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Vagaries of Tendentia Exegesis as Illustrated by the Interpretation of Is. 1, 18

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fessor Mübel († 1894) hat die Frage, die uns vorliegt, fein in seinem „Umriss“ einer Pastoraltheologie zusammengefaßt: „Es ist offenbar das Richtige, daß man da, wo eine christliche Gemeinde erst ins Leben gerufen wird, also auf dem Missionsfelde, erst unterrichtet und dann tauft. Da aber, wo eine christliche Gemeinde besteht mit ihrem ganzen Einfluß auf jung und alt, soll man erst taufen und dann unterrichten. Dort wird die Taufe der Erwachsenen, hier die Kindertaufe die Regel sein; doch ist die letztere nur dann berechtigt, wenn die Gewißheit vorhanden ist, daß der christliche Unterricht folgen wird.“

Auf diesen Ausführungen, die auf der Schrift beruhen, mag sich unsere Praxis auch ferner aufbauen. Während ein Pastor nicht leicht den Standpunkt einnehmen wird, daß er die Taufe verweigert, wenn solche, die die elterliche Gewalt über ein Kind besitzen, dieses zur Taufe bringen, so wird er gleichwohl auch hier alle Vorsicht gebrauchen, daß die heilige Handlung nicht zu einer bloßen Spielerei wird. Ist irgendwelche Aussicht, daß der christliche Unterricht später folgen kann, so mag die Taufe vollzogen werden. Ist aber eine solche Annahme von vornherein völlig ausgeschlossen, so muß die Taufe jedenfalls verweigert werden, besonders wenn jede Belehrung von seiten des Dieners am Wort zurückgewiesen wird.

B. E. Kreßmann.

Vagaries of Tendential Exegesis as Illustrated by the Interpretation of Is. 1, 18.

It would be difficult to find on the pages of the entire Scriptures, even in the fulfilment of the New Testament, a passage which in point of clarity, precision, and emphasis surpasses the offer of full and free grace that is contained in the oft-quoted, much-beloved words of the prophet Isaiah: "*Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord: Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool,*" chap. 1, 18.

The very English of this promise seems to have been chosen with a peculiar fitness; for with only two exceptions the words of the second part of the verse, with which we are particularly engaged, are monosyllables; and in the entire verse only two words are not of Anglo-Saxon origin. The appeal is thus clothed in a directness and simplicity which worthily corresponds to the profound promise of a divine mercy that assures to lost and condemned sinners the full and free forgiveness of sins, that lays down no conditions and insists upon no exceptions.

This English is a faithful and idiomatic reproduction of the original. Here, without any significant manuscript variants, with-

out any essential divergences in any major or minor version, the Hebrew presents this promise of pardon with such forcefulness and directness that no suggestion of any other interpretation was advanced until the rise of anti-Scriptural scholarship.

Our attention has been focused upon this passage and the mutilating tendencies of radical interpretation by the American Bible, issued by the University of Chicago. After the separate translations of the Old Testament, directed by Dr. J. M. Powis Smith, and of the New Testament, supervised by Dr. Edgar J. Goodspeed, had been individually announced to the American press and each one singly acclaimed, both were combined, and in another extensive publicity program "the first American Bible" was offered to the American people as the embodiment and consensus of the most scientific opinion in Biblical research and interpretation, clothed in the best and most modern English. In this Chicago University Bible the direct affirmation of full forgiveness in Is. 1, 18 is changed into the skeptical query:—

If your sins be like scarlet,
Can they be white as snow?
If they be red like crimson,
Can they become as wool?

And because this is but one of a half dozen attempts to vitiate this pledge of limitless love, we offer the following synopsis of some of the exegetical vagaries that have associated themselves with this passage.

I.

The Chicago University translation, of course, is neither new nor original. A Lutheran publication speaks of the American Bible as promoted by "the progress of modern criticism of the Bible teachings and truths." But there is nothing modern in the interpretation of Is. 1, 18 as a question. Some have ascribed it to Wellhausen (so, apparently, Sir George Adams Smith, *The Book of Isaiah*, p. 13); but long before Wellhausen, Koppe, Eichhorn, Michaelis, and Augusti made the verbs in the last clause interrogative: "Shall they be white as snow?" etc. In other words, this modern American Bible contains and endorses an interpretation which was current in Germany much more than a century ago, and an interpretation which must be rejected on the basis of reasons so compelling that the perpetuation of this mistranslation in the Chicago Bible must be ascribed to tendential reasons.

