

MEISTER ECKHART'S USE OF THE VULGATE¹

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ABSTRACT Although Meister Eckhart's thought is commonly referred to as speculative mysticism, the Biblical text is constantly present, not only in his German sermons and treatises but also in his scholastic writings. Thanks to the newly founded University of Paris, the 13th century saw a renewed effort at emending the Latin Bible by purging both the subsisting parts of the *Vetus Latina* and St. Jerome's Vulgate of bad readings. Considering the fact that Eckhart had studied and taught in Paris in the late 13th and early 14th century, his way of dealing with the Biblical text seems rather peculiar. By analysing his way of quoting certain verses from the Book of Wisdom, this paper intends to show that, if Eckhart's does indeed often change the wording or the word order of the Vulgate version, he never does so for philological but only for philosophical and theological reasons. To him, the text of the Old and New Testament is never "just words" but has to be quoted so as to mirror the metaphysical subtext of reality, which is the divine Logos himself.

KEYWORDS Meister Eckhart – medieval Vulgate – medieval exegesis – philosophy of language – metaphysics of the Logos

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Obwohl Meister Eckharts Denkansatz zumeist als spekulative Mystik bezeichnet wird, ist der Text der Heiligen Schrift nicht nur in seinen deutschen Predigten und Traktaten, sondern auch in seinen scholastischen Werken allgegenwärtig. Dank der neugegründeten Pariser Universität ging man im 13. Jahrhundert daran, den Text der lateinischen Bibel zu verbessern, indem man sowohl die verbleibenden Teile der *Vetus Latina* als auch den auf den Hl. Hieronymus zurückgehenden Vulgata-Text von falschen Lesarten reinigte. Angesichts der Tatsache, dass Meister Eckhart im späten 13. und frühen 14. Jahrhundert in Paris studiert und gelehrt hatte, mutet sein Umgang mit dem Bibeltext jedoch eigentümlich an. Anhand einer Analyse ausgewählter Verse aus dem Buch der Weisheit will dieser Aufsatz zeigen, dass Eckhart den Wortlaut bzw. die Wortstellung der Vulgata-Vorlage zwar oft verändert, aber nicht aus philologischen, sondern stets aus philosophisch-theologischen Gründen. In seinen Augen besteht der Text des Alten und Neuen Testaments nie „nur“ aus Wörtern, sondern muss so zitiert werden, dass er als Widerschein des metaphysischen Subtextes der Wirklichkeit erscheint, der nichts anderes ist als der göttliche Logos selbst.

SCHLAGWORTE Meister Eckhart – mittelalterliche Vulgata – mittelalterliche Exegese – Sprachphilosophie – Logos-Metaphysik

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1. Introduction

Most people know Meister Eckhart primarily, if not exclusively, as one of the greatest mystics of the Middle Ages. The core of Eckhart's spiritual teaching consists in the idea of an indistinguishable unity between God and man in the uncreated "ground of the soul". Since according to Eckhart, this absolute unity can only come to fruition if we eliminate from our relationship with God each and any form of "mediation", it is little wonder that the profoundly Biblical dimension of his thought tends to be overlooked, especially by the more popularised forms of contemporary Eckhart reception. But to neglect Eckhart's use of the Bible is to ignore what constitutes his very identity as a teacher and preacher. Like every medieval professor of theology at the University of Paris, Meister Eckhart commented extensively on various Biblical books and quoted Holy Scripture throughout his scholastic *Quaestiones*; like every Dominican friar's, his daily prayer life was shaped by the Psalms and many other texts from the Old and New Testament; and like every preacher, he started his sermons with a Biblical quotation taken from one of the liturgical readings of the day. But is there anything to be said about his specific use of the Latin text of the Bible that has come to be known as the Vulgate?

