



How My Mind Has Been Changed Regarding the Bible

JOHN P. MILTON

INTRODUCTION BY FREDERICK J. GAISER

John P. Milton (1897–1972), professor of Old Testament at Luther Theological Seminary from 1941 to 1968, delivered a form of this address at the seminary in 1966. Professor Emeritus Wendell Frerichs remembers an earlier version delivered by Professor Milton at Camp Onamia (Minnesota) in 1960. As far as we at Word & World can tell, having searched with the help of library and archives staff members, the address has not been published apart from the mimeographed version (1966) recently made known to us by a former colleague.

We publish Milton's address in this issue for at least two reasons: first, simply because of its historical interest to Luther Seminary. Milton was a significant figure in the biblical department at Luther Theological Seminary, and his changing views of the Bible made a deep impact on the seminary. Indeed, according to Professor Frerichs, Milton "saved" him through this address from heresy charges (for teaching the historical-critical method) that were threatened against him and Professor Roy Harrisville by two district presidents of the church. Milton's support, plus that of Professor Warren Quanbeck and the president of the then American Lutheran Church (TALC), Fredrik

John Milton's public announcement in the 1960s of how his mind had changed regarding the Bible had a deep and lasting influence on the Lutheran churches in America and their seminaries. Milton saw with new appreciation the human factors in the Bible, while continuing to understand it as the word of God. He recognized, though, that even the confession of the Bible as God's word required reinterpretation.

Schiotz, helped ward off that threat. But second, the impact of Milton's public statement was not limited to Luther Seminary. I was a student at what is now Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, during the early years of the newly formed TALC (a forerunner of the present ELCA), and in Columbus, too, we began to hear about Milton's new perspective. Eager to learn more, my classmates and I invited him to speak at a retirement celebration for our own beloved Old Testament professor Herbert C. Leupold in 1963.

It is certainly not the case that nobody in the American Lutheran seminaries of the mid-twentieth century (mine included) was saying things similar to the statements of Milton, but Milton was among the first to "go public" with these insights. Prior to Milton's change, he, like most of the colleagues of his generation and other American Lutheran pastors, operated with a kind of naïve (in the best sense of the term) historical literalism—not a rationalistic and combative fundamentalism, but the simple belief that the Bible was to be read as it stood and interpreted apart from "modern" historical or literary critical methods.¹

Milton and especially his younger colleagues at Luther and other American Lutheran seminaries were beginning to understand things differently—particularly by recognizing the Bible's human dimensions—but it took some time for these ideas to see the light of day in the church. Teachers like Milton were little interested in shocking students or church; they were, in fact, faithful Lutherans who held the Bible to be the word of God and who, at best, wanted their new insights to be as freeing and enlightening to students and church as they had been to themselves. So, by and large, they spoke cautiously. But their ideas were freeing, and most of us who were students in those days found that they built up the body of Christ rather than tearing it down, as some of their critics feared and claimed. As Professor Harrisville noted, "Milton was not the first to open the door to a more critical stance, but he certainly was among the first. And he did so in a way we younger ones should have imitated. We could have saved ourselves a good deal of trouble."²

Making these teachings public was a move necessary to the life and well-being of the church. In fact, some have suggested that at least one contributing factor to the controversies in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, that led to the eventual breakup of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis was the lack of widespread information among church members and congregations about the views of the Bible held by a majority of the faculty and students at that school, a disparity that allowed conservatives to "expose" those teachings as though they were a complete break with established Lutheran teaching. Seeking to avoid just such disruption,

¹Although Robert Boyd reports that Milton was influenced by the thought of fundamentalist teachers like J. Gresham Machen and Gerhardus Vos during his years of study at Princeton (from which Milton received his MTh degree in 1927), Milton, in his writings at least, does not betray such a rigid fundamentalism. See Robert H. Boyd, "Seminary Heritage Article: John Peterson Milton," *Luther Theological Seminary Review* 16/2 (1977) 34. Boyd's full article (pp. 32–39) provides much more information about the life and work of Professor Milton.

²Roy A. Harrisville, personal communication to the editor, July 2012.

