

Textual criticism of TBOTSS

The Whorl list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 15 Jun 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1449>

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Adam Stephanides — 15 Jun 2001, 14:21

With all the talk about the difficulty of determining the "true facts" behind the narrative(s) of TBOTSS, I thought I'd try and determine just what are the textual "components" of the book we have, and how close each of them is to the events it purports to describe. In the analysis below, I confine myself to what can be determined from the text, setting aside for the present hypotheses about long chains of copyists and such (which I'll get to later). There's nothing really new here, but I thought it'd be handy to have it in one place.

The components are:

1. The Narrator's manuscript, corrected for "obvious errors" and divided into chapters by the editors, and copied by the editors, presumably introducing further errors.
2. The third-person "Horn" sections written by the editors.
3. The first-person sections written by the editors, singly or together.
4. The volume and chapter titles, supplied by the editors.
5. The epigraphs to the volumes, of unknown provenance.

If my hypothesis, that the final two paragraphs were appended by someone else long after the rest of the book was written, is correct, then all the above were copied by an unknown copyist, introducing further errors.

6. The final two paragraphs, authorship unknown.

All the above were transcribed and translated (unless the Common Tongue is English; I don't recall) by Wolfe, introducing further errors. And finally,

7. The lists of "Proper Names in the Text," which I take to be by Wolfe, since the editors would have had no need to gloss Blue or Green.

In terms of closeness to the "events" they describe, 1, 3, and 6 are written by participants or eyewitnesses, though the "correction" and copying may have introduced inauthentic material. 2 is a narrative based on a combination, in unknown proportions, of a participant's testimony, imperfectly recollected by its hearers (there is no indication that Horn's recollections were transcribed at the time he spoke them) and conjecture by the editors. 5 is a mystery: they may be transcribed directly from the documents, or copies thereof; they may be Horn's reconstructions from memory; or they may even be the editor's reconstructions from conjecture, though this last seems unlikely. Similarly, we don't know whether Horn, the editors, or Wolfe placed the epigraphs in their current positions.

All the above takes the text's account of itself at face value. Is this justified? I think it is. The absence of contradictions, or passages of nonsense, implies either that there was no long chain of copyists, or that if there was it preserved the text accurately. And while the suggestion (made by someone a long time ago) that the hard-to-swallow elements of TBOTSS are legendary accretions to the original book has attractive features, I don't think it can be sustained. The style and voice is too consistent for the book to be such a composite. (And it's the astral travel I'd most like to dispose of as legendary, but if it were just a legend how would the originator have known about Severian and Merryn?)

If my account is correct, then the "textual problems" raised by TBOTSS are a less difficult than any of the Gospels (though if you believe John is written by an eyewitness--a minority view, as far as I can gather--you may disagree), and certainly much less difficult than the Gospels taken collectively, or the Bible as a whole. For reconstructing the "true events," the significant components are 1, 2, and 3. And if the editors aren't lying, which there's no reason to think they are (and if they are, the problem of what "really happened" becomes unsolvable), then 1 and 3 are essentially eyewitness and participant testimony. The only major problem is 2, which admittedly is a biggie; but even here we know the authorship and sources, just not what stems from which source.

--Adam

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Betty, Brian — 15 Jun 2001, 15:52 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote: "If my account is correct, then the "textual problems" raised by TBOTSS are a less difficult than any of the Gospels (though if you believe John is written by an eyewitness--a minority view, as far as I can gather--you may disagree), and certainly much less difficult than the Gospels taken collectively, or the Bible as a whole."

I definitely think it's easier than those, mostly because we have a single author at the bottom, that being Wolfe. The Bible was clearly written by many separate persons, and it's obvious from the seemingly limitless conflicts among those claiming to be Biblical Literalists (even those who are only Gospel literalists) that the Bible contains conflicting material. The Gospels themselves are mysterious to us: Bishop Spong (considered by many to be a 'heretic', which I think is a ridiculously anachronistic term) of the Episcopal Church has managed to explain the first three Gospels in terms of the traditional Jewish liturgical year without straining the text (really!); whether he is right or not, it point out that what we understand about them pales to what mystery the texts have for our understanding. (And I'm not Christian!)

In comparison, we know that Wolfe, as talented as he is, remains a single human being with - somewhere - a single writing goal, even if that/those goal(s) is/are unclear to us.

Anna June

Surah 101: The Calamity (al-Qari'a)

The qari'a

What is the qari'a?

What can tell you of the qari'a?

