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Listening to John and Paul on the Subject of Gospel and Scripture*

J. LOUIS MARTYN
Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York

I. READING AS LISTENING

Let me begin by inviting you to take a brief trip, chronologically back in time a third of a century to 1957, geographically across the Atlantic to the delightfully low-key university town of Göttingen. For me it was a Fulbright year; and the main attraction of Göttingen was the presence there of two very different New Testament scholars, Joachim Jeremias and Ernst Käsemann. The year left indelible marks on me from both men.

At the moment, however, thinking about the year 1957-58 takes me back to two other *Neutestamentler*, Walter Bauer and Ferdinand Christian Baur. And pondering aspects of the work of the two Bau(e)rs leads me, in turn, to two observations about the learning process that has claimed my allegiance over the third of a century since 1957, and that, more than anything else, has led to several changes of mind.

The first of these observations has to do with Walter Bauer. He had been in Göttingen when Jeremias arrived from Greifswald in 1935. In 1957 this grand old man, then 80 years of age, was still living there, in retirement, and the multiple aspects of his legacy were much in evidence. The one that became most important to me is not to be found in any of his writings, so far as I know. It was a piece of

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circulating oral tradition, which had it that Bauer had propounded an hermeneutical rule to be used in interpreting early Christian documents:

> On the way toward ascertaining the intention of an early Christian author, the interpreter is first to ask how the original readers of the author's document understood what he had said in it.

It is, at the minimum, an intriguing suggestion. In formulating it, Bauer presupposed, of course, that a thoughtful reader of a document in the New Testament will be concerned to learn everything possible about the author's intention, a clear indication that the famous essay of Wimsatt and Beardsley on the intentional fallacy had not yet made its way across the Atlantic.[1] For Walter Bauer, however, one begins one's reading not by inquiring after the author's

intention, but rather by asking how the author's text was understood by those who first read it.

I should admit that when I initially heard this rule, I was not uncontrollably enamored of it, having developed a certain allergy to discussions of hermeneutics. In retrospect I can see that it eventually got past my anti-hermeneutical bastion because of a striking experience one had while sitting in a seminar offered by Jeremias. Others will remember, as I do, one's amazement, the first time one saw Jeremias stride to the blackboard, open his New Testament to the Gospel of Mark, and, holding it in one hand, begin with the other hand to write the text in Aramaic, as though having given it no thought beforehand. Instant translation, or, as he thought, instant retranslation.

To one who had struggled with Aramaic under the genial tutelage of Marvin Pope, it was an amazing feat. Before long, however, I began to sense a head-on collision between Jeremias's act of instant translation and Bauer's rule, and I had no great difficulty in sorting the matter out. The exegetical stance of Jeremias clearly involved an act of interpretive hybris, for in that stance the first hearers of the Gospel of Mark received no attention at all, the hearers, namely, whom Mark had in mind when he wrote his tome in the Greek language. It seemed no accident, in fact, that the initial hearers of Mark's gospel and the evangelist himself disappeared simultaneously.

Thinking of Bauer and Jeremias, one could say, on the pedestrian level, that one colleague was having a mighty brief affair with a Greek lexicon on which another colleague had spent a large portion of his lifetime. At a deeper level much more was involved, namely the question whether both initially and fundamentally the New Testament interpreter necessarily has a responsibility that somehow involves the original hearers, *in order* to be able to discharge his responsibility to the author who had those hearers in mind as he wrote. An affirmative answer seems to me to be demanded. Bauer's rule is one of the chief things I have learned and tried to practice over the years; it has more than once led to a change of mind.

The second observation from 1957 is focused on the labors of an earlier Baur, the one without the "e," Ferdinand Christian. I had already read fairly widely in Ferdinand Christian Baur's writings, but the year in Göttingen drove me back to

[1]The essay of Wimsatt and Beardsley is itself widely misconstrued in our time, as Richard B. Hays has recently remarked, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989) 201 n. 90. Cf. W. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

his work in a decisive and unexpected way. That happened primarily as a result of truly formative—and very enjoyable—debates with Ernst Käsemann about the Gospel of John. We found ourselves in considerable disagreement, but the disagreement was focussed on a question we agreed to be crucial: Where does the document we are reading belong in the strains and stresses characteristic of early Christian history? With regard to every early Christian document that was one of the chief questions for Ferdinand Christian Baur; during the Göttingen year it became a truly burning question for me.

What needs to be added is the fact that the period in Göttingen also led—with the passing of time—to a conscious confluence of the hermeneutical rule of Walter Bauer with the historically dynamic, interpretive framework of Ferdinand Christian Baur. The confluence is not hard to explain. First, one thinks again, for a moment, of the rule of Walter Bauer.

