The *Lectio* Principle:
Its Significance in Assessing the Viability of a Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavad Gita

"If there are any general tendencies to be observed in determined variation, they may be subsumed under the lectio difficilior principle: that scribes will usually prefer the familiar words, the easy concept, the regular metrics, and will therefore often reject both neologism and archaic words, strikingly original expressions and nonce-words."

Greetham[1]

In this paper, I delve into the methodologies employed by scholars such as Otto Schrader, Krishna Belvalkar, Franklin Edgerton, and Vishwa Adluri to substantiate the potential existence of a Kashmiri recension of the Bhagavad Gita through the application of the lectio principle. The lectio *difficilior*, or "harder reading," posits that a more complex and challenging reading in a text is likely to be the older and superior one, as scribes tend to simplify intricate passages into more straightforward forms, known as the lectio *facilior*, in later versions of a text. The lectio principle prominently shapes the discourse of these scholars regarding the plausibility of a Kashmiri recension of the Bhagavad Gita.

However, the lectio principle introduces a quandary as scholars may employ it selectively to bolster their text interpretations, potentially sidelining alternative, more credible interpretations. While Adluri does draw attention to the use of the lectio principle by other scholars in their arguments concerning the plausibility of a Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavad Gita, he too employs the lectio principle to support his viewpoints, primarily in contrast to Schrader's perspective. Hence, applying the lectio principle

[1] Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 282

becomes problematic due to its inherently subjective nature, leaving the question of which interpretation is definitively and objectively more plausible unanswered.

In the subsequent sections, I will provide an overview of the findings and objections put forth by Schrader, Belvalkar, Edgerton, and Adluri concerning the plausibility of a Kashmir recension of the Gita. It is important to note that within the scope of this concise paper, my aim is not to engage in a definitive argument over who is correct or incorrect in their interpretations. As someone lacking formal training in philology, I do not possess the qualifications for such an endeavor. Instead, I intend to illuminate the inherent subjectivity inherent in the application of the lectio principle when scholars endeavor to objectively assess or disprove the existence of different versions of a text, in this particular case, the Bhagavad Gita and, more specifically, its Kashmir recension.

Ever since Otto Schrader first introduced the notion, several scholars have raised objections to his interpretation regarding the plausibility of a Kashmiri recension of the Bhagavad Gita, hereafter referred to as "K." Schrader's argument centers around the claim that Abhinavagupta's Saiva version of the Gita diverges from Sankara's Vulgate version, henceforth denoted as "V." This discrepancy, according to Schrader, raises questions about the existence of various recensions of the Gita, particularly one hailing from Kashmir, the place of Abhinavagupta's origin. In his paper for Contributions to Indian Philology and History of Religion, Schrader recounts his discovery while studying Abhinavagupta's *Bhagavadgitaarthasamgraha*. To his astonishment, he found that this text is not based on the standard Indian version (vulgate) but on a peculiar Kashmirian recension.[2] It is

[2] Schrader, *The Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavadgita*, 1

essential to note that Schrader, at this point, interprets his findings as indicative of the existence of alternative Gita recensions. This realization leads him to contemplate whether these recensions are "*difficilior*" (more challenging) or "*facilior*" (more straightforward).

Subsequently, Schrader identifies Ramakantha's Sarvatobhadra and a single Sarada-script birch-bark manuscript as possible sources for a plausible version of "K." Besides, Schrader's research prompts him to argue that "K" likely fell into disuse in Kashmir, with its demise occurring around the 14th century, possibly due to the encroachment of the Vulgate into the region.[3] He posits that this transition occurred "owing to the intrusion of the vulgate into Kashmir." In his Contributions paper, Schrader meticulously presents variant readings that a plausible "K" might contain in contrast to "V." He then proceeds to compare these variant readings with the commentaries of Abhinavagupta, Ramakantha, and the textual evidence from the Sarada-script birch-bark manuscript.

