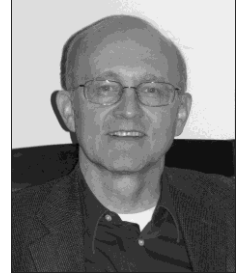


Johann Albrecht Bengel: A Prominent Post-Reformation Voice Engaging a Rising Tide of Biblical Criticism¹

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Introduction

In considering “voices from the edge of the Reformation,” it seems fitting that the prominent voice of post-reformation era German Pietist Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) should be heard. As a leading exegete of his time who is generally acknowledged as “the father of modern textual criticism,” Bengel’s numerous commentaries and his *Gnomon* have made significant contributions to biblical scholarship. As we begin our consideration of this “prominent post-reformation voice” and his “engagement of a rising tide of biblical criticism,” we turn our attention to the movement with which he is generally associated.

With the tide of biblical criticism rising in Europe in the late 17th century and early 18th century, another movement was birthed in Germany which would have no less significant impact upon Christianity. That movement was known as Pietism. Although Michel Godfruid’s claim, “To write the history of Pietism is to write the history of modern Protestantism,”² would appear to be an overstatement, it highlights the importance of this movement. It was a movement genuinely characterized by a strong emphasis upon the personal appropriation of the Christian faith and on active “living out” of its implications.³

¹ This paper represents an update of a 1997 research paper submitted to Dr. John D. Woodbridge for the doctoral class “Origins of Modern Biblical Criticism” at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, IL.).

² Cited in Peter C. Erb, ed., *Pietists Selected Writings* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983), 1.

³ For a treatment of the causes, major subdivisions, and theological tenants of Pietism, see Karl A. Olsson, “What Was Pietism,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 28 (1970): 3-14.; Dale W. Brown, “Pietism: What Is It?”, in *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 8-34; and series of articles by F. Ernest Stoeffler, Egon W.

While the names Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) are synonymous with Lutheran Pietism, a less well-known but no less significant figure was one Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752). Bengel is generally considered the originator of South German (Swabian) Pietism and “the one expositor of the Bible whose authority on biblical interpretation was well-nigh universally acknowledged by Continental Pietists.”⁴ In many ways Bengel’s legacy far exceeds those of the other more prominent Pietists of his day. Bengel’s *Apparatus Criticus* (1734), *Harmony of the Gospels* (1736), and *Gnomon of the New Testament* (1742) contributed substantially to the field of biblical studies.

It is claimed by some scholars that leading Pietists of the 18th century adopted a view of inspiration and inerrancy significantly different from that of the traditional orthodox position.⁵ It is further suggested that Pietism and its leading figures, including Bengel, abetted the rise of higher criticism.⁶ In light of these claims, this study will examine the life and writings of Johann Albrecht Bengel within the framework of early Pietism. Particular attention will be given to Bengel’s view of Scripture. The potential influences of rationalism and other philosophies of Bengel’s day will be considered. Specifically, we will address the question: Was Bengel, in fact, opposed to the tenants of higher criticism or did he contribute to its rising tide, either wittingly or unwittingly? These, and other, questions will be answered as we consider the voice of Johann Albrecht Bengel.

The Historical Context

As it is impossible to justly consider individuals apart from the context in which they lived, a brief summary of the historical setting which surrounded Bengel’s life is warranted. The major movements constituting the theological environment of Bengel’s day included the waning influence of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the rise of Evangelical Pietism, and the inception of rationalism which would later develop fully into the Enlightenment. While the complex

Gerdes, Manfred W. Kohl, and Dale W. Brown in “Contemporary Perspectives on Pietism,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 34:1 and 2 (1976): 1-89.

⁴ F. Ernest Stoeffler, “Pietism: The Wesley’s, and Methodist Beginnings in America,” in *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 199.

⁵ Frederick Holmgren, “The Pietistic Tradition and Biblical Criticism,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 28 (1970): 51. For a more detailed analysis of claims regarding the Pietist view of Scripture, see: Alan J. Thompson, “The Pietist Critique of Inerrancy? J. A. Bengel’s *Gnomon* as a Test Case,” *JETS* 47 (March 2004): 71-88. Thompson comes to similar conclusions regarding Bengel’s view of inspiration and inerrancy as reached in this paper.

⁶ Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 64-82. See also Peter C. Erb, ed., *Pietists Selected Writings* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983), 24-26. And especially: Frederick Holmgren, “The Pietistic Tradition and Biblical Criticism,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 28 (1970): 49-59.

political, socio-economic, cultural, and religious circumstances which set the stage for the emergence of German Pietism are beyond the scope of this paper, the movement can be viewed in large part as a reaction to two historical phenomena: the Thirty Years' War and Lutheran Orthodoxy. The Thirty Years' War had devastated much of Europe, not the least of which was the Württemberg area of Southern Germany, where between 1634 and 1654 the population was reduced from 313,000 to less than 60,000.⁷ Entire villages were wiped out. The people and lands were further raped by three French invasions before the turn of the century. The country was decimated and in despair with an accompanying moral decadence. The government, rather than respond to the mounting needs of the people, became increasingly corrupt and insensitive to them.

