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Private Interpretation, 2 Pet. 1, 20

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"Private Interpretation," 2 Pet. 1, 20.

"Besides, for the curbing of quarrelsome spirits, it [i. e., the Holy Synod] has decreed that in matters of faith and morals belonging to the edification which is produced by Christian doctrine nobody, relying on his own wisdom, should twist Holy Scripture to his own understanding or contrary to that sense which the holy Mother Church has held and does hold, whose province it is to judge about the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, or again, that nobody should dare to interpret Holy Scripture itself against the unanimous consensus of the Fathers, even if interpretations of this sort have never been published before. Those who act contrariwise are to be publicly mentioned by the officials and to be punished with the penalties fixed by a judge."

Hardly any theologian has to be told that this statement is found in the *Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Sess. IV, chap. 2). What might appear disconcerting is that this strong blast against an interpretation of Scripture-passages which differs from that of the Church and the Fathers apparently has Scripture authority to rely upon. Is it not evident that St. Peter in the passage appearing at the head of this article opposes *private* interpretation of prophetic utterances contained in the Scriptures? What other meaning can one find in the Authorized Version's rendering, "knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation"?

It is a question which Johann Gerhard in his famous *Loci Theologici* courageously faces. Having quoted the statement in Greek, *πᾶσα προφητεία ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως οὐ γίνεται*, he asks, Why is this true? And he replies, "Because, according to the following verse, in old times holy men of God did not speak on the basis of their own private judgment, but by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The same Being therefore who is the Author of Scripture is its supreme and authentic Interpreter. He who lays down a law is the best and highest interpreter of the law." And he continues: "De eo autem quaeritur, quae sit ἰδία ἐπιλυσις? Unde petendum sit Spiritus Sancti in Scripturis interpretandis dictamen? Unde agnosci possit ecclesiasticos illos interpretes mentem Spiritus Sancti in Scripturis loquentis recte assequi? (*Loc. Theol.*, II, c. 1). Yes, that is an important question, What is meant here by "private interpretation"? Where do we obtain the Holy Spirit's own explanation of the old prophecies? How are we to assure ourselves that the interpreter whose exegesis is placed before us in books and sermons and catechetical instruction has laid hold of the sense which the Holy Spirit intended? Evidently Gerhard is touching on matters which are of vital concern to every Christian, especially to every Christian theologian, and we now have considerations in sufficient number to convince us that an investiga-

tion of the meaning of 2 Pet. 1, 20 does not merely belong to the category of mental gymnastics.

It is clear that Peter is speaking not of prophecy in general, but of Old Testament prophecies. The context demands that we think of them. It is clear, too, what the apostle has in mind when he speaks of ἐπίλυσις. The strange suggestion which holds that the text should be emended or altered we need not here consider; the MSS. overwhelmingly favor the reading which our editions of the New Testament present. While ἐπίλυσις occurs nowhere else in the Scripture, it must mean interpretation, or explanation. In the sense of "interpret" the verb ἐπιλύω is used Mark 4, 34 and in a number of passages in the Apostolic Fathers, etc. The view held by some, that ἐπίλυσις here signifies destruction, annihilation, cannot be entertained. If the word were κατάλυσις, we should acquiesce at once, but for ἐπίλυσις no such meaning can be demonstrated. We simply cling to the meaning "interpretation," adopted by most commentators, and with that we shall fare very well.

