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The bible and its exegesis in the controversies about reform and reformation

Originalbeitrag erschienen in:
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If you talk about the sixteenth-century Reformation emphasizing that the controversy over the Bible, over its interpretation and over its theological importance was a central subject of the denominational arguments, you can be sure you tell your listeners nothing new. In every good handbook on church history you can read that the German Reformer Martin Luther—according to his own statement—found the answer to the tormenting question 'How can I find a merciful God?' by a new interpretation of Rom. 1.17, where it says: 'The righteous man lives through his faith' (Hab. 2.4). The Reformer's singular reverence for the Holy Writ as the source of all theology was reduced to the conclusive formula of 'Sola-Scriptura' and confronted with the Catholic Church's principle of tradition. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, which was finished in 1534 with the Complete Bible and whose effect can hardly be overestimated, had since 1522 served as means of communication between the theology of Wittenberg University and the masses.

The consequences of the Reformer's focus on the Holy Writ, concerning both the methods and the contents, have been frequently and intensively examined, for example, in Leif Grane's impressive book Modus loquendi theologicus: Luther's Fight for the Renewal of Theology (1515-1518), published in 1975. In contrast to this, Catholic Church historiography has only in places analysed the critical and creative function of the Bible in the sixteenth century. In so doing, emphasis has been placed on leading humanists, and no exhaustive study of the exegesis of the time has been made. An apologetically conditioned mistrust of a one-sided emphasis on the Bible may have had an obstructive effect in this.

My contribution to this symposium consists in the attempt to take
up aspects of the history of Reform and Reformation of the Early Modern Times under the title of ‘The Bible and its Exegesis in the Controversies about Reform and Reformation’, an approach which, in my opinion, should make clear some creative elements of the Bible.

As it is impossible to treat such a subject exhaustively, two points of emphasis are chosen: in the first place, remarks about humanism, its relationship to the Bible and to Catholic Reform; in the second place, the controversy over the Bible and its interpretation during the period of the Reformation. The separation of humanism from Reform and Reformation, which has here been practised for methodological reasons, is not a real division. On the contrary, to my mind, the single elements merge into each other far more than has been stated in historiography.

I. The Starting-point: Humanists and Holy Writ

The humanism of the fifteenth/sixteenth century was a great educational movement. Paul Oskar Kristeller has described it as follows: ‘The humanist profession as a whole was a scholarly and literary profession’. Following this definition, philology and the cultivation of the ‘bonae litterae’ were centres of humanist interests. People devoted themselves not only to pagan antiquity, but also to the Bible and to the old Christian literature. Especially the German humanists, such as Peter Luder, Rudolf Agricola and Jakob Locher, pleaded for a new theology which orientated itself to the Bible and the Early Fathers, but no longer to the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. This form of humanism found its unquestionable climax in Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536) whose genuine religious interests have been identified more and more distinctly during the last decades. Together with the English Thomas More, the French Lefèvre d'Étапles (Faber Stapulensis) and the German Johannes Reuchlin, Erasmus is the main representative of a movement which has been called ‘biblical humanism’ since the publication of the work of the Dutch scholar Lindeboom in 1913. Characteristic of this ‘biblical humanism’ is the interest in the genuine, original text of the Christian sources of faith, that is, the Bible; in the Early Fathers; its accentuation of the classical languages Latin, Greek and Hebrew; knowledge about the close relation between language and truth; and care for an interpretation appropriate to the Bible. On this
foundation, the humanist Hermann van dem Busche developed in his book *Vallum humanitatis* (The Rampart of Humanity), published in 1518, what was almost a programme for a new theology. Its intention was to refer to the original language for biblical exegesis and to make use not only of textual criticism, but also of rhetoric, poetry, history, and knowledge of the real facts. It was typical of humanism that for van dem Busche classical education and theology belonged indissolubly together and should both be taught at the university.

This new system of methods to understand the Bible was developed most impressively by Erasmus of Rotterdam in his two works: 'Ratio seu Methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram Theologiam' and 'Methodus', the consequences of which we shall deal with later on.