In the first place, this assumption of a question is utterly arbitrary. It is well known, of course, that there are some instances in which the interrogative particles ׀ and ׀ִ are omitted, since the natural emphasis is sufficient indication of interrogation. But this is not a syntactical license which permits a plain indicative to become

an interrogative by capricious metamorphosis. In *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper* H. G. Mitchell discusses "The Omission of the Interrogative Particle" (Vol. I, p. 115 ff.) and shows that "there are comparatively few cases in which the particle is omitted from a direct and independent single question." The omission of the interrogative particle is thus not a syntactical device to which promiscuous recourse may be taken; it is rather of such relatively infrequent occurrence that there must be strong and conclusive evidence of natural emphasis and context before it may be adopted. Mitchell, *o. c.*, finds only thirty-nine instances of omitted interrogative particles in the entire Old Testament; and we might just as easily, and with corresponding inappropriateness, change the opening words of Genesis to read: "Did God create the heaven and the earth in the beginning?" as to make our passage a question.

But there is a precise and absolute denial of this interrogative theory. Burney, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 11, 433—435, has shown that the interrogative particle is essential in constructions such as that before us. He says: "No clear case occurs throughout the Old Testament in which a question is to be assumed as implied by the speaker's tone (without use of an interrogative particle) in the apodosis of a conditional or a concessive sentence." And the Chicago translation's perpetuation of Wellhausen, and Wellhausen's reproduction of earlier critics, stand condemned on the decisive basis of Hebrew syntactical usage and contextual surrounding. Even the rationalist August Knobel, *Der Prophet Jesaias*, p. 10, feels that "*mit einer solchen Eröffnung konnte der Prophet das Volk nicht zur Verhandlung einladen, was er doch tut.*"

The claims that are raised in support of the interrogative hypothesis are typical of the liberal and tendential attitude. For instance, Gray, in "The Book of Isaiah," *International Critical Commentary*, p. 29, says: "The interrogative interpretation, though grammatically questionable, would accord with prophetic teaching. . . . If the sins are really flagrant, are they to put on the appearance of mere trifling errors? The whole argument of Yahweh in vv. 18—20 then embodies the fundamental, new teaching of the prophets: That Yahweh is Israel's God does not make Him more lenient to Israel's sin (cp. Amos 3, 2); scarlet sins He will treat as scarlet, not as white (v. 18); only through obedience to Yahweh's moral demands can Yahweh's favor be gained (v. 19); disobedience must invoke disaster (v. 20)."

But the obvious answer to this labored presentation is simply this, that the verse patently does not involve any "fundamental, new teaching of the prophets," but that it simply offers a restatement of the many promises of pardon with which the pages of the Old Testa-

ment abound. Thus, the natural, the direct and inevitable interpretation, recognized in the Targums and in the Jewish Church, expressed in every significant translation, offers the only reverent and scientific explanation of the passage.

It cannot be surprising therefore that the interrogative interpretation has, at best, found only half-hearted and hesitating endorsement, like the tentative approval of Gray, above, and that it is not accepted by the vast majority of liberal interpreters to-day. But these interpreters, instead of avowing the universal interpretation of these words, have frequently offered exegetical vagaries which are likewise condemned by the process of sound exegesis.

II.

Thus, Duhm, in *Handkommentar zum Alten Testament* ("Das Buch Jesaja," p. 10), offers:—

<i>Wohlan denn und lasst uns rechten,</i>	<i>spricht Jahve:</i>
<i>Wenn eure Suenden sind wie Scharlach,</i>	<i>lasst sie wie Schnee weiss sein!</i>
<i>Wenn sie rot sind wie Purpur,</i>	<i>lasst sie wie Wolle sein!</i>

He rejects the question hypothesis and pictures the proffering of this pardon as ironical, claiming: "*Die Ironie passt vielleicht besser, da doch das Rechten nur sarkastisch gemeint sein kann und da man dann auch das בְּצַחַר, בְּשִׂלְיָי as absichtliche, naemlich spoettische Uebertreibung fassen darf, waehrend die unabsichtliche Uebertreibung eine Ungerechtigkeit enthalten und den Angriff schwaechen wuerde. Auch der Bedingungssatz passt besser zur Ironie; er stellt als moeglich hin, dass scharlachrote Suenden zum Vorschein kommen, sagt aber nicht, dass 'eure Suenden' ueberhaupt scharlachrot sind.*"

But the irony is vicious, because the picture of a tainted nation, heavy with social and religious sins, being flaunted by the sarcastic derision of a God who institutes a mock trial, tantalizes the accused with the suggestion of purification and pardon, and then ridicules the very suggestion of their release from sin,—all this is utterly alien to Isaiah's and Israel's picture of the gracious Father.

Again, there is not the slightest evidence of any ironical elements in the verse itself or in the context. If the literal meaning of a text is to be abandoned in favor of a figurative meaning, the reasons for this departure must be clear and convincing. The mere fact that a German critic, two and a half millennia after the promulgation of this promise, insists upon a figurative interpretation which no one else had recognized or acknowledged, is one of the sharpest denunciations of this claim. And the following verse, which is based upon the acceptance of God's proffered purification, dismisses this theory of sarcasm as quite out of harmony with its textual environment. Even Gray, *o. c.*, admits: "But this [Duhm's theory of irony] gives a less satisfactory connection between" vv. 18 and 19.