Primarily, Schrader posits that the influence of the Vulgate, to some extent, vitiates all three sources.[4] He argues that this influence becomes especially conspicuous in the Sarada-script birch-bark manuscript due to two verses, 2.66-67, absent in both commentaries. Moreover, Schrader highlights that the 1750 manuscript for Ramakantha's commentary is written in the Kashmir Devanagari script but exhibits "traces of being copied from a Sarada original."[5] As for Abhinavagupta's commentary, Schrader claims it originates from two "Devanagari"[6] manuscripts from Jaipur Pandit and Deccan College.[7] It

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[3] *Kashmir*, 2
[4] *Kashmir*, 2
[5] *Kashmir*, 3
[6] *Kashmir*, 4
[7] *Kashmir*, 4

is worth noting that other commentators have interpreted these two Devanagari manuscripts as representing natisuddham and prayah suddham commentaries.

To support his assertion that, by the end of the 10th century, Kashmiri Brahmins were unaware of the existence of "V" (the Vulgate text), Schrader places Ramakantha and Abhinavagupta's writings in the latter half of the 10th century and the last quarter of the 10th century into the first quarter of the subsequent century. Schrader contends that both these commentators must have been entirely unaware of the Vulgate text of the Bhagavadgita[8] - otherwise, they would not have "failed to adopt or at least mention some of the better readings of the Vulgate."[9]

Applying the lectio principle to the variant readings uncovered in "K," Schrader discerns a noteworthy distinction. In the Vulgate version, 14.24 reads "*samaduhkhasukhah svasthah*," while in "K," a somewhat perplexing "*samaduhkhasukhasvapnah*"[10] emerges. This striking difference prompts Schrader to suggest that, since the Vulgate presents a more straightforward reading than "K," it hints at the potential antiquity of "K" relative to "V." This inference further strengthens his belief that "V" might not have been known in the context of "K" during that period. As a supplementary note, Schrader contends that, to the best of available knowledge, there is no reference to Sankara or his work in Abhinavagupta's writings.[11] He posits that this absence of reference can be attributed to the historical context in Kashmir, which, as an ancient Buddhist-friendly locale, did not hold Sankara in high regard as an original thinker.

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[8] *Kashmir*, 7
[9] *Kashmir*, 8
[10] *Kashmir*, 8
[11] *Kashmir*, 8

Following a brief introduction to his three primary sources, Schrader presents his interpretive analysis regarding the plausibility of "K." His initial impression is that "K" represents both "a somewhat enlarged and corrected version of V,"[12] evident from its inclusion of fourteen complete stanzas and four half stanzas not found in "V." This observation introduces a potential conundrum for Schrader because, if "K" is indeed enlarged, it would likely contain the lectio difficilior. In contrast, if it is corrected, it might contain the lectio facilior. Nevertheless, Schrader concludes that "K" postdates "V" because empirical evidence in the realm of Indian philology has established the rule that, when comparing two recensions of the same work, the longer one is more often than not the later one.[13]

Furthermore, Schrader interprets that "not one of the additional stanzas is unmistakably an interpolation," and some of the additional content in "K" might have been part of the original Gita.[14] Consequently, he posits that certain extra verses in "K" likely belong to the original Gita but were omitted in "V." At this juncture, Schrader is contending with three distinct texts: the original Gita, "V," and "K." Schrader further observes that two stanzas from "V," precisely 2.66-67, are absent in "K," despite their content not being "such as to be passed over."[15] This leads Schrader to interpret that these verses do not likely belong "in the original Gita."[16]

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[12] *Kashmir*, 9
[13] *Kashmir*, 9
[14] *Kashmir*, 10
[15] *Kashmir*, 11
[16] *Kashmir* 11

Subsequently, Schrader identifies three primary categories of variants within "K." In the first category, he contends that there exist a small number of readings that are seemingly corruptions of V.[17] This class includes examples such as the plural forms in 1.28 and 2.43, verse 2.5 except the term "*arthakamas*," the repetition of the word "karma" in 2.51, and the phrase "*yat tasyapi*" in 2.60, which he suggests might be considered the original reading, viewing it as constituting a protasis. Other instances in this first category include 3.27, 5.5, 9.24, and 17.6. Moving to the second category, Schrader asserts that there is a substantial number of readings that appear to be grammatical or stylistic emendations of V. Examples include the term "*varteya*" in 3.23, which replaces the unorthodox "*varteyam*,"[18] along with instances in 5.24, 9.14, 10.16, 10.19, 10.24, 11.41, 11.48, 11.54, and 18.8. Regarding the third category, Schrader identifies a somewhat numerous class of readings that appear to be original readings of the Gita preserved in K but corrupted in V.[19] Notable instances here include 2.5, where "*api*" is omitted after "*arthakaman*" in the Vulgate, 2.11 with the reading in "K" ("*prajnavan nabhibhasase*") deemed natural and unobjectionable, and similarly in 6.7, where the "K" reading ("*paratmasu sama matih*") requires little explanation.[20]

