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In Memoriam: Joh. Albrecht Bengel June 24, 1687 to November 2, 1752

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

NOVEMBER 2, 1952, is the two-hundredth anniversary of the death of Johann Albrecht Bengel, a leading figure in the history of Lutheran theology. He has exerted an influence over subsequent Biblical scholarship comparable to that of Luther and Flacius in the sixteenth century, the Buxtorfs in the seventeenth, von Hofmann in the nineteenth, and Schlatter in the twentieth. Until a generation or two ago his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* was a commonplace in the libraries of the evangelical clergy; and some of the works which have come to replace it, like Dean Alford's commentary and the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, are expansions and adaptations, though not always improvements, of Bengel's classic work. There has not been, to this writer's knowledge, a definitive study assessing the significance of Bengel's work in the history of Christian thought; he would certainly deserve such a treatment. In its absence this brief essay will attempt to describe his life and work and to point out some of the questions that warrant more detailed investigation.¹

I

Johann Albrecht Bengel was born on June 24, 1687, in Winnenden, a small town in Wuerttemberg. There his father, *Diaconus* Albrecht Bengel, left him an orphan in 1693. His mother, a great-granddaughter of Johann Brenz, was married a second time in 1703 to Johann Albrecht Gloeckler, who seems to have influenced his stepson in the direction of the holy ministry. After studies

at the *Gymnasium* in Stuttgart, where he progressed rapidly because of his preparation at home, he enrolled in the university of Tuebingen. At the age of twenty he passed the examination of the consistorium held at Stuttgart in December, 1706, and with his disputation "*De theologia mystica*," accepted in 1707, he ended his formal theological studies, meanwhile having also earned a master's degree in philosophy.

Of importance for his subsequent theological orientation were the books which he studied most while at the university. By this time the classic works of high Lutheran Orthodoxy had fallen into disuse at the major theological faculties, though some of them, like J. F. Koenig's *Theologia positiva acroamatica*, still enjoyed favor at Tuebingen. The principal textbooks were Spener's *De impedimentis studii theologici*, his exposition of the catechism, the exegetical handbooks of A. H. Francke, and the devotional and ethical works of Johann Arndt. Thus Bengel was exposed at an early stage of his development to the growing conviction of the Spenerites that the ills of Lutheran theology were due to a neglect of study in the Holy Scriptures and that the hope for a rejuvenation in theology lay with the resurgence of a truly Biblical method. It was in connection with these early Biblical studies that he first confronted the problem of the variants in the text of the New Testament, a problem to which seventeenth-century dogmatics had devoted comparatively little attention despite its lengthy discussions "*De Scriptura*." His youthful anxiety over this problem prompted Bengel in maturer years to concern himself with the text of the New Testament and to make outstanding contributions in the field of textual criticism.

Upon the completion of his studies, Bengel was called to a parish in Metzingen, where he spent one year. In 1708 he was invited to return to Tuebingen as a *repetens*, a kind of teaching fellow. For the next five years he carried on his theological research in the library there, and part of that time he also served as *vicarius* under his old professor, Andreas Adam Hochstetter, at churches in Stuttgart and Tuebingen. A scholarly word study entitled *Syntagma de sanctitate Dei* showed the philological skill and broad historical acquaintance of the youthful exegete. Examining the usages of *kadosh* and *bagios* in the Scriptures, he came to the conclusion

that the holiness of God was the sum total of His attributes, and he defended the historical study of these terms against the cabalistic manipulation of the Old Testament that was gaining currency in some sections of German theology.² Much of the material which later appeared in Bengel's works seems to have come from these five years of almost uninterrupted study. They ended with his call as *Klosterpraeseptor* at a new academy in Denkendorf, where he worked for the major portion of his ministry, 1713 to 1740.