Further compounding the situation was the seeming irrelevance of Lutheran Orthodoxy to religious life. People were disenchanted with the polemics that had come to be synonymous with Lutheran Orthodoxy as well as with the all-too-often use of the sermon as a means of controversy rather than as a means of edification.⁸ These were among the major forces which prompted the Pietistic movement with its stress upon the appropriation of one's Christian faith. The time was ripe for a renewed emphasis on the personal and experiential dimensions of religious life and Pietism did just that.

While Pietism took various forms and was comprised of numerous subdivisions,⁹ the term "Classical Pietism" has been used to designate the form which centred around Württemberg and the work of Spener, Francke, and Bengel.¹⁰ Among other features, this form of Pietism was characterized by: (1) a strong apocalyptic component, (2) a high view of education, and (3) a high regard for Scripture.¹¹ In addition, it was distinctly *Lutheran* in that it called for reform within Lutheranism rather than retreat from it as did some of the more radical forms of Pietism. The University of Tübingen, where Bengel received his training and with which he was later closely associated, became a theological centre for this movement through most of the 18th century.

⁷ W. H. Bruford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century: The Social Background of the Literary Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 152-153.

⁸ C. John Weborg, "The Eschatological Ethics of Johann Albrecht Bengel: Personal and Ecclesial Piety and the Literature of Edification in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2 and 3" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983), 13.

⁹ F. Ernest Stoeffler, "Pietism – Its Message, Early Manifestation, and Significance," *The Covenant Quarterly* 34 (February/May, 1976): 6-7.

¹⁰ Egon Gerdes, "Pietism: Classical and Modern," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (April, 1968): 257.

¹¹ Weborg, 14.

Bengel's Life And Legacy

Johann Albrecht Bengel was born on June 24, 1687, in Winnenden, a small town in Württemberg. His childhood presented him with numerous challenges which undoubtedly contributed to molding his character. His father, a pastor at Winnenden, died when Bengel was only five years old. Shortly thereafter, the family homestead was destroyed by the plundering hordes of Louis XIV, and young Bengel was placed under the care of David W. Spinder, a friend of his father. When in 1699 they moved to Stuttgart, Bengel enrolled in the *Gymnasium* where he studied ancient languages, French, Italian, history, and mathematics. Among his teachers was Andrew Hochstetter, a leading Pietist educator. Bengel remained at Stuttgart until 1703.

In 1703, Bengel's widowed mother married John Albert Glöcker, through whose efforts Bengel was enabled to enter the University of Tübingen at the age of sixteen. At that point, the Tübingen faculty was heavily influenced by the Pietistic movement centred at Halle. Bengel's personal study of Scripture was deeply influenced by the writings of leading Pietists, including Arndt's *True Christianity*, Spener's *Pious Desires*, and Francke's *Prolegomena to the Greek Testament and Guide to the Study of the Sacred Writings*.

Bengel's education at Tübingen, where he studied under John Wolfgang Jäger and Andrew Hochstetter, serves as a good example of the potential influence of one's mentors. At Tübingen, Bengel's studies included philosophy, advanced philology, and theology. During his one year of focused philosophical studies, he selected the writings of Aristotle and Spinoza for private study.¹² He also gave attention to Poiret, Leibnitz, and Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*.¹³ Bengel acquired such a thorough knowledge of Spinoza's metaphysics that professor Jäger requested he prepare materials for a treatise, *De Spinocismo*, which Jäger later published.¹⁴ It was through this early phase of his training that Bengel was first exposed to rationalistic thought and philosophy. The degree to which Bengel adopted such thinking will be discussed in a later section.

While Bengel's interest in philosophy was furthered under Jäger, it was Hochstetter who was instrumental in promoting Bengel's interest in textual criticism. The initial work was on the Old Testament. Hochstetter asked Bengel to assist him in editing a new edition of the German Bible. Bengel's contribution focused on the punctuation of Job through Malachi. From this work, he would later write an essay on the Hebrew accents in which he argued that, although there was general uniformity of accenting among the prophets, each book had its own distinctive accentuation. While he denied

¹² John Christian Frederic Burk, *A Memoir of The Life and Writings of John Albert Bengel . . . Compiled Principally from Original Manuscripts Never Before Published*, tr. by Robert Francis Walker (London: R. Gladding, 1842), 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

that the Masoretic pointing was a part of the inspired text,¹⁵ he did acknowledge that an intimate knowledge of the accents was required for proper interpretation.¹⁶ It was also during the first two years of Tübingen (1703-1705) that Bengel became troubled by textual variations in the Greek New Testament; this led him to in-depth investigation of the original language of Scripture.¹⁷ While this area will be further considered in a later section, suffice it to say that he would spend much of his life laboring in the collection and study of manuscripts in pursuit of “a perfect Greek text.”¹⁸

Following completion of his theological training at Tübingen in 1706, Bengel served as pastor at City Church for about a year, then as a theological repentant (junior divinity tutor) at Tübingen for several years. In 1711 he was ordained and became Curate at Stuttgart, serving under his old professor, Andrew Hochstetter. During this time, Bengel continued to carry on his theological research in the library at Tübingen. In fact, it was during this period that he demonstrated his philological skill and broad historical acquaintance in his scholarly word study *Syntagma de sanctitate*.¹⁹ In this work, he examined the Scriptural usages of *kadosh* in the OT and *hagios* in the New. The results of this study, in which he concluded that the holiness of God was the sum total of His attributes, would have a profound influence upon his later work and writings.