On its face Bauer's rule may seem quite simple, even simplistic. Pursued both rigorously and poetically, however, the rule proves to be immensely complex and immensely rich. For it involves all of the imagination and all of the disciplines necessary for a modern interpreter to take a seat in an early Christian congregation, intent on borrowing the ears of the early Christian neighbors, in order to hear the text as they heard it. To mention only a few of these disciplines, the exercise of Bauer's rule involves:

1. Resurrecting the hearers' vocabulary, as it is similar to and as it is different from the vocabulary of the author;
2. Straining to hear the links between the hearer's vocabulary and their social and cultural world, as those links are strengthened and assailed by the author's words;
3. Ferreting out the way in which certain literary and rhetorical forms are likely to have worked on the first listeners' sensibilities;
4. Trying to match the first listeners' ability to hear a fine interplay between figure and narrative, and on and on.

But how, then, does Walter Bauer's rule lead one back to the labors of Ferdinand Christian Baur? If the interpreter's initial step is the attempt to hear an early Christian document with the ears of its first hearers, it follows necessarily that, in addition to the partial list just given, one will have to hear the text as it sounded in the midst of the strains and stresses in early Christian theology that were of major concern to those first hearers.

One listens to an early Christian writing, as far as possible, with the ears of the original hearers; and, listening with those ears, one hears not only the voice of the theologian who authored the document in question—and not only the voices of, say, various itinerant teachers in rural Palestine, and of various street preachers and artisan-philosophers in this or that essentially Greek city—but also one hears the voices of other Christian theologians who prove, more often than not, to be saying rather different things, and in some instances to be saying those different things quite effectively. If one does not hear the chorus of these other voices, one does not really hear the voice of the author as his first hearers heard him.

I mention Göttingen, the year 1957, Walter Bauer, and Ferdinand Christian Baur in order to confess that the interpretive confluence I have just sketched goes a long way toward defining the location and the passion of my own exegetical labors

through the years; and as I have already said, it is that interpretive confluence that has more than once changed my mind, that is to say has taught me something.

I do know that there are other ways of reading early Christian texts, and some of those ways are, I think, helpful. I have learned—even in my old age—from scholars whose exegetical stance is different from my own. At the moment, however, I am concerned simply to point out that lying in wait for every interpreter is the omnipresent and dangerously unconscious tendency to domesticate the text, to cage the wild tiger. Every serious interpreter, therefore, is looking for an antidote to that domesticating tendency. In my judgment a truly powerful antidote has been given to us in the heritage that has come our way from Walter Bauer and from Ferdinand Christian Baur.

II. TWO EXAMPLES OF TRYING TO LISTEN

Let me now offer very briefly two examples that may illustrate the way in which the interpretive confluence I have just sketched has changed my mind. The general issue to be addressed is that of *Scripture* and *gospel*, and the two examples arise when we interview John and Paul with that issue in mind. How do John and Paul see the relationship between Scripture and gospel? I hardly need to say that the area to which this question points is massive and highly complex. Having been approached in the main by asking how Paul and John interpret Scripture, it is also an area much studied.[2]

Something a bit different might emerge, however, when we ask not how these first century theologians interpret Scripture, but rather how they see the *relationship* between Scripture and gospel, a distinguishable even if closely related question. Moreover we will interview them by imaginatively taking up residence in their circles, in order first of all to try to listen to their writings with the ears of their first hearers. And finally we will mount a galloping horse, in order to see whether attending to both John and Paul in a single essay may enable us to sense an aspect of early Christian theology we may have missed on more pedestrian sorties. Two terms fix the focus of our inquiry, then: Scripture and gospel. And the issue is one of relationship.

A. Scripture and Gospel in John

When we take up temporary residence in the Johannine community, what do we hear? The first thing we note is that without exception John's references to Scripture are references to the law, the prophets, the writings. When, therefore, he relates Scripture to gospel, he is relating the law, the prophets, the writings to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second thing we sense, as we listen, is that a number of John's references to these ancient Scriptures are couched in a distinctly polemical tone of voice. To take just one example, Jesus says to the crowd of people who have seen him raise the paralytic:

> You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life;

[2]See recently D.-A. Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1986); Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); and the book of Richard B. Hays mentioned in note 1 above.

> and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5: 39-40)

When John is speaking about or quoting Scripture, his voice often has an edge to it. In part that edginess is doubtless a rhetorical stratagem, but with Ferdinand Christian Baur at one's elbow, one may also think that this stratagem is designed to play a role in a rather tense setting in the history of early Christian thought and life.

