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The Works of Martin Chemnitz . . . . . Georg Williams 103

A Plea for Commonsense in Exegesis . . . . . H. P. Hamann 115

Walther's Ecclesiology . . . . . John M. Drickamer  
and C. George Fry 130

General Justification . . . . . George Stoeckhardt 139

Formula of Concord Article VI.  
The Third Use of the Law . . . . . David P. Scaer 145

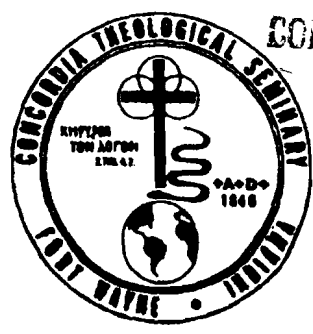
Teaching the Christian Faith By Developing  
A Repertoire of Skills . . . . . Anne Jenkins Driessnack 156

Theological Observer . . . . . 163

Homiletical Studies . . . . . 172

Book Reviews . . . . . 195

Books Received . . . . . 216



CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
LUTHERAN  
FT. WAYNE, INDIANA 46825

# A Plea For Commonsense in Exegesis

Henry P. Hamann

The proper interpretation of Scripture surely requires as much as any other study, the use of sound logic and common sense. Yet in current scholarly literature one comes upon repeated use of the argument from silence, even though from silence absolutely nothing can be concluded. One cannot conclude even that Peter was not in Rome when Paul wrote Romans from the mere fact that Paul does not greet Peter in Romans 16. Perhaps Peter forgot to call Paul long-distance before leaving Jerusalem. Even more common is the use of the unreal opposition such as the claim that the evangelists or the earliest Christians were interested in theology not history, when they could very well have been interested in both. Some scholars, moreover, are completely occupied with finding antecedents for this or that idea, this or that phrase, with the endeavour to find sources or influences for any interesting feature of the Gospels or Paul's letters. Yet originality has to exist somewhere along the line. Why should not Jesus or Paul have, on occasion, been the original persons? Perhaps we do not have to look for any other source for the special use of the term "son of man" than the personality of Jesus himself. Sometimes, too, one runs across blatant assertions of omniscience. For instance, Lohmeyer tells us in his commentary on Mark, in connection with the sayings of the Patch and the Wineskins, that the idea of a superseding of Judaism or the Law by the message of Jesus or the Gospel was "quite unthinkable for Jesus". Paul apparently could think of this idea, as in Galatians 3, but not Jesus. The observations that follow are haphazard in nature. There is no intention to present every lapse of logic that might support a plea for common sense in exegesis. I propose to make some observations of a more general nature first, to take up next one or two matters for more detailed treatment, and to conclude with parallel developments in extra-Biblical literature.

## 1.

Where we do not know, speculation is a useless occupation. We can look at this dictum in connection with the whole of synoptic criticism. Now, although you can read, especially in German theologians like Marxsen, that the synoptic problem

has been solved by the two-source hypothesis, actually there are other scholars, and not only Butler and Farmer, who are quite doubtful about that solution. The comments of Albert C. Outler in "The Interpretation of the Gospels Today: Some Questions about Aims and Warrants," *Jesus and Man's Hope*, II (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), are really quite startling at this point (p. 53):

Professor Fitzmeyer's calm allowance that the "problem is practically insoluble" seems modest enough—in view of the paucity of controllable data and the conjectural character of *all* the hypotheses involved. His conclusion—to stand by the *status quo ante* until something better comes along—is also at least allowable. But what will not follow from this. . . is that you can then hang much hermeneutical weight on any of the various hypotheses—neither the Two-Source theory nor any of the others, until the problem can be re-examined in new terms. It also suggests that such pontifications as the "nearly unanimous agreement of recent exegetes", etc., are only as decisive as the shakiest link in the chain of conjectures in their respective arguments.

