

Evangelical Biblical Interpreters: Puritans, Germans and Scots (Part 1)¹

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Purpose: The purposes of this our second, monthly, winter Haddington House lecture are several. First, tonight we want to promote the serious study of the Word of God – the scriptures. To that end we want to introduce or to become better acquainted with select evangelical interpreters who have stood the test of time. In addition to this overarching purpose I offer also the following: to help with guidance for your personal library acquisitions; to give some guidance in the vast field of biblical interpreters; to help you in your studies, preaching and writing by giving signposts to library usage; and to encourage you to see the faithful workers who have served their generation and laboured well.

Each generation can be blessed by taking a few hours of study on the heritage of evangelical biblical interpreters. Most will cite Spurgeon's two masterful lectures in the nineteenth century which eventually became his *Commenting on Commentaries*.² Spurgeon is not alone in that practice; in our generation I think of similar efforts done by D. A. Carson,³ Peter

¹ This lecture was first given on February 28th, 2002 as Haddington House Winter Lecture No. 2, Moncton, N. B. This paper is in substance that lecture. It is also reflective of the way Haddington House attempts to conduct theological training.

² There have been various printings of this, not to mention the electronic format of this work now available.

³ D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, third edition

Masters, Cyril J. Barber, or John F. Evans⁴ – one of which, each serious bible student should possess. This lecture will I hope open the door to this subject.

At the outset I would say that your very attendance here tonight goes far in keeping us from certain dangers in the field of biblical interpretation. One being the attitude which pretends not to need help from commentators. I will give to you a couple of quotations from Spurgeon to set the tone for this lecture. Commentaries should not be neglected

as an aid to your pulpit studies, you will need to be familiar with the commentators: a glorious army...we have found the despisers of commentators to be men who have no sort of acquaintance with them; in their case, it is the opposite of familiarity which has bred contempt. ...who can pretend to biblical learning who has not made himself familiar with the great writers who spent a life in explaining some one sacred book?⁵

Spurgeon further challenged the audience of The Pastor's College:

No, my dear friends, you may take it, as a rule that the Spirit of God does not usually do for us what we can do for ourselves, and that if religious knowledge is printed in a book, and we can read it, there is no necessity for the Holy Spirit to make a fresh revelation of it to us in order to

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

⁴ John F. Evans, "A Guide to Biblical Commentaries And Reference Works for students and pastors", revised 1993 edition (privately produced at Haddington House, Moncton, N. B.). This list is by no means exhaustive of annotated bibliographic works or commentators. For a fuller list see Evans, page 4 and 5.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, "Lecture No. 1"

screen our laziness. Read, then admirable commentaries...

Yet Spurgeon was also wise enough to know that even good things must be properly approached and went on to write:

...be sure you use your own minds too, or the expounding will lack interest...Freshness, naturalness, life, will always attract, whereas mere borrowed learning is flat and insipid... So to rely upon your own abilities as to be unwilling to learn from others is clearly folly; so to study others as not to judge for yourself is impecility.⁶

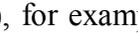
Criteria for inclusion in the study of admirable commentaries:

The criteria I have adopted as to whom would be included tonight in this lecture of admirable commentators is first, their evangelical theological stance (I take this in the categories of the Reformation solas); second, that they are either multiple volume sets or composite multiple volume sets or commentators who at least produced commentaries or works on several scripture books; third, to select commentators representing a wider European context to educate us in the larger scope of evangelical interpretation; and fourth, as much as possible to select works available in reprint form or fairly readily available in good libraries.

The Puritans: The Two Matthews

We begin with the Puritans, and limit our discussion here to the two Matthews, namely Matthew Henry and Matthew Poole. I will assume that most will have heard of each and many of you will own each in some form. My biographical information will be brief here. I begin with the older of the two, namely

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, "Lecture No. 2".

