The Lectio Principle and Its Relation To the Plausibility of a Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavad Gita

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The *Lectio* Principle and Its Relation

To the Plausibility of a Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavad Gita

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षट्शतानि सविंशानि श्लोकानां प्रह केशवः |

अर्जुनः सप्तपञ्चाशत् सप्तषष्टिस्तु संजयः |

धृतराष्ट्रः श्लोकमेकं गीताया मानमुच्यते ||

गीतामानश्लोकः
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> *"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."*

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Greetham[1]
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In this paper, I explore how Otto Schrader, Krishna Belvalkar, Franklin Edgerton, and Vishwa Adluri justify the plausibility of a Kashmir recension of the Gita by employing the *lectio* principle. *Lectio difficilior* means that the more difficult reading is probably the better and older one since scribes may often simplify the difficult reading into a simple one, the *lectio facilior*, for the later versions of a text. The employment of the *lectio* principle then pervades these scholars' discussions about the plausibility of a Kashmiri recension of the Bhagavad Gita. However, the problem with the *lectio* principle is that scholars may employ it to justify their interpretations of a text, although some other interpretations of the exact text may be more plausible. While Adluri calls attention to the employment of the *lectio* principle by the other scholars regarding the plausibility of a Kashmir Recension of the Bhagavad Gita, he employs the *lectio*

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[1] Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 282

principle himself to justify his opinions which are mainly against Schrader. The use of

the *lectio* principle is thus problematic because of its subjective nature that leaves open

the question of what interpretation is definitely, and objectively, more plausible.

In what follows, then, I will summarize the findings and objections of Schrader,

Belvalkar, Edgerton, and Adluri concerning the plausibility of a Kashmir recension of

the Gita. In this short paper, however, it is not my intention to argue who is right and

who is wrong. I am not a trained philologist and thus not qualified to the task. My

intention is just to show the subjective problems attached to the use of the *lectio*

principle when scholars try objectively to find or discredit the idea of versions of a text,

in this case, the Bhagavad Gita and, specifically, its Kashmir recension.

Since Otto Schrader initially presented it, several scholars have contested his

interpretation for the plausibility of a Kashmiri recension of the Bhagavad Gita

(hereafter, K). Schrader claims that Abhinavagupta's Saiva version of the Gita differs

from that of the Sankara's Vulgate (hereafter, V). Schrader finds in this discrepancy

reasons to wonder whether there are different recensions of the Gita – especially a

Kashmir one since that is wherefrom Abhinavagupta comes. Thus, in his paper for

Contributions to Indian Philology and History of Religion, Schrader describes that when he

was studying Abhinavagupta's *Bhagavadgitaarthasamgraha*, he "found to [his] surprise

that [it] is not based on the common Indian version (vulgate)… but on a peculiar

Kashmirian recension…"[2] Note that Schrader already interprets his finding to mean the

existence of other recensions of the Gita and that, in turn, leads him to wonder whether

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

such recensions are *difficilior* or *facilior*. Schrader then finds Ramakantha's

Sarvatobhadra and a single Sarada-script birch-bark MS for a plausible K. Furthermore,

his finding also leads him to argue that K must have fallen into disuse in Kashmir since

the Poona Critical Edition of the Mahabharata follows the Gita text according to V. He

posits that may have happened around the 14th century, "owing to the intrusion of the

vulgate into Kashmir."[3] In his paper for the *Contributions,* Schrader presents variant

readings of what a plausible K contains in contrast to V and contrasts the variant

readings with the commentaries of Abhinavagupta, Ramakantha, and the text of the

Sarada-script birch-bark MS.

Mainly, Schrader interprets that "the influence of the Vulgate to some extent

vitiates all the three sources."[4] Specifically, he argues that such is especially evident in

the Sarada-script birch-bark MS because it contains two verses present in neither of the

commentaries: 2.66-67. He further relates that the 1750 MS for Ramakantha's

commentary is in Kashmir Devanagari script though it shows "traces of being copied

from a Sarada original."[5] About Abhinavagupta's commentary, Schrader claims that it

stems from two "Devanagari"[6] MSSs obtained "from a Jaipur pandit and the Deccan

College resp."[7] Schrader notes that other commentators have interpreted these two

Devanagari MSSs to be *natisuddham* and *prayah suddham* commentaries, respectively. To

confirm his interpretation that, by the end of the 10th century, Kashmir brahmins did

