Among the luminaries of the Lutheran Church, none should shine brighter than Johann Albrecht Bengel, who has met the underserved fate of being known only in academic circles. Yet he certainly was the greatest Biblical scholar of his century, and made more lasting contributions to Biblical studies than many more famous men. The purpose of this article is to point out those contributions. To do so one must look at Bengel's life and character, for his studies were the direct result of his own spiritual experience.

Bengel as a Christian

Bengel was born to a Lutheran parsonage family at Winnenden, Germany, on June 24, 1678. He lost his father at the age of six. As a child he read Arndt's True Christianity and Francke's Introduction to the Reading of the Scriptures. Thus early was he influenced by the pietistic movement, although the never became a pietist. In later life he used Arndt's work and Francke's Sermons and Muller's Hours of Refreshing in family devotions. He completed his theological education at Tubingen in 1706. Then followed a curacy at City Church, Tubingen, a period as theological repetent at his alma mater, another curacy at Stuttgart, and a professorship at Denkendorf (1713-1741) which he left only to serve as prelate of the church. His home was blessed with twelve children, but six died in infancy. His comfort in his hours of sorrow was that "if a vacancy has been made in his family circle, another vacancy had been filled up in heaven." At his death, on Nov. 2, 1752, the words "Lord Jesus, to Thee I live; to Thee I suffer; to Thee I die: Thine I am, in death and in life; save and bless me O Saviour, for ever and ever. Amen." were repeated over him. He signified his assent by placing his hand over his heart, thus reaffirming what he had said previously, "All that I am and have, both in principle and practice, is to be summed up in this one expression—the Lord's property."

The depth of his own spiritual life is seen in his hymns "Daysman! Source of Power" and "Word of the Father! Speak!" He constantly drew upon heavenly resources. As he began to revise his Exposition of the Apocalypse, he said, "O what cause have I to ask continual help of God in this important business." Combining thus deep personal piety, which he considered the conditio sine qua non, with extensive learning, he was well qualified to become "the most important exegete since Calvin." At the close of his edition of Cicero's Epistles he gives a word of warning against the danger of study separated from piety. "There is no bodily or mental labor which may not be made injurious to our secret and perpetual communion with God." Understanding his spiritual and mental preparation, we can turn to his labors as a scholar.

Bengel as a Scholar

Bengel's lasting fame rests upon his labors on the New Testament. However, his first scholarly efforts were upon the Old Testament. He collaborated with his professor, Dr. Hochstetter, (later president of Denkendorf) in a corrected edition of the German Bible wherein the punctuation was made to conform to the Hebrew accents of the Massoretic text. This led him to write an essay on the Hebrew accents. All of this was good preparation for his critical studies in the New Testament. In later life he wrote the Praefatio to the Gnomon in duodecim prophetas minores of his son-in-law, P. D. Burke. Perhaps if he had not been weighed down with too many classes he could have produced, like Calvin in the 16th century and Grotius in the 17th, a commentary on the whole Bible. Certainly, "He would have..."
been one of the exceedingly small number of those who have been found competent to comment upon the whole Bible.⁸

The unfolding of Bengel's literary career is an interesting story in itself. Denkendorf was somewhat of a junior college-seminary combination. Therefore part of his labors were in classical fields: Greek and Latin. He judiciously chose for reading material texts having a direct relationship to the ministry. For classroom use he brought out new editions of Cicero's ad familiares (1719), Gregory's Panegyric on Origen (1722), and Chrysostom's de Sacerdotio (1725). He also published Annotationes ad Macarius and Annotationes ad Ephrem Syrus. However, already the trend of his scholarly activities had been fixed. With his students he went through the Greek New Testament every two years, collecting notes carefully. Finally, in 1722, he determined to publish a commentary and completed it in two years. However, he kept it maturing for eighteen years more before publishing it. So the Gnomon actually represented thirty years of study and over twenty years of actual preparation.

The Greek Text

Before he could publish the Gnomon it was necessary to determine that he was commenting upon the best possible text. So he entered upon his prodigious and exceedingly fruitful labors as a critic. Even as a student he had been interested in the variant readings, and no little disturbed by them. In his edition of Chrysostom he appended a Promdomum Novum Testamentum Graecii which outlined his plan to publish a new Greek text, a critical apparatus and a commentary upon the whole New Testament. A brief summary of the important printed Greek texts up to his time will give some insight into the problems he faced. In 1749, the German scholar, A. T. Robertson remarks:

"The Greek Text

The Greek text was that of Robert Stephens (Paris, 1546). He used several Greek manuscripts in the royal library at Paris. However, his text was not the best text. Bengel's basis was mainly based upon the Textus Receptus because he determined to print no reading in the text which had not been previously printed. However, he did put some better readings into the text. His marginal readings were divided into five groups: (1) genuine readings, (2) those superior to the text, (3) those just as good, (4) those inferior, (5) those to be rejected. In his preparation he used the texts of Walton, Fell, Mill, Wetstein, and Smith. He collected nearly all manuscripts then in England and other abroad. He did not use the Church Fathers in any measure for textual criticism. His work had an excellent critical apparatus.