In 1713, Bengel accepted a professorship at a new theological seminary at Denkendorf where he remained until 1741. Prior to taking up his new duties at Denkendorf, he was sent at government expense on a six-month tour of the major German churches and institutions as part of qualifying him for this new position.²⁰ This tour, which included a trip to Halle and opportunity to interact with Francke, made a particularly deep impression upon him. Writing from Halle on June 17, 1713, he described the life of faith that he found

¹⁵ Contra the Buxdorfs of Basel, John Owen, Francis Turretin and The Company of Pastors, and other in the United Provinces during the mid-late 17th century who argued thus to give certainty to the biblical text in light of both mounting skepticism and Roman Catholic arguments against the sufficiency of Scripture apart from the Church. See John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 87-89.

¹⁶ Joel Lee Samuels, “Bengel’s Interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics” (M.Th. diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968), 20.

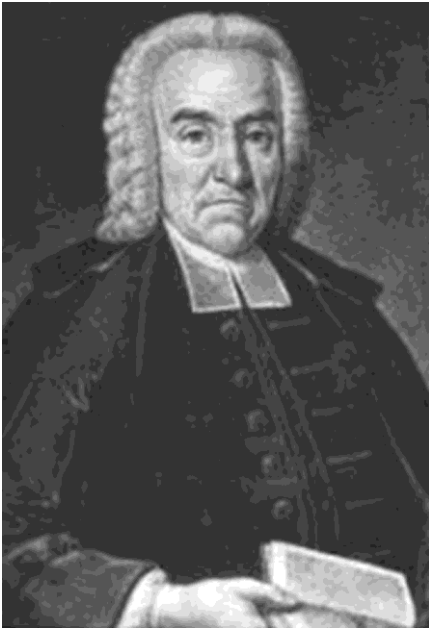
¹⁷ Burk, 10.

¹⁸ Andrew Helmbold, “J. A. Bengel: Full of Light,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 6:3 (1963): 76.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, “In Memorium: Johann Albrecht Bengel, June 24, 1687, to November 2, 1752,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 23 (November 1952): 786. Though the *Syntagma* never appeared separately, Bengel made reference to it and summarized it in *Erklaerte Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi* (2d ed.; Stuttgart, 1746), 310-312.

²⁰ Burk, 7-8.

evident there, "What delights me above all is, the harmony of these men among themselves, which they study to keep up by social prayer . . . I had heretofore thought myself a sort of isolated Christian, left almost entirely to my own resources; but here I learn something about the communion of saints."²¹



It was at Denkendorf that Bengel completed most of his major textual and exegetical work. With his students, Bengel worked through the entire Greek New Testament every two years, carefully collecting notes along the way.²² This would provide the basis for much of his literary contributions. Bengel's major contributions to biblical studies include: *Apparatus Criticus* (1734), *Harmony of the Gospels* (1736), *An Explication of the Book of Revelation* (1740), *Ordo Temporum* (1741), *Gnomon of the New Testament* (1742), *Cyclus* (1745), *Sixty Practical Addresses on Revelation* (1747), and his translation

of the *German New Testament* (1753). Indeed, Norman Sykes' extraordinary summary of Bengel's contributions appears justified:

His union of individual piety with sound theological learning enabled him to correct some of the dangerous tendencies of the school at Halle, but his own theological teaching was less a systematic exposition of dogmas than a continuous exegesis of Scripture. Moreover, he was significant also in another respect, as a pioneer in textual criticism of the New Testament and as an exponent of the Old Testament as a historical record of God's dealing with men, to be studied historically and with regard for the circumstances of the times in which it was compiled. Bengel and his followers not only bridged the gulf between theology and piety, but also foreshadowed the later development of literary and historical criticism of the Bible.²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²² Helmbold, 74.

²³ Norman Sykes, "The Religion of Protestants," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 192. It is here noteworthy that Bengel's recognition of the organic uni-

Bengel And Textual Criticism

In the early days of his training at Tübingen, Bengel had been deeply troubled by the 30,000 readings in John Mill's 1707 edition of the Greek New Testament. However, following his exhaustive study of the available manuscripts, he concluded that the variant readings were fewer than might have been expected, and that they did not impact a single doctrine of the faith. He noted that he had finally "found rest in the sure conviction that the hand of God's providence must have protected the words of eternal life which the hand of His grace had written."²⁴ It is here that one notes a marked contrast with the English Deist Anthony Collins (1676-1729), who appealed to the existence of so many variant readings in his argument against the authority of the Scriptures.²⁵

A notable contemporary example of one who appeals to the existence of the multitude of variants in arguing against the accuracy or inerrancy of Scripture is Bart D. Ehrman, who in his *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible* asserts:

I kept reverting to my basic question: how does it help to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly? What good is it to say that the autographs (i.e., the originals) were inspired? We don't have the originals! We have error-ridden copies, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them, evidently, in thousands of ways.²⁶

ty of the Old and New Testaments and of the divine economy of history laid the foundation for the *Heilsgeschichtliche Schule* to follow.