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[3] Schrader, 2
[4] Schrader, 2
[5] Schrader, 3
[6] Schrader, 4
[7] Schrader, 4

not know of the existence of V, Schrader places Ramakantha and Abhinavagupta as writing, respectively, in the latter half of the 10th century, and the last quarter of the 10th century into the first quarter of the next. Schrader then claims that both "must have been completely ignorant of what is now the Vulgate text of the Bhagavadgita"[8] because both commentators could not have otherwise "failed to adopt or at least mention some of the better readings of the Vulgate."[9]

Applying the *lectio* principle, to the variant readings he has found in K, Schrader interprets that whereas the Vulgate reads *samaduhkhasukhah svasthah* in 14.24, "the nonsensical"[10] *samaduhkhasukhasvapnah* appears in K. Thus, because V has a more straightforward reading than K, Schrader hints that K is older than V. This further suggests to him confirms that V may not have been known in K at that time. As a footnote, Schrader further claims that there is, "so far as known,"[11] no reference to Sankara or his work in Abhinavagupta's works because Kashmir, being an ancient Buddhist-friendly site, did not regard Sankara as an original thinker.

After briefly remarking on his three sources, Schrader presents his interpretive analysis for the plausibility of K. His first impression is that K is both "a somewhat enlarged and corrected version of V"[12] since it contains fourteen complete and four half stanzas extra to V. Although this could prove to be problematic for Schrader because, if enlarged, K likely contains the *lectio difficilior* while, if it is corrected, K likely contains

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[8] Schrader, 7
[9] Schrader, 8
[10] Schrader, 8
[11] Schrader, 8
[12] Schrader, 9

the *lectio facilior*, Schrader concludes that K is later to V because "experience in the field of Indian philology has yielded the rule that of two recensions of the same work the longer one is more often than not also the later one."[13] Furthermore, Schrader interprets that "not one of the additional stanzas is unmistakably an interpolation" and that "some at least of the additional matter… may have been in the original Gita."[14] Thus, Schrader reasons that some of the extra verses in K belong to an original Gita and that they have been preserved in K but are absent in V. Schrader is now dealing with three different texts: an original Gita, V, and K. Because he notes that two stanzas of V are missing in K, 2.66-67, even though they are not "such as to be passed over,"[15] Schrader interprets that they do not belong "in the original Gita."[16]

Next, Schrader claims there are three main sets of variants in K. In the first set, he claims that "there are… a small number of readings which are apparently but corruptions of V."[17] He claims this class contains the plurals in 1.28 and 2.43, the verse 2.5 except for the word *arthakamas*, the word *karma* in 2.51 which, he interprets, is repeated twice in error, and in 2.60, *yat tasyapi* which "might be looked at as the original reading" since he interprets it as making the verse a protasis. Other first-class examples include 3.27, 5.5, 9.24, and 17.6. In the second set, he claims that "there is a large number of readings… which look like grammatical or stylistic emendations of V." This class contains the word *varteya* in 3.23 "for the unclassical *varteyam*,"[18] in addition to

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[13] Schrader, 9
[14] Schrader, 10
[15] Schrader, 11
[16] Schrader 11
[17] Schrader, 11
[18] Schrader, 12

examples in 5.24, 9.14, 10.16, 19, 10.24, 11.41, 11.48,54, and 18.8. About the third set, he

claims there are "the rather numerous class of readings which appear to be original

readings of the Gita preserved in K but corrupted in V."[19] As examples, he mentions 2.5,

which "in the vulgate the word *api* is missed here after *arthakaman*," 2.11, in which "the

reading of K (*prajnavan nabhibhasase*) is quite natural and unobjectionable," and

similarly in 6.7, "the reading of K (*paratmasu sama matih*)… hardly requires any

explanation at all."[20] He has found many other variants which he interprets as being

less significant: 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,

18.78. In addition, he interprets 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 to be other original readings of the Gita preserved

in K but corrupted in V. Thus, based on his preferred interpretations of these verses

according to his employment of the *lectio* principle, Schrader has established his reasons

for the plausibility of K.

