

# THE MEANING OF EUANGELIUM IN THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE OF TREBIZOND (1396-1472/3)



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*The Byzantine scholar George of Trebizond (1396-1472/3) commented several times on the dangers of tampering with the Gospel (euangelium). However, it is not immediately clear what George meant when he used this word – the original text or its translation, and of which part of the Bible? This article explores how George used the word euangelium, by comparing three texts in which he commented on textual problems in the Bible, as well as a treatise by Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472) on the same topic. Both authors wrote in Latin, while their native language was Greek.*

## Introduction

In his *Adversus Theodorum Gazam in perversionem problematum Aristotelis* (henceforth *Protectio*), George of Trebizond attacked the translation of Aristotle's *Problemata* by his rival Theodore Gaza (c. 1410-1475). George objected to this translation for many reasons; not least because he himself had made a translation of the *Problemata* shortly before.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, George's critique of Gaza's translation includes a passage about biblical translation:

[N]on sunt labefactanda fundamenta, non remouendi fines, non quassandi termini, qui a patribus nostris iacti, constituti firmitaque sunt. Unus apex aut unus iota si remotum ex euangelio fuerit, facile data licentia cetera diripientur. [...] Minimum aliquid ex euangelio remotum parua primum, deinde paulatim serpens maxima secum trahet. [...] Quas ob res nihil, o patres, remouendum, nihil addendum, nihil mutandum in euangelio Christi catholicis est.<sup>2</sup>

We must not weaken the foundations, remove the boundaries, or shatter the borders that were laid down, established and fixed by our fathers. If

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<sup>1</sup> On George of Trebizond, see, e.g., Monfasani 1976 and 1984; and Viti 2000. George's *Protectio* is edited in Mohler 1967, 3, 274–342.

<sup>2</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 274–342. The passage referred to is on page 330.

one apex or one iota were to be removed from the Gospel, everything else will be torn to pieces once this license is granted. [...] Once the smallest element is removed from the Gospel, creeping along it first drags along smaller matters, and little by little the most important ones. [...] Which is why, O Fathers, nothing ought to be removed, nothing added, nothing changed in the Gospel of Christ by true Christians.

Of course, Gaza had translated Aristotle's *Problemata*, not the Gospel, and this passage seems rather out of place. George probably meant to attack Gaza's protector, Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472).<sup>3</sup> He had engaged in discussions about the text of the New Testament, and specifically, he had suggested a change in the biblical text at John 21:22 – a change to which George felt strong objections.<sup>4</sup> Bessarion had once been George's friend and protector, but by 1452, they were no longer on friendly terms.

Apart from the broader context of the polemics between George and his Byzantine rivals, the passage quoted above is interesting for the way it refers to 'the Gospel' (*euangelium*). For one thing, it remains unclear whether George refers to the Gospel in Greek or in Latin – a question relevant for the context, because he is writing about a translation problem. Furthermore, it is difficult to tell to what part of the Bible George is referring here: does he mean the Gospel of John, in which this passage occurs, or something else? The immediate context suggests that *euangelium* has a broader meaning.

The terminology used to refer to the different versions of scripture was by no means unproblematic in the medieval and early modern period.<sup>5</sup> Clarifying George's use of the word *euangelium* will contribute to our understanding of his views regarding biblical scholarship. In what follows, I will explore its meaning by comparing two texts written by George on John 21:22, and a text by Bessarion on the same topic. I argue that *euangelium*, although not clear-cut in its meaning, has particular connotations in George's texts, and that he used it discriminately from alternatives such as *sacra scriptura*.

### The debate

As stated above, George's comment in the *Protectio* was part of a debate with Cardinal Bessarion on a textual problem in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> This problem is briefly as follows. In John 21, a dialogue takes place between Christ and the Apostle Peter, about the fate of John the Evangelist. Having

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<sup>3</sup> On Bessarion, see, e.g., Mohler 1967; Monfasani 1995; Märkl, Kaiser, & Ricklin 2013; and Monfasani 2021. For Bessarion's library, see Labowsky 1979 and Monfasani 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For this debate, see below, footnote 6.