²⁴ Cited in Andrew Helmbold, "J. A. Bengel – 'Full of Light,'" *Bulletin of the Evang. Theol. Soc.* 6:3 (1963): 76.

²⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

²⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 7. In their insightful analysis of Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace [*Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Didn't Tell You* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 287-88] note that Ehrman (*Misquoting Jesus*, 109-112) discusses the role that Bengel played in the history of textual criticism and that he, in fact, "gives Bengel high praise as a scholar: he was an 'extremely careful interpreter of the biblical text' (ibid., 109); 'Bengel studied everything intensely' (ibid., 111)." Yet as noted by Komoszewski, et al, "Ehrman speaks about Bengel's breakthroughs in textual criticism (ibid., 111-12) but does not mention that Bengel was the first important scholar to articulate the doctrine of the orthodoxy of the vari-

With confidence that God had indeed protected his Word, Bengel dedicated much of his scholarly endeavor in an attempt to obtain a text as close to the original as possible. It is here that text-critic Bengel put forth his most ardent work as noted Bengel scholar Gottfried Mälzer states:

Of course, the defects (variants) involve no fundamental questions of faith, hence they are secondary. Notwithstanding, it is necessary for one to attempt the recovery of the original texts. Here, the text-critic Bengel put forth his ardent and dedicated work.²⁷
[translation mine]

While Bengel certainly considered the Bible unlike any other book in its content and character, when it came to textual criticism he applied the same basic methodologies as would be used on the classics or patristics. Mälzer further asserted: “Still, it is remarkable that, as a text-critic, Bengel rendered no distinction procedurally between the classical and patristic treatments, consequently no difference between secular texts and those of the Bible” [translation mine].²⁸

ants. This is a curious omission because Ehrman is well aware of this fact, for in Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), which appeared just months before *Misquoting Jesus*, the authors note that Bengel collected the available manuscripts and early translations. ‘After extended study, he came to the conclusions that the variant readings were fewer in number than might have been expected and that they did not shake any article of evangelic doctrine’ (158). On the other hand, Ehrman mentions J. J. Wettstein, a contemporary of Bengel, who, at age twenty, assumed that these variants ‘can have no weakening effect on the trustworthiness or integrity of the Scriptures’ (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 112). Years later, after careful study of the text, Wettstein changed his views after he ‘began thinking seriously about his own theological convictions’ (ibid., 114). One is tempted to think that Ehrman may see a parallel between himself and Wettstein. Like Wettstein, Ehrman started out as an evangelical when in college but changed his views on the text and theology in his more mature years (see *Misquoting Jesus*, 1-15, where Ehrman chronicles his own spiritual journey). But the model that Bengel supplies – a sober scholar who arrives at quite different conclusions – is quietly passed over.”

²⁷ Gottfried Mälzer, *Johann Albrecht Bengel, Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1970), 364. German text: “Da es nicht mehr verfügbar ist, gelangte im Zuge der Tradition nur noch ein fehlerhafter Text der Bibel in unsere Hände. Zwar betreffen die Fehler keine fundamentalen Glaubensfragen, sind also zweitrangig. Aber trotzdem ist es geboten, sich um die Wiedergewinnung des originalen Textes zu bemühen. Hier setzt der Textkritiker Bengel mit seiner leidenschaftlichen und entsagungsvollen Arbeit an.”

²⁸ Gottfried Mälzer, *Johann Albrecht Bengel, Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1970), 364. German text: “Immerhin ist bemerkenswert, dass Bengel als Textkritiker methodisch keinen Unterschied Zwischen der Behandlung klassischer und patristischer, also profaner Texte und dem Bibelwort, gemacht hat.”

Bengel's advancements of the study and analysis of manuscripts earned him the epithet "the father of modern textual criticism." His critical principles²⁹ provide the basis for textual critical studies to the present day. Bruce Metzger reports that Bengel was the first to distinguish between families of New Testament manuscripts.³⁰ Bengel also established a canon of criticism for weighing variant readings which, in one form or another, has been practiced by critics ever since. Among the leading principles still practiced are: (1) the difficult reading is to be preferred, (2) where the manuscripts differ from each other, those agreeing with versions of the Fathers are to be given greater authority, and (3) while more witnesses are to be preferred to fewer, the more important consideration lies with witnesses from differing countries, ages, and languages who agree.³¹

It should be noted that Bengel was not without his critics. The mounting tensions of the day in the realm of biblical-critical studies are evidenced by the fact that following publication of both his *Apparatus Criticus* (1734) and the *Gnomon of the New Testament* (1742), Bengel was caught between attacks from both sides. Some assailed him as a dangerous innovator with "unprecedented audacity" and claimed that his Greek text would "supply infidels with weapons." Others believed that he was too timid and had not gone far enough.³² Interestingly, one of Bengel's sharpest critics was the son of friend and fellow Pietist, August Francke.³³

Bengel's View On Inspiration And Inerrancy

It should first be recognized that the Lutheran Orthodoxy of Bengel's day staunchly defended the infallible authority of Scripture with inspiration extending to the very words themselves. They believed in the canonical status of both the Old and New Testament books and that these books were inspired and free from any and all error.³⁴

As we begin examining Bengel's view of Scripture, it is worthwhile first to consider those of other key Pietist leaders. With the emphasis of Spener, Francke, and Bengel on biblical theology over dogmatics, it is also not surprising that these early Pietists exalted the Bible as the supreme authority. However, their exact views on inspiration and inerrancy have been debated – with much of the discussion centring around Spener and Francke's distinc-

²⁹ John Albert Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, translated by Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), Author's Preface xvi-xx.

