

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY: WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO LESSING

by LEONARD DE MOOR

DR. LEONARD DE MOOR was a contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY in its early years; his first article to appear in our pages was "John Calvin's View of Revelation", in Vol. iii (1931), pp. 172-192. Then he was a research student in Marburg; now he is Professor of Greek and Philosophy in Hastings College, Hastings, Nebraska. His name has for too long been absent from the QUARTERLY; we are happy to present here the first instalment of another study of his in the doctrine of revelation—this time with reference to the eighteenth, not the sixteenth, century.

THE object of this paper is to trace the emergence of the problem of revelation in eighteenth-century Germany, particularly as reflected in the thought-life of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). But in order to understand the problem, as reflected in his thinking, we shall first need to concern ourselves with two special features of the world in which he lived. Lessing developed his own theological conceptions in a most earnest wrestling with two opposite currents of thought in his day. A preliminary word about the view of revelation present in Protestant Scholasticism and the variegated Rationalism of Lessing's day will be necessary as a key to an understanding of the latter's own reflections on the problem.

For Luther what in the ultimate analysis constituted a man a Christian was the experience of faith in Christ, and that only (*sola fide*). This was for him essentially a religious experience, a divinely inspired happening in the soul of a man when he is justified before God in Christ. But Luther always tied this experience to definite facts of history contained in the Bible, which he held to be true. Thus he combined religious faith with historical faith.¹ The two were for him inseparable. The objective and subjective were one.

This was also Calvin's view.

¹ For this analysis of Luther and Protestant Scholasticism generally, I owe much to Gottfried Fittbogen, *Die Religion Lessings* (Mayer and Müller, Leipzig, 1923), Ch. I.

The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ efficaciously unites us to Himself and the act by which this bond is established is called faith, because

faith is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise of Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.²

The activity of the Holy Spirit consists in making effective in the human soul that which in the person of Christ constitutes the historical reality of God's revelation.

But what assurance have we that the deeds of redemption upon which our faith rests have actually taken place? Might not the experience be illusory? The answer is that God Himself is the real author of the Bible. The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture was thus closely associated with faith in history, and these together were linked with religious faith. In the thinking of Protestant Orthodoxy the three conceptions constituted one reality: an inner experience of saving faith, an historical revelation, and an infallible Bible which holds that objective revelation is the source of the inner experience.

And because it is easier to cast one's assurance upon an external, objective, historical reality than to maintain an inward assurance, faith in the Bible came, in time, to gain the ascendancy in Protestantism.

The same kind of an "ex opere operato" theory was attached to the Bible as the Catholics attached to the sacraments. It came to be viewed exclusively as a doctrinal code instead of a means of grace, and its primary quality was infallibility.³

Other related characteristics of this Protestant Scholasticism were: a belief that the writers were amanuenses, who wrote down what was dictated by the Holy Spirit. This made the Bible the literal word of God. There was an indifference to questions of date, author, circumstances of composition, authenticity, and integrity of the books. Some even went so far as to think the vowel points of the Hebrew Massoretic text were inspired. Likewise, it was held that the Bible was inspired not only in the sphere of religion and morals, but also in history, geography, geology, astronomy, and every other field upon which the Bible touches. All notions of successive stages in the process of revelation was lost.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by John Allen (6th American edition, revised and corrected, Presbyterian Bd. of Publication, New York, 1921) III, 1 (2); III, 2 (7).

³ A. C. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought before Kant* (Chas. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1912), p. 146.

The Bible became a collection of proof-texts for the doctrines of Protestant theology.⁴

Also, reason, it was conceived, did not stand in opposition or contradiction to either religious or historical faith in the Bible. The Protestant Scholastics instead sought to ground the truth of the Scripture upon the external proof of reason. There was an exchanging of

the living and savings facts of Christianity for a system of notations by which alone salvation was to be obtained.⁵

This, in sketchy form, was the view of revelation which was held in Protestant Orthodoxy in the latter part of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, and continued on into the eighteenth century. Then the latent contradiction between religious and historical faith became acute. What complicated the problem particularly was the emergence of the question of the relation of revelation as such (whether historically or subjectively considered) to reason. How successfully could reason continue to be pressed into the service of revelation as was here done? Will it be satisfied with such a service?

Questions of this nature now came to demand not only attention, but fixed themselves as the inescapable problems for a new era which passed through the successive stages of Deism, Wolffianism, Neology, and Rationalism.⁶ We must digress for a definition of these terms.

Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), a professor of oriental languages in a Hamburg Gymnasium, wrote a manuscript entitled *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* ("An Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God"). Its content represented the views of the English Deists whom he had read. He did not think it wise, while he lived, to make his views public. But when, after his death, the manuscript was intrusted by his daughter Elise to Lessing, the latter published its contents anonymously in a series of seven papers, which have subsequently been known as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* (1774-8), so named from the fact that Lessing at the time was librarian at Wolfenbüttel.⁷ We know that in 1738 Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* and in 1741 Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* had been put into German, and were followed by translations of many other English books,

⁴ Cf. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁵ J. A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology* (E.T., T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1871), Vol. II, p. 315.

⁶ Karl Aner, *Die Religion der Lessingzeit* (Max Niemeyer, Halle/Saale, 1929), p. 1.

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, article "Lessing".

both radical and conservative. Reimarus was influenced in the direction of the advanced views he here expressed, by this contact with English thought.

His works

contained a sharp criticism of the notion of revealed religion in general, and of the Old and New Testaments in particular. Reimarus agreed with Orthodox Christians that Christianity and the Bible stand or fall together. He therefore believed as they did that an attack upon the Bible was an attack on Christianity.⁸

But whereas the orthodox believed that no such attack was possible because the Bible was inspired and thus infallible, Reimarus, as these fragments so abundantly testify,⁹ had insuperable difficulties with the doctrine of the literal inspiration of Scripture. There were accounts in the Bible which he relentlessly rejected. For example, there was the physical impossibility of the children of Israel (600,000 men, representing, so he calculated it, three million persons, all told) crossing the Red Sea in three hours, as the account has it. Instead, such a procession, as he claimed to have estimated conservatively, would have lasted nine days. This, and a multitude of other similar difficulties, led him not only to doubt, but to reject Biblical history, and with it its claim to impart a revealed religion. For, as Orthodoxy taught, the Biblical witnesses claimed to be more than human witnesses. They claimed in all their words to have been guided by the Holy Spirit. And what Reimarus shared with Orthodoxy was the conception that Christianity is essentially a system of dogmas. So that when, to his own satisfaction, he believed he had disproved the rationality of the doctrines (notably the resurrection, because of flagrant inconsistencies which he discerned in the account) the only conclusion left him was that Christianity was false. This was an inference which Lessing refused to draw, as we shall see later. But the type of thought represented in both Protestant Orthodoxy and Reimarus' Naturalistic Deism helped to set the stage for the drama of Lessing's own thought.

But this was not the usual form which rationalistic thought took in Germany in the eighteenth century. For the most part it was dominated more by the Leibniz-Wolffian complex of thought than by that of the more radical English Deism reflected in Reimarus.

Like Orthodoxy, Christian Wolff (1679-1754) entertained the view that reason and revelation are supplementary, but not contradictory. In Wolffianism these factors were placed alongside of

⁸ A. C. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁹ G. E. Lessing (editor), *Fragmente des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten* (Sanders, Berlin, 4th edition, 1835).

each other in peaceful dualism. To be sure, a part of the truths of revelation he conceived as supra-rational. But he taught that there is nothing in this complex which is *contra rationem*. Under the influence of the optimistic spirit of Leibniz, he taught that that which involves no contradiction is possible, and that which is clear and has a sufficient reason why it should be so, and not otherwise, is actual. Clearness and reasonableness, then, were made the sole marks of truth.

Under this influence there developed toward the middle of the eighteenth century a rational supernaturalism similar to that of Locke and others in England . . . There was the . . . idea that natural religion is good as far as it goes, but needs supplementing by divine revelation, which imparts truths above reason, but not in any way out of accord therewith.¹⁰

Thus under Wolffian influence there was established, especially after 1730, an alliance between philosophy and religion. In the Wolffian stage reason had the decisive say in matters of faith: but this right was actually used only in pointing out the rational possibility of Christian dogmas, and was not used against the dogmatic substance itself. Nevertheless, the principle was established that dogmas must justify themselves before the bar of reason. This was the principle which in some form dominated every step of the Enlightenment.

But the Neological stage¹¹ (from about 1740-1790) went a pace further than was attained in the Wolffian period, and subtracted from this rather amicable complex of reason and revelation what appeared to it to be contrary to reason. This proved to be the whole specifically Christian content of revelation. Nevertheless, it allowed the concept of revelation as such to remain, and gave it as its content the religious truths of reason. In this way it more nearly approached the position where revelation came to be identified with reason. Neology removed from the concept of revelation its historical content. The content which it substituted in its place was the rational. Philological-historical methods for the most part were employed to bring about this alteration in the relation of reason and revelation. The formula that has been proposed to describe Neology is: reason, plus the concept of revelation, minus the content of revelation.¹² In this way it is apparent that the content of revelation was considerably reduced. Historical and objective phenomena more and more became equated with reason, or else were dropped altogether.