TALC in 1964 commissioned and published essays by its teaching theologians to inform the church what its seminaries taught and believed.³

Those who knew and heard Milton recognized that his mind had indeed changed. In 1942, for example, he had argued that the Pentateuch was “substantially the work of Moses,”⁴ and in 1943 he still espoused a relatively young earth.⁵ One finds in his mimeographed class notes, however, that already by 1950 he was assigning students in his Pentateuch classes readings that most likely disagreed with some of his own views.⁶ Intriguingly, he wrote at that time:

Read enough so as to have your eyes opened to points in the text that require interpretation, then form your own conclusion. If you do not have time to read sufficiently now to reach a conclusion, mark the point mentally for future study in the lifelong study of the Scriptures to which the minister of the Word should be devoted. Meanwhile, until you have reached an intelligent conclusion, do not become too dogmatic in your ignorance.⁷

Happily, Milton did not remain dogmatic about his own perspective, and his openness to learning something new makes this essay retain relevance for today. Most of us would, no doubt, put things somewhat differently, but as we preach and teach in congregations and even as we meet new students, we recognize that questions about the legitimacy of “new” understandings of the Bible have not disappeared. True, there are other pressing issues, including the lack of biblical literacy, the wonderings of a post-Christian culture about why anybody would read the Bible at all, much less believe it, and the brazen attacks of the new atheists and their strange bedfellows, the strident fundamentalists—both groups reading the Bible with almost the same kind of wooden literalism and historicism. But among those we teach, issues remain about the nature and uniqueness of the Bible and which views of that sacred book are legitimate and helpful. So, we are pleased to make public this statement from Professor Milton for both its historical and present relevance.

³The Theological Professors of The American Lutheran Church, *The Bible: Book of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964). In his own essay in this volume, “The Message and Purpose of the Old Testament” (pp. 48–65), Professor Milton examines the Old Testament accounts of creation and the early history of Israel for their theological significance without directly addressing historical issues.

⁴John P. Milton, *People Are Asking* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1942) 143.

⁵John P. Milton, *More People Are Asking* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1943) 83–84.

⁶See John P. Milton, “Notes on the Pentateuch” (unpublished class notes, Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN, mimeographed and catalogued in the seminary library, 1950).

⁷Milton, Notes on Genesis, in “Notes on the Pentateuch,” 1.

HOW MY MIND HAS BEEN CHANGED REGARDING THE BIBLE⁸

John P. Milton

In agreeing to speak to this topic I was well aware of the many booby traps into which it might lead. To some, any change of mind in matters of religion is suspicious, suggesting immediately a departure from the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 RSV).⁹ To others, any change of mind short of a complete reversal in theological position is scarcely worth recognizing. It may well be that some who know me and who hear me today will say that I have not changed my mind at all or at least not enough; others may say that I have changed dangerously or too much. This is the risk I must take—and added to it is the fact that it is now twenty-five years since I was called to Luther Seminary, which might suggest to my former and continuing Augustana friends a correlation or connection between what I am and my associations during this quarter century!¹⁰

Nevertheless I consented to speak on this topic in the hope and with the prayer that what I shall say about myself and my experience may be helpful to others and may be of some service to Christ’s church in the world today.

That my mind has been changed on some things is true. It would be tragic if it were otherwise, for change is a part of growth. If we cease to grow in religious insight and theological understanding, as well as in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18), we actually cease to live. It is essential to growth, of course—if we may use the analogy of a tree—that there also be deep and permanent roots. Any change theologically that cuts itself off from the living roots of our Christian faith would be as tragic as no change at all. In either case it means death. I trust therefore that as I try to make clear wherein my mind has been changed it will also become clear that my faith has not suffered shipwreck!

I will address myself first and chiefly to the Scriptures as the word of God. I have been called at various times a fundamentalist and also a modernist, a biblicist and also an evolutionist, a nineteenth-century liberal, a seventeenth-century scholastic, a legalistic pietist, and an advocate of Neo-Orthodoxy. Personally, I would say of myself—as I did in a letter a few years ago in answer to the rather heated question, “If you are not a fundamentalist, what are you?”—that “I am an evangelical Lutheran, who believes the Bible to be the Word of God and who subscribes without equivocation to the fundamental doctrines of Scripture as contained in the Confessions of my Church.”

⁸This manuscript has been slightly edited for publication by the editor of *Word & World*. All footnotes and headings, for example, are the editor’s additions. The male language commonly used when Professor Milton spoke in 1966 has been updated. Milton’s original, unedited manuscript is available in the Luther Seminary archives.

⁹All Scripture references in this article are to the RSV as used by Milton.