Before taking up his new duties at Denkendorf, he undertook an extensive trip to many churches and schools, among which Halle made a particularly deep impression upon him. A letter written from Halle, June 17, 1713, indicated the direction in which his theology and his piety were traveling by this time and gave some interesting insights into life at Halle:³

.... On May 29 I came here. . . . I can assure you that everything here lives up to the expectations which I had of this seat of wisdom and piety. . . . Dr. Anton is expounding the Revelation of St. John and lecturing on the church history of the seventeenth century; in both courses he adds very many general comments which show deep wisdom. Dr. Francke, whom the king has especially favored, has begun an exposition of the Psalms. In each hour he takes up one, two, or even three briefer Psalms and carefully gives their content and purpose, making use, but not excessive use, of older and more recent expositions. He explains his ideas to the theological students in an edifying way. He also delivers lectures on casuistry on the basis of selected passages from *Speners theologische Bedenken*. In the hymn periods and public sermons he often becomes very fiery, though he never transgresses charity. Seriousness and clarity are blended in a beautiful combination. . . . What pleases me most is the harmony of these men among themselves, which they seek to cultivate especially through common prayer. In general, the faithful here live on a more confident basis with one another than I have seen in other places, and this more than anything else helps to prevent spiritual indolence. I treasure it as a great divine grace that I can see so many glorious living examples of what the power of the Lord can make of men. *Till now I have been a Christian almost exclusively for myself, but here I have learned to realize the meaning of the fellowship and communion of saints.*

Into Bengel's years at Denkendorf falls a large part of his literary activity. This included an edition of *M. Tullii Ciceronis Epistolae ad diversos* (Stuttgart, 1719); of *Gregorii Thaumaturgi Panegyricus ad Origenem* (Stuttgart, 1722); and of *Joannis Chrysostomi de sacerdotio libri sex* (Stuttgart, 1725). Here the author had an opportunity to manifest and exercise that skill in philological analysis, textual criticism, and succinct exegesis that was to mark his later New Testament studies, especially the *Gnomon*. Growing as they did out of his work in the classroom, these editions of classical and patristic texts co-ordinated scholarly thoroughness with adaptability to pedagogical purposes in a manner that was almost a Bengel trademark.⁴ In addition to these published works, Bengel prepared a critical edition of the works of Macarius as well as of Ephraim Syrus, neither of which was ever printed.

As a preface to this edition of Chrysostom, Bengel composed a *Prodromus Novi Testamenti graeci recte cauteque adornandi*, setting forth his future plans in the field of New Testament study. Although such promises and prophecies are usually a very hazardous undertaking for the scholar, Bengel was blessed with the opportunity to make the promise and also to keep it. He purposed, according to the *Prodromus*, to publish a commentary on the entire New Testament under the title *Gnomon*. But before doing that, he was determined to establish as well as he could the authentic text of the New Testament. As we have already noted, this problem had been of religious concern to him in his youth; and though his doubts of faith were allayed, his scholarly concern for the manuscript evidence of the New Testament continued. He expressed his dissatisfaction with existing editions of the New Testament, in particular those current in evangelical Germany, and his conviction that a new critical principle ought to underlie any further research in the field. He promised to state his new principle in four words.⁵ Although he already had before him a vast amount of textual material, he begged his readers to help him in gathering more. He even had the *Prodromus* reprinted in pamphlet form, and he circulated this appeal wherever he thought additional manuscripts might be stored. The appeal brought him material from various parts of Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Slovakia, as well as some Coptic and Armenian variants.

Nine years later, in 1734, Bengel fulfilled his promise in double measure. For he published not only a new manual edition of the Greek New Testament (Stuttgart, 1734), but also an elaborate edition, joined with an *Apparatus criticus* that expounded his canons of textual criticism (Tuebingen, 1734). In the *Apparatus criticus* Bengel first outlined the problems that confront the textual critic and sketched the achievements of his predecessors. In the second and longest section of this study, he proceeded book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, to cite the significant readings from manuscripts and patristic citations, often appending a brief explanation of why he finally chose a given variant in a particular instance. He devoted a special part of this section to the complex textual problems of the Book of Revelation, which, as we shall see, was to concern him at length later in life. And in the third section he documented the conviction voiced in the *Prodomus* that the fault in previous editions lay with the principles of discrimination which they had employed in weighing manuscript evidence. He propounded his promised four-word canon, which has since become almost axiomatic to textual critics: "*Proclivi scriptioni praestat ardua,*" the more difficult reading is to be preferred to the easier one.⁶ In a *Defensio N. T. graeci* which he wrote in 1737, Bengel further explained and validated his methods in answer to his critics, claiming that the basic principle he followed was actually an old one and not original with him.

