

LECTURE IV

SCRIPTURE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

It is obviously difficult to treat a subject like this adequately in one lecture. Rather than attempt too much, I shall content myself with big principles, illustrated by examples here and there. Two approaches to the matter of interpretation, at opposite ends of the endeavour, seem to me to be in the way of an intelligent position. On the one hand, we often find a wooden literalism which is quite unappreciative of the subtleties of human language united with an excessive preoccupation with harmonization, with showing how this or that statement must be shown to be in agreement with that or this statement. The result is an incapability or unwillingness to operate with the text as it stands. The further result must be a sterile exegesis. On the other hand, the endeavour to accommodate Biblical texts to what moderns believe to be historically possible has made many modern exegetes blind to the evident meaning and intention of these same texts. In both cases there is a refusal to operate with the texts as we have them. In the presentation of the big principles of interpretation I am following the method of my old teacher, the late Dr. Martin Franzmann. This will make up the first part of the lecture. The second will deal with what I shall call the exegesis of the historical-critical method.

1.

Dr. Franzmann described exegesis as taking place in a union of three concentric circles: the circle of grammar, that of history, and that of theology. The language of the NT – I shall confine myself to this, but what I say here is true also of the Old – is really quite simple. For the scholar who has been brought up on Thucydides, the tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and the comedian Aristophanes, the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, coming to the NT is like going back to primary school. You come upon an occasional difficult word, a puzzling phrase. You have to read a little between the lines when reading Paul. Hebrews is more difficult, but compared with the great Attic writers, he's a breeze. But taken as a whole, the NT is remarkable for its simplicity, its lucidity. I think there is a very obvious reason for this. Apart from the fact that none of the writers of the NT were really literary men at heart or by profession, it is also true that they wrote for congregations, whose members, if we can trust St. Paul, were not the most highly educated members of the community, and what they wrote was written to be heard by most of them. The individual members did not all have their own copy of early Christian writings to study at their leisure, with concordances and synopses of the four gospels to help them. They had to understand what was written from hearing alone. I suppose this fact was partly countered by a further fact that they probably had more time to discuss with congregational leaders what had been read. But the writers as a whole must have been aware of the limitations on their style set by the hearing audience. You would never think this was the case with the NT when reading modern commentaries. One gets the impression from such men that every book simply bristles with difficulties, which I suppose is quite a good way to maintain the sacred quality of your craft or guild.

There is nothing really difficult about the language of the New Testament. It is simpler than most ancient books. There is also no secret or mystery or arcane quality about reading it or the books making it up. You read it, on the grammatical level, like any other book. After all, human beings wrote it and in writing it they made use of all the forms and aspects of the Greek language, written and spoken, that had been developed over the years, or, at least, of as many of them as they individually had made part of themselves. The most important thing about reading to understand, granted the presupposition that you know language at all, is that thoughts are expressed by words in sentences and sentences belong to paragraphs, and paragraphs to the whole piece of work. Individual words mean nothing by themselves, or rather, they may mean a number of different things. The range of meanings you discover either by dictionaries or by voluminous reading when in effect you become your own dictionary. Only the sentence, the combining of words into a subject

and what you say about it, gives you real meaning. And where one sentence is obscure, the context in which it is embedded fixes the meaning for you, that is, if the writer is not a completely incompetent, which no NT writer is. So understanding, adequate understanding, is the result of a reciprocal movement from details to a whole and from the whole to details. As this movement is repeated again and again, your understanding of a piece of writing and of an author becomes more and more complete.

More difficulty attaches to arriving at the history in which a writing is embedded. Modern books here causes no difficulty. For most of those we read we know the setting, for we are living now and know enough of the world to be completely at home with most references, with the world view of the writer, and so on. With an ancient book, the situation, of course, is far different. There we must make good use of the aids the scholars provide us. I think you can understand the Bacchae of Euripides and the Antigone of Sophocles without knowing anything of Greek life and religion. But how much you miss without this knowledge! So you can understand the NT on its own grammatical terms, but you will certainly miss a lot without knowing the OT in which our Lord and his apostles lived as we live against the background of the daily paper and TV; without knowing the history of Palestine in the Greek and Roman world; without knowing something of the life, customs, and religious life of the Jewish contemporaries of the writers of the NT; and, where the background shifts to the Gentile scene; without knowing something of heathen life and religion, social and political life of the early Roman Empire. Without historical knowledge like this, in fact, you are likely, even bound, to make serious mistakes, even actual blunders in the exposition of the NT texts.

