

**The Unruly Text: Scribal Authority, Scriptural Fragmentation, and
Hermeneutical Crisis in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners***

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Paper Received on 29-07-2026, Accepted on 30-08-2026
Published on 31-08-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.08.574

Abstract:

This paper presents John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) as a paradigmatic case study of early modern hermeneutical anxiety, arguing that the stages of Bunyan's spiritual autobiography function as scripture—both an authoritative and unstable phenomenon, simultaneously salvific and threatening. By examining Bunyan's obsessive scriptural activities, including his desperate attempts to recover lost passages, his absorption of biblical phrases as intrusive mental intrusions, and his distress at apparent contradictions within his narrative, I establish how sola scriptura ideology among Protestants induced a characteristic crisis of interpretation. The situation wherein salvation is solely based on the proper reading of the Bible and lacks ecclesiastical authority to ensure correct interpretation generates various voices attacking the reader's psyche. The story of Bunyan demonstrates scripture not as something constant, but as a battlefield in which verses fasten themselves into minds uninvited, are misremembered over a lifetime, and simultaneously serve as a source of grace and damnation. Such hermeneutical instability, I maintain, is precisely the process of Bunyan's spiritual formation—his subjectivity is manifested through his struggle with the unruliness of scripture. This article contributes to the literature on religious subjectivity during the early modern period, exploring material textuality and the psychological impacts of Reformation hermeneutics.

Keywords: Hermeneutical crisis, Scriptural fragmentation, Scribal authority, modern subjectivity, Reformation hermeneutics, Spiritual autobiography

Introduction:

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666) by John Bunyan does not begin with certainty regarding doctrine, but with a visceral fear. For months, the apostle's warning about Esau "he found no place of repentance, though he sought it

carefully with tears" (Heb. 12.17) functioned as "fetters of brass" binding Bunyan's spiritual limbs, a verse that "would be sounding in mine ears" with unrelenting force (Bunyan 112). This immediate experience was not a foundation upon which scripture could be confidently believed, but rather an unmanageable text: both redeeming and dangerous, yet also authoritative and disruptive. Grace Abounding is written, not only of the spiritual struggle of Bunyan, but also of an in-depth hermeneutical crisis in which Protestant sola scripture ideology- stripped of its ecclesiastical mediation- created a psychological disintegration by disintegration of scripture. Where salvation was absolutely at stake over the correct biblical interpretation, verses lost their contexts and attacked the reader's psyche as weaponized fragments, with no institutional agent to ensure their proper understanding.

The article interprets Bunyan through an interdisciplinary synthesis of approaches, drawing on book history's examination of the material textuality of the book, cognitive literary studies' investigation of intrusive thoughts, and Reformation theology's study of authority without mediation. This approach illuminates how Bunyan's subjectivity emerges through grappling with scripture's unruliness verses that "bolt" unbidden into consciousness, misremembered passages that haunt for years, and contradictory promises that lodge in "a pair of scales within my mind" (Bunyan 148). The analysis employs a three-dimensional framework: first, scribal authority, considering Bunyan's disputed status as an unlicensed interpreter compelled to establish his own hermeneutical standards; second, scriptural fragmentation, examining the text as a discrete, invasive phenomenon rather than as a representation of a unified narrative; and third, the hermeneutical crisis, exploring the psychological effects of scripture becoming hostile and generating ontological uncertainty regarding the nature of salvation. Ultimately, Bunyan's story demonstrates that this chaotic text is not an impediment, but rather the process of conversion.

II. Scribal Authority: The Unlicensed Interpreter

The Grace Abounding of John Bunyan stages a major crisis of scribal authority inherent to the Protestant hermeneutical situation: the unauthorised scribe compelled to establish his own standards of biblical truth, unconfirmed by ecclesiastical authority. Denuded of Catholic magisterium and driven by the salvific imperative of correct scriptural interpretation, Bunyan occupies an epistemologically precarious position, wherein failure to interpret scripture accurately leads to damnation. This tension manifests most vividly in his year-long search for the verse commanding him to "look at the generations of old" to verify whether any who trusted in the Lord were confounded. When he finally locates the passage not within the canonical scriptures but in Ecclesiasticus 2:10 of the Apocrypha, Bunyan admits being "somewhat daunted" by its extra-canonical status yet immediately insists "it was of God to me" (Bunyan 102). His decision disregards the limits of any institution and instead replaces the role of spiritual efficacy in his own life with the role of text,

such that when the verse was used as divine comfort, its location mattered not. This hermeneutical manoeuvre epitomises what David Loewenstein identifies as Bunyan's "hermeneutics of suspicion" toward human mediations of divine truth a suspicion that paradoxically demands the individual assume ultimate interpretive responsibility (147).

