

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

A. SKEVINGTON WOOD

B.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.

*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



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PART II

Luther and the Bible

(b)

LUTHER'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

LUTHER AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

LUTHER WAS NOT BREAKING NEW GROUND WHEN he turned to the Bible," according to Ernst Zeeden, "but only when he cut the Bible off from pope and Church, or subordinated them."¹ The authority of the Word was not seriously questioned. The issue at stake was whether that authority stood on its own feet, or was derived from or needed to be supplemented by that of the Roman Church. This more than anything else was what the Reformation was about. All the other items on its agenda stemmed from the underlying controversy about the magisterial role of Scripture. As we speak of a new reformation in our time, once again biblical authority is the key to the debate.

As we have seen, the exponents of the *via moderna*, under whose influence Luther came at Erfurt, belonged to the Occamist school which laid greater stress on the supremacy of Scripture than most medieval theologians had done. Friedrich Kropatscheck has shown that not only did they accept a thorough-going doctrine of inspiration but also held that the Word of God posits certain propositions of faith which the Christian is obliged to believe on pain of being ejected as a heretic.² Occam himself had declared that whoever suggested that any part of the Old or New Testament was false, or need not be recognized by believers, was heretical and must be firmly resisted.³ Whereas the advocates of the *via antiqua* urged the use of the Scriptures for the edification of the masses, the Occamists were more concerned with underlining the sole authority of the Word. They taught that the only sure foundation for the superstructure of Christian belief was the revealed truth of God.

"Yet this viewpoint could not produce evangelical and reformatory results," added Reu, "since despite all its emphasis and the decided assertion that only accordance with the Scriptures renders truths of faith obligatory, the conviction nevertheless obtained that the teaching of the Church and the teaching of Scripture are identical, and Occam insistently recognized not the pope but the Church as the final judge of the question as to whether

¹ Ernst W. Zeeden, *The Legacy of Luther* (E.T. 1954), p. 1.

² Friedrich Kropatscheck, *Das Schriftprinzip der lutherische Kirche*, Bd. I, *Die Vorgeschichte. Das Erbe des Mittelalters* (1904), pp. 438-40. Cf. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, p. 134, to which I am indebted for this and certain other references.

³ Occam, *Dialogue* I.4.vi, in Goldast, op. cit., Vol II, p. 449.

his understanding of the Scripture is correct."¹ In his *Compendium Errorum Johannis Papae XXII* (c. 1334-8) Occam had included this disclaimer in the preface: "If I should have written something in this work which is contrary to Holy Writ or the teachings of the saints, or the assertions of the most holy Church, I submit myself and my words to correction by the Catholic Church - not the Church of malignants, or heretics, or schismatics and their protectors."² The Erfurt Occamists, however, modified Occam's position by acknowledging the pope and not a general council as the mouthpiece of the Church.³ Luther's conception of biblical authority therefore, was revolutionary in that it denied that the teaching of Scripture and the teaching of the Roman Church were necessarily identical, and that the pope or a council as representing the Church must ultimately determine the meaning of the Word.

This was not a conviction which Luther reached all at once, even after his illumination. In his *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1515), despite the repeated statements about the efficacy of Scripture, he could nevertheless assert that understanding of Scripture does not guarantee truth.⁴ He also claimed that the Holy Spirit was given to the leaders of the Church, not only to enable them to interpret the existing Word but also to receive new truths.⁵ This continued to be Luther's attitude as he started his lectures on Romans. From this point onwards, however, as a consequence of his tower experience, he began to shake off the shackles of ecclesiasticism and to recognize the sole authority of Scripture. Even as early as 1516 he could declare that "faith surrenders itself captive to the Word of Christ" - a striking anticipation of his testimony at Worms.⁶

We must now seek to analyze Luther's developed teaching about the authority of Scripture. It is this that lies at the heart of the Reformation witness. *Sola Scriptura* was its watchword. Luther would admit no other criterion, even as a corollary. He was content to abide by what he called "the sure rule of God's Word".⁷ For him it was *norma normans* not *norma normata*. It was an unregulated regulator. By it everything was to be judged but nothing might judge it. When man attempts to set himself up as one who is capable of critical appraisal he merely displays his ignorance and folly. "Among Christians the rule is not to argue or investigate," wrote Luther, "not to be a smart aleck or a rationalistic know-it-all; but to hear, believe, and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to determine out of ourselves what we must believe about him, but to hear and learn it from him."⁸

¹ Ibid., p. 14.

