



If Only Paul Had Used The Chicago Manual of Style

By Roger L. Omanson

Bible scholars spend a lot of time quibbling over what the Bible says. Many of the disagreements arise because we do not have a single original text to work from. For the New Testament, the earliest manuscripts date to around 200 C.E., but they are only a scrap or two. Most existing manuscripts come from the fourth century C.E. or later, and all of these are copies of copies of copies. Variations among the manuscripts are often blamed on the copyists, who may have changed passages for stylistic or theological reasons or tried to harmonize differences among different passages, or who may simply have made mistakes.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had the original manuscripts? Then we'd know the precise words Paul used to excoriate the Corinthians, say, or just how Mark described Jesus' miracle working in Galilee.

Or would we?

Unfortunately, even if we had a letter in Paul's own hand, there still would be much to debate. For in the days of Paul and the other New Testament writers, and indeed for the next few centuries, people wrote in a style called *scriptio continua*, that is, without any breaks between words, sentences and paragraphs, and without any punctuation at all. Texts flowed in continuous streams of letters, leaving modern copyists and translators with significant decisions to make about every sentence, every clause, indeed every word of a manuscript.

Modern translations of the New Testament are usually based on a widely accepted critical Greek text, such as the United Bible Societies' *The Greek New Testament* or the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

But the editors of these editions do not always agree on where breaks and punctuation marks should appear. And translators sometimes depart from the segmentation and punctuation found in these critical texts based on their own understanding of the New Testament writings. Their decisions can create real differences in meaning, as is shown by comparing several modern translations.

Let's look at some examples, punctuation mark by punctuation mark:

Accent Marks

The most minute punctuation marks can have a surprisingly strong impact on our understanding of the biblical world. For example, Romans 16:7 mentions a person named either 'Iounián or 'Iouniân, whom Paul describes as "prominent among the apostles." The difference in names might not seem like much, but the shift in accent marks transforms this name from Junias (RSV, NIV, NJB), a shortened form of the man's name Junianus, to Junia (GNB, NRSV, REB), a woman's name. Is this person a man or a woman?

Some interpreters, considering it unlikely that a woman would be among those referred to as apostles, argue that the name must be Junias. However, the female name Junia occurs more than 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions found in Rome alone; the male name Junias

never appears. Further, when the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament first began to be accented, copyists wrote the feminine Junia. Thus the extrabiblical evidence suggests that Paul was referring to a woman. If the biblical name is Junia, then it provides a direct challenge to the common assumption that women were not included among the apostles in the early church.

Quotation Marks

Imagine a news report stripped of its quotation marks: It would be impossible to know who said what to whom. We find the same problem in Acts 1:16–22, in which Peter is speaking to Jewish believers in Jerusalem about Judas. Without any quotation marks, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between Peter’s speech and the author’s own words.

Verse 19 of this passage includes a reference to Aramaic—the language of Jews in Palestine in Peter’s day—as “their” language. This is odd, because Peter is addressing the Jews; it seems he would have spoken of “our” language. Some interpreters, therefore, understand verses 18 and 19 to be a parenthetical statement inserted into Peter’s speech by the author of Acts as an explanation to his readers. For these translators, quotation marks close verse 17 and open again as Peter resumes his speech at the beginning of verse 20:

¹⁵Peter stood up before the assembled brotherhood, about 120 in all, and said: ¹⁶“My friends, the prophecy in scripture, which the Holy Spirit uttered concerning Judas through the mouth of David, was bound to come true; Judas acted as guide to those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷he was one of our number and had his place in this ministry.” ¹⁸

(After buying a plot of land with the price of his villainy, this man fell headlong and burst open so that all his entrails spilled out; ¹⁹everyone in Jerusalem came to hear of this and in their own language they named the plot Akeldama, which means “Blood Acre.”)

²⁰“The words I have in mind,” Peter continued, “are in the book of Psalms...”
—Acts 1:15–20 (REB, see also NRSV)

Other translators (NJB, TOB), however, see the whole passage as part of Peter’s speech. If verses 18–19 are the author’s parenthetical comment to the reader, the text presents no historical problems, but if these verses are punctuated as Peter’s words, then the reader is forced to recognize that Peter’s speech is really a creation of the author of Acts.

Sentence Breaks

A period generally marks where one thought ends and another begins. Often, when a period is shifted, so is the meaning.

An example: If a period is placed after the words “in love” (*en agape*) in Ephesians 1:4–5, then “in love” refers to the previously mentioned Christians:

...just as he [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption...
—Ephesians 1:4–5 (NRSV)

If, however, the major break precedes “in love,” then these words describe the loving way in which God treats believers as his children:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.

—Ephesians 1:4–5 (NIV)

Question Marks

Whether a sentence is translated as a question or a statement often has little significance, especially when the question is rhetorical. But sometimes it does matter, as when Paul is discussing the Corinthians' choice of judges. Is Paul showing his disapproval by asking why the Corinthian Christians have put their legal cases before pagan gentiles?:

Why do you lay [your] cases before those who are least esteemed by the church?

—1 Corinthians 6:4 (RSV, NRSV, TOB) (That is, Paul is referring to pagan gentiles as “those least esteemed by the church.”)

Or is Paul stating that the Corinthians must avoid putting cases before non-Christians, even if it means they have to put cases before the least reputable Christians:

“Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!”

—1 Corinthians 6:4 (NIV) (That is, Paul is referring to the “least esteemed” here as those Christians who are not highly regarded by others in the church.)

Whether this verse is punctuated as a statement or as a question will not change our understanding of Paul's relations with non-Christians; either way, Paul is emphasizing that Christians should not take lawsuits or other cases before non-Christians for judgment. If this verse is translated as a statement, then “those least esteemed by the church” refers to insiders, that is, believers of little account in the church. But if translated as a question, then Paul is asking why the Corinthian Christians have the gall to take cases before non-Christians, that is, people whose values the church rejects (in Paul's view).

If only Paul had used *The Chicago Manual of Style!*

People who read only one English version of the Bible are often blissfully unaware of how many decisions translators have made for them. Some scholars have expressed concern that knowledge of the translator's input will bring confusion and doubt to the mind of the average believer. That may be true, but the fact remains, whether readers know it or not, that literally thousands of decisions are made by translators—decisions regarding the original wording, the meanings of words and grammatical constructions, and the segmentation and punctuation of the text. I believe that any readers striving for a complete understanding of the Bible must at least recognize that these decisions have been made.

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Note: A longer version of this essay originally ran in *Bible Review* 14:06, Dec 1998, a publication of the Biblical Archaeology Society. See: <http://www.bib-arch.org/>

Bible Translations cited in this essay

GNB: Good News Bible

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

REB: Revised English Bible#

RSV: Revised Standard Version

NIV: New International Version

NJB: New Jerusalem Bible

TOB: La Bible Traduction œcuménique (French)

NIV: New International Version

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>