Further listening may convince one, then, that there have been—and probably still are at the time of John's writing his gospel—theologians both in and around John's community whose understanding of the relationship between gospel and Scripture is not only different from that of John, but is also an understanding of gospel and Scripture that sets his teeth on edge. In order to

hear the Gospel of John with the ears of its original listeners, we must try very hard to hear in the background the voices of these other theologians. For the sake of ease of reference, I will refer to these other persons as "the simple exegetical theologians in John's setting"; and let me repeat that they seem to be located both in and around John's community.[3] How do they view Scripture and gospel?

In a word "simply." Both the exegetical theologians who accept Jesus as God's Son, and those who do not, share one fundamental conviction: They believe that whenever God acts newly, he does so in a way that is demonstrably in accordance with Scripture. Thus all of these exegetical theologians prefigure C. H. Dodd's book, *According to the Scriptures*, by agreeing that the Scriptures form the sub-structure of true theology.

We can be still more specific. These exegetical theologians presuppose a clear trajectory *from* the scriptural expectations connected with various "messianic" figures *to* the figure of the Messiah. They believe, in turn, that all theological issues—including ones having specifically to do with christology—*are subject to exegetical discussion*.

Now, tuning our ears for John's own voice brings surprises. For when we do that, while hearing the voices of the simple exegetical theologians ringing in the background, we notice that John's theology is radically different from theirs. To be sure, there is some common ground, and that common ground is important. Like the simple exegetical theologians, John gives considerable attention to the interpretation of Scripture; and he several times speaks explicitly about the exegetical process itself, making clear that exegesis of Scripture is part of the totality of preaching the gospel.

For John, however, the *relationship* between Scripture and gospel is anything but simple and innocent. He is sure, in fact, that exegesis of Scripture can blind the blind and deafen the deaf. There is, accordingly, a striking subtlety and even, as we will see, a radicality to John's understanding of gospel and Scripture. Three major points stand out.

1. First, John finds that the story of Jesus contains numerous geological faults (*Verwerfungen*), radical disjunctures that cause the gospel story to be a landscape

[3]Some of these theologians have elected to remain in the synagogue; others are in John's group. With regard to the relationship between Scripture and gospel they are essentially of one mind.

over which it is impossible for human beings to walk.[4] Again and again, the hearer of this gospel senses the motif of the impossibility of human movement. Again and again the evangelist hears Jesus say, in effect, "You cannot get *here* from *there*" (see, for example, John 6:44; 6:65). One does not walk into the community of the redeemed across the terrain that reaches from the past into the present, for there seem to be no bridges that reach over the geological fault created by the advent of Christ, the Stranger from Heaven.[5]

2. Second, in the evangelist's opinion the impassable geological faults are nowhere more evident than in the relationship of Scripture to Jesus Christ, for that relationship is as riddly and elusive as are Jesus' words themselves. Contrary to the opinion of the simple exegetical theologians, exegetical discussion does not offer a route beyond the geological faults. It is thus a fundamental error to think that, if one will only persevere with one's interpretation of Scripture, one can leap over the geological faults from this side.[6]

Does John believe, then, that Scripture has lost its voice altogether? Hardly! The

evangelist several times speaks of *memory* in order explicitly to address the issue of the relation between the proclamation of the gospel and the exegesis of Scripture. When we pause in order to listen with Johannine ears to John's use of the verb *mimneskomai*, we sense one of John's basic convictions; and it is a conviction all members of John's community will have recognized as polemical with respect to the views of the simple exegetical theologians: Only after Jesus' resurrection/glorification were his disciples given the power of a memory that could believe *both* Scripture *and* Jesus' words (cf. notably John 2:22 and 5:46-47).[7]

The connecting link, then, between Scripture and gospel is a matter of great importance, but for John that link is given by the gospel story itself, a fact that tells us two things: first, that the gospel story has to do with the same God who granted to Isaiah a vision of Jesus' glory (John 12:41) and who allowed Abraham to see Jesus' day (John 8:56); and second, that the fundamental arrow in the link joining Scripture and gospel points from the gospel story to Scripture and not from Scripture to the gospel story.

