

Strack-Billerbeck, Orthodoxy and a Jewish New Testament

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of the evidence of publications dating from the eighteenth century, this paper argues that the orthodox doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible caused extreme views on the language of the Old Testament which could not be transferred to the "heathen" language of the New Testament. The resulting void was filled by focussing on the Jewish (read "Hebrew") thought of the New Testament. The work of Christian Schoettgen, available to the author in Vienna, is used in conjunction with the Critica sacra by Johann Gottlob Carpzov to develop the argument for the thesis. Some conclusions are drawn.

1. INTRODUCTION

The library of the Protestant Faculty at the University of Vienna owns a collection of some 200 old printed books from the time of the Reformation and the era it initiated. Several older publications are also to be found in the Institute of Church History and Christian Art, which is, of course, to be expected. However, the Institute of Old Testament and Biblical Archeology too houses a number of historical publications which can be classified as "old material". Several of them date from the eighteenth century and reflect the exegetical interests of the time.

One of the most valuable of these old books is titled *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in universum Novum Testamentum* or "Explanatory Hebrew and Talmudic notes on the complete New Testament", written by Christian Schoettgen and published in 1733 at Dresden and Leipzig by the Christoph Hekel publishing house. The author and his book are practically unknown. Presentday biographical dictionaries, church histories, histories of theology and research histories hardly mention him

or his book of well over 1000 pages. The only references to him that I know of, are to be found in two old German biographical collections dating respectively from 1891 and 1906, written by the same author (Müller 1891:412-417; Müller 1906:704-705), and in an incidental reference in *RGG*⁵ (Liebing 1961:1532).

Another of these older books is well known, as everyone knows who has read the standard tome of Hans-Joachim Kraus on the history of Old Testament research, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Kraus 1969). This is the work by the German theologian from the 18th century, Johann Gottlob Carpzov, under the title *Critica Sacra Veteris Testamenti* or "Sacred criticism of the Old Testament", published in 1728 by the Leipzig publishing house of Johann Christian Martin.

Carpzov is a standard example of German Protestant orthodoxy and its views on and use of the Bible. Comparison between the two books shows clearly that Schoettgen, though not as rigid and crass as Carpzov, also falls into the conservative Protestant tradition. I propose:

- to briefly introduce Schoettgen;
- to illustrate some typical traits of German orthodoxy from the book by Carpzov, especially concerning the holiness of the language of the Old Testament;
- to show that Schoettgen introduced a perspective on the Jewish sources for biblical scholarship the implications of which strengthened the orthodox view of the Bible.

If my thesis is right, it would mean that the great emphasis on the necessity to study the New Testament as a Jewish document, or to do so from the vantage point of a Semitic linguistic background and Jewish sources, became important in the Protestant tradition because of the needs of Protestant orthodoxy, if not actually brought about by it.

2. CHRISTIAN SCHOETTGEN AND HIS WORK

Christian Schoettgen (full name: Johann Christian Schoettgen or Schöttgen; cf Müller 1891:412-417; Müller 1906:704-705) was born at Wurzen in Saxony on 14 March 1687 as the son of a shoemaker. He was a brilliant schoolboy and student who be-

came a classical scholar, historian with specialist expertise in the history of upper Saxony, classical philologist, theologian, New Testament commentator, and an expert in Hebrew and Aramaic. He had a special interest in education and was, at various times in his career, teacher, college rector and professor. He also had pastoral interests and wrote several devotional works. However, the main fields of his publications were philology (*Novum lexicon Graeco-Latinum in Novum Testamentum*, published at Leipzig in 1746) and New Testament exegesis, for which he became well-known in his day. His main work was *the Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* which was followed by a second volume, actually a commentary on Jewish theology (*Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in theologiam Judaeorum dogmaticam antiquam et orthodoxam de Messia impensae*, published at Leipzig in 1742). He even published a Greek edition of the New Testament at Leipzig in 1744, only two years before his Greek-Latin lexicon. He died in Dresden on 15 December 1751.

3. CARPZOV AND ORTHODOX VIEWS OF SCRIPTURE

The other figure of interest to us, Johann Gottlob Carpzov (1679-1767), belonged to a famous family of orthodox Lutheran theologians and worked in several German cities, among others Dresden and Leipzig with which also Schoettgen had links (both as author and rector). Carpzov was an ardent proponent of the verbal inspiration of the Bible and went to extreme lengths in its defence. He relentlessly polemised against the Herrnhut Brethren and even against co-Protestants from the Calvinist tradition (Beyreuther 1957: 1624).

