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978-0-521-09293-7 - The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation

G. R. Evans

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The Protestant sixteenth century saw changes in the study of the Bible which had huge consequences. A new textual criticism, an acceptance of translations into the vernacular, new theological preoccupations, brought elements in the Bible's teaching which had not been so apparent before to a lasting prominence. It was felt that a necessary break was being made with the traditions of the late Middle Ages, that there was much which had to be rejected in the scholasticism of previous generations. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote to his friend Martin Dorp in May, 1515:

What connection is there, I ask, between Christ and Aristotle? Between the petty fallacies of logic and the mysteries of eternal Wisdom? What is the purpose of this maze of disputations? How much of it is deadening and destructive by the very fact that it breeds contention and disagreement! Some problems, of course, should be investigated and others definitely settled . . . But on the other hand, there are many problems which it would be better to pass over than to examine.¹

The reformers and the pioneers of the new criticism were not by any means always in agreement. Erasmus accuses Luther of a lack of the 'courtesy' of Christ himself: that 'evangelical spirit' which 'has its own prudence, . . . its own courtesy and gentleness'. 'What has been accomplished,' he asks, 'by so many harsh little books, by so much foolish talk, by so many formidable threats, and by so much bombast, save that what was previously debated in the universities as probable opinion may be hereafter an article of faith, and that then indeed it may be scarcely safe to teach the Gospel, while everything is seized and misrepresented because all have been exasperated?'² Controversy breeds hard opinions and extreme views. One result was an artificial crystallising of the picture sixteenth century reformers had of the scholastics and their opinions. In certain respects, these opinions were brought into sharp focus; a good deal else was obscured.

The temper of Erasmus's own mind was more moderate and more subtle in its selection of helps from the past. He was heir to a long

tradition of Italian humanism which had run quite comfortably beside scholastic endeavour for a century or two. He sees no objection to using 'certain comparisons between the divine and the human', for did not the 'parables have something in common with the fables of the ancients? Evangelical truth sinks in more pleasingly and takes a firmer hold in souls when dressed up in these little enticements than if it is simply stated as naked truth, an effect Augustine certainly strives for in his work on Christian doctrine.³ That in the end marked the character of the change: something was taken and something left. Matthew Poole, writing in the seventeenth century, approaches Romans with the same preliminary questions as Aquinas had asked – why Paul was given his name; where Romans comes in the sequence of the Pauline Epistles – and with some of his answers drawn from the same tradition.⁴

This study seeks to show something of the direction of endeavour of the last mediaeval centuries in work on the Bible, and to point towards some of its results in the debates of the sixteenth century. There was, undoubtedly, much in the outcome that was new and revolutionary and a sense of making a fresh start. But the extent to which mediaeval scholarship led the way has often been underestimated, and the condemnation of the scholastics has tended to sink with them a proper recognition of what they achieved as students of the Bible. Sixteenth century writers were themselves not always quite clear what it was they were putting behind them. They were less clear still perhaps how much they were taking with them.

I have tried to tell the story up to the end of the twelfth century in an earlier volume.⁵ This is its sequel. It can be no more than an interim study. A vast quantity of commentary material remains in manuscript. We are particularly ill-informed about the fifteenth century. But the main lines of development seem clear enough, and perhaps there is something to be said for setting them out as the skeleton of that bridge which must be made from the Middle Ages into the sixteenth century if we are to understand the nature of Reformation and Counter-Reformation thinking about the Bible.

Certain influential aspects of the late mediaeval study of the Bible have had to be neglected in order to bring the problems raised by the Bible's language to the forefront: the liturgical use of the Bible; the way the Bible was used to support new political movements; the relationship between Bible study and canon law; the mystics' approach to the Bible; the influence of the new Platonism. (In the areas of technical discussion with which this study is chiefly con-

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cerned Aristotle is dominant.) These aspects can only be touched on here. I hope in due course to continue the story in a study of the sixteenth century and its immediate environs in which the work of the humanists on the original languages and the great questions of reform can be given greater space and weight. On the road to Reformation certain features can be seen ahead. They remain glimpses until we can come up to them and see them at close quarters, but it is important to understand the lie of the land first. This book attempts to provide a map of the later mediaeval scene and a pointer to what lay ahead, as questions of logic gave way to questions of language.