When working on the level of grammar and history with our texts we are working at what I may call the descriptive level; Paul, Peter, John, and the rest are saying Such and Such; I understand what they are saying, I'm interested in it or I'm bored by it; it's strikingly put; and so on. At this stage, the NT is read like all literature of the past. But with the theological circle a completely new factor enters into or interpretation, and this is, finally, the decisive exegetical concern.

For the church of God, for all of us pastors and teachers of the LCA, the Bible is the Word of God in writing, one with all forms of the Word. It has the authority of God's word. As authoritative Word of God it calls on men, especially those who have been united with Christ by faith, to hear, to hear and obey, to hear and do, to hear and believe. Not man addresses us here but God – otherwise talk of God's Word is just that, mere talk without reality. At this point the Scripture parts company with all other writings of men. They can be criticized and judgement as to their value or non-value can be given. We may accept this part of what is said with alacrity, something else with less enthusiasm. On some points we may take a non-committal stand, and others we may reject outright, even with indignation and fury. But the Christian exegete stands under the Word, submissive to it. He does not put himself on a level with it, nor above it. He is not superior, nor equal; not fellow-teacher, nor teacher in the presence of a pupil. He is only and always a learner, one to be instructed. 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.' Without this attitude, no one can understand or explain the Bible as it cries out to be understood and explained. All one can do in that case is read it on a purely human level, rejecting its call for decision, for repentance, for faith, and then, consistently, giving it away altogether. There's lots more in the world to read. Why waste your time on something which you reject absolutely?

At this point, a number of thoughts expressed in a previous lecture on authority and the clarity of Scripture begin to exert their influence. There is unity of teaching in the Scriptures, and this unity as well as other things constitute its clarity. So we have certain old and well-tried rules concerning Biblical exposition which are part of the third, the theological circle. Difficult sentences or phrases are understood in the light of clearer ones. Hints of teaching, likewise, are related to and understood from paragraphs or sentences where the same matter is more fully or even fully discussed. One cannot build up a doctrine of election from the sentence 'Many are called, few

chosen' or even from 2 Timothy 1:9: 'who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago'. So we go to Eph. 1 and Rom. 8 for greater light and fuller instruction. So Scripture interprets Scripture. Many examples can be given of this procedure of seeing any passage in the light of others that deal with the same matter. It is no real objection to proceeding like this to point out that in many cases you may be explaining one writer by another, Peter by Paul, James by both. Only if the unity of proclamation is denied, can this procedure be faulted. But then, if unity is denied, then no one Gospel can be proclaimed either, and we might as well shut up shop and turn to other things. But if unity is granted, then the many voices of witness will not only sound forth their own special note, but each will be harmonious with the other. People who really agree can agree on many formulations of their agreement and they can agree on one. It is perfectly legitimate, granted the unity of the Biblical witness, to let one writer explain another, to allow one man's light to illumine another's lesser clarity.

All this comes to a head in the authority of the material principle in the exposition of Scripture. The rule is that no passage can have a meaning that is contrary to the Bible's own centre, and that is, of course, the Gospel, understood in the comprehensive sense of the Augsburg Confession. The material principle exerts what might be termed a negative control on exegesis. No exegesis can be right that is contrary to it. However, the material principle cannot compel the exact exegesis of a passage. It can only mark out the boundaries within which exegesis must move. Our Theses of Agreement assert this exegetical influence of the material principle in relation to divergent interpretations of Biblical passages. In connection with the problem of church fellowship we have the following agreed statements:

- (e) In case of differences in exegesis that affect doctrine, agreement on the basis of God's Word must be sought by combined, prayerful examination of the passage or passages in question.