The implications of this criticism are shattering, especially in the area of redaction criticism. The possibility arises that every book on this subject might as well be pulped. If, for instance, Mark should by further study be shown to have depended on Matthew, then the theology of Mark has to be in part demonstrated by what he did with Matthew's Gospel, and not the other way around. We should have to try to separate the original tradition from the present Matthew (not from the present Mark). And more than that—since the date of Mark's Gospel is pretty generally fixed about the mid-sixties of the first century, then Mathew's Gospel goes back a few years, say, to 50 A.D. The whole of form-criticism would be fundamentally affected by that fact. A mere twenty years remains for all the supposed development, and the criticism of form-criticism based on the time factor involved becomes annihilating. It seems very much as though we might forget about form-criticism and redaction-criticism till the "practically insoluble" problem has been solved.

Even if we allow, for the sake of argument, the commonly-accepted solution of the synoptic problem, much of the activity of form-critics comes under the strictures of the dictum: where we do not know, speculation is a useless occupation. The methods of gospel criticism have been subjected to a searching analysis by Humphrey Palmer in his book, *The Logic of Gospel Criticism*. His conclusions concerning form-criticism are these:

Attempts to classify Gospel paragraphs into distinct literary "forms" are the topic of the present chapter. To affect our grading of these paragraphs as historical evidence, such a classification would need to be dovetailed with *independent* knowledge of groups producing, preserving, or altering stories cast in one or another "form." We have no such knowledge.

These conclusions are primarily concerned with the methods and arguments available to biblical historians. Application of these conclusions has here been made only to the extent of remarking that certain inferences require certain sorts of evidence which, in some cases (as in form-criticism), do not appear to be available.<sup>1</sup>

This theoretical analysis is supported by the actual results. Form-critics are not at all agreed in their assessment of Gospel paragraphs. Vincent Taylor comments on the little scene of Mark 1:16-20, the calling of the first disciples Peter, Andrew, James, and John: "It is astonishing how widely appraisals of the story can differ." Miss Hooker speaks of this fact quite neatly:

Of course, NT scholars recognize the inadequacy of their tools; when different people look at the same passage and all get different answers, the inadequacy is obvious, even to NT scholars!

The tools are inadequate, the method illogical. On evidence like that supplied for all sorts of form-critical conclusions, no person would ever be arrested, let alone brought to trial. All the conclusions are, in short, not much better than pure guesswork, and, to quote Miss Hooker again, "Sometimes one feels that the hypotheses demonstrate an excessive endowment of imaginative ability on the part of those who put them forward."<sup>2</sup>

Let us turn to critical judgments concerning texts and authorship as determined by the *style* of the writers in question. I am understanding "style" here in a rather wide sense to include also psychology and logical consistency. First, a few random samples of the judgments that are made in great profusion. Hans Walter Wolff tells us in respect of Hosea 2:18-23:

Since the literary composition is far less logically connected than vv 4-17, we should probably not ascribe it to Hosea, but to the redactor responsible for 1:2-6, 8f. This is suggested by the expression "on that day" which does not appear again in the book.<sup>3</sup>

And in respect of 4:1-3:

If we are correct in identifying v. 1a as secondary to the following verses, the beginning of 4:1 probably was

written by the same redactor responsible for the superscription in 1:1. "Word of Yahweh" is found in Hosea only in 1:1 and 4:1. "Sons of Israel" does not occur again in chaps. 4-14, but in the preceding chapter in 3:1, 4, 5 (and 2:1, 2). This observation supports our assumption that a redactor formulated this verse in dependency upon the preceding context. Finally, to assume that v. 1a was added by a redactor better accounts for the grammatical complexity created by the two subordinate *ki*-clauses than to suppose that the passage is a rhetorical unit.<sup>4</sup>

To turn to the New Testament, Nineham avers, referring to Mark 2:10, that Jesus does not elsewhere in Mark claim the right to act with authority on the basis of the claim to be the Son of Man. On the same page he uses a similar argument: "he is not elsewhere represented as claiming the power of forgiving sins by his own *fiat*."<sup>5</sup> At this point it is fitting to refer to a text, Romans 9:5, which has quite a bearing on the position taken by Father James Murphy O'Connor.<sup>6</sup> Barrett takes the common position. He grants that "it would be grammatically easier to unite the doxology with the preceding words as a relative clause referring to Christ, thus: From them. . . springs the Christ himself, who is God over all, blessed for ever." Grammar and style support this translation. Pauline doxologies are usually connected with the context and do not stand, as this one in Barrett's translation and that of the Revised Standard Version, in complete asyndeton. Romans 1:25 and 2 Corinthians 11:31 are examples of doxologies arising out of the preceding words. Besides, if Paul wished to say "Blessed is God," he should have placed the *eulogetos* first in the sentence, which he does not do. So why the unnatural translation? "Nowhere else in any epistle does Paul call Christ God. Even Phil. 2:6 is not a real parallel."<sup>7</sup>

None of these examples of exegesis are arguments; they are prejudiced assertions. It is just not possible to argue from the non-appearance elsewhere in an author's works of a certain phrase to the claim that it cannot appear at all. This is particularly the case with such harmless and neutral phrases as "on that day" or "word of Jahweh" or "sons of Israel." And, suppose we do find somewhere a poor logical connection. Is it seriously suggested that a logical writer never produces a paragraph where the logic is not as apparent as it usually is? In connection with this last observation we may refer to Conzelmann's cavalier treatment of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36.<sup>8</sup> Since this little section seems out of place in the chapter he treats it as an interpolation, in spite of the unanimous textual testimony, even that of D and G, which place the section after

verse 40. An unexpected position does not prove that Paul did not write the material; it only proves that Paul put it in an unexpected place. This sort of thing is common enough in secular literature, especially in letters.

The argument against the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals and Ephesians is based largely on considerations of style. It is held that Paul could not have written any of these letters because of the big difference between the Greek we find in them and the Greek of the four main letters. On this matter I have held for some time that we do not have enough material from Paul to be able to say that he *could not* have written such and such. We have enough, of course, to make the other claim: This is just like Paul. But to make the negative judgment we need a much larger body of evidence. With all of Dickens in our head we might be able to say: Now Dickens could never have written this sentence or paragraph. But with the few words of Paul available — that is a different thing altogether. My convictions here received support from *The Tyndale Paper* of June 1976. "Style and Authorship" is the title of a contribution by Francis I. Andersen. He refers to three modern studies of style: Was the mysterious author of the Quintus Curtius Snodgrass letters in the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* of 1861 Mark Twain? Was the writer of *The Federalist Papers* Hamilton or Madison? Who was Junius, the pseudonym of the writer of a series of letters appearing in the *Public Advertiser* from 1769 to 1772?

In comparison to the straight-forward problems, any investigation of problems of authorship in biblical writings faces enormous handicaps. First, the evidence is meagre. The texts are too small. For current work on vocabulary statistics, a running text of 100,000 words is standard. . . Hosea has 2393 words, measured in Massoretic orthographic words. . . Needles to say, it is fatuous to take small portions of a text and, by inspection of their stylistic features in isolation, to declare that they belong to some or other tradition, source, or author. . . The smaller the text, the more tenuous are the inferences from statistics, unless one can find a styleprint with enormous discriminating power or compensate for the small sample by the use of multiple discriminators. (pp. 21-23)

In the case of the Pauline letters that are disputed, it would be equally difficult to show that their style is in keeping with the style of Paul. But one does not have to do that. There is external evidence for Pauline authorship. As far as all the external evidence goes, the testimony of the early church is unanimous that Paul wrote Ephesians and the Pastorals. The possibility that he used various secretaries cannot be dismissed. But that

aspect of the question put aside, the power of external evidence cannot be overthrown by an argument based on style when so little is there of Pauline material to work with.

While still dealing with more general examples of exegetical principles or activities which run counter to common sense, I shall conclude with the way in which supposed forerunners of a text are used to explain the text. Conzelmann, for instance, makes the claim concerning 1 Corinthians 11:23b-25 that "as a piece of tradition the section has in the first instance to be interpreted on its own."<sup>9</sup> I am very doubtful whether this is the proper method even in this case where Paul quite deliberately quotes a tradition; the material should be seen first in the context in which it is quoted. Did Paul supply the Corinthians with the original traditional form so that they could understand his words properly? If they could understand him without such a form, why not we? However, I am really concerned with those instances where a quotation is presumed, and where the original is not at all known. (In the case of the passage just referred to we have, of course, the parallel material in Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22.) I am concerned with passages like Philippians 2:5-11; Romans 3:24-25; Romans 1:3, 4. It is this last one with which I shall especially deal.