In the post-Reformation period a special theological genre called *critica sacra* or "holy criticism" developed (cf Kraus 1969:82-86). It was a type of literature devoted to the understanding of the Bible according to orthodox Protestant principles. Of "criticism" in the scholarly sense of the word, namely as clarification of the literary and historical issues involved, there was no question. Rather it was an endeavour to steer the exegesis of the Bible in the direction of the confirmation of orthodox doctrines. The *Critica sacra* by Carpzov is one of the most famous of these. It remained influential for a long time as one of the standard works on the Old Testament in European Protestantism.

The book of 10 plus 1007 pages is built around a conscious opposition to "normal criticism" and contains chapters on divine revelation in general, the inspira-

tion, authenticity, purity and integrity of the Old Testament. Then follows a discussion of the Hebrew language, including an argument for its "dignity and excellence". This is of importance to us, since it demonstrates the lengths to which the orthodox doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible was forced to go.

Whereas the authority of Scripture was accepted in the Roman Catholic tradition in the sense that the meaning ascribed to it by the church had authority (*Traditio seu ecclesia est Scripturae interpres*), the Reformation located the authority in the Bible itself (*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). But Luther saw that a norm still was needed to understand what the authoritative word said. According to him, this is provided by the Bible, notably in the motif of justification through faith alone (cf Deist 1979:46). Exactly at this point the Lutheran (and Calvinist) orthodoxy turned away from their Reformation heritage. Luther's canon within the canon was supplanted by the idea that the Bible as a written document is itself the norm for its own understanding. The origin of this position in an escalated polemic against the Roman Catholic view of the role of the church in understanding the Bible is obvious. This set in motion a whole chain of logically necessary implications and consequences, especially since orthodoxy was deeply indebted to the rationalistic use of Aristotelian philosophy. It can be clearly seen in Carpzov's argument.

At this stage the situation had been reached in which the Bible *is* the revelation and is no longer regarded as a *testimony* to the revelation. Revelation and Scripture are identified, which means that authority is a quality of the writings themselves. The formulation of these ideas by Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) on the Lutheran side and François Turretini (1623-1687) on the Calvinist side (cf Pfister 1962:1089-1090) is developed by Carpzov. The logical consequence is that, if the writing contains the authority, not only the biblical ideas, but also their linguistic expression must be supernatural.

In turn, the inspiration of Scripture became extremely important. This motif is found in Christianity since the earliest times, but was never fully developed or integrated with the idea of the authority of Scripture as in orthodoxy. What now became important, was not the revelation *behind* the Bible, but the *way* in which revelation was recorded. It followed necessarily that all that was involved in the writing process had to be regarded as of divine origin. So all grammatical forms, writing conventions, even diacritical points, were seen as inspired by God. Gerhard opposed the

questioning of the Hebrew vowel signs by Robert Bellarmin with the argument that Jesus himself accepted these signs, since he spoke of the small letter *yod* and the small *dot* signs of the Old Testament. And when Louis Cappellus dated the vocalisation of the Old Testament in post-Talmudic times, Turretini countered by ascribing them to Esra and Moses on the grounds that God inspired them (cf Rogers & McKim 1979:176-178; Deist 1985:71-72).

Carpzov works out the implications of this system. According to him (1728: 202-204) the Hebrew language is a sacred linguistic system. Because it was used by God, even its smallest details must be holy. He uses Jewish terminology to argue his point: the expression לשון הקודש which plays no role in the Old Testament itself, is used to demonstrate of what quality its language is. In turn this must mean that the Old Testament is also *expressed* beautifully and in a dignified way.

The other consequences of this train of thought, as the inerrancy, clarity and sufficiency of the Bible and the necessity of interpreting a part of it in terms of another part, are also found in Carpzov's work. Since, however, it is not of direct interest for our present purpose, we leave these aside.

