning. To follow the way in which Arabic could be studied is one example. Though Christian Europe had been in contact with Arabic civilization for centuries, a knowledge of Arabic was difficult to gain at the opening of the 16th century.

In some ways the acquisition of a knowledge of Arabic paralleled the difficulties in acquiring a knowledge of Greek in the early Renaissance. The early scholars of both languages were dependent on learning the language from some one who already knew it; many were self-taught; concerted efforts had to be made to produce dictionaries, vocabularies, and grammars; manuscripts had to be collected at great expense from far places; libraries established, and fonts of type founded.11

It required courage to cultivate the friendship of heretics, infidels, and Jews. In fact the famous altercation of Reuchlin with Pfefferkorn exploded well into the 16th century. Traditional systems of exegesis would not do in any event. Daniel Bomberg in Venice was instrumental in publishing the first complete Hebrew text of the Old Testament with Aramaic *Targums*. The second edition appeared as late as 1525, becoming the pattern for all later Jewish and Christian editions.

Bomberg's fifteen printings of grammars and dictionaries, for both Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic, were gladly accepted by Christian and Jewish students everywhere. Even as late as the 1520's a Reuchlin, while teaching at Tübingen, and Melanchthon at Wittenberg, would order Hebrew texts from Italy for the use of their pupils.12

The minutiae of philological analysis seemed harmless enough for cabalistic


9 Ibid., p. 94.

10 *Elegentiarum latinae linguae libri sex.*


study and Arabic theories of chess. It was quite different to question the Vulgate text of the Pauline epistles, checkmating successors of the poor fishermen of Galilee. What began as an innocuous activity of antiquarians became relevant all too quickly in the critical minds of Valla, Politian, et al. Baron places Burkhardt's Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy in perspective. It described the prototype far more than the origin of the modern world.\(^{13}\)

\[\ldots\] the importance of the Quattrocento lay in a new type of thinking, in a fresh approach to intellectual problems, and not in the extent of the innovations that were immediately effected in the specific sciences and arts.\(^{14}\)

The result for hermeneutics was in historical perspective with respect to time what optical perspective of Renaissance painting was to space.\(^{15}\)

**B. Salutati**

In 1405 Coluccio Salutati defended such study by reference to patristic precedent. His self-awareness is helpful in establishing the reality of the Renaissance. Three examples of Quattrocento humanism in Italy should be sufficient to represent a radical departure from medieval exegesis. Coluccio Salutati and Angelo Poliziano Ambrogini at the opening and close of that century set off in bold relief the achievements of Laurentius Valla. Kristeller has shown the religious nature of Petrarch's dependence on Augustine. A rejection of scholasticism was not meant to be a rejection of Christianity. One does disservice to many Renaissance humanists in Italy by prejudging and impugning their motives. For many of them, especially Petrarch, Salutati, and Valla, greater importance was attached to prescholastic theologians, that is, the church fathers and Augustine in particular.\(^{16}\) A reading of primary sources is still a healthy corrective for theologians and historians who implicitly or explicitly assume a wholesale denial of religious and/or ethical values during the Italian Renaissance.

Finally, the active interest which the humanists dedicated to the classical authors was also extended to the Church Fathers. Among the Greek texts which the humanists translated into Latin and thus made available to the educated reader in Western Europe, the works of the Eastern theologians, that is, Basil, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril, and others, occupy a prominent place. Thus many of these works were translated for the first time, and some of them became very popular.\(^{17}\)

The self-awareness which authenticates the existence of the Quattrocento Renaissance

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\(^{13}\) Hans Baron, "Toward a more positive Evaluation of the Fifteenth Century Renaissance,"* Journal of the History of Ideas,* IV (1943), 24.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 40.

\(^{15}\) Abbagnano, p. 277.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 364. "Although the revival of letters in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which has deserved the peculiar title of ‘the’ Renascence, was more markedly independent of the Catholic tradition than those earlier revivals of learning which took place during the reigns of Charlemagne and St. Louis, yet the accusation of Paganism which it has received from many historians can hardly be substantiated." Nigel Abercrombie, *St. Augustine and French Classical Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 3.
appears in several codices. Certain ideas incorporating this historical self-awareness are foundational. The scheme of interpretation was as significant as the fact, indeed that method which the humanists employed is the means whereby facts of the Quattrocento are to be interpreted. That is factual and historical only which is recognizable within their scheme of interpretation.

When Salutati speaks of Biblical study, such statements are to be taken seriously. There is unfolded in his letters a program of the humanities which Augustine outlined as necessary for the interpretation of Scripture.

This understanding was inflamed by the study of sacred letters. Salutati’s intellect could not dissent from the new awareness and possibility of uncovering a genuine Biblical theology. For him the doctrine of Christ was to be recovered by grammatical analysis. One might then and only then proceed to theological synthesis. Salutati’s attack on scholasticism is no mere defense of rhetoric and poetry. There was a purpose in his philological method, a raising of philosophical and theological questions based on philological decisions. Salutati found the work of Quintilian necessary for an understanding of rhetoric, and inductive grammar necessary for reading the Greek and Latin classics. Salutati’s pattern is the De Doctrina Christiana of Augustine. This classical program of study contained a Christian purpose.