The care he had been devoting to the problem of harmonizing New Testament manuscripts was closely connected to a similar question, namely, the relation between the various Gospel records of the life of our Lord and, behind this, the total problem of Biblical chronology. He addressed himself to these issues during his closing years at Denkendorf, and from this there emerged two works, *Die richtige Harmonie der vier Evangelisten* (Tuebingen, 1736), and *Ordo temporum a principio per periodos oeconomiae divinae historicas atque propheticas . . . deductus* (Stuttgart, 1741). In the first of these he repudiated the method adopted by Andreas Osiander in his *Harmonia evangelistarum* of 1537, based on the thesis that each Evangelist presented an essentially chronological narrative. This enabled Bengel to solve many of the problems of Gospel harmony with greater facility and freedom, without sacrific-

ing his faith in the integrity of the Gospel accounts.⁷ The *Ordo temporum* is a painstaking effort to establish the sequence of events not only in the life of our Lord, but in the entire Old and New Testament. In this effort Bengel made use of every fixed date he could find in the Scriptures, and he sought to correlate these with what he could determine from secular history. We shall have more to say a little later concerning the theology of history at work in the *Ordo temporum*. Connected with it, as well as with the interests that dominated Bengel's thought and writing in the last decade or so of his life, is the fact that he felt able on the basis of his calculations to fix not only the date of past events in the divine economy, but also the time of future events, even the *parousia* itself, which he thought would come in 1836 or 1837.⁸

During the time that the *Ordo temporum* was in preparation, Bengel left Denkendorf after more than a quarter century of service, admonishing his students to remember that⁹

the learned world brings various wares to market, but what is most highly prized today will not be valid tomorrow. . . . The Holy Scriptures alone never become antiquated; though men in every age seem to despise them, they always carry away the crown of victory. And so whoever chooses the imaginations of his own perverse heart rather than the Word of God as the rule of his life and supposes that he can combine immorality with scholarly pursuits defeats his own ends. . . . For this reason may you give attention to this, my last exhortation to you, and make piety your most important concern. Thus, and thus alone, you will foster your own salvation as well as the salvation of both State and Church; thus you will bring joy to me and to all who love you.

From 1741 to 1747 Bengel occupied the position of *Probst* at Herbrechtingen, and in 1747 he was transferred to Stuttgart, where he held various positions of authority, including membership in the consistory.

The eschatological interest evident in the *Ordo temporum* was the predominant element of a work composed almost simultaneously with it, *Erklaerte Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi* (Stuttgart, 1740). From the time he left Denkendorf, Bengel paid increasing attention to the eschatological issue. The Biblical material bearing upon it he treated in the *Ordo temporum*,

the *Erklaerte Offenbarung*, and articles in various journals. He even tried to make use of astronomical calculations to substantiate his Biblical computations, assembling these data in *Cyclus sive de Anno Magno solis, lunae, stellarum consideratio* (Ulm, 1745), a work which, unfortunately, was not available for the preparation of this study. Despite his general sobriety, Bengel did occasionally permit his preoccupation with eschatology to take on the more bizarre features of apocalyptic. The historians and dogmatists will apparently see to it that these aberrations in his thought are not forgotten by subsequent generations.¹⁰

But in the same years Bengel also completed the work for which he is probably best remembered and most appreciated, the *Gnomon N. T. in quo ex nativa verborum vi, simplicitas, profunditas, concinnitas, salubritas sensuum coelestium indicatur* (Tübingen, 1742). Perhaps its outstanding characteristic was the consummate skill with which the author grasped the organic unity of the New Testament beneath the individual differences of books and writers. In the *Ordo temporum* he had pointed out that no section of the Scriptures was complete without the other sections so that in view of the divine plan the Scriptures had to be viewed as a unity or totality,¹¹ and in the *Gnomon* he proved the validity of that approach. Into the scope of one rather brief commentary he put precise textual comments, doctrinal deductions, historical observations, polemical asides, paraenetic exhortations, and a wealth of aphorisms that would warrant separate compilation under some such title as "The Wit and Wisdom of J. A. Bengel." The *Gnomon* is not without its bizarre sections either, and the author's apocalyptic predilections did make their presence known.¹² But the predominant motif of the book was to show the fundamental necessity of word study for the exegete, to demonstrate the indispensability of the Old Testament for the student of the New Testament, and to insist upon the practical relevance of Biblical theology for devotion and piety.