Up to this point my own presentation has contained an unclarity in that, referring to orthodoxy, I have used the terms "the Bible" and "the Old Testament" indiscriminately. This is where the interesting aspect of the orthodox view of Scripture lies. A vagueness in this regard obscures a crucial problem for orthodoxy: If the doctrine of inspiration, developed as it was to this extent by the impact of the debate with the Roman Catholic tradition, necessitated a holy language, which in turn meant that God's revelatory language was Hebrew, what becomes of the other part of Holy Scripture called "New Testament"? Obviously one cannot claim that the Koine Greek language of heathen philosophers was divine, sacred and holy. Nevertheless, the New Testament contained the revelation of God just as the Old Testament did – what is more, now in its final or "fulfilled" form – and its expression cannot be inferior to that of its unfulfilled shadow in the Old Testament. As far as I can see, an answer to this embarrassment for orthodoxy is never attempted directly. But a way out of the dilemma was indeed ventured.

4. THE *HORAE HEBRAICAE ET TALMUDICAE* BY SCHOETTGEN

What would a natural strategy in this situation be? I think one would, if one is orthodox, be as silent as possible about the rational dilemma which cannot be solved logically, and quietly develop a surrogate or replacement which can be perceived to fill the gap. This would be to stress the Hebrew character of New Testament thought. And indeed, during this period interest in this kind of study appears on the scene.

Not all of the studies of the Jewish background of the New Testament were motivated by this need. So, for instance, Johann Jakob Wettstein (1693-1754) collected rabbinic and other Jewish comparative material mainly motivated by his textual critical interest and his work on the edition of the Greek New Testament in 1751-1752 (cf Bertheau 1908:198-203). The same interest in Talmud and Midrash was shown by Johann Gerhard Meuschen (1680-1743). His book, *Novum Testamentum ex Talmude et antiquitatibus Hebraeorum illustratum*, published at Leipzig in 1736, contained only two essays by himself. The others were by Balthassar Scheid, Johann Andreas Danz and Jakob Rehnferd (cf Franck 1885:538-539). However, the first major scholar to show an interest in this regard was the Presbyterian John Lightfoot (1602-1675), known for his assistance to Brian Walton on the London Polyglot. He too wrote a work with the title *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, published in stages from 1658 to 1678. This was intended to show the importance of Jewish studies for the interpretation of the New Testament, but did not cover the entire New Testament. Only the Gospels and Acts, as well as a few chapters of the Epistle to the Romans and the First Epistle to the Corinthians, were commented upon.

Schoettgen intended his work to be understood as an expansion and further development of Lightfoot's work, which can be seen in the extensive title: *Christiani Schoettgenii Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in universum Novum Testamentum. Quibus Horae Io. Lightfooti in libris historicis supplentur, Epistolae et Apocalypsis eodem modo illustrantur. Accedunt dissertationes quaedam philologico-sacrae, indicesque locorum Scripturae, rerum ac verborum necessarii* ("Christian Schoettgen's explanatory Hebrew and Talmudic notes on the complete New Testament. In which the explanatory notes of Iohannes Lightfoot on the historical books are expanded, while the Epistles and the Apocalypse are illustrated in the same manner. Upon

which follows certain philological-sacred dissertations and indices of the scriptural passages, necessary matters and words”).

Already in the title we can see the orthodox orientation of the work. According to Schoettgen an important aspect of his work is to be seen as containing “holy” philology. Philology here is the study of words and phrases in their grammatical, literary and historical contexts. Though the concept of “holy philology” is not as crass as that of a “holy linguistic system”, it comes very close to it.

Schoettgen himself formulates the character and intention of his work as follows (Preface, paragraph XX, section 1, unnumbered page):

The main use of this volume is that the phrases and sayings of the New Testament are illustrated from the ancient rabbinic writings in far greater light than can ever be expected from heathen writers. Since I have been quite clear about this matter above, I add nothing further.

He then goes on in the next section to summarise a defence of this position against possible criticism (which is also a central theme of his preface): Christ and the apostles are claimed not to have rejected the “good things” (*bona*) that were derived from the “ancient Jewish church before the birth of Christ” (*Ecclesia antiqua Judaica ante Christum natum*), but to have fortunately used these good things so as to turn them against the “abuse” (*abusus*) of the Pharisees.

