

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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

Martin Luther



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LUTHER AND THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

“**A**FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTION OF LUTHER’S CRITICISM and of his exegetical work generally . . . is the unity of the Bible.”¹ Such is the judgment of Pelikan. A scrutiny of Luther’s writings, particularly those which are of an expository nature, amply vindicates the statement. Luther’s approach to Scripture was never atomistic. He treated the Bible as a homogeneous whole. For him it was not simply a set of unrelated books, but a divine library, selected by the Holy Spirit himself, in which no part was superfluous and all parts were interlaced. In thus recognizing the intrinsic integration of Scripture, Luther anticipated the findings of much more recent inquiry. Biblical theologians pay due regard to this factor today. Whereas the nineteenth century critics ignored the underlying oneness of the revealed Word to a serious extent, the tendency of late has been to reinstate it.

Luther appealed again and again to “the constant and unanimous judgment of Scripture”.² It was this awareness of unity in the Bible which not only distinguished him from some of his predecessors, but also from the rationalistic critics of more recent times, as Pelikan points out.³ This is most marked in the case of the Old Testament. But after driving a wedge between the Old and the New Testaments, and virtually advocating a resuscitated Marcionism, the pioneers of modern criticism proceeded to insert similar wedges in the New Testament itself – between Jesus and Paul, between the Synoptics and John, and eventually between Paul and pseudo-Paul. “Partly because they often found the origins of New Testament thought and language elsewhere than in the Old Testament, scholars who practised such interpretation of the New Testament sought to explain the divergences within New Testament speech by reference to extra-biblical sources; and so they frequently ignored the possibility that differences of language and of emphasis between one writer of the New Testament and another could be part of a unity underlying and preceding the whole. For Luther, as for most of the theologians that preceded him, that was more than a possibility; it was one of the most consistent devices he employed in interpreting the New Testament. Sometimes he looked for synonyms or equivalent expressions by which one New Testament writer

¹ LW. 21. xiii. Introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan.

² LW. 3. 210.

³ LW. 21. xiii.

said what another writer had said in some other way. Sometimes he proceeded on the assumption that the same term was used in the same way by different writers, although he was quick to notice the differing shades of meaning in various biblical books. The New Testament formed a unit with the Old Testament, and it was also a unit within itself."¹

Luther's recurring reference was to "all Scripture" – a phrase which appears regularly throughout his works.² At other times he used the alternatives "all Holy Writ", "all of Holy Writ", and "the entire Bible".³ His employment of the expression "the Word of God" – which was often though not always resorted to as an equivalent for the Scriptures – also implied the wholeness of the written revelation. Luther insisted that because of this inherent unity, the Bible must always be treated as being of a piece, and that it is impermissible to accept one portion of it and discard another. The Holy Spirit is in every verse of it, and, although not all is equally edifying, yet nothing is to be dismissed as negligible. Unless all is believed, nothing is believed.⁴

It is the heretics who refuse to respect the oneness of Scripture. It is because of their fragmented conception that they fall into error, failing to balance one area of biblical teaching with another. "At first they deny only one article, but afterwards all must be denied. It is as with a ring; if it has only one defect, it can no longer be used. And if a bell cracks in only one place it does not sound any longer and is useless."⁵ And again, from Luther's sermon on "The Christian Armour": "When the devil has succeeded in bringing matters so far that we surrender one article to him, he is victorious, and it is just as bad as though all of them and Christ Himself were already lost. Afterwards he can unsettle and withdraw others because they are all intertwined and bound together like a golden chain, so that if one link be broken, the whole chain is broken, and it pulls apart. And there is no article that cannot be overthrown if it once comes to pass that reason intrudes and tries to speculate and learns to turn and twist the Scripture so that it agrees with its conclusions. That penetrates like a sweet poison."⁶ For Luther, of course, the articles of faith were drawn from Scripture.

In his lectures on Romans, Luther had occasion to refer to Matthew 4:4 – "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." "But why the phrase 'by every word'? Because by disbelieving one single word you no longer live by the Word of God. For the whole Christ is in every word, and He is wholly in all single words. When, therefore, one denies in one word Him who is in

¹ Ibid.

² LW. 7. 344; LW. 8. 472; LW. 14. 75, 99, 168, 305; LW. 26. 341, 397, 418; LW. 27. 15, 212; LW. 30. 165, 307.

³ LW. 23. 42, 483; 16, 27; 17.

⁴ Ibid.; cf. WA. 31. i. 208.

⁵ WA. 54. 158.