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PART I

SCRIPTURE'S DIVINE WARRANT

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1

‘SCRIPTURE HATH FOR ITS AUTHOR
GOD HIMSELF’

1

During the sixteenth century the Church in the West ceased to be a single body of the faithful. The Protestant reformers brought about a division in which lay many further divisions. Thomas Stapleton (1535–98), the English Catholic polemicist, sneers at the multiplicity and confusion of protestant beliefs:

Now, so ye be no priest, ye may be a Sacramentary, an Anabaptist, or a Lutheran; and then a Civil, a Zealous or a Disordered Lutheran, among all which ye may choose of what sort in each branch ye list to be; whether ye allow two sacraments with the Zealous Lutherans, three with the Leipsians or four with the Wittenbergers; whether ye will be an Osiandrin, a half-Osiandrin or an Antiosiandrin.¹

In the web of politics, social and economic change and religious and theological developments which brought about this fragmentation one continuous thread is visible from at least the beginning of the fourteenth century. Those scholars and preachers and demagogues (Marsilius of Padua, Wyclif and the Lollards, the Hussites, for example) who challenged the authority of the Church as it was then institutionally constituted, held up the authority of the Bible in its place and argued that the interpretation of Scripture was no matter for the Church to regulate if by the Church was meant the Pope and his cardinals. Instead, the individual must read for himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The study of the Bible had always formed the basis of Christian theological endeavour; so much so that it was not until the twelfth or thirteenth century that the word ‘theology’ came into use in the schools of the West alongside ‘the study of the Sacred Page’. The changes of the late Middle Ages in the way the Bible was interpreted did not altogether supersede the old approach but they altered the emphasis and threw new light on the whole enterprise. Their importance in the events of the sixteenth century is perhaps best understood if we take the work of late mediaeval Bible study as a whole, old and

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new together, and try to get a picture of what it was that the reformers thought they had discovered.

Discovery it seemed to be. His first encounter with a copy of the Bible, which he had – like most mediaeval students – met before only in pieces, had a powerful impact on Luther:

On one occasion he came across a Latin Bible such as he had never seen. Greatly astonished, he observed that it contained far more passages, epistles and gospels than were customarily expounded in the postils and from the pulpits. Since all was so new to him he began to desire earnestly that God would sometime give him a copy of this book.²

Biblical study in this spirit of discovering a new world focussed and brought together otherwise disparate elements, many of which were far from new,³ in the discontent of the reformers. It made sense of much that was being said. For Luther, its force and power was the greater because he was deeply offended by what he saw as a young man in Rome: the cynicism of those celebrating Mass, for example.

But for all its directness and air of cutting through a muddle of accretions to the truth, Bible reading was still a matter of close, detailed study. Luther again: he was troubled by the word ‘righteousness’ in the first chapter of Romans, because he was haunted by a sense of sin, even though he led a life as a monk which he could not see how to make better. Then it seemed to become clear to him that the word has a ‘passive’ sense in this passage, that is, that it refers not to God’s punishment of the sinner but to his justification of the sinner by his mercy. Luther was filled with joy at this discovery. ‘My mind ran through the Scriptures,’ he says, ‘as far as I was able to recollect them, seeking analogies in other phrases, such as the work of God, by which he makes *us* strong, the wisdom of God by which he makes *us* wise’, and so on.⁴ To his friend and superior Staupitz he wrote in a letter of 1518, ‘This your word fixed itself in me like a sharp arrow of the mighty. At once I began to compare it with the Scripture texts on repentance. And behold, I had a most pleasant surprise! Statements from all sides began to stand forth in harmony, and, plainly smiling, to gather round this dictum, so that the word “repentance”, which had been the most bitter term in the whole Bible to me, . . . now became to me the most sweet and pleasant-sounding word of all.’ He did not stop at comparing texts. He looked into the Greek and ‘discovered that the original meaning of this Greek word *metanoia*, from *meta* and *nous*, which mean “afterwards” and “mind”, is “coming to one’s right mind again” . . . Next I saw, as I