Matthew Poole (b.1624 - d.1679) who had been a student at the noted Puritan institution at Cambridge, Emmanuel College. In 1662 he along with 3,000 other Puritans was ejected from his pulpit. Basically the remainder of his life was spent in exhaustive study and writing, chiefly in exile in Amsterdam where he died. His *magnum opus* was not his English commentary we use today but rather the work which underlies it, his *Synopsis Criticorum* a five volume, folio sized Latin work, which brought together the writings of bible scholars from several nations. This was a very learned work not suitable for a wide readership. Having completed this his *magnum opus* he set to work to produce “annotations” upon the whole bible. Annotations were first in the style of brief notes upon each verse printed at the bottom of a page such as in a study bible. Poole’s proposal was to produce such annotations but somewhat fuller since he would not print the text at the top of the page but insert the commentary between verses. The work relies heavily upon the church fathers (for example, Jerome or Ambrose) but this Poole never tells you in the actual annotation. He never cites his references but rather it reflects the maturity of years of study. The purpose was to provide the plain sense of the text. Thus, it was not to cite other authors (these are hidden), nor was it to be critical, nor to deal with controversies rather the goal was to arrive at the plain sense, and reconcile seeming contradictions – simply to open up the scripture. On occasion a word will be printed in Greek (without transliteration), for example, Acts 2:27, , or in Hebrew.⁷ On page 389 volume three I checked and there are five words in the original languages. Thus, it is beyond a simple Bible annotation in a Study Bible. However in the three volume reprint of the 1685 edition we must acknowledge one fact – Matthew Poole did Genesis to Isaiah 58 and upon his death editors went through his works to complete the remainder to

⁷ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* original 1685 *Annotations on the Holy Bible* reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979). I prefer the Banner of Truth reprint over the recent Hendrikson reprint because the Hendrikson set have reduced the print size by approximately 10%.

Revelation. So there are some internal inconsistencies. In much of the Old Testament you will not find Hebrew words whereas in the New Testament you will find the Greek. Also in the Old Testament Hebrew references are made in the side-bars and in English.

Matthew Henry

The bible student should also know that the Puritan Matthew Henry really came at the end of the Puritan period and had Poole at hand in his own study. In fact, Matthew Henry claimed that if he himself was brief upon a certain text it was because Matthew Poole covered it so well that there was no need to repeat the same material. Therefore in a certain respect Henry must sit beside Poole on the library shelf!



Matthew Henry (b.1662 - d.1714) was born in the year of the Great Ejection when Matthew Poole was beginning his *magnum opus*, the *Synopsis Criticorum*. Henry was trained in a Nonconformist Academy, then studied law, and was privately ordained to his first charge at Chester in 1687.

Henry was uniquely trained by his father Philip, a first rate scholar and Puritan minister. We know that Matthew went to

visit Richard Baxter in prison and had a profound sense of the sufferings of God's people. It was in 1704 that he began his multi-volume *Commentary on the Bible*, completing to the end of Acts at his death in 1714, the remainder being completed by editors working from his notes.⁸ It is not a work which attempts full textual exegesis but strives to bring a plain interpretation with much reflective application. At times Henry displays a limited knowledge of the manners and customs of Bible lands. Its strength lies in its Christological focus, its covenantal focus, its pastoral piety, and stress upon relevance. The secret to understanding it lies in Henry's view that the study of scripture was "part of the life of prayer. The two always went together. One prayed that one might understand Scripture and studied Scripture that one might know how to pray".⁹

His commentary was based upon his "exposition" from the reading of the scripture lesson as *lectio continua*.¹⁰ Today we would call this meeting the Adult Class. It was not a sermon. Ministers delivered an exposition and a sermon. Thus, Henry's intent in these "expositions" was not higher critical matters – God's Word was reliable and possessed harmony – the Scripture interpreted by Scripture directs us how we are to glorify God and enjoy him forever.¹¹

⁸ Since there are so many reprint sets of Matthew Henry's *Commentary* which include the "Memoirs" I will not recommend one particular set. In preparing this paper I used the old, undated Revell six volume edition.