² Occam, *Compendium Errorum Johannis Papae XXII*, in Goldast, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 958.

³ Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, p. 27.

⁴ WA. 4. 436.

⁵ Ibid., 345.

⁶ WA. 1. 87.

⁷ LW. 7. 21.

⁸ LW. 13. 237.

In the empire of the Church the rule is God's Word, Luther insisted.¹ "We must judge according to the Word of God."² Conversely, we must not try to be its judge. It is the Anabaptists (as well as the Romans) who think that they can "measure the Word of God . . . with their own yardstick and judge it on the basis of their own education and their own notion as to its meaning. This settles it for them, and God ends up playing the role of pupil to all men".³ The deviationists would pass judgement on Scripture and say, "That is true, and that is false." "You must cling to His Word. . . . In brief, you must become God's pupil. If God does not grant you the Word and faith, you will not believe it. Without this all will fail."⁴ Luther lodged the same complaint against the Jewish exegetes, when they tampered with the text of the Old Testament. With reference to their interference with Genesis 19:24, for example, Luther asks: "But who ordered them to have the audacity to do this in the case of God's Book? For if one were at liberty to trifle in this way with Holy Scripture, no article of faith would remain intact. Hence it is a characteristic of the unbelieving Jews and of the godless papists to be teachers of the Holy Spirit and to teach him what or how to write. But let us be and remain pupils, and let us not change the Word of God; we ourselves should be changed through the Word."⁵

It is by the standard of Scripture that the believer is enabled to measure all other teaching. It is in this way that he will put everything to the proof and retain only that which is good.⁶ "A Christian soon smells from afar which is God's and which is human teaching. He sees from afar that the schismatic spirits are speaking their own human mind and opinion. They cannot escape me, Dr. Luther. I can soon judge and say whether their doctrine is of God or of man; for I am doing the will of God, who sent Christ. I have given ear to none but God's Word, and I say: 'Dear Lord Christ, I want to be thy pupil, and I believe thy Word. I will close my eyes and surrender to thy Word.' Thus He makes me a free nobleman, yes, a fine doctor and teacher, who is captive to the Word of God, and is able to judge the errors and the faith of pope, Turks, Jews and Sacramentarians. They must fall, and I tread them all underfoot. I have become a doctor and a judge who judges correctly."⁷ In the end, for all their raving, the heretics have to give way. A Christian who has the Scripture as his guide can differentiate between true and false doctrine.⁸ That is why Paul can claim that the spiritual man, equipped with God's Word, "judges all things, but is himself judged by no one" (I Cor. 2:15). "And though they fall to, judge and condemn, roar and bellow, murmur and speak defiantly against

¹ LW. 41. 134.

² LW. 26. 383; cf. LW. 24. 75 - "We must judge and consider all wonders and miracles in the light of God's Word, to ascertain whether they are in accordance and agreement with it."

³ LW. 23. 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵ LW. 3. 297.

⁶ I Thess. 5:21.

