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ARCHIVES

BRIEF STUDIES

SINFUL THOUGHT AND SINFUL DEED — SOME INSIGHTS OF NATURAL MAN

In our rush to club sin-drugged man into an awareness of his precarious plight we can easily skid across the line of demarcation between strict fact and unwitting overstatement. Does unenlightened human reason recognize that sinful thought is culpable even as is the sinful deed? Although man may frequently defend himself by pointing to the absence of wicked deeds from his life and by pronouncing thoughts, evil and criminal, quite innocuous, the question still remains as to whether this marks an incapability of human reason or a desperate attempt at self-defense in defiance of better knowledge. Apparently we have always known the answer.¹ Have we kept it in mind? Have we been precise in our homiletical presentation?

The problem can be illustrated by placing a representative quotation from Luther beside two lines of Juvenal, the Roman satirist (c. A.D. 60—130). Luther:

Item, so weiss sie [alle menschliche Vernunft] auch nicht, dass boese Neigung des Fleischs und Hass wider die Feinde Suende sei; sondern weil sie siehet und fuehlet, dass alle Menschen so geschickt sind, achtet sie solchs fur natuerlich und recht gut Ding, und meint, es sei gnug, wenn man nur aeusserlich den Werken wehret.²

Juvenal (in the name of human reason):

Nam scelus intra se tacitum qui cogitat ullum,
facti crimen habet.³

For the man who in the secret recesses of his heart contemplates some crime is already guilty of the criminal act.

It is evident that the judgment of Luther without further delimitation is contradicted by the sentiment Juvenal expresses. It would seem, then, that a review of some of the pertinent data is in order.

The commentaries show that the insight of these two lines of Juvenal has a pagan pedigree. Parallel utterances are scattered through classical writings.⁴ There is no particular occasion for surprise when Cicero recognizes:

In omni iniustitia permultum interest utrum perturbatione aliqua animi quae plerumque brevis est et ad tempus, an consulto et cogitata fiat iniuria.⁵

In every instance of crime it makes a great deal of difference whether the injury has been inflicted in some violent passion of the mind

which is generally brief and temporary, or whether it is a case of deliberate crime with malice aforethought.

Cicero sees only that the deliberate perpetration of evil differs from wrong committed in a violent seizure of blinding passion. He pronounces no verdict to the intent that the blinding passion short of the deed is wrong.

Juvenal, however, has advanced far beyond this view. To merely meditating a criminal act he ascribes the guilt of accomplished evil, whereas according to Luther's definition he ought to pronounce the stirrings of the mind and heart free from blame.

The thought is not new with Juvenal. Thales was asked:

εἰ λάθοι θεοὺς ἄνθρωπος ἀδικῶν.
ἀλλ' οὐδὲ διανοούμενος ἔφη.⁶

Whether the evildoer might escape the notice of the gods. No, he answered, not even in his thoughts.

Socrates differed from the vulgar in believing that the gods know all things said and done.

καὶ τὰ σιγῇ βουλευόμενα.⁷

Even those things which are resolved upon in silence.

But to extend the knowledge of the gods to the secret workings of the mind is not tantamount to implicating those thoughts, if sinful, in the guilt of the sinful deed. Juvenal is not the only classic writer who has taken this important step.

Ovid:

Quae, quia non liceat, non facit, illa facit.

Ut iam servaris bene corpus, adultera mens est.⁸

If she does not commit the deed because of lack of opportunity, she is still really carrying out the deed. Even if you carefully guard your body, your mind is adulterous.

Seneca:

Sed ipsa cogitatione nos laedunt et iniuriam qui facturus est iam facit.⁹

But even by thought they hurt us, and he who is going to injure is already doing so.

Exercetur et aperitur opere nequitia, non incipit.¹⁰

Wickedness is carried into effect and brought to light by the deed; it does not begin there.

Omnia scelera etiam ante effectum operis, quantum culpae satis est, perfecta sunt.¹¹

All wicked deeds even before they have been carried out are completed in point of fullness of guilt.

The attempt at a critique suggests these points:

1. The definitions of classical authors caution against oratorical exaggeration of the blindness of unconverted man to the sinfulness of evil thoughts. The very awareness of a superior being seems to include the knowledge that the deity knows and is concerned with thoughts of the human heart.
2. Although unregenerate man tends to limit sin to the conscious violation of a known law, this is done in contradiction of the insights at least of the more serious thinkers. There comes to mind the similar case of the atheist who despite the voice of conscience and the declarations of the heavens insists that there is no God.
3. Our wielding of the Law is more, not less, crushingly effective if we can confront man with the voice of his own conscience and make the accusation: "Even thoughts of evil are guilt-stained. And you know it!" It is a mistake to flail wildly instead of placing our blows with calm and devastating accuracy.
4. This understanding of the ability of human reason involves no contradiction with such Scripture passages as Matthew 5:21 ff. and Romans 7:7 ff. The antithesis of Matthew 5:21 ff. is not meant in the sense that this is a novel interpretation but rather a neglected and forgotten one. Even from the schools of the rabbis there could emerge a parallel such as this: "Derech Erez 10, R. Eliezer (um 90) sagte: wer seinen Naechsten hasst, siehe der gehoert zu den Blutvergiessern."¹² In the interpretation of Romans 7:7 ff. care must be taken to maintain the proper balance so as not to overemphasize *cognoscere* to the neglect of ἀφορμὴν λαβοῦσα. The Law brings intellectual clarification, but in so doing it also rouses the perverse nature of man to sin. The sin resident in man requires only the stimulus from without to begin its powerful stirrings. The prohibition of the Law provides this stimulus.¹³
5. That lack of faith, of love and trust in God, constitutes the quintessence of sin is not here recognized. And so human reason is still blind to the basic nature of sin. "Denn wo Gottes Gesetz nicht ist, da ist alle menschliche Vernunft so blind, dass sie die Suende nicht mag erkennen. Denn kein menschlich Vernunft weiss, dass Unglaube und an Gott verzweifeln Suende sei. . . ." ¹⁴

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1. Compare, e. g., Louis Wessel, *The Proof Texts of the Catechism with a Practical Commentary* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., 1927), p. 70, ad Rom. 7:7.
2. EA 63:16.

3. Satire XIII, 209, 210. *Nam* ties in with the following context. Juvenal is consoling a certain Calvinus who has been defrauded. Assuring his friend that only those of small spirit find satisfaction in physical vengeance, he describes the pangs of conscience which will torture the evildoer. Juvenal then slightly interrupts his line of thought to recount the story of Glaukos (Herodotus VI, 86). All trace of Glaukos and his family had vanished for having merely harbored the desire to defraud. Restitution had been made, but *meum, non moribus*. Therefore the gods destroyed him. Juvenal comments: *Has patitur poenas peccandi sola voluntas*. "Such are the penalties incurred even by the mere will to sin." In the "Belles Lettres" series the editor (E. Legrand, *Herodote, Histoires* VI, Paris, 1948, pp. 93, 94) comments on the Herodotus passage in an interesting footnote contending that ". . . l'opposition établie entre πειρηθῆναι τοῦ θεοῦ et ποιῆσαι prouve que ce qui est condamné est surtout autre chose: l'intention de commettre une action criminelle. . . . La conscience des Grecs du Ve siècle était assez éclairée pour ne pas méconnaître la gravité du péché d'intention. Étaient tenus pour également coupables, en droit pénal attique, ὁ βουλεύσας καὶ ὁ τῇ χειρὶ ἐργασάμενος. (Andocides, *Myst.* 90.)" I have not been able to verify the reference to Andocides.
4. The parallels here quoted are selected from the list in John E. B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal with a Commentary* (Macmillan & Co., London and New York, 1888), II, 281, 282.
5. Off. 1, 27.
6. DL I, 36.
7. Xen. Mem. I, 1, 19.
8. Amor. III 4, 4 and 5.
9. De Ira I, 3, 1.
10. Ben. V, 14, 2.
11. Const. Sap. 7, 4.
12. E. Klostermann, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, Dritte Auflage (Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], Tuebingen, 1938), ad loc.
13. Cf. Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Roemer*, Leipzig, 1910, p. 340. Anders Nygren: "The effect of the Law is that it arouses sin to activity and in a sense provokes it." *Commentary on Romans* (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1949), p. 280.
14. Luther, EA 63:16.

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THE APPEAL TO SCRIPTURE AS THE LIVING VOICE OF GOD

Like the other writers of the New Testament, the inspired author of the Epistle to the Hebrews appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures in order to demonstrate to his readers that his statements are true. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have indicated the unique method which the unidentified author employs as he cites passages from the Old Testament. For instance, we find several composite quotations from the Old Testament, or "mosaics," as in Heb. 1:5-13; 2:12 ff.; 3:7 ff. While we grant that a chain of several passages is to be found also

in Rom. 3:10-18, this tendency is more characteristic of the Epistle to the Hebrews.¹

Apart from these stylistic differences between the Pauline epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews in the citation of the Old Testament, we meet the unusual argument in the latter epistle which views God's Word, recorded long ago, as living and speaking to us in the present. This appeal interests the conservative theologian today in particular, in view of the current discussion as to *what constitutes the Word of God*.