³⁰ Metzger, 112.

³¹ Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, xvi-xx.

³² *Ibid.*, xxxix-xl.

³³ Martin Brecht, "Johann Albrecht Bengel's Theologie der Schrift," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche* 64 (1967): 105ff.

³⁴ Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957).

tion between the “kernel” and the “husk” of Scripture. Holmgren suggests that such references, along with Spener’s assertion that some parts of the Bible are more important than others, set the stage for Semler and his distinction between Scripture and the Word of God.³⁵ Snyder agrees in concluding that the notion of kernel and husk had all the makings of a “canon within the canon” and the later “search for the historical Jesus.”³⁶

While Semler and later Pietists would come under the influence of increasing rationalistic tendencies at Halle, any direct connection to Spener and Francke and their position on inerrancy appears unwarranted. For starters, the oft-cited kernel-husk duality appears to be overstated. For Francke, the “husks” referred to the externals of Scripture, that is, the history, chronology, ancient rites, laws, etc. while the “kernel” was the divine message which relates to salvation and one’s life as a Christian.³⁷ Their point in using this illustration seems more to do with differing degrees of emphasis than with degrees of inspiration. Francke, for example, lamented the fact that too many people were feeding “contentedly on the husks,” while the “heavenly delights of the kernel remained untasted and unenjoyed.”³⁸ He was not suggesting that the husks were uninspired or in error! To acknowledge that different parts of the Bible are of differing *value* is not synonymous with saying some parts are in error! For instance, what Christian would not acknowledge that they find the dietary laws of Deuteronomy 14 of less *value* than the Apostle Paul’s teaching on justification by faith in the epistle to the Romans?

The suggestion that the Pietists’ view of inspiration and inerrancy somehow opened the door for accepting the tenants of higher criticism³⁹ appears to be largely unfounded in the case of Bengel. Like the “kernel” and “husk” analogy of Spener and Francke, Bengel’s view of “graded inspiration”⁴⁰ is often cited as a denial of inerrancy. Here too the claim appears unfounded. While Bengel does distinguish between the apostles and the OT prophets, this distinction does not diminish his view of inspiration or inerrancy.⁴¹

³⁵ Holmgren, 55-56.

³⁶ Lawrence W. Snyder, Jr., “The Pietist Millennium: Eschatology and the Hope for Spiritual Renewal” (M.S. diss., Wheaton College, 1985), 39.

³⁷ Holmgren, 52.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 49-59.

⁴⁰ C. John Weborg, “Pietism: Theology in Service of Living Toward God,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 182.

⁴¹ Gottfried Mälzer, *Johann Albrecht Bengel, Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1970), 362-63, notes the following with respect to Bengel’s varying degrees of inspiration, “Er kennt allerdings recht verschiedene Grade der Inspiration; z. B. unterscheidet er zwischen den alttestamentlichen Propheten und den Aposteln: ‘Es ist ein Unterschied zwischen der Art von göttlicher Eingebung, welche die Apostel und welche die Propeten genossen haben; letztere eigneten sich eher für das Jünglings-, jene für das Mannes-Alter.’ Den Propheten wurden alle Worte genau

Mälzer further notes that Bengel refers to differing degrees of inspiration (“Grade der Inspiration”) with Matthew and John having greater priority than Mark and/or Luke.⁴² However, Bengel clarifies his position in the following statement:

A minister of government may have two secretaries: a mere writing clerk, to whom every word is dictated; the other well-acquainted with his lord’s mind, and thus enabled to express it accurately in words of his own; so that what he has thus expressed is as much the will and pleasure of his principle, *as if it had been written by verbal dictation* [emphasis mine].⁴³

In light of the above and other equally definitive statements by Bengel, it is indeed difficult to conclude that he held to anything short of a strict view on inerrancy. Mälzer himself asserts that there is no tension between a strict version of inspiration and Bengel’s acceptance of *Graden der Inspiration*: “That means that no tension exists between this strict version of the inspiration-teaching and the acceptance of extents (degrees) of inspiration for Bengel” [translation mine].⁴⁴

In contrast to Semler and others who would follow, Bengel accepted the entire Bible as the Word of God. As noted by Hehl, the Bible was for Bengel truly *the book of books*.⁴⁵ According to Bengel, one must accept Scripture in total, not just certain parts. Both the minute parts and the whole are to be revered as he indicated in the following response to a letter from a former student:

Your query as to Scripture being divinely endited to the sacred penmen is ambiguous. If you ask whether the very words which they wrote were thus dictated to them, I can only remind you, that the apostles themselves have drawn the most important inferences from Scripture terms and expressions of the utmost brevity and minuteness . . . but if your inquiry be respecting the general inspira-

vorgesprochen, die sie reden und schreiben sollten; die Apostel hatten eine mehrere Freiheit, aber doch sind auch ihre Schriften Gottes Wort.”