It is very generally held that at this point Paul is making use of an already existing creedal statement. The arguments for such a belief are based on imaginary deviations of language from Paul's style. The pertinent linguistic facts may be listed: *ginesthai ek* is found only here and in Galatians 4:4; *ek spermatis David* is otherwise found only in 2 Timothy 2:8; the combination with this of *kata sarka* appears elsewhere only in Romans 9:5; *horizein* and *huios theou* (without an article) are unique; *en dunamei* occurs in eleven other passages in Paul; the combination *pneuma hagiōsunēs* appears only here; and *ex anastaseos nekrōn* is only here used of Jesus' resurrection; in 1 Corinthians 15 it is used four times of the general resurrection. The conclusion that is reached by one writer on the basis of this evidence is as follows:

This statistical result shows that, with the exception of *en dunamei*, all other words and phrases are unusual in Paul or not to be found in his letters. This fact can be adequately explained *only* (emphasis added) by the supposition that the apostle is making use of an existing piece of tradition.<sup>10</sup>

This assertion hardly deserves the dignity of being called an argument. Reconstructions of the supposed tradition by Bornkamm, Bultmann, Schweizer all differ to a degree. However, I shall not dispute the claim. I only doubt its exegetical relevance. In short, even if the claim be completely true, it does

not help us to understand the actual text any better. So, Paul has used a creedal statement. In using it he has adopted it. In using it without criticism, he uses it in keeping with his own Christology. The whole is now his statement. If we had the original and not merely subjective reconstructions of it, it might be interesting to see what variations Paul introduced if any; but even then we should probably only be guessing at the reason for the changes. In the *Journal for Theological Studies* of April 1973, in an article on this passage, a very pertinent comment occurs:

We can never be so certain about the earlier form of a saying or pericope as we can about the form in which it has come down to us. We can never be so certain about its earlier context as we can about its present context. And since exegesis and interpretation depend to a crucial degree on form and context, this means that we can never be so sure of a saying's original or earlier meaning and significance as we can be about its present meaning and significance. . . It necessarily follows that the first task of the exegete and student of Christian origins is the uncovering of the meaning of the saying in the form and context in which it has come down to us.<sup>10a</sup>

## 2.

In the part of this paper dealing with more detailed treatment of certain aspects of exegesis, we shall take up first what one may call the "tyranny of the vocable." We have a good example of this phenomenon in the big fuss made over the term "son of man". I do not depreciate at all the scholarship and indefatigable pains undertaken in some of the big studies on this term. I do think, however, that they are mostly a waste of time. The two big questions to be answered in the exegesis of the son-of-man passages are "Who is the subject?" and "What is said about the subject?" I hold with those who declare that, if there is anything certain about Jesus, it is that he claimed to be the son of man. It is not important for the argument at the moment to defend this position. The important thing is rather that, even if Jesus did not so speak of Himself, the texts as they stand now see in the phrase a self-designation of Jesus. Let us grant, then, that the subject of the son-of-man passages is known; it is Jesus. The second important question is "What do the passages concerned say about the subject." If we find that—and we pretty well all know what they say—we have everything that is really important about the son-of-man passages. Subject and predicate are determined. We have sentences; we have thought; we have meaning. But almost



every scholar is concerned about something else: Why did Jesus use the term, if he did indeed use it? What are the antecedents of the term? How did he come to use it? And so on. The determination of these matters, even if that were completely possible, would add very little to the understanding of the passages where the term is used. For that which gives meaning is already known: who the subject is and what is said about him. Common sense suggests that we give the search into the origin of the term and into the reason for its use a rest—the question looks like one of those which will never be determined—and concentrate on the *sentence*, where the real meaning resides after all.

