

WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM A LUTHERAN EXEGETE
OF THE BIBLE?
(HERMENEUTICS AND CHRISTOLOGY)

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I am consumed by a burning desire to understand the witness of my forebears in the faith in the Christian and Jewish communities, the New Testament and the Jewish Tanakh, our Christian Old Testament. I try to live my life in and with and through the power of the Spirit which guided my forebears and me.

Growing up in a devout Evangelical Lutheran home (very orthodox and pious) I began to ask questions concerning faith, Bible, dogmas and theology very early in my life, i.e, about the Fall of 1941 when I was 9 years of age.

My father (an Austrian from Vienna) was an “Evangelischer Diakon,” a preacher, teacher and minister for German congregations in Yugoslavia. In 1941 we lived near the city of Banja Luka. The German Army had occupied Yugoslavia. From now on, we in the “German” community had to greet each other with “Heil Hitler” and no longer with “Grüß Gott,” “Guten Tag.” I was deeply disturbed, because I knew that Jesus was my Lord and not Hitler. So, every time I said “Heil Hitler” I was convinced that I was betraying Jesus.

So, I began to ask questions concerning faith, Bible, dogmas during this period of my life. The hunger for answers to my questions led me to the study of theology (at the University of Vienna, Austria [1953-1959] and Heidelberg, Germany [1956/57]) and then also to specialized studies of Hebrew and Semitic languages (at the University of Wisconsin [1966-1970]) in order to be enabled to understand, especially, the ancient witness as stated in the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Old Testament.

To understand this witness I have found to be utterly necessary in order to grasp the meaning of the excitement of Jewish and Gentile Christians alike in their statements about the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth as reported in the New Testament.

In my studies of the Scriptures there is a constant flow from the OT to the NT and from the NT to the OT witness - always the one illuminating the other.

In the following comments I let myself be guided by Norman Habel's "Basic Principles," in his study *The Form and Meaning of the Fall Narrative: A Detailed Analysis of Genesis 3*. St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1965, pages 1-3.

(1)

My work on exegesis of the Scriptures is governed by my faith through (1) Jesus, the "Christ," who was resurrected by YHWH and who is "coming again"; (2) my "door" to YHWH; (3) the engrafting point, which connects me, the wild olive branch with the cultivated olive tree, the people of God; (4) the word, *logos*, the divine communication from God, which is brought to life (made flesh and blood = incarnate) by Jesus and all those who live according to the will of God from the time of Abraham until today.

I understand *the common denominator* in all "Christologies" to be that through Jesus the will of God becomes, *again*, also transparent to us, and to me, i.e., that Jesus becomes the *way*, the *door* to God, the *guide* to YHWH.

I understand the excitement of the early Jewish and Gentile Christians, who showered Jesus with many different names and epithets: Messiah, King, Servant, Teacher, Highpriest, Lord ... and even "god." Like Thomas, I too, can use the phrase (which is, of course, blatant high-treason for any worldly power which claims my loyalty): "You, Jesus, are my lord and god and not the emperor in Rome, not Hitler, not Stalin, not ..." I have learned, a long time ago, that the word "god" does not always refer to YHWH, but to various powers which claim or impose on us ultimate allegiance. Scripture does not proclaim that Jesus is the flesh-become YHWH. But through Jesus the communication from YHWH, the word, *logos* from YHWH to me, a Gentile, becomes clear. All the metaphors showered upon Jesus simply make it clear that I, as a Gentile, am now also invited into the presence of YHWH.

For my Jewish brothers and sisters the covenant, the Torah (=Teaching) has the same function as "Christ" has for us Gentile Christians, namely, an invitation to a life and conduct according to the image which YHWH has for all of us humans. God images us as royalty, ambassadors of YHWH's will, stewards of God's creation for God's sake (and not for our sake!). This invitation is, of course, also valid for Jewish people. But not only for Jewish or Christian person, but for all humans ... and *that* is the content of our (Jewish and Christian) mission to the world.

I have been nurtured in the faith mainly by my father and in various Christian communities in Yugoslavia, Poland, Austria and in the USA. Before I accepted a call to ordination in the Church (January 1961) I had purposely committed my self to the Christian way of faith and life.

(2)

All of Scripture is for a Gentile Christian (but not for a Jewish religious person) immediately related to Jesus and his work (*solus Christus*). This is the center, or better the focal point for us. The center is always YHWH. Through Jesus we focus on YHWH. Through Jesus and his work I know that I am just and right in the eyes of God as a repentant sinner. I now that I am justified by faith and utter trust in God through Jesus and that I am now also a part of the family of

God/YHWH. I, as a Christian, through baptism and an obedient, sanctified life. A Jewish person through circumcision and an obedient life guided by the Torah (=Teaching). There is no “reason” why God should forgive me: I am just and justified purely by grace, God’s grace through my faith and trust in God through Jesus (*propter Christum*). I am now empowered and free to live a life of sanctification no matter what the cost and always ready to repent and always ready to extend the forgiveness which I have received to those who need it and ask it of me.

(3)

With the eyes of faith then it is easy to see that Scripture always interprets Scripture (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*).

N. Habel states it this way:

“Understood in its primary sense this rule means that the clear passages of Scripture, namely those which display the teaching of justification by grace through faith in all its force and glory, must be used to interpret and evaluate those portions of Scripture where this truth is obscure. In short, the right distinction between Law and Gospel must be rigorously maintained in all biblical exegesis (Apology IV 5).”

The clearly understood passages in the Scriptures help me to interpret and evaluate the passages in the Scriptures where the teaching of the Scriptures is not immediately clear.