¹⁰Professor Milton was raised and educated in the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church and taught at Augustana Lutheran Seminary in Rock Island, IL, from 1928–1931.

But what does it mean to me when I say that the Bible is the word of God, and how has my mind been changed at the point of definition, understanding, and interpretation of the Scriptures as God's word—not only to me, but to all who will listen?

THE HUMAN FACTOR IN THE BIBLE

I think that the most important change for me has been a growing awareness of the human factor in the Bible—the fact of “the condescending love of God in speaking to men [*sic*] through the agency of human language,” as the United Testimony on Faith and Life has put it.¹¹ This union document could have gone further and specified the pictorial and particularistic aspect of Hebrew thought, the human linguistic forms, the human literary forms, the human thought forms, the human imagery, and the human confession of faith that characterize our Bible as a written document and may seem to complicate our understanding and our interpretation of it. The United Testimony does go on to say (and I thank God for it), “We reject all rationalizing processes which would explain away either the divine or the human factor in the Bible.”¹²

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I do not mean to say that this was a sudden discovery or a radically different point of view with me, for I have never held to a dictation theory of the origin and nature of Scripture. It has been rather a deepening awareness for me that in trying to understand the human factor in the making and makeup of the Bible we must approach our task with complete honesty. That means we cannot shut our eyes to the real contributions that literary and historical studies of the past century have made to biblical interpretation; nor can we be afraid to give a rightful emphasis to this human factor just because by some it has been overemphasized to the exclusion of the divine—that is, to the exclusion of the voice of God speaking through these human factors to inform us what God would have us believe and do. The two factors in the Bible are comparable to the two natures in Christ. In both instances there is a union and a tension between the two; and we dare not (if we value truth) get rid of the tension by denying the union. We may not (if we value truth) rationalize away either the divine or the human factor in the Bible.

The principle has become clear to me especially through the last twenty-five years. In the application of the principle, the problem becomes more difficult; of this too I have become more aware through the years. The conclusions of

¹¹“United Testimony on Faith and Life: Approved by the Uniting Churches at Their Conventions in 1952,” in *Handbook of The American Lutheran Church*, 1965 ed. (Minneapolis: The American Lutheran Church, 1965) 130.

¹²*Ibid.*

form-criticism often seem to me much too dogmatic for the evidence; but I can follow with appreciation and profit the work of a Gerhard von Rad in his *Genesis* commentary,¹³ where the form-critical is stressed but always as a stepping-stone to the more important theological interpretation. Our ultimate concern in all study of the Bible, whether critical or devotional, is with the question, "What does God say here that is relevant for human (my) faith and life?" In this respect my mind has not really changed; for I have always believed this to be the right question to ask when we read or study the Bible. What has happened is the confirmation of a long-standing conviction through the very recognition of the human thought forms by which the word of the Lord comes to me.

What a risk God took! And it is a risk that God continues to take as he chooses to depend on you and me to speak for him with all the inadequacy of our language to express with infallible fullness and clarity the word of the Lord.

Let me illustrate briefly what this recognition of the presence of human literary and cultural thought forms in the Bible must mean for our interpretation. It is both obvious and dangerous; it is easily and often ignored, and yet it is essential for our understanding of the truth.

The language of the Bible is human language

The very language in which the Bible is written is a human language. If I may speak specifically from the viewpoint of the Old Testament, which I am called to teach, that language is Hebrew. It is not a sort of divine Esperanto, a sacred language come down from heaven. It is a human form of speech with its own laws and limitations. It belongs to the Semitic family of languages, but it uses an alphabet (for which it was indebted to the Phoenicians) instead of the Babylonian cuneiform or the Egyptian hieroglyphics. How different (and difficult) it would have been for us if the Bible had been written in cuneiform or in hieroglyphics! The difference might have been almost as great if it had been written in English, or in theological German, or in Norwegian! For Hebrew is an Oriental language, not Indo-European. It is a language which abounds in pictorial imagery, which loves to speak in terms of a concrete particular rather than of abstract universals. It has its strengths and its weaknesses, but the thing to remember is that it was through the medium of this language that God condescended to speak with human beings and to let them (thinking now of Israel) speak for him. What a risk God took! Does it matter that the risk might have been greater if the language had been English? And it is a risk that God continues to take as he chooses to depend on you and me to speak for him with all the inadequacy of our language to express with infallible fullness and clarity the word of the Lord.

¹³Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961).