¹⁰ A. C. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

¹¹ For this interpretation I am indebted to K. Aner, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹² K. Aner, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Nevertheless, we do not have fully developed Rationalism until we come to Kant and Fichte. The former in his famous *Religion within the Bounds of Pure Reason* (1793) and the latter in his *Kritik aller Offenbarung* ("A Critique of all Revelation") serve as classical exponents of German Rationalism of a wholly non-supernatural type. Here the idea of revelation is given up altogether, and the traditional content of revelation is frankly converted into truths of reason. This fully developed Rationalism frankly poured the historical element, which Neology had only begun to set to one side, into the vessel of reason. The formula expressive of full-fledged Rationalism is: Reason equals the content of revelation minus the concept of revelation.¹³ All we have left of revelation is what is contained within reason itself. In this way there came about a complete transformation of Christian traditions and tenets into truths of reason. Revelation in any legitimate connotation of that term experienced a complete extermination at the hands of fully developed Rationalism.

This was the intellectual climate prevalent in Lessing's century: a medley of Protestant Orthodoxy, Deism, the Leibniz-Wolfian philosophy, Neology, and fully developed Rationalism. It will now be possible to proceed with an analysis of the views of Lessing, as these were developed in the above-described thought-context. We shall see that his own views were developed in reaction to each and all of these factors which served to constitute the intellectual atmosphere of his day.

For he was a sensitive soul. In his mind,

clear and sharp as a well-cut and polished diamond, were accumulated, as in but few peculiarly gifted spirits, all the various interests by which the intellectual world of his age was stirred.¹⁴

He was really a literary man, not a theologian, by occupation or vocation. In the field of theology he was only a writer of pamphlets, not an author of voluminous compendiums of dogmatics. Indeed, they were chiefly polemical writings he sent out to the world, which for only a few years (1777-1781) set the theological world in commotion and uproar.

Nevertheless, as one writer puts it, he was of greater worth for theology than the entire army of subsequent theologians, believing and unbelieving alike. For he broadcast more fertile seed in the spiritual acreage of his time than could be found anywhere else in the theological circles of his day. He was without question the spiritual summit of the theological development of the eighteenth

¹³ K. Aner, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ J. A. Dorner, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

century.¹⁵ Another has said that there are personalities in which the deepest spiritual life of a people and an era are gathered together as in a ventricle of the heart. From thence they flow back through thousands and thousands of arteries into the whole, and thus first here come to consciousness. In this way everyone who is gripped by the general spiritual stream of that century also discovers himself dependent upon such a sovereign spirit. Two personalities which in a peculiar fashion have served in this capacity in the spiritual history of the German people are Luther and Lessing. For, as in Luther the spiritual deed of the sixteenth century, the break of the German conscience with the Mediaeval Church, was consummated, so in Lessing the spiritual deed of the eighteenth century, the break of the German intellect with the early Protestant dogmatics, was effected.¹⁶

Now the manner in which there burst forth upon our modern world the problem of revelation, as we are still today largely concerned with it, can best be seen in the reaction Lessing experienced to currents of thought as above described. We shall see that he caught the progressive and liberal spirit of the Deists, Neologists, and Rationalists. This made him an advocate of the scientific spirit, and an enemy of the obscurantism of so much of Protestant Scholasticism. It will be seen that Lessing set himself in opposition to the dogmatic-metaphysical way of thought which was the common property of both the liberal and conservative thinkers of his age. He was unique in the age of the Enlightenment in the new evaluation he put upon the historical in relation to doctrine. And finally, in loyalty to the new enthusiasm for life, so characteristic of the eighteenth century, Lessing came to exalt a living ethic in preference to what, for him, was the lifeless and sterile bibliolatry of the orthodox. If we are right in believing that this is the way to understand Lessing, we see at once that his was not a one-sided reaction. He saw extravagances in the Deism and Neology of his day as well as in Orthodoxy. The nature of that higher synthesis which he sought to fashion will now be illustrated from those of his writings which touch upon our problem.

In Lessing the scientific spirit triumphed over the obscurantism of Orthodoxy, as well as over the extravagances of free thought of his day. He was governed by an ardent instinct for truth, and that not merely of a theoretical kind. He longed for a personal appropriation of truth by the affections, the reason, and the will.

¹⁵ Carl Schwarz, *Lessing als Theologe* (Pfeffer, Halle, 1854), p. iii.