⁴² Mälzer, 363.

⁴³ Burk, 264.

⁴⁴ Mälzer, 363. German text: “Das bedeutet, dass zwischen dieser strengen Fassung der Inspirationslehre und Der Annahme von Graden der Inspiration für Bengel keine Spannung besteht.”

⁴⁵ Werner Hehl, *Johann Albrecht Bengel, Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Schutzumschlaggestaltung, 1987), 83. “Die Bibel war für Bengel seit eh und je das Buch der Bücher. ‘Hier ist die Sonne, die alle Nebel durchbricht. Hier ist die einzige Schrift, die niemals veraltet.’ Seitdem er die Anfechtungen seiner Studienzeit überwunden hatte, war ihm Gottes Wort ‘unbedingt zuverlässig,’ was er gewiss, dass man ‘himmelfest darauf fussen’ könne.”

tion and authority of all Scripture, I may refer you to the proofs of it which have been collected by various excellent writers, . . . but for my own part, I am satisfied with this simple position, that the whole sacred volume is in most beautiful harmony with itself.⁴⁶

Bengel, nevertheless, denied a strict mechanical dictation theory of inspiration recognizing the individualities and differences of the various biblical authors. He did, however, note that in certain prophetic parts, the text takes its form from *Divine dictation*.⁴⁷ In his exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16, Bengel states “It was divinely inspired, not merely while it was written, God breathing through the writers, but also while it is being read, God breathing through the Scripture and the Scripture breathing [through] him.”⁴⁸ Here, Bengel affirms both the inspiration of the writers of Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit in illumination of the reader, a teaching which received considerable emphasis within Pietism. In his studies, Bengel placed great emphasis on the individual words and their interrelationships in context. He approvingly quotes Luther’s statement that “the science of theology is nothing else, but Grammar, exercised on the words of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹

With respect to the author’s choice of words in the writing of Scripture, Bengel appears to have held an Augustinian view of accommodation.⁵⁰ That is, God accommodates Himself to us by using language that we can understand, even phenomenological language, but always makes accurate statements. In the preface to his *Gnomon* in a section dealing with the style of the biblical authors, Bengel states: “Certainly the wisdom of God, even when through His instruments He accommodates Himself to our grossness . . . the result was that the writers of the New Testament, however unlearned, wrote always in a style becoming their subject . . .”⁵¹ Mälzer adds: “Concerning himself about the account of its origin, Bengel sees a makeshift (stopgap), support-type design in the Bible, which God Himself uses in order to take into account human infirmity” [translation mine].⁵² Bengel held that God accommodated *the weakness of the people* in communicating the text of Scripture. (This is also the view espoused by Francke, “Indeed, it appears that the Spirit condescended to accommodate himself to their particular genius and

⁴⁶ Burk, 58.

⁴⁷ John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, vol. 5, revised and edited by Andrew R. Fausset (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1863), 201, 183.

⁴⁸ Bengel, *Gnomon*, vol. 2, 553.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵⁰ For a detailed treatment of the various views on accommodation, see Glenn Sunshine, “Accommodation in Calvin and Socinus: A Study in Contrasts” (M.A. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985).

⁵¹ Bengel, *Gnomon*, xxii-xxii.

⁵² Mälzer, 362, “Um die Beschreibung der Ursprünge bemüht, sieht Bengel in der Bibel einen Notbehelf, eine Hilfskonstruktion, deren sich Gott bedient, um der Schwachheit der Menschen Rechnung zu tragen.”

modes of writing, which evidently vary in the different books of Scripture."⁵³)

Lest there remain any doubt as to Bengel's commitment to a strict view of inerrancy and a high regard of Scripture, his following summary of the general principles of biblical exposition are decisive:

The sum, then, of the above remarks is, (1) That the Holy Scriptures are the sole repertory of that complete system of truth which man, as a being appointed to obtain everlasting salvation, needs to be acquainted with. (2) That every, even the minutest, scripture detail has its importance in the structure of revealed truth; and natural reason has often the power of seeing and tracing that importance, but never the power of choosing or rejecting any such matter at pleasure. (3) That the expositor who nullifies the historical groundwork of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, certainly brings death upon all correct interpretation. (4) That the Scriptures best illustrate and corroborate themselves; consequently, those expositions are safest which keep closest to the text. (5) That the whole power and glory of the inspired writings can be known only to the honest, devout, and believing inquirer. (6) That much in Scripture is found to stretch far beyond the confines of reason's natural light, and far beyond even our symbolic books. Still, whatever kinds is evidently declared in Scripture, ought to be received as a part of the system of divine truth, notwithstanding all reputed philosophy, and all reputed orthodox theology. On the other hand, every theological notion, which is not evidently deducible from Holy Scripture, ought to be regarded with religious suspicion and caution.⁵⁴

Lastly, Bengel's view of inerrancy extending even to historical dating is evidenced by his *Ordo Temporum* (1741), in which he detailed the chronology of the Old and New Testament. He further extended his biblical chronology in a work entitled *Cyclus* (1745) into the realm of prophecy even to the fixing of the date of the start of the millennium to 1836. To Bengel, the book of Revelation is a tightly knit compendium of future things, such that the removal of a single word would mar not only the context of its location but more importantly the comparisons of passages which contain the things which must shortly come to pass.⁵⁵ While Bengel certainly went too far in his

⁵³ Holmgren, 51.