⁶ W. 9. 950.

all words, one denies Him in His totality."¹ In our final chapter we shall be considering the Christocentricity of Scripture. For Luther the oneness of the written Word was related to the oneness of the living Word. As Christ is one so also is the Scripture. That is why it cannot be broken without impairing the whole.

Luther's conception of biblical unity was also associated with the completeness of faith. "Faith consists of something indivisible: it is either a whole faith and believes all there is to believe, or it is no faith at all if it does not believe one part of what there is to believe. This is why our Lord likens it to one single pearl and one single mustard seed, etc. (cf. Matt. 13:45, 46; 31, 32). For Christ is not divided; therefore, one either denies Him in His totality when one denies Him with respect to one point or affirms Him in His totality. But one cannot at the same time deny and confess Him now in this, and then in that, word."² It will be realized that for Luther the oneness of Scripture is bound up with the oneness of Christ and the oneness of faith.

The unity of Scripture is such that there is no possible contradiction between one part of it and another. What seem to be discrepancies are capable of resolution. If we do not know the answer now, we will eventually. "I see that Scripture is consonant in all and through all and agrees with itself in such a measure that it is impossible to doubt the truth and certainty of such a weighty matter in any detail."³ This perfect inner harmony of Scripture was a basic principle with Luther. "Scripture is not against itself," he strongly affirmed.⁴ "Holy Scripture is in excellent agreement with itself and is uniformly consistent everywhere."⁵ It is not to be supposed that this was the conclusion of one who had failed to face the difficulties involved in a reconciliation of intransigent passages. That would be to charge Luther with a naiveté which was quite foreign to his nature. Over a period of thirty-four years he was a professional exegete. Few men in his age had given more attention to these matters than he had. It was with eyes wide open, not tight shut as some would have us imagine, that Luther maintained his convictions about the unanimity of Scripture. It was his opponents who denied it. "I let you cry in your hostility that Scripture contradicts itself, ascribing righteousness now to faith and then to works. It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only seems so to foolish, coarse, and hardened hypocrites."⁶ That may sound severe and unsympathetic language, but Luther had suffered too much at the hands of those who played ducks and drakes with the holy Word of God.

The nub of Luther's recognition of biblical unity lies in the relationship between the New Testament and the Old. This is still a crucial issue today.

¹ LCC. 15. 105.

⁴ WA. 9. 450.

² Ibid., 102.

⁵ LW. 3. 247.

³ WA. 40. iii. 652.

⁶ WA. 40. i. 420.

Luther declared that it is characterized both by unity and diversity. Such a realistic appraisal of the situation is typical of him. His stress on the oneness of Scripture did not lead him to ignore its obvious divergences. However, for Luther the decisive distinction in the Bible was not that between the two Testaments. It was that between law and gospel. These distinctions are not coincidental. That is to say, the differentiation between law and gospel is not a refinement of the differentiation between the old covenant and the new. The law-gospel dichotomy runs through both Testaments, as Althaus brings out.¹

The gospel is to be found in the Old Testament in terms of the promises, and the law is to be found in the New Testament, as for instance in our Lord's reinterpretation in the Sermon on the Mount. "Thus the books of Moses and the prophets are also gospel, since they proclaimed and described in advance what the apostles preached and wrote."² On the other hand, "what the gospel or the preaching of Christ brings is not a new doctrine to undo or change the law, but, as St. Paul says (Rom. 1:2), the very same thing that was 'promised beforehand through the prophets in Scripture'."³ As McDonough has cogently argued, this law-gospel interrelation lay at the heart of Luther's theology.⁴ It arose from his biblical presuppositions.

Luther did concede, however, that the Old Testament contained more law and the New Testament contains more gospel. In his Preface to the Old Testament, he explained that it is primarily "a book of laws, which teaches what men are to do and not to do – and in addition gives examples and stories of how these laws are kept or broken – just as the New Testament is gospel or book of grace, and teaches where one is to get the power to fulfil the law."⁵ After pointing out that in the New Testament there are also given, along with the teaching about grace, many other commandments for the control of the flesh, and that in the Old Testament there are besides the law certain promises and words of grace by which the patriarchs and prophets were kept in the faith of Christ, Luther added: "Nevertheless just as the chief teaching of the New Testament is really the proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, so the chief teaching of the Old Testament is really the teaching of laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good."⁶ Thus the Old Testament may correctly be described as a law-book and the New Testament as a gospel.⁷

"This is the first way in which they are different from each other," explains Althaus, "and indicates that a tension exists between them. In so far as the Old Testament also contains the gospel, there is a basic unity

¹ Althaus, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁴ McDonough, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁵ *LW.* 35. 236.

