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Essays in Hermeneutics

Martin H. Franzmann
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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By M. H. FRANZMANN

II. THE CIRCLE OF HISTORY

And it came to pass in those days . . .

In the circle of language the interpreter seeks to master the language in which the Scriptures were originally written; in the circle of history he seeks to master the world in which and for which the Scriptures were originally written; he strives to envisage and to keep before himself, as concretely and as plastically as may be, the geographic, social, economic, and cultural pattern in which the original proclaimers and the first hearers lived and moved. This pattern, or complex, includes also the past of which the proclaimers and hearers were the inheritors, for by the very fact that a man is born of parents he is irrecoverably linked with the past and comes into the world with history upon him. This is especially true of the all-influential and decisive past of the Old Testament revelation of God, which was, of course, for the devout Hebrew and for the believing Church not strictly past at all, but an ever-present and continually effective actuality. When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, Micah was no dim historical figure, but a present voice; and at Pentecost the voice of Joel, in the mouth of St. Peter, was a living, and for those who would hear, a decisive tongue.

That is the circle of history in its wider sense. In the case of the New Testament proclamation, which arose in Palestine, fulfilling, not destroying, God's previous revelation of Himself to His people, and spread over the whole Graeco-Roman world, that circle embraces two cultures, the Semitic culture

of Palestine and the Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean world. The deeper and more comprehensive the interpreter's knowledge of those two cultures is, the more immediate will his contact with the sacred text be; his understanding and appreciation of the text will be correspondingly more vital and rich. Good commentaries will, of course, give the material that bears on any given portion of text. But commentaries must of necessity give the information piecemeal; and piecemeal knowledge means little and dissipates quickly if it does not find a secure place in an organic complex of previously acquired comprehensive and general knowledge. Bible dictionaries and Bible encyclopedias supply that historical knowledge in outline; but what they give us is, for us, secondhand. Unless the mind have a basis of firsthand knowledge of contemporary and precedent texts and monuments, at least in selection, such information is likely to remain a pale, sickly thing, and the understanding of the text remains feeble and incomplete. Here, as in the circle of language, the value and purposefulness of our traditional pretheological curriculum is vindicated. Its emphasis on the history as well as on the languages of the ancient world provides an excellent basis for the interpretation of Scripture on the historical side. One might wish to see it pointed more specifically to the fullness of times than has often been the case; one might wish that Palestine and its history and culture, both intra-Biblical and extra-Biblical, were made a more equal partner with the world of classical antiquity; but the general idea is sound, and the foundation so laid is indispensable.

The circle of history in the narrower sense includes the specific occasion that called forth a literary production, the circumstances under which it was written and received, the persons addressed, and so forth — the materials commonly covered in courses in New Testament Introduction, materials derived from the texts themselves, from other Biblical sources (e. g., Acts for the Pauline Epistles), or from extra-Biblical tradition. The very existence of courses in New Testament Introduction, or Isagogics, is a testimony to the importance of the circle of history in interpretation. Every book of the New Testament is written for the times; if we are to get the meaning which these books have for all time, we must first get

at the meaning they had for the first time. The character of the New Testament books as occasional writings is most clearly seen in the case of the Epistles; but even in the case of the Gospels, the preface of St. Luke and the varied character and emphasis of the Synoptics generally, to say nothing of the distinctive character of St. John, leave no room for doubt that they, too, were designed to meet definite needs. And as for the Apocalypse, the persecuted Church is the unmistakable background and occasion of its prophecies.

God makes all things serve the good of His Church: the vagaries and impieties of the elder Higher Criticism have, under His providence, had a beneficent by-product; they have recalled Biblical scholarship to a more sanely historical approach to Scripture. We have been forced to study Scripture in the live realities of its historical setting, and the result can only be beneficial. Common sense should have taught us as much: no man can be understood in a vacuum; he comes into the world with the ties ready-fashioned that bind him to his family, his people, his cultural setting. He must be understood, if he is to be understood at all, in relation to his contemporaries and his ancestors — imagine trying to understand Socrates without Athens or Demosthenes without Philip of Macedon! A man's new birth does not alter, for this world, the given historical facts of his human birth. Paul after the Damascus road is the same Roman citizen that he was before his conversion, and Paul the Christian and the missionary makes use of that Roman citizenship; parts of his history are unintelligible without a knowledge of what that citizenship involved. Nor does the fact of inspiration break the historical ties that bind a man to his present and his past: the converted Saul writes the Greek he learned before conversion at Tarsus and employs the imagery derived from the world about him, the Hebrew world with its Temple and its cultus, the pagan world with its athletics and its spectacles, its commerce and its law. The Holy Spirit took men as they were, historically situated and historically conditioned, and used them so. . . . There is nothing novel in this renewed emphasis on the historical side in interpretation; for Luther, too, the emphasis on history went hand in hand with the return to the single sense: "Sola enim historica sententia est, quae vere et solide docet."