　　Meanwhile, in his introduction to the *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita with the*

Jnanakarmasamuccaya Commentary of Ananda, Belvalkar discusses some of the

interpretive problems he finds with Schrader. Belvalkar relates that "the Gita text on

which [his commentary] comments is the so-called Kashmir Recension of the

Bhagavadgita, for which Professor F. Otto Schrader has claimed not only intrinsic

superiority but even authenticity and priority to the [Vulgate]."[21] Belvalkar will then

employ the *lectio* principle to argue against Schrader's view that V was unknown in K

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[19] Schrader, 12
[20] Schrader, 16
[21] Belvalkar, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita*, 15

by the time of Abhinavagupta and even against the plausibility of K. Thus, Belvalkar

argues that both Ramakantha and Bhaskara, predecessors to Abhinavagupta, gave

"unmistakable citations from the Sankarabhasya."[22] Belvalkar interprets that because

Abhinavagupta was a student of one Laksmana who, in turn, was a student of one

Utpala, who was a teacher of Ramakantha, that the latter was then senior to

Abhinavagupta! Although Belvalkar presents an extract from Ramakantha's

commentary that he interprets as likely a citation from Sankara's text, he recognizes that

other scholars, applying the *lectio* principle differently, may doubt whether it refers to

the Sankarabhasya. Belvalkar argues, nonetheless, that "from the disparaging way in

which [Bhaskara] refers to [Sankara]… there can be little doubt that Bhaskara [whom

Belvalkar interprets to be]… the same author of the Bhasya on the Brahmasutras"[23] has

quoted from Sankara's bhasya.

 In Belvalkar's view, because scholars have assigned Bhaskara to around 950 and

claim that Abhinavagupta's works are from "dates 990-1 and 1015-1015 a.d.,"[24] it is

reasonable to interpret that when Abhinavagupta quotes a Bhatta Bhaskara, that he is

then quoting Bhaskara as an earlier authoritative commentator on the Bhagavadgita.

Since Belvalkar interprets that Bhaskara has cited from Sankara's bhasya, V was then

not unknown in Kashmir, as Schrader has claimed. Though Belvalkar claims that other

scholars have regarded this Bhaskara as a Kashmirian Bhaskara, Belvalkar simply

reasons that "it is unnecessary to multiply entities in this fashion."[25] Without explaining

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[22] Belvalkar, 16
[23] Belvalkar, 17
[24] Belvalkar, 17
[25] Belvalkar, 18

what he means, he concludes that this Bhaskara is senior to Abhinavagupta. Thus, Schrader's contention that Sankara's bhasya was unknown in Kashmir in the days of Abhinavagupta does not hold in Belvalkar's interpretation.

Furthermore, Belvalkar argues against Schrader's view that K is intrinsically superior to V because it retains more original readings – a conclusion at which Schrader arrived by employing the *lectio* principle to the three sources he had. According to Belvalkar, there are "a number of passages where the Kashmirian reading seeks to regularize the grammar."[26] As examples, he cites व्रजेच्च for व्रजेत in 2.24; यत् तस्योपि for यततः in 2.60; एतं मे संशयं for एतन् in 6.39; and ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतः for मतम् in 6.18. Furthermore, Belvalkar claims that "according to the accepted canons of textual criticism,"[27] Sankara's grammatically incorrect reading is likely to be authentic. Belvalkar acknowledges, however, that, in a few instances, his employment of the *lectio* principle works against some of Sankara's readings. As examples, he gives अत्यशतः for अत्यश्रतः and अतिजागरतः for जाग्रतः in 6.16. In some other passages, Belvalkar notes that K seeks to improve the syntax in V, for example, in 5.21, यत् सुखं changed to यः सुखम्, and संप्रेक्ष्य changed into the present participle संपश्यन् to agree with धारयन् and अनवलोकयन् in the same verse. In some other passages, Belvalkar notes that while K tries to improve the sense in V, it often fails to do so. As examples, he cites सत्समक्षं for तत्

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[26] Belvalkar, 18
[27] Belvalkar, 19

समक्षं in 2.42 and argues against it because "the word तत् [would have] nothing to which it [could] refer."[28] Besides, according to Belvalkar, "the Kashmirian reading… is singularly inappropriate" for what is required to understand the verse is "in the presence of other people" and not K's "in the presence of good people."[29] Likewise, he argues against प्रवर्ते ऽय च कर्मणि for वर्ते एव च कर्मणि in 3.32 because while it "would appear at first sight to be an improvement in [V] sense," this reading goes against "the well expressed [sense] Sankara's reading."[30] Belvalkar concludes this section of his work by claiming that his interpretation of the variant readings of K at least complicates Schrader's interpretation of the intrinsic superiority of K over V.