Human cultural thought forms

Let me move from the issue of language and speak also about the cultural thought forms that clothe the message of the Old Testament (and the New), which are often demonstrably related to the age to which the writers belonged. That is true scientifically when they speak of the four corners of the earth. It is true theologically when they speak of Sheol, the abode of the dead, in terms quite different from the Christian hope based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and on the clear teaching and promises of the New Testament. It is true historically of what Edward Riehm so felicitously calls “the times-colouring” of the prophets,¹⁴ where the covenant fulfillment, the Messianic hope, the consummation of redemption history, are so often and largely seen in terms of history of a particular people, Israel. And yet, as von Rad has said of the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:1–3, “What is promised to Abraham reaches far beyond Israel; indeed, it has universal meaning for all generations on earth.”¹⁵ That is, what Abraham was, Israel was called to be, and what Israel was—a people of God with a mission—the church is called to be; for through these imperfect and inadequate thought forms taken from Hebrew history, God was making himself known in some of the essential aspects of the divine nature and will. There was revealed, as Hebert says so well, “a clear continuity of theological principle,” which leads finally to Christ.¹⁶ The medium, however, was not the language of a scientific theology but of the thought forms suitable to the history of the age, whether it be the exodus-redemption, or the conquest of the promised land as an inheritance, or the return from Babylonian captivity, or the judgments on contemporary nations, as the judgment and redemption motifs unfold preparatory to their full unveiling in Jesus Christ (von Rad, “an allusion to a final, universal unchaining of the salvation promised to Abraham”¹⁷). The human milieu is evident in the message at almost every step, the divine self-revelation moves along the horizontal as well as the vertical line; it belongs to history and is clothed in historical terms.

Human literary forms

Let me move on a step further to the literary forms of which the Old Testament especially makes such abundant use. They too belong to the human side of Scripture, and they affect our understanding of any divine revelation for which they are the media. What a tragedy if they are ignored in exegesis or in preaching or in plain Bible reading!

There is in the Old Testament, for instance, poetry as well as prose. The RSV has helped us to see how large a part of the Old Testament is poetic in form, and re-

¹⁴Edward Riehm, *Messianic Prophecy: Its Origin, Historical Growth, and Relation to New Testament Fulfillment*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Lewis A. Muirhead (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891) 133. The entire second part of Riehm’s book, “The Historical Character of Messianic Prophecy: Its Adaptation to the Times” (pp. 124–216) apparently stands behind Milton’s statement here.

¹⁵Von Rad, *Genesis*, 150.

¹⁶It is uncertain to which of Arthur Gabriel Hebert’s books Milton here refers.

¹⁷Von Rad, *Genesis*, 150.

cent biblical studies have helped us to see how similar Hebrew poetry is to that of its (Semitic) neighbors, by whom it was in a position to be influenced culturally. To interpret poetry as prose is a serious mistake, whether in the Bible or in other literature. There are literary characteristics of poetry in any language that must not be ignored. To mention one, there is the more frequent use of imagery, of figures of speech, of pictorial representation. If, as we have said before, this pictorial quality is characteristic of the Hebrew language as such, it is doubly true of Hebrew poetry. We ignore it at our peril. Whether we admit it or not, we handle a specific literary form whenever we read poetry, even in the Bible. What if the form be borrowed from or influenced by Israel's cultural neighbors, as so many scholars today sincerely believe? It is still a proper medium for a word of the Lord to Israel and to us, and for the expression of a spiritual experience in response to that word; but if we would understand what the word of the Lord to us really is we must acknowledge and try to understand the form through which the word comes.

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I have spoken of poetry as illustrative of literary forms as a human factor in the Bible. There are a wide variety of others as well. We could speak of the three departments of knowledge among the Hebrews as illustrating the same truth. There is a clear-cut distinction among torah (or law) and prophecy and wisdom, both as to function and form. There is also a close resemblance as to form with the religious literature of other nations of antiquity. That does not mean that they stand on the same religious level. It does mean that the Bible writers make use of recognized literary forms in the service of their profoundly different religion. The list of such forms is long. There is the proverb and the parable, both represented in the Old Testament by the Hebrew word *mashal*, each with distinctive literary characteristics, but each in its way a medium of religious truth. There is at least one instance of a fable (Jotham's, in Judg 9:7–21). We have the short story in the case of Ruth and Esther (and perhaps Jonah); the codification of law in the book of the covenant; the homiletical addresses of Deuteronomy; the many personal and liturgical prayers; biography (in a limited sense); history (with a religious interpretation); prophecy in the sense of preaching to the contemporaneous situation (which is quite different from prophecy in the sense of prediction, also present); and apocalyptic, which differs from prophecy in several different points. We may also have saga, in the sense in which von Rad defines it when he says, "At the beginning the saga in most cases certainly contained a 'historical' fact as its actual crystallizing point. But in addition it reflects a historical experience of the relevant