As is well known, considerable efforts were made during the thirteenth century to emendate the Latin Bible by purging the subsisting portions of older Latin versions of mistranslations due to bad readings and St. Jerome's original text, of the numerous corruptions accumulated over the centuries. With its newly founded University, Paris became one of the centres of Biblical scholarship, as is attested by the names of two of the most famous *correctoria* of the Biblical text, "Sorbonne I" and "Sorbonne II",³ and the Dominican convent Saint-Jacques was heavily involved in this revision of the Bible, too.⁴ Since Eckhart had studied at the University of Paris and occupied twice the Dominican chair of theology there, it is safe to assume that he was well aware of the efforts made by his fellow Dominicans and other contemporary scholars to establish a more reliable version of Holy Scripture. Unfortunately, there is no way

3. Cf. Samuel Berger, *Des essais qui ont été faits à Paris au treizième siècle pour corriger le texte de la Vulgate*, *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 16 (1883), 41-66, here 4. 12. 15.

4. Cf. Gilbert Dahan, 'Sorbonne II'. Un correctoire biblique de la seconde moitié du XIIIe siècle, in: Giuseppe Cremascoli and Francesco Santi (eds.), *La Bibbia nel XIII secolo. Storia del testo, storia dell'esegesi: convegno della Società Internazionale per lo Studio del Medioevo Latino, Firenze, 1-2 giugno 2001*, Firenze, SISMEL edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004, 113-153, here 150.

to tell exactly what Eckhart's Bible looked like,⁵ given that there simply is no medieval manuscript we can label as *the* "Parisian Bible" or *the* "Bible of Saint-Jacques".⁶ Nevertheless, thanks to Loris Sturlese's and Markus Vinzent's publication of the Biblical index to Eckhart's works, it is possible to gain a more precise insight into Eckhart's way of quoting, adapting, and transforming the Latin version(s) of the Bible he might have had at his disposal.⁷ On the following pages, I shall focus on Eckhart's commentary on the Book of Wisdom, where his specific approach to the Biblical text becomes particularly visible.

2. Eckhart's commentary on the Book of Wisdom

Generally speaking, Eckhart's way of dealing with Holy Scripture is motivated by the systematic philosophical-theological framework of his thought. To him, the words of the Bible are never "just words" in a purely linguistic sense but mirror the "deep grammar", i.e. the metaphysical structures, of reality itself. When Eckhart changes the wording or the word order of a verse, he always does so with a precise theological intention. The Book of Wisdom is particularly interesting for our present topic in that it belongs to those Old Testament books that were incorporated into the Vulgate in their old Latin form without having been being modified or retranslated by St. Jerome.⁸

The first example I want to discuss concerns Sap 1:13. The Vulgate version reads as follows: *Deus mortem non fecit, nec laetatur in perditione vivorum*. In his commentary on the *Liber Sapientiae*, Eckhart quotes the first part of this verse three times according to the Vulgate. In this particular context, the question is whether death is or is not a reality created by God. Eckhart argues that death is not "anything" at all (*non est ens*) but an absence (*defectus*) of being.⁹

5. Cf. Markus Vinzent, *Die Schrift als Leben und das Leben als Schrift bei Meister Eckhart*, in: Martina Roesner (ed.), *Hermeneutik des Lebens. Meister Eckharts exegetisches Programm* (Eckhart: Texts and Studies 15), Leuven, Peeters, 2021 (forthcoming).

6. Guy Lobrichon, *Les éditions de la Bible latine dans les Universités du XIII^e siècle*, in: G. Cremascoli / F. Santi (eds.), *La Bibbia nel XIII secolo*, 15-34, here 23. 32 sq.; Hans H. Glunz, *History of the Vulgate in England from Alcuin to Roger Bacon*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1933, 260. 278.

7. In Eckhart's works, there are traces of the *Biblia Parisiensis*, the correctorium "Sorbonne II", and the *Biblia Senonensis*. Cf. Markus Vinzent, *Einleitung*, in: Loris Sturlese and Markus Vinzent (eds.), *Indices in Opera Omnia Magistri Eckhardi* (LW VI), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2015, 5-7.

8. Cf. Bonifatius Fischer, *Die Überlieferung allateinischer Bibeltexte im Mittelalter*, *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 56,1 (1975), 19-34, here 29.