It has been held that St. Peter in this verse wishes to express his conviction on the origin of Old Testament prophecy, saying that no prophecy *arises* through human interpretation. We shall all agree that the sense yielded by such an explanation would be entirely in keeping with the analogy of faith, and if our only task were to find a doctrinally satisfactory interpretation of a passage, we might now write, *Finis*. But in the way of this exegesis there stands first the present tense, which makes it evident that St. Peter is not speaking of the origin of the prophecies in Old Testament times; for in that case he would have employed the past tense, either the aorist or the imperfect. One must not overlook what has been pointed to above, that the definite body of Old Testament prophecies is in the mind of Peter as he here speaks, the prophecies contained in the writings of the Old Covenant. In the second place, the view under discussion is grammatically impossible or, to put it more cautiously, very improbable. Γίνεσθαι with the genitive was not used by the Greeks to express an idea like the one in question. It is true that here we set ourselves in opposition to the late A. T. Robertson, who very vigorously championed this very interpretation and who, it will be agreed, deserves to be heard. We shall quote a paragraph of his, which, though it contains several thoughts which receive our hearty endorsement, in its main idea seems to us to be incorrect. In his book *Epochs in the Life of Simon Peter* he says (p. 303 f.), discussing our passage: "Peter says that they [the readers] know the origin and source of prophecy of Scripture in a passage (vv. 20. 21) that is usually misunderstood and misapplied by the words 'of private interpretation.' Alford rightly insists that γίνεσθαι here does not mean 'is' (ἐστίν), as it never does, in fact, in spite of what Bigg says and

despite frequent mistranslations of γίνεσθαι as being the same as εἶναι. The difference is clearly shown in the use of ἦν (was) in John 1, 1, and ἐγένετο (became) in John 1, 14, both of the Logos. As Alford insists, γίνεται here followed by the ablative case ἐπαύσεως means 'comes from, springs out of.' This is made certain by v. 21, which explains (γὰρ, for) the meaning of v. 20: 'For no prophecy was ever brought by the will of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.' That is to say, prophecy has divine, not human origin. One does not pump up a prophecy of himself. 'Ἐπαύσεως occurs only here in the New Testament, but the verb ἐπαύω, to unloose, to untie, occurs in Mark 4, 34, where it can mean that Jesus disclosed parables to the disciples, and in Acts 19, 39, where it means to decide. It is the misinterpretation of v. 20 (private interpretation) that the Roman Catholics use to prove the peril of an ordinary man reading the Scriptures without a priest who tells him what it means. But the passage is not about interpretation of prophecy, but about the source of prophecy." In his *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*² (p. 514 f.) he voices the same opinion and points as passages having a similar construction to 2 Cor. 4, 7; Acts 20, 37; and Acts 20, 3, with the admission that the last one is "probably parallel." Professor Robertson might have added that the modern Greek version of the New Testament published by the British Bible Society has this rendering, which supports his interpretation, οὐδε μία προφητεία τῆς γραφῆς γίνεται ἐξ ἰδίας τοῦ προφητεύοντος διασαφήσεως.

In spite of the weight which the authority of Robertson lends to this interpretation we have to continue our dissent. If authorities are to be cited, we have to say that Blass in his grammar (Blass-Debrunner, § 162, 7, note), Thayer and Preuschen-Bauer in their *Lexica* (s. v. γίνομαι), do not accept Robertson's view.¹ Γίνεσθαι with the genitive as a part of the predicate denotes coming into a certain sphere or arriving at the possession of some characteristic or some

1) The reader may appreciate a note embodying some other modern translations of our verse. Goodspeed: "You must understand this, in the first place, that no prophecy of Scripture can be understood through one's own powers." Moffatt: "Understanding this at the outset that no prophetic Scripture allows a man to interpret it by himself." *Twentieth Century New Testament*: "But first be assured of this: There is no prophetic teaching found in Scripture that can be interpreted by man's unaided reason." Friedrich Hauck (*Das Neue Testament Deutsch*): "Vor allem wisset das, dass keine Weissagung der Schrift eigner Auflosung (Deutung) unterliegt." Georg Hollmann and Wilhelm Bousset (*Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments neu ubersetzt und fuer die Gegenwart erklart*): "Das muesst ihr vor allem erkennen, dass Schrift-Weissagung willkuerliche Deutung nicht zulassst." It will be observed that these modern translators, while not agreed among themselves, all range themselves against Robertson's opinion.

attitude. Cf. Acts 20, 3: (Paul) came to entertain the resolution (*ἐγένετο γνώμη*).²⁾