² *LW.* 30. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

³ *LW.* 21. 69.

⁷ *WA.* 10. i. 159.

between both parts of the Bible; the only difference is that the Old Testament promises Christ and salvation while the New Testament bears witness that His promise is fulfilled. The two Testaments are therefore related to each other as promise and fulfilment."¹ "The ground and proof of the New Testament is surely not to be despised," argued Luther, "and therefore the Old Testament is to be highly regarded. And what is the New Testament but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ?"²

A further distinction recognized by Luther was that between Scripture and preaching. Unlike the law-gospel classification, this does coincide with the division between the Testaments. At times Luther spoke of Scripture as the New Testament itself necessarily does, that is, as referring to the Old Testament. The New Testament he preferred to regard as preaching. This differentiation between *Schrift* and *Predigt* could lead Luther to speak about "the authority of Scripture" and "the testimony of the New Testament" as separate witnesses.³ The gospel, or the New Testament, Luther believed, "should really not be written but should be expressed with the living voice which resounds and is heard throughout the world."⁴ He could even suggest that "the fact that it is also written is superfluous".⁵ The Old Testament alone has been put in writing when the apostles were compiling the documents which were eventually to be incorporated into the New Testament. So they call it Scripture. It pointed to Christ who was to come - Luther was commenting in this passage on I Peter 1:10-12. "But the gospel is a living sermon on the Christ who has come."⁶

To the extent that both Testaments contain the gospel, Luther's understanding of their relationship may be expressed in two theses, according to Althaus.⁷ In the first place, the entire truth of the gospel is already implicit in the Old Testament, and thus the New Testament is based on the Old. In the second place, although this truth is present, it is nevertheless hidden and must therefore be made known and revealed, and this takes place through the word of the New Testament. It was within the orbit of these twin considerations that Luther's elucidation of intertestamental relationships moved. It is essential to hold both aspects of it in tension.

With regard to the first, Luther went out of his way to make it clear that he valued the Old Testament, not only as adumbrating the gospel, but as actually providing the basis of it in embryo. He dismissed those neo-Marcionites of his day who played down the significance of the Old Testament and tossed it aside as "a book that was given to the Jewish people only and is now out of date, containing only stories of past times."⁸

¹ Althaus, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

² LW. 30. 19.

⁷ Althaus, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³ LW. 35. 236.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸ LW. 35. 235; cf. LW. 9. 6.

⁵ LW. 3. 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Luther quoted the testimony of Christ Himself, and of the New Testament writers, in order to confute such an erroneous view. The Old Testament is not to be despised but diligently read.¹ The New Testament cannot be understood apart from the Old, Luther insisted – and current scholarship is re-echoing his insight. He could speak of Moses as “a well of all wisdom and understanding, out of which has sprung all that the prophets knew and said. Moreover even the New Testament flows out of it and is grounded in it.”² And again: “The apostles have drawn everything which they taught and wrote out of the Old Testament; for it proclaims everything which Christ would do and preach in the future. It is for this reason that they base all their sermons on the Old Testament and that there is no statement in the New Testament that does not refer back to the Old Testament in which it was previously proclaimed.”³ Luther could even declare that the “first chapter of Genesis contains the whole Scripture in itself.”⁴ Similarly, Luther found the whole gospel in the promise attached to the first commandment – “I am the Lord your God.”⁵

This dependence of the New Testament on the Old meant that only in the light of the Old could the New be made plain. In this axiom of interpretation Luther had laid hands on the key to a fresh approach to Scripture. It was largely by means of it that he managed to shake off the grip of medieval hermeneutics. “By rooting his interpretation of the New Testament in his understanding of the Old Testament, Luther thus helped to break the exegetical habits of many centuries,” wrote Pelikan. “He read the New Testament as the early Church had apparently intended it, as an addition to the Scriptures which the Church already possessed in the Old Testament. Far from being a Marcionite, as he has sometimes been portrayed, Luther did precisely what Marcion seems to have criticized. He read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, and he read the New Testament on the basis of the Old.”⁶

Coming to the second thesis distilled by Althaus from Luther’s comments, the evangelical significance of the Old Testament, being concealed, can only be brought to the surface by the New.⁷ Luther could even claim that basically the New Testament has no other function than to open up the Old Testament so as to reveal the gospel hidden in it.⁸ If the New Testament is preaching, it is preaching on the text of the Old Testament with a view to interpreting its meaning in the light of Christ. Thus, when the New Testament is “understood well, the entire Scripture of the Old Testament is clear.”⁹ Paul’s aim in writing Romans was to “sum up briefly the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine and to prepare an introduction to the entire Old Testament. For, without doubt, whoever has this

¹ LW. 35. 236.