If this does not lead to agreement, because no unanimity has been reached on the clarity of the passage or passages in question and hence on the stringency and adequacy of the Scriptural proof, divergent views arising from such differences of interpretation are not divisive of church fellowship, providing [sic! provided is the right form] that

- (i) ...
- (ii) ...
- (iii) such divergent views in no wise impair, infringe upon, or violate the central doctrine of Holy Scripture, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

[Doctrinal Statements...Lutheran Church of Australia, A2]

A further proviso in the same connection relates to the authority of the Confessions of the Lutheran Church in the matter of exegesis. Since Lutheran pastors by conviction hold that the Confessions are a true confession of what the Bible teaches, a compendium of the Bible witness, so a sort of concentrated exegesis, it follows that no explanation of any passage can run counter to the doctrine confessed there. The control exerted by the Confessions, in other words, is exactly the same as that exerted by the Scriptures, for they agree in their teaching and in their centre. So the fourth proviso reads:

- (iv) (provided that) nothing be taught contrary to the publica doctrina of the Lutheran Church as laid down in its Confessions.

[Doctrinal Statements... A3]

All of us here should make it part of our method when arriving at the meaning of a passage or book of Scripture to test it against the heart of our faith and resolutely discard any idea, no

matter how marvellous we think it is, which is plainly contrary to the faith to which we are committed and on the basis of which we have been ordained.

2.

The biggest danger I see to the principles of exegesis just outlined and to our use of them in our day is the prestige enjoyed by great scholars and the hesitation generally shown to disagree with them or the readiness to accept without criticism everything they may write. I have written about this a number of times. It seems, however, appropriate to do so again in this connection and set up in comparison and contrast with the method of a soundly grammatico-historico-theologico exegesis the exegetical method that is in line with the historico-critical study of the Bible. Lest anyone chooses to prevaricate with the term 'historical criticism' I shall herewith give a definition which I use personally and which I hold is what the proponents of historical criticism really mean by that term.

What are we to make of the Bible today? It has been the subject of an intellectual revolution, and this revolution has affected all branches of theology. Only one hundred years ago, most Christians of all traditions would have been quite content to describe the Bible as inerrant, infallible, and inspired equally in every part. ...

But in spite of shocked churchmen, horrified canons and protesting Evangelicals, the revolution moved inexorably on. It consisted in the simple but far-reaching discovery that the documents of the Bible were entirely conditioned by the circumstances of the period in which they were produced. The results of this discovery will become evident to those who read the pages of this volume. It meant that the books of the Bible were henceforward open to being treated precisely as all other ancient documents are treated by historians of the ancient world. No sanctity, no peculiar authority, no special immunity to objective and unsparing investigation according to the most rigorous standards and methods of scholarship, could ever again be permitted to reserve the Bible from the curious eyes of scholars. The Bible might well in future be approached by scholars with presuppositions about it in their minds, but not the presupposition that this book is a sacrosanct preserve whose historical accuracy and literal truth must be maintained intact.

[R.P.C. Hanson in The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology, Vol. 3, pp. 9, 10]

A definition like this immediately removes the theological circle. There is no Biblical authority controlling exegesis. There is no Word of God in the Bible, nor is the Bible in any sense the Word of God. This fact would immediately disqualify any exegesis produced on the basis of historical criticism. Which statement may seem to render any further discussion valueless. However, rejection of historical criticism as a principle does not necessarily mean rejecting every piece of information or every insight and discovery about the Biblical books, their language, and their history which historical criticism has made. There will remain, so I hold, judgements of some value to be made concerning the use of grammar and history which the student commonly finds in writers who are devoted to historical criticism. So I intend to furnish some examples of historico-critical exegesis as pointers to what you will find when reading and as warnings against reading uncritically.

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The first example concerns the importance taken up in much modern exegesis of supposed forerunners, sources, backgrounds of our Biblical texts, and the regular use made of this material to explain the Biblical text and throw light upon it.