community which extends into the present time of the narrator.”¹⁸ And so we could continue, illustrating the fact that the divine-human factor in Scripture necessarily involves the use of human linguistic, literary, and historical thought forms to convey to us “in many and various ways” (Heb 1:1; Weymouth, “in many fragments”¹⁹) the word of the Lord. This, as I see it, is the point at which my mind has been changed the most during these twenty-five years of Old Testament study and teaching—changed, not by a dramatic reversal of direction, but by a steadily deepening appreciation of what the human factor means for a correct interpretation of Scripture as the word of the Lord. We have said before that it entailed a risk on the part of God to make himself known in this way. It entailed a risk also when the Son of God became human, when the living Word became flesh. How could this *man* from Nazareth, who came out of a woman’s womb like any other child, who grew intellectually and physically and socially and spiritually like other children did, who worked with his hands as a carpenter, who became tired in his body just like other men, who could cry in disappointment if not in grief, who suffered in patience but with seeming helplessness at the hands of evildoers—how could *he* be the son of God, the incarnate Word? But he was, and some believed that he was because of something that they saw in him as he confronted them with power and compassion in their sin and need. His word, his work, his presence among them, was with authority, but it was clothed in human form. So (it seems to me) it is with the Scriptures as the word of the living God. God’s word comes at times through very strange and lowly human forms; but it comes, and faith responds to it, and God authenticates his word to us, not by some theory of inspiration but by the inherent persuasive power of that word spoken to us in human language. Ultimately, no one believes in the Bible as the word of the Lord except through the persuasion of the Holy Spirit as it speaks to us in our human predicament and satisfies our deepest need.

THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD

Let me go on and indicate briefly several corollary lines within the same general area of the Bible as the word of God, where my mind has been changed in much the same way as I have already described.

A book of complex origins

For example, in the matter of the literary origin of different books of the Bible I am free to acknowledge that there may be a much more complex history than I once thought.

When I came to Luther Seminary, the textbook in Old Testament Introduction that I sort of inherited was the one by John H. Raven.²⁰ I was uncomfortable

¹⁸Ibid., 33.

¹⁹Richard Francis Weymouth, *The New Testament in Modern Speech: An Idiomatic Translation...*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pilgrim, 1943) 527.

²⁰John H. Raven, *Old Testament Introduction: General and Special* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910).

with it from the start because of its limited awareness of the problems involved in the history of origins, whether it be of the Pentateuch or of the Psalms or of the prophets. I have not taught Old Testament Introduction for a number of years, but some of you may remember the two-page mimeographed statement of personal opinion as to “Mosaic Authorship and/or Essential Mosaicity of the Pentateuch” that I shared with my classes for a number of years. I confess that I see no danger to the faith in recognizing that there may be a history to the formation of the Pentateuch that involves more than the man Moses, significant as his contribution was to the religion of Israel. I could never accept the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis in its crude original form, but I cannot deny that some of the principles of historical criticism are true and, as handled by scholars within the context of faith, have done much to illumine the true meaning of the Old Testament message for us. With James Orr I would defend the “essential Mosaicity”²¹ rather than the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in its present form.

With Gerhard von Rad, in his *Genesis* commentary, I would regard the question of origins as of secondary importance to the theological interpretation of the message. That is not to say that problems of origin, such as authorship, literary format, relation to the ongoing religious faith and life of the Israelite community, use of sources, date of final completion, etc., are unimportant and may simply be ignored as nonexistent; nor does it mean that there have been no excesses committed in the name of historical criticism. It is often easier to raise questions than it is to answer them, and this is certainly true in the area of biblical studies. Nevertheless, it is good to face up to the questions even when we do not have the final and convincing answer. It makes for a humble approach to the study of the Bible. But after we have wrestled with the literary and historical problems in all honesty and to the best of our ability, I am more convinced than ever that if we come to the reading of Scripture with the right question—“What would you, O God, have me believe and do?”—the answer will come through loud and clear.