Next, Belvalkar tackles the problem of the extra stanzas of K, which Schrader interpreted as perhaps belonging to an original Gita. Belvalkar explains that the fourteen complete and four half stanzas are hailed forth "as an indication of the authenticity of [K], because the current Gita text of 700 stanzas falls short of the 745 stanzas which, according to a statement found in some Mahabharata Mss., the Gita once had."[31] Though he additionally relates that some scholars accept the plausibility of K as partially making up for the number deficiency, he nevertheless maintains that "the [extra] stanzas cannot be regarded as an authentic part of the Mahabharata."[32] Belvalkar interprets that the extra stanzas involve a misunderstanding involving different interpretations of the Gitamana verse in which "the extent of the Gita," as quoted at the

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[28] Belvalkar, 21
[29] Belvalkar, 21
[30] Belvalkar, 20
[31] Belvalkar, 21
[32] Belvalkar, 23

top of this paper, is related. Belvalkar charges that "the attempt to solve [the problem of the extra 45 stanzas] is an attempt merely to explain under what circumstance the specific additional stanzas might have been inserted into a few copies of the Mahabharata, mostly hailing from Kashmir"[33] and thus do not attest to any authenticity on the part of the text of K. Belvalkar claims that this issue, which should not even exist, cannot be solved by the mere finding of 45 extra stanzas in K.

Belvalkar thus concludes by not entirely accepting Schrader's interpretation for a distinctive Kashmir version of the Bhagavad Gita. In his own words, while "it is legitimate to speak of a Kashmirian recension…," it is also legitimate to speak, say, of a "Ramanujiya recension of the poem."[34] Belvalkar reasons that K exists because of a solid Saiva tradition of commentaries in Kashmir whose commentary of the Gita "comes to be accepted unquestioned by almost all the subsequent writers"[35] once the head of a religious sect comments on a version of such a text. In his view, Schrader's interpretation for the plausibility of K does not hold. Belvalkar claims that even Schrader admits that K adds nothing significant to V.

It is worthwhile, however, to dwell briefly on Belvalkar's solving of the problem of the extra stanzas in K as he relates it to the Gitaprasasti, Gitamana, and Gitasara. In his "The Bhagavadgita Riddle Unriddled," Belvalkar interprets that the 45 extra stanzas the Gitamana verse claims as the extent of the Gita may be explained without recourse to Schrader's plausibility of K. Addressing the Gitaprasasti lines found at the beginning

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[33] Belvalkar, 23
[34] Belvalkar, 26
[35] Belvalkar, 26

of the Bhismaparvan, Belvalkar claims that "on the evidence of the Mss. of which more than 50 have been collated at the B.O.R. Institute, [the Gitaprasasti lines]… have to be treated as a late interpolation…"[36] Furthermore, Belvalkar mentions different versions of the Gitasara which is a work that is to the Gita what the Harivamsha is to the Mahabharata. This is important for Belvalkar because he will apply the *lectio* principle to add to and subtract from lines of different interlocutors in the Gita to agree with the extent of the Gita as expressed by the Gitamana verse arguing against Schrader's solving of the problem by relating it to K.

Thus, Belvalkar interprets that "the Gitaprasasti lines as we have them now in the Vulgate did not originally stand by themselves. They came towards the end of a more extensive work called Gitasara."[37] The Gitasara, in turn, is the result of "the desire for a short, trenchant summing up of the 'quintessence' of the [Gita]."[38] By repeatedly applying the *lectio* principle to the text of V so that it conforms to the Gitamana and the Gitasara, it is crucial to quote Belvalkar's conclusion fully here:

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

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[36] Belvalkar, *The Bhagavadgita Riddle Unriddled*, 337
[37] Belvalkar, *Riddle*, 341
[38] Belvalkar, *Riddle*, 341

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 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 sum, because Belvalkar applies a different *lectio* principle to the Riddle of the Gita, he ultimately denies Schrader's claim of the plausibility of K and what it may mean to the history of the text of the Gita.