⁴ WATR. 3. 155. No. 3043a.

⁷ Althaus, op. cit., p. 88.

² Ibid., 247.

⁵ LW. 9. 112.

⁸ WA. 10. i. 181.

³ WA. 10. i. 181.

⁶ LW. 21. xi.

⁹ LW. 3. 73.

epistle well in his heart, has within him the light and power of the Old Testament."¹ Hence "the New Testament is nothing more than a revelation of the Old".² "In the New Testament the Old Testament is quoted and used everywhere; by God's mercy and His revelation this leads to a clear understanding of faith, no matter how dark and obscure it remains for the unbelievers. We reach into the dark, black forest and become snow-white. We observe that all the apostles appeal to the Old Testament, citing clear and lucid passages from it in substantiation of the faith. And prior to that, the Jews had quoted these same passages daily, and yet they remained obscure and dark to them. For the Ψ , the Distributor and Nourisher, who spreads the wings of the cherubim and the doves, had not been given at the time. First Christ had to die and to bring Him. Is it still surprising to hear that black becomes white and darkness light? That is the miraculous work of God."³

We cannot adequately discuss Luther's conception of biblical unity without dealing with his attitude to the canon. It is at this point that he has come in for considerable criticism on the grounds of alleged inconsistency. His strictures on the Letter of James have been repeated *ad nauseam*. Every theological student knows that Luther dismissed it as an epistle of straw. What is not so generally realized is that Luther wrote differently on other occasions about James, and that if the actual context of the offending reference is consulted a rather different construction is placed upon his observation.⁴ It occurs at the close of his Preface to the New Testament — although not in any editions after 1537, or in any copy of the complete Bible.⁵ Luther has been asking and answering the question: "Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament?"⁶ From what he had already written it has become clear that "John's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books".⁷ These are the foremost books to set forth the essence of the Christian faith, and a new convert should turn to them first.⁸ They teach all that is necessary for salvation, and therefore, Luther adds, "St. James's epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."⁹

It will be realized that the operative clause is "compared to these others" (*gegen sie*). Luther was merely making a comparative estimate. In the preface to the Letter itself, Luther said that he praised James and held it to be a good book.¹⁰ But he was compelled by candour to add that he personally did not regard it as apostolic. "Therefore I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from

¹ LW. 35. 380.

⁴ LW. 35. 362.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 361-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 395.

² WA. 10. i. 181.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 358 n. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 362.

³ LW. 13. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁹ *Ibid.*

including him or extolling him as he pleases.”¹ From this point of view James may be an epistle of straw, but, as Philip Watson pertinently observes, “even straw is not an entirely valueless commodity.”²

This familiar instance, however, raises the whole question of Luther’s approach to the canon, and to that of the New Testament in particular. Not only did he hesitate about James. He was not disposed to deny that Jude was an extract or copy of Second Peter, in view of the similarity of its contents.³ Moreover, the author “speaks of the apostles like a disciple who comes long after them (v.17) and cites sayings and incidents that are found nowhere else in Scripture (vv. 9, 14).”⁴ It was for this reason that the ancient fathers excluded it from the main body the Scriptures. “Therefore, although I value the book,” Luther concluded, “it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books which are supposed to lay the foundations of the faith.”⁵ As with James, Luther did not reject it outright, but relegated it to the second division, as it were.

We have seen that he questioned the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. He took it that the language of Hebrews 2:3 sets the author at a remove from the apostles themselves – “it was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard Him.”⁶ It was “the work of an able and learned man”, but “who wrote it is not known, and will probably not be known for a while: it makes no difference”.⁷ But Luther felt he could not classify it with “the true and certain chief books of the New Testament”.⁸ The same reservation was expressed in the case of the Apocalypse. Luther left everyone free to form their own opinions, but for his part he could not accept it as either apostolic or prophetic.⁹ He could “in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it”.¹⁰

In the catalogue of New Testament books immediately following his overall preface, Luther included these four – James, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation – at the bottom and in a group apart.¹¹ The other twenty-three were all numbered, but these were not. The intertestamental books of the Apocrypha were listed in the same way.¹² Erasmus was suspicious of these four writings, and his viewpoint would be familiar to Luther from his *Annotations* to his Greek New Testament of 1516.¹³ The same outlook was

¹ *Ibid.*, 397. Editions before 1530 read: “Therefore I will not have him in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases.” Luther added: “One man is no man in worldly things (a reference to the proverb, *Einer est keiner*); how, then, should this single man alone avail against Paul and all the rest of Scripture?” (*Ibid.*, n. 55; cf. WADV. 7. 386 nn.17–21).