Salutati understood the allegorical appeal of Gregory’s Moralia in Iob. The relation of allegory to grammar was significant in the new interpretive framework. Salutati, p. 215, lines 20 to 26, line 16.

It is evident that Salutati’s understanding of allegory was a product of a new awareness of the importance of the Bible. His approach to the study of sacred letters was a reflection of the new humanistic philosophy that was emerging in the Quattrocento. The study of sacred letters was a key component of the program of the humanities that Augustine had outlined as necessary for the interpretation of Scripture. This classical program of study contained a Christian purpose.

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22 “Non sum animo dubius quin velis atque consentias Christi doctrinam per sacras litteras intraturas a grammatica debere necessitate quodam incipere. Quomodo potest enim Scripture sacre noticiam sumere qui litteras ignoraret? quomodo potest scire litteras qui grammaticam omnino non novit? nonne vides quo perduxit ignorantia grammaticae religiosos et omnes qui defectu talis habitus laborarent? non enim intellegunt quod legunt, nec legenda possunt aliis preparare. potest sine litteris fidei sinceritas percipi, sed non divina Scriptura, non doctorum expositiones et traditio, quas vix capere valeat litterati, ed edum simpliciter docti grammaticam, sed etiam qui dialecticis et retoricians insuderant.” Ibid., p. 215, lines 20 to 26, line 16.
23 Ibid., pp. 221—22.
24 Ibid., p. 224.
25 “Quod quidem an observet divina pagina videamus? divina scriptura nonne sermo et locutio Dei est?” Ibid., p. 235, lines 16-17.
26 Gregory had said, “Multiplicatis sensibus ut non solum verba historiae per allegoriaum sensum excuteret, sed allegoriaum sensum pro­ tinus in exercitium moralitatis inclinaret.” Cited from ibid., p. 236, n. 1.
tati dismissed allegory. His interpretation was not novel, but that practiced by the patristic fathers. Salutati introduced a program far-reaching in its consequences a century later. Gregory's occult multiplication of senses Salutati abhors. "Dimittam hoc igitur et de rebus atque sententiis ad verba simplicia transeamus." What better self-awareness could one desire than this letter of Salutati, which rejects allegorical Biblical exegesis only to posit a historical-grammatical study? The mystery of Scripture for Salutati was contained in and through the text, not beneath it. Spiritual understanding did not hide in a deeper level to be mined by allegory and symbolism, but rather lay on the surface. For Salutati, Scripture was pellucid. Simplex Scripturae meant a unity of the literal text with its spiritual understanding or moral application. Multiplication of senses not only obscured the text but also blocked one's true spiritual insight. Kristeller agrees with the interpretation of Eugenio Gatin. The recovery of such a framework was truly Christian.

27 "Quid mysteriosius, quidque magis poetici quam liber et historia Iob, cuius occulta cum aliis plures tum sanctissimis antistes Gregorius super omnes, multiplicatis sensibus, pertractavit?" Ibid., p. 236, lines 5-8. (Cf. Sciacca, p. 335—36, and comments on De sensibus allegorici fabularum Herculis. . . Here, as is well known, Salutati employed allegory. Cf. Berthold L. Ullman, The Humanism of Coluccio Salutati (Padova, Editrice Antenore, 1943), p. 88. N. b. 90—91. It seems that Salutati would accept allegory for the classics in an attempt to reconcile them to Christian literature. It does not seem that he was prepared, however, to allegorize Scripture, since it was not mythological as were the Homeric Epics.

28 Novati, IV, 236.

29 Ibid., p. 238, lines 19-25.

Others may reject the methods of scholastic theology, but try to combine humanistic learning with a simple faith based on the reading of Scripture and the church fathers. This was the position of some leading humanists such as Petrarch, Salutati, Erasmus, and More, and we might very well call them Christian humanists with Bush, or Christian scholars with Harbison.

One may speak then of a method in Biblical study common to humanism as a whole. There is not one humanistic method for Germany and the Northern Renaissance and another for Italy. The philological and aesthetical methods are really one. Melanchthon realized that a remedy for lack of order in the various studies lay "in a greater awareness of the end of purpose of each art."

The historical perspective appears in Leonardo Bruni's Laudatio Florentinae urbis. A swing from style in historical writing to veracity is noticeable. Bruni's history marks the concern of the early Quattrocento for veracity. Style was a means to an end, and this led to Barocci's dilemma. Was he to give greater praise to Bruni's

30 Kristeller, "Studies on Renaissance Humanism During the Last Twenty Years," p. 19.


32 Gilbert, pp. 72—73.

elegant style or to his accuracy? 34 Bruni writes of the humanist method in De Studiis et Litteris.

Nam et litterae sine rerum scien
tia steriles sunt et inane
es, et scientia rerum quan
ingens, si splendore
caret litterarum, ab
dita quaedam obscura
eraque videtur.35

It was the same Bruni who sought to translate Greek theologians into Latin.36 Until printing made possible the wide-spread circulation of critical texts and grammars, and until lexica and vocabularies were available in scientific editions, such translations were very necessary and useful. Gilbert’s analysis of both method and purpose is lucid.