⁹ H.O. Old, "Matthew Henry" in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), p.196.

¹⁰ Old, "Matthew Henry", p.197.

¹¹ Many of the old reprints include on the title page these words following the title: "wherein each chapter, is summed up in its contents: the sacred text inserted at large in distinct paragraphs; each paragraph reduced to its proper heads: the sense given, and largely illustrated with practical remarks and observations." Notice the paragraph structure – ideal for family worship – part of Henry's plan.

In conclusion Poole and Henry should be by our side. We should turn to Poole to aid us to uncover the plain sense and we must not rush reading him. He is concise and uses an economy of words and all sidebars must be studied. Follow him with Henry who bequeaths to us that “tradition of pastoral theology unsurpassed in the history of Christianity in the English speaking world.” Be aware that at times Henry, like other Puritans, may not always pay exacting attention to the text “in front of them” unlike Calvin, a prince of exegetes. Remember that both Poole and Henry have internal differences in part within these multi-volume works because some come to us at the hands of editors. Finally as Ligon Duncan said “Puritan theology has served for more than three centuries as the basic doctrinal framework for evangelicalism.” Thus, attention to Poole and Henry, properly used, leads us in a noble way – that of a Christological, evangelical, experimental and practical cultivation of the faith.

German Interpreters: 18th and 19th Centuries

We move now from the English Matthews to three classic German bible commentators: Johann Albrecht Bengel, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, and Johann Peter Lange. As we proceed it will become more obvious why each has been selected.

(A) Johann Bengel (b.1687 - d.1752): The Exegete of Pietism

Johann Bengel was one of Germany’s foremost Pietistic Lutheran New Testament scholars and remains a classic writer and interpreter of the New Testament. Students working with commentaries written in the last twenty years will have noted that Bengel’s name is still being quoted and reference made to his work.¹² Unfortunately few take the time to enquire as to who he was and how he approached his work as a bible interpreter.

Bengel’s father had been a pastor who died while Johann

¹² See, John Stott, *The Message of Acts* BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), pp.6, 13, 33, 109, etc.

was a boy and was raised by David Spindler a Latin Schoolmaster and conventicle leader. He studied at the University of Tubingen and afterwards served as a pastor and on the faculty at Denkendorf cloister school. In latter years he was appointed superintendent in Herbrechtingen then Alpirsbach. He made an extensive study of German Pietism and was well aware of certain of their exercises.¹³

His first major contribution in the area of biblical studies is that of being “the father of textual criticism”. As a young man he corrected a new edition of a German Bible with particular attention on punctuation. This followed in 1734 with *Grundtext*, which marks a significant point of establishing a Greek text with an accompanying apparatus.

What concerns us here tonight primarily is his *magnum opus* work on interpreting the New Testament in his 1742 *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* a classic in New Testament interpretation. This work took twenty years for Bengel to produce. It was titled *Gnomon*¹⁴ after the Latin word for “pointer or indicator”, that is, “his aim being to point out or indicate the full force and meaning of the words and sentences of the New Testament.” Spurgeon said of it – “Men with a dislike for thinking had better not purchase (these) volumes...” The last English printing was in 1971 by Kregel’s of Grand Rapids. Robert Clouse wrote: “Among evangelical scholars, Bengel’s

¹³ David Bundy, “Johann Albrecht Bengel” in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860* ed. Donald M. Lewis Vol. I (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp.82-83.

J. Weborg, “J.A. Bengel” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, pp. 289-294. Weborg gives a helpful bibliography on Bengel, including reference to his doctoral thesis on Bengel.

¹⁴ I have used the 1862 English translation. John A. Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament. Pointing out From the Natural Force of the Words, the Simplicity, Depth, Harmony and Saving Power of its Divine Thoughts*. Trans. Charlton Lewes, Marvin Vincent, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1862).

Gnomon is still in use.” The popular title today for the *Gnomon* is *New Testament Commentary* (2 volumes).