To attempt to exemplify all the implications of history for

the interpretation of the New Testament, even in outline, would be an ambitious undertaking. We might do better to proceed modestly, and empirically: to take one of the shorter and simpler Pauline Epistles, First Thessalonians, and point out how history can further and enrich our understanding of this portion of Holy Writ.

"Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus. . . ." Within the circle of history the very names in the greeting at the beginning of the Epistle are luminous and meaningful. "Paul"—suppose there were nothing known of this Paul save what 1 Thessalonians tells us. The Letter would still be meaningful and instructive, even as the Epistle to the Hebrews is instructive, although "God only knows for certain" who its author is. But what riches we should have to do without! For we know that this Paul had been Saul, an Hebrew of the Hebrews, a fanatical Pharisee, who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious. The Epistle is a testimony, writ large, to the fact that the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant toward him: we see him writing to the Christians whom he before had hated, to Christians from among the Gentiles, whom he had before despised; writing with an overflowing abundance of love and concern, with a fervent prayer of thanksgiving that runs through the first three entire chapters, with a burning zeal for their continuance and growth in the Christian estate. The very fact that this Saul-Paul is writing the Letter is a preachment of the power of God and the grace of God.

"Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy"—the linking of the names is a testimony to the cohesive power of the Christian faith. Here we have conjoined Paul, the converted enemy of the Church, the former Pharisee, and Silas, member of the first Jerusalem church, the charter aristocracy of Christendom, and Timothy, one of the first fruits of Paul's missionary journeys, a strangely diverse group, yet one in their servitude to the Lord Jesus Christ. The three names thus joined are a testimony, too, to the cosmopolitan character of the early Church, and thus of the universal intent and scope of the early Church, even at this early date. As Paul was also Saul, so Silvanus also bore the good Jewish name of Silas, and both men were Roman citizens, thus uniting in their own persons the two cultures that constitute the historical background of

the New Testament, the Semitic and the Graeco-Roman. Timothy is similarly cosmopolitan: his father was a Greek, and his mother, though she bore a Greek name, was a devout Jewess who had reared her son in the Holy Scriptures of God's ancient people. By a sort of gracious irony, Timothy had not been circumcised until about to begin his work as a minister of the New Covenant. Salvation is marked in the history of its proclamation and in the persons of its proclaimers as being of the Jews but for all the world. The character and the antecedents of these proclaimers are both a fulfillment of prophecy and in themselves prophetic.

"Thessalonica," "Achaia," "Macedonia," "Athens": the place names, too, are rich in meaning, within the circle of history. The indistinctly premonitory "isles," "ends of the earth," and "every man from his place" (Is. 41:5; Zeph. 2:11) have become concrete and plastic place names in the fulfillment of the new dispensation. In place of "isles" we have now, as fulfillment unrolls, the great harbor city of Thessalonica as the center and theater of God's work, in which the Gospel takes root, grows, and spreads. The interpreter will do well to visualize this great city if he is to understand First Thessalonians to the full. Like most of the cities in which St. Paul labored, it is a crossroads city, being situated on the great Roman highway, the Via Egnatia, and being by virtue of its splendid and picturesque natural harbor a center of shipping and commerce; history under the providence of God so shaped this city, its character and site, as to make possible and to underline the words of the Apostle: "For from you sounded out the Word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything" (1 Thess. 1:8). We may well believe, too, that it was an expensive city to live in; for here St. Paul, despite the labors of his hands wherewith he toiled day and night that he might not be chargeable to any man, yet twice accepted help from the church of Philippi (Phil. 4:16). It was a populous city, and its population, which according to inscriptions was made up of men of every nation, included a goodly number of Jews, who had there their own synagog (Acts 17:1); it was here in the synagog that St. Paul according to his usual practice had begun work in Thessalonica "and three sabbaths reasoned with them out of