The demands for a new theological method would have made no sense, if the humanists had not themselves been concerned with the essential foundation of all theology, the text of the Bible. Therefore, the system of methods for understanding the Bible and working on the text belong indissolubly together, as the example of Erasmus shows. Already in 1505, he had edited the Annotationes to the New Testament by the Italian humanist, Laurentius Valla, in which the Vulgate was criticized. In 1516, Erasmus published the critical edition of the New Testament to which he added the Paraclesis and the 'Methodus' as prefaces and guiding introductions; at the same time he himself produced a new Latin translation. The second edition of the Greek New Testament of 1519 to which he added the 'Ratio' was later on used by Luther as a basis for his September Testament, the German translation of the New Testament which he made on the Wartburg in 1522.

It is beyond question that the work on the text of the Bible and on its interpretation was not a neutral, purely philological exercise, but resulted in a development of extremely grave consequences. Creative and critical forces were set free which could change theology and religious practice.

This creativity of the Holy Writ was nothing new. Already the Poverty Movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had found in the Bible its ideal of the unconditional Imitation of Jesus, an ideal which was inseparably connected with the sermon and with radical poverty, and which the members of the movement tried to realize concretely in life. The Spiritual Movement of the Franciscan Friars
orientated itself later on to the historical speculations of Abbot Joachim of Fiore who, among others had been inspired by the Apocalypse of the New Testament. With John Wyklif and Jan Hus a religious movement started which also appealed to the Bible, was basically critical of the Church, and aimed at a change of heart.

Biblical humanism differed from such an immediate religious-practical transposition of the Holy Writ in two important respects: in the first place, it worked on the actual biblical text and did not take it for granted; and, in the second place, it found its way to the contents of the Writ through its own approach, the rhetorical-scholarly method previously mentioned. The creative elements, thus released, had necessarily to develop in directions other than earlier Bible movements had taken. In the sense of the general direction of humanism this happened, first of all, on the level of education and rhetoric, concretely of theology, sermon, catechesis etc. and, secondly, on the level of religious practice.

These problems had not yet been clearly recognized by the contemporaries of Erasmus, but they could already sense the heart of the matter. Therefore, it is not astonishing that, from the start, his edition of the Bible and his humanistic demand for three languages in theology were controversial. The Italian prince, Alberto Pio Carpi, rejected the Christian biblical humanism entirely, and a theologian of Louvain, Jakob Latomus, turned against Erasmus' system of methods to understand the Bible in a comprehensive work under the title of 'De trium Linguarum et studii theologici ratione dialogus' in 1519. On one hand, the Archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht von Brandenburg, admired the work of this great humanist. In a letter dated from September 13th, 1517, he wrote: 'What could have been desired more in our times but the improvement of the editions of the NT'. The Ingolstadt theologian Johannes Eck, on the other hand, already criticized the attempts at interpretation by the great humanist who in Eck's opinion bound the Holy Writ too strongly to its time and environment.

What announced itself during these first years of controversies soon developed into two fundamental standpoints which, however, were interlocked for a long time. One of them was a Catholic Reform movement which in spite of all criticism of theology and piety remained within the Catholic Church. The other was a movement which, as a final consequence, destroyed the borderlines of the Old Church and involuntarily created a new church; reform became
Reformation. This result becomes even more complicated if you consider the circumstance that also within the Reformation, in spite of the common recourse to Holy Writ, fundamental divisions took place. Therefore, the principle of Sola-Scriptura and the text alone could not be the determinative factors. For that reason, hermeneutics and the theological pre-understanding were soon to play a most decisive part in the differences about the Bible.

II. Three Models

As it is impossible to enumerate in a short time the whole complexity of the exegesis, its improvements, its controversies and its consequences, three models—as a scheme—will be presented into which the developments of that time can be divided. There are the following points: 1. a philology without consequences for theology; 2. the biblical-New Testament Reform programme of biblical humanism; 3. the controversy over the Bible and its interpretation during the Reformation.