In a word, with Jesus' glorification, belief in Scripture *comes into being* by acquiring an indelible link to belief in Jesus' words and deeds.[8]

3. Third, while we can do little more here than mention it, John's acknowledgement of the geological faults also produces a radicality in the matter of origins, and thus a view of history that must have been as strange to the simple exegetical theologians as was his view of the relation of Scripture to gospel. Here the question

[4]For a suggestive use of the term *Verwerfung* in the sense of a geological fault see G. Bornkamm's critique of Käsemann's "Jesu Letzter Wille Nach Johannes 17" in *Evangelische Theologie* (1968) 8-25; see p. 91 in John Ashton, *The Interpretation of John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

[5]See Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972) 44-72; reprinted in Ashton (note 4 above); M. de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977).

[6]For John, Jesus' own lack of education, for example, is a clear warning, showing that his identity cannot be perceived on the basis of exegetical exertion (John 7:15).

[7]Those who do not believe Jesus show *thereby* that they do not believe Moses. On "believing in Moses," cf. Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 295.

[8]In Luke 24:6, 8, a similar motif involves the use of the verb *mimneskomai*. What is absent in Luke is a sense for the gospel-created geological faults, and thus a theological allergy to the naive promise-fulfillment hermeneutic.

is not whether John can speak positively of the Jews and of Israel. Clearly he can, and he does. The question is whether for him Scripture points to a *linear* entity that in a linear fashion prepares the way for, and leads up to, the incarnation of the *Logos*. In this regard, we have simply to note in the Gospel of John the absence of even an embryonic *Heilsgeschichte*, a linear sacred history that flows *out of* Scripture *into* the gospel story.[9]

Indeed the *heilsgeschichtlich* perspective is more than absent; it is a perspective against which John is waging a battle. In his gospel, *the* origin, *the* beginning, *the* point of departure for the doing of theology is not to be found in the linear development of a linear history. In the very beginning with God, there was the *Logos*, the Word. He has no precedent in any history, for nothing and no one anteceded him. The *Logos* alone has been with God. It follows that he alone is the exegete of the Father (1:18), and thus that nothing and no one can provide the criterion against which he is to be measured, not even Scripture.

B. Scripture and Gospel in Paul

When we turn to Paul's letters, asking about Scripture and gospel, 1 Thessalonians brings us a jolt. That letter contains not one exegetical paragraph. It is both true and important, as Richard Hays has recently argued, that the voice of Scripture is more weighty to Paul himself than one would think on the basis of his explicit exegeses.[10] Still, the absence of even one of these in 1 Thessalonians is impressive. If we had only that letter, we would have no reason for thinking that Paul ever caused his gentile converts to trouble their minds over the relationship between the gospel and Scripture.

Things change dramatically when we come to Galatians, where we encounter two finely crafted exegetical sections that address quite directly the matter of Scripture and gospel. Indeed, in one of these Paul speaks in a single sentence of both gospel and Scripture, saying in the main two things: first, that Scripture foresaw a development which is transpiring in the current scene, namely God's present activity in rectifying the gentiles by faith; and second, that, foreseeing this development, Scripture preached the *gospel* ahead of time to Abraham (Gal 3:8; cf. Rom 1:1-2). Thus, the exegetical sections of Galatians offer rich possibilities for the pursuit of our question. Before we look at one of these, however, we will find it profitable to sharpen the issue by a brief detour into 1 Corinthians.

In an arresting paragraph in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks thematically of the gospel, identifying it as the preaching of the cross. Trying to listen to that paragraph with the ears of the Corinthians, we hear most sharply an utterly outrageous affirmation.

Specifically, in 1 Cor 1:18 Paul is saying that the gospel of the crucified Christ is not subject, and cannot be made subject, to criteria of perception that have been

[9]In the scenes presented in John 1:35-51, disciples of the Baptist confess Jesus to be the Messiah, him of whom Moses wrote, Son of God, and King of Israel, thus seeming to make their way *from* scriptural expectations *to* Jesus. I take this material to be tradition which John accepts only because he can enclose it in a gospel that proves over-all to be anti-*heilsgeschichtlich*. See R. T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 15-47. See also, however, the response below by Professor Gaventa.

[10]See Richard Hays' book mentioned in note 1 above.

developed apart from it.[11] To bring this outrageous affirmation into sharp focus, we need to return to the two Bau(e)rs, asking how this affirmation is likely to have been heard by the various factions in the Corinthian church.

Members of the church for whom the Scriptures were of central importance will have foreshadowed Eusebius and numerous other theologians by holding that God did in fact provide some preparation for the gospel. They will have thought, moreover, that with regard to that preparation, a clear distinction is to be drawn between the scriptural traditions of Israel and the traditions of other peoples. One can imagine a comment from some good, solid exegetical theologian in the Corinthian church:

> Paul may be quite right to say that the gospel is not subject to criteria of perception that have been developed apart from it—among the gentiles! Surely the same does not apply to perceptive criteria embedded in the Scriptures. We have noted that Paul himself quotes from Scripture, and that he does so immediately after insisting that the gospel is not subject to extra-gospel criteria of perception.