A day humankind are like moths scattered

And mountains are like fluffs of wool

Whoever's scales weigh heavy

His is a life that is pleasing

His mother is Haayiyat
What can tell you what she is?
Raging fire

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 15 Jun 2001, 13:17 · follows Betty, Brian

I definitely think it's easier than those, mostly because we have a single author at the bottom, that being Wolfe.

I deeply agree with Anna June (and Adam) on this point.

Bishop Spong (considered by many to be a 'heretic', which I think is a ridiculously anachronistic term)

It is an accurately descriptive term -- though I don't know whether it applies to Spong in particular. Within the context of a community of faith (Christian or otherwise), there are agreed-upon tenets; they are defining of the faith community. Within the context of that community (and ONLY in that context), tenets which directly or by strong implication contradict those community-defining tenets are "heresy." One who believes such tenets is a "heretic," and puts him- or herself outside the pale of the faith community. One who teaches (or attempts to teach) such tenets to others in the community is a "heresiarch," and is actively destructive of the community (at least in its present form; it is possible that the net result of such teaching will actually be a strengthened community).

Some examples: Abraham was a heretic in the context of polytheistic Chaldaea; so were Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles in the context of monist Judaea; so was Martin Luther in the context of Roman Catholicism.

[Spong] of the Episcopal Church has managed to explain the first three Gospels in terms of the traditional Jewish liturgical year without straining the text

It seems quite likely to me -- again, I haven't read Spong, but the story as related in the synoptic Gospels is _deeply_ tied to Second-Temple Jewish piety and liturgy. Many of the parables and most of Jesus' encounters with the various priestly factions are completely out of context if you don't understand that.

In comparison, we know that Wolfe, as talented as he is, remains a single human being with - somewhere - a single writing goal, even if that/those goal(s) is/are unclear to us.

And here I must disagree, or refrain from agreement. It seems very unlikely to me that Wolfe, or any other writer, has a "single" goal in creating a work as complex as -- well, as any reasonably-serious novel. (Disclaimer: I exempt from the term "reasonably-serious novel" (a) most potboiling pulp adventure novels and (b) most "yellow-journalist" novels like THE OCTOPUS and THE JUNGLE -- "most" because there are exceptions, books in both categories that exceed the minimal requirements of their categories.)

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Adam Stephanides — 15 Jun 2001, 23:12 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

on 6/15/01 2:52 PM, Betty, Brian at BBetty at foleyhoag.com wrote:
Adam Stephanides wrote: "If my account is correct, then the "textual problems" raised by TBOTSS are a less difficult than any of the Gospels (though if you believe John is written by an eyewitness--a minority view, as

far as I can gather--you may disagree), and certainly much less difficult than the Gospels taken collectively, or the Bible as a whole."

I definitely think it's easier than those, mostly because we have a single author at the bottom, that being Wolfe.

I don't think the crucial difference is that TBOTSS has a single author. While Wolfe is the sole real author, there are several fictional authors, whose goals in writing differ to some extent (whatever Narr's motives for writing his manuscript are, they're not the same as the Editors' motives for writing the third-person sections, or for writing their individual first-person sections). Theoretically Wolfe could have written a book whose fictional authors and sources were as various and entangled as the real authors and sources of the Bible; but he didn't.

--Adam

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Jerry Friedman — 18 Jun 2001, 07:54 · follows Adam Stephanides

--- Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:
With all the talk about the difficulty of
determining the "true facts"
behind the narrative(s) of TBOTSS, I thought I'd try
and determine just what
are the textual "components" of the book we have,
and how close each of them
is to the events it purports to describe.

...

Thanks for this clarifying outline.

All the above were transcribed and translated
(unless the Common Tongue is
English; I don't recall) by Wolfe, introducing
further errors.

...

And that, in turn, was set into type by publishers,
introducing further errors. I read the SFBC edition,
but I gather from comments in the archives that the
original Tor edition was also poorly proofread.
Though it would be amusing if the typos were made
intentionally by Wolfe, for instance as reflections of
copyists' errors in his supposed original source.

Incidentally, maybe people who know about textual
criticism will be skeptical of this, but it's possible
that some of the fictional editing steps did in fact
correct previous errors.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 18 Jun 2001, 08:50 · follows Jerry Friedman

Quoth Jerry Friedman:

Incidentally, maybe people who know about textual criticism will be skeptical of this, but it's possible that some of the fictional editing steps did in fact correct previous errors.

This is certainly possible, and does in fact happen in RL, but nowhere near as often as it introduces them.

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