Thayer, having stated that *γίνωμαι* with the genitive signifies "to become the property of any one, to come into the power of a person or thing," adduces our passage and interprets it thus: "No one can explain prophecy by his own mental power (it is not a matter of subjective interpretation); but to explain it, one needs the same illumination of the Holy Spirit in which it originated." What we ought to note here are the words enclosed in parentheses, for they constitute an almost perfect rendering of our sentence: Prophecy is not a matter of subjective interpretation. If Thayer had written: "Prophecy does not *become* a matter of subjective interpretation," we could not improve on his rendering. Analyzing the statement of Peter as given in this translation, one will see at once that it can be taken in two meanings, a fact which in part is responsible for the variety of translations submitted in the note above. The meaning may be: "No one has the *right* to give to a prophecy of Scripture his own interpretation," or it may be: "No one has the *ability* to interpret a prophecy of Scripture with powers of his own." Goodspeed and the *Twentieth Century New Testament* sponsor the latter sense (in which they have the endorsement of Thayer); Moffatt, Hauck, Hollmann, and Bousset the former. It is safe to say that they all would agree that the translation adopted above is correct. But just as if to demonstrate that it is difficult for anybody to translate without at the same time interpreting, they have added a word or phrase showing whether they hold Peter is speaking of ability or of authority with respect to interpretation. To decide which one of the two significations was in the mind of the apostle, the context will have to be appealed to.

In the section vv. 12—21 Peter is concerned with giving force and emphasis to the instruction with which he began the epistle and which extended to v. 11. Of the important matters which he has laid before his readers he intends to remind them while he lives,— it will not be a long time any more,— and his aim is to enable them readily to recall these admonitions and principles. His earnest endeavor in this respect is due to his conviction that what he has taught them is the absolute truth. Not fables and myths have guided him as he has spoken to them of the power and coming of Jesus Christ. He himself saw the glory of Jesus at the transfiguration, and he himself heard the voice from heaven declare the divine sonship

2) The passages on which Robertson relies, including the one just quoted, plainly do not prove his point. The only one which might with some show of justice be adduced, Acts 20, 37, on close inspection simply yields the meaning "A loud wailing of all ensued"; there is nothing to compel us to translate, "A loud wailing arose from all."

of our Lord. But there is a factor which is still more certain and firm—the prophetic Word in the Scriptures, likewise speaking of Jesus and His return. About this Word it is important to remember that it does not become a matter of private interpretation (in that case it would not be reliable); it is not a human, fallible word, but was spoken by men who uttered what the Holy Spirit made them utter. If this hasty sketch of the line of thought of Peter is correct, it shows that what he wishes to bring out in v. 20 is not our inability to interpret the Scriptures without the aid of the Spirit (a thought which is altogether correct by itself), but the lack of authority for any one to give to the Scriptures his own explanation.

There is still the word "private" to consider, for which we above accepted the rendering of Thayer, "subjective." A glance at the Greek original (ἰδίᾳ) suffices to show that private here must not be taken in the sense of "secret," "hidden from view," but "one's own," "individual." To arrive at a clear view of what is meant, we inquire, What is the antithesis? Does Peter mean to say, Not our own interpretation must be proposed, but that of somebody else, that of the Church or of a priest? The context says, no. What the apostle wishes to inculcate is the truth that the Word is firm, reliable, majestic, inviolable. There it stands in divine dignity; let no one touch it with presumptuous hands. That Word has spoken of the great matters pertaining to Jesus, His second coming and our entering into His glorious kingdom, and what it has said must not be altered or weakened by bringing in an exegesis which is foreign to the words. The Word is not a football of the interpreter, which he may kick about at will. He is the servant, not the master. Let him become humble and say, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." The antithesis, then, to one's own interpretation is the sense which the Word itself conveys to us.

