Changing Jerome’s Bible: Biblical quotations in the patristic translations of Lampugnino Birago (1390–1472) and George of Trebizond (1396–1472/3)

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the fifteenth century, the Italian humanists set out to restore the glory of Antiquity by reviving classical literature and purifying the Latin language. Byzantine scholars arrived in Florence, Venice, Naples and Rome, bringing their books and learning with them; in the 1460s, the printing press entered the picture. Against this background, humanist authors developed new standards and methods for textual scholarship and translation, which in some cases they applied to the Bible. Although humanist biblical criticism would remain marginal until the sixteenth century, when humanists such as Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and Desiderius Erasmus published new Latin translations and philological discussions of the biblical text, the fifteenth-century cases show how the Bible could be studied in an environment of transformation, before the Reformation polarized all debates on Scripture and its authority.

A few biblical projects from this period have been studied thoroughly, especially Lorenzo Valla’s Annotationes to the New Testament. However, there is still much uncharted territory.¹ In this article, I propose a new approach to studying fifteenth-century humanist biblical criticism.² I focus on patristic...

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²I use the term biblical criticism to refer the philological study of the biblical text, including practices such as textual criticism and translation.

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translations, and analyse how humanist translators treated the biblical quotations they found in their source texts. Concretely, I compare their renderings of biblical quotations with the Latin translation of the Bible that was common at the time. This allows me to explore what the treatment of biblical quotations can tell us about the text of the Latin Bible in the fifteenth century, about humanist translation practices, and about humanist views on biblical authority.

To this end, I compare the works of two scholars who were active in the context of Quattrocento humanism. The first is Lampugnino Birago (1390–1472), who translated Basil the Great’s *Hexaemeron* around 1470. Birago wrote a preface for this translation in which he specifically addressed the problem of embedded biblical quotations. I compare Birago’s case with that of George of Trebizond (1396–1472/3), who made several patristic translations in the 1440s and 1450s. George held strong opinions on changing the text of the Latin Bible, but as we shall see, his own practice suggests that these did not apply to quoted biblical passages in the texts he translated.

II. BIRAGO’S PREFACE

Lampugnino Birago translated Basil’s *Hexaemeron* into Latin around 1470. In the preface, he discussed his translation choices, and particularly his treatment of biblical passages: these occasionally differed from ‘Jerome’s translation’, and he offered his readers an explanation for this. Before we discuss Birago’s arguments in detail, it is necessary to situate his translation in the history of the Latin Bible and in the context of humanist Greek–Latin translation. The Latin Bible that was in common use in the Roman Catholic Church until recent times, the *Biblia Vulgata* (English: Vulgate), is a product of the sixteenth century, when it was standardized and declared the official translation of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent. From that time onwards, the text has been comparatively stable. But there was no such *Biblia Vulgata* in the fifteenth century. The Latin Bible was not known by any particular name, although it was often referred to as ‘Jerome’s translation’ after the Church Father who had allegedly translated it. Nor was there a standard ver-

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3 For the status of the Latin Bible in the fifteenth century, and the name *Biblia Vulgata*, see Section II below.
4 On Birago’s life and works, see Massimo Miglio, ‘Birago, Lampugnino’ in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 10 (1968), 595–7. Birago’s translation of Basil’s *Hexaemeron* is discussed by Iréna Backus in her study on Basil’s humanist reception (see below, footnote 48).
5 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (hereafter BAV), MS Vat.lat.302, fols. 6r-103v. The preface is on fols. 1r–5r.
6 The Vulgate was declared the official translation of the Catholic church in 1546. The first official edition of the Vulgate appeared in 1590 (the Sixtine Vulgate), and was updated in 1592 (the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate).
7 For an introduction to the textual history of the Latin Bible in this period, see e.g. Cornelia Linde, *How to Correct the Sacra Scripturæ? Textual Criticism of the Latin Bible between the Twelfth and Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012).
8 We find this usage also in Birago. Linde discusses the various names used for the Latin Bible up until the fifteenth century. Linde, *How to Correct*, 7–26.
sion of the text. Although some standardization of the Latin text took place from the thirteenth century onwards, there was no ‘edition’ of the Latin Bible in the fifteenth century. A Latin Bible was printed in Rome just around the time when Birago translated the *Hexaemeron*, at the printing press of Konrad Sweynheim and Arnold Pannartz. It is possible that Birago used this text, but it is unlikely that it was considered a standard version. Birago’s own translation of Basil was not printed, and most of his readers must have read the Latin Bible in manuscript, where each copy differed from the next. On the other hand, this textual variety should not be exaggerated. Works by biblical critics dating from about that time suggest that they used a Latin Bible rather similar to the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate, with only minor variations.

Next to the history of the Latin Bible, Birago’s translation should be understood against the background of a broader humanist translation movement. While particular Greek texts, notably texts by Aristotle, had been translated in the Middle Ages, knowledge of Greek had been limited. Few translators had the skills and opportunity to render Greek texts into Latin. This changed in the fifteenth century, when the literary movement of Renaissance humanism joined forces with the influx of Greek sources and scholarship from the East. In order to preserve the Greek heritage, and to restore the glory of Antiquity, humanist translators set out to make the Greek classics available to Latin readers. One of the main characteristics of humanist as opposed to medieval translation was a preference for translation *ad sensum*, according to the sense, as opposed to *ad verbum*, word for word. This suited the humanist taste for elegant Latin style, allowing the translators to advertise their own linguistic skills and to imitate the style of the original Greek author.

It is in this context that Birago made his translation of Basil’s *Hexaemeron*, a commentary on the first chapters of Genesis describing the six days of creation. Birago’s preface is dedicated to Pope Paul II (1417–71), to whom he

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9 On medieval ‘editions’ such as the Carolingian revision and the Paris Bible, see Linde, *How to Correct*, 39–48. On the Paris Bible, see also Laura Light, ‘The Thirteenth Century and the Paris Bible’, in R. Marsden and E. Matter (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From 600 to 1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 380–91.