Bengel's last work on the New Testament did not appear until after his death. It was a translation and commentary prepared especially for lay consumption and printed in Stuttgart in 1753 with a preface that he composed only a few days before his death in Stuttgart on November 2, 1752.

II

In the two centuries since his death, Bengel has continued to shape evangelical thought and scholarship. The *Gnomon* has appeared in various editions and translations, forming the basis for several subsequent commentaries. The textual work of the *Apparatus criticus* was sound enough to receive the support even of Semler, who was not sympathetic to the author's theological position, and to form the basis for much of the stupendous work that was done in this field during the nineteenth century. To this day students of Nestle's edition of the Greek New Testament — printed at Stuttgart! — are greeted with Bengel's trenchant admonition: "Te totum applica ad textum: rem totam applica ad te." Thus Bengel is still a force in exegetical study.

Even more direct an influence than this is the place that Bengel's thought occupies in the theologies of several men who followed him. Goltz has pointed to the bifurcation of Bengel's followers.¹³ One group, more literally faithful to him, continued Bengel's emphasis upon thorough textual study as the key to theological understanding. The fact that less than half a century after Bengel, evangelical theology found itself confronted by the thought of Schleiermacher, and that for the subsequent century the conflict over liberalism almost monopolized theological discussion, has tended to obscure the fact that throughout this period there was a continuing tradition of Biblical theology after the fashion of Bengel. It was particularly in some aspects of the "positive" Lutheran theology of the nineteenth century, and more particularly in the exegetical and philological work of men like von Hofmann, Cremer, and Schlatter, that this Biblical antithesis to the humanistic aspects of nineteenth-century liberalism manifested itself. For a number of reasons, not the least of which is the relation of George Stoeckhardt to von Hofmann, this tradition forms an important part of the theological background of the Missouri Synod.¹⁴

Alongside the Biblical theologians who followed Bengel's exegesis was another group of men who worked up many of the emphases of his theology into a speculative metaphysical system. F. Chr. Oetinger (1702—1782) made use of Bengel's approach to the Scriptures in his system; but instead of deriving his metaphysics from Leibnitz and Wolff, as did most of his contemporaries,

Oetinger drew upon Jakob Boehme's theosophy for his inspiration. The study of divine holiness and glory that had been the beginning of Bengel's scholarly career provided Oetinger with the bridge between Bengel and Boehme; for thus he could synthesize Bengel's concept of history with Boehme's concept of nature in a manner that did justice to both reason and revelation. Through Johann Tobias Beck (1804—1878) the ideas of Oetinger, Roos, and other speculative disciples of Bengel formed the basis for a pious and evangelical philosophy whose influence is still discernible in some sections of Lutheran theology.¹⁵

The peculiar set of influences that Bengel has exerted raises the question of his own position amid the theological movements of his time. This is, it would seem, one of the prime tasks which the definitive study mentioned earlier would have to undertake. A comparison of Bengel with Valentin Ernst Loescher (d. 1749) and Johann Sebastian Bach (d. 1750), both of whom died at almost the same time as Bengel, would suggest that at the middle of the eighteenth century there was an entire group of theologians and churchmen in whom the conflict between Pietism and Orthodoxy was beginning to resolve itself. All of them emphasized the meaning of the Church, the importance of the quest for purity of doctrine and the integrity of Biblical truth, and the need for personal piety in a manner that belied the usual antithesis of the Pietist controversies.¹⁶ Their affinity, in turn, for Johann Arndt and Johann Gerhard would raise the problem of the origins of Pietism in the seventeenth century and its relation to the increasing subordination of exegesis to dogmatics in the Lutheran theology of the latter half of that century.