the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). Our Epistle and the history of the church of Thessalonica impinge here on the tremendous historical fact, important in more than one respect for redemptive history, of the Diaspora of the Jews, that vast scattering of Israel, whether by forcible deportation or voluntary emigration, over the face of the whole ancient world, so that the miracle of Pentecost was witnessed by men of Israel "out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5); so that we read in Philo a letter addressed to Caligula which contains the remarkable statement: "Jerusalem is the metropolis, not of the single country of Judea, but of most countries, because of the colonies which she has sent out, as opportunity offered, into the neighboring lands of Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, and Coelesyria, and the more distant lands of Pamphylia and Cilicia, most of Asia, as far as Bithynia and the utmost corners of Pontus; likewise unto Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, with the most parts and best parts of Greece. And not only are the continents full of Jewish colonies, but also the most notable of the islands — Euboea, Cyprus, Crete — to say nothing of the lands beyond the Euphrates." We have grown so accustomed to reading that St. Paul, again and again, at Pisidian Antioch, at Thessalonica, at Athens, at Corinth, at Ephesus, begins his work in the synagog that the wonder of that providential fact is likely to be lost on us unless we look upon it freshly with the historian's eye; and it is only in the light of that fact that we can understand a statement like that of Acts 16:3 regarding the half-Greek Timothy: "Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him *because of the Jews* . . ." and yet the Epistle to the Thessalonians is addressed to a Gentile church, to men who had "turned to God *from idols* to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1:9-10). In Thessalonica, as elsewhere, St. Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh fulfilled their tragic destiny, both to serve as the preparation for the Christ and to spearhead the rejection of Him; they who were the Israelites, to whom pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose were the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came (Rom. 9:4-5), even they refused to submit themselves unto the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:3).

The bitterest words that St. Paul ever spoke concerning his countrymen are found in our Epistle; they reflect the experience of the Apostle in Thessalonica as recorded in Acts 17:5, where we learn that it was the Jews (only *some* of them believed), moved with envy, who were the instigators of the persecution which made the Thessalonians followers of the churches of God which in Judea are in Christ Jesus: "For ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews; who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway" (1 Thess. 2:14-16). Still it is true: "The captivity of the Jew became the freedom of both Jew and Gentile, and the scattering of Israel was the gathering in of all nations unto God" (Plummer). The synagog was the starting point, and the synagog was also the bridge to the Gentile world; for on the fringe of the synagog were that fruitful group, "the devout Greeks," or proselytes, among whom in Thessalonica, as so often elsewhere, the Gospel obtained a sympathetic hearing. We have the evidence of Acts that in Thessalonica "a great multitude" of such believed.

The Prophets saw the "heathen" and "every man from his place" worshiping Jehovah. We see the fulfillment, concretely and in detail. We see the laborers and artisans of Thessalonica — there were some Jews and "of the chief women not a few," but the common Gentile men formed the bulk of the congregation — men who are exhorted to do each his own business and to work with his hands. We know from the whole ancient economic picture how hard was the lot of the free laborer (the problem of the Christian slave and the Christian master are not touched on in our Epistle; perhaps because they were few) in a slave-holding society; there is a new poignancy in St. Paul's description of the labor of their faith, the toil of their love, and their patient endurance in hope in their new Lord Jesus Christ if we remember that. We know, too, that when St. Paul speaks of the churches of Macedonia as giving liberally "in a great trial of affliction . . . and deep poverty," he is stating sober fact (2 Cor. 8:2). For this young church suffered both persistent persecution and chronic poverty.

We know, too, what were the temptations to which these young Christians of Thessalonica were, by their position in a Greek society and the ingrained attitudes acquired by life in that society, especially exposed. "God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness"; this emphasis on sexual purity, this foremost emphasis given in the hortatory part of the Epistle to the warning against fornication, comes as no surprise to anyone acquainted at all with the life of a Greek city, especially the life of a harbor city. Passages like this, and the *Lasterkataloge*, such as we have in Romans 1, evoke a thousand echoes in the mind that come to them conditioned by Archilochus and Mimnermus, Aristophanes and Greek comedy generally, the amatory epigrams of the Palatine Anthology, or their lineal Roman descendants, such as Catullus and Martial. To one who has walked the pavements of Pompeii and has seen the obscene mark of the brothels engraved on its stones, the strongest words of Scripture under this head will seem mild enough. Ἀκαθαρσία was in the grain of Graeco-Roman life. The Epistle to the Thessalonians is a living and immediate word spoken to an actual and concrete Thessalonica.