<sup>5</sup> Linde 2012, 7–26.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed description of this debate, see Monfasani 1976, 90–102 and Bianca 1999, 740.

just been told about his own future, Peter asks “What will happen to him?” Christ gives an ambiguous reply: “If I want him to stay until I come, what is that to you? You follow me.”<sup>7</sup> This answer leaves it unclear if John would die or not before Christ’s Second Coming. In the next verse, this ambiguity is highlighted by the Gospel text itself, where the other disciples misinterpret Christ’s words.<sup>8</sup>

The Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, clears up the confusion — or adds to it — by choosing an interpretative translation of the Greek conditional *ἐάν*.<sup>9</sup> Instead of “Si eum uolo manere” (If I want him to stay), it reads “Sic eum uolo manere” (Yes, I want him to stay). The difference between the literal and the interpretative translation of the Greek is only one letter: *si* (if) as opposed to *sic* (yes). In the fifteenth century, Cardinal Bessarion argued that the Latin translation had originally been *si*, and that *sic* was a later corruption. George of Trebizond, on the other hand, claimed that *sic* was the authentic reading, as well as a correct interpretation of the Greek text. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) incorporated Bessarion’s suggestion in his *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, at the suggestion of Bessarion himself:

Nam Cardinalis Nicenus, uir de me optime meritus, et qui, ut Romam uenirem, mihi autor extitit, habet in opere meo partem: quippe qui illud, cuius supra feci mentionem: *Sic eum uolo manere, quid ad te?* quod ego non animaduerterem, ut adderem, admonuit.<sup>10</sup>

For Cardinalis Nicenus [i.e. Bessarion], a man who has treated me very well, and on whose advice I came to Rome, has a part in my work, for it was he who suggested that I would add what I referred to above, *Sic eum uolo manere, quid ad te?*, which I did not observe.

George and Bessarion both wrote multiple texts on this textual problem between 1440 and 1470.<sup>11</sup> George put his view in writing three times. He first wrote a letter to Pietro Del Monte (1400/1404-1457), the bishop of Brescia,

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<sup>7</sup> Ἐὰν αὐτὸν θέλω μένειν ἕως ἔρχομαι, τί πρὸς σέ; (If I want him to remain till I come, what is it to thee?).

<sup>8</sup> John 21:23: “This saying therefore went abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die. And Jesus did not say to him: He should not die; but, So I will have him to remain till I come, what is it to thee?” (Douay-Rheims Bible).

<sup>9</sup> I use the name Vulgate here to refer to Jerome’s Latin translation and revision of the Bible. For the medieval and Renaissance use of the proper name *Vulgata*, see Linde 2012, 13–23.

<sup>10</sup> Valla made this comment in his *Secundum Antidotum in Poggium* (1453). The *Secundum Antidotum* is printed as *Antidotum IIII* in the *Opera omnia* edition of Valla’s works: Valla 1962, 1, 325–66. The quoted passage is on 340.

<sup>11</sup> Monfasani 1976, 90–102. For the dating, see also Monfasani 1984, 311–12 (Text CIV).

who had apparently asked George for a discussion of this textual problem.<sup>12</sup> After that, he wrote his *Protectio* against Gaza, in which the letter to Del Monte is largely incorporated.<sup>13</sup> The *Protectio* was probably written in the second half of 1456;<sup>14</sup> the letter to Del Monte must have been written before the *Protectio*, but it is unclear when.<sup>15</sup> Finally, George discussed the problem again in 1464 or 1465, in a treatise that he dedicated to Paul II.<sup>16</sup>

### George's letter to Del Monte and his *Protectio* against Gaza

Since the letter to Del Monte and the relevant passage in the *Protectio* largely overlap, I will discuss them together in what follows. George's overall argument in these texts is that the Latin translation of John 21: 22 should not be changed, because it reflects what the Greek really means; wiser men than us, George wrote, interpreted the text for the benefit of later generations.<sup>17</sup> The word *euangelium* appears frequently in George's discussion. It is sometimes used in a technical sense, to refer to the Gospel of John in particular:

Testis est ipse Augustinus, qui cum super euangelium Iohannis scriberet, non *si eum uolo manere*, sed *sic eum uolo manere* saepius repetit.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine himself confirms this, because he, when commenting on the Gospel of John, repeatedly wrote not *si eum uolo manere*, but *sic eum uolo manere*.