Bunyan's authority crisis intensifies through his rejection of what he terms "notions of flesh and blood" in favor of "revelations of God in heaven" (Bunyan 135). Under the ministry of Mr. Gifford, Bunyan learns to distrust secondhand faith: "if you do otherwise, when temptations come... you will find you want that help and strength now to resist" (134). This pedagogical formation trains him to validate scriptural truth not through communal consensus or clerical endorsement, but through visceral, interior confirmation a "solid joy and peace" that accompanies genuine revelation (136). However, the standard in this instance is volatile. Bunyan is unable to discern when blasphemous thoughts assail his mind, whether they originate from Satan or his own perverted nature; when he experiences positive feelings, he can not determine whether they are the result of divine grace or self-deception. His interpretive power remains tentative and liable to withdrawal at the onset of the next spiritual attack.

This contested authority produces not coherent exegesis but what Timothy K. Beal describes as "religion's monsters"--textual instabilities that emerge when scripture is severed from institutional containment (89). Bunyan's hermeneutical practice becomes a battleground where verses detach from their contexts to operate as autonomous agents: Hebrews 12:16-17 transforms from narrative episode into "fetters of brass" binding his legs for months; the promise "My grace is sufficient" arrives as three thunderous repetitions that "were then, and sometimes are still, far bigger than others be" (Bunyan 162). Lacking ecclesiastical systems to fit these fragments back together into the unity and wholeness of a doctrine, Bunyan had to erect his own hermeneutical scaffolding--a shaky affair in which it was a matter of life and death to discern which scriptural voices represented God and which represented Satan. This impossibility of unmediated reading produces the same fragmentation with which he characterizes his spiritual experience, where verses are ripped to pieces and collide with each other, offering no assurance of resolution. The unlicensed interpreter, who must be judge and be judged by the text, does not perceive scripture as a solid ground but as a battleground on which meaning cannot be definitively determined.

III. Scriptural Fragmentation: Verses as Intrusive Phenomena

In *Grace Abounding*, the scriptures are presented not as a unified theological system, but as fragmented and weaponized sections that can exert an independent power within John Bunyan's consciousness. Stripped of the ecclesiastical mediation of *sola scriptura*, biblical verses lose their narrative contexts and become self-sufficient mediating forces--both saving and condemning. This fragmentation is

organised through three distinct phenomenological modes, shaping Bunyan's spiritual experience.

To begin, scripture assaults Bunyan's senses through auditory intrusion. Verses "bolt" unbidden into his mind with such acoustic intensity that he mistakes interior revelation for external speech. Most strikingly, Luke 22:31--"Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you"--resonates "so loud within me, yea, and as it were call so strongly after me, that once above all the rest, I turned my head over my shoulder, thinking verily that some man had, behind me, called to me" (Bunyan 122). This phenomenological failure in the divinity-human voice address reveals scripture's ability to circumvent cognitive mediation, reaching the soul with the immediacy of sound (physical). The verse is experienced not as interpreted text, but as a traumatic intrusion--an event involving sound that precedes hermeneutical processing.

Second, spatial dislocation detaches passages from their contexts, rendering them portable tools of either condemnation or comfort. Hebrews 12:16--17's warning concerning Esau becomes "fettters of brass" binding Bunyan's spiritual limbs for months--not as part of a sustained argument about apostasy, but as an isolated shard of terror operating independently of Genesis' narrative of sibling rivalry (Bunyan 157). Similarly, the promise "My grace is sufficient" arrives divorced from 2 Corinthians' discussion of Paul's thorn in the flesh, instead functioning as three thunderous repetitions that "were then, and sometimes are still, far bigger than others." These fragments freely float within Bunyan's psyche, and their semantic power is enhanced precisely by their decontextualization.