Yet there is a sense in which the histories are correct in regarding most Renaissance philosophers as slaves of the word, and that, curiously enough, to a greater degree than their medieval predecessors. For the Renaissance “philosopher” was a man who read his authorities in the original language and who permitted no deviations of doctrine that were not sanctioned by the original language of the author.37


36 “Si qua praeterea vel de Gregorio Nazanzeno vel de Johanne Chrysostomo vel de magno Basilio, Graecis doctoribus, transita sunt, ea leges censeo; modo, qui traduxit, in Latinum converterit illa, non autem perverterit.” Garin, p. 150.

37 Gilbert, p. 36. Cf. p. 52, n. 23, for discussion of “humanist” Aristotelians in this same

C. Politian

A clear definition of the scope of humanistic research may be found in the work of Angelo Poliziano Ambrogini (1454—94).38 Politian defined the humanities in the sense of παιδεία, that is to say, free from any element of φιλανθρωπία. Such a statement found in the writings of the “compleat grammarian” expresses what Quattrocento humanists felt to be the purpose of scholarship. Expressing his views to Lucius Phosphorus, Politian defines humanitas as the simplicity contained in words and the work of interpretation of the text, classical or Christian.39 One fault


39 Angelo Poliziano Ambrogini, Opera Tomus Primus, Apud Seb. Gryphium (Lugduni, 1539), p. 76. ‘Angelus Politianus Lucio Phosphero pontifici Signino S. D.’ Reference not listed by Garin nor any other secondary source known to me. Cf. Maier, p. 267, for this practical purpose of philology as παιδεία. Karl Hartfelder, Philipp Melanchthon als Praeceptor Germaniae, Monumenta Germaniae Peadagogica (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1889),
of medieval grammarians was to study grammar independently of the text. Politian moved toward "a religion of the word." He would distinguish between objective philology — the grammaticus and allegorical interpretation, or philosophus.

The ethical implications of this search for truth and veracity were recognized by Politian. His Centuriae miscellaneorum was the first true model of the scholarly note or article. In this he was enforcing an ethical code of absolute personal integrity in scholarship. One would need to prove plagiarism for the humanists to accuse them correctly of lacking ethical insights. While some scholars of the Renaissance incorporated extracts from printed works without documentation, they did so not to conceal authorship so much as to reproduce accurate accounts. Such research was an attempt to avoid cases of equivalence between the scholar's views and those of his subject. At least Politian posited the nature of grammatical study in this way.

Politian's historicism is further revealed by the fact that he does not seek in his auctores the confirmation of his own beliefs and tastes on those of his time. His painstaking efforts in establishing the true word of the auctor and interpreting its precise meaning are justified by the very assumption that such words and meanings are different from ours, and that the temptation to establish cases of equivalence of identification is natural, but to be avoided.

Politian read the Bible quite accurately in Hebrew.

Humanist philology may be represented as antiquarian logomachy. Yet rightly understood, such effort was necessary to avoid cases of equivalence which were all too easily accomplished with the fourfold tool of medieval exegesis. The purpose was not philology, 

40 Scaglioni, pp. 67—68: "In this sense Politian appears to be the greatest exponent of mature humanism in its technical manifestations, the 'absolute philologist.' In fact the literary scholar, the philologist or grammaticus, is the true hero of Italian Quattrocento humanism, even more than the free creator, the poet." For a "minor" humanist and colleague of Politian at Florence, see Charles Trinkaus, "A Humanist's Image of Humanism: the Inaugural Orations of Barolomeo della Fonte," Studies in the Renaissance, VII (1960), 90—147.
liant insight of Scaglioni, important for its explanation of Luther's, Melanchthon's, Calvin's, Beza's, and Zwingli's unwillingness to discard the humanistic "philosophy of philology." 47

Formal, normative study of grammatical structures abstractly considered was made impossible by the very absence of manuals before Valla codified Latin forms in a rigorous, though far from "normative," manner, in his Elegantiae (1444 — no scholastic textbook to be sure). Even Valla felt no tenderness toward "rules." Guarina's Regulae and Gaza's Greek grammar were, quite typically, an abridgement and radical simplification of the grammar prevailing in the middle ages . . . in order to reduce that part of the student's work to a minimum, and to introduce him as soon as possible to the living heart of instruction: the familiarization with the auctors and their authentic texts. A lesson in grammar resulted in the critical reading, explication de texte, of any good author available.48

One suspects that the building of inductive grammars was made possible by a constant reading of the text. Valla applied this method to critical study of the New Testament. With his notes on the Greek text of the New Testament one may speak of humanist philology supporting a revival of New Testament criticism. No longer were philological questions to arise from philosophical decisions alone. Melanchthon's comments on Biblical exegesis are similar in intent to Valla's hermeneutical revolution.49 The best faith is a simple explanation, devoid of ingenuity and curiosity.50