10 Giovanni Andrea Bussi (ed.), *Biblia latina* (Rome: Conradus Sweynheym and Arnoldus Pannartz, 1471).

11 I conclude this mainly from a thorough comparison of Giannozzo Manetti’s New Testament with a manuscript of the Latin Bible in his library, as well as with Valla’s *Annotationes*; Annet den Haan, *Giannozzo Manetti’s New Testament: Translation Theory and Practice in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), especially 30–33, 48–58, 70–82. This impression is confirmed by the *verbatim* quotations in the translations by George of Trebizond and Cristoforo Persona; see below, footnote 64.

12 For an overview of Greek studies in the Middle Ages, see e.g. Walter Berschin, *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter. Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues* (Bern, München: A. Francke AG Verlag, 1980).

13 For humanist Greek–Latin translation, see e.g. Ernesto Berti, ‘Traduzioni oratorie fedeli’, *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 2 (1988), 245–66; Stefano Baldassarri, *Umanesimo e traduzione da Petrarcha a Manetti* (Cassino: Università di Cassino, 2003); Paul Botley, *Latin Translation in the Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti and Desiderius Erasmus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Marianne Pade, ‘Chrysoloras on Translation’, *Renaissanceforum*, no. april (2017), 1–19.

14 For the Greek text, see J.-P. Migne (ed.) *Patrologia Graeca* 29, 3–208.
also dedicated other translations. In the opening lines of the preface, Birago praises the Pope as the protector and promotor of the Christian faith, and he links his own translation to these activities: Paul II had requested a translation of Basil’s *Hexaemeron* for the use of the Roman Church. After pointing out some of the merits of Basil’s text, Birago goes on to discuss his translation method, and specifically his rendering of the biblical quotations that appear in the *Hexaemeron*. This discussion takes up almost the entire preface, and it is clearly the most pressing problem on Birago’s mind. He introduces it by pointing out that some of his readers may wonder why the biblical passages in his translation are put differently than in Jerome’s version. Especially the theologians, a group not further specified, will object that he has changed Scripture – not just the words, but even the sense:

Nunc autem ne quis miretur esse quaedam alter hic posita quam uir doctissimus sanctissimusque Hieronymus noster posuerit, quod quidem fieri minime debuisse dicent theologi forsan aliqui – mutari scilicet in probata iam scriptura sacra aliquid, et hic non modo verba, sed sensus etiam mutatos esse […] . (Birago’s preface) 16

But now, lest someone wonders that some things are put differently here than that most learned and most holy man, our Jerome, put them; which perhaps some theologians will say ought not to happen at all, that is, that something is changed in the recognized Holy Scriptures, and that here not only the words, but the meaning has been changed […] .

The reference to theologians as opposed to philologists or grammarians is familiar from sixteenth-century debates on the territory of the humanists as opposed to the scholastics. In the fifteenth century, a similar argument is made by Aurelio Lippi Brandolini (1454–97), who wrote a Latin paraphrase of the Old Testament which he dedicated to Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini. In a preface accompanying his work, Brandolini defends himself in advance against critics who will object to his project, notably the ‘theologians’:

[…] nouam fieri Bibliam, ueteremque ob id neglectum iri clamitantes, Jeronimi verba immutari nefas esse, neque licere eum qui in theologia doctorum

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15 Of Dionysius Halicarnassus and Plutarch. Miglio, ‘Birago, Lampugnino’, 596.
16 Vat.Lat.302, fol. 1v. When quoting directly from the manuscripts of unedited texts, I have updated the punctuation, and in some cases the spelling.
17 See e.g. Erika Rummel, *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); *The Humanist–Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
18 On Brandolini, see Antonio Rotondo, ‘Brandolini, Aurelio Lippi’, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 14 (1972), 26–8. See also John O’Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*: *Rhetoric, Doctrine and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c.1450–1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), 44–51.
19 The preface was edited, with a short introduction, by Rummel: Erika Rummel, ‘In Defense of “Theologizing Humanists”: Aurelio Brandolini’s “In Sacram Ebreorum Historiam. . . Prefatio”’, *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 44 (1995), 90–106.
ornamenta atque insignia non accepisset quicquam omnino sacrarum rerum conscribere. (Brandolini, *In Sacram Ebrevium... Prefatio*)

[...] crying that a new Bible is being made, and that because of this, the old one will be made obsolete; that it is a mortal sin that Jerome’s words are changed, and that it is not allowed for someone who has not received the marks of honour and the distinctions of the doctors in theology to write anything at all on sacred matters.

In Brandolini’s text, these theologians are mentioned again and again. Although he does not mention names, his wording suggests that he had specific people in mind who attacked his work and tried to suppress it. What these *theologi* have in common, Brandolini writes, is their attachment to academic titles, which they value more than knowledge. These are contrasted with humanist authors who write about theology, and with the Church Fathers, who laid the foundation for the teachings of the Church but did not practice theology after the manner of the scholastics.

Earlier biblical critics among the Italian humanists are less specific about the identity of their critics. About a decade before Birago’s *Hexaemeron*, Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) wrote a treatise in defence of his Psalter translation, *Apologeticus* (1458). In the opening paragraph he mentions anonymous critics, assuring the reader that he is not ashamed to be attacked and to defend himself from criticism; this has happened to all great authors, as he substantiates at length with a list of examples. We know that Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) was attacked for his work on the New Testament, mainly by Poggio Bracciolini. However, it seems that Valla did not anticipate criticism from theologians specifically: he did not mention them as a group when anticipating or responding to criticism, although he did attack scholastic theologians in many of his writings. It is unclear why Birago anticipated criticism from theologians rather than from humanist competitors, as in Valla’s case, and whether he had particular names in mind. In any case, he does not explicitly present himself as a philologist as opposed to a theologian, as Brandolini and later biblical humanists would.