III.

Others, realizing that the sentence is indicative and that the offer of God is real and not ironical, have gone to other extremes in the effort to obviate the plain implications of the text. Gesenius asserts that the sins of Israel will be blotted out by divine punishment and that in this way the red sins will become white. In his *Kommentar ueber den Jesaias*, pp. 163. 164, he claims: "*Man wird sich auch hier Jehovah nicht vergebend, nicht das Volk als zu ueberzeugen suchend, sondern als strafenden Richter denken muessen, so dass Wegschaffen der blutroten Schuld in einer Vertilgung der Suenden besteht.*"

But the introductory proposal "Come and let us reason together" repudiates this; for if the passage involves merely the announcement of punishment, no consolation or forensic procedure such as that is required. Besides, the color symbolism is neither adequately appreciated nor correctly explained in the picture of sins that are whitened in destruction.

A particularly curious interpretation of this symbolism has been made by Umbreit, who explains the last clause by asserting that, however red, *i. e.*, discolored or disguised, Israel's sins may be, they are to be brought to the light and to appear in their natural guilt. In his *Praktischer Kommentar ueber den Jesaja*, Part I, p. 9, he declares: "*Denken wir bei Scharlach und Purpur nicht an die blutrote Farbe der Suenden, nach V. 16, welches ueberhaupt dem guten Geschmacke widerstrebt, sondern . . . an die staerkste Ueberfaerbung derselben, so dass sich im Gegensatz der roten Farbe zu der weissen des Schnees und der Wolle der passende Sinn ergibt: 'Wenn die Frevler ihre Schuld auch noch so sorgfaeltig verbergen und mit Scheinheiligkeit uebertuenchen, so wird dieselbe, sobald sie sich in einen Rechtsstreit mit Jehova einlassen, doch in ihrer nackten Bloesse hervortreten.'*"

Similarly, Hackmann in *Die Zukunftserwartung des Jesaia*, p. 118, asks whether the key to the interpretation is not to be found in the scarlet as a symbol of pomp and majesty and the white as the symbol of the sins that have lost their color and glamor. The sense would then be (Gray, *o. c.*, 29): "Your sins, though they may now flaunt forth in all the glory of color, will lose it and become washed out."

But these interpretations have found little critical favor because they are openly inconsistent with the Scriptural associations of red and white. Deep red, expressed by the two forceful terms "crimson" and "scarlet," is the color of extreme guilt, Rev. 17, 4, while white is the color of restored innocence, according to the natural and widely accepted presentation of Scriptures, Mark 16, 5; Rev. 3, 4; 7, 13 f.; 19, 11. 14. And any suggestion or any translation that rides ruthlessly over these accepted figures eliminates itself.

IV.

These translations, while presenting the most frequently suggested critical evasions, by no means exhaust the catalog of misinterpretations. Thus Gray, *o. c.*, offers:—

Though your sins were like scarlet (robes), they might become white like snow;

Though they were red like crimson, they might become like wool,

and claims that the argument is: "Even though the people may have committed the most flagrant sins, they may regain the highest degree of innocence," putting the whole as merely imaginary hypothesis. Cheyne similarly gives the imperfect a potential force, translating, "They may be white as snow," but palpably weakening this magnificent assurance. Moses Bittenwieser takes the inevitable recourse to emendation and changes the text, against all textual evidence and in utter disregard of the sacred prophecies.

But behind all this, directly or indirectly, is the refusal of radical scholarship to accept and believe the plain reading of a plain text that is substantiated by every aid to interpretation which we have. All arguments that have been advanced to discountenance the traditional interpretation (the assertion that "an offer of complete forgiveness is out of place in a summons to judgment"; the objection that "Isaiah nowhere so complacently offers the free forgiveness"; that this contradicts other statements of the prophet) are all easily met by sound and reverent exegesis. Once again the conviction forces itself upon the student of the text that this squirming, evasive exegesis is but the telling evidence of an inflexible desire to minimize or even to eliminate the free grace of a forgiving God. W. A. MAIER.

A Note on the First Christian Congregation at Rome.

Chapter 16 of St. Paul's letter to the Romans has been called in question by some of the higher critics. To one who realizes that Rome then was the center of Mediterranean civilization and that men (and women) incessantly came and went there for a multitude of motives, there is nothing wonderful in the preponderance of *Greek* names over Latin in that chapter. *Prisca* (Priscilla) and *Aquila* pursued there the manufacturing of tent-cloth; but they were natives of the province of Pontus. Paul himself, a Roman citizen by birth, was a native of *Tarsus*, capital of Cilicia. I will dwell a little on that town. Let us see what our best authority, Strabo, tells us. Strabo,¹⁾ a contemporary of Augustus and Tiberius, a native of Amaseia in Asia

1) See my essay on Strabo in the *American Journal of Philology*, 1923.