

REFORMATION ARTICLES BY RAEDER, OPITZ, AND WICKS

“The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther”

Siegfried Raeder (1929 – 2006) was a professor of Church History in the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen. In addition to his primary research interest in the biblical interpretation of Martin Luther, he was also very interested in the relationship of Christianity and Islam through history.¹ The present article explores Luther’s work as a theologian, interpreter, and translator of the Bible, particularly focusing on his work in the Old Testament.

After earning a doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg in 1512, Luther devoted himself almost exclusively to studying, teaching, and translating the Bible (365). He began his teaching career by lecturing on the Psalms from 1513 to 1515 (366). Raeder notes that in this task, Luther’s exegesis was particularly influenced by the work of Jerome, Augustine, and Cassiodorus (367). In addition, and speaking more generally of Luther’s work as an interpreter of Scripture, Raeder points out that Luther was also greatly influenced by “three great representatives of the humanistic movement”—Johannes Reuchlin, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, and Erasmus of Rotterdam (368). But while Luther was sympathetic with certain aspects of this movement, he also “diverged” from it in various ways, most notably in his relentless quest to discover “the centre of the biblical message” (369). And for Luther, of course, this center was the Lord Jesus Christ. As Raeder observes, “The central issue in Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms is: Christ himself . . . and faith in Christ” (372).

¹ This information has been taken from a news release of Professor Raeder’s death by the University of Tübingen at <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/qvo/Tun/tun132/tun132-nachrufe-2.html> (accessed October 13, 2011), as well as from the biographical information in the list of contributors to *Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Vol. 2, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 1070. Please note: all future references to this text will be given in parentheses in the body of this paper.

However, when we come to his second series on the Psalms (1519-1521), Raeder describes Luther's interpretation as "'evangelio-centric' rather than christological." By this he means that Luther's interpretation is now geared more toward "the Gospel of Christ than . . . to the person of Christ" (377). In Raeder's estimation, this shift brought Luther "to a new understanding of history" and "the historical interpretation of the Old Testament" (377).

Interestingly, Luther's exegetical work was predominantly concerned with the Old Testament (381). He viewed the task of Moses as revealing "sin by Law" and ruining "all the presumption of human ability" (383). When this task has been properly performed, the person despairs "of himself" and looks for "divine grace in Christ" (384). But once a person has Christ, "the Law, even the Decalogue, comes to an end" (384). Christians are still to observe the Ten Commandments, but not because they were given by Moses. Rather, we are to observe them because they agree "with nature" (386). In Luther's view, the remainder of the Old Testament is simply a commentary and "illustration of the Law of Moses" (386).

After discussing Luther's Old Testament interpretive work, Raeder briefly pauses to make a few critical comments. In light of the modern historical-critical method, he says, we can no longer follow Luther in seeing "certain texts as explicit prophecies of Christ" (394). But he does not think that this should bother us much, for not even Luther read the Old Testament "solely within the narrow limits of prophetic christology." Indeed, over the years even Luther himself attempted "to understand the Hebrew Bible . . . in the context of its own history" (394).

The essay concludes with a discussion of Luther's work as a translator of the Bible (395). Although there had been translations into German prior to Luther's, Luther was the first to translate from the Hebrew and Greek text, rather than the Latin (395-96). The New Testament, the Pentateuch, and the Old Testament historical books were all completed relatively quickly (397-98). The poetic and prophetic books, however, proved to be much more challenging. By the time they were completed, twelve years had been spent translating the Old Testament (399). Although Raeder implies that the translation (which is also an interpretation) is hampered by the fact that Luther lived and worked before the advent of the historical-critical method, he

nonetheless views it as a positive sign that it is grounded in the conviction “that the Old Testament comes to its fulfilment in Jesus Christ” (406).

**“The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of John Oecolampadius,
Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin”**

Peter Opitz, the author of this essay, is a professor of church history in the Institute of Swiss Reformation History at the University of Zurich.² His research interests are primarily directed toward the history and theology of the Reformation and he has published extensively on the work of both John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger.

Opitz begins his discussion in this essay with the exegetical and hermeneutical work of John Oecolampadius (1482 - 1531). Oecolampadius, who “is generally regarded as the Reformer of Basel,” is best known for his commentary on Isaiah (408-09). Desiring “to let the prophet Isaiah speak in the present,” Oecolampadius was guided in his interpretative work by two primary principles (410). First, he regarded Christ as the primary aim and content of Scripture. Second, he believed that everything in the Old Testament was written “for our instruction” (410; see also 1 Cor 10:6-11). The goal of Scripture, then, is to reveal Christ and shape us into His likeness.