Rom. 1:3, '[his Son], who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' is frequently taken by scholars to be a 'trace of a very early christology'. The antithesis of the two lines and the use of the term "appoint" make it clear that Jesus receives the dignity of divine sonship only with his exaltation and enthronement. Hence the two participles speak expressly of becoming rather than being.' We have here an adoptionist Christology. Now, this was not Paul's Christology. What he takes from the formula 'as the decisive thing for him, and, according to 1:9, as characteristic of the gospel, is only the title "Son of God", which for Paul belongs to the pre-existent one. By putting v.3a first and closing with the Kyrios title in V.4, he corrected the formula's view.' 'The formula performed the service of showing that he shared the same basis of faith as the Christians at Rome.' These quotations come from Kaesmann's Commentary on Romans, pp.12 and 13 in the English translation of Geoffrey W. Bromiley. As you can see, quite important exegetical conclusions are drawn from the thought that a pre-Pauline formula, an early-Christian Christology is being used by Paul.

Now, the arguments for such a belief are based on imaginary deviations of language from Paul's style. The pertinent linguistic facts may be listed: ginesthai ek is found only here and in Galatians 4:4; ek spermatos David is otherwise found only in 2 Timothy 2:8; the combination with this of kata sarka appears elsewhere only in Romans 9:5; horizein and huios theou [without an article] are unique; en dunamei occurs in eleven other passages in Paul; the combination pneuma hagiosunes appears only here; and ex anastaseos nekron is only here used of Jesus' resurrection; in 1 Corinthians 15 it is used four times of the general resurrection. The conclusion that is reached by one writer on the basis of this evidence is as follows:

This statistical result shows that, with the exception of en dunamei, all other words and phrases are unusual in Paul or not to be found in his letters. This fact can be adequately explained only [emphasis added] by the supposition that the apostle is making use of an existing piece of tradition.

This assertion hardly deserves the dignity of being called an argument. Reconstructions of the supposed tradition by Bornkamm, Bultmann, Schweizer all differ to a degree. However, I shall not dispute the claim. I only doubt its exegetical relevance. In short, even if the claim be completely true, it does not help us to understand the actual text any better. So, Paul has used a creedal statement. In using it he had adopted it. In using it without criticism, [maugre Kaesemann], he uses it in keeping with his own Christology. The whole is now his statement. If we had the original and not merely subjective reconstructions of it, it might be interesting to see what variations Paul introduced if any; but even then we should probably only be guessing at the reasons for the changes. In the Journal for Theological Studies of April 1973, in an article on this passage, a very pertinent comment occurs:

We can never be so certain about the earlier form of a saying or pericope as we can about the form in which it has come down to us. We can never be so certain about its earlier context as we can about its present context. And since exegesis and interpretation depend to a crucial degree on form and context, this means that we can never be so sure of a saying's original or earlier meaning and significance as we can about its present meaning and significance... It necessarily follows that the first task of the exegete and student of Christian origins is the uncovering of the meaning of the saying in the form and context in which it has come down to us.

The second example, or rather series of examples, illustrates form-critical exegesis. In Mark 2:1-3:6 we have a group of five incidents, closely related, often described as conflict stories. Representative opinions concerning these five stories are herewith presented. Mark 1.1-12, the story of the Man Sick of the Palsy, is really a fusion of two separate and unrelated stories, one

dealing with the healing of the paralysed man, the other dealing with forgiveness, the latter being a church addition to the former. So Nineham:

It is impossible now to discover the origin of these verses or the details of the process by which they came to be added, but the passage provides an excellent example of how a story might be moulded and developed during the stage of oral tradition in the interest of instruction and apologetics.

As for Mark 2:13-17, it is a paragraph made up by early Christians from [a] the report that Jesus practised the closest of fellowship [table fellowship] with despised publicans; [b] the problem which arose in the early Church whether such fellowship was also possible with 'sinners'; and [c] the double sentence of Jesus in v.17 [Lohmeyer]. The conflict over fasting (Mark 1:18-22) makes of v.20 an addition to the text by the church before Mark, an addition designed to justify the resumption of the habit of regular fasting, while vv.21 and 22 are often regarded as words of Jesus spoken in a different connection but added here by the church for some special purpose. The present position makes the principle inherent in them more radical than a question about a pious custom would warrant (Nineham, Vincent Taylor). However, Lohmeyer holds not only that Jesus never spoke the words of vv.21 and 22, but also that he could never have thought of them ('ganz abgesehen davon, dass schon die-ser Gedanke der Ueberwindung – i.e., of the old by the new – fuer Jesus unvorstellbar waere').