Schrader also notes several other variants that he considers less significant, including 1.7, 3.2, 5.21, 18.8, 6.17, 6.16, 8.18, 11.8, 11.40, 11.44, 13.4, 17.3, 18.50, and 18.78. Additionally, he identifies a range of verses such as 1.7, 2.5, 6, 10, 12, 21, 35, 3-2, 23, 31, 38, 4.18, 5.21, 28, 37, 10.42, 11.43, 16.3, 8, 19, 17.13, and 26 as original

[17] *Kashmir*, 11
[18] *Kashmir*, 12
[19] *Kashmir*, 12
[20] *Kashmir*, 16

readings of the Gita preserved in "K" but corrupted in "V." Consequently, Schrader's use of the lectio principle, in conjunction with his preferred interpretations of these verses, forms the basis of his argument for the plausibility of "K."

In his introduction to the Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita with the Jnanakarmasamuccaya Commentary of Ananda, Belvalkar discusses some of the interpretive challenges he identifies within Schrader's perspective. Belvalkar elucidates that the text of the Gita upon which his commentary is based is what is commonly referred to as the Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavadgita, a version Professor F. Otto Schrader has asserted not only possesses intrinsic superiority but also claims authenticity and precedence over the Vulgate.[21]

Belvalkar proceeds to utilize the lectio principle as a tool to counter Schrader's viewpoint, which posits that the Vulgate ("V") was unknown in Kashmir by the time of Abhinavagupta, thus casting doubt on the plausibility of the Kashmir Recension ("K"). In this context, Belvalkar argues that Ramakantha and Bhaskara, who preceded Abhinavagupta, made "unmistakable citations from the Sankarabhasya."[22] He interprets this to imply that Abhinavagupta's senior, Ramakantha, had access to the teachings of Sankara. While Belvalkar does provide an excerpt from Ramakantha's commentary, which he believes could be a citation from Sankara's text, he acknowledges that different scholars applying the lectio principle may interpret it differently, potentially raising doubts about its connection to the Sankarabhasya. However, Belvalkar maintains his argument by emphasizing the disparaging way in which Bhaskara refers to Sankara; it strongly suggests

[21] Belvalkar, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita*, 15
[22] *Gita*, 16

that Bhaskara, whom Belvalkar identifies as the same author of the Bhasya on the Brahmasutras, quoted from Sankara's bhasya.[23]

According to Belvalkar's perspective, he considers it reasonable to deduce that when Abhinavagupta references a figure known as Bhatta Bhaskara, scholars have generally dated Bhaskara to around 950 AD, and Abhinavagupta's works are placed within the time frame of 990-1015 AD.[24] Consequently, it is plausible to interpret that when Abhinavagupta quotes Bhatta Bhaskara, he cites Bhaskara as an earlier authoritative commentator on the Bhagavadgita. Belvalkar's interpretation contends that Bhaskara, who he believes quoted from Sankara's bhasya, was not unknown in Kashmir during Abhinavagupta's era, contradicting Schrader's assertion.

While Belvalkar acknowledges that some scholars have identified this Bhaskara as a Kashmirian Bhaskara, he argues against introducing additional complexities into the equation.[25] Without a detailed explanation, Belvalkar concludes that this Bhaskara holds a senior position relative to Abhinavagupta. In summary, Belvalkar's perspective challenges Schrader's contention that Sankara's bhasya was unfamiliar in Kashmir during Abhinavagupta's time, based on his interpretation of Abhinavagupta's references to Bhaskara and the chronological positioning of these scholars.