However, it is also used in a more problematic way. For this, we return to the passage quoted in the introduction, in shortened form:

[...] Unus apex aut unus iota si remotum ex euangelio fuerit, facile data licentia cetera diripientur. [...] Minimum aliquid ex euangelio remotum parua primum, deinde paulatim serpens maxima secum trahet. [...] Quas

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<sup>12</sup> Monfasani 1976, 90–91. On Pietro Del Monte, see Ricciardi 1990.

<sup>13</sup> On George's *Protectio*, see Monfasani 1976, 152–56 and 1984, 411–421 (Text CXXVIII). The text of George's *Protectio* in Mohler 1967, 3, 274–342. The passage that corresponds to the letter to Del Monte is on 330–337. Those parts of the letter to Del Monte that were not included in the *Protectio* were edited by Monfasani: Monfasani 1984, 311–312 (Text CIV).

<sup>14</sup> Monfasani 1976, 162–65.

<sup>15</sup> Monfasani dates the letter to Del Monte to 1450–1451, while others have proposed a much earlier date (Monfasani 1984, 311).

<sup>16</sup> This treatise is edited in the *Patrologia Graeca* (PG 161, 867–882), which mentions Sixtus IV as the dedicatee. However, the manuscripts do not mention the Pope by name. See Monfasani 1984, 574–76 (Text CXLVI). On this treatise, see also Monfasani 1976, 97–102.

<sup>17</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 336.

<sup>18</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 331.

ob res nihil, o patres, remouendum, nihil addendum, nihil mutandum in euangelio Christi catholicis est.<sup>19</sup>

If one apex or one iota were to be removed from the Gospel, everything else will be torn to pieces once this license is granted. [...] Once the smallest element is removed from the Gospel, creeping along it first drags along smaller matters, and little by little the most important ones. [...] Which is why, O Fathers, nothing ought to be removed, nothing added, nothing changed in the Gospel of Christ by catholic Christians.

In this passage, it remains unclear if George referred to the Greek or the Latin text of the Gospel. It is unlikely that George would warn against changing the Greek text, because there is no question of that: the discussion is about the accuracy of the Latin reading *sic*. On the other hand, if George referred to the Latin text, this passage would imply that the Latin translation itself is authoritative, whether it reflects the Greek adequately or not. In that case, George would oppose any change whatsoever to the Latin text, even to correct it. He would ascribe a sacred status to the translation, and for him, no new Latin translation of the biblical text would ever be possible.

There are other possibilities. Perhaps George used *euangelium* in a general sense, including both the Greek and the Latin version. If he did, this would not be unique. A parallel for such usage would be the medieval use of the proper name *Septuaginta*, which referred both to the Greek version of the Old Testament produced in the Hellenistic period, and to its early Latin translation, the *Vetus Latina*, as opposed to Jerome's later version. In medieval discussions of the biblical text, it is often unclear if the text referred to is the Greek or the Latin.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, in the case of George's discussion of John 21:22, the difference between the Greek and Latin text is relevant for the author's argument. This makes it less likely that he would use *euangelium* in this inclusive sense.

For this reason, I do not believe that George referred to either the Greek or Latin text of the Gospel, or both; but rather, that he referred to the Gospel's content or meaning, independent from its linguistic form. In George's view, if a wrong translation of the text were accepted – or in this case, a correct interpretation rejected – this underlying meaning would be compromised. Such an understanding of *euangelium* – as something that goes beyond the text in its Greek or Latin form – is in line with the use of the word elsewhere in the same text. In other passages, George also used *euangelium* without specifying if he referred to the Greek or the Latin text, even though one would expect this:

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<sup>19</sup> See above, note 2.

<sup>20</sup> Linde 2012, 8–13.

Hoc enim simplicitati, dilucidationi certissimaque consuetudini euangelicorum uerborum apprime congruit.<sup>21</sup>

For this corresponds perfectly with the simplicity, the clarity and the established usage of the words of the Gospels.

Here, George refers to the *language* of the Gospel, without indicating if he means the Greek or the Latin; rather, he refers to the Gospel in general, as something that precedes both versions.