Now the meaning of the passage becomes quite evident. The apostle tells us that the prophecies given in the Scriptures must not be tampered with as we approach them in the role of interpreters. The Word of these prophecies is a sacred, inspired Word, and we must treat it with reverence and not think that we may give it any meaning we desire. On the contrary, the Word is an objective entity, and in reading, interpreting, and applying it, we must not let our subjective feelings or preconceived notions be the judge of its meaning. Peter is here issuing a warning, for instance, against our turning allegorizing interpreters, who, not satisfied with the plain significance of the words, try to find some hidden meaning in them, although Scripture itself does not give a hint that an allegorical interpretation is intended. There is implied here a warning for us not to be like those people who shake and twist and maltreat a passage till finally, much against its will, it yields the meaning the self-

willed interpreters are bent on extracting from it. The apostle, to state one more implication, urges us not to be like the rationalists who, offended by the miraculous content of the Scripture, endeavor to explain all its statements and narratives in such a way that the mysterious, supernatural element disappears.

What Peter, then, frowns on is not private interpretation as opposed to ecclesiastical or official interpretation. On the contrary, every individual Christian is to read the Scriptures and to meditate on them (Ps. 1, 2), which is equivalent to saying that he is to interpret them for himself. Is it not true that whoever ponders a saying of the Scriptures and applies it to himself is thereby doing some exegetical work? No thoughtful reading of a Scripture-passage is possible without some process of interpretation, that is, some mental effort to apprehend the meaning of the words; and that, after all, is the essence of interpretation—getting at the meaning of a statement. The nine-year-old girl—blessings on her!—who proclaims with glistening eyes, "Jesus loves me, for He says, 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not,'" is a little exegete. She has gone into the divine garden and there picked a beautiful flower. What more can an old exegete, having a whole workshop filled with implements, accomplish? May interpretation of this kind ever flourish among us! But when we, instead of gathering and presenting the flowers of God's garden in their natural grace and loveliness, take a petal from a pansy and a rose and a violet and try to construct a flower of our own, then we are engaged in the mischievous business which Peter warns against. In that case we are offering our own interpretation instead of what the Scripture has entrusted to us. The people who are here given a verdict of condemnation are all those who, instead of accepting what the Bible teaches, endeavor by all manner of tricks and devices to put a meaning into the words different from the one which the Holy Spirit has placed there.

Even when we are dealing with the words of a human author, common honesty demands that we be not arbitrary and subjective in our interpretation as we set forth, and comment on, the meaning of his words. How much more should such a procedure be avoided by us when we are dealing with the Word of the great God which abideth forever! If Scripture were an enigmatic book and the prophecies were puzzles inviting us to try our ingenuity on them and the prize were given to him who is most clever in finding interesting, novel, fantastic meanings for the various passages, we should expect private, subjective, arbitrary interpretation to be declared permissible. But since the Bible is clear and the prophecies in it are not intended to furnish us material for diversion and pastime, but to be our guide, to instruct us as to the way of salvation, the

Christian can see the justice of the stand that all playing with the Word and twisting of its passages into something that suits our own fancy, all wresting and distorting of them (cf. 2 Pet. 3, 16), is improper and blasphemous. Let us, then, keeping these words of Peter in mind, interpret Scripture, but do it with reverence; let us dig deep into the strata of the Word containing precious metal, but let our concern be to bring up not what we ourselves have put into the shaft, but the gold which God has deposited there.

To revert to Johann Gerhard's questions with which we began, we have seen that, in speaking of "private interpretation," St. Peter warns against an unwarranted procedure, a course of license calling itself exegesis, but amounting to eisegesis, adding to, or subtracting from, the divine content of Scripture. The Holy Spirit's explanation of the old prophecies is found not in what the Church says about them, but in the prophecies themselves, which must be permitted to stand whether we find their message palatable or not. In determining whether those people who are interpreting the Bible for us, our pastors and teachers, do their work properly and give us the sense intended by the Holy Spirit, one criterion to employ is the question whether they faithfully adhere to what the Scripture itself says. We close with the words of St. Augustine, spoken in prayer to God and quoted by Gerhard: "*Sint castae deliciae meae Scripturae tuae, nec fallar in eis, nec fallam ex eis.*"

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