⁵⁴ Burk, 263.

⁵⁵ C. John Weborg, "The Eschatological Ethics of Johann Albrecht Bengel," *The Covenant Quarterly* 36 (May 1978), 31. Here Weborg refers to *Gnomon of the New Testament*, vol. 5, revised and edited by Andrew R. Fausset (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1859), 187.

strict chiliastic interpretation of Revelation in the predicting of dates, he did so as an earnest student seeking to exegete inerrant Scriptures, not as many charlatans have through the centuries. The charge by Snyder that Bengel's eschatological predictions resulted not so much as a fruit of exposition as from his "literalistic biblical primitivism"⁵⁶ is unjustified.

Pietism's Relation To Philosophy, Rationalism, And Biblical Criticism

While later Pietists, and even a few in Bengel's day (e.g., Christian Wolff), were impacted by rationalism and the effects of the Enlightenment, the early Pietist leaders generally stood opposed to any philosophy which they viewed to be counter to Scripture. For example, Jacob Spener in his *Pia Desideria* (1675) sharply criticized German Lutheran theologians who had become caught up in writing showy metaphysical tractates.⁵⁷ Francke declared that "anybody who occupied himself with the definitions and scholastic metaphysics was a fool."⁵⁸ Interestingly, such repudiation of Aristotelian philosophy (which was so much a part of Lutheran Orthodoxy) is often cited as actually contributing to the growing success of Rationalism.⁵⁹

Indeed, the broader German Pietism of Bengel's day was not immune to the effects of rationalism and the ensuing higher criticism. In particular, the thinking of Spinoza (1632-1677), Leibnitz (1646-1716) and other rationalists infiltrated Pietism largely through the University of Halle. Christian Thomasius (1655-1728), a professor of law at Halle (and one of Leibniz' teachers), attempted to provide a foundation for law apart from theology. That is, he separated natural law from metaphysics and theology. While not discarding belief in the supernatural, he sought to separate religion from the sphere of philosophical reflection.⁶⁰ Furthermore, his emphasis that the exercise of reason should be directed to the social good is a characteristic idea of the Enlightenment.⁶¹

Pietist philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754), who also taught at Halle, went even further than Thomasius in drawing a rigid separation between phi-

⁵⁶ Lawrence W. Snyder, Jr., "The Pietist Millennium: Eschatology and the Hope for Spiritual Renewal" (M.S. diss., Wheaton College, 1985), 39.

⁵⁷ John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 187.

⁵⁸ Theodore G. Tappert, "Orthodoxism, Pietism and Rationalism," in *Christian Social Responsibility*, ed. by Harold C. Letts (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 69. Cited in Joel Lee Samuels "Bengel's Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics" (M.Th. diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968), 16.

⁵⁹ Joel Lee Samuels, "Bengel's Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics" (M.Th. diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968), 16.

⁶⁰ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. V: Wolff to Kant (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1964), 101-105.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

losophy and natural theology, employing the cosmological proof for the existence of God. While Wolff was banished from Halle in 1723 after imbibing the rationalist teachings of Leibnitz, he was later reinstated by Frederick the Great in 1740 and the influence of his ideas began to spread through the German universities.⁶² Indeed, Halle was the first major German centre to yield to rationalism, leading to the common eighteenth century saying that “he who goes to Halle returns either a Pietist or a Rationalist.”⁶³ With respect to the connection between Pietism and the Enlightenment, leading Pietist scholar F. Ernest Stoeffler notes:

While we should not make the mistake of crediting Pietism with the modern insights and ideals which we usually associate with the Enlightenment it needs to be pointed out that the former lent a hand, at least, in the formation of some of the important values which inform our contemporary moral self-understanding. Quite contrary to a still prevalent misconception in our day, Pietism was oriented toward the present in hope of a better future, not the past . . . this teleological element within the Pietist perspective helped to shape the later vision of an improved humanity found in men like Lessing, Fichte, Kant, Schleiermacher, and even Hegel.⁶⁴

Stoeffler adds, “It is not without significance that all of these thinkers had a Pietist background,” and concludes that “the moral and cultural optimism of the Enlightenment, then, as well as its faith in educational and other programs of man’s betterment, is at least in part of Pietist vintage.”⁶⁵ Stoeffler goes on to draw a similar corollary between the experiential emphasis of Pietism and later emphasis on natural experience. He notes that for men like Friedrich Oetinger (1702-1782), “the transition from religious experience to the experience of nature through experimentation was but a logical step.”⁶⁶ (Oetinger was the second major personality in connection with the Pietism of Württemberg and was one of Germany’s most original theologians of the eighteenth century.)⁶⁷

Brown, like Stoeffler, appropriately cautions against drawing too strong a cause-effect relationship between Pietism and the Enlightenment but adds, “To deny direct causative relationships because of fundamental differences is

⁶² *Ibid.*, 106-107.