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made progress, that *metanoia* can also be derived from “over again” and signify a change of mind and affection, indicating, it seems, not only the fact, but also the method of the change, that is, the grace of God.⁵

2

Scripture hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth. Therefore, the authority of Scripture may be proved from the author himself, since the authority of God himself shines forth in it.⁶

The English Calvinist and contentious Cambridge academic William Whitaker (1547–95) takes a position which had come to be central to the thought of the reformers: that God not only provides the only sure witness to the truth of the Bible, but that he does so exclusively in what he says in the Bible itself.

The first of these ideas, that God is his own authority, is one thing, and by and large caused no difficulties in the Middle Ages.

The fifteenth century advent of the new Platonism, although it threatened to turn the theory of knowledge on its head, did not disturb this picture. Rather, it reinforced it. Aristotle's epistemology tends to draw knowledge from sensation, Plato's from the inward teaching of God.⁷ Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) describes the authoritative divine illumination like this in an aside on Scripture in his commentary on the *Philebus*:

It is not without great mystery that Paul attributes all the acts of a living being to the divine word, making it penetrate the spirit and the soul and the body, making it distinguish between affections and thoughts and see and hear all. It's as if God himself were there in his words even when they're represented through the prophets.⁸

The second notion in Whitaker, the principle of *sola scriptura*, is another and more controversial matter. To assert that God authorises for belief only what he says in the Bible and that he does so directly to the individual reader, is to challenge the Church both as official interpreter of the Bible and as having authority to decide questions of doctrine. These implications gave a coloration to the debates of the sixteenth century protestants so strong that it sometimes obscures other elements in the mediaeval discussion of Scripture's authority which went into the forming of the reformers' ideas. Of these old and deep threads the clearest and most continuous with mediaeval work, and with the patristic tradition to which fresh direct

reference was now being made, was the principle that God 'authorises' his own Scriptures, and we must begin from that.

3 The image of God

The Trinity, says the thirteenth century Franciscan Alexander of Hales, is revealed in three ways: by teaching (*doctrina*), as through authoritative writings (*ut per auctoritatem*); by means of created things, which are the works of the Trinity; by the inspiration of faith (*inspirazione fidei*). In the last, God works directly. The others may involve human agents.⁹ Behind those human agents stands God, authenticating what he chooses to teach through men. The doctrine that God bears witness to himself like this¹⁰ is a commonplace of early mediaeval exegesis. On it rests the mediaeval notion of Biblical authority. Still in the thirteenth century, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas has in mind the first two methods when he explains that Paul's preaching was authenticated not only by the arguments he used (*doctrina*) but also by signs which confirmed that God was speaking through him.¹¹

This account of authority was not unchallenged. English Wyclifite writings protest about the tendency for 'images' to become objects of worship in themselves, as the 'rude wittis of many' forget that all wonders are God's work and attribute them to statues or pictures.¹² Some of the Lollards themselves were not free from confusion: one Margery Baxter, tried for heresy at Norwich in the third decade of the fourteenth century, believed that the honouring of images was wrong because they contained devils, who fell with Lucifer and entered into the *ymagines* which stand in churches and dwell there.¹³ Margery Baxter's notion reflects the long tradition of heretical dualist teaching going back to the Gnostics, which was interfused with Lollardy at a number of points; it represents the view that no material thing can body forth a God who is all spirit, and that only spiritual beings in whom something has gone fearsomely wrong can manifest themselves in ways the senses can perceive. What the senses show us is likely to mislead us in the search for God. In the earlier instance, the 'rude wittis' of simple men are led astray in this way, so that they fail to see God because the image itself strikes their imaginations so forcibly that they do not look beyond it. This questioning of the divine use of images runs as a counter-current in patristic and mediaeval thought in both East and West. But the usual view was that of Alexander of Hales: that God speaks in words in his

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Scriptures and provides evidence for what he says in what can be observed in the natural world, in events and objects of various sorts; he confirms the truth of what he says by giving men an inner certainty, the gift of faith.