Aut quomodo catholicus orthodoxusque dici uere poterit, qui nullo periculo imminente uerba euangelii commutanda esse praedicet?<sup>22</sup>

Or how could someone justly be called a catholic and true-believing Christian, if he claims that the words of the Gospel can be changed without any danger?

In this passage, George writes about changing the *words* of the Gospel, but again, it remains unclear in which language.

Interestingly, when George referred to the Greek text specifically, he used *scriptura*, not *euangelium*:

Sed graecam scripturam unde traducta haec sunt, sequendam multi asserunt.<sup>23</sup>

But many claim that the Greek text (*scriptura*), from which this is translated, should be followed.

Cumque [Hieronymus] esset diligentissimus, doctissimus et gratia spiritus sancti plenus, qua maxime usus est tum in transferendis denuo scripturis, tum in emendandis iam translatis, hunc locum ita reliquit, sicut inuenit.<sup>24</sup>

And because [Jerome] was very diligent, learned, and filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, which he used in the highest degree both for translating the scriptures (*scripturae*) anew, and for correcting what had already been translated, he left this passage as he found it.

Si ergo illi utriusque linguae nobis longe doctiores differentiam esse inter *si uolo* et *sic uolo* sciissent, et graecae scripturae *si uolo* congruere adhaerereque, *sic uolo* autem alienum ab ea putassent, *si uolo* certe, non *sic uolo* traduxissent.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 335.

<sup>22</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 337.

<sup>23</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 330.

<sup>24</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 331.

<sup>25</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 331.

For if those who were much more learned in either language than ourselves had known that there was a difference between *si uolo* and *sic uolo*, and if they had believed that *si uolo* corresponded and matched with the Greek text (*scriptura*), while *sic uolo* differed from it, they would certainly have translated *si uolo*, not *sic uolo*.

These instances are perhaps not frequent enough to draw definite conclusions about George's use of *euangelium* and *scriptura*, but they are at least suggestive; it seems that while *euangelium* refers to the content of the biblical message, *scriptura* refers to its concrete textual form.

George typically used the word *euangelium* when he discussed its defense: he believed that the true meaning of the text was in danger, and he warned against tampering with it. In these cases, he always used the word *euangelium*:

Quas ob res summa mihi euangelio uidetur fieri iniuria, si quis non modo dixerit, uerum etiam cogitauerit emendandum esse hunc euangelii locum, et tanta, ut moriendum potius sit quam patiendum. Nec dubito, si quis defendendo id euangelicum mortem oppetat, eum martyria habiturum coronam.<sup>26</sup>

For these reasons, it seems to me that the greatest injustice is done to the Gospel, if someone does not only say, but even think, that this passage of the Gospel should be corrected; an injury of such magnitude that is it better to die than to suffer it. And I do not doubt that, if someone dies by defending this Gospel passage, he will receive the martyr's crown.

And again, in a passage we have already seen:

Aut quomodo catholicus orthodoxusque dici uere poterit, qui nullo periculo imminente uerba euangelii commutanda esse praedicet?<sup>27</sup>

Or how could someone justly be called a catholic and true-believing Christian, if he claims that the words of the Gospel can be changed without any danger?<sup>28</sup>

At this point, we can tentatively conclude that George used *euangelium* to refer to the biblical message, independent from its linguistic form; and, moreover, that he used it when he believed that the integrity of that message was at stake.

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<sup>26</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 336.

<sup>27</sup> See above, footnote 22.

<sup>28</sup> Similar instances of *euangelium*: “zelo integritatis euangelii Christi” (Mohler 1967, 3, 330); “summa mihi euangelio uidetur fieri iniuria” (336); “propter integritatem euangelii mortem oppeterent” (337).

Another question we can ask about George's use of *euangelium* is which part of the Bible is covered by this name. Although in many cases it is clear from the context that George refers to the Gospel of John specifically, in other cases he seems to indicate more than that. Is *euangelium* the four Gospels put together; the New Testament; or the entire Bible?