Third, scripture exhibits a temporal instability, appearing and disappearing unpredictably. Verses arrive as responsive "echoes" to Bunyan's anguished cries--"How can God comfort such a wretch as I?" This is exemplified by the sudden return of 1 John 5:16--"This sin is not unto death"--followed by an equally abrupt vanishing, leaving the individual "as if I had been raised out of a grave, " only to sink again when the word's "supportation" withdraws (Bunyan 172). This instability reflects the hermeneutical state of the Reformation, where, in the absence of magisterial authority to ensure interpretive continuity, believers tended to perceive scripture as a series of temporary visitations rather than a foundation for belief.

The material dimension of this fragmentation finds poignant expression in Bunyan's encounter with Luther's Commentary on Galatians, which he describes as "so old that it was ready to fall piece by piece if I did but turn it over" (Bunyan 144). The book's physical disintegration mirrors Bunyan's own fragmented engagement with scripture; paradoxically, Luther's commentary provides the coherence his solitary reading lacked--Bunyan finds his "condition...so largely and profoundly

handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart" (144). This instance represents a terrible irony of Reformation hermeneutics: that same material frailty, which marks a textual instability, also facilitates close identification across centuries.

Theological considerations suggest this disintegration reflects unresolved Protestant tension surrounding *sola scriptura*, which demands scripture as the sole authority for salvation yet lacks ecclesiastical structures to synthesise textual fragments into theological consistency, leaving the individual with the task of creating a coherent understanding. Bunyan's psyche becomes the contested terrain where verses splinter into competing authorities--grace versus law, promise versus threat--leaving him suspended "in a pair of scales within my mind" (Bunyan 179). Consequently, the division of Scripture does not represent a failure in reading but rather the requisite state of Reformation subjectivity: the disordered writing actively shapes the self through its inherent unmanageability.

IV. Hermeneutical Crisis: When the Text Turns Against Itself

Bunyan endures psychological torment in *Grace Abounding* not necessarily due to the sin itself, but rather because of the internal contradictions within scripture when applied to his spiritual state. The Reformation's dismantling of ecclesiastical mediation left him suspended between two irreconcilable scriptural registers: grace, promising universal sufficiency ("My grace is sufficient for thee"), and apostasy warnings threatening irrevocable exclusion ("it is impossible... to renew them again unto repentance" Heb. 6:4-6; 2 Cor. 12:9; Bunyan 178). These competing voices locked within what Bunyan terms "a pair of scales within my mind," producing ontological vertigo as he questioned "whether the scriptures could agree in the salvation of my soul?" (179). This was not the moment of anxiety, but a hermeneutical failure--the same text used to offer salvation was also used to threaten damnation. The mechanics of this crisis are expressed in Bunyan's use of the paradigm of the city of refuge in Joshua 20. Imagining himself a manslayer pursued by the "avenger of blood," he envisions the apostles as "elders of the city" who might either grant sanctuary or "deliver me up," depending on whether his sin was committed "unwittingly" (Bunyan 188-89). Yet scripture itself becomes the avenger: Hebrews 12:16-17's warning about Esau transforms into "fetters of brass" binding his spiritual limbs for months, while Hebrews 6:4-6 functions as an eternal barrier to mercy's gate. The writing is divided into conflicting groups--grace versus law, promise versus threat--and Bunyan finds himself amidst their crossfire, lacking magisterial power to adjudicate between them. His body registers this textual warfare somatically: when condemnation verses assault him, he experiences "clogging and heat at my stomach" and feels his "breastbone would have split in sunder" (193). This corpus text demonstrates how Reformation hermeneutics engendered a spiritual crisis--the instability of scripture manifesting as physical distress.

More importantly, the solution is not achieved through the logical harmonisation of conflicting passages, but through an affective rearrangement. After months of torment, Bunyan experiences "My grace is sufficient for thee" and "This sin is not unto death" (1 John 5.16) bursting into consciousness with such force that they overpower the Esau passage. He interprets this not as intellectual resolution, but as a divine verdict: "Mercy rejoiceth against judgment" (Jas. 2.13; Bunyan 182). Grace verses triumph not by explaining away apostasy warnings, but by affective supremacy--their "power, and sweetness, and light, and glory" simply overwhelming competing texts. However, this hierarchical rearrangement is only tentative; the scales swing to and fro over weeks, during which Bunyan oscillates between comfort and horror, demonstrating that *sola scriptura* brought not stable assurance but hermeneutical precarity.