Personally, I would rather settle for that answer than for a dogmatic or a scientific solution to every problem of authorship and date or for a rigid theory of inspiration that keeps me so busy defending the Bible that I have no time to listen to it. If it took a thousand years to complete the written Pentateuch, it still represents the faith of Israel as it developed under God within the covenant that God made with them at Sinai. God’s self-revelation in his will for his people Israel and for the world was not limited to one person at one moment of time. I have come to think that we may safely say that, just as in the history of the Christian church and of Christian doctrine, God’s word and Spirit was at work in the whole religious community of Israel from Moses to Malachi, or if you will, from Abraham to Jesus Christ. Weymouth’s translation of Heb 1:1—“in many fragments and by various methods”—is suggestive of the history that lies back of the formation of the Old Testament.

²¹James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament Considered with Reference to Recent Criticism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906) 369.

Progressive revelation within Scripture

Let me turn to still another aspect of Scripture about which my mind has been changed in this same fashion of a growing and deepening appreciation of something that seems to me now quite self-evident.

I don't know just when I first became seriously aware of and therefore began to speak openly about progressive revelation within Scripture. It may go back to a time earlier than twenty-five years ago. My first articulation of it probably came in a lecture to a group of ELC pastors in 1940 on "Significant New Testament Interpretations of the Mosaic Law." I remember distinctly a seminar for Twin City pastors shortly after coming to Luther Seminary where I stressed it in connection with the covenant concept. It became the theme for a series of four lectures at the Luther Academy in Dubuque in 1947. In 1963 it was the theme of a lecture at the Ohio District Theological Conference. It is obvious that the subject has been growing on me through the years. Since growth is change, as we have said before, I include it under the present topic, "How my mind has been changed during the last twenty-five years."

What do I mean by progressive revelation? In general, it is a recognition that there are significant differences of spiritual insight within the Scriptures.

What do I mean by progressive revelation? It would take more time than this address permits to define it fully and to illustrate it adequately. In general, it is a recognition that there are significant differences of spiritual insight within the Scriptures. There is a definite development or progression within the Scriptural teaching concerning many things, for which we can find no better term than a "progressive revelation." The practical conclusion is that we dare not use and interpret the Bible as if every part stood on the same level, had the same relevance or value, and had equal validity as a "proof text" for doctrine.

The obvious illustration, of course, is that it makes a difference whether a teaching stands on the Old Testament or the New Testament side of the historical Jesus Christ, or of the Christ event, as we sometimes call it.

From one angle, Paul's analogy of the more and the less honorable parts of the human body, which he uses with respect to the church, may help us also here with respect to the Scriptures. There is certainly a difference in spiritual value between John 3:16, for example, and Deut 23:12-14:

- For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)
- You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it; and you shall have a stick with your weapons; and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because

the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to save you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you. (Deut 23:12–14)

We sense the difference immediately. Yet, despite the significant difference in direct spiritual value for us, the Deuteronomy passage had its significance as an ordinance of God in a given historical situation for his people Israel and may still have a continuing significance on the principle that “cleanliness is next to godliness”: as a part of God’s great object lesson wherein the outward cleanness of the body or of the camp symbolized the inward cleanness of the heart and of the whole life, stressing the truth that the whole community should be holy before God who dwells in the midst of his people. The Deuteronomy passage, however, is no longer binding as an ordinance on the Christian church. Deleting John 3:16 from the Bible would be like cutting out the very heart, whereas deleting Deut 23:12–14 would be, relatively speaking, only a minor flesh wound. Nevertheless, thinking of the continuity of God’s saving and revelatory acts in the Scriptures, both are a part of the one body, serving its purpose in the complete message of the one book. What we plead for is that you see the progression in revelation between an object lesson in holiness given to the nation Israel under rather primitive conditions and the completely spiritual New Testament teaching concerning sanctification and holiness of life.

From another angle we may think of the comparison between shadow and substance. See, for example, Col 2:16–17: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” (The Greek word for substance here is *σῶμα*, meaning body or reality—the thing itself.) Certainly in using the Scriptures we must recognize this distinction between shadow and substance, or we will become guilty of flagrant misinterpretation. There is a progressiveness of revelation, from shadow to substance; and this fact is not altered by the difficulty that we may sometimes encounter in distinguishing between what belongs to the shadow and what belongs to the substance.