1. A Philology without Consequences for Theology

As an example of the model which is here to be characterized we can take the above-mentioned Johannes Eck (1486–1543).23 His letter to Erasmus had already revealed how small his agreement was with the biblical humanism. Although this negative attitude of Eck was to grow even stronger over the years,24 it should not lead to the conclusion that he did not recognize the worth of the Holy Writ and of the classical languages. Eck, who was three years younger than Luther and belonged to his bitterest enemies, had lectured on theology in Ingolstadt since 1510 and was quite interested in reforms. Several of his publications which deal explicitly with the Bible group themselves around the years 1537 and 1538. A linguistically bad Bible translation of his own, an interpretation of the twentieth psalm in the Vulgate and a comprehensive exegesis of the prophet Haggai appeared in print.25 Beyond that, he had delivered numerous exegetical lectures since 1520. They have only been preserved in manuscript and not been interpreted till today.26 In the following, his 'Explanatio Psalmi Vigesimi' may be introduced as an example.27

First of all, it can be observed that the humanist textual criticism as well as the new Latin and German translations, which were numerous at that time, no longer allowed Eck in 1538 to assume that
the Vulgate was correct and valid. He had to prove its textual foundation philologically and defend it. As a control instance he accordingly used the Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos of Hieronymus as well as the new Latin translations of Felinus Aretius (pseudonym of Martin Bucer), Felix Pratensis, Konrad Pellikan and Sebastian Münster.28 To come to a judgment of his own, Eck consulted the Hebrew psalter and the Targum. It is amazing to see how extensive his knowledge of the Jewish exegesis is, a knowledge he had probably acquired through Johannes Reuchlin.29 On the basis of the rabbinic Bible, which was edited in Venice by Daniel Bomberg, he quoted the following Jewish commentaries: Ibn Esra, David Kimchi (David ben Josef, 1160–1235, Narbonne) and Rashi (Salomon Jizchaki).30 In the system of his interpretation, the Rabbis are consulted in a twofold manner: first of all, philologically concerning their variant readings and their explanations of the Hebrew language. As the Vulgate is decisive for Eck, he decides himself basically for such interpreters who stand nearest to the lectio ecclesiastica. Secondly, he also uses the theological interpretation of the Rabbis as far as they represent the Messianic interpretation of the psalm. That is the case with the Targum and with David Kimchi. But on the whole, Eck does not only understand the psalm as Messianic prophecy, but as the direct prediction of Christian christology. This decision, which follows the traditional Christian interpretation, finally prevents his entering into a serious controversy on the rabbinic theology. Instead, he is guided by the interpretations of the Early Fathers, of the Middle Ages and contemporary scholasticism, especially by the Thomist Cajetan.

Just as little as it came to a serious controversy with the Rabbis, he does not succeed in making his extensive philological work fertile for the essential theology of the psalm. In this, he equals his teacher Reuchlin whose purely philological exegesis ‘de verbo ad verbum’, concerning the seven psalms of penance, Eck knew well.31 Although the decisive step of a transposition of philology to theology was not achieved, this first model can be defined as significant, in that as far as future biblical exegesis was concerned it did not close the gate on the reason for the present biblical text; rather, it opened it.

Essentially more extensive than Eck’s exegesis was a reform programme which was represented by the biblical humanists. Here
we find, to a high degree, creative elements of the Bible and its interpretation. For that purpose, Erasmus serves as an example, not that there have been no other original representatives of biblical humanism.

Already the Greek edition of the New Testament and the new Latin translation of Erasmus were sufficient to relativize the theological consequences which since then had been drawn from the Vulgate text, and to call in question the scholastic-Latin exegesis. Added to that, came the recourse to the Early Fathers, especially to Origen and Hieronymus, as well as a distinct focussing on Christ, concerning the interpretation of the New Testament. The ‘Ratio... ad veram theologiam’ contains a whole theological reform programme and was placed in front of the edition of the New Testament as an introduction. Here Erasmus developed his hermeneutics and his understanding of the Bible.