In 1711 the ninth Greek Text was published by the Amsterdam firm of Wetstein and Smith. It was a carefully corrected copy of Elzevir's text with variants from a Vienna manuscript. It is important because it contained the Crisis of Gerard von Maestricht, containing his forty three critical canons. These canons were ponderous and well received but erroneous or misapplied in many places by their author. Bengel had been working on the Greek Text for many years when he undertook the refutation of von Maestricht's errors. This he did in 1734 in his Apparatus Criticus to his Greek Testament. In the meantime a second edition of the Crisis appeared in 1735, so he wrote a second defense of his arguments against it and published it as an excursus to his Harmony of the Gospels in 1736 and later in the appendix to the second edition of his Apparatus Criticus (1765). Thus Bengel's judicious weighing of the canons of criticism led to the formulation of his own canons which guided him in the production of his own Greek Testament.

The first edition of his Greek Testament appeared in 1734 in Tubingen in a quarto edition with the Apparatus Criticus appended. It was also published the same year at Stuttgart as an octavo without the apparatus. This went through five editions. It became the basis of the Danish text. Bengel's basis was mainly based upon the Textus Receptus because he determined to print no reading in the text which had not been previously printed. However, he did put some better readings into the text. His marginal readings were divided into five groups: (1) genuine readings, (2) those superior to the text, (3) those just as good, (4) those inferior, (5) those to be rejected. In his preparation he used the texts of Walton, Fell, Mill, Wetstein, and Smith, plus twenty-four Greek manuscripts, in addition to a number of Latin manuscripts. Wishing to placate the idolizers of the Textus Receptus he adhered strictly to his rule of printing in his text (except in Revelation, where peculiar problems were encountered) only readings previously printed. So his text itself, perhaps, was not so important as his marginal readings and his notes on reasons for including or excluding readings, and most of all, the Apparatus Criticus and the various writings in which he expounded his critical principles. These have been briefly summarized as follows:¹¹ (1) The antiquity of witnesses must receive the greatest consideration (i.e., manuscripts must be weighed as well as counted), (2) the diversity and ages from which readings come is important, (3) the number of witnesses to a reading must be observed, (4) the origin search. However, it did serve to popularize the Textus Receptus. This came about because the Elzevir brothers used his first edition with the third of Stephens to publish their text of 1675. The second edition of Elzevir used the fourth of Bengel's text without image.
of a corrupt reading must be sought, and if found, it is often possible to reconstruct the original text. (5) the greatest importance must be given to "the native appearance of the genuine reading" and his most important (6) the more difficult reading is to be preferred. Added to these canons was Bengel's observation that texts came in families. He divided them into two groups, Asiatic and African.15 Bengel was the first to recognize the extreme importance of Codex A.16 Scrivener said that Bengel "left the stamp of his mind deeply imprinted on the criticism of the sacred volume . . . . But the peculiar importance of Bengel's New Testament is due to the critical principles developed therein."17 Concerning Bengel's textual labors it has been said that "he always regarded the impulse which he had been the instrument of communicating to the pursuit of a perfect Greek text as one of the chief services which he had done to his age; and no one who rightly estimates the vast results of more modern criticism will think that he overvalued it."21 No wonder his prodigious labors on the Greek text19 merited for him the epithet "the father of modern textual criticism."20

For all his careful labors Bengel was repaid, not with thanks, but with criticism from the right and from the left. On the right were those who had a "textus receptus is good enough for me" attitude. He was attacked by John George Hager in Early Gathered Fruits (1738) for his temerity. If every bookmaker is to take into his head to treat the New Testament in this manner, we shall soon get a Greek text totally different from the received one. The audacity is really too great for us not to notice it, especially as such vast importance, it seems, is attached to this edition. Scarcely a chapter of it has not something either omitted, or inserted, or altered, or transposed. The audacity is unprecedented.21