Raymonde of Sabunde describes the 'two books given us by God', the Book of Nature and the Book of Holy Scripture. The first was given to man at the creation of the world, and is available to everyone, a book which cannot be altered, into which no mistakes can creep. The second only the literate can read and it can be corrupted and misinterpreted. The two ought to be in perfect agreement, and so they are to the man who is *naturaliter rationalis*, and open to instruction (*Theologia Naturalis*, printed 1502, Prologue).

The idea that God teaches and confirms his teaching by signs still seemed sound to Melancthon and Zwingli in the sixteenth century. Melancthon explains that from the very beginning God set up external signs pointing to his Word. Adam, Abel, Seth and Noah sacrificed lambs by divine revelation to signify the Saviour to come, whom God himself would sacrifice for mankind. God himself told the Jews to circumcise their children to remind them of the sacrifices the patriarchs had made. In our own time he gives signs and pledges of divine grace in the sacraments.¹⁴ His intention is to make it possible for those he calls to be sure that he calls them; he is demonstrating the authority of his Scriptures. In a sermon given to the Dominican nuns of the Oetenbach convent in 1522, Zwingli asks what is meant by saying that man is made in God's image. He looks at the way in which 'eyes, ears, a mouth, a face, hands and feet are all ascribed to God in Scripture'. This does not tell us that God has a body like ours. In terms much like those used by Gregory the Great in the sixth century to explain the same principle, Zwingli shows how these members are mentioned to help us understand in familiar terms the works of God: we see with our eyes, and so Scripture ascribes eyes to God to indicate his perfect knowledge and perception of all things. It ascribes ears to God because he 'hears' all our prayers, a mouth, because he reveals his will by his Word, a face because he gives and withholds grace like someone looking towards or away from us. It is apparent from these metaphorical references to the outward signs of the soul's operation in man that man's resemblance to God, the point at which he can be said to be made in his image, lies not in his body but in the soul, which acts, in its creaturely way, like the divine spirit. It is 'in respect of the mind or soul that we are made in the image of God' (and here Zwingli men-

tions Augustine's account of the 'trinity' of memory, will and understanding in the mind of man). Thus God speaks to us in the Word of Scripture, confirms what he says by using metaphors and images and things familiar to our bodily senses, and enlightens the mind of man inwardly by 'shining' on his understanding. Like Melancthon, Zwingli is sure that this demonstrates God's wish to make what he says clear to men and to give them reason to accept its authority: God wanted to give his message to man in a gentle and attractive way, for it is the nature of that which is presented in parables and proverbs and riddles to appeal to men's understanding and bring them to knowledge. Images are helpful to human understanding and reassuring.¹⁵

'The Lord of mercy . . . has raised everywhere, in all places and in all things, his ensigns and emblems, under blazons so clear and intelligible that no-one can pretend ignorance in not knowing such a sovereign Lord; . . . who has, in all parts of the world, in heaven and on earth, written and as it were engraved the glory of his power, goodness, wisdom and eternity. St. Paul has therefore said quite rightly that the Lord has never left himself without a witness; even among those to whom he has never sent any knowledge of his word.'¹⁶

The mutual testimony borne to one another by the words of Scripture and the signs and miracles which witness to their truth (and are knit together by God in men's minds by faith) is nowhere more characteristically exemplified in Scripture than by the working out of prophecy's fulfilment.

The most popular and influential teaching in this area was undoubtedly that of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132–1202). He looked at the Bible as a history of God's work, stretching not only back to the beginning but also to the end of the world, by prefiguring what was to come. He saw patterns of numbers and events repeated and he postulated that when they occurred again they would signify the imminence of the end of the world. But his popularity owed a great deal to the fact that he touched a chord in politically-minded interpreters, and he falls outside our immediate concern with the Bible's language.

In two further areas the subject of prophecy carried over from mediaeval to Reformation thinking as a topic of lively debate. Successful prophecy implies that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophet and that the will of God inescapably brings about what it wills; the sign is proved true in the event. The discussion of contin-