The focussing on Christ is developed in such a way that Jesus is seen as teacher and educationalist. The true theology understands the life of Jesus as ‘doctrina pietatis’. In an ethically understood succession Christian life realizes itself. For the interpretation of the Writ, the particular contemporary circumstances have to be observed, the forms of language, the geography, the historical-political situation, etc. Erasmus does not regard the Writ as clear in itself, but sees many dark passages in it. He consciously relies on the Fathers’ exegesis and on the system of spiritual sense of Scripture as represented by Origen.

Therefore it is no wonder that he carried the Platonic philosophy and its sharp separation between the visible and invisible into his exegesis. This happened strikingly in ‘Enchiridion Militis Christiani’ (Handbook of the Militant Christian), published for the first time in 1503. Concerning the Pauline distinction between ‘flesh and spirit’, it is said: ‘What the philosophers call reason, that is called by Paul sometimes spirit, sometimes inner man, sometimes law of the conscience... You read in Paul of the outer man who is depraved and of the inner man who is renewed every day. Plato has postulated two souls in man. Paul creates two men in the same man’. Priority is given to the interior and the invisible, the spirit is interpreted platonically and so misunderstood. Concerning this exegesis, this leads in consequence to a depreciation of the outward ceremonies and so, as well, of the Old Testament and all religious practice. The inner law of love is confronted with the outer law. A spiritualized
ethical piety characterizes the reform programme offered by Erasmus for Christian practice.\textsuperscript{37}

An extraordinarily passionate controversy developed when Erasmus applied his theory of accommodation, i.e. the teaching of the assimilation of the Revelation to the particular time and to the inner law of love, to the dissolution of marriage. Already Laurentius Valla and Lefèvre d'Étaples had taken divorce into consideration on account of the biblical results, and they had criticized the text of the Vulgate.\textsuperscript{38} Erasmus went more deeply into this position in his interpretation of Mt. 5.31 Mk 10.4 and especially 1 Corinthians 7.\textsuperscript{39} In his opinion, Jesus had admitted the dissolution of marriage in case of 'hardness of heart'. Quite in the sense of his anti-legal attitude, the law of the indissolubility of marriage, which is in force as such, has to be repealed when salvation is at stake.

Later on, Erasmus wrote that he had wanted only to draw attention to such a possibility.\textsuperscript{40} But because here the canon law and the whole practice of the Catholic Church were called into question, it was no surprise that this 'slight remembrance' evoked an exceptionally loud controversy, in which Jakob of Hochstraten, Stunica, Edward Lee and Johannes Dietenberger took part.\textsuperscript{41} Concerning this point, his exegesis could not assert itself. Of importance, perhaps, was the fact that the Reformers no longer accepted marriage as a sacrament, and therefore its significance had to be increased on the Catholic side.

What we have recognized by this example, was already understood by contemporaries: In the work of Erasmus on the Bible and in biblical humanism could lie a dangerous explosive, especially if you consider that his works were soon translated into German and printed in large quantities.\textsuperscript{42} Erasmus himself had never thought of overstepping the border-lines of the church. But as early as 1521, a picture was published with the title 'The Divine Mill'. Here he was presented as a miller producing the flour out of which Martin Luther could bake his bread.\textsuperscript{43} The inner connection between biblical humanism and the Reformation, which has not been fully analysed until the present day, was suggested in that image, while the qualitative difference between Luther and Erasmus was also visualized.

3. The Controversy on the Bible and its Interpretation during the Reformation

With the Reformation and its principle of Sola-Scriptura the
differences over the Bible and its interpretation reached a new level. While the exegesis of many biblical humanists was still orientated to the tradition of the Old Church, a liberation from it—connected with many other factors—led to a theology which finally was to destroy the frame of the Old Church. At this point of decision, the humanists separated themselves into different groups, with, however, a common conciliatory attitude as their characteristic feature. Among this group were, for example, Melanchthon, Martin Bucer and Erasmus himself.

It is impossible to enumerate all the negative and positive elements of the controversies during the Reformation. A few examples must suffice. They are chosen in such a way that the positive and negative sides of the dispute can be recognized.