This criticism challenges readings that portray Bunyan as experiencing an individual pathology. As Simpson argues, Reformation biblicism produced "hermeneutical violence," wherein the unmediated text became "an instrument of terror" precisely because it lacked institutional containment (112). The crisis Bunyan experienced was not unique but structural, an expected outcome of Protestant hermeneutics that disconnected scripture and ecclesial interpretation and simultaneously rendered proper reading salvifically required. His violent reactions were not personal neurosis, but the historical trauma resulting from textual fragmentation when scripture was read in isolation. When Bunyan finally achieved stability, it stemmed not from resolving contradictions, but through Christological recentering: "Thy righteousness is in heaven"--externalising salvation from self to Christ seated at God's right hand (Bunyan 197). Bunyan was only able to avoid the hermeneutical crisis that had almost killed him by moving the righteousness outside the battlefield of scriptural interpretation. The textual anarchy, which had undermined his self-sufficiency, ultimately led him beyond the textuality of the text to that personage of Christ.

V. The Unruly Text as Theological Necessity

The conversion narrative of Bunyan reveals the inherent dynamism of scripture, not as a hermeneutical failure, but as a theological necessity. This instability carves out the self by dismantling egoic self-sufficiency. Only a text that resists complete mastery, fragmented by conflicting voices of law and gospel, can undermine the arrogant interpreter who seeks to establish righteousness through accurate reading. The exhortations in Hebrews 12:16-17 to condemn and 2 Corinthians 12:9 to promise were not accidental suffering experienced by Bunyan, but constituted formative experiences; the text's uncontrollable nature was essential to dishabituate his reliance on interpretive competence as a means of salvation.

His salvation does not lie in the reconciliation of contradictions but in a radical abandonment of interpretive domination. When the phrase "Thy righteousness

is in heaven" suddenly seizes his soul, Bunyan experiences an ontological reorientation: "I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, is my righteousness" (Bunyan 219). This moment externalised righteousness entirely from the self to the ascended Christ "my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, the same yesterday, and today, and forever " (220). Textual fragmentation can only be resolved through Christological recentring: the disorderly text directs the soul beyond textuality to the person of Christ at the right hand of God.

This dynamic exposes a profound paradox at the heart of the Reformation: *sola scriptura* requires scripture to become "unruly" precisely to prevent idolatrous fixation on human interpretation. When the text cannot be further synthesised, the believer is no longer able to rely on exegetical success but must turn to Christ, who represents the sole and definitive coherence of salvation. Upon Bunyan's final arrival at the correct interpretation, his chains do not fall, and he no longer uses interpretation as the foundation of assurance. Therefore, the riotous text constitutes a pedagogical violence required of Protestant subjectivity—namely, deconstructing the illusion of salvation as dependent on the command of scripture, requiring the soul to cling only to the crucified and risen Christ, whose righteousness is eternally secure in heaven and, consequently, invulnerable to the vagaries of human knowledge or textual instability.

VI. Conclusion: Afterlives of the Unruly Text

Hermeneutics during the Reformation transformed scripture from a static, ecclesial authority into a fluid and destabilising force, generating subjectivity within the crisis itself, as illustrated in *Grace Abounding*. Protestant *sola scriptura*, divorced from magisterial mediation, produced a "unruly text," as John Bunyan's suffering illuminates. This text's fragmentation—including aural invasions, spatial dislocations, and temporal ruptures—constituted the mechanism through which believers were spiritually formed. Salvation would no longer depend on mastery of interpretation, but on surrender to Christological coherence, which transcended textual instability. Disjointed information ecosystems, algorithmically selected "verses" that unexpectedly emerge, and the futile pursuit of stable meaning amidst competing interpretations are all symptomatic of the modern digital age's hermeneutical dilemma. By acknowledging these challenges, Bunyan's example continues to serve as a model of faithfulness in the face of textual instability, holding tension between opposing voices until grace intervenes. "Flouncing toward the promise, as the horses do towards sound ground that yet sticks in the mire" (Bunyan 233) encapsulates the ever-changing posture of Protestant subjectivity. Through this textual quicksand, the believer finds Christ, the sole anchor amidst the storms of the wild text, and is simultaneously fully free and utterly captive. Amidst a sea of competing interpretations, what matters most is not finding a solution, but rather holding fast to the faith of one who, despite the surrounding chaos, never loses sight of the righteousness seated in heaven.

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