Bengel’s “Essay on the Right Way of Handling Divine Subjects” provides us with helpful insight into his views of biblical interpretation. I make quotation from this essay now:

- Put nothing into the Scriptures, but draw everything **from** them, and suffer nothing to remain hidden, that is really **in** them.
- Though each inspired writer has his own manner and style, one and the same Spirit breathes through all, one grand idea pervades all.
- The true commentator will fasten his primary attention on the **letter** (literal meaning), but never forget that the **Spirit** must equally accompany him; at the same time we must never devise a more spiritual meaning for Scripture passages than the Holy Spirit intended.
- The **historical** matters of Scripture, both narrative and prophecy, constitute as it were the **bones** of its system, whereas the **spiritual** matters are its muscles, blood vessels, and nerves. As the **bones** are necessary to the human system so Scripture **must** have its **historical** matters. The expositor who nullifies the historical groundwork of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, brings death on all correct interpretations. Those expositions are the safest which keep closest to the text.

David Brown, of the famous Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commentary, (who viewed Bengel as his favorite Biblical scholar), commended all students of Scripture to “Suffer not your theological studies to deaden your spirituality. Walk closely with God in the midst of your studies, as great Bengel did; so that when his students met daily for their studies, and he began with a few words of prayer, they said his prayers were like morning

dew.”¹⁵

The *Gnomon* is not like a Henry’s Commentary or Poole’s Annotations. Rather Bengel’s purpose was to closely set forth textual help on the Greek text, then giving the word sense, to proceed to exegesis and finally to provide that which was for edification. Bengel is master of sending the reader to other scriptures to see the harmony. He never flaunts his profound learning of Jerome or Augustine but simply uses them to carry his desire to open the text.

Today most would discount his eschatological views which were chronological and very popular by many in the mid-eighteenth century. (Namely 1836/7 as the time for the Millennial Reign of Christ.) This aside Bengel stands within that great German evangelical tradition of bible interpreters who were textually rigorous, scholarly, precise, yet pious. As Bengel worked so he lived: “Apply the text wholly to yourself; apply yourself wholly to the text.” Students of the Word must not neglect solid and rigorous intellectual study of the Word of God nor lose the focus of the spirit of religious affection as they work with it.

(B) Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (b.1802 - d.1869): The Champion of Biblical Orthodoxy

Hengstenberg also was greatly indebted to a father who set before him an excellent sphere of training prior to his going to the University of Berlin. However, Hengstenberg as a young man was attached to the German Rationalist school of thought. Then he came under the influence of Pietists and was converted while teaching Eastern languages at Bâslé Missionary College. He attached himself to those who were Evangelical and Orthodox Lutherans. Thus Hengstenberg moved from once being a sympathizer of such Rationalist bible scholars as David Friedrich Strauss to becoming the apologist for Christ the Messiah of the

¹⁵ Wilbur M. Smith, “Biographical and Bibliographical Forward” in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), I, p.m.

Old Testament prophecies. All who in orthodox evangelism know the center of scripture to be Jesus Christ owe a great debt of gratitude to Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg who fought this critical matter. He was a rigorous scholar and eventually gained a prestigious Professorship at the University of Berlin yet his motto can be summarized well in his recorded last words: “No orthodoxy without pietism, no piety without orthodoxy.”

Hengstenberg’s landmark work was *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions*.¹⁶ (Note the full title.) In this classic work is a defence of the principle that Christ is in the center of the Old Testament revelation. He was not just the scholar refuting the critics, nor simply a philologist, he was also an expositor. The English translation we possess is an abridgement from his original four volume set. Yet it remains one of the best commentaries on the theme of Christology for us in English. He works his way through a massive survey of Old Testament passages which Evangelicals had long seen as Messianic. Beginning in Genesis with the *Protevangelium* he works his way through other passages in Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy before turning to the Messianic Psalms. (The abridgement omits the Angel of the Lord discussion and II Samuel 7.) Then he turns to the Prophets, but first gives an excellent essay on the nature of prophecy before turning specifically to Isaiah, Zechariah, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Haggai, Malachi, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The result – 700 pages in English abridgement as a commentary on the Messianic Predictions. The student should know that Hengstenberg cannot be rushed through. He is well aware of what the Rationalist Critics wrote and he labours like a lawyer dissecting their argument and uses all his powers in the process.