The two Sabbath stories are similarly treated. As for the first, Mark 2:23-28, it is held that 'it seems to consist of two (or possibly three) originally independent units bound together by unity of subject – this time failure to keep the regulations governing the observance of the sabbath' (Nineham). Verse 28 is very generally held to be an addition, and not a very suitable one, to the story, deriving from the church. The sudden appearance of the Pharisees in the cornfields is thus treated by Nineham:

Scribes and Pharisees appear and disappear just as the compiler requires them. They are part of the stage-property and scenery, like 'the house' and the 'the mountain'.

The final little section, Mark 3:1-6 is regarded by Bultmann and others also as an apophthegm (Pronouncement Story) formed in the early Palestinian Church. Verse 4 may be an isolated logion in the tradition made use of to formulate the organically complete story. Verse 6 is an editorial comment, which almost everybody would recognize as such, and does not belong particularly to this story or even to this group of stories.

To conclude the examples I refer to Joachim Jeremias and his view of the parables. They have all of them gone through changes, some of them major, during the course of transmission. What we have, then, is how the original parables were told or understood at the time when the Gospels were written. It is not good enough for the scholar, nor for the church, to be satisfied with this stage of the development of the parables. What is necessary is to get back to the original parable in each case. And much of the writing of scholars of the parables consists in just this, trying to find out what the parable was as originally told, how it ran, and what it meant. For example, in connection with Matt. 20:1-16, the obvious intent of Matthew to make the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard part of the context beginning with the question of the rich young man, and continuing on with a conversation with the disciples about riches and the kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 19:30 and 20:16, with the chiasmus and all!) is rejected partly because of that very attempt. What is wanted is not what the beginning church found valuable in it for its own situation and life but what Jesus meant when he said it. His position is quite sharply and unmistakably seen in this quotation from The Parables of Jesus, p.114:

These ten laws of transformation will help us to lift in some measure here and there the veil, sometimes thin, sometimes almost impenetrable, which has fallen upon the parables of

Jesus. Our task is to return to the actual living voice of Jesus. How great the gain is we succeed in rediscovering here and there behind this veil the features of the Son of Man! To meet with him can alone give power to our preaching.

I believe this whole historical-critical exegesis is to be rejected out of hand. My reasons briefly put are the following. The attempted reconstruction in every case is impossible to demonstrate as really true and correct. Reconstruction without evidence is not a proper exegetical or historical method. Where no further evidence is available we have to be content with what material we have and work with that. Reconstructions are regularly unreliable, for the reconstructions of equally eminent scholars are often in conflict and even contradictory.

This being the case, why do we have such a wealth of exegesis of this kind? And my thoughts on this question for what they are worth are offered to you as the conclusion of this lecture. For one thing, the NT is such a small book that there is a limit to what scholars can find out about the text and its meaning. There must come the time when you can only repeat. What [is] more likely, then, than that the time is here when we must take up for investigation --- speculation rather --- what lies behind the text. There is ample scope here for the imagination and for doctorates in theology for some time, or even for the production of a new book which because of its difference and originality might score something of a hit and put some dollars in the pocket-book. More importantly, the miraculous material of the NT is impossible, granted our modern historical presuppositions: what we have not seen happen or have not experienced cannot have happened. So there arises the necessity to reconstruct what happened with the elimination of the miraculous. One story after the other obviously has to be understood differently, and the most natural thing is for the scholar to see most of them as having arisen from the desire of the early church to support either their faith or their practice. This is illegitimate method. Where you do not know from solid evidence any more than you have had handed down, there you have no right in reason or in historical method to invent. You have only the right to accept the story you have or reject it. It amazes me that so many Scholars continue to busy themselves with a book which their own

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conclusions have shown to be unworthy of trust and then expect the church to accept with some sort of belief the completely new book they have produced.