¹⁶ Willibald Beyschlag, *Lessings Nathan der Weise und das Positive Christentum* (Raub, Berlin, 1863), pp. 3-4.

His whole nature from early youth was against the thoughtless formalism and complacent conformity to time-worn systems of thought inherited from the fathers, which he believed were often not vitally comprehended, and equally against inconsequent systems of thought, even if in the direction of liberalism.

As early as in his twentieth year, he had written to his father that the Christian religion was not a thing to be received on trust from one's ancestors; but, with reference to himself, could even then add that time would teach whether he is the better Christian who has the principles of Christian doctrine in his memory, and, often without understanding them, in his mouth; who goes to church and performs all the ceremonies because they are customary; or he who has once wisely doubted, and endeavoured to arrive at truth by way of investigation.¹⁷

He conceived his mission to Orthodoxy as being that of a gadfly, sent to sting it awake from its self-satisfied sleep.

We can therefore also understand how in a letter to his brother Karl Gotthelf, dated February 2, 1774, he could refer to Orthodoxy as "impure water"¹⁸ which can no longer be used. But his impartial spirit led him, in this same letter, to refer to the newer theology of his day (Neology) with an even more contemptible term. He called it "liquid manure" (*Mistjauche*), and added that it would not be wise to throw away the "impure water" of Orthodoxy before knowing whence might be produced in its place "pure water". It is clear that Lessing considered Neology not as that "pure water", but something even worse than the "impure water" of Orthodoxy. Why? Not because it was rational, but because it was not rational enough; because it was only a half-way house, because it held many assumptions in common with conservatism, without having a respectable system of thought such as Orthodoxy did have to its credit. In answer to the criticisms of prevailing Lutheranism which his brother had made, Lessing rises up in defence of the same.

I know nothing in the world, upon which human sagacity has exhibited and exercised itself more than upon it.¹⁹

While Lessing's working ideas were therefore clearly on the side of the Enlightenment, his sympathies were frequently on the side of Orthodoxy. He saw values there which he was loth to surrender

¹⁷ Adolph Stahr, *The Life and Works of G. E. Lessing* (E.T. by E. P. Evans), Vol. II, p. 226.

¹⁸ Cf. Carl Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁹ "Ich weiss kein Ding in der Welt, an welchen sich der menschliche Scharfsinn mehr gezeigt und geübt hätte als an ihm." (From the letter of Lessing to his brother Karl Gotthelf, Feb. 2, 1774, excerpts of which are given in Aner, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-5.)

as long as the critics of his day had nothing of equal or greater value to put in their place. And yet he was equally convinced that the "impure water" would eventually have to be thrown away.

Nowhere more clearly than in the famous and frequently quoted passage from the *Rejoinder* (an answer to Ress, one of his critics), does Lessing take his stand with the scientists as over against the dogmatists.

Not the truth of which a man is or believes himself to be possessed, but the sincere effort he has made to come behind the truth, makes the worth of the man. For not through the possession but through the investigation of truth does he develop those energies in which alone consists his ever-growing perfection. Possession makes the mind stagnant, indolent, proud. If God held enclosed in His right hand all truth, and in His left, simply the ever-moving impulse toward truth, although with the condition that I should eternally err, and said to me, "Choose!" I should humbly bow before His left hand, and say, "Father, give! Pure truth is for Thee alone!"²⁰

Here in this bold utterance we have the real kernel and fundamental concept of Lessing's being. Truth by itself has no worth; for it is not as yet what it should be. It becomes such only through the subject, through his living appropriation, through his free and endless striving for truth. The truth is not a finished product nor a dogma, but research, critical inquiry, a never-ceasing process going on within the subject. John Dewey's definition of science, quoted in chapter one, stands in this tradition. The justice of calling Lessing the Luther of the eighteenth century (as his friends were in the habit of calling him) consists in the fact that he exalted the principles of the most inward and free appropriation of truth for the subject, and was the first one to bring this principle to its full right and acknowledge the full import of its consequences.²¹ In this respect he was the enemy as well of the often intolerant Rationalism of his day (which also was dogmatic) as of Protestant Orthodoxy. Both were on a false tack in his estimation, because they looked upon truth as a finished product.

(To be continued)

Hastings College,
Hastings, Nebraska.

²⁰ Quoted in E.T. by James Sime, *Lessing* (Trubner, London, second edition, 1890), Vol. II, p. 206. Verified with the original German of the *Duplik* (Braunschweig: in der Buchhandlung des Fürstlichen Waisenhauses, first edition, 1778), pp. 10-11.

²¹ Carl Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 7.