The first example is taken from a literary conflict between Martin Luther and Hieronymus Emser from 1521 to 1522. Emser was court chaplain in Dresden, influenced by humanism and Erasmus, an expert on the Early Fathers, and therefore he felt himself—however mistakenly—able to conduct a theological dispute with Luther. One of the points of the controversy was the interpretation of 2 Cor. 3.6. The text says: Τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ (‘For the letter kills, but the spirit makes alive’). Erasmus had related this passage to the polyvalent sense of Scripture and named the letter as the literal sense and the spirit as the spiritual sense. At the same time, he related the Old Testament to the letter and so depreciated its significance. This complex interpretation was soon employed very simplistically against Luther and the Reformers during the controversies. Emser and others reproached them by maintaining that they knew only the dead letter, i.e. the literal interpretation. They ignored the spirit, which came to full effect in the interpretation of the church and its tradition. Emser’s dispute with Luther had a creative effect in that the Wittenberg reformer was hereby forced to define his own teaching on the spirit and the letter. Luther emphasizes that there is only one meaning to the Holy Writ. The literal and the spiritual sense, which refers to Christ, may not be separated. Therefore the passage 2 Cor. 3.6 should not be related to the interpretation of Holy Writ, but to the sermon on the law and to the sermon on mercy. ‘The letter is God’s law in the Old Testament, which does not make people better, but even worse.’ According to Luther, this law gives no mercy. ‘But the spirit gives mercy to the heart and renews man.’ In this way,
Luther succeeds in giving the literal text of the Bible a new worth and succeeds in overcoming the teaching of the fourfold sense of Scripture. At the same time, he could bring out the central teaching of the law and gospel through this passage.

But the subject of hermeneutics was in no way settled. Even in 1529, the Swiss theologian Johannes Buchstab wrote a book of his own with the title *That the biblical works have to have a spiritual interpretation.* There he defended the spiritual sense which goes beyond the literal text. It is decisive for us to see that hermeneutics was recognized as a problem, which could be of great moment for the history of exegesis on a long-term basis. Luther and Erasmus are thought to have taken up the most profound standpoints. They had in common the connection between the spiritual sense and Christology but, in contrast to Luther, Erasmus held firmly to the multiple senses of Scripture during his lifetime and refused to accept the teaching of the 'Claritas Scripturae'.

The second example is taken from an exchange of letters by two humanists which was published under the title: *De Sacrae Scripturae dissonis translationibus* in 1542. Here the Augsburg Canon Konrad Adelmann von Adelmannsfelden asked the Augustinian Canon Kilian Leib in Rebdorf near Eichstätt why the different translations of the Bible differed so much from each other, concerning the text. Leib, a good hebraist, answered with arguments from the Old Testament. He stated two reasons: first, each translation is formed by a basic theological decision which has been made in advance. Secondly, the Hebrew language presents philological difficulties. As evidence for the first thesis, he uses Luther's teaching of justification, 'sola fide', which is the determinative perspective for the translation by Luther. The Hebrew language, however, is difficult in a twofold manner: because of its punctuation, which can be different even with the same number of consonants, and because of the manifold meanings of one and the same word. As a paradigm, he mentions 'Ruach', which could be translated either by 'wind' or 'spirit'.

It is no mere accident that Adelmann and Leib were humanists. In their letters, they pointed out a problem to which humanism had already directed its attention for a long time. It was the relationship between language, translation and interpretation. They were conscious of the circumstance that each translation was, as well, an interpretation which had to be made clear to the reader in a convincing linguistic form.
The controversies over the Bible deepened this knowledge during the Reformation. The criticism of Luther’s September Testament of 1522 (which lasted for years) is especially applicable to this thesis. The crucial point of the dispute shifted very quickly from the actual state of the text to the glossing of the text and to the prefaces which Luther placed in front of the individual biblical books. Leib’s opinion can already be observed during the twenties: people argued more about the basic theological decisions and the hermeneutic rules than about the actual text. The first comprehensive criticism of Luther’s translation, written by Emser, proves this. Later on, other Catholic theologians such as Johannes Dietenberger, Georg Witzel and Johannes Eck argued similarly. Therefore, the following subjects run through the particular controversies like a red thread: Claritas Scripturae, Writ and Church, Canon of the Writ, Law and Gospel, Writ and Tradition, Spirit and Letter. In his own way, Erasmus of Rotterdam indicated this problem when he wrote against Luther in ‘Hyperaspistes’ in 1526: ‘By the way you always fail in your attempt to impose on us your interpretation as God’s word’.