Furthermore, Belvalkar presents a counter-argument to Schrader's assertion that "K" is inherently superior to "V" because it preserves more original readings. Schrader arrived at this conclusion by applying the lectio principle to his three sources. Belvalkar, however,

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[23] *Gita*, 17
[24] *Gita*, 17
[25] *Gita*, 18

contends that there are "a number of passages where the Kashmirian reading aims to regularize the grammar."[26] As illustrations, he cites instances such as व्रजेच्च instead of व्रजेत in 2.24, यत् तस्योपि instead of यततः in 2.60, एतं मे संशयं in place of एतन् in 6.39, and ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतः instead of मतम् in 6.18. Belvalkar further contends that Sankara's grammatically incorrect readings are likely authentic according to accepted principles of textual criticism.[27] He does acknowledge that, in a few instances, his use of the lectio principle works against some of Sankara's readings, providing examples like □त्यशतः for □त्यश्रतः and □तिजागरतः for जाग्रतः in 6.16.

In specific passages, Belvalkar observes that "K" seeks to enhance the syntax found in "V." For instance, in 5.21, it changes यत् सुखं to यः सुखम् and modifies संप्रेक्ष्य into the present participle संपश्यन् to match धारयन् and □नवलोकयन् in the same verse. However, Belvalkar notes that while "K" attempts to improve the sense in "V" in some passages, it often fails. Examples include सत्समक्षं for तत् समक्षं in 2.42, which he argues against because "the word तत् [would have] nothing to which it [could] refer."[28] Moreover, in Belvalkar's perspective, he argues that the Kashmirian reading appears "singularly inappropriate" because the intended meaning of the verse is "in the presence of other people," in contrast to the interpretation presented by "K," which reads "in the presence of good people."[29]

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[26] *Gita*, 18
[27] *Gita*, 19
[28] *Gita*, 21
[29] *Gita*, 21

Additionally, he critiques "K's" reading of प्रवर्ते ऽय च कर्मणि instead of वर्त एव च कर्मणि in 3.32. While this reading may initially improve the sense in "V," it contradicts "the well-expressed sense" of Sankara's reading.[30] In conclusion, Belvalkar contends that his interpretation of the variant readings in "K" at least complicates Schrader's argument regarding the intrinsic superiority of "K" over "V."

Next, Belvalkar addresses the issue of the additional stanzas found in "K," a matter that Schrader interpreted as potentially belonging to the original Gita. Belvalkar elucidates that the fourteen complete stanzas and four half stanzas have been presented as evidence supporting the authenticity of "K," as they compensate for the shortfall in the current Gita text of 700 stanzas when compared to the 745 stanzas mentioned in certain Mahabharata manuscripts.[31] However, Belvalkar notes that while some scholars entertain the plausibility of "K," partially rectifying the numerical deficiency, he firmly asserts that the extra stanzas cannot be considered authentic components of the Mahabharata.[32]

He posits that these additional stanzas arise from a misinterpretation of different understandings of the Gitamana verse, which relates to "the extent of the Gita," as cited earlier in this discussion. Belvalkar charges that resolving the dilemma of the extra 45 stanzas is essentially an effort to explain the circumstances under which specific additional stanzas might have been inserted into a few copies of the Mahabharata,

[30] *Gita*, 20
[31] *Gita*, 21
[32] *Gita*, 23

primarily from Kashmir.[33] Consequently, he maintains that this issue, which should not exist in the first place, cannot be resolved by merely discovering 45 extra stanzas in "K."

Belvalkar, therefore, concludes by offering a perspective that does not fully endorse Schrader's interpretation of a distinct Kashmir version of the Bhagavad Gita. In his own words, he acknowledges that “while it is legitimate to speak of a Kashmirian recension,” it is also equally legitimate to consider the existence of, for instance, a “Ramanujiya recension of the poem.”[34] Belvalkar argues that "K" exists due to the strong Saiva tradition of commentaries in Kashmir, where the commentary of the Gita becomes unquestionably accepted by nearly all subsequent writers once the head of a religious sect comments on a particular version of such a text.[35] From his viewpoint, Schrader's interpretation regarding the plausibility of "K" lacks validity. Belvalkar contends that even Schrader concedes that "K" does not contribute significantly new compared to "V."