The forms of the Epistle are also well within the circle of history; they are in the main current of contemporary epistolography and can be paralleled, feature for feature, from the non-literary letters of the time. The greeting χάρις καὶ εἰρήνη is so familiar and has become so much a part of ecclesiastical language that we are likely to be blinded to the fact that in these two words we have again the meeting and fusion of the two cultures that constitute the historical setting of the New Testament: χάρις reproduces the conventional greeting of Greek letters, χαίρειν (cf. James 1:1 and Acts 15:23), while εἰρήνη is the Semitic *shalom*, which in ordinary daily usage had become so perfunctory and conventional that Our Lord had to mark it as "My peace" and "not as the world giveth" when He wished His disciples to feel the full force that the word had had in the Old Testament and was again to have in the mouth of His Apostles. We have not, of course, "explained" the greeting when we have traced its historic origins. Both words received in Christian usage a wealth and depth of content that pre-Christian and non-Christian usage never dreamed of. It is both the assimilative and the *transforming* power of the inspiring Spirit that we witness in even so slight an instance as this.

It is the same transforming power that we behold in the form that the opening of the Epistle takes: both the thanksgiving, here extended to unusual length, and the prayer can be paralleled from non-literary letters in the papyri; for instance, the letter of Apion, the Egyptian soldier, printed by Deissmann in *Light from the Ancient East* (pp. 179 ff.), who points out that this is "a thoroughly 'Pauline' way of beginning a letter and that St. Paul was . . . adhering to a beautiful secular custom when he so frequently began his Letters with thanks to God (1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3; Philemon 4; Eph. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:4; Rom. 1:8; Phil. 1:3)." These lines are not theological lucubrations of generalized intent and import; history here underlines what Scripture asserts of itself; Scripture is "profitable," ὠφέλιμος (useful); these are the words of an inspired man passionately concerned for the souls of men, writing to them in language and in forms that they were familiar with and readily understood. And if we will but use the materials that God gives us, we shall readily understand them too.

The whole thanksgiving and prayer, extending through three chapters of the Epistle, are reminiscent of the history of the church at Thessalonica and of St. Paul's contact with, and separation from, it; to read it apart from the account in Acts 17 is to deprive oneself of living contact with much of its content. Nor should we neglect such light as incidental touches elsewhere can throw on the situation: the weakness and fear and trembling with which St. Paul first appeared in Corinth (1 Cor. 2:3) reflect the tension he was under regarding his beloved church in Thessalonica. The reminiscences reach back to history previous to the evangelizing of Thessalonica, too: the allusion in 1 Thess. 2:2 to the suffering and shameful treatment at Philippi recall the memorable events recounted in Acts, particularly the imprisonment of Paul and Silvanus; Paul's impassioned words at the magistrates' offer of a huggermugger release indicate and make vivid how deeply felt the indignity had been: "They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? Nay, verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out." (Acts 16:37.)

Interwoven with the reminiscent history of St. Paul's relations to the church of Thessalonica is an apologia of Paul

the Apostle; St. Paul defends the sincerity of his conduct and the purity of his motives:

> For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile; but as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness; nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the Apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children. (1 Thess. 2:3–7.)

Why all this? Why should an Apostle of Jesus Christ feel compelled to meet suspicions as base and, to our eyes, as utterly unfounded and improbable as these? The obvious and easy answer that these were the aspersions cast upon St. Paul by his enemies at Thessalonica only pushes the question a step farther back. How, then, did the enemies of St. Paul hope to influence his Christians with such slanders as these? What grounds had they for believing that they might gain a hearing and create suspicion with such allegations?