With these necessarily very short remarks the interconnectedness of the controversy on the Bible and its interpretation in the sixteenth century becomes once again evident: It is the complex interweaving of language, methods of interpretation and theological content as well as their consequences for the image of the Church and the Christian Life.

Here the controversies showed themselves to be creative by developing further the work on the Bible and by deepening reflection. They proved themselves to be obstructive when their denominational fixation blocked the view and set limits which could not be overstepped without penalties.

NOTES


7. See the following notes.


10. Vальн humanitatis D IVbff.

11. Vальн humanitatis A Vbff.


13. Laurentii Vallensis ... in Latinam Novi testamenti interpretationem ex collatione Grecorum exemplarium Adnotationes apprime utiles (edited, with a


15. Cf. Raeder, p. 271 (see n. 3).


22. Letter from Johannes Eck to Erasmus, February 2, 1518: ‘Primo autem omnium, ut hinc exordiar ... Istis enim verbis innuere videris Evangelistas more humano scripisses ... Ad aliud ascendantus. Acta Apostolorum elucidatus cap. X adnotasti haec verba: “Tamen etiam cum Graece scribunt Apostoli, multum referunt ex proprietate linguae suae” ... Hoc minus sobrie a te homine Christiano fore scriptum plerique opinantur ... Postremo pluribus praeteritis ... hoc ex meo addam, qui Augustini doctrinam eminentissimam in primis post sacrum canonem ac Ecclesiae sanctae decreta suspicio et veneror. Idcirco dislicet mihi iudicium tuum, quod de Augustino super Joanne affers; “Impudentissimum” asseris “alterum alteri comparari”’ = Allen n. 769. The answer of Erasmus to Eck dated May 15, 1518 = Allen n. 844.


26. See, for example, Universitätsbibliothek Munich: 2° Cod. 37, 8° Cod. 8, 8° Cod. 9 with lectures of Eck on the Psalms, Malachi, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus etc.

27. For useful discussion, see the introduction of Walde (see n. 25).


32. Cf. n. 12; see also M. Hoffmann, Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung der wahren Theologie nach Erasmus von Rotterdam, Tübingen (1972).

33. Cf. Reventlow (see n. 1), pp. 68-89.

34. Cf. Reventlow (see n. 1), p. 75.


40. Letter from Erasmus to Hochstraten, August 11, 1519, Allen IV n. 1006, p. 49: 'Cum viderem Christi spiritum mire pro tempore dispensare suos afflatus, et animadverterem quanta sit autoritas Ecclesiae, submonebam, si qua fieri posset, ut tot hominum pereuntium saluti consuleretur'.


45. Cf. Augustijn (see n. 8); Robert Stupperich, *Der Humanismus und die Wiedervereinigung der Konfessionen*, Leipzig (1936).


47. Erasmus, *Novum Testamentum* (see n. 39), col. 759: '...et intelligas novum Testamentum spiritum, vetus litteram. At Apostoli delecti sunt ut spiritum administrarent, non ceremonias Legis tantum ac praecepta Legis, quae suo more litteram vocat'; *idem*, *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (ed. Welzig, see n. 35), p. 80: 'Erue sensum spiritalem, iam nihil suavius, nihil succulentius'; p. 84: 'Sed uti divina scriptura non multum habet fructus, si in
littera persistas . . . '; p. 90: ' . . . neque ad spiritalem scripturarum cognitionem elaborant . . . non Paulum magistro astruentem: Littera occidit, spiritus est, qui vivificat'. Cf. Reventlow (see n. 1), pp. 74f.


50. Smolinsky op. cit., p. 263.


54. Cf. Dietenberger (see n. 41); Georg Witzel, Annotationes in Sacras Literas, Mayence (1537); Eck, Enchiridion (see n. 48).