⁷ LW. 23. 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*

others, their judgement is none the less wrong and does not endure as a Christian's judgement endures before God."¹

We must not rely on man, Luther warned. We must learn to adhere solely to the Word of God. It is not who speaks that matters in the Church, but what is spoken. "The person is of no consequence; nor is the person's name important, whether it be Peter or Paul. The person is acceptable so long as he teaches faithfully. Therefore let the Word of God be your guide, and assure yourself that this is presented correctly. If the preacher does that, he is above suspicion. But if he does not follow that guideline, then may he be accursed, even if it were I myself or an angel from heaven. St. Paul says to the Galatians (1:8): 'But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.'"²

Elsewhere Luther referred to the Scriptures as "the proper touchstone"³ by which all teaching is to be tested. It is "to be the rule or touchstone or Lydian stone by which I can tell black from white and evil from good".⁴ Luther did not want to contradict the fathers, "but I will take their books and go with them to Christ and his Word as the touchstone and compare the two."⁵ "If anyone says, the Church or the bishops decided this, then answer: Come, let us go to the touchstone and let us measure with the right yardstick and examine whether it agrees with the *Pater Noster* and with the articles of faith and whether he also preaches the forgiveness of sins. If it agrees with what Christ taught us, then let us accept it and do according to it."⁶ We can detect here what is to be found again in Luther – namely, a standard even within the standard. The Word is the Word of Christ, and its authority is really his.

Luther sometimes used the analogy of light in relation to Scripture. "It illumines everything just as the sun does. Wherever this light does not shine, you must say: 'I gladly concede that it may appear beautiful before the world, that it may glisten and seem like something precious. But I will never agree that it helps me to God or delivers me from death, no matter how much it may glitter, if it is not in agreement with the Word of God. If such zeal affects my soul's welfare and salvation, I will spit on it and tread it underfoot. I will refuse to tolerate, hear, or see it; for it is not God's Word.'"⁷ Again, Luther alluded to the Scripture "alone as the fountain of all wisdom".⁸ Hence he could speak about "the commanding Word of God", and declare that God "does all things with the Word alone".⁹ Commenting on Galatians 1:9 – "a clear text and a thunderbolt" – Luther showed how Paul subordinated himself, along with an angel from heaven, teachers on earth and any other masters at all to sacred Scrip-

¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴ *LW.* 23. 174.

⁷ *LW.* 23. 174-5.

² *Ibid.*, 191.

³ *WA.* 46. 771.

⁸ *EA.* 4. 328.

⁵ *LW.* 24. 177.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 780.

⁹ *LW.* 9. 7; *LW.* 8. 275.

ture.¹ "This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to her."²

In the same section of his lectures on Galatians, Luther nailed "the accursed lie that the pope is the arbiter of Scripture or that the Church has authority over Scripture".³ And in preaching on John 7:17 he took up the same cudgels: "The pope boasts that the Christian Church is above the Word of God. No, this is not true! We must be pupils and not aspire to be masters, for the pupil must not be above his master."⁴ And again: "Years ago all the pope's pronouncements were called Christian truth and articles of faith, yet this was simply based on man. And then it happened that people sank into the abyss and lost everything that pertains to the Word of God and Christ. Therefore we must now declare: 'Pope, council, and doctors, we will not believe you; but we will believe in the Divine Word.'"⁵

Luther took Erasmus to task because he was prepared to submit his mind to the authority of the Church as well as to that of the Scriptures. "What say you, Erasmus? Is it not enough that you submit your opinions to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the Church also? What can the Church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures?"⁶ When the Church is indeed the Church, its doctrine will coincide with that of the Bible. Luther reversed the assumption of the Occamists. They equated the teaching of Scripture with that of the institutional Church as it then was in its unreformed condition. Luther declared that the true Church is reformed according to the Word of God and that what it teaches is in line with Scripture, not because the Bible has been accommodated to the Church, but because the Church has been aligned to the Bible.

The priority of Scripture over the Church is everywhere stressed in Luther. The Church is the creation of the Word, not vice versa. "The Scripture is the womb from which are born theological truth and the Church."⁷ "The Church is built on the word of the Gospel which is the word of God's wisdom and virtue."⁸ "The Word of God preserves the Church of God."⁹ The Church owes its existence to the Word and is maintained by the same means. The Holy Spirit governs the Church only through the Word.¹⁰ These emphases, which are to be found even in Luther's early lectures, were expanded and clarified in his later writings.¹¹ In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he gave full expression to them. "The Church was born by the word of promise through faith, and by this same word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is the promises of

¹ LW. 26. 57.

⁴ LW. 23. 231.

⁷ WA. 3. 454.

¹⁰ LW. 24. 362.

² Ibid., 58.

³ Ibid., 297.

⁸ WA. 4. 189.

⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶ BW. 22.

⁹ WA. 3. 259.

¹¹ The references in notes 35-37 are from the *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1515). Holl has shown how soon Luther's doctrine of the Church was formulated (op. cit., Bd. I, pp. 288-99).

God that make the Church, and not the Church that makes the promise of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the Church, and in this Word the Church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?"¹

Luther quickly disposed of the argument – still prevalent – that the Church is superior to Scripture because it was responsible for selecting the books included in the canon. The thesis of the ecclesiastical sophists ran like this, according to Luther: "The Church has approved only four Gospels, and therefore there are only four. For if it had approved more, there would have been more. Since the Church has the right to accept and approve as many Gospels as it wishes, it follows that the Church is superior to the Gospels."² "What a splendid argument!" exclaimed Luther ironically. "I approve Scripture. Therefore I am superior to Scripture. John the Baptist acknowledges and confesses Christ. He points to Him with his finger. Therefore he is superior to Christ. The Church approves Christian faith and doctrine. Therefore the Church is superior to them."³ It is noteworthy that four centuries later Hans Lietzmann recognized the self-authenticating character of the inspired writings in much the same way as Luther did.⁴

Although the apostolic provenance of the New Testament books carried weight in the acceptance of the canon, Luther refused to defer to apostolic authority as such. He only admitted it in so far and because it was scriptural. Paul in Galatians 2:6 refutes the argument which the false teachers based on the apostolic tradition. "He says that it is out of order, beside the point, and therefore irrelevant to the issue," claimed Luther. "For the issue here is not the distinction amongst social positions; it is something far more important. It is a divine matter involving God and His Word, the question whether this Word is to have priority over the office of an apostle or vice versa. To this question Paul answers: 'To preserve the truth of the gospel and to keep the Word of God and the righteousness of faith pure and undefiled, let apostleship go! An angel from heaven or Peter and Paul – let them all perish!'"⁵

Luther's attitude to the historical creeds was determined by their biblical content. He accepted them not because they had been adopted by the councils of the Church but because he found that they conformed to Scripture.⁶ Quite often he linked Scripture and the creeds as his authorities.⁷ This is only another indication that Luther did not regard himself as a rebel

¹ LW. 36. 107.

² LW. 26. 57; cf. CC. 27. i. 74 for an example in Politus.

³ LW. 26. 57.

⁴ Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, Vol. II, *The Founding of the Church Universal* (E.T. 1950), pp. 97-98.

⁵ LW. 26. 98.

⁶ LW. 37. 361-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 185-6.

against the universal Church, but only against the errors and tyranny of the papal organization. In controversy both with the Romanists and the radicals, he repeatedly referred to the creeds as being grounded in the Scriptures and accepted by the whole Church. In 1538 he published *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith*, in which he elaborated on the brief theses in the first part of his Schmalkald Articles of 1537.¹ In it he declared that the Apostles' Creed is "truly the finest of all" since "briefly, correctly, and in a splendid way it summarizes the articles of faith, and it can easily be learned by children and simple people."² But the Nicene and Athanasian symbols were also valued by Luther, and much of his treatise was occupied with showing how the latter sought to safeguard the biblical revelation concerning the person of Christ.³ There is no question in Luther's mind of setting the creeds above or against Scripture. He simply recognized that they were statements based on Scripture.