It is necessary at this point to caution oneself about Valla. In the same way that Baron strove for a positive evaluation of the 15th century, one can appreciate the vital service performed by the humanistic method for Biblical study. Valla did not destroy the tension between linguistic and theological interpretation of Scripture. When one asserts that Valla freed Biblical study by a hermeneutical revolution, one must also admit the religious purpose that motivated his method. Jerome Aleandcr was a fine humanistic scholar, but somehow never used his gifts positively to reform the church.51 Where others sought to prune foliage, Valla attacked the root. His contribution to Catholic reform was radical. Valla had nothing to do with a criticism that divorced theological purpose from linguistic investigation. His exegesis was philologically oriented, a religion of the Word. God was revealed in the New Testament all the same, not to be discovered at the end of a syllogism. A careful


48 Scaglioni, p. 52.


50 Corpus Reformatorum, XV, col. 499.

reading of Valla's treatise on free will will soon discover why both Luther and Calvin were enthusiastic in their endorsement of Valla. His grammatical study was a necessary foundation for the new philosophical and scientific study. Valla's attempt to cleanse the church in the pure stream of the Greek New Testament followed the scholar-bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries who revived the church through Biblical study.

II. VALLA

A. Grammarian

Laurentius Valla was born in 1407. Son of a Piacenza lawyer, he served as secretary to King Alphonso of Naples. Later he passed into papal service under Nicholas V. Valla died in 1457, the object of invective then as now. Manchini vindicates Valla as "an extremely acute critic, a courageous preacher of truth, a profound thinker, the object of savage attacks, an untiring worker, a highly moral writer, and one of the most notable and brilliant spirits of the quattrocento." Valla learned Greek at an early age, becoming professor at Pavia soon after 1430. While in service of Alphonso, Valla produced a brilliant treatise on the Latin language. His De Elegentia was the first such manual by a Western scholar since Duns Scotus. These principles he applied to two documents: the Donation of Constantine, which was shown to be a spurious gift, and the notes on the Greek text of the New Testament. One must not assume that Valla intended to show the New Testament to be spurious. Rather, he showed that the Latin translations of the New Testament hindered its clarity when compared to the Greek text.

Present conditions are such that every true friend of literature can scarcely restrain his tears. The Latin language is now in no better plight than the city of Rome pp. 32—39. Saitta, Capitolo Quarto, "I Filologi," notes the positive contribution of Valla; see Vittorio Rossi, Il Quattrocento (Milano, Storia Letteraria D'Italia, 1949), Capitolo II, "Il Pensiero Critico," pp. 75—120. N. b. p. 85: "La cause della verità, della giustizia e di Dio il Valla intese difendere anche nell' opuscolo sulla donazione di Costantino."

52 Saitta, p. 190.

after its capture by the Goths. For centuries the philosophers, jurists, and orators have been using a language which does not show any longer a trace of pure Latin and with which they can barely make themselves understood.57

The "Babylonian Captivity" of the church was not to be compared with the "Barbarian Captivity" of its Sacred Scriptures. The year 1444 is a significant date in the history of Biblical scholarship. More ominous than the attack on political preoccupations of the papacy was this positive development of textual criticism, so necessary to recover the precise meaning of the Holy Scriptures.58 In his Apologia ad Eugenius IV, Valla appealed to the pope to permit his linguistic skill to be used for reform. Since his notes were not published until 1505, one can date the hermeneutical revolution in that year, identifying it with Erasmus. How then does political servitude to Alphonso of Naples match Valla's purpose as stated in available documents? 59

It can be judged to be political only by impugning the motives of Valla. Since his motives were consistent with humanism conceived as παράδοση, a rejection of the entire humanistic defense of studia humanitatis is necessary to invalidate Valla's contribution to New Testament study. His work undergirds the Evangelical Catholic Reformation.

This work, undertaken for the purpose of defending his humanism and not for political purposes, marked the beginning of that diligent reediting of the Scriptures which played an important part in the development of the Protestant and Catholic Reformation.60

Valla's dedicatory letter in his De Elegentia cogently states his purpose. It and subsequent quotations will be cited as they appear in his printed works.

Taceo qua pronuntiandi maiestate & gratia, quanta memoria, quanta rerum copia, quanta doctrinarum omnium elucet: vel humanarum, Vt historicae, Vt oratoriae, Vt grammaticae, Vt philosophicae, Vt poeticae, etiam metricae: vel divinarum, Vt theologiae, Vt omnis iuris, vt eius quam Graeci μεταφρασεως vocant. . . . Nec ego minus veneror eius virtutes apud me, quam datas a Deo Apostolicas daues, quum praesertim scientia sacarum literarum daues vocet ab eodem Deo tributa: quae aperit et nemo daudit, daudit, et nemo aperit. Itaque vtraque manu daues gestat, sapientiae altera, altera potestatis.61

Two other works of Valla merit comment. His De Voluptate is sometimes represented


58 Renaudet, Erasme Et L'Italie, 39: "... il confrontait la version latine recue par l'Eglise avec l'original grec; il enseignait aux exégètes modernes l'art de retrouver les passages mutilés, et de saisir, à l'aide de la philologie et de l'histoire, le sens exact des Écritures saintes."


60 Grimm, pp. 87—88. Notice Grimm's mention of the Apology with no citation from it.

61 Laurentii Vallae de Latinae linguae elegentia, op. cit., 4, to John Tortellius Aretinus.

(ED. NOTE. This text conforms with the text in Garin, Laurentius Valla, Opere omnia [Turin, 1962], pp. 1 f.)
as a vigorous plea for a Stoic revival. The irony of the position represented by Antonio Beccadelli is obvious to one who reads extensively in Valla's Opera. Valla is not to be identified with the Stoicism of Aretilo, nor the Epicurianism of Beccadelli, but rather with the critical Christianity of Niccolo Niccoli. Subsequent philological works of Valla make such identification of his own views with Niccoli probable. A comparison of this dialog with the Donation and Annotations is instructive. The acrimony in his defense against Poggio in 1452 does not represent the content of Valla's reform. The significance of his Disputationes dialecticae is enormous. There Valla defines "virtus" as "areta," the peace of God. One should also read Valla's dialog on free will. It is usually forgotten that Valla forbade the use of philosophy and reason as handmaidens of theology. Both Luther and Calvin praised Valla for his unwillingness to reconcile human freedom to divine providence by rational means. Valla stood on faith.

And if we entrust our life to friends, should we dare not intrust it to Christ who for our salvation took on both the life of the flesh and the death of the cross? We don't know the cause of this matter; of what consequence is it? We stand by faith, not by the probability of reason.


63 Printed by Badia at Paris in 1509 and influential for Peter Ramus, the logician so important for Puritan theological method.


"When Calvin writes, quoting from Lauret Valla, 'But since (God) sees things to come for no other reason than that he has determined that they should come, it is folly to dispute and debate what his prescience is doing, when it is apparent that everything occurs by his ordinance and disposition,' he is not denying that distinction, but on the contrary maintaining the difference of nature between foreknowledge and predestination." Francois Wendel, Calvin, the Origins and Development of His Religious Thought (London: Collins, 1963), 272, n. 122.

68 Trinkaus, pp. 59—60. Latin text in Anfossi, p. 50.
It is not surprising to read that Valla attacked Thomas Aquinas. His *Encomium Sancti Thomae Aquinatis* does not identify Valla with pagan philosophers but rather with patristic Biblical scholarship. An open attack on scholasticism also occurs in his 1449 *Annotations*. He preferred Paul and the early Fathers to philosophical theology. Addressing the clergy of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome on March 7, 1457, Valla impugned Aquinas. Thomas signifies twin. There is in Thomism, Valla reminded his audience, a filial relationship of theology and philosophy. Valla left Rome in no doubt which was legitimate and which was not. In *De Libero Arbitrio* Valla discarded the protection of philosophy.

For it seems to me that they have a poor opinion of our religion if they think it needs the protection of philosophy. The followers of the Apostles, truly columns in the temple of God, whose works have now been extant many centuries, used this protection least of all.  

As one turns to Valla's *Elegentia* he finds a new spirit vivifying the liberal arts. Its initial paragraph recites Jerome's well-known struggle with his conscience. Was Cicero compatible with Christ? In Tertullian's phrase, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Valla's answer was lucid and compelling. In theology the Greek writers preserve what the Latins have mutilated. Missing from Valla's 1540 *Opera* is his treatise *De Professione religiosorum*, discussed in 1869 by J. Vallen, from Urb. lat. 595 in the Vatican library. Contained in the handwritten copy is a treatise called *Oratio in principio Studii*. The former is important for its reforming program.

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69 Cassirer et al., p. 148: "On the positive side Valla identified himself with Latin patristic thought. In this respect it might very plausibly be claimed that he belongs rather with the Christian Humanists or with the Pre-Reformers than with the nominally orthodox Catholic humanists who dallied with pagan philosophy." Introduction and translation by C. Trinkaus.


71 Cassirer et al., p. 155; see Anfossi p. 49, lines 783-87, and p. 50, lines 793-94: "Et si sapientibus vitis etiam sine ratione proper auctocritarem fidem habemus, Christo, qui est Dei Virtus et Dei Sapientia non habebimus? Qui ait se omnes salvos velle et mortem nolle pecatoris, sed magis ut convertatur et vivat . . . fide stamus non probatione rationum." It is little wonder Bellermine accused Valla of being Luther's *aliter ego*. Cf. *De Poenitentia*, I, 7: "Laurentius Valla . . . praeceptor quidam lutheranae factionis videtur fuisse." Cited by Gaeta, p. 10, n. 3.


73 Ibid., p. 620. Cf. *Elegentia* V, cap. 30, for his definition of faith. "Quae [persuasio] (quantum ego quidem sentio) id significare videtur quod Christiani dicunt fidem. Et si originem graecam inquiramus, nescio commodius dixerimus quam fides, praesertim re ipsa pro nobis faciente. Fides autem proprie latine dicitur probatio, ut facio fidem per instrumenta, per argumenta, per testes. Religio autem Christiana non probatione nititur, sed persuasione quae praestantior est quam probatio. Nam saepe probationibus non adducimus: ut malus servus, malus filius, mala filia, mala uxor, optimo consilio quod confmare non potest, non tamen acquiescit. Qui persuasus est, plane acquiescit, nec ulteriorum probationem desiderat. Non enim solum si probatum putat, sed sese commotum ad ea exequenda intellegit. Sed quia fides etiam pro (ut sic dicam) credulitate accipitur, quale est habeo tibi fidem, recte nostra religio nominata est fides, sicut a Graecis nostris."