His other works, many of which have been translated into

¹⁶ The current reprint edition of Hengstenberg’s classic we have available today in English is an abridgement of his original multi-volume work. This must be borne in mind when reading from this English edition. See, E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, trans. Reuel Keith, abridged by Thomas Kerchever Arnold (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970). The 1970 was in hardback, but recent printings are now in paperback by Kregel and with a foreword by Walter C. Kaiser.

English include commentaries on *Psalms*, *John*,¹⁷ *Ezekiel*, *Job*, *Revelation* and *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, with *Treatises on Song of Solomon*, *Job*, *Isaiah*.¹⁸ Many Reformed ministers of the last two generations have told candidates for the ministry to scour the used book stores and buy Hengstenberg. If you see them or some of the more recent reprints bear this in mind.

Hengstenberg's other writings are not commentaries as such but were a nineteenth century defence of traditional authorship for several Old Testament works. See his *Dissertations on the Genuineness of the Pentateuch* and *Dissertations on the Genuineness of Daniel*.

The legacy of nineteenth century German Rationalism is still with us. We can find it resurfacing in current works in Old Testament studies where the force of Christology in the Old Testament is muted. Thus the relevance of Hengstenberg's challenge remains. For those who use Albert Barnes', *Notes*, Barnes in essence put Hengstenberg into the Isaiah commentary in that series. I conclude with Peter Masters' words on Hengstenberg's *Christology of the Old Testament* – "The foundation stone in the preacher's library".¹⁹

(C) Johann Peter Lange (c. 1802 - d.1884): Germany's Outstanding Conservative Bible Scholar

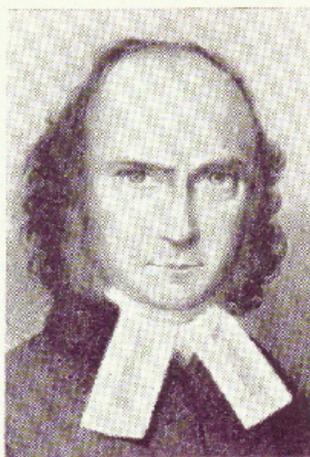
As the German interpreter Hengstenberg set forth a proper Christology in the Old Testament it was the German bible interpreter Johann Peter Lange who took to task the false teaching of Strauss on the life of Christ by producing a conservative bulwark. Bible students must be aware of Lange's

¹⁷ Still available in reprint form from Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids.

¹⁸ As far as I am aware it is not available in modern reprint form but can still often be found in used book stores.

¹⁹ Peter Masters, *The Preacher's Library* (London: Wakeman, 1979) as in *A Classic Bible Study Library for Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988), p.13.

contributions in biblical interpretation.²⁰



JOHN PETER LANGE

Lange was a Reformed pastor and later a Professor at the University of Zurich then at the University of Bonn.²¹ He produced the most complete life of Christ ever written. It clearly is a German parallel to Alfred Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* in many regards, except, Lange deals extensively with the critics and creates an apologetic at the same time. Lange was dealing with an age in which German Bible teachers were attacking the gospels as frauds, that they must be rationalistically set aside, and that they are "mythical". Along with others Lange was a leader in a German school of theology (Vermittlungstheologie) which endeavoured to be faithful to the Reformation Confessions yet interact with the modern writers. It

²⁰ It is most dissappointing that Lange has been forgotten by many today. He was not included in the large John H. Hayes, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

²¹ D. S. Schaff, "J. P. Lange" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. S. M. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), VI, p.411.

was somewhat of a loose school including the pietist Friedrich Tholuck of whom Charles Hodge was greatly indebted. As far as I am aware Lange's *Life of Christ* is now relegated to library shelves and has not been reprinted since the late 1950's.²² So I will pass on to his commentaries.