² Philip S. Watson, “Texts and Contexts”, *Expository Times*, Vol. LII (1941), p. 313.

³ LW. 35. 397.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 397–8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 399.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹¹ WADB. 6. 13.

¹² WADB. 8. 34.

¹³ Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (1855), pp. 439–41.

shared by Cajetan and Sixtus Senensis.¹ Did Luther's devaluation of these four books imply that he was unready to allow the full inspiration and unity of Scripture? Are we justified in regarding him as a progenitor of radical criticism?

To do this is to prove guilty of trying to squeeze Luther into a modern mould. Although in many ways he was a man ahead of his time, it would be quite incongruous in this instance to hail him as the precursor of eighteenth or nineteenth century radical liberalism.² Luther's attitude to the New Testament canon was not so much a foreshadowing of the future as a recreation of the past. He himself appealed in this matter to the tradition of the early Church and noted that the authenticity of these four books had been queried by some of the fathers. In particular, he adduced the example of Eusebius of Caesarea, the pioneer ecclesiastical historian, as witnessing to a primitive distinction between recognized writings (*homologoumena*) and those that were disputed (*antilegomena*).³ At the opening of Book III in his extensive survey, Eusebius wrote: "But as my history advances I shall deem it profitable to indicate, along with the successions, what Church writers in each period have made us of which of the disputed (books), and what they have said about the canonical and acknowledged writings, and anything that they have said about those that are not such."⁴ From this and other passages in his *Ecclesiastical History* we learn that Eusebius grouped five of the seven catholic epistles under the heading of *antilegomena* – namely, James, Jude, II Peter, II and III John. The Book of the Revelation he classed with the *homologoumena*, although with a query. Eusebius accepted the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, and thus included it amongst the fourteen epistles of Paul which are "manifest and clear" as regards their genuineness.⁵ But he was aware that others doubted the apostolic provenance of Hebrews, and elsewhere he mentioned it amongst the disputed books.⁶

The appeal to Eusebius, therefore, establishes the precedent for distinguishing between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*, without suggesting that the components of these categories were fixed. Luther availed himself of the breathing-space provided by such a convenient differentiation without at all abusing it. As Walther contended, for Luther the extent of the

¹ Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, pp. 175–6. Sixtus Senensis, i.e. of Siena, was a leading biblical scholar of the sixteenth century. His *Bibliotheca Sacra* appeared in 1566. Based on scientific principles, it is considered the first of the modern introductions. He distinguished between protocanonical and deuterocanonical books (NCE. 13. 275a).

² Althaus considers that Luther's sporadic excursions into the field of textual, canonical and historical criticism scarcely qualify him to be regarded as a harbinger of modern developments (op. cit., p. 82).

³ LW. 35. 400. Later writers referred to protocanonical and deuterocanonical books.

⁴ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, ed. H. J. Lawlor and J. E. L. Oulton (1927). Vol. I, Bk. III. 3. 3., p. 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. III, 3. 5, p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. VI, 13. 6, p. 188.

canon was an open question, but the books that were unchallenged remained absolutely authoritative for him as the inspired Word of God.¹ In a more recent assessment, Carl F. H. Henry has reached the same conclusion: "Whatever Luther's questions may have been about the canonicity of certain books . . . he had no question whatever about the authority and inerrancy of the books viewed as canonical."²

When Luther spoke about "all Scripture" he intended therefore to indicate all canonical Scripture. He had his own opinions about the four books of the New Testament mentioned above, but he did not quarrel with others who accepted them. To this degree it might be admitted that his conception of biblical unity was impaired. But he would doubtless have defended himself by denying that the disputed books contain anything necessary to salvation which is not also to be found in those that are universally acknowledged. "All the genuine books agree in this," he wrote "that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ."³ It is in Christ that the real unity of Scripture is to be sought.

¹ Wilhelm Walther, *Das Erbe der Reformation in Kampfe der Gegenwart*, Bd. I, *Der Glaube an das Wort Gottes* (1903), p. 42; cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I (1924), p. 292.

² Carl F. H. Henry, *The Protestant Dilemma* (1949), Appendix. Note B, p. 251.

³ LW. 35, 396. He added: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic."