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Essays in Hermeneutics

By M. H. FRANZMANN

III. THE CIRCLE OF SCRIPTURE

Thou art good and doest good; teach me Thy statutes. Ps. 119:68.

"Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Heretofore, in the circle of language and in the circle of history, we have been concentrating on the fact that "men . . . spake," on the fact that God the Holy Ghost spoke in tongues in definite moments in history. We have been, therefore, concerned largely with the skills and techniques of interpretation. In the circle of Scripture we pass from skills and techniques to what is rather an attitude, a gift of God, a *charisma* to be prayed for. For we are now concerned with the fact that what was spoken by men in times past was uniquely spoken; that these men spoke as "men of God," as men "moved by the Holy Ghost." We are concerned with that aspect of the Bible which makes it different from all other texts, however much it may, linguistically and historically considered, have in common with them; upon the fact that it is the Word of God, not only the record of God's revelation of Himself, but the continuation of it; that here God not only spoke through men, but speaks.

Scripture being, then, not only a record of revelation, but itself the revelation of God, we are confronted immediately with the same sharp either-or that is involved in every contact with God: "In our relationship to God there is no such thing as neutrality. Whether we obey His Law or not, whether we believe His Gospel or not, whether we love Him or not, fear Him or not — always we can do only the one or the other. No third attitude is possible. Disobedience is not defective obedience, but an active decision against God; likewise, unbelief; likewise, not fearing Him. That is to say, that for which we decide when we decide against God is not a blank, not a non-entity, but is an act that absolutely determines our existence. In unbelief and in disobedience we have consigned ourselves, whether we know it or not, whether we want it so or not, to that other which is absolutely antagonistic to God." (Elert.) Hence Luther's constant insistence on what must be the first axiom in theological interpretation,

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namely, that we be *under*, subject to, Scripture; what he calls "der Gehorsam des Worts." "Du und ich sollen unter dem Worte sein. Das Wort ist nicht mein und dein, darum will ich dich nicht ueber Gott setzen und dich nicht lassen recht haben, wo du unrecht bist." God is King, and His Word is supreme; we are bound to it: "An das goettliche Wort sollen wir gebunden sein, das sollen wir hoeren, und niemand soll ohne Gottes Wort aus seinem Kopfe etwas lehren." God's Word is not a force that we can guide or control; it guides and controls us: "Das Wort Gottes sollen wir nicht lenken, sondern [uns] von demselben lenken lassen." Against its authority, reason has no claim: "Wider alles, was die Vernunft eingibt oder ermessen und ausforschen will, ja was alle Sinne fuehlen, muessen wir lernen am Worte halten." Neither has our feeling, our experience, anything to say over against this authority; especially is this so in times of trial, when our feelings so readily run counter to revelation: "In der Zeit, wenn wir angefochten werden, sollen wir nicht nach unsern Empfindungen, sondern nach dem Worte Gottes urteilen." "Wir muessen nicht urteilen nach dem, was wir empfinden, sondern nach dem, was Gott selbst in seinem Wort ausspricht und urteilt." Only so can Scripture be grasped: "Das Wort Gottes ist so beschaffen, dass wenn man nicht alle Sinne schliesst und es allein mit dem Gehoer aufnimmt und ihm glaubt, man es nicht fassen kann." "Christus kann durch sein Wort nicht in die Herzen der Menschen einziehen, wenn sie nicht ihren Sinn gefangen geben unter den Gehorsam des Worts." We not only suspend judgment until we have heard the Word of God; we renounce our own judgment when we hear it; we must learn not to think above what is written: "Wo Gottes Wort gehet, soll man nicht fragen, ob es recht sei; was es heisst, das soll recht sein." We are not to seek beyond it: "Was uns im Wort nicht offenbart ist, soll man fahren lassen, denn ohne Gefahr und Schaden kann man sich daran nicht versuchen." To render the Word anything less than absolute obedience is to add to it something of our own, and the Word of God cannot tolerate adulteration: "Gottes Wort und Sachen koennen schlecht keinen Zusatz leiden, es muss ganz rein und lauter sein, oder ist schon verderbet und kein nutz mehr." Such an attitude of unconditional obedience will not be offended at the servant's

form of the Word either, its apparent weakness with which God's revelation of Himself begins: "Das ist die Art des goettlichen Wortes, dass, wenn es anfangen will, seine Kraft und Gewalt zu erzeugen, *es zuvor geschwaechet wird.*" Interpretation is, therefore, finally, a gift, not a skill or an achievement: "Die dem Worte anhangen, tun dies aus Gottes Gabe, nicht aus eigenen Kraeften, denn die Vernunft stoest sich an dem Evangelium." It is a gift of Christ: "Das Wort kann ich nicht erdenken, sondern ich hoere es durch den Mund Christi, und ich kann es nicht verstehen, hoeren, lernen noch glauben, so er's nicht ins Herz gibt." It is a gift of the Holy Ghost, who makes us spiritual: "Soll ich die Worte verstehen, die ich hoere, so muss es geschehen durch den Heiligen Geist, der macht mich auch geistlich; das Wort ist geistlich, und ich werde auch geistlich." It was an appreciation of this basic attitude toward the Word of God that led Wilhelm Moeller to describe interpretation as "heiliges Schauen." And it was the absence of just this "Gehorsam des Worts" that made liberal exegesis so flat and unfruitful that the inevitable reaction has set in widely again, a reaction that we find voiced, for instance, in Donald G. Miller's review of Goodspeed's *How to Read the Bible*: "Is it very presumptuous to express concern that a book which comes from one who would be considered by many the dean of New Testament scholars in America, should be so lacking in religious content and so devoid of the Biblical point of view while writing about the Bible? Has not the day come when American Biblical scholarship should end the process — which surely must be complete by now — of judging the Bible by the shallow canons of twentieth-century complacent American liberal thought and with at least a little of the feeling of the man who beat upon his breast and cried, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner,' to begin the very disturbing and humbling process of permitting the Bible to judge us?"

This demand for submission to the text might be deemed an unreasonable one to make of the interpreter at the outset and as the opposite extreme from that open-mindedness (*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) so often set up as the ideal of the interpreter's attitude toward the text to be interpreted. But is it really unreasonable to ask of the Christian student that he approach the Word to which he owes his new birth with

the reverence that befits a Word of such power and importance? His basic attitude toward Scripture has long ago been established by his position in Christ: "They are they which testify of Me." Our attitude toward Christ can never again be neutral or open-minded; we cannot even for the purpose of study assume an attitude of neutrality. The Christian interpreter might do well to write upon his desk what Luther used to write out before himself in hours of trial: "Baptizatus sum"—to remind him that Jesus Christ is his Lord and that the Word which testifies of Him is to be met with "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."

And after all, this demand for complete open-mindedness in any field of interpretation is both impossible and wrong. Impossible, for no man comes to any text with a completely open mind, entirely without prepossessions. He has been conditioned to Shakespeare, for instance, a thousand ways before he ever opens a volume of Shakespeare: he has been exposed to rhythm, verse, and rhyme from his nursery days onward; he has been subjected to drama from kindergarten on; he has heard Shakespeare quoted, whether he knew it or not; he has heard his phrases in the mouth of everyman; even if his reading has been confined to billboards and the back pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*, he cannot have escaped Shakespeare entirely. And what child ever reached the age of six without being in some way touched by the influence of the Bible? At the very least, he has heard men curse and swear by the divine names which he meets in Scripture: that desecration of the holy is in itself a sort of satanic tribute to the power in those names and will have left its mark upon the man who heard it. (He has never heard anyone take the names of Thor or Baldur in vain.)

And the demand for open-mindedness, in the sense that it is made, is wrong also. For if a man would understand any text, he must at least begin by submitting himself to it. No one has achieved an understanding worthy the name of Homer or Milton or Goethe by remaining coolly above him. A man must submit himself to Homer if he would know Homer. He must submit himself fully and sympathetically to Milton if he is to know Milton. The demand for open-mindedness, for a prepossessionless approach, makes sense only in the form of the positive demand that man's mind be

really open to the text that he is to interpret, that, as Torm puts it, a man "begin by bowing willingly and obediently to the quiet influence of the text. He must, so to speak, give the text time to work upon himself by dint of its own internal power"; he must exclude norms and analogies that are foreign to the text and hear the text out on its own terms. Most schoolboys who end up by hating Horace as heartily as Byron did ("Then farewell, Horace, whom I hated so"), do so, not because Horace is "hard," but because they could not, or were not induced to, submit themselves to Horace and his charm. And so it is no unreasonable demand, even from an un-theological point of view, to ask the interpreter to begin by submitting himself to Scripture in order to understand it. There is, of course, this cardinal difference between submitting to Scripture and submitting to any other book: a man can, and ought to, detach himself again from the Horace or Homer to whom he has for a time sympathetically subdued himself; but—let the candid reader beware, and let him reckon the cost of the tower beforehand—he will never again be able to detach himself from Scripture once he has given himself to it unreservedly; for he will have been taken by a power and a love that will not let him go.

UNUS SIMPLEX SENSUS

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"; this absolute submission to the Word is the beginning of all real interpretation, and from it all other theological norms of interpretation flow. So the one great Reformation principle of interpretation, that of the one intended sense of Scripture, is the inevitable outcome of this attitude toward the Word. If we are open-minded in the only admissible and fruitful sense of the word, that is, if we are under Scripture, we shall not be offended at the servant's form of God's Word. We shall accept Scripture as we find it, even as we accept the Son of Man, the sign that is spoken against, as we find Him, in His weakness and humility. We shall not deem it the business of interpretation to make Scripture more "spiritual" than the Holy Ghost has made it by going beyond the simple, literal sense of its words and embroidering upon the plain meaning additional mystical "senses" after the manner of much Patristic and most Medieval exegesis.

The old "fourfold sense" of Scripture has become so remote for us, the inheritors of the Lutheran Reformation, that we can hardly appreciate how great and bold a step Luther took when he declared that the simple, literal sense of Scripture is "Frau Kaiserin, die geht ueber alle subtile, spitzige, sophistiche Dichtungen, von der muss man nicht weichen. . . ." This in opposition to the whole medieval theory and practice which, during the centuries of its sway, had taken the literal sense as a mere point of departure for the sometimes devout but always arbitrary development of the allegorical, the moral (or tropological), and the anagogical senses.

Litera gesto docet; quid credas, allegoria;
Moralis, quid agas; quo tendas, anagogia.

Thus "Jerusalem," in any context, might be literally the city of Judea; allegorically, the Church Militant; morally, every faithful soul; and anagogically, the heavenly Jerusalem. The burning bush that was not consumed might by this sort of "spiritual jugglery" (the term is Luther's) be made to signify the Mother of our Lord, who was not consumed by the Divine Fire in her womb; and in the "two or three firkins apiece" of John 2:6 an adept might find a reference to the two or three senses that Scripture might bear in addition to the literal.

To be sure, this mystical or allegorical mode of interpretation finds some apparent support in the occasional "allegorical" use of Old Testament incidents or figures in the New Testament. But the support is only apparent; for aside from the fact that this "allegorical" interpretation of the Old Testament is confined to a few instances, a cardinal difference is to be observed: "Whereas allegorical interpretation goes its own way alongside the literal sense (often independently of it, sometimes even excluding it), the typological interpretation [in the New Testament], or better, the typological view, of the text holds fast to the literal sense and is based upon it" (Torm). In other words, these instances of "allegory" in the New Testament are not so much interpretations of the Old Testament text, giving them an additional meaning, as a fresh *application* of them. "This allegorical sense is not a second sense of the words, but a second meaning of the contents of the words. Gal. 4:21-31." (Fuerbringer.)

We of the twentieth century deem ourselves, rather complacently, far above the vagaries of an Origen or a Thomas

Aquinas. The wild work of patristic or medieval exegesis cannot, we feel certain, happen here. And yet the history of exegesis in modern times offers abundant evidence that the simple Gospel is still an offense to many, that the unregenerate heart cannot take it as it is. Modern exegesis does not allegorize; but much of it has paltered with Scripture in a double sense nevertheless: after all, an exegesis that pares away the miraculous in the Gospels and ignores the Atonement in the life and death of Christ, that ethicizes the "religion of Jesus" and creates an unbridgeable gulf between Jesus and St. Paul, or brings down everything in the New Testament, *religionsgeschichtlich*, to the level of a first-century religious development, can hardly lay claim to dealing any more honestly with the text than the ancient practitioners of the four-fold sense.

SCRIPTURA SACRA SUI IPSIUS INTERPRES

From such an attitude of reverent submission to the Word there follows also the second great Reformation principle of interpretation, namely, that Scripture interprets itself. For such an attitude toward Scripture precludes any interpretation by an alien or imported norm, whether that norm be tradition, the consensus of the Church, "the spirit," enlightened reason or the Christian consciousness, a moral norm, a dogmatic system, or an assumed entity, such as the whole of Scripture. For as F. Pieper points out, such a treatment of Scripture is not an interpretation, but a criticism of it: "What Scripture does not itself interpret, no man shall make bold to interpret." It is worth while to remind ourselves again at this point that on this level skill in interpretation of Scripture is a gift. And like all God's gifts, it is given to the humble, to the poor in spirit, to the broken and contrite heart. An *aliquid in nobis* is as bad in interpretation as it is in the doctrine of conversion and predestination (F. Pieper). And so the really Christian exegete will follow Luther's advice: "Despair absolutely of your own sense and understanding. Pray with real humility and earnestness to God that He may through His dear Son give His Holy Spirit to illumine and guide you and to make you wise."

It is in this sense, Scripture as interpreter of Scripture, that Luther and our Confessions understood the *analogy of faith*. Luther uses "a public article of faith" and "Scripture"

interchangeably, and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 13, explains "regulam" by "scripturas certas et claras." The men of the Reformation "sought earnestly to place themselves under Scripture, in the full confidence that the God who had given the Scriptures to the Church had also given clear and distinct guides to their understanding, if one would only use them rightly" (Torm). Luther has given classic expression to this confidence, this faith, in the words: "Rest assured, beyond all doubt, that there is nothing brighter and clearer than the sun, that is, the Scriptures. If a cloud has come before it, there is still nothing else behind that cloud than this same bright sun. And so, if there is a dark saying in Scripture, there is surely behind it the same truth which is clearly expressed in another place." All the light that is needed, theologically, in Scripture is provided by Scripture itself.

Not as if the usefulness of the analogy of faith, or as it is also called, the analogy of Scripture, is exhausted in providing light for "dark sayings," though naturally that use looms largest in the formulation of doctrine and in polemics. Its greater day-by-day usefulness lies in the establishing of the content of theological concepts, the sort of work done in the great theological lexica of Cremer and of Kittel. The interpreter in seeking to determine just what and just how much a word like *χαρις* means will welcome whatever by-illumination etymology and secular usage can provide (though it be but by contrast). But his real questions are directed to Scripture itself, and it is from Scripture itself that he gets his decisive answers. It is to Scripture that he directs such questions as: In what applications is the idea found? What is predicated of it? What is contrasted with it? With what is it paralleled? What synonyms or near synonyms of the word occur? What is the history of the idea in the two Testaments? All of Scripture is made to cast light on any portion of it.

It is, of course, a piece of irreverence toward the Word if the analogy of faith is used to rationalize away tensions that Scripture itself has left unresolved, the tension, for instance, that for human rationality will always exist between the universal grace of God and the particular election of the saints. A really theological interpretation will never seek to rend God's veils nor pry into the hidden counsels of the Almighty.

True interpretation is better occupied. For in this interpreting, always remaining under Scripture, we shall not only introduce no alien or imported norms; we shall also remain always under the influence of the same Spirit who first gave the Word to the Church. That Spirit is the Spirit of truth and will lead us to seek and find Christ as the whole content of Scripture. That does not mean that we are to allegorize and twist texts to find explicit reference to our Lord where none such exists. It does mean that we view and treat Scripture as an organic whole, with one Author, all the parts of which are vitally related to the one central theme of God's redemptive work in Christ. It is Christ, our Redeemer, whom we seek and find.

Practically, all this means that the concordance is more valuable than the dictionary; that the large dictionary with its systematized parallels is more valuable than the small dictionary; that theological lexica of the order of Cremer and Kittel are more valuable than merely lexical works; that the best part of a good commentary is often the collections of parallels from Scripture; that the margins of a Nestle are better than a good many commentaries; that the best of all is to be your own concordance of words and ideas, to do as Luther did, who read through all Scriptures twice a year, "bis ich ein ziemlich guter Textualis wurde."