Another problem which such a definitive study will have to consider is the significance of Bengel's work for the history of the eschatological consciousness. As has already been mentioned, many histories of Christian thought dismiss Bengel's eschatology with the observation that he predicted the end of the world for 1836. There is a kind of condescending "second guessing" in such histories which neglects the fact that, wrong though he was in attempting to fix the date of the second coming, he was at least determined to take Biblical eschatology seriously — and this at a time when the Enlightenment had begun to secularize eschatology

and the Kingdom of God into what Carl Becker has called "the heavenly city of the eighteenth century philosophers." It would be necessary to examine Bengel's eschatological utterances in the light of the general hermeneutical principles which he voiced and applied in his exegetical works. As has been pointed out elsewhere, there seems to be need to study the interrelations of hermeneutics and the eschatological hope in the development of theology during the second and third centuries.¹⁷ It would seem to be equally important in the history of Protestant and Lutheran theology during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the theology of Bengel would be a convenient *locus* for such an investigation.

A full examination of Bengel's eschatology would have to determine the interactions between his hope of the second coming and the *Heilsgeschichte* he formulated in the *Ordo temporum*. It would have to examine the theology of history in that volume and compare it with the federal theology of Coccejus and his Reformed followers, with a view toward ascertaining whether Bengel's Lutheranism acted as a corrective against the legalism that often appeared in Reformed versions of *Heilsgeschichte*. When set into the context of his total *Heilsgeschichte*, Bengel's eschatology may emerge as more than a rabid apocalyptic. For as he himself pointed out, only that expectation of the *parousia* was valid which was rooted in an understanding of God's functionings in the history of Israel, in Christ, and in the history of the Church since.¹⁸ Much of the apocalyptic of our own time has cut itself loose from these historical moorings, or it has rationalized history in order to superimpose it upon its preconceived dispensationalism. Even though Bengel cannot be absolved completely of this same tendency, a thorough study of his eschatology in terms of his theology of history, his Biblical scholarship, and his sense of the Church in all ages might come to some valuable conclusions regarding the full dimension of the eschatological perspective in the New Testament and in any theology that purposes to be based upon the New Testament.

These are only some of the areas in Bengel's thought that are in need of further study. The concept of the Church in his theology, piety, and churchmanship would present a valuable index to the ecclesiology of that crucial period. A careful evalua-

tion of his achievements in textual criticism and of the canons that he employed in carrying on that work would serve as a useful preface to the vitally needed study of the interrelations between the doctrine of inspiration and the textual and isagogical scholarship of seventeenth and eighteenth century Lutheranism. In that connection, Bengel's departure from the Osiandrian principle of Gospel harmony could well be compared with the methodology of other Gospel harmonies in Lutheran history, notably that of Chemnitz, Leyser, and Gerhard.

But while historical theologians investigate and debate these problems, many a student of the New Testament will continue to have reason for thinking gratefully of Johann Albrecht Bengel as one of those who in life and death "have spoken unto you the Word of life" (Heb. 13:7), remembering his wry comment *sub loco*: "Facilius spectamus et miramur beatum obitum piorum, quam fidem, qua eum consecuti sunt, imitamur."

NOTES

1. Bengel's son-in-law Johann Christian Friedrich Burk wrote a biography, *Dr. Johann Albrecht Bengel's Leben und Wirken* (2d ed.; Stuttgart, 1832), based on many letters and diaries. Oskar Wachter's *J. A. Bengel of 1865* is in many ways corrected by K. Hermann, *J. A. Bengel der Klosterpraeseptor von Denkendorf* (Stuttgart, 1937).

2. Though the *Syntagma* never appeared separately, Bengel made reference to it and summarized it in *Erklaerte Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi* (2d ed.; Stuttgart, 1746), pp. 310-312: "Der feyerlichste Lobspruch der Goetlichen Majestaet in der ganzen Schrift ist eben dieser, dass Gott auch von diesen [i. e., angels], die ihm so nahe sind, heilig genennet wird. . . . Heilig heisst . . . so viel als abgesondert . . . von alle dem, was creatuerlich ist, auf eine unvergleichliche Weise unterschieden und entfernet ist und bleibet. . . . Heilig heisst so denn auch, was Gotte gewidmet oder Gotte aehnlich, und von dem gemeinen Hauffen anderer Dinge heraus gesondert ist."