Although Oecolampadius employed the medieval distinction of the four-fold sense of Scripture in his own interpretive work, he nonetheless firmly believed that any “allegorizing” of the text must be carefully built on the “foundation of the literal sense and the historical events reported there” (410). This led him to make much of typology, seeing various persons and events of Isaiah’s day as types of “Christ and his kingdom” (411). In light of all of this, Opitz sees in Oecolampadius’s dedication of his commentary “to the Basel municipal council” a clear “summons to a ‘Reformation’ of the city according to God’s word” (412).

² This information has been taken from Peter Opitz’s faculty webpage at the University of Zurich website here: <http://www.irg.uzh.ch/personen/opitz.html#17> (accessed October 14, 2011).

Opitz next turns his attention to the interpretative work of Huldrych Zwingli (1484 – 1531). Zwingli regarded the entire Bible as “Gospel,” that is, “a salutary word of God pointing to Christ” (416). As the word of God, the Bible is the great liberator from all merely human words and commandments (415). The Bible is good news for those who are weary and heavy-laden.

Beginning in 1525 Zwingli, along with some of his colleagues, began a systematic presentation and exegesis of the Old Testament, which had as its primary goal the “equipping” of “the Zurich clergy to read the Scriptures in the original languages and to expound them” (420). This meeting became known as the *Prophezei* and had the “prophetic” purpose of expounding the word of God in the Old Testament (421). According to Opitz, Zwingli’s exegesis of the Old Testament “can be analyzed in three steps: establishment of the ‘literal sense’, the explanation of its meaning for the congregation in the present, and the ‘allegorical’ exegesis, which in a hidden way points to Christ” (423). Although Zwingli warned against the “arbitrary” use and abuse of allegorical exegesis, he nonetheless believed it was warranted (and even necessary) when “the natural sense of Scripture” does not yield “a clear sense that is fruitful for us” (425-26). Such exegesis, however, should still be “oriented to Christ” and it should not transgress “the clear sense of Scripture” (426-27).

The final section of this essay concerns the work of John Calvin (1509-1564). With the publication of his 1532 commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia*, Calvin placed himself “clearly in the early French humanist movement” (430). The interpretative method which he employed in writing this commentary would remain largely unchanged as he applied himself to the interpretation of Scripture (430). In both instances, Calvin is primarily concerned “to recover the original ‘meaning’ of the . . . text,” which “is found by understanding the text in its grammatical and historical context and the intention followed by its author” (433). This, in Calvin’s estimation, is the primary aim and “duty” of the exegete (440).

The goal of the expositor is slightly different. The expositor aims “to draw a ‘useful teaching’” from the work of the exegete (441). Calvin conceived of this primarily in terms of teaching the congregation to both “trust in God” and to go one’s way “in fear of him” (442).

Even more important, however, was to help people recognize that everything in Scripture in some sense pointed to Christ (442). As Calvin puts it, “every doctrine of the law, every command, every promise, always points to Christ” (447).

Interestingly, however, the practical outworking of this perspective looks rather different in Calvin’s interpretative work than it does in his contemporaries who shared the same view. As Opitz observes, “Compared with most of his contemporary Christian exegetes, including Bucer, Calvin is . . . very reserved in christological exposition and opposes ‘forced’ interpretations that fail to take the context into consideration” (448-49). However, by reading the Bible in light of the “one covenant,” and by seeing it as a history of liberation “that is grounded in . . . Christ,” Calvin is able to see the whole of these writings “from the perspective of the sovereignty (*regnum*) of Christ that is taking place in time” (449). And this, notes Opitz, enables Calvin to have a thoroughly christological interpretation, even if he often resists concluding “that the Old Testament witnesses refer explicitly to Christ” (449).

“Catholic Old Testament Interpretation in the Reformation and Early Confessional Eras”

Jared Wicks is involved in theological research and writing as a member of the Jesuit community at John Carroll University in Ohio.³ Throughout his long career he has been particularly interested in the theology of Martin Luther.⁴ As the title implies, in the present article he is concerned with the interpretation of the Old Testament by Roman Catholics in the Reformation and early confessional eras.