75 Vahlen, p. 19. Treatise will be published in the forthcoming edition of Valla's *Opera*. 
which clarifies Valla's position vis-a-vis the papacy. In the excerpt made available by Garin there is a statement about the simplicity of belief. The prophetic voice often comes from those not in holy orders. Their faith is nonetheless valid.

"It would not seem to be that John the Baptist without the Episcopate, sacraments or religious orders \( (\text{sine professione}) \) was inferior to a bishop, priest or monk." \(^{76}\) Manchini's assessment stands the test of the sources. Valla was important for his work, which infused a new purpose into the study of the arts, secular and sacred. His recent biographer can point to Valla's mature insights.

It is an arresting suggestion that the work of Lorenzo Valla represents a major contribution to Italian thought and a renewal of its culture during the period of the humanistic renaissance, especially as it opened a new horizon to the limited vision of the fifteenth century.\(^{77}\)

Laurentius Valla's treatise on the Latin language is a major departure from medieval secular scholarship. His notes on the Greek text of the New Testament, \( \text{sans doute} \), created a new climate of opinion among theologians. Bellarmine was correct in his assessment of Valla. What is not always remembered is Valla's impact on Catholic reform. Richard Simon realized the significance of Valla's new hermeneutic for Biblical study.\(^{78}\) His examples from Valla's \textit{Notes} are as complete as any modern study, including those of Manchini and Gaeta.\(^{79}\) There is no complete study of these important notes available.\(^{80}\) They will repay careful analysis. After working through the logical distinctions of Aquinas' Pauline commentaries, one is struck by the clarity of Valla.\(^{81}\) Valla had bitter comments on Aquinas as a commentator.

Was Paul better understood by Thomas than by Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom? (Why do I mention Greek writers?) or by Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine? May I die if this is not a lie. For why did Paul not remind him of all his mistakes, especially of his ignorance in Greek? \(^{82}\)

Nicolas, Cardinal Cusa, and the Greek Cardinal Bessarion endorsed Valla's comments.\(^{83}\) Valla compared the \textit{Vulgata} with citations from Scripture of Jerome, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, and

\(^{76}\) Garin, op. cit., p. 590.

\(^{77}\) Gaeta, pp. 7—8.

\(^{78}\) Richard Simon, \textit{Histoire Critique des principaux Commentateurs Du Nouveau Testament} (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1693) pp. 537—47, where Cajetan and Catharinus are contrasted. Part of Valla's notes on the gospels were included in \textit{Critici Sacri}.


\(^{80}\) Cf. references in G. Zippel, "Lorenzo Valla e le origini della storiografia umanistica," \textit{Rinascimento}, VII (1956), 93—134. Also see S. Garofalo, "Gli umaniste italiani de secolo XV e la Bibbia," \textit{Biblica}, XXVII (1946), 338—75. I am not convinced that Valla was antitrinitarian. Anna Morisi, "La filologia neotestamentaria di Lorenzo Valla," \textit{Nuova rivista storica}, XLVIII, 35—49, was not available to me.


\(^{83}\) Manchini, p. 238.
Augustine. On April 8, 1546, the Council of Trent placed this work on the Index, indicating its own motives in the substitution of et... et for parim... parim. No higher compliment could be paid the father of modern Biblical criticism.

B. New Testament Notes

Valla's mention of Chrysostom is interesting, indeed several such references occur in his notes to the Gospels. Though meant as a positive clarification of the text and not a negative critique, Valla's grammatical comments opposed scholastic theology. An example is Matthew 7:22. From the Vulgata text a theologian could argue that early Christians merited God's favor by their actions. Therefore a good Christian could perform deeds acceptable to God. Valla eliminated that sense by reference to the Greek text. The Vulgata is in error and should read vis or potentias for virtutes. The Greek equivalent of virtutes is ἁρετῇ, while the text reads δύναμεις.

At Matt. 4:10 Valla berated ignorance of grammar. Theology must obey the usage of spoken and especially written language. "Nobody understands him who does not observe the proper use of language." When philology was applied to the doctrinal writings of St. Paul, the result was disastrous for commentators of a scholastic bent. Valla only purified the Latin text. It was for others to correct doctrine by means of that purer text.

Valla corrected the text of Rom. 1:17. "The just is living by faith" he changed to "The just is living by his own faith." 84

84 The Vulgata reads, "In nomine tuo virtutes multas fecimus"; the Greek, καί τῷ σῷ δύναμιν δύναμεος πολλὰς ἐποίησαμεν. The context of verses 21 and 23 excludes merit.