As if to anticipate this line of thought, Paul is shockingly even-handed when he speaks of the difficulties created by the gospel's refusal to be subject to previously crafted criteria of perception. The gospel of the crucified Christ is foolishness to the gentiles, as one might expect; but that gospel proves, with equal clarity, to be an offensive scandal to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23).[12] No one, and no one's way of understanding the world, is exempted from the geological fault created by God's foolish and scandalous act in the cross of Christ (cf. Rom 3:9).

For our present concern, the point is the explosive implication for the relationship between gospel and Scripture. Obviously Paul grants to Scripture a role he does not give to any other body of tradition. Yet he is both consistent and comprehensive in his insistence that the gospel cannot be made subject to perceptive criteria developed apart from it. How can Paul have it both ways?

As an hypothesis one could suggest that, like the fourth evangelist, Paul sees no route from Scripture to gospel, while seeing very clearly a route from gospel to Scripture.[13]

We might explicate this hypothesis by returning finally to the letter to the Galatians, for the exegetical sections in that letter are indeed produced by the radical hermeneutic we see in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. Consider, for example, Gal 4:21-5:1, Paul's exegesis of the stories in Genesis 15-21 about Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac. When we listen to Paul's exegesis of the Genesis text with the ears of the Galatians, we notice several things.

(a) We are immediately thrown back into the company of the two Bau(e)rs, for the form of Paul's exegesis in Gal 4:21-5:1 shows us that, if we really take our seat in the Galatian churches, we hear not only Paul's words, but also the words of

[11]The exegetical argument is given in Martyn, "Paul and His Jewish-Christian Interpreters," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 42 (1988) 1-15.

[12]Cf. W. Schrage, "`...den Juden ein Skandalon'? Der Anstoss des Kreuzes nach 1 Kor 1,23," *Gottes Augapfel*, ed. E. Brocke and J. Seim, 2nd ed. (Neukirchener Verlag, 1988) 59-76.

[13]Cf. Ph. Vielhauer, "Paulus und das Alte Testament," in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation*, ed. L. Abramowski et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 1969) 33-62.

the teachers who invaded those churches.[14] It was in the teachers' sermons, in fact, that we Galatian gentiles *first* heard about Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac. And in the interpretation given by these exegetical theologians we have noted three major accents, all having to do with the term "covenant":

1. God's covenant with Abraham commenced a covenantal line that extended through Isaac to God's people, Israel;
2. God provided a specific definition of his covenant: that covenant is the commandment of circumcision, observed repeatedly in generation after generation (Genesis 17);
3. At the present time, via the good news streaming out from the Jerusalem church, the covenantal line is being extended to gentiles; for, through the Messiah Jesus, gentiles are now invited to enter the line of the Abrahamic covenant by observing the commandment of circumcision.

(b) Now we turn with our other ear, so to speak, to listen to Paul's exegesis of Genesis 15-21, and doing that, we find a radically different picture:

1. In his exegesis of Genesis 15-21 Paul gives to the term "covenant" an emphasis at least

equal to that given to this term by the teachers;

2. But departing radically from the plain sense of Genesis 15-21, Paul affirms *two* covenants, diametrically opposed to one another, something not at all to be found in the text itself;

3. Paul is totally silent about the fact that in the Genesis stories God specifically defines his one covenant as his commandment of circumcision; Paul is equally silent about there being in his Scripture no covenant attached to Hagar and her son Ishmael.[15]

Of two things we can be confident. We can say that, when Paul's messenger had finished reading aloud this exegetical section of Galatians, both the teachers, who had invaded Paul's Galatian churches, and their followers must have risen to their feet, vociferously condemning it as one of the most arbitrary and unfaithful interpretations one can imagine.[16] We can be equally sure, however, that, when Paul had finished dictating this paragraph, he was certain that, by providing *this* exegesis of Scripture, he had preached the *gospel* once again, and specifically the gospel that was "in accordance with the Scriptures," the gospel, indeed, that had been preached ahead of time to Abraham by Scripture itself.

Pause, now, for a moment, and allow yourself the fantasy of being able to raise with Paul the matter of ancient texts often being subjected to eisegetical domestication. And since you are indulging in a fantasy, you might as well go ahead by suggesting to Paul that Gal 4:21-5:1 is a prime instance of such eisegetical domestication. If you have enough imagination to do all of that, then you also have enough imagination to hear Paul's response:

[14]On the nomenclature "the teachers" see J. Louis Martyn, "A Law-Observant Mission to the Gentiles: The Background of Galatians," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985) 307-324.