Another review of Schrader's work is that of Franklin Edgerton. In his review, Edgerton mentions that though "it has always been supposed that the Gita... has been handed down to us in only a single recension," thanks to Schrader, "we learn that at least a thousand years ago there existed in Kashmir a recension of the famous poem which differed from the Vulgate."[40] Though he seems sympathetic to Schrader's interpretation that there may be variant readings and recensions of the Gita because, Edgerton ultimately concludes that none of Schrader's reasons for preferring K over V are "conclusive."[41] As an example of Schrader's misplaced application of the *lectio* principle, Edgerton claims that although V has *asocyan anvasocas tvam prajnavadans ca*

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

bhasase in 2.11, "we naturally expect the statement that Arjuna's words are *not* wise. And this is precisely what the Kashmirian text makes Krishna say: *asocyan anusocans tvam prajnavan nabhibasase*."[42] Even though Edgerton interprets this reading as a more natural and straightforward reading in favor of K, he disagrees with Schrader's interpretation that this reading is what an original of the Gita would have read because although scholars have "felt, as so many have felt since his day and feel even in ours, that the text ought to say the opposite of what it seems to say,"[43] the proper meaning may simply be that Arjuna presumes to "utter speeches concerning wisdom… although [he is] so foolish as to mourn those who should not be mourned."[44] Thus, he concludes that Schrader's "attempt to prove the superiority of K is a failure"[45] since even Sukthankar's supposedly Kashmiri version of the Mahabharata contains the V text of the Gita, not K's.

So far, I have presented summaries of how each scholar has used the lectio principle, a tool of textual criticism, to justify their interpretation for or against the plausibility of K. I now turn to a recent analysis of the matter, which is vital because as Adluri argues against Schrader and in favor of Belvalkar, he is accepting Belvalkar's subjective interpretation against Schrader's while claiming that it should objectively put the plausibility of K to test.

Thus, in his "Who's Zoomin' Who?" article, Adluri relates the *lectio* principle to his well-known criticism of the Protestant biases of German Indologists. Adluri claims

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[42] Edgerton, 70
[43] Edgerton, 71
[44] Edgerton, 71
[45] Edgerton, 75

that the quest for K attests to these "scholars' [unbounded] confidence in being able to identify" an original of the Gita. Adluri then wonders "what might the existence of such a recension reveal about the textual history of the Bhagavadgita?"[46] He sides with Belvalkar's interpretation in that "as can be seen, the differences [between K and V] are not very significant."[47] He quotes Belvalkar in that "the variants in Schrader's three sources did not justify the assumption of an independent Kashmiri tradition, significantly different from the text of Sankara."[48] He finally argues that, even if granted, the plausibility of K as a distinct recension of the Gita should have no more authenticity and priority than V.

Notwithstanding his siding with Belvalkar over Schrader, Adluri himself employs the *lectio* principle to work against Schrader's interpretation. He does so by comparing Schrader's interpretation of variant readings with those made by the editor of the Poona Critical Edition of the Mahabharata. He starts by acknowledging the difficulties with working with the l*ectio* principle: "[It] is often subject to challenge… opinion will differ upon which reading will have appeared more obvious to a scribe… determining often comes down to a matter of weighing the probabilities..."[49] Adluri then charges that Schrader's employment of the *lectio* principle in 2.11 led him to reject Edgerton's interpretation for preferring V's *asocyan anusocas tvam prajnavadams ca bhasase* over K's *asocyan anusocams tvam prajnavan nabhibhasase*. In Adluri's view, Schrader could not "concede the necessity of holding on to the reading of V… [for that

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

reading] is supposedly the *lectio difficilior*… [which] is often based on a mere corruption of the text…"[50] Adluri next charges that such is an example of how scholars may employ the *lectio* principle to justify one's thesis for preferring one variant over the other, but he fails to realize that the subjective nature of the employment of the *lectio* principle may apply to his own interpretation. Mistakenly, Adluri unwarrantedly expects that his application of the *lectio* principle over the plausibility of K should hold over the others. As we have seen, however, the problem with the *lectio* principle is that scholars may employ it to justify their interpretations of a text, although some other interpretations of the exact text may be more plausible.

Therefore, one can see how the *lectio* principle enables scholars to justify their conclusions by cherry-picking textual evidence that confirms their predetermined theses. As mentioned before, even though some of these scholars' interpretations may be more plausible than others, the very subjective nature of the principle allows for confusion in objectively ascertaining who is right and who is wrong. Though Michael Witzel recently noted that although scholars "always find justification for something… the principle is a good indicator,"[51] can a text's original ever be objectively found, if any, from among so many subjective applications of the *lectio* principle?

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[50] Adluri, 11-12
[51] Private conversation.

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