Wicks begins with a discussion of the Old Testament interpretative work of Tommaso de Vio, or Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534). Cajetan wrote commentaries on several Old Testament

³ This information has been taken from a faculty webpage of John Carroll University at <http://www.jcu.edu/jesuit/people.htm> (accessed October 16, 2011).

⁴ For more information, see the interview with Wicks posted here: <http://www.hereiwalk.org/2010/10/23/an-interview-with-jared-wicks-s-j-catholic-scholar-of-luther/> (accessed October 16, 2011).

books. He was primarily interested in the “literal sense” of the text, although he would also permit a “mystical sense” if this seemed appropriate or necessary (619). He followed Jerome in rejecting the canonicity of the Apocrypha, believing that the Christian Old Testament canon should be identical with that of the Hebrew Bible (621-22). His work “raised suspicions of error,” especially among members of the Parisian Theology Faculty, and it was largely ignored for the next century and a half (622-23).

Wicks next discusses the decrees of the Council of Trent, particularly as these have bearing upon the extent of the Old Testament canon, the status of the Vulgate, and the interpretation of the Bible. He observes that Trent, in contrast to Cajetan, decreed that the Apocryphal books should be accepted “as sacred and canonical” (626). The Council also decided that the Vulgate should serve as “the official text for public use in lectures, disputations, and sermons” (628). But this decree, at least for a time, met with a great deal of dissatisfaction, for the Council acknowledged that the Vulgate was in need of correction and it was generally recognized that the original Hebrew and Greek texts would render a much-needed service in making such corrections (628-29). For these reasons it struck many as odd to make the Vulgate the “official text” of the Roman Catholic Church.

Regarding the issue of biblical interpretation, the Council was concerned to keep individual interpreters “within the bounds of the perennial and present meaning of Scripture held by the Church” (630). In particular, interpreters were not to promote readings of the biblical text that ran “counter to positions of patristic consensus” (630). As Wicks observes, this decision served to steer post-Tridentine interpreters “away from Cajetan’s focus on the literal sense . . . toward spiritual interpretation, the recovery of messianic foreshadowings, and possibilities of multiple meanings” (630).

Finally, after briefly discussing “biblical studies in the early Jesuit order” (636-39), Wicks concludes his essay with a brief examination of six Catholic authors who wrote in the wake of the Council of Trent (639-48). Here he reviews the work of Sixtus of Siena (639-40), Francisco Foreiro (640-41), Andreas Masius (641-42), Juan Maldonado (643-44), Benito Perera

(644-46), and Robert Bellarmine (646-48). Each of these writers, with their different interests, contributed something of importance to the study and interpretation of the Old Testament.

Conclusion

These articles showcase the Reformation as an age of conflict. This conflict was not primarily concerned with issues of race, sex, or class. Rather, it was grounded in differing views regarding the authority and interpretation of the Bible. In many respects, the opening sentences of G. R. Evans' article, "Scriptural Interpretation in Pre-Reformation Dissident Movements," capture the appropriate tone for all the articles in this series. She writes, "A number of the attitudes to the study of Scripture found in the pre-Reformation dissident movements eventually emerged as core questions in the Reformation debates of the sixteenth century. The most crucial of these was the setting of the authority of the Bible against the authority of the Church" (295).

As Evans makes clear in her article, we see the authority of the Bible being used to challenge the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in such pre-Reformation dissident movements as the Waldensians (296-305), the Lollards (305-12), and the Hussites (312-18). But we also see it in the work of such early Reformers as Martin Luther. And this, of course, represents just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to issues of conflict over the authority and interpretation of the Bible in the Reformation era.

Not only did the Reformers use the Bible to challenge the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, but Roman Catholics used the Bible (along with their traditions) to challenge the authority of the Reformers. Roman Catholics also debated issues of biblical interpretation and the status of the Vulgate with one another at the Council of Trent (see the article by Wicks, pp. 624-36). Similarly, Reformers like Luther and Zwingli debated with one another over the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. And "radical Reformers," like the Anabaptists, debated with the Reformers over the issue of infant baptism (see the article by Goertz, pp. 586-88). These are just a few examples, of the many that could be cited from this week's reading, which reveal the Reformation to be an age of conflict over the authority and interpretation of the Bible.