[15]Cf. Martyn, "The Covenants of Hagar and Sarah," *Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer*, ed. John T. Carroll et al. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 160-192.

[16]Jewish scholars of our time have understandably characterized it in similar terms; see, e.g., Shalom Ben-Chorin, *Paulus, der Völker Apostel in jüdischer Sicht* (Munich: Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980) 132: "...eine völlige Umdrehung der Vätersage."

Whether, in interpreting the stories in Genesis 15-21, I have used the gospel to domesticate the voice of Scripture is a question that can be answered only on the basis of the gospel.[17]

One hardly needs to add that with that response Paul takes us back to the radical hermeneutic of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, and we are thus faced with some of the specific dimensions of Paul's understanding of the relationship between gospel and Scripture.

If the gospel is significantly related to Scripture—and for Paul it is—and if the gospel of the crucified Christ nevertheless brings its own criteria of perception, then in the case of Paul, as in the case of John, it is misleading to speak of an even-handed dialectical relationship between Scripture and gospel.[18] That much should be clear from the fact that for Paul the text of Scripture no longer reads as it did before the advent of the gospel.[19] When one needs to do so—and most of Paul's formal exegetical exercises are polemical[20]—one *can* find in Scripture a voice that testifies to the gospel; but one finds this testifying voice—the voice of God in Scripture—only because one already hears God's voice in the gospel, that is to say in the story of the cross, the story that brings its own criteria of perception, the story, therefore, that brings its own criteria of exegesis.

III. A FEW PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS

To listen to John and Paul with ears borrowed from members of their own circles is—at least in my experience—to have one's mind repeatedly changed, by noting several things.

1. To a considerable extent, the earliest history of Christian thought and life can be profitably analyzed as the history of various struggles over a single issue: Is the gospel of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ subject to criteria of perception that have been developed apart from it? And with regard to this issue, Paul and John share a number of convictions, not least the belief that prior to the

[17]It is imperative to note that Paul believes Scripture actually says exactly what he hears it saying. He is not constructing what some rabbis of the middle ages called *pilpul*, an exegesis one knows not to correspond to the original meaning. In fact, Paul does not think of one meaning back then and a second and debatable meaning now. For him the scriptural stories in Genesis 15-21 do in fact speak about the two gentile missions, one law-observant and one law-free, thus uttering the gospel ahead of time (cf. 1 Cor 10:11).

[18]Note Ph. Vielhauer's critique of statements by U. Wilckens: "So gewiss `das Christusgeschehen...nicht als isoliertes Faktum in seinem universal-eschatologischen *Heils*sinne erkannt und verstanden werden (kann),' so wenig ist die Behauptung begründet: `es bedarf des Zeugnisses der Geschichte, deren Erfüllung es ist'...; denn so gewiss Abraham für Paulus von hoher theologischen Bedeutung und so gewiss die Verheissung dem Gesetz vorgeordnet ist, so gewiss gibt der Text von Röm 4 und Gal 3 die Folgerung auf eine `Erwälungs*geschichte*' nicht her....Die Geschichte Israels als Ablauf interessiert den Apostel überhaupt nicht" (*Oikodome. Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1 [Munich: Kaiser, 1979] 217-218).

[19]Cf. Richard B. Hays in *Echoes* (note 1 above), 149: "This means, ultimately, that Scripture becomes—in Paul's reading—a metaphor, a vast trope that signifies and illuminates the gospel of Jesus Christ."

[20]Regarding the thesis that Paul's exegetical efforts are mostly polemical, see A. von Harnack, "Das Alte Testament in den Paulinischen Briefen und in den Paulinischen Gemeinden," *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1928) 124-141. From the work of E. Grässer, *Der Alte Bund im Neuen* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1985), it seems clear that all of the crucial *diatheke* passages in Paul's letters—Gal 3; Gal 4; 2 Cor 3—are exegeses formulated by Paul in an explicitly polemical form because of opponents in Galatia and in Corinth who are speaking *scripturally* to his churches about the term *diatheke*. Paul is an exegetically active "covenantal theologian" only when compelled to be.

event of the gospel, the human being does not possess adequate powers of perception any more than he or she possesses freedom of will. One hardly needs to add that the issue of perceptive criteria became truly thorny when one was asking whether the gospel was subject to criteria of perception one had inherited *in Scripture*. For, to take one's bearings again from Paul and John, one would say that the human being cannot find these adequate powers of perception even in the Scriptures themselves.