It is worth a moment to delve into Belvalkar's resolution concerning the additional stanzas in "K" as he connects it to the Gitaprasasti, Gitamana, and Gitasara. In his work titled "The Bhagavadgita Riddle Unriddled," Belvalkar offers an interpretation that explains the 45 extra stanzas mentioned in the Gitamana verse without resorting to Schrader's theory regarding the plausibility of "K." Regarding the Gitaprasasti lines located at the beginning of the Bhismaparvan, Belvalkar contends that, based on the evidence from numerous manuscripts, more than 50 of which have been examined at the B.O.R. Institute, these lines ought to be regarded as a relatively recent interpolation.[36]

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[33] *Gita*, 23
[34] *Gita*, 26
[35] *Gita*, 26
[36] Belvalkar, *The Bhagavadgita Riddle Unriddled*, 337

Furthermore, Belvalkar references various versions of the Gitasara, a work akin to the Gita as the Harivamsha is to the Mahabharata. This is significant to Belvalkar because he intends to apply the lectio principle to add and remove lines from different interlocutors within the Gita. This manipulation aims to align the verses with the extent of the Gita as articulated in the Gitamana verse, thereby challenging Schrader's approach to resolving the issue by linking it to "K."

In Belvalkar's interpretation, he posits that the Gitaprasasti lines, currently present in the Vulgate, were not originally a standalone entity; instead, they formed part of a more extensive work known as Gitasara.[37] The Gitasara, in his view, represents an endeavor to encapsulate concisely the essence of the Gita.[38] Through repeated application of the lectio principle to the text of "V" in a manner that aligns it with the Gitamana and the Gitasara, Belvalkar's conclusion can be encapsulated as follows:

> "I propose to invoke here the aid of another principle already generally recognized. It is well known that a stanza in the Epic (the Anustubh as well as the Tristubh) occasionally consists of 6 padas, particularly where the padas convey one homogeneous sense. Accordingly, I propose to give to Samjaya the following four six-pada Anustubhs: 1.20 + 1.21ab, 1.21cd + 1.22, 1.26 + 1.27ab, and 1.29cd + 1.30. The sense is not repugnant to this procedure. On similar grounds Arjuna can be assigned the following two six-pada Anustubhs: 10.13 + 10.14ab, and 10.14cd + 10.15, and the following two six-pada Tristubhs: 11.36 + 11.37ab, and 11.39cd + 10.40. For the still obdurate excess of

[37] *Riddle*, 341
[38] *Riddle*, 341

> two stanzas in Arjuna's total, I may be permitted to evoke the aid of the Garbe-Otto-Schrader expedient of dropping 8.1-2… I have thus, I believe, fully accounted for the intrusion of the Gitaprasasti lines at the commencement of the 43rd chapter of the Bhismaparvan in the Vulgate edition, and explained how the Gitamana of 745 could have been arrived at, with an exact correspondence as regards the sub-totals for the different interlocutors…"[39]

In summary, Belvalkar's distinctive application of the lectio principle to unravel the enigma of the Gita leads him to reject Schrader's assertion regarding the viability of "K" and its potential implications for Gita's textual history.

Another critical review of Schrader's work comes from Franklin Edgerton. In his review, Edgerton notes that, traditionally, it has been believed that the Gita has been transmitted to us in a single recension. Thanks to Schrader's research, it becomes apparent that over a thousand years ago, a version of the renowned poem existed in Kashmir that differed from the Vulgate.[40] While Edgerton appears to sympathize with Schrader's notion that there might be variant readings and recensions of the Gita, he ultimately concludes that none of Schrader's arguments in favor of "K" over "V" are "conclusive."[41] Edgerton provides an example of what he believes to be Schrader's misapplication of the lectio principle. He points out that in "V," there is the line "*asocyan anvasocas tvam prajnavadans ca bhasase*" in 2.11, which naturally implies that Arjuna's words are not wise. However, the Kashmirian text, according to Edgerton, has Krishna saying, "*asocyan*

[39] *Riddle*, 346-347
[40] Edgerton, *Review*, 69
[41] *Review*, 70

anusocans tvam prajnavan nabhibasase," which aligns more with the idea that Arjuna presumes to speak wisely despite mourning those who should not be mourned.[42]