This is a massive commentary set which is really a composite, multi-volume work. J. P. Lange was really its chief German editor and authored several of the volumes. He was reliant upon Keil and Delitzsch, yet took a different structural approach. Each book of the bible is introduced extensively, followed by "General Preliminary Remarks" upon each chapter, then "Exegetical and Critical" comment, followed by "Doctrinal and Ethical" comment, and last "Homiletical and Practical". By comparison, Keil and Delitzsch's comments on Genesis 21 span 5 1/4 single column small pages, whereas, Lange provides 8 1/2 double column large size pages with full categorical divisions. Clearly the Lange series by volume is of a different order. Lange authors several commentaries on books of the Bible in this set, such as Genesis, Exodus, Matthew, Mark, and John. Some of these have also been singularly printed by several publishing houses, so again watch for them in used book shops or new reprints.²³

This imposing Bible commentary set possesses "brilliant homiletical hints" particularly those by Lange. Spurgeon said of it "I do, however, greatly prize the series lately produced under the presidency of Dr. Lange... For homiletical purposes these volumes are so many hills of gold, but, also, there is a dross [dross]...". The series has generally been afforded the distinction of being "the greatest commentary covering the entire Bible to be published anywhere in the 19th century... a gold mine for those

²² The first English translation was edited by Marcus Dods in his younger years. J. P. Lange, *The Life of the Lord Jesus Christ*, trans. M. Dods 6 volumes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1864). The last reprint I have seen is the 1958 Zondervan printing done in Grand Rapids.

²³ I have consulted the T. & T. Clark edition for this lecture which is housed in the Haddington House Library.

who are willing to work its rich veins.” (Wilbur M. Smith).²⁴ Spurgeon’s comments “on dross” refer to one or two of the other entrants in the series. However, several of the entrants possess the caliber of Lange in every regard. For example Packard did the entry on Malachi and in recently working with it on Malachi 3:1-5 I saw the same exegetical and critical caliber as with Lange. It was conservative and interacted with Hengstenburg and Keil and offers sound exegesis. Both Packard’s “Doctrinal and Ethical” and “Homiletical and Practical” divisions set forth helpful evangelical application – no dross here. That Lange, for all the volumes with which he was involved, attempted to keep his hand upon who was involved is evidenced by Lange’s rejection of W. Pressel’s commentary on Zechariah because Pressel opposed the genuineness of this prophecy. (Such a story sounds all too contemporary to our age). I think at moments you will find great exegetical blessing – these men worked and mined hard – you will feel humbled to see how the knew Cyril, Augustine, Vitringa and others like old friends – it is like we are babes in the study next to them.

Lange in his early years had several essays and poems published in Hengstenberg’s famous periodical, *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung*. Though one was Reformed and the other Lutheran, both were committed to orthodox, biblical, evangelicalism and we see in Lange a catholic spirit.²⁵

Conclusion of Part I

Our purposes I now remind you of were:

- to promote serious study of the Scripture with piety;
- to help with guidance for your personal library acquisitions;

²⁴ Wilbur M. Smith, *A Treasury of Books for Bible Study* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1960) and Wilbur M. Smith, *Chats From a Minister’s Library* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1951).

²⁵ *Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church*, ed. Elgin Moyer, revised edition (Chicago: Moody, 1982), pp.234-235.

- to give signposts and direction to library usage; and
- to encourage you to be mindful of the faithful workers in the Vineyard before you, many of whom we can still mine.

I hope the brief comments I have made on the two Matthews of the Puritan age will help you as to how you approach and use them. With the three Germans – Bengel, Hengstenberg, and Lange – see that each offer unique contributions in biblical interpretation – close textual study with proper religious affections, the glory of Christ in all the Word, and evangelical grammatical historical exegesis leading to thoughtful homiletical and practical application.

In part two of this lecture we will move from Germany to Scotland and I will develop a plan of building your library.

Thank you for your kind attention.