2. When we analyze early Christian history in the light of this issue, listening to the multitude of voices that were directed to it, we see that, more often than we should like to admit, we have attributed a motif to John or Paul, when in actuality that motif is characteristic of theologians against whom these authors were waging a significant battle.[21]

3. Why have we often done that? In part, I think, because we have been unconsciously afraid that, if Paul and John should prove to be anti-*heilsgeschichtlich* theologians, they would also prove to have applied to Scripture an anti-Judaic hermeneutic. That fear is unfounded. Theologically it is important to note that neither Paul nor John was an absolute innovator. In Scripture itself there is ancient tradition for theology oriented to the geological fault. Consider, to mention two examples, Psalm 78 and Second Isaiah. The prophet, you will recall, several times

calls on his fellow exiles to remember the things of old, to remember the exodus, in the sure hope of the new exodus, and so on. One time, however, he reflects on the ways in which tradition can blind eyes and stop ears. Thus he hears God say with emphasis:

> Do *not* remember the former things, nor remember the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? (Isa 43:18-19)

4. Even the similar note in the Second Isaiah cannot forestall, however, a final question: Did Paul and John unwittingly prepare the way for Marcion? In the present context this question has to be posed for two reasons.

First, the battle that raged around Marcion was focused to no small degree on the issue to which we have been directing our attention, that of the relationship between Scripture and gospel. Second, when the emerging great church identified Marcion's theology as heretical, it did so, in part, by adopting a view of the relationship between Scripture and gospel that in general terms looks rather similar to the view of the simple exegetical theologians against whom Paul and John struggled in the first century (Justin Martyr; Rhodo; Irenaeus). Had the orthodox theologians of the great church had an accurate sense for the faulty theology of Paul and John, would they not have been compelled to draw some degree of analogy between those two and Marcion, thus raising some doubts as to the complete orthodoxy precisely of Paul and John themselves?[22]

The raising of the question can lead us to a closing point. If one of the most virulent heresies of the second century emerged in connection with the matter of

[21]An example lies before us, I think, in the chart Ed P. Sanders presents in *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 7. To speak of the human being transferring from sin to righteousness is characteristic of the teachers who invaded Paul's Galatian churches, not of Paul himself.

[22]As the Gospel of John won its place in the canon only with difficulty, that development has rightly been said to have occurred "through man's error and God's providence" (E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968] 75).

gospel and Scripture, may it not be that the same is true of the first century, except that, as one passes from one century to the other, the identities of orthodoxy and heresy undergo a remarkable reversal?

If one listens to Paul and John, and if, at least tentatively, one takes one's view of heresy from them (note the term *anathema* in Gal 1:8-9), then one could be led to ponder the possibility that, while the problem of relating Scripture to gospel did in fact produce several heresies, the earliest of these wore a very *un*-Marcionite hat, being the cross-avoiding, simple-minded, exegetical view of Scripture and gospel that flourished in some circles almost from the beginning. It is the author of the letter to the Galatians, at any rate, who is the theologian of the cross, whereas the teachers are theologians of an incipient *Heilsgeschichte*.

Could it be, then, that thinking in a Pauline-Johannine mode would lead one to identify as the *earliest Christian heresy* precisely the embryonic *Heilsgeschichte* characteristic of the simple exegetical theologians? And would one then trace as heretical the heritage from those theologians that made its way through the centuries to the full-blown *Heilsgeschichte* of Eusebius, J. C. K.

von Hofmann, Tobias Beck, and others?

However those questions are to be answered, it seems that Paul and John, in their respective settings, perceived it to be an essential part of their vocation to struggle against an incipiently *heilsgeschichtlich* reading of the relationship between Scripture and gospel. And, positively put, they carried out that struggle, precisely in order to bear witness to the true identity of the God of Abraham by speaking of him as the Father of Jesus Christ. By his deed in the crucified Christ, that is to say, this God is announcing who he is, and thus showing who he always was, the one who rectifies the ungodly. It follows that this God is sovereign even over traditions celebrating his own earlier deeds.

The struggle of Paul and John is one the Second Isaiah would have understood.

Critical Responses

In her critique Beverly Gaventa expressed a measure of agreement as regards Paul and some serious reservations with respect to John. In her remarks, I heard two major points: (a) The location of inadequacy to assess the gospel. Does it lie with Scripture or with human beings? (b) The role of Scripture is making the gospel intelligible. What is signified by the line that runs from gospel to Scripture?