In one suggestive passage, George contrasts *euangelium* with the Mosaic Law, by drawing a comparison between the protection of the Gospel and the martyrdom of the Maccabees, who were executed because they refused to eat pork:

Quid enim est maius legem Moysi semel in non comedendis suum carnibus non seruasse, an locum euangelii hunc commutare? Hoc profecto tanto maius atque periculosius est, quanto euangelium legi Moysaicae praestat, quanto veritas figuram excedit, quanto qui venturus erat, praesignificante ipsum umbra excellentior. [...] Levior enim uideri possem parumque catholicus, si rem legis Moysaicae multo maiorem, quam suillinis uti carnibus, uni euangelico apici conferrem.<sup>29</sup>

For what is more important: to once disobey the law of Moses, on the point of not eating the meat of pigs, or to change this passage of the Gospel? The latter is surely a much greater and dangerous matter, to the degree that the Gospel surpasses the Mosaic Law, that the truth exceeds the prefiguration, that He who was to come, is more excellent than the shadow that announced him. [...] I could seem flighty and hardly a Catholic, if I compared something of the law of Moses that is much more important than the use of pork meat, with one apex of the Gospel.

The point here is that the integrity of the Gospel message is more important than the commandment to abstain from eating pork. However, the comparison also throws light on George's view on the Gospel as opposed to other parts of the Bible. By contrasting *euangelium* with the law of Moses, he calls to mind the distinction between the Old and the New Testament: it is much more dangerous to compromise the Gospel than to break the commands of the Old Covenant, "quanto veritas figuram excedit, quanto qui venturus erat, praesignificante ipsum umbra excellentior." The Gospel here functions as a *pars pro toto* for the New Testament. Furthermore, George's warning against changing one apex of the Gospel is similar to the passage quoted in the introduction, where he writes about "changing one apex or one iota of the Gospel".<sup>30</sup> Both passages allude to the Sermon of the Mount, where Christ

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<sup>29</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 336.

<sup>30</sup> "Unus apex aut unus iota si remotum ex euangelio fuerit, facile data licentia cetera diripientur." See above, footnote 2.



states that not one iota or tittle will be changed to the law.<sup>31</sup> While Christ spoke about the integrity of the Mosaic Law, George applied the same wording to the Gospel. This repeated juxtaposition of the Gospel and the law suggests that to George's mind, the Gospel had a more general meaning, representing the New Covenant, as opposed to the law of Moses, which represents the Old Covenant.

### George's second Johannine treatise

In George's second discussion of John 21:22, which was written about a decade later, the argument is quite different from that of his earlier texts. The later treatise dwells much more on the role of Peter, for example, and on the prophetic implications of George's interpretation of the passage. The word *euangelium* is used mostly to refer to the Gospel of John, for example here:

Demum secundum Joannis Euangelium apparuit Jesus in littore illis piscantibus, interrogavitque si quidquam pulmentarii haberent.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus appeared to them on the coast, while they were fishing, and he asked them if they had anything to eat.

Interestingly, the second treatise does not include comments on the dangers of tampering with the text. Apparently, such comments were fitting in the context of the *Protectio* against Gaza, but not in this treatise addressed to the pope.

There are other differences. In the second treatise, George admitted explicitly that the literal translation of the passage would be *si*:

Graece, si uerbum de uerbo exprimitur, non *Sic eum uolo manere*, sed, *Si eum uolo manere*, scriptum est.<sup>33</sup>

In the Greek, if it is expressed word by word, is written not *Sic eum uolo manere*, but *Si eum uolo manere*.

This made no difference for his overall position, however: he was still convinced that the Vulgate translation *sic* was a correct interpretation of the Greek, and not a corruption.

Furthermore, in this text George addressed the difference in status between the Greek original and the Latin translation. He did this in the context of an argument about the fate of John the Evangelist.<sup>34</sup> To determine whether John

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<sup>31</sup> "For amen I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot, or one tittle shall not pass of the law, till all be fulfilled." Matthew 5: 18, Douay-Rheims Bible.

<sup>32</sup> PG 161, 870.

<sup>33</sup> PG 161, 871.