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20 Rummel, ‘In Defense’, 94.
21 Especially in caput 2 of the preface: Rummel, ‘In Defense’, 93–4.
22 Rummel, ‘In Defense’, 96–8.
23 Giannozzo Manetti, *Apologeticus*, ed. Alfonso De Petris (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1981); A *Translator’s Defense*, eds. Myron McShane and Mark Young (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
24 On this dispute, see the introduction to the Latin edition of Valla’s first attack on Poggio: Lorenzo Valla, *Antidotum Primum: La prima apologia contro Poggio Bracciolini*, ed. Ari Wesseling (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1978).
25 Valla does not mention theologians in his two prefaces to the *Annotationes*, addressed to Nicholas V. For the Latin text of Valla’s prefaces, see Perosa’s edition, Valla, *Collatio*, 3–10; and more recently, with English translation, Celenza, ‘Lorenzo Valla’s Radical Philology’, 380–9. For Valla’s anti-scholasticism, see Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
Next to the identity of Birago’s critics, the nature of their criticism is interesting too. These theologians, Birago writes in his preface, are convinced that nothing may be changed in the text of the Bible. The same sentiment is mentioned by other humanist authors, always ascribed to anonymous critics. Manetti and Valla had both argued against the notion that Scripture ought not to be changed. Cardinal Bessarion, writing around the same period as Manetti and Valla, referred to ‘some authors’ who believed it was wrong to change anything in Scripture. All defend themselves by pointing out that Jerome had faced the same criticism in his time, and that he had corrected and changed the Bible all the same.

Although Birago expected to be criticized for attacking Jerome’s authority, this had not been his intention at all. To illustrate this point, he gives an example of a biblical passage in his translation of the *Hexaemeron* that will certainly look unfamiliar to readers.

In the Latin Bible, the opening of Genesis is as follows:

> In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram. Terra autem erat inanis et uacua… (Genesis 1: 1–2)

In the beginning God created heaven, and earth. And the earth was void and empty… (Douay-Rheims Bible)

In his translation of Basil’s commentary, Birago renders the second line as follows:

> Terra autem, inquit erat inuisibilis et non instructa (It says:) The earth was invisible and unfurnished.

This translation corresponds to Basil’s Greek:

> Περὶ τοῦ, ἀόρατος ἦν ἡ γῆ καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος… (Basil, *Hexaemeron*, Homily II, 1)

About the passage that the earth was invisible and unfurnished

The reading that Basil follows is that of the Greek Septuagint; the familiar Latin reading is based on the Hebrew text of Genesis. Birago explains the difference by informing his readers of the origin story of the Greek and Latin

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27 Bessarion comments on textual problems in Scripture in his treatise *De ea parte evangelii Joannis ubi scribitur: [. . .] Si eum volo manere donec veniam, quid ad te [. . .] disceptatio*. The Latin text is in *Patrologia Graeca* 161, 623–40. A Greek version of this treatise is printed in Ludwig Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist, und Staatsmann: Funde und Forschungen* (1942; repr. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1967), Vol. 3, 70–87. For comments on anonymous opponents who forbid any changes to Scripture, see e.g. p. 626C. Bessarion probably referred to George of Trebizond: see Section IV below.

28 Vat.lat.302, fol. 18v.

29 *Patrologia Graeca* 29, 28.

30 The Septuagint reads: ‘Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. ἢ δὲ γῆ ἢν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος…’
versions of the Old Testament. He shows himself aware of the complicated relationship between the Latin Bible and other textual traditions. The Greek Septuagint translation originated in the Jewish diaspora in Egypt, allegedly because king Ptolemy ordered a translation of the Hebrew holy books for the library of Alexandria. Thus, the early Church knew two versions of the Old Testament: the original Hebrew text, and its Greek translation. Opinions were divided as to which version should serve as the basis for a Latin translation. The Church Father Jerome, having revised the Latin Gospels first, translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew sources. This was a controversial step, and he was criticized for it by Augustine, who emphasized the authority of the Septuagint translation for the early Church. After Jerome’s lifetime, the Greek and Latin Bible developed independently for centuries.

Medieval scholars knew about the complex textual history of the Old Testament, and commented on it. In some cases, they studied Greek and Hebrew themselves, and borrowed from the works of Jewish exegetes. In the fifteenth century, interest in the Greek tradition intensified, especially after the Council of Florence–Ferrara, which sparked off a series of new patristic translations.

When Birago discusses the Old Testament text in his preface, he refrains from any judgment on the comparative authority of the Greek and Hebrew traditions. He carefully avoids choosing sides. First, he describes how in the Latin Church, the Greek version was forgotten rather than rejected – implying that there is no reason for Latin Christians to reject it now. Then he explains that Basil followed the customs of his own Church. The Greeks, Birago writes, believe that their translation is inspired by the divine will. He adds that Augustine, when confronted with Jerome’s new translation based on the Hebrew, had initially preferred the translation based on the Greek, because he did not want to go against the established tradition of the Church; Jerome, by contrast, challenged the authority of the Septuagint translation and preferred the Hebrew. Birago writes that opinions are divided as to which textual tradition is the better one, and that he does not wish to attack either of them as both are supported by eminent authorities. He follows the Septuagint for pragmatic reasons: in his translation of the Hexaemeron, he simply cannot follow Jerome’s translation in some cases, because doing so would have made Basil look ridiculous.