A second example of the tyranny of the vocable occurs in scholarly discussion of the use by John of the verb *hupsoun* with respect to the crucifixion of Jesus. It is a common opinion that in the three passages where *hupsoun* is used in John's Gospel (3:14; 8:28; and 12:32-34) John uses the word deliberately in the double sense of "raising up" and "exalting," in order to convey the deep theological insight that Jesus' crucifixion is to be viewed as his exaltation. Thus Barrett writes: "In Mark the suffering and glorification are chronologically distinguished; in John one word is used to express both. *Hypsoun* has this double meaning at each place in the gospel in which it is used".<sup>11</sup> I was impressed by this insight for some time, but I am now convinced that it is not an insight which John himself had in mind. The first reason is the casual and unobtrusive way in which the term is suddenly inserted into the narratives. One would expect at least some sort of attempt to draw attention to a deep and penetrating thought, not that it be left completely to the astuteness of the reader to pick up. But not so—no whisper of a hint, no pause, no special word order to point out the word, such as the writer of Hebrews employs in his positioning of *IHSOUS*.

The second reason is that in two of the three instances, if there is any emphasis, it is all the other way, an underlining of the "raising up" meaning. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, so that . . ." We have a strict paralleling of the raising of the serpent and that of the son of man. Was the serpent exalted, too, when it was raised or lifted up? In John 12:32-34, also, the emphasis is clearly on the raising up as a picture for dying, being crucified. "And if I am raised up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself. This he said to signify what sort of death he was to die." There is no hint of exaltation in the express explanation of the evangelist. The reply of the crowd simply underlines the literal meaning by drawing attention to the hiatus between the death by crucifixion and the eternal existence of the Christ: "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains for ever;

how can you say that the son of man must be raised up?" The third instance is quite neutral, that of chapter 8:28.

It is not that John is incapable of making a point if he wants to. The whole Gospel is obviously a very powerful but simple exposition of the purpose he himself spells out at the end of the Gospel proper: "These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you may have life in his name." Now in John there is almost as much use of the verb "believe" and its synonym "know," of their opposites, and of "life" and its synonyms as in the rest of the New Testament put together. Add to this the pictures of these realities: light and darkness, seeing and being blind, hunger and eating, thirst and drinking. (For none of these pictures need one look for antecedents. Anyone who could not from his own resources think of these common, everyday experiences as suitable pictures for his theme would be completely devoid of all imaginative ability. Once he had hit on one of them, all the others would suggest themselves by an automatic association of ideas.) Every section of the Gospel brings the thought of faith or unbelief, life or death, into prominence. The point is very clear. What John says his purpose is, he carries out very clearly and completely. It is difficult to imagine that a writer who has developed his stated theme so consistently should suddenly, in a very striking instance, fail to develop it at all. There is no evidence that John had any equation of crucifixion and exaltation in his mind; the thought is wholly in the mind of the scholars. They fail to read John with the simplicity and the directness, the common sense, with which they should read this sort of material. The whole situation is an excellent example of the tyranny of the vocable. *Hypsoun* must carry with it its common meaning in the New Testament of "exaltation" wherever it is used, even if every argument of context, near and far, and every argument of common sense cries out, "No."

A reference to a redactional-critical study will serve to round off this part of the paper. The study is that of Norman Perrin on Mark 8:27-9:1 in the little book, *What is Redaction Criticism?* To the simple, unsuspecting and unsuspecting reader, this section of Scripture seems simple enough. Jesus asks Peter who he is, and Peter acknowledges him to be the Christ. Thereupon Jesus enjoins silence about this fact on his disciples. His instruction to them that he must die and rise again is met by remonstrance on the part of Peter. Jesus then rebukes him, and goes on to describe the life of his disciples as a taking up of the cross, as a losing of one's life in order to save it. The conclusion is a warning against being ashamed of Jesus (the cross with its shame is in the background) and a promise that some of those listening to him would see the Kingdom of God come with power.