<sup>34</sup> PG 161, 880–81.

had died or continued to live on earth, George raised the point that in the Book of Revelation, it was foretold that John would “prophesy again to many nations, and peoples, and tongues, and kings” (Revelation 10:11, Douay-Rheims Bible).<sup>35</sup> If he had not already done this in the past, this must happen at some future time; and in that case, John must still be alive somewhere. We do not know of any instances of John prophesying, George mused; but what about his biblical writings, the Gospel and the Book of Revelation? These had been translated into Latin centuries ago – so in a sense, John had already spoken in multiple languages. Would this mean that the prophecy had been fulfilled? George concluded that this was not the case:

Nam nec Euangelium prophetiam ullus unquam appellabit nec multis scriptum est linguis, sed Graece solum. Nec refert si per traductionem ad multas peruenerit linguas. Traductiones enim non sunt auctorum, sed translatorum.<sup>36</sup>

For no one would ever call the Gospel a prophecy, and it is not written in multiple languages, but only in Greek. And it makes no difference if it has reached multiple languages through translation. For translations are not [the work of] authors, but of translators.

Since George used this point as an argument for John’s continued life on earth, it is risky to take this comment out of the context of this argument, and to draw any conclusions from it about George’s view on biblical translation – e.g., on the inspiration of the translator, or the infallibility of the Vulgate translation. However, it is also difficult not to be reminded of Jerome’s famous words that “it is one thing to be a prophet, and another thing to be a translator.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Bessarion’s Latin treatise**

George’s texts were written in dialogue with Cardinal Bessarion, who also wrote a treatise on the topic. This was first written in Greek, and then translated into Latin.<sup>38</sup> Bessarion’s Latin treatise *In illud Euangelii secundum Joannem*<sup>39</sup> uses the word *euangelium* in ways that are similar to

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<sup>35</sup> “Oportet te iterum prophetare populis, gentibus, linguis et multis regibus.” PG 161, 880.

<sup>36</sup> PG 161, 880.

<sup>37</sup> “Aliud est enim uatem, aliud esse interpretem: ibi spiritus uentura praedicat, hic eruditio et uerborum copia ea quae intellegit transfert.” Jerome, *Praefatio in Pentateuchum*. Quoted from Weber & Gryson 1994, 1, 3.

<sup>38</sup> The Greek text is in Mohler 1967, 3, 70–87; the Latin text is in PG 161, 623–640.

<sup>39</sup> The full title is *In illud Euangelii secundum Joannem: Ἐὰν αὐτὸν θέλω μένειν ἕως ἔρχομαι, τί πρὸς σέ; Si uolo eum manere donec ueniam, quid ad te?*

what we have seen in George's texts. First, Bessarion used *euangelium* to refer to the meaning of the text, separate from its linguistic form:

Apud Graecos manifestus est sensus euangelii, neque aliqua uerborum ambiguitate inuolutus.<sup>40</sup>

With the Greeks the meaning of the Gospel is crystal clear, and not shrouded in any ambiguity of words.

Quomodo igitur se apud Graecos habeat hic, de quo loquimur, Euangelii locus, et quomodo Latinus sermo in hoc a Graeco dissentiat, satis ex his quae diximus apparet.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, what this passage of the Gospel of which we speak looks like in the Greek, and how the Latin reading differs here from the Greek, appears clearly enough from what we have said.

In these passages, the sense of the Gospel is distinguished from the Greek and Latin text; it manifests itself in a specific way in the Greek text, as opposed to the Latin.

Second, it seems that for Bessarion, as for George, the word *euangelium* did not only refer to the Gospel of John, but more broadly to a part of the Bible with a special status:

Post haec asserunt, nihil in sacra scriptura innouandum esse, praecipueque in Euangelio, ubi uel unum apicem, aut unum iota immutare nefas est – daretur enim hoc modo facultas uolentibus scripturam sacram corrumpere, quod nullo modo est permittendum; cum igitur apud Latinos euangelium sic habeat, asseri aliter mutariue sine crimine non posse.<sup>42</sup>

After this they say that nothing new should be introduced in sacred scripture, especially in the Gospel, where it is a sin to change one apex, or one iota – for that way, an opportunity would be given to those who intend to corrupt sacred scripture, which should not be permitted in any way – and that therefore, because this is what the Gospel is like in the Latin version, it cannot be claimed to be otherwise, or changed with impunity.

Here, the Gospel is distinguished from the rest of the Bible: while it is always dangerous to make changes to the biblical text, this applies even more strongly to the Gospel. We should keep in mind, however, that Bessarion wrote his treatise in reaction to George's. George is mentioned by name in

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<sup>40</sup> PG 161, 630.