3. Reprinted in Burk, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33; italics mine.

4. Of the three, I have been able to examine only the two patristic texts, whose notes would be a worth-while study. Particularly noteworthy are the corrections and comments he felt obliged to make, e. g., in favor of lay authority in the Church, *De sacerdotio*, p. 446, and on the unique Trinitarianism of Gregory, *Panegyricus*, pp. 149-151.

5. "unicus canon . . . iam fixus et quatuor verbis comprehensus," *Prodromus, De Sacerdotio*, p. xii; he appeals for manuscripts, p. xviii.

6. In the second edition of the *Apparatus criticus* (Tuebingen, 1763), to which I have had access, his exposition of this canon appears, p. 69, with supporting evidence from Lactantius!

7. See the characterization of Osiander's work in M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, 1944), pp. 118-122 and note 194, pp. 173-175.

Bengel himself felt that the older harmonists "es nicht fueglich genug" while the more recent ones "es nur allzu kuenstlich gemacht haben," *Richtige Harmonie der vier Evangelisten* (3d ed.; Tuebingen, 1766), p. 39. He commented on the same problem, *Ordo temporum* (2d ed.; Stuttgart, 1770), pp. 208—209.

8. He set the date for the *interitus bestiae* at 1836, *Ordo temporum*, p. 328, on the basis of his exegesis of "a time, times, and a half" (Dan. 12:7), *ibid.*, pp. 321—328, with the world to end when it is 7777 and 7/9 years old, *ibid.*, p. 333.

9. Reprinted in Burk, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

10. Some examples are: Karl Hase (ed.), *Hutterus Redivivus* (Leipzig, 1829), p. 372; H. E. F. Guerike, *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (3d ed.; Halle, 1838), II, p. 1082, note 330; J. G. Baier, *Compendium theologiae positivae* (Walther ed.; St. Louis, 1879), II, p. 256; J. J. Herzog, *Abriss der gesamten Kirchengeschichte* (2d ed.; Erlangen, 1892), II, pp. 703—704; Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zuerich, 1947), pp. 113—14; Em. Hirsch, *Geschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie* (Guetersloh, 1949 ff.), II, pp. 179—198, which includes a discussion of his textual work.

11. "Unum Scriptura instrumentum, omnes libri eius unum corpus constituunt. Singuli libri totum quiddam sunt, et particularis scopi quisque sui rationes exhauriunt: conjunctim, unus liber est, ex partibus illis resultans, scopum universum habens multo ampliorem," *Ordo temporum*, p. 334.

12. Perhaps the most famous of these bizarre sections is the exposition of the word "blood" (Heb. 12:24), *Gnomon* (8th ed.; Stuttgart, 1891), pp. 935—943.

13. Hermann Freiherr von der Goltz, "Die theologische Bedeutung J. A. Bengels und seiner Schule," *Jahrbuecher fuer deutsche Theologie*, VI (Gotha, 1861), pp. 460—506, esp. pp. 492 ff.

14. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Amerikanisches Luthertum in dogmengeschichtlicher Sicht," *Evangelisch-lutherische Kirchenzeitung* (July 25, 1952), pp. 250—253.

15. Geert Sentzke, *Die Theologie Johann Tobias Becks und ihr Einfluss in Finnland*, I (Helsinki, 1949), pp. 5—38. For this book I am indebted to my friend, Prof. Uuras Saarnivaara.

16. Cf. Moritz von Engelhardt, *Valentin Ernst Loescher nach seinem Leben und Wirken* (2d ed.; Stuttgart, 1856), p. 25, for a concise delineation of these controversies in terms of the doctrine of the Church.

17. Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Eschatology of Tertullian," *Church History*, XXI (1952), pp. 108—122.

18. *Ordo temporum*, pp. 256—264.