The polemic is clear: Attack is the best form of defence. The embarrassment of a “heathen” cultural setting in the use of the Greek language is circumvented. Without further substantiation it is only claimed that the New Testament cannot be understood in the light of heathen authors. On the other hand, the New Testament can be understood in the light of the Hebrew tradition, since:

- the latter comes from the ancient “church” of the period before the birth of Christ and, having its origin in the “church”, not among heathens, it is acceptable;
- the problem of the Pharisaic/Jewish misuse of the ancient Hebrew writings has been overcome by the use of these writings against the Pharisees by Christ and the apostles.

However, it is exactly from this “misuse” of the Old Testament that Schoettgen draws all the material for his book. The light to be shed on the New Testament is the perverted darkness of the rabbis. The Talmud, midrashim and other rabbinic writings are all Pharisaic. So the embarrassment has not been eliminated, only made to seem so.

One illustration may suffice to show that this position is untenable. Eleven pages (see Schoettgen 1733:1063-1073) of extensive commentary is given on the *Comma Johanneum* in 1 John 5:7. The ancient Jewish material must bear out that this verse proclaims the Holy Trinity, or else the system of the commentary will break down at the most crucial point of the Triune God. So Schoettgen adduces many examples to show that the number 3 is associated with the number 1 in Jewish literature. This leads to the conclusion that the mystery of the Trinity was known to the ancient Jews (Schoettgen 1733: 1074): *Ad rem ipsam faciunt haec loca, quae ostendunt, mysterium Trinitatis antiquis Judaeis fuisse cognitum.*

But the purpose has been served: The holy ideas of the New Testament are expressed in the holy language of the Jews – albeit corrupted by the Pharisees, yet purified by Christ. This construction of thought severely relativises the claim by Schoettgen (Preface, paragraph II, unnumbered page) that his *modus operandi* is legitimate since Jesus and all of the New Testament writers were Jews who spoke this language (which is in itself not at all above doubt). Basically the same claim is made by Strack & Billerbeck (1924:v) as theological justification for their gigantic collection of rabbinic material that is to be a commentary on the New Testament. But the tradition of the theological use of the rabbis has its origin not in the scholarly perspective of the contemporary history or the wish to investigate the *religionsgeschichte* context and relationship between the New Testament/early Christianity on the one hand and its historical Jewish roots on the other. It developed in the wake of the difficulties presented by the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration.

5. CONCLUSION

When one compares the work of Strack & Billerbeck with its early antecedent, several things become clear. Although Strack & Billerbeck (1924:v) refer to Schoettgen and some of the others discussed above, they do so in the merest passing fashion, only to show that the earlier work was inadequate. Quantitatively, they have certainly super-

seeded the early works in a majestic fashion (although there are cases where they provide the same rabbinic references as Schoettgen, e g on Mt 5:3, where both works use Pirque Aboth [שפ"ל ר"ה] to comment πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι). But qualitatively they have not moved beyond the theological deficits of Schoettgen's work. The most important aspect of this is, in my opinion, the indiscriminate use of all kinds of rabbinic material from just about every period, including very late sources well into the Amoraic era of centuries after Christ. It is very difficult to defend this position merely by the claim that the rabbis preserved ancient traditions. This would be no stronger than a claim that the Pentateuch throws light on the Mosaic period because the later documents preserved old traditions. A deep-seated uncritical strand runs through the work of Strack & Billerbeck, which is not altogether foreign to their theological conservatism.

I think I have adduced the argument to show that the emphasis in Christian theology on the study of the New Testament as a Jewish document, or on reading it from the vantage point of a Semitic linguistic background and Jewish sources, became important in the Protestant tradition because of the needs of Protestant orthodoxy.

My conclusion does *not* mean that reading the New Testament against its Jewish background is wrong in principle. This in itself is quite a different matter. It *does* mean, however, that care should be taken in the use of the traditional exegetical tools from this tradition, introduced under the auspices of German orthodoxy and passed on via a conservative line with a pietist slant. It means, especially, that one should be aware of the context, motivation and purpose of this type of study.

This illustrates the necessity of a critical use of one's own tradition. The one that we have been considering makes up a large part of the Protestant theological tradition in South Africa as well as in Austria. To this end the *Forschungsgeschichte* plays an important role. Far from being at most a curiosity of some interest, it serves the purpose of hermeneutical orientation in that it obviates presuppositions and mental make-ups present in the exegetical tools themselves as well as in their users. Perhaps the most important aims to strive for in a theology that is learning to become tolerant, is awareness of what baggage of our theological tradition we bring into the exegetical process.

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