<sup>41</sup> PG 161, 631.

<sup>42</sup> PG 161, 625.

the Greek version.<sup>43</sup> The Latin version may have been written many years later,<sup>44</sup> but it is clear that Bessarion must have had George's text close at hand. The above passage is a paraphrase of George's own argument, which accounts for the similarity in wording. Note that while Bessarion's use of *euangelium* is similar to George's, he was less consistent in his terminology: he used *sacra scriptura* more or less as a synonym for *euangelium*. In other words, Bessarion's use of *euangelium* echoed George's mainly because his treatise was a reply to George's text, not because he understood the meaning of the word in the same way.

Another possible explanation for the similarities between the two authors is that they were both native speakers of Greek. When discussing the Latin version of the New Testament, they must have been more keenly aware of its status as a translation than authors who had been raised with the Latin Bible. As it happens, the meaning of *euangelium* as discussed above seems to have been restricted to the writings of George and Bessarion. Although Valla, in his *Annotationes*, addressed the textual problem at John 21:22, he did not discuss the topic at length, and he did not reply to George's arguments. Valla's prefaces to the *Annotationes* mention *euangelium* only once, in the technical sense, as opposed to the other parts of the New Testament.<sup>45</sup> It is possible that Valla used *euangelium* in a specific way in the text of the *Annotationes* itself, but this would require further research. Other writings from the period that touch on textual problems in the Bible mostly focus on the Old Testament. Giannozzo Manetti (1396-1459), who translated the New Testament into Latin, left no preface or other paratextual material in which he problematized changing the text of the Gospel.<sup>46</sup> His *Apologeticus*, a treatise on the biblical text and issues of biblical translation, focuses entirely on the Old Testament, and so does the preface to his new Latin translation of the Psalter.<sup>47</sup> Lampugnino Birago (1390-1472), in the preface to his translation of Basil's *Hexaemeron*, discussed the conflicting textual traditions of the Bible, but his discussion also focuses on the Old Testament. The Gospels are not mentioned at all.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Mohler 1967, 3, 70–87. I have not studied the Greek terminology that Bessarion used to refer to the Bible, but limit myself here to the Latin.

<sup>44</sup> For the dating of Bessarion's treatise, see Monfasani 1976, 94, n. 112.

<sup>45</sup> For Valla's prefaces, see Valla 1970, 3–10, and also Celenza 2012.

<sup>46</sup> On Manetti's translation of the New Testament, see den Haan 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Manetti's *Apologeticus* was written in 1458 in defense of his Psalter translation, which had been published a year earlier. For *Apologeticus*, see Manetti 1981 and Manetti 2016. Manetti's preface to the Psalter is available in Botley 2004, 179–81.

<sup>48</sup> Birago's translation, as well as the preface, remains in manuscript: MS Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.lat.302, fols. 6r–103v (fols. 1r–5r for the preface). For a discussion of Birago's preface, see den Haan 2022. On Birago, see also Miglio 1968.

### Conclusions

In this brief survey of the meaning of *euangelium* in the writings of George of Trebizond, and to a lesser degree Cardinal Bessarion, we have seen that George used *euangelium* in a special sense, distinct from alternatives such as *sacra scriptura*. He referred to *euangelium* as the message, or content, of the Gospel, as opposed to its linguistic form – Greek or Latin. When George warned against changing the Gospel, he did not object to correcting the Latin translation absolutely, but rather to changing the Latin text in such a way that the meaning of the text would be affected. While it often remains unclear to which part of the Bible *euangelium* refers, it is certainly distinct from the law of Moses.

We can further conclude that George's use of *euangelium* seems quite idiosyncratic; it is echoed in the writings of Bessarion, but this is not surprising, since Bessarion wrote with George's text in mind, often paraphrasing him quite closely. Other humanists who comment on textual problems in the Bible do not use *euangelium* in the way George did, if at all. As a consequence, this exploration is less relevant for the general use of the word *euangelium* in the middle of the fifteenth century. However, it does illustrate how fruitful it can be to carefully compare instances of terminology in the work of one author, to clarify his argument and position.

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