9. Cf. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 17, LW II, 338,2-4.

From a systematic viewpoint, one could say that the immediate juxtaposition of the words *Deus* and *mortem* expresses the hypothesis that God might be the origin of death, but Eckhart rejects this idea by stressing that *if* God had actually created death, he would take delight in the ruin of anything that lives, which is clearly not the case:

Unde si deus mortem fecisset, consequenter laetaretur in perditione vivorum. Propter quod cum dixisset: ‘deus mortem non fecit’, subiecit: ‘nec laetatur in perditione vivorum’.¹⁰

According to Eckhart, there is no other Being than God himself¹¹ and since God’s pure Being cannot be the source of any non-being, he cannot be the origin of death either. From this perspective, it is noteworthy that Eckhart quotes the first part of this verse several other times in a different form. Four times, he writes *deus non fecit mortem*¹² and once, *deus enim mortem non fecit*.¹³ These variations are significant in that they express the incompatibility between God and death in the sentence structure itself: in the first case, *deus* and *mortem* are shown as polar opposites, separated by the barrier of the *non fecit*, and in the second case, they are separated by *enim*, which is quite absent from both the Vulgate and any other Latin version. By modifying the wording of the text, therefore, Eckhart drives home the point that God and death cannot possibly co-exist, not even in the linguistic vicinity of a harmless Latin sentence.

The second example concerns the first part of Sap 1:14. The Vulgate reads: *Creavit enim ut essent omnia*. Eckhart quotes this verse not only in his commentary on the Book of Wisdom, but also in the General Prologue to his *Opus tripartitum* and, as one would expect, in his commentary on Genesis. In the first of these quotations, Eckhart writes *creavit deus ut essent omnia*¹⁴ and in the following three occurrences, *creavit ut essent omnia*.¹⁵ The replacement of *enim* by *deus* emphasises that God alone is the Creator, whereas the omission of any other word between *creavit* and *ut essent* stresses the metaphysical immediacy of the effect of God’s creative action: Between God and created beings, there is

10. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 17, LW II, 338,11.

11. Cf. Eckhart, *Prol. gen. in Op. tripart.* n. 12, LW I/1, 156,15–158,4.

12. Eckhart, *In Sap.*, Tabula auctoritatum, LW II, 303,13; *ibid.* n. 14, LW II, 334,5; *ibid.* n. 15, LW II, 336,8; *ibid.* n. 16, LW II, 337,13.

13. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 223, LW II, 558,7-8.

14. Eckhart, *Prol. gen. in Op. tripart.* n. 17, LW I/1, 162,4-5.

15. Eckhart, *Prol. gen. in Op. tripart.* n. 18, LW I/1, 162,11; *In Gen.* I n. 19, LW I/1, 200,14-15; *ibid.* n. 137, LW I/1, 290,14; *ibid.* n. 141, LW I/1, 294,13.

no mediation whatsoever, not even in the form of the particle *enim*. In Eckhart's commentary on the Book of Wisdom, we encounter still more variations of this verse: Once, Eckhart writes *Creavit enim deus, ut essent omnia*,¹⁶ thereby accepting the *enim* from the Vulgate but adding *deus* for good measure in order to remind his readers that the subject of any creative action is always God. After that, we find more abbreviated quotations like *creavit ut essent*¹⁷ and *creavit omnia*,¹⁸ but also the very forceful *deus creavit, ut essent omnia*,¹⁹ which mirrors exactly the dynamic of creation itself: God is quite literally the beginning of everything, without anything being interposed between him and his creative activity (*creavit*), while the totality of all created beings (*omnia*) constitutes quite appropriately the end of the sentence, just as it is the final point of this act of creation.