But this is not what Perrin sees in the paragraph. He gives hardly any consideration to this incident as something that happened at a certain time and place in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples. According to Perrin, what we must see here is Mark's own involvement in a doctrinal dispute in the church with which he was associated. Perrin holds that some in the church were understanding Jesus to have been a God-like hero. Mark saw a wrong development in this view. What he wanted was that the church should see Jesus rather as the suffering servant of God.

The conclusion is inevitable: Mark presents a false understanding of Christology on the lips of Peter, a true understanding on the lips of Jesus. But in recognizing this, we are recognizing that the narrative is not concerned with the historical Peter's misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messiahship but with a false understanding of Christology prevalent in the church for which Mark is writing, i.e. with the heresy that necessitated Mark's Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

It must be emphasized that Perrin is not at all concerned whether anything like what the paragraph seems to say actually happened in the lifetime of Jesus.

It is perhaps not out of place to add that the validity of the Marcan presentation is not dependent upon whether Caesarea Philippi "actually happened" but upon the meaningfulness of the cross as presented to Christian devotion in this way.<sup>13</sup>

In short, what we have in Mark 8:27-9:1 is an allegory; the biographical framework, the surface appearance is not to be taken seriously, even if some words spoken by Jesus are made use of.

The characters in the pericope bear names and designations derived from the circumstances of the ministry (Jesus, Peter, the multitude), they also equally represent the circumstances of the early church: Jesus is the Lord addressing his church, Peter represents fallible believers who confess correctly yet go on to interpret their confession incorrectly, and the multitude is the whole church-membership for whom the general teaching which follows is designed.<sup>14</sup>

Are we really to take this interpretation seriously as an exegetical effort? One must grant that, if Mark acted in the way suggested, he certainly adopted a most curious procedure. The normal person engaging in a debate like that posited by Perrin does so in a fairly direct manner, the way Paul does in his various letters. Mark is immediately separated from the ranks of normal mortals and becomes a distinct oddity. How

many people did he expect to win over to his point of view by this strange procedure? He writes a complicated allegory, which is curiously like historical fact. He gives no clue that he is writing an allegory. He has succeeded in concealing his real intention from Christians for the better part of two thousand years. If the whole of his gospel is of a piece with this section, then it is probably all allegory, or rather a series of allegories, sufficient obviously to give plenty of scope for doctoral theses for quite a few years.

The actual writing of the man shows us quite a different person from the one we would have to suppose if Perrin's exposition were true. He can write (2:15): "And it happened that he was at table in his house and many tax-collectors and sinners were at table with Jesus and his disciples; for they were many and they were following him." Also (2:23): "And it happened that he was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and his disciples began to make their way by plucking ears of grain." Also (8:24): "I see men, but I see them walking like trees." He can suddenly at the end of his description of the raising of Jairus's daughter say: "And at once the girl got up and began to walk about; for she was twelve years old." Mark is a lot closer to a housewife passing on some news over the back fence to her neighbor than he is to the complicated master of indirectness that Perrin makes him out to be. The most characteristic feature about him is his concern to pass on a story, a history, a gospel of which he is completely convinced. I think that T.A. Burkill has hit the nail on the head when he writes in his *New Light on the Earliest Gospel*:

St. Mark was perhaps the first writer who sought to supply the church's increasing need for a comprehensive account of the career of Jesus in terms of the apostolic faith, and, in view of the difficulty of the undertaking, it is not surprising to find that the various parts of his gospel hang together rather loosely. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Perrin's study is not a window into the thought of Mark; it is a mirror reflecting his own mind.

### 3.

Perrin's treatment of Mark reminds me very much of Verrall's treatment of Euripides, and this circumstance may take us into the final section of the paper. I refer especially to Verrall's understanding of Euripides' *Alcestis*. The plot of the *Alcestis* as the normal man reads the play and as the original Athenians must have seen and heard the play is as follows: Apollo once served in the house of king Admetus, and, in return for the kindness he experienced there, obtained for that prince a release from death, on condition that a substitute was