85 Valla, Matt. 7:22; "δύναμις. Virtus hic pro honesto accipitur, quod dictur ἁρετῇ, quod nomen nusquam in evangelio reperitur, sed pro potentia, sive pro operibus potentiae, ut apud Paulum: Virtus vero peccati non est, sed vis ac potentias." Cyprian, for example, used this word to indicate what the perfect man who imitates the example of Christ can do in his Jesus Christus Patientiae Exemplar.

86 The superiority of Greek is emphatically asserted. The reference is to Greek grammar.

87 The reference to the Greek text. The Vulgata is in error and should read vis or potentias for virtutes. The Greek equivalent of virtutes is ἁρετῇ, while the text reads δύναμεις. At Matt. 4:10 Valla berated ignorance of grammar. Theology must obey the usage of spoken and especially written language. "Nobody understands him who does not observe the proper use of language." When philology was applied to the doctrinal writings of St. Paul, the result was disastrous for commentators of a scholastic bent. Valla only purified the Latin text. It was for others to correct doctrine by means of that purer text.

Valla corrected the text of Rom. 1:17. "The just is living by faith" he changed to...
a future tense. Where a medievalist might comment on works in Rom. 3:28, Valla has a terse comment on verse 30. He is laconic. Again a grammatical correction contented Valla. It is difficult at times to settle Valla’s Latin text. Some of his variants are unique. The use of meritum for debitum in chapter 4 puzzles this writer, unless Valla has consciously changed the text. Usually he is careful not to change the Vulgata without first citing it. This is an interesting substitution. One suspects Valla was equally puzzled by lack of a standard Latin text.

That Valla is first a philologian and incidentally a theologian one can see from reading his notes on Romans. Where both Aquinas and Erasmus said much about original sin, Valla avoided it. His comments on chapter 5 are innocuous. Valla was orthodox at this point! Not surprising when one reads his De Libero Arbitrio. It appears Valla used the critical notes only to purify the Vulgata, not to overthrow Catholic theology. His comment on Romans 7:25 is a primary example of such a purpose. Notice the reference to plerique codices as authoritative and the lack of negative comment.

Infelix ego homo, quis me liberabit de corpore mortis huius? gratia dei per Iesum Christum dominum nostrum non est dei, sed deo, hoc est gratia sit deo, χάρις τῷ Θεῷ, quanquam plerique codices habeant, gratias ago deo, εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ. Credo sic exponendum, gratia deo, quod ipsa liberabit nos per Iesum Christum.

In the Vulgata in Rom. 8:28 Valla notices errors and additions. The Vulgata reads: "Scimus autem quoniam diligentibus deum omnia cooperantur in bonum, his qui secundum propositum vocati sunt sancti." Valla nowhere displays a better command of Greek. He removed the ambiguity by an appeal to grammar. How can all things work for good to lovers of God, those called to be holy? Valla answers that God works in all things for the benefit of the chosen (advocati). Grammar was the key to understanding God’s purpose, where verbal errors had hidden it. Valla meant to read the verse, "Scimus autem, quoniam diligentibus deum omnia cooperatur in bonum, his qui secundum propositum isti sunt advocati mei." συνεφγεῖ is singular and

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91 Ibid. p. 198. “Quoniam unus deus qui justificavit circumciseonem ex fide, et praepetum per fidem futuri temporis est justificabit, non praeteriti justificavit, δικαωσει." 92 The Vulgata reads: "ei autem qui operatur merces non imputatur secundum grattiam sed secundum debitum." Wordsworth and White, Pauline Epistles, Rom. 4:4, p. 79. Valla’s text is, "ei autem qui operatur, merces non imputatur secundum gratiam, sed secundum meritum." Operantur and meritum are variants not listed by Wordsworth and White. Valla, p. 199. Operantur may be a printing error. Perhaps Valla was attacking both congruous and condign merit.
93 Supra, n. 67.
94 Ibid., p. 202. Valla refers the struggle to the entire Christian life, and the victory to the future. The usual medieval “Catholic” interpretation was different. It read chapter 7 as a struggle with carnal desires before the grace of God (gratia dei) was sacramentally administered. When 'gratia deo' was restored, the passage became eschatological for Valla (liberabit) not sacramental. "Semper peccamus, semper justificanditi?" Petri Lombardi, Collectanea In Omnes D. Pauli Apostoli Epistolas: In Epistolas Ad Romanos, Migne, P. L. CXCI, 1426—1427.
95 Wordsworth and White, op. cit., p. 104.
96 "Scimus autem quoniam diligentibus deum omnia cooperatur in bonum, his qui secundum propositum vocati sunt. Ambigum est, an coop-
must have *spiritus* as a subject, not *omnia*. Several ambiguities arise if the correction is not made. The first objection would be an empirical one based on Paul's religious experience reported in Romans 7. Valla was not simply a grammarian, but as a translator must do, he acquired a psychological insight into the meaning of the text. The evidence of one verse is not conclusive, but when the entire volume is carefully read, Valla emerges as something other than a ribald pagan. In reading Valla on Galatians 2, one finds no comment on faith and works as in Aquinas. In chapter 3 there is no scholastic distinction of *fides informis et fides formata charitate*. Valla's orthodoxy here is impeccable.