The third example is Sap 15:3, a verse dedicated to a topic particularly dear to Eckhart, i.e. the link between our knowledge of God, the concept of "justice", and immortality. The Vulgate reads: *Nosse enim te consummata iustitia est, et scire iustitiam et virtutem tuam radix est immortalitatis*. Again, Eckhart quotes this verse once in his commentary on Exodus, eight times in his commentary on the Book of Wisdom, and once in his commentary on the Gospel of John, but always in more or less varying forms. The first occurrence quotes the verse as *nosse te consummata iustitia est, et scire te radix est immortalitatis*.²⁰ As is his habit, Eckhart drops the *enim* from the Vulgate version, while *te* replaces *iustitiam et virtutem tuam*. There is, however, a profound systematic reason to this change in the second part of the sentence. Eckhart quotes this verse in his commentary on Ex 33:13, where Moses asks God: *Ostende mihi faciem tuam ut sciam te*. According to Eckhart, the simple personal pronouns (*ego / mihi / me; tu / tibi / te*), used with regard to God, express the utmost purity and simplicity of the divine essence.²¹ Since in Ex 33:13, Moses' desire is precisely to know God's "face", i.e. his very being in its most fundamental and completely re-

16. Eckhart, *In Sap.*, Tabula auctoritatum, LW II, 304,4.

17. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 24, LW II, 345,1; *ibid.* n. 25, LW II, 345,12; *ibid.* n. 26, LW II, 346,9; *ibid.* n. 31, LW II, 352,7.

18. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 26, LW II, 346,1.

19. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 35, LW II, 355,14; *ibid.* n. 38, LW II, 359,8.

20. Eckhart, *In Exod.* n. 274, LW II, 221,3-4.

21. *Li 'ego' pronomen est primae personae. Discretivum pronomen meram substantiam significat; meram, inquam, sine omni accidente, sine omni alieno, substantiam sine qualitate, sine forma hac aut illa, sine hoc aut illo. Haec autem deo et ipsi soli congruunt* (Eckhart, *In Exod.* n. 14, LW II, 20,3-6). Cf. also *ibid.* n. 276, LW II, 222,12.

vealed form, the quotation from Sap 15:3 has to be adapted accordingly so as to eliminate the idea of different divine attributes (i.e. justice and power) in favour of the simple *te*.

In his commentary on the *Liber Sapientiae*, Eckhart quotes the same verse in two slightly different manners that stress the link between knowing God and eternal life (*nosse te radix est immortalitatis*),²² and knowing God and perfect justice (*nosse te consummata iustitia est*).²³ According to Eckhart, intellectual knowledge itself already *is* a form of eternity because it is essentially uncreated and above time.²⁴ By the same token, knowing God is equivalent to perfect justice because one cannot know God without being profoundly transformed by him, and for Eckhart, justice is primarily an ontological quality before being an ethical one.²⁵ Both quotations are merged in a third variation of this verse that reads: *scire iustitiam radix est immortalitatis*.²⁶ This formulation is closer to the Vulgate version, except for the fact that it omits the *et virtutem tuam* after *iustitiam*. Again, there is a precise theological and metaphysical reason for this omission: With regard to God, Eckhart distinguishes between the attributes that are supra-temporal effluxes of his divine essence – i.e. the transcendental properties *esse, unitas, veritas, bonitas*, plus the spiritual perfections *sapientia* and *iustitia*²⁷ – and the attributes that are tied to God's external action as creator, like power and mastery.²⁸ It is, therefore, logical that Eckhart omits the *virtus* from the above-mentioned verse because only the knowledge of supra-temporal and supra-creational realities, like justice, can grant us immortality.

The fourth and last example I want to analyse is the first part of Sap 18:14-15, which appears as a prophetic anticipation of the Incarnation. In the Vulgate, these verses read as follows: *Cum enim quietum silentium contineret omnia et*

22. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 261, LW II, 593,8.

23. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 262, LW II, 594,3.

24. *Sapientia autem, quae pertinet ad intellectum, non habet rationem creabilis* (Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 4, LW V, 41,10-11).

25. *Bist dû gereht, sô sint ouch dîniu werke gereht. Niht engedenke man heilicheit ze setzenne ûf ein tuon; man sol heilicheit setzen ûf ein sîn, wan diu werk enheiligent uns niht, sunder wir suln diu werk heiligen* (Eckhart, *Reden der Unterweisung* 4, DW V, 197,8–198,3); cf. also Theo Kobusch, *Mystik als Metaphysik des moralischen Seins. Bemerkungen zur spekulativen Ethik Meister Eckharts*, in: Kurt Ruh (ed.), *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter. Symposium Kloster Engelberg*, Stuttgart 1986, 49-62.

26. Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 265, LW II, 596,3.

27. Cf. Eckhart, *Prol. gen. in Op. tripart.* n. 8, LW I/1, 152,8-12; id., *Prol. in Op. prop.* n. 4, LW I/1, 167,9–168,5.

28. Cf. Eckhart, *In Ioh.* n. 540, LW III, 471,6–472,5.

nox in suo cursu medium iter haberet, omnipotens sermo tuus de caelo, a regalibus sedibus, [...] in mediam [...] terram prosilivit. In his commentary on the Book of Wisdom, Eckhart quotes the first part of this verse several times without change, except for the habitual omission of *enim*.²⁹ In the Vulgate wording, the translation would be: “While gentle silence enveloped all things ...”. In other words, the silence appears, grammatically speaking, as the subject of the sentence and ontologically speaking, as the medium that has to contain and surround all things in order for the divine Word to leap from heaven. However, in his commentary on the Gospel of John³⁰ and especially in his German sermons, Eckhart quotes Sap 18:14 according to the missal of the Dominican order, which reads: *Cum [or dum] quietum silentium tenerent omnia.* This reading entails a significant difference of meaning, given the fact that now *omnia* is the subject of the sentence, while *silentium* is the object. In other words: all things have to observe silence for the divine Word to come down from the heavens. The sheer number of times Eckhart quotes this verse according to the version of the Dominican missal is highly significant.³¹ In fact, the most important *leitmotiv* of Eckhart's German sermons is that we have to detach ourselves from everything that is not God and silence the chatter of our particular, created being (*ens hoc et hoc*) in order for the divine Word to be born in our soul.³² This silencing of all creatural voices in us is a task we have to do. This explains why Eckhart prefers the Dominican reading of this verse to the Vulgate version: According to the Vulgate, silence simply comes without us doing anything; according to the Dominican missal, all creatures have to keep silent in order to dispose themselves to receive the Incarnation of the Word. Given that Eckhart emphasises the birth of God in the soul much more than the unique, historical birth of Jesus, it is comprehensible that he quotes Sap 18:14 in the form that is in harmony with the idea of an individual preparation of each and every human being for the arrival of the divine Word in the innermost core of their soul.

29. Cf. Eckhart, *In Sap.*, Tabula auctoritatum, LW II, 317,4; *ibid.* n. 280, LW II, 613,1-2; *ibid.* n. 281, LW II, 613,6; *ibid.* n. 283, LW II, 615,11; *ibid.* n. 285, LW II, 619,3-4.

30. Cf. Eckhart, *In Ioh.* n. 80, LW III, 69,1; *ibid.* n. 488, LW III, 420,11-12.

31. Cf. L. Sturlese / M. Vinzent (eds.), *Indices in Opera Omnia Magistri Eckhardi* (LW VI), 145 sq.

32. Cf. Eckhart, *Pr.* 1, DW I, 15,2–16,11.

3. Conclusion

As we have seen from these few examples, Eckhart's use of the Vulgate text seems creative at times, but his changes are never arbitrary or gratuitous. If he opts for a different reading or changes himself the wording or the word order of a verse, he always does so for a precise theological reason. His primary concern is not philological in nature but always motivated by the desire to find the one and true text that is the divine Word underlying the many words of the Bible. The original "language" in which Holy Scripture is written is neither Hebrew nor Greek but the intellectual framework of divine truth itself. The different versions of the Bible in human language, by contrast – including the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament –, are not originals but already "translations". From this point of view, the various readings of the *Vetus Latina*, the Vulgate, the Dominican missal etc. are not to be considered in their horizontal, mutual relationship of translation, transmission, and possible textual corruption but rather in a vertical perspective, i.e. as more or less adequate or inadequate versions and "incarnations" of the one true original, which is the eternal Logos himself.