While the words themselves are recorded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, they are quoted by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews as though God were speaking them in the present, for the benefit of the readers. Though Paul makes a similar appeal in Gal. 4:24, where he regards the Old Testament Scriptures a contemporary witness, testifying to his preaching, this approach is found chiefly in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Generally it must be observed that no difference is made between the word spoken and the word written. For us and for all ages the record is the voice of God. . . . As a necessary consequence the record is itself living. It is not a book merely. It has a vital connection with our circumstances and must be considered in connection with them. The constant use of the present tense in quotations emphasizes this truth: ii. 11 οὐκ ἐπαισχύνεται . . . καλεῖν, λέγων. . . . iii. 7 καθὼς λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον. xii. 5 ἦτις . . . διαλέγεται. . . . There is nothing really parallel to this general mode of quotation in the other books of the N.T. Where the word occurs elsewhere, it is for the most part combined either with the name of the prophet or with "Scripture." . . . When God is the subject, as is rarely the case, the reference is to words spoken directly by God.²

William Manson has recently called attention to certain parallels between the address of Stephen in Acts 7 and the Epistle to the Hebrews to point out that the Scriptures are the living, unchanging word of God, valid for all times.³ Tasker states:

The Old Testament is, however, something more than just the record of *past* utterances of God. In it the voice of God can still be heard. . . . In this way the writer shows clearly that the message of God

¹ Otto Michel, "Der Brief an die Hebräer," *Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1949), pp. 81 ff.

² Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1889), p. 475.

³ William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), p. 36.

spoken of old time *remains* a message which God speaks at *all* times in the present circumstances of men's lives.⁴

This is evident especially in Heb. 3:7, 15: "Therefore as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, when you hear His voice.' . . . While it is still 'today,' do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." It is also noteworthy that the writer of this epistle rather frequently employs the present tense, λέγει, when he refers to God's words recorded in the Old Testament. For this reason the writer can say that the Word of God is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12).

Westcott summarizes another characteristic of the Letter to the Hebrews as follows:

It is characteristic of the Epistle that the words of Holy Scripture are referred to the Divine Author and not to the human instrument. . . . His voice, that is, the voice of God spoken through Christ as the Apostle applies these words. The application to Christ of that which is said of the Lord in the Old Testament was of highest moment for the apprehension of the doctrine of His Person.⁵

In Heb. 3:7 the author presents the Holy Ghost not only as speaking at a specific historic moment in the past, but as speaking in the present time as well. The Israelites in the wilderness disregarded the voice of the Holy Spirit. The writer of this letter admonishes his readers not to harden themselves against the truth. While this voice is still addressing them, they are to obey it if they would receive the promised rest of God.

Again, in Heb. 1:6-12, the writer makes a similar appeal in this instance to establish and prove the superiority of Christ to the angels. He quotes the words of the living voice of God, drawing from Ps. 104:4; 45:7 f.; 102:26-28; 110:1 in order to show that the Son is superior to the angels. The significant fact is that the author of this letter establishes the superiority of Christ over the angels by stating in the present tense what God has said in the Psalms concerning the enthronement and glorious rule of Christ (Heb. 1:8-13).

Another significant example of the living and present voice of God is Heb. 12:5: "And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?" In order to encourage his readers to remain steadfast in the truth in times of persecution the writer gave them Christ's example, who remained steadfast in His suffering and was glorified. Then he proceeds to persuade them to bear divine chastisement, if necessary,

⁴ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Old Testament in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), p. 114.

⁵ Westcott, p. 80.

martyrdom, and under no circumstances yield to the enemies of the truth to escape persecution. The author regards the admonition as an utterance of God in the present: "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him" (AV). This is introduced with the pointed admonition: "And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children" (AV). Thus the author regards the utterance in a manner that shows that it is God who presently addresses them:

The utterance of Scripture is treated as the voice of God conversing with men. Through the written word the Wisdom of God addresses us. This peculiar use of *διαλέγεσθαι* does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament, but the personification in Gal. 3:8 (*προϊδοῦσα ἡ γραφή*) . . . is even bolder.⁶

This appeal occurs again in connection with the author's final argument for the superiority of Christ and His priesthood over that of the old legal covenant. In the new covenant of grace, this closing proposition states there is no room for Levitical sacrifices. How does the author prove this? He appeals to the voice of God, Heb. 10:15 ff., as follows:

Whereof the Holy Ghost is also a witness to us; for after that He had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more (AV).

Previous to this, the author had proved that God no longer demanded the sacrifices which had been obligatory under the old covenant. He directs his readers to what God says (*λέγει*) in Ps. 40:7-9:

Wherefore when He cometh into the world, *He saith*, Sacrifices and offering Thou wouldest not, but a body hast Thou prepared Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast had no pleasure (Heb. 10:5 [AV]).

And thus

The words of the Psalmist are ideally the words of Christ; and they are not past only but present. Compare ch. 1:16 f.; 3:7; 5:6; 8:8. No person is named. The thought of the true speaker is present to the mind of every reader.⁷

Thus the writer to the Hebrews recognized in the Old Testament, quoted by him from the Septuagint, the proclamation of Christ Himself, as well as the prophetic truths which Christ came to fulfill.⁸

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⁶ Ibid., p. 399.

⁷ Ibid., p. 309.

⁸ Michel, p. 81.

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