If we were speaking today to this subject alone, we could go on and examine any number of illustrations: in the matter of the Messianic hope; of the covenant or covenants; of the teaching concerning sin and righteousness; of religious forms, such as circumcision and baptism, the memorial Passover and the Lord’s Supper, animal sacrifices, and the sacrifices of a contrite heart and spirit; in the matter of civil law; in the deepening understanding of the Ten Commandments; even in the knowledge of God. We need to regain (and this is the change that happened to me over the years) the Lutheran conception of Scripture as a living organism, an organic whole, with more and less honorable parts, but not a collection of atoms strung together like beads or pearls on a string; we need to grasp firmly the histori-

cal character of both Judaism and Christianity, of both Old Testament and New; we need to recognize within Scripture the progressive self-revelation of God, of whom we love to say that he is redemptively engaged in human history.

There are those within our church still to whom this way of thinking about the Bible is anathema. It runs counter to the completely static concept of Scripture that to me seems a front for a dictation theory of inspiration.

To some of you this may seem so elementary that you wonder why I take time to stress it; indeed, that I seem to admit that this viewpoint was not always crystal clear to me, so now it represents a change of mind (in the sense in which I have defined change as a growing conviction). May I simply remind you that there are those within our church still to whom this way of thinking about the Bible is anathema. It runs counter to the completely static concept of Scripture that to me seems a front for a dictation theory of inspiration, however vehemently that is denied. I am not saying that my mind has been changed at this point during the past year or even during the past twenty-five years, except in the sense of an ever-firmer conviction that we will never understand the word of the Lord that comes to us through the Bible unless we recognize the dynamic quality of a progressive revelation such as we have tried to sketch in these few words.

Reading in the mind of Christ

This leads me to still a third aspect of Scripture as the word of God wherein I must confess that my mind has been changed; and this may indeed have taken place during the past twenty-five years, because it is during this time that I have become acutely aware of the problem in relation to Christian faith. I am no longer under an inner compulsion to defend as “the word of the Lord” that in the Old Testament which, on its face, is contrary to “the mind of Christ.” I don’t know how profitable it is to cite examples without taking the time for thorough discussion of them, but I suppose that in fairness to you I should say that I am thinking of such specific items as the *lex talionis*; the Holy War and its use of the *cherem* or the ban; the curse of Elisha “in the name of the Lord” on the small boys who jeered at him and called him “you baldhead,” leaving them to be killed by two she-bears that came out of the woods in response (shall we say) to Elisha’s curse; some aspects of the imprecatory or curse psalms, such as Ps 69:22–28 or Ps 137:7–9; and others. In these, I seem to see something of the perversion of the human spirit that can take a truth of God, such as God’s justice, righteousness, and covenant faithfulness, and misunderstand and misuse it. In my book on the Psalms I have wrestled, as some of you know, with the problem of the imprecatory or curse psalms. If I were to rewrite the section on Ps 137, I think I would come right out and say that verses 8 and 9, instead of being in any sense “a word of the Lord” to us, express an understand-

able—but from the Christian point of view indefensible—“desire for punitive justice and human revenge.”²² I cannot believe that it was God’s Spirit that prompted the psalmist to say, “Happy [or blessed] shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

I cannot believe that in response to Elisha’s curse, God sent forth a couple of she-bears to kill some mean little boys! I cannot believe that it is ever right to pray,

Add to them punishment upon punishment;
may they have no acquittal from thee,
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous. (Ps 69:27–28)

For the ultimate norm is Christ; and Christ prayed a different prayer, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). What then shall we say of these things that on their face seem contrary to the mind of Christ? What can we say but this, that the Scriptures record accurately not only the will of God but the imperfect comprehension of that will by people, and that everything in Scripture must ultimately be tested as to its truth or falsehood by its conformity to the norm which is Jesus Christ?

I remember lying one night in an upper berth on a train on my way to a speaking engagement, and reading before going to sleep from the book by E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road*. Jones tells in this book of the relief that came to him as a missionary when once he realized that he was not called to run to and fro behind a long skirmish line, defending this and that in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, but that he could take his stand squarely behind the center of the line, which is Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the truth.”²³ By that norm I too am content to let every biblical teaching be tested. ⊕

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²²John P. Milton, *The Psalms* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1954) 170.

²³E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925) 11–12.