Lutherans have a particular problem of, quite often, misunderstanding the distinction between “Law” and “Gospel.” Many times “Law” is equated with the “Old” (as an “Obsolete”) Testament, while “Gospel” is equated with the “New” (as the only valid) Testament. Such a misunderstanding leads to anti-Jewish thoughts, attitudes and actions and, finally, to the attempted “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem” by the German National Socialists at Auschwitz (during World War II).

I understand that Thomas Mann is supposed to have said: “The passages in Scripture which I do not understand do not disturb me, but the passages which I do understand, they disturb me.” (I have to find the correct quote and reference one day).

(4)

Christians have accepted the Jewish Scriptures (which Jewish people know as the Bible or as the Tanakh, which is an acronym for Torah=Teaching, Nebi'im=Prophets, Kethubim=Writings) as the “Old” Testament. The word “Old” has caused many problems. Instead of understanding it as the basis, the foundational promise, assurance and covenant from God, many Christians have understood “old” to mean “obsolete.” But, it is impossible to re-new a promise, a covenant if and when the original promise is no longer valid. “New” in the term “New Testament” means Re-newed Testament, with an extension to include not only Jewish people, but also non-Jewish people into the promise and covenant, which was made by God to Noah, Abraham, Moses ...

But, because we Christians have the experience with “Jesus” first we tend to read the OT in the light of the NT. There is nothing wrong with this as long as we realize what we are doing.

Again, N. Habel states this in traditional Lutheran terminology:

“The Lutheran exegete also follows the norm that ‘the Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament,’ that is, in the light of Christ’s advent as the fulfillment

of Gods' eternal plan of salvation. The ultimate context of the Old Testament is the New Testament. This principle is abused, however, when we insist that the New Testament interpretation or application of a given Old testament passage is always the only meaning which God intends us to discover in that Old Testament passage."

The NT helps us Christians to experience and see the eternal plan of God's wishes, hopes and dreams for all humans. God's plan of salvation is clearly outlined in the Tanakh/OT. It has been clear from the very beginning: our God saves us from bondage (exile, death); God creates us humans as one family; God creates all that is and asks humans to care for the creation *in God's stead* (and not for our own purposes); God wants all humans to live according to the vision and image, which God has, (=image of God), namely to live as humans, fully aware of the dignity, responsibility and freedom which God bestows on all.

In order for us humans to know the rough outlines of God's wishes for us God provided us with instructions and guidelines, i.e., God gave us the Torah, the Teaching and Guidelines in the Scriptures. God inspired Moses, the prophets, and many others, including Jesus, to continue to guide us and open our "blind" eyes so we can see the the loyalty and care of God and implement and continue the healing of the "lame" so they can jump for joy, continue the awakening of the "dead" so they can live a life alive for God's intentions in this world.

(5)

As an exegete of the Word of God, of God's communication with us humans through the Scriptures, I *must* have an attitude of utmost humility before the text.

The text is ancient, the language(s) (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) strange, foreign, oriental, exotic. The times, situations, customs, geography, etc. are different from mine. If I want to hear God's word, as spoken to believers before me, then I *must* use any and all and every tools at my disposal (or even invent new tools, "hearing aids") in order to be enabled to listen to the word, message, challenge and invitation by God. I *must* have an attitude of subservience, of humility, before the text which was written to lead all humans in the way of communion with God.

But in order to *practice* an attitude of subservience I *must*, of course, know the biblical languages. Without such knowledge subservience to the Scriptures is not possible for an exegete. N. Habel says it this way:

The Lutheran exegete must assume an attitude of subservience to the Scriptures as the inspired word of the living God which is designed to lead men (Note: this was written before inclusive language) to salvation. In so doing the exegete will always seek to determine the message which *God* intends to communicate in any given passage."

(6)

As an exegete I must listen to the God-intended meaning (*sensus literalis*) and not be satisfied with a surface meaning (*sensus literae*).

N. Habel states it this way:

By seeking to ascertain the intended sense of a given passage the Lutheran exegete is applying the principle *sensus literalis unus est*. This Latin formula stand in antithesis to

the medieval method of discerning the fourfold meaning of each passage of Scripture. *Sensus literalis* has reference to the God-intended rather than the surface meaning (*sensus literae*) of the biblical text.

The temptation is often great to be satisfied with a superficial, a *literal* meaning of words and phrases and forget that all language is metaphorical. Just think of the words and phrases which we use when we are “in love.” Lovers know that words, most of the time, are not meant literally. The result of a “fundamentalist” interpretation of Scripture is a superficial, cheap, distorted, misleading and wrong understanding of the message from God.

(7)

In order to be able to listen to the God-intended meaning of a text I, as an exegete, *must* be familiar with all of the tools available to me as a teacher of the Scriptures and as a preacher of the message of Scripture in the times and places where I live.

These “tools” are meant to unlock the meaning of the ancient and exotic texts. The first, and basic, tool is a knowledge of the biblical languages. See, above, under point 5.

(8)

The use of the tools of exegesis includes the *usus loquendi*, that is the desire of the exegete to understand the terms, concepts, forms, poetic forms, etc., ... of a biblical text. It includes the understanding of the languages, cultures, geography, historical situation, the audience which is addresses, etc.

Exegesis has the goal to make the exegete become as if he/she were part of the original audience to which the word was addressed. Only then do we, as exegetes, have a chance to hear the gracious message of God in the Scriptures.

If such an attitude (as described here) does not grasp the exegete, then Scripture remains a *dead* book. Even worse, grave misunderstandings of Scripture can lead to murder (murder of the body and reputation) even among so-called believers.

In my own life I have been hurt deeply, most often, by fellow believers, by Christians (men *and* women!). In a few instances I was mistreated so badly, that I was ready to give up on Christianity and on life.