In very truth, most learned Erasmus, I cannot help but assent to your candid and thoughtful judgement of our Valla; for, as he has merited the blame of no justly thinking man, so he has deserved the greatest favor and gratitude of every studious man. For if, as in matters of Christian doctrine St. Augustine rightly deemed, the things that are somewhat obscure and hard to understand in one language are illustrated and made plain by comparison with the same in another language, why should odium attach to any man who points out those instances in which the Latin copies differ at times, and at times totally vary? Unless perchance we are indignant with him because he has relieved us from such a mighty task. But it is idle

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97 Radetti, p. 599. He shows that Valla is not totally unaware of divine omnipotence. Valla can say "... ita dum homines similes diis efficere vult, deos fecit similes hominibus." *Cod. Ottob. lat. 2075*, ff. 191v—195r.

98 Ibid., p. 608. Cf. Delio Cantimori, *Eretici Italiani Del Cinquecento* (Firenze, 1939), pp. 36 ff., for a suggestion that the anti-trinitarianism of Servetus was taken from Valla's *Annotations*. I am not prepared to concede the point to Cantimori.
to be angry; and I only hope that your
hunt in the library of the monastery will
be as gratifying as it is delightful to all
students of the Holy Scriptures.99

Our analysis of Valla through a study
of the Annotationes has shown Bade's letter
to be an accurate assessment. Valla's philo-
logical hermeneutic formed a 15th-century
seedbed for the roots of Catholic reform.100

99 John Joseph Mangan, Life, Character and
Influence of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam
(London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, Ltd.,
1928), I, 197—98. The text is in Allen,
Epistolarum Erasmi, Tome I, n. 183 (Paris,
March 7, 1505): "Enimvero, Erasme discretis-
sume, non possum candido ruo atque graui de
Valla nostro iudicio non subscribere; vt enim
nullius aeque censentis invidia, ita
studio­sorum omnium non infimam et gratiam et be-
neuolatiam meruit. Nam si, vt de doctrina
Christiana recte sentit diuus Augustinus, in vna
lingua subobscura et clause ex alterius collatione
funt illustria et aperta, quae tandem inuida si
es locos in quibus Latina exempla ab Graeco
exemplari modo discrepant, modo etiam frigent,
in medium afferat? nisi id illi forsan inuidemus,
quod tanto nos labare leuarit. Sed
nolo stoma­
chari; spero enim fore vt venatio tua omnibus
diuinae lectionis studiosis, vt est gratissima, ita
sit et iucundissima. Vale."

100 Valla's comments on 1 Cor. 2: 13 are
interesting. ["Non in doctis humanae sapientiae
verbis, sed in doctrina Spiritus spiritualia com-
parantes] cur variavit interpres graecum vocabu-
lum? Nam sic legirur graece: Non in doctis
humanae sapientiae verbis (seu sermonibus) sed
in doctis Spiritus Sancti Quasi in humana sapien-
tia sint verba, in Spiritu autem Sancta doctrina:
quod ita non est." Erasmus was the link be-
tween Valla and the Reformers. Cf. C. A. L.
Jarrot, "Erasmus' In Principio Erat Sermo: A
Controversial Translation," Studies in Philology
LXI (1964), 35; Lorenzo Riber, Boletin De La
Real Academia Española, XXXVIII (1958),
251—53; A. Renaudet, Erasme Et L'Italie, p. 2;
and Marcel Bataillon, Erasme Et L'Espagne,
p. 179—242.

Coler's return to a literal exegesis, imbied
from Ficino's Platonism, is another facet of
the same struggle to understand St. Paul.
Both Valla and Colet are essential to an
understanding of Erasmus' Novum Instrumentum.
When the eloquence of Erasmus
joined the piety of Colet and the exegesis
of Valla, the hermeneutical revolution was
complete. From this vantage Catholic and
Protestant alike claimed Erasmus. The
search for reform centered in the meaning
of the documents of revelation. Germane
to doctrinal discussions of the Reformation
are Catholic commentaries on the Pauline
Corpus.101 Valla must be permitted a final
word.

Do you dare to speak words in the
presence of God's Word? He himself has
made you, He knows you are prostrate.
He has no need of your clamor. He
his Word is our life.102

St. Paul, Minn.

101 Luther's comments on Valla have been
observed, but his own exegesis merits a brief
comment. Schwarz opposes Erasmus and Luther
as exegettes. This may appear to make Luther
an "inspirational exegete," as Schwarz attempts.
Without mentioning Schwarz, Regin Prenter
calls attention to the grammatical nature of
Luther's work: "For it was precisely his Christo-
 logical exegesis which compelled him to reject
allegory and to emphasize grammatical inter-
pretation." Regin Prenter, "The Living Word,
More About Luther, Martin Luther Lectures
(Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1958),
II, 77. After 1518 Luther departs from the
Quadriga. His remarks about Valla must be
seen in this context.

102 Valla, Opera, p. 996. "Ecquae auderes
coram Verbo Dei verba facere? Ipse te fecit,
ipse te incement inteligit, nec tuum orationem
desiderat, Verbum eius vita nostra est."