found. Admetus did finally find one, his wife Alcestis. At the beginning of the play she is near her end. She dies soon after and is buried. On the very day of the death and funeral, Heracles visits his friend Admetus, finds the house in mourning but is not told the reason for it. An old servant later blurts out the truth concerning the situation in the house to Heracles, who is well and truly drunk. Brought to sobriety at once, Heracles goes forth to do battle with death for the wife of Alcestis, succeeds, and restores her to her husband. In his study of the play in the book *Euripides the Rationalist*, a study that is brilliant in many respects, Verrall comes out with a view which gained some support—for instance, that of Gilbert Norwood. According to Verrall, Euripides, in dramatizing the old story for the stage, made an outward show of conformity with the usual tradition; but, in the setting of the legend, he contrived by means of delicate innuendos and hints (conspicuously lacking in Mark by the way) to throw doubt on the whole business and to bring the miraculous into contempt. Hence we have a double plot—the superficial plot (to satisfy orthodox believers) and the rationalized modification concealed beneath it (for the intelligent sceptic to detect). According to this theory, Alcestis never dies at all, but is reduced to a state of trance by fear of the Delphic oracle; and her husband, who thinks her dead, buries her hurriedly to avoid public scandal. Then Heracles hurries off to the tomb—only to find Alcestis awakened from her trance. He then and there restores her to Admetus.

This view is a good parallel to much redaction criticism, I think, and the criticism it has received is most enlightening and instructive. Blakeney in his school edition of the *Alcestis* avers that “it is difficult to believe that the real purpose of Euripides has been misread by all critics of the *Alcestis* for twenty centuries or more.”<sup>16</sup> The Canadian scholar, G.M.A. Grube, speaks of “critics who have made little effort to find what dramatic relevance there may be” of “supposed blunders” on the part of Euripides. He says that Verrall takes his stand “on a preconceived notion that Euripides’ attitude to his gods must have been much like that of a nineteenth-century Englishman towards God,” that Verrall’s “interpretations, for all their ingenuity and the deep scholarship of their author, have not, in detail proved convincing to many.”<sup>17</sup> He refers to “special pleading.”

There is nothing new under the sun. What is happening now has happened before. The big trouble, however, seems to be that the biblical theologians are about two generations behind developments in parallel literary disciplines. I am using here an essay by Ronald Mushat Frye, Professor of English Literature

at the University of Pennsylvania. His essay is entitled "A Literary Perspective for the Criticism of the Gospels," and it was presented at the so-called Festival of the Gospels, held to mark the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Men like Albert Outler, C.F.D. Moule, F.W. Dillistone, Paul Minear, David Daube, Robert W. Funk, James Barr, Eduard Schweizer, Leander Keck, William R. Farmer, took part. So it was no second-rate affair, and Frye is no slouch. But what he says is the important thing, not his reputation or the company he keeps. I hope I shall be pardoned if much of what comes is quotation.

There is a proverb in my field that not everyone could write *Hamlet*, but almost anyone can rewrite it. Contemporary NT scholarship unfortunately includes many efforts to rewrite the Gospels. My criticism of such practices in this paper is not based upon their religious effects, but rather on the fact that they violate the most basic literary principles. Of all critical principles the most basic is this: the critic is not free to alter, or deny, or ignore the text in order to suit his own presuppositions or needs or desires. The text may be altered only on the basis of hard, objective textual and historical evidence, but not to fit critical systems and predispositions.<sup>18</sup>

He finds "some of the most extraordinary violations" of this principle to show up in the New Testament field. "For example, when a prominent twentieth-century critic excludes the thirteenth chapter of Mark without objective textual evidence, he is scarcely operating on principles which leading critics in other literary fields could accept as valid."<sup>19</sup>

The effect of such assertions (i.e., of dogmatic existentialism) upon the study of the Gospels is what concerns us here, and that effect would be devastating on any literary work. If we play fast and loose with literary texts in order to eliminate or ignore whatever does not accord with stereotyped twentieth-century views, then we have abandoned anything which might legitimately be regarded as literary criticism.<sup>20</sup>