The fathers of the Church were subjected to the same test of fidelity to the Word. Although it is true that Luther appealed again and again to the primitive Church as well as to Scripture itself, and quoted the fathers with a profusion and facility which belies the charge that he had little knowledge of their writings, he nevertheless refused to bow to their authority wherever it conflicted with the disclosures of the Word. "I will not listen to the Church or the fathers or the apostles unless they bring and teach the pure Word of God."⁴ "Their authority is worth most when it has clear scriptural support," he stated with reference to the fathers.⁵ There were those who accused Luther of rejecting all the past teachers of the Church. That was a libel. "I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred."⁶ Then he added an apt quotation from Augustine to justify his attitude. Writing to Jerome, the great African father said: "I have learned to do only those books that are called the Holy Scriptures the honour of believing firmly that none of their writers has ever erred. All others I so read as not to hold what they say to be the truth unless they prove it to me by Holy Scripture or clear reason."⁷

"Luther was suspicious of all the fathers," explained Hugh Thompson

¹ This doctrinal statement was drawn up by Luther at the request of Johann Friedrich, Elector of Saxony, to be presented to the proposed General Council convened by Pope Paul III at Mantua in May 1537. The Schmalkald Articles set out the points on which the Protestants felt that no compromise was possible. The Council never met.

² LW. 34. 201.

³ LW. 36. 218-22. The three symbols with which Luther dealt in his treatise were the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds and the *Te Deum laudamus*. The Nicene Creed was added almost as a postscript. The *Te Deum* was regarded from early times as a declaration of the Christian faith and classed with the liturgical confessions (cf. LW. 36. 199. Introduction by Robert R. Heitner).

⁴ LW. 26. 67.

⁵ LW. 32. 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.* Augustine, *Epistolae*, 82, PL. 33. 286-7.

Kerr, "simply because the Roman Church found it expedient on many occasions to confirm certain practices which he detested by appealing to tradition and the writings of the fathers."¹ An examination of his disputes with Cajetan and the two Ecks will bear that out. In the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German works (1539) Luther confessed that he hesitated to increase the number of human writings for he felt that they tended to draw men away from the Divine Word. He went so far as to say that he considered it a blessing in disguise that some of the patristic manuscripts had not been preserved, for "if they had all remained in existence, no room would be left for anything but books, and yet all of them together would not have improved on what one finds in the Holy Scriptures."² "Neither councils, fathers, nor we, in spite of the greatest and best success possible," he went on, "will do as well as the Holy Scriptures, *i.e.*, as well as God Himself has done."³ In this he claimed to follow the example of Augustine, who was the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Scriptures alone and independent of fathers and saints.⁴ Luther, then, did not repudiate the fathers except where they departed from the biblical norm. He was more thoroughly versed in their works than some of his detractors have cared to concede. But he only cherished those insights which had been gained from the Word. "He was not without a historical sense and a reverence for antiquity," observed Henry E. Jacobs, "provided that it was subjected to the tests of Holy Scripture. Scripture was not to be interpreted by the fathers, but the fathers were to be judged by their agreement or disagreement with Scripture."⁵

Although at the outset of his reforming career Luther entertained hopes that an appeal to a general council might result in the resolution of his dilemma, he nevertheless remained critical of previous conciliar decisions. Once again the Bible was his criterion. He could only approve what the councils had decreed when those pronouncements could be reconciled with the Word of God. Otherwise he was compelled to reject them as merely human declarations. "When anything contrary to Scripture is decreed in a council, we ought to believe Scripture rather than the council. Scripture is our court of appeal and bulwark; with it we can resist even an angel from heaven – as St. Paul commands in Galatians 1(:8) – let alone a pope and a council."⁶ "God is more ancient than all the councils and the fathers," Luther argued, against those who rested their case on the precedents of antiquity. "He is also greater and higher than all the councils and fathers. Scripture, too, is higher and more ancient than all the councils and fathers."⁷ He conceded that councils could clarify

¹ *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, ed. Hugh Thompson Kerr (1943), p. viii.

² LW. 34. 283.

³ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵ ERE. 8. 201.

⁶ LW. 32. 81.