⁶³ Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 152-153

⁶⁴ F. Ernest Stoeffler, “Pietism: Its Message, Early Manifestation, And Significance,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 34:1 (February/May 1976): 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁷ Stoeffler, *German Pietism in the Eighteenth Century*, 107.

not to deny, however, that indirectly Pietism helped prepare the way for the German Enlightenment.”⁶⁸

What of Johann Bengel? Bengel is cited as being not only sympathetic to Spinoza but to have incorporated aspects of Spinoza’s metaphysics into his theological framework.⁶⁹ Bengel did hold a degree in philosophy and had given special attention to Spinoza in his studies. Certainly the high moral ethics promoted by Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* would have appealed to the Pietistic emphasis on practically living one’s faith. Furthermore, referring to his philosophical training, he wrote that the “attention of that season to metaphysics and mathematics gave his mind a clearness for analyzing and expounding the language of Scripture.”⁷⁰ The ethical treatises of Aristotle and Spinoza were likewise valued by him as helps in moral philosophy. His view of the philosophical enterprise, however, was held in check by his devotion to the Scriptures. Philosophy was always to be secondary to the Scriptures:

It is only the student who habitually delights in the Scriptures previously to entering upon philosophy for the clearer arrangement of his ideas, that can study philosophy to good effect; for to stand on the vantage of Divine revelation, is the only security for safely considering and judging of every floating system which may meet the eye.⁷¹

As noted by Pietist scholar C. John Weborg, Bengel appeared to place the value of philosophy in its teaching one *how* to think more than *what* to think.⁷² Bengel states, “All the real advantages which *divines* can derive from philosophical training may be comprised in a very small compass; its chief use of them is for teaching good arrangement and methodological inferences.”⁷³ When confronted with the more speculative philosophy of his day, such as in the case of Leibnitz’s theodicy, Bengel’s opposition is clear:

. . . the more we talk of such things, the less we know about them. Is it to promote piety? Knowledge of this sort will not at all promote our recovery from sin; and when we are recovered enough, we shall know enough; wisdom will then be spontaneously manifested to us. This is all I now have to say upon speculative philosophy; for though I meant to have said a great deal more, the desire

⁶⁸ Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 153.

⁶⁹ Samuels, 19.

⁷⁰ Burk, 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

⁷² Weborg, “The Eschatological Ethics of Johann Albrecht Bengel: Personal and Ecclesial Piety and the Literature of Edification in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2 and 3,” 47.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 57.

has left me, because I know that God cannot be pleased with our too curiously inquiring into the secret things which belong to him.⁷⁴

Bengel's beliefs clearly stood in opposition to the philosophical underpinnings of the impending wave of rationalism. In fact, in his classic work entitled *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century*, Stoeffler attributes both the delay in the Enlightenment's arrival in the Lutheran church of Württemberg and its more limited effects in that area to a form of Pietism which "had been made respectable by the Tübingen-Bengel axis around which it revolved."⁷⁵

Conclusions

While not a prominent figure in contemporary biblical studies, the impact of Bengel's work has earned him the epithet "the father of modern textual criticism,"⁷⁶ "the father of scientific exegesis,"⁷⁷ and "the father of eschatological study."⁷⁸ His principles of textual criticism are, with few exceptions, those used by contemporary scholars. His commentaries have received world-wide recognition and, until recently, his *Gnomon* was commonplace in the libraries of evangelical pastors.⁷⁹ He is acknowledged to have laid the foundation for the *Heilsgeschichte Schule*, whose main representative was J. C. K. von Hofmann. His influence over subsequent biblical scholarship has been compared to that of Luther and Flacius in the sixteenth century, the Buxtorfs in the seventeenth, von Hofmann in the nineteenth and Schlatter in the twentieth.⁸⁰

On a personal note, what is particularly impressive about Johann Bengel is his focus on genuine critical scholarship while maintaining an unwavering dedication to both the text and the Author of Scripture. His testimony challenges the recent claim of narrative critic Robert Fowler that "he or she who 'serves the text' with utter devotion cannot objectify and thereby know what text is in fact being served."⁸¹

With respect to the issue of Bengel and the inception of the German historical-critical school, the results of this study suggest that while the subjectivism and experiential emphasis of later Pietists may have contributed to the rise of higher criticism, Bengel's criticism went no higher than to search for the pure text of the inerrant, inspired Word of God! The impact Bengel

⁷⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁵ Stoeffler, *German Pietism in the Eighteenth Century*, 129-130.

⁷⁶ Helmbold, 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁹ Pelikan, 786.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Robert M. Fowler, "Who Is the 'Reader' in Reader Response Criticism," *Semeia* 31 (1985): 9.

would leave upon German Pietist is perhaps best summarized in his own motto, “Apply thyself wholly to the text. Apply the text wholly to thyself.”



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