I am criticizing practices which have had close parallels in the humanities, in the hope that our experiences may be of interest and value to you. Corresponding to biblical analyses which ascribe sources or priorities to passages down to the verse or even half verse, there have been secular literary analyses which ascribe sources or chronological priorities down to the line or half line of poetry. Though it is generally true that more evidence is available to support such analyses in the

modern literatures than in the Bible, it has been found that such analyses are at best only marginally productive, and far more often that they are counter-productive.<sup>21</sup>

In Frye's own field these efforts are described as "disintegrating criticism" and their practitioners "disintegrators." In a footnote he declares that "the parallel between NT and Shakesperian disintegration is quite remarkable." He adds in a subsequent note this most important comment:

The fact that literary critics in the humanities have discredited impressionistic tamperings with the text represents a significant advance over the practices of many nineteenth-century critics. . . .<sup>22</sup>

I think we should pay attention to criticisms like this coming from an obvious master in a literary field—even if the criticism becomes as sharp as in the following passage:

The question arises whether able and learned men should devote their lives to speculation and debate over questions which are essentially as insoluble as the old medieval puzzle of how many angels can stand on the head of a pin.

The reference to that puzzle is not merely rhetorical. A large part of the NT study of forms, sources, and stages reminds me of nothing so much as the aridity of medieval scholastic speculation. I get the impression that a highly complex game is being played—a game with rules as artificial as that of chess. . . . In source-critical, form-critical, and redaction-critical analyses, we are repeatedly presented with highly rationalized suppositions, built layer upon layer into intriguing structures of marvellous intricacy. But when we look for evidence, there is very rarely anything which would be convincing, at least to leading literary historians in the humanities. It is a pity to see eminent scholarly minds spending so much time on such elaborate intellectual jigsaw puzzles.<sup>23</sup>

I have felt this way for a long time and have used Frye with a certain amount of personal satisfaction. I have even occasionally used the comparison with certain fruitless medieval scholastic debates. But I never thought of Frye's answer to the old conundrum about the angels standing on the head of a pin. "The definitive answer, to my taste at least, is that any number could, but no respectable angel ever would."<sup>24</sup> A new twist to this solution of the old conundrum can provide a conclusion to the present paper: Any exegete can take part in the game of exegetical acrobatics and contortions, but no respectable exegete ever would.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Humphrey Palmer, *The Logic of Gospel Criticism* (Macmillan, 1968), pp. 193-194.
2. The quotations from Miss Hooker are from her essay, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75 (1972), pp. 570-581.
3. Hans Walter Wolff (tr., Gary Stansell), *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 48.
4. *Ibid*, p. 66.
5. D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 91.
6. Father O'Connor, who served as guest lecturer at the 1976 meeting in Adelaide of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Theological Studies (at which this essay was originally presented), argued strongly that St. Paul did not regard Jesus Christ as God.
7. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1962), p. 179.
8. Hans Conzelmann (tr., James Leitch), *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 246.
9. *Ibid*, p. 196.
10. Heinrich Zimmermann, *Neutestamentliche Methodenlehre*<sup>2</sup> (Stuttgart: Verlag Kath. Bibelwek, 1966), p. 194.
- 10a. James D.G. Dunn, "Jesus-Flesh and Spirit: An Exposition of Rom. 1:3-4," p. 42.
11. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1956), pp. 178-179.
12. Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 56.
13. *Ibid*, p. 53.
14. *Ibid*, p. 42.
15. T.A. Burkill, *New Light on the Earliest Gospel* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 2.
16. E.H. Blakeney, ed., *The Alcestis of Euripides* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), p. 17.
17. G.M.A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London: Methuen, 1941), p. 11.
18. *Jesus and Man's Hope*, II, p. 195.
19. *Ibid*, p. 196.
20. *Ibid*, p. 197.
21. *Ibid*, p. 213.
22. *Ibid*, pp. 220-221, notes 47 and 48.
23. *Ibid*, p. 213.
24. *Ibid*, p. 220, note 45.

This theoretical analysis is supported by the actual results. Dr. Henry P. Hamann is vice-principal of Luther Seminary in Australia. This essay was presented at a convocation in which he was awarded the doctor of divinity degree from Concordia Theological Seminary.