The answer is obvious enough, but since it illustrates so well the value of the circle of history for interpretation, we shall do well to state it. First, St. Paul wore no halo when he entered the gate of Thessalonica. The good people of Thessalonica looked upon him with first-century eyes; they had no way of viewing him in the light of all that Acts was subsequently to recount of him and all that a Christianized Europe was to see in him: they saw merely "a small, unimposing, sickly man before them, who had nothing striking or prepossessing about him. . . . Once the formalities with the guard at the gate had been disposed of, not a soul took notice of the itinerant Jewish artisan" (von Dobschuetz). For those who received the Word of his preachment for what it indeed was, the Word of God, he became a person of authority; but the self-revelations of the Corinthian Letters show how slippery and unstable that authority might be, even in a church less young and religiously unfinished than that of Thessalonica. St. Paul was not impressive in personal appearance and demeanor; and the man on the street, especially the Greek man on the street, goes by externals — and the converted Greek did not cease to be Greek all at once; and, after all, even in our day a pair of broad shoulders and a stout, rolling bass

have been known to compensate for less-than-perfect preaching. And St. Paul's history, though he himself does not blink his sufferings and reverses, was, to any but the eyes of faith that saw in his sufferings a glory, not impressive: the picture of the man of God driven by persecution from city to city and from province to province could easily be distorted into that of the deluded and discredited fanatic. And once a shadow had fallen on the person of the Apostle, his cause was endangered. Wavering and shaken faith in the man might soon and easily enough become a wavering and shaken faith in his cause: Was it all a delusion or perhaps even a clever deception on the Apostle's part? Was St. Paul, like so many others, only another selfish seeker after gain and fame?

The suspicion came easily to the inhabitant of a first-century Greek city. There were many others; the heralds and witnesses of Christ were not solitary travelers of the Roman highways and were not the only men who sought a public hearing. They were part of a motley procession of rhetoricians, rhapsodes, Sophists, philosophers Stoic and Cynic, and Neopythagoreans, of swindlers and charlatans, of propagandists for the Mysteries and for Isis and Mithras, not to forget Jewish and Samaritan teachers, who traveled, made claims and created impressions, promished much, gave little, and went on, leaving their hearers "richer in a few rapidly fleeting impressions and in enduring disillusionment, and poorer in money" (von Dobschuetz). For, though there were notable exceptions, the common run of these itinerants were after two things: fame and money. Against a background like that the Apostle's words are not only natural, but inevitable, whether motivated directly or indirectly by a comparison with these "competitors." The words were timely then, and, as anyone who hears popular criticism of Christianity and the Church knows (the Church the handmaiden of Capitalism, the workman's opiate!), they are timely now; and we know what they mean now, more fully and more accurately, because we have learnt what they meant then.

As one might expect in a Letter written to a Gentile church only a few weeks after its founding, there are not many links with past history of God's people in the Old Testament. One might find more fruitful material for the study of this aspect of the circle of history in a book like the Gospel

According to St. Matthew, where the first verses, the genealogy of Our Lord, take us from the Patriarchs to the full moon of Israel's history under David and on to the darkness of the Captivity and back again to the new light risen with the birth of Jesus, who is called Christ. But a verse like 1 Thess. 4:5: "the Gentiles, which know not God" — spoken to Gentiles! — shows us that here, too, the Old Testament is the ever-present background to the New, that the Gentile Church feels and knows itself to be the Israel of God, that the circle of history always includes the sacred past as well as the contemporary world.

There is much more that one might treat even in so slight an Epistle as this, especially in the region where the circle of history and the circle of language intersect, in those cases where a single word involves history for its understanding, words like ἐκκλησία, with their reach into the Old Testament; words like παρουσία, panoplied with associations from the reigns of the Ptolemies and the Roman emperors; words like κύριος, that both reach into the Old Testament past, and present a "polemical parallel" to the contemporary claims of many lords and of the deified emperor; or even words like the simple ἐκηρύξαμεν, where a translation like "preached" fails to convey all the associations that cluster about the herald, from Homer down, within the circle of history.

But enough has been said to indicate, at least, the riches at the interpreter's disposal within this circle of history, how much is to be gained by a patient and imaginative immersing of oneself in the times and the world of the Apostles and Prophets. Only, we must not forget: history is a means, not an end. The historical approach is not the historian's approach. We do not aim to write the history of the primitive Church, neither do we seek the "historical Jesus." Theology is a *habitus practicus* still; and we enter the circle of history in order to hear the words that spelled, and spell, eternal life.

(The third installment will appear in an early issue)