⁷ LW. 45. 145.

controverted matters of interpretation, but where the Word is plain we do not need to wait for conciliar confirmation.¹ It was in his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539) that Luther spread himself on this theme. "A council has no power to establish new articles of faith, even though the Holy Spirit is present. Even the apostolic council in Jerusalem introduced nothing new in matters of faith, but rather held that which St. Peter concludes in Acts 16, and which all their predecessors believed, namely, the article that one is to be saved without the laws, solely through the grace of Christ. . . . A council has the power – and is also duty-bound to exercise it – to suppress and to condemn new articles of faith in accordance with Scripture and the ancient faith, just as the council of Nicaea condemned the new doctrine of Arius, that of Constantinople the new doctrine of Macedonius, that of Ephesus the new doctrine of Nestorius, and that of Chalcedon the new doctrine of Eutyches."² We must have "something else and something more reliable for our faith than the councils. That 'something else' and 'something more' is Holy Scripture."³

For this reason Luther repudiated some of the previous councils as being unscriptural and therefore unacceptable. Being "outside Scripture", they were "councils of Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod; as the apostles say in Acts 4 (:26), They were gathered against the Lord".⁴ "Such are the majority of the pope's councils, in which he sets himself up in Christ's stead as head of the Church, makes Holy Scripture subject to himself, and tears it asunder."⁵ "Nothing should be asserted in (questions of) faith without scriptural precedent," Luther demanded.⁶ The only hope he had of a successful appeal to a general council lay in the rather remote likelihood of this principle being recognized by Rome. It is small wonder that he soon grew sceptical about such a possibility.

Faced with this discrepancy between what was revealed in Scripture and what had been promulgated by the institutional Church, Luther fell back on the distinction between the external organization and the genuine fellowship of the Spirit within it and indeed sometimes beyond it. In dealing with the extent of temporal authority, he made it plain that the rule of emperor or elector was only to be obeyed in so far as it conformed to the Word of God. "Hence it is the height of folly when they command that one shall believe the Church, the fathers, and the councils, though there be no Word of God for it. It is not the Church but the devil's apostles who command such things, for the Church commands nothing unless it knows for certain that it is God's Word. As St. Peter puts it, 'Whoever speaks, let him speak as the word of God' (1 Peter 4:11). It will be a long time,

¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

² *LW.* 41. 120.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *LW.* 41. 123. Acts 15:11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶ *LW.* 32. 230.

however, before they can ever prove that the decrees of the councils are God's Word."¹

Luther's assertion of *sola Scriptura* as over against the counter-claims of the pope, the fathers and the councils must be seen in the perspective provided by his own writings from which we have quoted. We must beware of maintaining a distinction which Luther himself did not recognize. It is not that he set the Bible on one hand, and all that was ever said by the Church on the other, and drew a sharp line of separation between them as if they had no connexion with each other. That would be to exaggerate his emphasis on biblical authority. Rather he used the Word of God as a touchstone by which to test the tradition of the Church. He did not reject tradition outright. He did not invariably disconnect tradition from Scripture. He was ready to allow that where tradition was itself in line with Scripture it had a contribution to make. "Those parts of the tradition of the Church . . . which prove to be based on Scripture also have authority," concludes Althaus in summarizing Luther's view, "even though it is only a derived authority."²

To discard the sovereignty of Scripture was for Luther the worst of all apostasies. It could only lead to spiritual anarchy. "For once the pure and certain Word is taken away, there remains no consolation, no salvation, no hope."³ To overthrow this is to overthrow all. Christianity stands or falls by the Word. Once the foundation is threatened, the structure will soon collapse. "He who does away with the Word and does not accept it as spoken by God does away with everything."⁴ Luther realized that in his day. We need to be aware of it in ours.

¹ LW. 45. 106. Luther employed the term *Kirche* in two differentiated senses in this passage. Its first appearance in capitalized form (translated "Church") indicates the institutional organization. In the next sentence it is decapitalized (translated "church") and refers to the company of true believers.

² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (E. T. 1966), p. 7.

³ LW. 26. 77.

⁴ L.W. 3. 272.