Regarding John,

> The target [of John's polemic in 5:39-47] is not the adequacy of scripture to reveal Jesus Christ. The target...is the adequacy of human beings, who read scripture—which does testify on behalf of Jesus—without seeing what it says. [Thus,] while John practices an interpretation that reads scripture by means of the gospel and not the other way around, he nevertheless perceives a line...[that] begins with God and the Logos,...contains the history of Israel and, with it, scripture, and then culminates in the gospel. The Logos thus precedes scripture, but scripture in turn points toward the advent of Jesus [note particularly John 1:35-51].

Regarding Paul,

> [The apostle holds as a major conviction] the inadequacy of human beings to assess the gospel, [but] this conviction comes to expression in terms drawn from scripture (e.g. 1 Cor 1:19-31). [Paul does not reason from scripture to the cross, but—even in 1 Thessalonians—the words and echoes of scripture] provide the language with which Paul articulates the meaning of the gospel. [That is so because] the gospel...remains unintelligible apart from the language of scripture and the story of Israel. [In short, for Paul] scripture is not only a convenient mode for interpretation but a vital requirement.

This is, I think, a constructive critique. Both John and Paul focus the polemic I have discussed against other *interpreters* of Scripture, while being able themselves, beginning with the

gospel, to hear God's voice in Scripture itself. But what is one to make of Gaventa's use of the expression "the story of Israel"? If, in Galatians, Paul understands Abraham to be a point rather than the beginning of a line, and if our word "story" indicates a narrative always possessing some sort of linearity, then can we say that Paul articulates the gospel by drawing not only on the language of Scripture, but also on the story of Israel? It is a service of Gaventa to express herself in a way that calls for further substantive discussion.

In contrast to Beverly Gaventa, and perhaps as much to her surprise as to mine, Paul Meyer professed basic agreement with my remarks about John, while expressing a significant degree of skepticism about my reading of Paul.

Regarding John,

> This gospel avoids making Jesus as Messiah dependent upon the Hebrew scriptures or any tradition of their interpretation. In John's theology, the Son is so carefully aligned with the Father who sent him, so completely transparent to the presence and reality of the God who confronts the world in him, that there is no possibility of any independent access to God to establish the credentials of the Son.

Regarding Paul,

> [For Paul scripture is far too important to be left in the hands of] those who are intent on domesticating the gospel to their own criteria of perception. It provides access not just to the continuities of Israel but to the God of Israel, who is the `antecedent' of the gospel as well as its *ex post facto* authorizer, indeed who cannot be the latter without being the former, without whom the gospel too would have no validity.
>
> The appeal to Abraham does provide to Paul, in his own hands of course, a confirmation to his preaching of the gospel...that parallels the confirmation that God himself provided when he..."raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." Without this authentication from scripture, i.e., from God's side, Paul's argument would no more be believed and trusted than could the dead Jesus of Nazareth apart from his authentication from God's side. It is not just criteria of perception that are at stake in the relationship of gospel and scripture. It is also a matter of categories of interpretation...and above all, within the historically concrete process of a life-and-death argument about God, a way of reaching beyond the tools of argument to a truth and reality that argument alone cannot establish or adjudicate. It requires a scripture that is more than a product of Paul's hermeneutic, one in which God speaks before human beings interpret. [The issue is] fundamentally the relationship between the Father of Jesus Christ and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Like Gaventa, Meyer has provided a critique that is constructive by raising in one's mind further questions. Let me mention two: (a) Granted that Paul was in every instance concerned to search for a way of reaching beyond the tools of argument, can we say that he was successful in this search? And if he was, can we identify the result? Is further conversation perhaps needed with regard to the relationship between Scripture and the event of apocalypse? (b) Granted also that the God who sent his Son is the God who uttered his promise to Abraham. Both of these deeds are deeds of the same God; thus the expression "God's steadfast identity" is altogether crucial, especially in light of the continuing influence of a Marcionite type of thought in the modern church. Could it be, however, that Paul compels us to use the terms "identity," "identical," and "identify" in several ways? Gaventa, Meyer, and I should surely agree that Romans 9-11 shows us a theologian who is thoroughly convinced that the God who elected Abraham is identical with the God who sent his Son. Is this theologian also concerned to say that, in sending his Son, this one God is *newly identifying himself* as the one who rectifies the ungodly? And if so, is this dual use of the root *idem* something that was missed (to make theology of linguistics) both by Marcion and by many of those who read Marcion out of the church? With hearty thanks to Beverly Gaventa and to Paul Meyer, let me say that the discussion is to be continued.