Edgerton contends that this reading favoring "K" may seem more natural and straightforward but disagrees with Schrader's interpretation that it represents what the original Gita would have said. He explains that many scholars have grappled with the text, feeling that it should convey the opposite of what it appears to say,[43] and the actual meaning could be that Arjuna is foolishly uttering speeches about wisdom while mourning those who should not be mourned.[44] Ultimately, Edgerton concludes that Schrader's attempt to establish the superiority of "K" is unsuccessful,[45] as even Sukthankar's supposedly Kashmiri version of the Mahabharata contains the "V" text of the Gita, not "K."

Up to this point, I have provided summaries of how each scholar employed the lectio principle, a fundamental tool of textual criticism, to support their respective interpretations regarding the plausibility of "K." Now, I shift the focus to a more recent analysis of the issue, which holds significance because Adluri, in his argument against Schrader and support of Belvalkar, acknowledges and adopts Belvalkar's subjective interpretation as a counter to Schrader's. Adluri asserts that this interpretation should be subjected to an objective evaluation to test the plausibility of "K."

In his article titled "Who's Zoomin' Who?" Adluri draws a connection between the lectio principle and his well-known critique of the Protestant biases in German Indology. He asserts that pursuing "K" reflects these scholars' unwavering confidence in identifying

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[42] *Review*, 70
[43] *Review*, 71
[44] *Review*, 71
[45] *Review*, 75

an original version of the Gita. Adluri then prompts us to contemplate what the existence of such a recension might reveal about the textual history of the Bhagavadgita.[46] In this context, he aligns himself with Belvalkar's interpretation, highlighting that the differences between K and V are insignificant.[47] He cites Belvalkar, who argues that the variations found in Schrader's three sources do not warrant the assumption of an independent Kashmiri tradition that significantly diverges from Sankara's text.[48] Adluri ultimately contends that even if we were to grant the plausibility of "K" as a distinct recension of the Gita, it should not inherently possess more authenticity or priority than "V."

Despite Adluri's alignment with Belvalkar over Schrader, he also employs the lectio principle to counter Schrader's interpretation. He does so by comparing Schrader's assessment of variant readings with those made by the editor of the Poona Critical Edition of the Mahabharata. Adluri initiates this process by acknowledging the inherent challenges of the lectio principle. He notes that it is often open to dispute, as opinions may diverge on which reading would have seemed more evident to a scribe. Determining the most likely reading often boils down to weighing probabilities.[49] Adluri then contends that Schrader's use of the lectio principle in the context of 2.11 led him to reject Edgerton's interpretation, which favored "V's" "*asocyan anusocas tvam prajnavadams ca bhasase*" over "K's" "*asocyan anusocams tvam prajnavan nabhibhasase*."

According to Adluri, Schrader could not concede the necessity of adhering to "V's" reading because it was supposedly the lectio difficilior, a reading often based on mere text

[46] Adluri, *Who's Zoomin' Who*, 2
[47] *Who*, 9
[48] *Who*, 9
[49] *Who*, 11

corruption.[50] Adluri then proceeds to argue that this is an example of how scholars might utilize the lectio principle to support their preference for one variant without acknowledging the subjectivity inherent in applying it. In doing so, Adluri appears to expect that his application of the lectio principle in the context of the plausibility of "K" should supersede others. However, as demonstrated earlier, the issue with the lectio principle is that scholars may employ it to validate their interpretations of a text, even though alternative interpretations of the exact text may be more plausible.

Hence, it becomes evident that the lectio principle allows scholars to substantiate their conclusions by selectively highlighting textual evidence that aligns with their preconceived theses. As previously discussed, while specific interpretations put forth by these scholars may indeed appear more plausible than others, the inherently subjective nature of this principle introduces an element of ambiguity when striving for an objective determination of correctness. As Michael Witzel astutely observed, scholars often discover justifications for their viewpoints, implying a degree of subjectivity in their interpretations.[51] This raises the profound question of whether, amidst the myriad of subjective applications of the lectio principle, it is possible to objectively identify the original form of a text if such an original even exists.

[50] *Who*, 11-12
[51] Private conversation.

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