31 Augustine urged Jerome to translate from the Septuagint rather than from the Hebrew in letter 28 and in letter 71. For Augustine’s view on the Septuagint, see e.g. Annemaré Kotzé, ‘Augustine, Jerome and the Septuagint’, in J. Cook (ed.), Septuagint and Reception: Essays Prepared for the Association for the Study of the Septuagint in South Africa (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 245–60.
32 For an overview of medieval scholarship, including the fifteenth century, see Linde, How to correct. For the patristic movement within Italian humanism, see Charles Stinger, Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and the Italian Renaissance (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977).
33 Vat.lat.302, fol. 2r.
34 Vat.lat.302, fol. 2v.
Birago’s discussion of the origin of the Greek and Latin translations has a striking parallel in Manetti’s *Apologeticus*. In that text, Manetti problematizes the conflicting textual traditions of the Old Testament, as well as the difference between translating the Bible – and similar genres such as theology and philosophy – as opposed to lighter genres such as historiography and poetry.\(^{35}\) He discusses the history of the Old Testament text at considerable length, quoting long passages from both Jerome and Augustine.\(^{36}\) Like Birago, he does not choose sides, but simply states that opinions are divided. In Manetti’s case, this is striking, because the comparative authority of the Septuagint is crucial to his translation project. In making a new Latin translation of the Psalter, Manetti was forced to choose between the Septuagint or the Hebrew as a source text. By choosing the Hebrew, he signalled that for him, the Septuagint was less authoritative. Be that as it may, it is evident that both Manetti and Birago were aware of the conflicting textual traditions of the Old Testament, and both withheld judgment: they did not commit themselves to choosing sides in the debate.

Having settled this point, Birago goes on to discuss a second problem that appears in the same verse. The Greek ἀκατασκεύαστος [unfurnished], Birago writes, can be rendered by equivalents deriving from the Latin construo [to construct, to build] and instruo [to construct, but also: to furnish, to prepare].\(^{37}\) Birago has chosen *non instructa* [unfurnished] because it suits Basil’s interpretation better than *non constructa*. This brings him to a second problematic passage, a few lines further on, in Genesis 1:4, where he explains why his translation differs from that of earlier translators:

 […] ego dixerim ‘<et> uidit deus lucem quod pulchra esset’, quod non equidem idcirco feci, quia mihi non liceret per uocabulum grecum etiam ‘bonam’ dicere, sed quia ‘pulchram’ potius eo loco lucem significari uoluerit Basilius. (Birago’s preface)\(^{38}\)

I say: ‘And God saw the light, that it was beautiful’; and I did not do this because the Greek word did not allow me to translate ‘good’, but because Basil, in this passage, understood it to mean that the light was beautiful rather [than good].

Birago refers here to the ambiguity of the Greek καὶ έδειξεν ο Θεός το φῶς, ὅτι καλόν; which can be rendered by ‘And God saw the light, that it was beautiful’ as well as ‘[…] that it was good’. Whereas Jerome had chosen ‘good’ [quod esset bona], Birago changed this to ‘beautiful’ [quod pulchra esset].\(^{39}\) As he explains, he made this change because Basil’s commentary turns on the meaning

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\(^{35}\) About Manetti’s *Apologeticus*, see den Haan, *Giannozzo Manetti’s New Testament*, 110–52.

\(^{36}\) Manetti, *Apologeticus* II.

\(^{37}\) The MS has *atastastenastos* (fol. 2v); in the margin *Acatascenastos* (3r).

\(^{38}\) Vat.lat.302, fol. 3r.

\(^{39}\) Vat.lat.302, fol. 24v. This is where the verse appears in the commentary itself, but Birago also quotes it in the preface (fol. 3r).
'beautiful' rather than 'good'. He also explains why in this same verse, the translation *quod* [that] for *ὅτι* is better than *quia* [because]. When Jerome chose the translation *quod* rather than *quia*, he did so not to attack earlier translators, but to give his own, correct, interpretation of the verse:

Scribens enim in opere proprio Hieronimus de luce non 'quia esset bona', sed 'quod bona' dixit, exprimens sensum melius, nec ille tanquam aliena redarguens, sed recte tradere nolens sua. (Birago’s preface)

For Jerome, writing in his own work about the light, did not say 'because it was good', but 'that it was good', expressing the sense better; not as it were to attack the work of others, but because he did not want to betray his own, and rightly so.

In such cases, Birago continues, a translator may change an earlier translation by choosing a better equivalent. Although he does not write this in so many words, he implies that this freedom is also open to himself, as a modern translator following Jerome’s example.

It is difficult to determine whether Birago’s approach to the Bible was representative. The specific question of what to do with embedded biblical quotations does not appear in most of the prefaces to humanist patristic translations, but we do find a comment on this issue in a preface by Lilius Tiphernas (1418–86) to his translation of Chrysostom’s *Sermons on Job*:

[… ] quedam que de sacris mutuata scripturis iuxta grecam editionem traduxi. Que, tam et si a nouissima nostra quandoque discrepent, consilium tamen non fuit eadem a greca dimouere sententia, quo a Crisostomo disputantur clarius [et] conuenientiusque consentiant. (Urb.lat.32, 240v)

[… ] I have translated some passages that are derived from the sacred Scriptures according to the Greek version. Although these differ from our latest version in some places, it did not seem right to me to separate them from the Greek meaning, so that they should be discussed more clearly by Chrysostomus, and harmonize more consistently.

As regards more general discussions of biblical criticism, one wonders if Birago was aware of the earlier writings of Valla, Manetti, and Bessarion, and whether he was referring to these. The parallel with Manetti’s *Apologeticus* could be coincidental: both authors had good reason to describe the textual traditions of the Old Testament. It illustrates, however, that this question was one that interested humanist authors. Birago’s comment about hostile theologians appears to be new, and it is interesting that we encounter it again in

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40 *Patrologia Graeca* 29, 45–8.
41 Vat.lat.302, fol. 4v.
42 BAV, MS Urb.lat.32, fol. 240v.
43 The dating of Bessarion’s treatise is uncertain. See John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 94, n112.
Brandolini’s preface. However, Birago does not explicitly point to his own status as a grammarian or philologist, as Brandolini – and indeed Erasmus – would. This suggests that the frame of ’philologists’ as opposed to ‘theologians’ emerged only later.

III. BIRAGO’S TRANSLATION

Birago’s preface gives us an impression of his ideas about scriptural authority, and of his treatment of biblical quotations in particular, but it may not be representative of his actual translation method. In order to study that in practice, I have analysed fifty-three biblical quotations that appear in the first three capita of the first homily of Basil’s *Hexaemeron*. These include both the quoted passages from Genesis 1 and quotations in the commentary text itself that Basil used to support or illustrate his interpretation. I have compared these with the Vulgate in the critical edition by Weber and Gryson.  

A survey of these passages shows that as a rule, Birago does not follow ‘Jerome’s translation’. Some of his renderings are quite similar to Jerome’s, but most of them depart from it on one or more points. Interestingly, these variations cannot always be accounted for by the reasons Birago gives in his preface. His first stated reason – that Basil’s interpretation had been based on a Greek variant reading – hardly ever applies in my sample. His second reason is that he is following Basil’s particular interpretation of a Greek word. This is rare as well: the example of Genesis 1:4 (where the light is ‘beautiful’ rather than ‘good’) is the only case in my sample. In most cases, neither reason applies, yet Birago’s rendering still differs from Jerome’s translation. This is illustrated by the example below (Table 1):

In such cases, it appears that Birago translated the quotations directly from the Greek rather than revising the Latin translation. A clear illustration of this is the first verse of Genesis, likewise the opening line of Basil’s *Hexaemeron*. There is a slight difference here between the common Latin translation of this verse and how it appears in Birago’s translation (Table 2):

The translation *creavit* corresponds to the Hebrew אָרָּב, which in the Septuagint was rendered as ἐποίησεν. The Greek word ἔκτισεν would have been a specific rendering, while the Septuagint rendering ἐποίησεν is a more neutral term. For a translator working from Basil’s Greek, which follows the Septuagint translation, it would be natural to choose the more neutral *fecit* [he made] as opposed to the specific *creavit* [he created].

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44 *Biblia sacra Vulgata: Editio Quinta*, eds. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007). In most cases the Vulgate MSS agree, whereas Birago’s translation differs. In the few cases of textual variety Birago’s translation follows no particular version of the text. For the Latin Bible used by humanist scholars, see above, footnote 11.

45 Apart from the example that Birago gives in the preface: Genesis 1:2.

46 We find this rendering not only in Birago’s translation, but also in other Latin translations of the *Hexaemeron*, which are mentioned below, footnote 48.
While Birago anticipated that his critics would object to changes he had made to Jerome’s translation, what he really did was make a new translation from the Greek, which in some cases diverged enough from Jerome’s translation to be conspicuous. His intention was not to correct Jerome’s text, and the lexical choices and variant readings we find in his translation are not necessarily the ones he believed to be the most accurate.

Birago’s method of retranslating biblical passages directly from the Greek is not unique among the translators of the Church Fathers. Basil’s Hexaemeron was translated into Latin multiple times. Next to Birago’s translation, there are Latin translations by Johannes Argyropulos (c.1415–86), Joachim Périon (Perionius, d. 1559), and Victorinus Striegel (1524–69).

While Birago anticipated that his critics would object to changes he had made to Jerome’s translation, what he really did was make a new translation from the Greek, which in some cases diverged enough from Jerome’s translation to be conspicuous. His intention was not to correct Jerome’s text, and the lexical choices and variant readings we find in his translation are not necessarily the ones he believed to be the most accurate.

Birago’s method of retranslating biblical passages directly from the Greek is not unique among the translators of the Church Fathers. Basil’s Hexaemeron was translated into Latin multiple times. Next to Birago’s translation, there are Latin translations by Johannes Argyropulos (c.1415–86), Joachim Périon (Perionius, d. 1559), and Victorinus Striegel (1524–69). There is also a

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47 In other words, he did not mean to improve upon the Vulgate, as has been suggested before: ‘In the preface to Pope Paul II for his translation of St. Basil’s Hexaemeron, Lampugnino Birago defended his right to provide, where needed, and improvement upon the Vulgate version of biblical passages quoted by Basil’. Monfasani, ‘Criticism of Biblical Humanists’, 20.

48 For the humanist reception of Basil, see Iréna Backus, Lectures humanistes de Basile de Césaré. Traductions latines (1439–1618) (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 1990); for the Hexaemeron, see pp. 83–8, where Backus discusses the various Latin translations.

49 Argyropulos’ translation was dedicated to Sixtus IV, but no manuscript of this version survives. I consulted it in a printed edition, Hexameron Magni Basilij per Ioannem Argyropolum et greco in latinum convertsum, Rome, Apud Iacobum Mazochium, 1515.

50 Joachimus, D. Basilii Archiepiscopi Caesariensis in Cappadocia orationes in Hexaemeron, Ioachimo Perionio Benedictino Carmoeriaceno interprete, Paris, Apud Nicolaum de Guinguant, 1552.

51 Basilii de Operibus sex diem tabulam humaniae quodam interprete Victorino Strigelio (Leipzig: Andreas Richter, 1566).
late medieval translation by Burgundio of Pisa (ca. 1110–94). A comparison of these Latin translations shows that in none of these cases were biblical passages copied directly from the common Latin translation, even if the renderings are sometimes very similar.

Interestingly, the practice of retranslating biblical passages from the Greek does not depend on the translator’s general translation method. Burgundio of Pisa, who as a rule translated word for word, retranslated biblical passages, just like the humanist translators who embraced ad sensum translation. Furthermore, the practice of retranslating biblical quotations – as opposed to copying them from an edition of the Latin Bible – did not end with the emergence of print. We find the same pattern in the translations by Péron and Striegel, which were made in the sixteenth century, when print was well established and translators and readers had access to Bibles with extensive cross-references and indexing. Furthermore, these translations were made after 1546, when the Roman Catholic Church declared the Vulgate translation to be the only acceptable version for use. Although these translations often follow the Vulgate for biblical quotations, they still contain a considerable number of retranslations. Evidently, for these translators, the authority or special status of Jerome’s translation was not too strong to rule out varying its wording.

IV. GEORGE OF TREBIZOND

Although Birago’s method was not exceptional, there are cases where translators did not retranslate biblical quotes but copied the existing Latin translation. A striking example of this is our second case study: George of Trebizond, one of the most prolific translators of the fifteenth century. George made twenty Greek–Latin translations, including six translations of patristic texts. Unlike Birago, George did not discuss the treatment of embedded biblical quotations specifically. He never entered into this problem in the prefaces to his patristic translations, nor did he discuss it in any of his other writings, as far as I have been able to ascertain. However, we do have some very telling specimens of George’s views on correct translation and on scriptural authority.

52 It is not certain that this translation was made by Burgundio, but since there is a thirteenth-century copy of this translation, it must have predated the humanist movement. I consulted this translation in BAV, MS Urb. lat.61, fols. 5r–34r.
53 Backus comments on Burgundio’s translation method: Lectures humanists, 83–4. Péron’s and Striegel’s translations are very free. Ibidem, 87–8.
54 I have checked this for Homily I, 1–3.
55 For George of Trebizond and his translations, see especially Monfasani, George of Trebizond; see also Monfasani, Collectanea Trapezuntiana: Texts, Documents, and Bibliographies of George of Trebizond (Binghamton (NY): Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1984).
56 These figures are based on Monfasani’s Collectanea Trapezuntiana, 698–754.
First, George did not embrace the ideal of *ad sensum* translation as enthusiastically as many other humanists. For more technical texts in philosophy and theology, he recommended a more literal approach. He did this mainly for rhetorical reasons, while attacking the translations of Theodore Gaza, but he also expressed this view in less polemical writings.57

Second, and more importantly, George commented on the dangers of changing the Latin Bible. One of his most explicit comments on this topic is this passage:

[N]on sunt labefactanda fundamenta, non removendi fines, non quassandi termini, qui a patribus nostris iacti, constituti firmatique sunt. Unus apex aut unus iota si remotum ex evangelio fuerit, facile data licentia cetera diripientur. […] Minimum aliquid ex evangelio remotum parva primum, deinde paulatim serpent ens maxima secum trahet. […] Quas ob res nihil, o patres, removendum, nihil addendum, nihil mutandum in evangelio Christi catholicis est. (George of Trebizond, *Adversus Theodorum Gazam*, 35, 2)58

[We must not weaken the foundations, remove the boundaries, or tamper with the limits that were laid down, established and fixed by our Fathers. If one apex or one iota were to be removed from the Gospel, everything else will be torn to pieces once this licence is granted. Once the smallest element is removed from the Gospel, the serpent 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].

He made similar comments elsewhere.59 Note that George, who was himself of Byzantine origin, is writing here about changing the Bible in Latin. This is apparent from the context: George is writing these comments in a text about a problematic passage in the Latin Bible.60

Based on these comments, it is tempting to group George with the anonymous *theologi* referred to by Birago in his preface, those who would object to making any changes to Jerome’s translation. However, George himself quoted the Bible with considerable freedom in his own patristic translations. For example, in his translation of Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica*, the biblical quotations do not follow the Latin Bible at all, but are retranslated from the

57 George commented on translation method especially in his attacks on Gaza’s translation of Aristotle’s *Problemata*; see footnote 58 below. For George’s ideas on translation, see also Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 153–4 and Cornelia Linde, ‘Translating Aristotle in Fifteenth-Century Italy: George of Trebizond and Leonardo Bruni’, in A. Ossa-Richardson and M. Meserve (eds.), *Et Amicorum: Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy in Honour of Jill Kraye* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 47–68.

58 This text, *Adversus Theodorum Gazam in perversionem Problematum Aristotelis*, is printed in Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion*, Vol. 3, 274–342. The passage referred to is on page 330. Note that George does not mention the translator explicitly: he writes about changing the Gospel (*Evangelium*), which can refer both to the (Latin) text, and to its meaning. He uses *Evangelium* in this sense repeatedly elsewhere in the same text.

59 E.g. further on in the same text; Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion*, Vol. 3, 336–7.

60 See below, footnote 66.
As a translator, George did not apparently feel that it was a problem to change the Latin Bible when he was rendering biblical passages.

George’s translation method as regards biblical passages is not altogether consistent, however. The clearest illustration of this is another patristic translation he made, that of Cyril’s commentary on John. George made this translation for Pope Nicholas V in the late 1440s. I will discuss this translation at some length, both because it provides an interesting contrast with Birago’s translation and because it throws some new light on a debate in which George participated. I should point out first that the Greek source text follows John’s Gospel line by line, alternating the scriptural passages with short sections of commentary. In George’s translation, this structure is clearly reflected in the layout. The verses from the Gospel of John are set apart and written in red ink in the dedication copy, while in George’s own copy they are underlined.

When translating these passages from John’s Gospel, George followed the earlier Latin translation word for word, with only occasional, and very slight, variations. However, particular scriptural passages in Cyril’s commentary appear in the commentary text itself to illustrate or support the Church Father’s interpretation. In George’s translation, these are not set apart or signalled by the layout of the text in any way, and George translates these passages from the Greek together with the rest of Cyril’s text. A similar method was followed by Cristoforo Persona in his translation of Theophylactus’ commentary on the Pauline epistles. There also, the commentary follows the order of the scriptural text, alternating biblical passages with commentary. In the translation, the biblical quotations are set apart and written in red ink, and the translation follows Jerome’s translation verbatim, as a survey of the first chapters of Romans shows. Biblical quotations embedded in the commentary text, however, are rendered freely.

These two examples show that not all humanist patristic translations treat biblical quotations the same way – perhaps unsurprisingly as, in these two cases in particular, the source texts had a different structure and purpose than Basil’s Hexaemeron. But the case of George’s translation is worth our notice for another reason: since George did follow Jerome’s translation as a rule, the changes he made become significant. There is one reading in particular I want to focus on here, because it was the subject of a polemic between George

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61 On this translation, see Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 72–3, and *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, 721–6. I consulted it in BAV, MS Vat.lat.228, fols. 3r–228v. George’s translation method in the *Praeparatio evangelica* is very free. Monfasani edits the preface: *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, 291–3.

62 For this translation, see Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 72–3, and *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, 715–7. Monfasani edits George’s preface: *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, 293–8.

63 The dedication copy is BAV, MS Vat.lat.528; George’s own copy, with corrections in his handwriting, is MS Vat.lat.525.

64 These biblical quotations correspond verbatim with the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate.

65 BAV, MS Vat.lat.263. Persona himself ascribed this commentary to Athanasius. The translation was dedicated to Pope Sixtus IV.
and Cardinal Bessarion (1403–72). The dispute turned on John 21:22, where the apostle Peter asks a question about the fate of the Evangelist. In response to this question, Christ answers in the Greek:

Ἐὰν αὐτὸν θέλω μένειν ἕως ἔρχομαι, τί πρὸς σέ;
If I want him to remain till I come, what is it to thee?

In the Latin Bible, this becomes:

Sic eum uolo manere donec veniam, quid ad te?
So I will have him to remain till I come, what is it to thee? (Douay-Rheims Bible)

This translation, where *sic* is a rather free rendering of the Greek conditional ἐὰν, is common in the Latin tradition. George’s opponent in the dispute, Cardinal Bessarion, argued that *sic* [yes] is a corruption in the Latin text which originally must have read *si* [if], a more accurate rendering. George, on the other hand, argued that *sic* was not a corruption, but the authentic reading of Jerome’s Gospel: although not perhaps a literal translation of the Greek, it was a correct interpretation – and as it happened, the interpretation that informed George’s own eschatology. Both George and Bessarion wrote multiple texts on this issue, dating from the 1450s and 1460s.

George’s translation of Cyril’s commentary on John includes John 21:22, as well as Cyril’s interpretation of it. The Greek commentator’s understanding of the verse clashes with George’s view: the commentary clearly understands the Greek to mean ‘if’ rather than ‘yes’. It does not allow for an ambiguous reading of the verse:

Τοῦτ᾽ ἔστιν· Ἀκήκοας, ὦ Πέτρε, τὰ κατὰ σαυτὸν, τί σοι τὰ ἑτέρων φιλοπευστεῖν, καὶ τῶν θείων κριμάτων ἀνορύττειν ὡσπερ οὐκ ἐν καιρῷ τὴν εἴδησιν; Εἰ γὰρ καὶ μηδόλως τελευτῇ, φησὶν, ἃρα τί τοῦτο τὴν σὴν φροντίδα παραμυθήσεται; (Cyril, Commentary on John, Book XII)

Id est: audisti, o Petre, que ad te pertinent; cur aliena queris, cur divine iustitie secreta rimaris? Nam *si etiam vellem minime istum mori*, quid tu unquam emolumenti aut quid consolationi consequeris? (George’s Latin translation, emphasis mine)

That is: you have heard, Peter, the things that concern you. Why do you ask about someone else’s fate? Why do you uncover the hidden things of divine justice? For even *if I would not want him to die at all*, what benefit or comfort would you pursue?

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66 For this dispute, see Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 90–102.
67 Ibid., 97–102.
68 *Patrologia Graeca* 74, 754.
69 MS Vat.lat.525, fol. 248r.
In his translation, George was therefore forced to change the Latin *sic* to *si* – exactly the change that Bessarion proposed and that George himself so vocally rejected. We find this reading in the dedication copy for Pope Nicholas V, as well as in George’s own autograph copy.\(^70\)

This raises a number of questions. George’s first writing on the topic dates from around 1450.\(^71\) It is possible that George had not yet made up his mind about this textual problem when he translated Cyril in 1448 or 1449. However, if we take his own word for it, he had already been teaching on this passage in Venice and Florence, well before coming to the Vatican in the late 1440s.\(^72\) In any case, he must have been aware that Cyril’s interpretation was at odds with his own reading of the verse, since he points this out himself in one of his attacks on Bessarion’s interpretation.\(^73\) If George wrote *si* here against his own view on the matter, it is surprising that he does not justify this in the preface to Nicholas V by using the argument we find in Birago’s and also Tiphernas’ preface: that he was forced to change the familiar Latin reading to make it compatible with the Greek author’s interpretation.

What makes the problem even more puzzling is that there is at least one manuscript of George’s Cyril translation that reads *sic* both in the quoted scriptural passage, which is written in red ink, and in the commentary text.\(^74\) I think it is likely that this manuscript was copied at the court of Alfonso at Naples, where George moved after he was banished from the Vatican court in 1452, at a time when he had become more and more explicit in his views on the passage.

In this particular case, then, the translator’s treatment of biblical passages can be used as a source to reconstruct his view on a textual problem or on the right way to approach Scripture; but George’s example also illustrates that it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions. In what follows, I further explore the possibilities of using biblical quotations to study humanist biblical scholarship.

V. QUOTING THE BIBLE: HUMANIST TRANSLATION AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM

The cases of Birago and George of Trebizond show that humanist translators of patristic texts could treat embedded biblical quotations in roughly two ways. Either they translated the quotations directly from the Greek, together with the rest of the source text; or they treated them as separate and copied them from Jerome’s translation. These two approaches offer different opportunities for research on the textual history of the Bible. In the case of a humanist translator following Jerome’s translation, as in the case of George’s translation

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\(^70\) MS Vat.lat.528, fol. 138r; MS Vat.lat.525, fol. 248r.

\(^71\) Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 91.

\(^72\) He writes about this in a letter to Bessarion in 1469. See *ibid.*, 91, n. 99.

\(^73\) In the *Protectio* against Gaza. For the passage, see Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion*, Vol. 3, 334–5.

\(^74\) Barcelona, Biblioteca Central, MS 555, fol. 208v.
of the Cyril commentary, one could reconstruct the Latin Bible that these humanists had access to: something that is not possible for the translations where biblical quotations are retranslated. Neither category of translations, however, can serve as examples of textual criticism: the translators, limited as they were to the context of the commentary, could not adopt the biblical readings that they believed were authoritative. George’s translation of Cyril shows this most clearly, and the manuscript that has his preferred reading is the exception that proves the rule.

In all cases, however, these translations reflect underlying assumptions about translation and quoting, and in this respect they add to our understanding of quoting practices in the Early Modern period. If quotations from the Bible – a text we may assume was easily available to both translators and readers – could be treated with so much freedom, the same freedom is likely to have been used with embedded quotations in general. If a translator chose to retranslate quotations from a third text rather than copying them from an existing translation of that text, it does not follow that the existing translation was unavailable, or that the translator had reasons to ignore it.75

A more complicated question is what the treatment of biblical quotations can tell us about humanist attitudes to changing the Bible in particular, as opposed to other texts. As pointed out above, the treatment of biblical quotations does not depend on the author’s translation principles or overall method.76 It may be tempting to understand the treatment of biblical quotations as part of humanist translation practice, and to class retranslating them with ad sensum translation, but we see the same method in the late medieval case of Burgundio of Pisa, and in the case of George of Trebizond we see multiple approaches. The practice of retranslating biblical quotations can therefore not be understood as typical for Renaissance humanism. Yet it does indicate several things about the use of Scripture at the time.

First, it indicates that we need to distinguish between establishing the text of the Latin Bible – either by criticizing the existing translation or by offering a new one – and quoting the Bible in Latin, which appears to have been an entirely different matter. In the latter case, Renaissance authors and readers may not have understood the biblical quotations as biblical text in the first place. This would mean that for them, it would have been possible to quote the Bible freely even if the biblical text was otherwise considered to be sacred, authoritative, and untouchable.

Second, it matters how a translation was used. In the cases of George’s translation of Cyril’s commentary and Persona’s translation of Theophylactus’ commentary, it is likely that readers were using the translation as an

75 Cf. ‘[I]n the De beryllio of 1458, Cusanus still quoted the Parmenides from the medieval version of Proclus’ commentary, which is hard to explain if Cusanus had a translation of the Parmenides [by George of Trebizond] since about 1451’. Monfasani, George of Trebizond, 167.

76 See above, Section III.
instrument to interpret the Bible, meaning that the biblical text was their point of departure; in other cases, the patristic text itself would be primary. The case of the _Hexaemeron_ is particularly interesting because, as it follows the text of Genesis quite closely, it would be easy for readers to compare the scriptural passages to the common Latin translation. Yet apparently in this case that was no reason for translators to follow that translation _verbatim_. The various functions of humanist translations are an underexplored topic, and the treatment of embedded quotations may be one way to study them. 77

A further distinction is that between quoting in a translation and quoting in other texts. It seems that rephrasing biblical quotations was acceptable in the context of a translation, but that in other texts, quotations from Scripture were read as if lifted directly from the biblical text. Humanists used embedded quotations in Latin texts to settle text-critical problems, a practice that would only work if they believed these passages to be quoted _verbatim_. Ever since Antiquity, the works of Jerome in particular had been mined for biblical quotations, because he was widely believed to be the translator of the Latin Bible. Therefore, when quotations in his own works did not correspond to his own translation, this attracted attention. 78

Finally, we need to keep in mind that probably not all fifteenth-century authors and readers would agree on this topic. When Birago refers to what his critics, the theologians, might say, we do not know how much of his remark is rhetoric and how much was anticipating real criticism. However, that he felt the need to explain his method indicates that some of his readers probably would have wondered why he ‘changed Jerome’s version’.

VI. IN CONCLUSION

In this article, I have used a specific practice as a source for the study of humanist biblical criticism: the practice of translating biblical quotations as part of a patristic text. My two case studies, Lampugnino Birago and George of Trebizond, were both active as translators; both reflected on their translation method; and both commented particularly on translation issues in connection with Scripture. As my analysis has shown, they held different views on translation, even more so on the question of scriptural authority; yet these views cannot be applied straightforwardly to how their rendering of biblical passages in their patristic translations.

What we can conclude is that for Renaissance translators (and for their readers), there was a difference between establishing the biblical text and quoting it; that there was a difference between biblical passages that appeared in line-by-line commentaries, and passages that appeared in other patristic writings; and that there was a difference between reading a quoted passage in

77  A categorization was suggested by Botley, _Latin Translation_, 164–77.
78  See e.g. Linde, _How to correct_, 85–6.
translation and reading a quoted passage in an original text. In other words, ‘changing Jerome’s translation’ was less problematic in some cases than in others.

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Abstract

The fifteenth-century Italian humanists applied their ideas on translation and textual scholarship not only to classical texts, but also to Scripture. One problem they encountered was the rendering of biblical passages in their patristic translations. The Church Fathers had occasionally based their exegesis on variant readings or interpretations that clashed with ‘Jerome’s translation’, the Latin translation in common use in the fifteenth century and traditionally ascribed to Jerome. When the patristic source text demanded it, changing Jerome’s translation was therefore surely justified – but perhaps it was justified in other cases too. This article analyses how humanist translators treated biblical quotations in patristic texts, focusing on the Latin translations of Basil’s *Hexaemeron* by Lampugnino Birago (1390–1472) and Cyril’s *Commentary on John* by George of Trebizond (1396–1472/3), and explores what their practice can tell us about humanist approaches to translation and the biblical text.