From the Catholic party he was attacked by Rev. T. A. Berghauer in Bibliomachia (1746). Bengel's reply is appended to his Sixty Practical Addresses on the Apocrypha (1747) and is contained in the second edition of the Apparatus Criticus (1768). He showed that he had done no more than Cardinal Ximenes, and that the Bibliomachia was appropriately entitled "War with the Bible" because it was full of blasphemy against the word of God in all Bibles, Catholic and Protestant. Its threats of persecution he regarded as pointing to the fulfillment of many prophecies in Revelation. In his reply to Berghauer are these beautiful words:

O that this may be the last occasion of my standing in the gap to vindicate the precious original text of the New Testament! The children of peace cannot love contention; it is troublesome and painful to them to be obliged to contend even for the truth itself (Gal. vi. 17). May the Lord Jesus diffuse among us his peace, his grace, and his glory, ever more and more! Ruling even in this midst of his enemies, till he shall have subdued all things; yea, unto Himself.22

Bengel, whose own faith had been disturbed by the 30,000 variants in Mill's text until he had thoroughly winnowed the canons of criticism and 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,"23 certainly could not be accused of playing fast-and-loose with the sacred text.

From the left his principal protagonist was J. J. Wettstein. This critic maintained that Bengel did not go far enough, that he should have put many of his marginal readings in the text because they were supported by superior manuscripts, and that caution did not secure freedom from persecution, for Erasmus was accused of being an Arian, and Stephens had to flee to Geneva to escape burning at the stake, and that Bengel himself had to abandon his cautious approach in editing the text of Revelation.24 In these points Wettstein was probably correct, but he certainly was in error in opposing Bengel's "more difficult reading" rule25 and in insisting upon giving the preference to counting manuscripts instead of weighing their value.26 Wettstein did admit, however, that Bengel's text was the best yet printed, although he never saw the value of Bengel's critical acumen. The critical principles of Bengel, with modifications, have been carried out by Semler, Griesbach, Tregelles, Westcott and Hort, and a host of others, but to Bengel goes the honor of putting textual criticism upon a scientific basis.27

The Gnomon

Herculean as were his textual labors, for Bengel they were only a means to an end. His great desire was to understand the Word of God, for which a relatively pure text was a most important requirement, but not the goal itself. Therefore, his Greek Testament and the corollary writings were but preliminaries to his magnum opus, the Gnomon of the New Testament and his other exegetical writings. Because of his deep love for the Scriptures, he wanted to unfold their meaning to others, and to arouse in them a thirst for their life-giving waters. In his essay "On the Right Handling of Divine Subjects" he said, "Whatever, therefore, He tells and teaches us in His word, we are to suffer ourselves to be told and taught" and "It also possesses a supernatural efficacy . . . it takes men captive and kindles faith within them, before they even thought what faith is . . .28 and we are to receive "all and every thing" which God puts before us in Scripture and "not of vain conceit to reject or strike out any portion or particle as useless."29 No wonder Tholuck said of the Gnomon, "it was prepared with the devotion of an enthusiastic lover, whose searching eye noticed and admired even the smallest particle."290

His views of the inspiration of Scripture are reflected in these quotations, but if he were alive today he would be caught between two fires as he had been in the attacks on his Greek Testament. He would be called a Bibliolater by some because he thought the prophets wrote from dictation and that Hebraisms in the Apocalypse were due to the fact that "the whole style of John, and especially in the prophetical parts, takes its form, not from accustomed habit, but from Divine dictation, the resources of which are boundless."30 Others would dislike his idea that the apostles wrote freely from their intimate acquaintance with the mind of the Lord. His approach to the problem of inspiration serves to highlight his importance in the history of exegesis, for he was the first to free exegesis from the chains of dogmatic theology. He saw the weakness of Protestant theology in his day in using Scripture as a standard of a fixed system and not as a source of ever new and deeper truth.32

Bengel outlined his exegetical principles in six points.33 The fourth, on the self-sufficiency of Scripture, he elaborated as follows:

The Scriptures, moreover, carry in themselves convincing and independent evidence of the truth, validity, and sufficiency of all the narratives, doctrines, promises, and threatenings they contain. Truth is its own witness, and exacts our assent. I recognize the handwriting of a friend without needing to be told who has written to me. We want not the stars, much less a torch, to show us the sun: it is only the blind who cannot see it. Every Divine communication carries, like a diamond, its own light with it, showing whence it comes, and needing no touchstone.34
No wonder he was unhindered by the trammels of dogmatism or philosophy and was free from the restrictions of following a party-line. His most famous axiom is “Adhere strictly to the text; apply the subject entirely to thyself,” printed in the preface to his Gnomon. Another is “read nothing into the Scripture, but draw everything from them, and suffer nothing to remain hidden that is really in them.” Added to these is his principle of interpreting the Word of God analogia Scriptura and not analogia fidelis and his insistence that “The proper exposition of Holy Scripture depends upon the gift of divine grace, though with this the science of language, history, and helps of that kind do service. His over-all view of Scripture, which will be considered later, was that “we are to regard them... as a matchless, regular account of God’s dealings with man through every age of the world, from the commencement to the end of time, even to the consummation of all things. They indicate together one organic unity, harmonious, and gloriously connected system.” With these principles of exegesis and this philosophy of the organic unity of Scripture he proceeded to produce a series of important exegetical works including his Harmony of the Gospels (1736), Gnomon of the New Testament (1742), An Explanation of the Book of Revelation (1740), and Sixty Practical Addresses on Revelation (1747).

His Harmony went through three editions (1736, 1747, and 1766). Its chief contribution was his theory that the life of Christ encompassed only three Passovers, a theory now generally accepted. The Gnomon appeared after thirty years of study and meditation. It went through numerous Latin and German editions. The first English translation was edited by Andrew R. Fausset in 1857-1858. This has gone through seven editions, and other English translations have followed it. Gnomon became the basis of Wesley’s Expository Notes on the New Testament, with notes and revision of Luther’s translation, by Daniel Ch. Gottlieb Michaelis (1764), and of a Paraphrase of the New Testament by his son Ernest Bengel (1784).

Keeping in mind that the New Testament was informed by a Hebrew spirit, adhering strictly to the grammatico-historical method, aiming at pointing out the full force of the words and sentences of the New Testament, using words parsimoniously, Bengel produced a commentary which stood the test of time. It drives its readers back to the Scriptures themselves, as was his design. This is illustrated, as well as his terse style, in his comment on Matt. 26:8: “apoleia, waste or perdition.—Nay, thou, Judas, art the son of perdition! See John xvii. 2.”

Bengel’s philological and grammatical finesse are responsible for much of the merit of the Gnomon. It is certainly true that “Many of its most striking beauties are the result of an exquisite appreciation, such as no modern criticism has surpassed, of the shades of meaning conveyed by the selection and order, and emphasis of the original words.” The same writer goes on to say, “It may be questioned whether any single commentary on the New Testament has ever exerted a greater influence, directly or indirectly, than the Gnomon.” Among the many tributes to Bengel’s exegetical genius one may cite that of Philip Schaff:

When the first edition of the Gnomon came off the press, March 23, 1742, he sang the well-known hymn:

O Thou, who our best works hast wrought,  
And thus far helped me to success,  
And to Thy grace the glory give.

Combining this vital piety, spiritual insight, scholastic ability and indefatigable efforts, he produced a commentary which, as Fritsch correctly says, is altogether sui generis. We may well denominate Bengel “the father of modern exegesis.”

Before turning to the third field in which he labored mightily, let us reconsider his philosophy of Scripture as “an incomparable narrative of the divine economy with reference to the human race.” This adumbrated the Heilsgeschichtliche Schule of Von Hofmann (1810-1877) which starts with the assumption that the Bible is the perfect, self-contained memorial of the redemption acts and revelation of God. Von Hofmann was the founder of the Erlangen school and deeply affected conservative theology in Germany and Scandinavia. Among his followers were Zahn, Hallesby, Frank, Bugge and Otto Piper. The first two of these have had a strong influence upon American Fundamentalism. Thus his philosophy of revelation lives on.

**Eschatology**

With his basic premise of Scripture as the record of God’s dealings with his people in every age, it is no wonder that Bengel became interested in chronological and prophetic studies. Beside his two works on Revelation, he published his Ordo Temporum (1741), Cycle sive de anno magno solis (1745), and Weltziet (1746). Although these studies have not appealed to students of the twentieth century, yet they did have merit. Prior to his time millennial speculations (after the first three or four centuries of church history) were limited to mystical sects and Anabaptist groups. This Bengel changed by bringing eschatological study into the mainstream of the eschatological endeavors. His principles of interpretation compelled him to carefully examine all of Scripture, not just the historical and doematic portions, and to publish his Apocalyptic studies, although he knew they would bring him into disrepute. So he wrote, “But truth is of more importance to one’s credit or anything else. We must not be deterred from uttering truth by any concern as to what people will say of us.” His method of interpreting Revelation was the Continuous-historical one. He is considered among belonging to the historical premillennialist. His eschatological and prophetic studies have come down to more recent days through his influence upon Chr. A. Crusius, whose memory “has been revived by Delitzsch in his Biblico-prophetic theology” and through Hengstenberg, Stier, von Hofmann, Kurz, Baumgarten, Beck and Aubelen, who all have striking affinities with Bengel’s school, and most of them have a more or less immediate connection with it via their education. It is true that “Millenial views, varying in their expectations of a more sensuous or more spiritual Kingdom, have been revived from time to time since then [the Reformation], and owe their great modern development to Bengel.” Therefore, Bengel can be called “the father of modern eschatological study.” We can close this discussion of his eschatological studies with these words from the Lutheran Commentary:

The chief importance of Bengel’s system (Continuous-Historical method of interpreting Revelation) consists in this, that he brought to light again the princi-
tive Christian doctrine of the millennial kingdom, which had been misapplied for nearly fifteen centuries. He laid the foundation for a dogmatic development of eschatology, and his world-chronology assisted greatly in promoting the idea of an organic historical development of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Enough of Bengel's importance has been pointed out so that the claim can be justly made that he is the father of (1) modern textual criticism, (2) modern scientific exegesis, (3) modern eschatological study. Any one of these would have been sufficient honor for any scholar. Yet there are grounds for believing that a fourth such distinction could be claimed for Bengel. After taking two pages to pay tribute to Bengel's greatness, Karl R. Habelnach drops this hint:

He founded a school, not, indeed, on any set system of doctrines, but moved by his broad and genial spirit, and the influence of his followers was widely beneficial. Under the conduct of men of this school, the first scheme of an alliance of all Evangelical Christians was carried into effect, and the basis of union, the broad, yet distinctive features of salvation through Christ, has been retained even until our own time, and is reproduced in the Evangelical Alliance of today. If Habelnach is correct, then Bengel is the father, or at least the grandfather of the evangelical ecumenical movement.

Other features of Bengel's life-work must pass unnoticed. They were incidental to his great labors upon the Scripture. His high estimate of the Sacred Word is given in these words:

Scripture is the foundation of the Church: the Church is the guardian of Scripture. When the Church is in strong health, the light of Scripture shines bright; when the Church is sick, Scripture is corroded by neglect; and thus it happens, that the countenance of Scripture and that of the Church, are wont to exhibit simultaneously, the appearance either of health, or else of sickness; so that it comes to pass that the treatment of Scripture corresponds, from time to time, with the condition of the Church.

Church history has proven time and again the sagacity of this observation.

What light Bengel had shed upon Holy Writ by his exhaustive labors on the Greek Text, by his careful exegesis, and his well thought out philosophy of revelation! It matters little that time has disproved his chronological speculations. His principles abide and flood our twentieth century researches with light. Yet all

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FOOTNOTES

1. Christian Observer, XI (1811), 661. In addition to the works cited in this article see the bibliography of Christian Expositor, Interpretation, V (April, 1851), 215, for the most recent biographies.

2. Bengel, Theological Preparation, tr. by Andrew R. Fassett (Edinburgh, 1860), V, xxxiv. All future references to the Gronau are to this 2nd English edition.

3. Ibid., xxxix, xxx.


6. August Herkomer, tr. by Albert H. Newman (Andover, 1777), 47.


8. Ecclesiastical Quarterly Review, XI (1859), 201. Biblical studies in the late 19th. and early 20th. centuries were often led astray by the sharp dichotomy between the O.T. and N.T. fields.


12. ibid.


14. Bengel, V, 137-177. Preparation of his Greek text to Revelation alone took more than 400 days.

15. Miller, op. cit., 293.


17. Life, 235, Bengel, XVI, 228.

18. Life, 228. Bengel, XVI, 219. In spite of these attacks from the right Zinzendorf was wise enough to adopt Bengel's text for his own new German translation, for which he also suffered persecution. L. O. R., XI (1858), 250.


20. Life, 238.


22. Bengel's text was prefixed to a volume of sermons by J. Ch. Storr (1750), and published in the 2nd. edition of Bengel's German New Testament. It should be required reading for all seminarians.

23. ibid., 255.


27. L. O. R., XII (1862), 253.

28. L. O. R., XII, 253 quoting essay mentioned above.


34. Interpretation, V, 210 for other examples of his brevity.


36. ibid., 219.


38. Interpretation, V, 212.


41. Pfetsch, ibid., 290.

42. Life, 281 note, 310.

43. Futurist and Prerestoration schools existed in his day for Bengel complains that some see only the future Christ and others only the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in his book. Life, 529.


48. Karl H. Hennebach, German Rationalism (Edinburgh, 1856), 126f.