Part II

Luther and the Bible

(a)

LUTHER'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

CHAPTER VII

LUTHER AS A COMMENTATOR

IT IS ALL TOO EASILY IMAGINED THAT MARTIN Luther was mainly, if not exclusively, cast in the mould of an agitator and controversialist. He is commonly regarded as a prophet of fire, but little more. In consequence, his considerable scholarship is altogether overlooked, and it is assumed that his serious exegetical achievement was virtually negligible. His name is not associated, in the uninformed mind, with the production of biblical commentaries. Calvin is more often seen in this context, but hardly Luther. This failure to realize the scope of Luther's varied gifts – not least those of the intellect – is not always confined to popular misconceptions of his capabilities. It sometimes even vitiates what claims to be an expert assessment. Hence a contributor to a standard encyclopedia could announce that "of the reformers Luther did little strictly exegetical work apart from his preaching".[1]

It is incredible that such a verdict could be passed on one who held the chair of biblical exegesis at a highly reputable German university for over thirty years, and whose published commentaries cover so many books of the Bible. It was in the fulfilment of his professorial duties that Luther was brought to understand that the key to Scripture lies in a proper interpretation of God's righteousness. It was in this same capacity that he pinned his Ninety Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. It was as holding this office that he sounded the trumpet of reform. When he died in 1546, he was still Professor Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scripture.

Indeed, we have to be yet more explicit and point out, as Bornkamm has done, that if Luther belonged to a modern faculty, he would not occupy the chair of New Testament exegesis, still less that of systematic theology or dogmatics.[2] If we are to judge from his actual courses in the classroom, he would be a teacher of the Old Testament. Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us that "the most ironic feature of the reinterpretation of Luther's thought on the basis of his exegetical work is that this rediscovery of Luther as a biblical theologian will bring Luther scholarship back into line with Luther! For it was as a biblical theologian that Luther understood himself and wanted others to understand him."[3] He goes on to say

[1] H. S. Nash, 'Hermeneutics', NSH. 4. 244.
[2] Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament* (1948), p. 6.
[3] LW Companion Volume, 46.

that *Doctor in Biblia* more than any other title summarizes Luther's own sense of vocation and mission.[1]

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Luther met the challenge of an imaginary critic who asked: "Why do you publicly attack the pope and others, instead of keeping the peace?"[2] Here is Luther's answer: "A person must advise and support peace while he can and keep quiet as long as possible. But when the sin is evident and becomes too widespread or does public damage, as the pope's teaching has, then there is no longer time to be quiet but only to defend and attack, especially for me and others in public office whose task it is to teach and warn everyone. I have a commission and charge, as a preacher and a doctor, to see to it that no one is misled, so that I may give account of it at the Last Judgment (Heb. 13:17). So St. Paul (Acts 20:28) commands the preachers to watch and guard their whole flock against the wolves that were to appear among them. Thus it is my duty to chastise public sinners so that they may improve, just as a judge must publicly condemn and punish evildoers in the performance of his office."[3] It will be noted that Luther had as high a conception of his teaching function as he did of his calling as a preacher. In those days the two belonged together. Each professor had to preach, and each preacher had to teach his congregation. Pulpit and desk were related. Luther taught from the pulpit and exhorted from the desk, as well as *vice versa*.

His call to be an instructor in the Word came to him through the instrumentality of Staupitz.[4] One day in September 1511, a group of monks at Wittenberg were sitting in the shade of a pear tree. As a member of the university senate the vicar-general had just been recognizing four candidates for the doctorate. He caught sight of Luther and, knowing something of his uncertainties, said to him: "Herr Magister, you must become a doctor and preacher; then you will have something to do." A few days later Luther came to Staupitz with a string of fifteen objections. "Why, my dear fellow," replied Staupitz, "you don't want to set yourself up as wiser than the whole community and all the fathers too!" Luther retorted: "Herr Staupitz, you will bring me to my death. I will never endure it for three months." But his kindly counsellor refused to let the earnest young monk take himself too seriously. "Don't you know," he added playfully, "that our Lord God has many great matters to attend to? For these He needs clever people to advise Him. If you should die, you will be welcomed into His council in heaven, for He too has a vacancy for one or two doctors."[5]

It was through the good offices of Staupitz that Luther first presented

[1] Ibid. [2] LW. 21. 44. [3] Ibid.
[4] LW. 54. 320. No. 4091 – "Staupitz drove me to it"; cf. WATR. 2. 245. No. 1878.
[5] WATR. 2. 379. No. 2255a; 3. 188. No. 3143b; cf. 5. 98. No. 5371, C.R. 6. 160.

himself for the doctorate, which he gained at the exceptionally early age of twenty-eight, and then took up the *lectura in Biblia*, which Staupitz relinquished in his favour. Thus in 1512 Luther committed himself to the task of biblical exposition as a life-work. The terms of his contract required him to stick to the post for the rest of his career. Luther was not slack concerning the promise implicit in his vocation. From then on he delivered at least two or three lectures each week, unless prevented by sickness or his multifarious activities in the cause of the Reformation. In one sense, Luther's onslaught on the evils in the Church and his stand for Scriptural truth are almost incidental. They both emerged in the line of duty. In his commentary on Psalm 82 which appeared in 1521, Luther tried to explain his position to those who enquired why, since he was a professor and preacher at Wittenberg, he wished to reach the whole world through his books. "I answer: I have never wanted to do it and do not want to do it now. I was forced and driven into this position in the first place, when I had become Doctor of Holy Scripture against my will. Then, as a doctor in a general free university, I began, at the command of pope and emperor, to do what such a doctor is sworn to do, expounding the Scriptures for all the world and teaching everybody. Once in this position I have had to stay in it, and I cannot give it up or leave it yet with a good conscience, even though both pope and emperor were to put me under the ban for doing so. For what I began as a doctor, made and called at their command, I must truly confess to the end of my life. I cannot keep silence or cease to teach, though I would like to do so and am weary and unhappy because of the great and unendurable ingratitude of the people."[1] There spoke a man who was clearly under authority to God and to the Word.

In dealing with Luther as a commentator, we can base our estimate, of course, only on those lectures of his which were eventually published or have been preserved in students' notes. But we know of others which have not survived. The complete catalogue, so far as it can be ascertained, is as follows.[2] Those that are in print are marked with an asterisk.

1512–1513 Genesis (?)
1513–1515 *Psalms
1515–1516 *Romans
1515–1516 Galatians
1517–1518 *Hebrews
1518–1521 Psalms; *Galatians (revised), Titus, Judges (?)
1523–1525 Deuteronomy

[1] LW 13. 66. Luther's inaugural oration as a doctor was probably an encomium on the Scriptures (Fife, op. cit., p. 18 n. 2).
[2] Cf. A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (1960), pp. 9–10.

1524–1526	Minor Prophets
1526	Ecclesiastes
1527	1 John; Titus; Philemon
1528	1 Timothy
1527–1530	Isaiah
1530–1531	Song of Solomon
1531–1535	*Galatians
1532–1535	*Psalms
1535–1545	*Genesis

Despite this considerable productivity, springing from more than competent technical equipment, Luther modestly disclaimed any title to distinction. After thanking Johann Brenz, a learned pastor in Schwäbisch-Halle, for a sight of his commentary on Amos, he added: "Far be it from me to suggest any alterations, for I cannot set up as a master in the divine writings. I only wish to be a learner in that school."[1]

The noticeable omission from the curriculum, of course, is that of the four Gospels. But, as Gerhard Ebeling explains, there was no exclusion on principle.[2] Luther had once announced a series on the pericopes, or Gospel passages in the liturgy, in 1521, but he was prevented from delivering it because of his summons to the Diet of Worms. Moreover, the task of instruction was shared by his colleagues in the faculty, and we know that Melanchthon gave a course on Matthew and John, whilst Dolsch lectured on Luke and a little later so did Lambert and Agricola. Luther himself handled the Gospels not in the classroom but in the pulpit. This is not to suggest, however, that his treatment is therefore unworthy of serious consideration. Our accepted modern distinction between preaching and biblical exegesis was unrecognized by Luther. As we have seen, the functions of pulpit and desk coalesced. Luther's preaching was always expository in character, and his exegetical lectures invariably contained a homiletical element not nowadays associated, for good or ill, with scholarly comment. As J. W. Heikinnen makes clear, Luther's exegesis was essentially kerygmatic.[3]

In our estimate of Luther as a commentator we shall concentrate on his methodology. His principles of interpretation will be discussed in a later chapter.[4] By reference to Luther's earlier lectures in particular, we will try to discover how he freed himself from the shackles of medieval exegesis, and arrived at a new way of approaching Scripture and elucidating its meaning. In doing so, however, we must avoid the pitfalls of an undue denigration of scholastic attitudes. We cannot dismiss the Middle

[1] LML. 196.

[2] Gerhardt Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelien-Auslegung* (1942), p. 13.

[3] Jacob W. Heikinnen, "Luther's Lectures on the Romans", *Interpretation*, Vol. VII (1953), p. 180.

[4] See below, pp. 159–168.

Ages as altogether barren in this field. Important work in biblical exposition was pressed forward in this period, as Miss Beryl Smalley has shown in her definitive book on *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, which should be consulted by all who seek an honest and impartial assessment. Nevertheless, it remains true that, as E. C. Blackman points out, "there had developed a regrettable shift of emphasis from the Bible to the fathers, and from seeking the direct guidance of the Spirit to reliance on established usage, so that the main task of the reformers in the sixteenth century was to redress the balance and put the Bible back in its place".[1]

The real weakness of medieval exegesis lay in its rigid insistence that Scripture must always be interpreted in a fourfold sense. According to Guibert of Nogent, these are the rules on which the sacred page revolves as if on wheels.[2] The *quadriga* can be traced back to John Cassian.[3] In each part of Scripture four different meanings could be found. The first was literal and explained the historical contents. The allegorical clarified matters of faith, by revealing the hidden spiritual significances. The moral sense indicated rules of human conduct, whilst the anagogical dealt with the future to be hoped for. This method still persisted in the sixteenth century and, indeed, tended to dominate the lecture rooms. It is mentioned in the famous Complutensian polyglot Bible, produced by Cardinal Ximenes and published in 1520 at Alcala. In the first volume this couplet is quoted:

> *Littera gesta docet: quid credas allegoria.*
> *Moralis quid agis: quo tendas anagogia.*
> ("The letter teaches what has been done, the allegory what you are to believe, the moral what you must do, and the anagogy where you are heading for.")

It is not difficult to realize what inhibitions such a method of exegesis could impose. It puts the Scripture in a straightjacket. Luther sought to release the Bible from its bondage and restore the primacy of the plain, literal sense. This had never been entirely obscured during the Middle Ages, and in Thomas Aquinas the balance was considerably redressed in its favour. He believed that "all interpretations are based on one, that is the literal, from which alone we can argue".[4] He was not the pioneer in this matter, however, as Miss Smalley has demonstrated, although it was his own great authority which gave weight to the tendency. Miss Smalley ascribes the credit to Albert the Great, whose pupil Thomas was, and who insisted that his custom was not to concern himself

[1] Edwin C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation: The Old Difficulties and the New Opportunity* (1957), p. 109.
[2] Guibert de Nogent, *Quo Ordine Sermo Fieri Debet*, PL. 156. 25.
[3] John Cassian, *Conlationes*, 14. 8.
[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1. 3. 10.

"with divisions which cannot be deduced from the letter."[1] Richard of St. Victor must share the honour, and Nicolas of Lyra – the Jerome of the fourteenth century – continued the trend.[2] Luther, then, was not altogether an innovator as he championed a return to the straightforward meaning of Scripture. He picked out of the past what he felt was in line with the way in which the Bible itself demanded interpretation.

The first assumption of medieval exegesis which Luther challenged was the acceptance of the Vulgate as the basis of comment. There was as yet no suggestion in the Church that the Hebrew and Greek texts might take the place of the official Latin version for the purpose of research. The Vulgate was venerated as if it were inspired. The humanist movement was still in its infancy. Reuchlin's *De Rudimentis* appeared only in 1506, Lefèvre's *Quintuplex Psalterium* in 1509, and Erasmus' New Testament not until 1516. It was only after this date that Luther began to pay greater deference to the original texts. By the time that he was ready to embark on his translation of the Bible in 1521, he had unreservedly recognized the need to work from the Hebrew and Greek. This factor becomes increasingly apparent in his commentaries. In the *Dictata Super Psalterium* he still showed a preference for the Vulgate, and expressed his opinion that it did justice to the spiritual sense better than any other version. But when he treated the Psalms a second time in the *Operationes in Psalmos*, he did not hesitate to use the Hebrew text. In his lectures on Romans there is quite a dramatic turning-point. In the first eight chapters his acquaintance with the Greek text was limited to what he could glean from Lefèvre's translation and comment. But by the time he reached the ninth chapter, Luther was using the New Testament in Greek published by Erasmus, and from then on his notes fairly bristle with references.[3]

Luther's debt as a commentator to the biblical humanists did not end there. Not only did he learn from them to accord the primacy to the original texts. He was able to avail himself of the lexical aids they provided. Reuchlin's *De Rudimentis* was a combined Hebrew grammar and lexicon, of which it has been said that "it placed the hitherto almost neglected scientific study of the Hebrew language on an entirely new basis and became a powerful incentive to the study of the Old Testament in the original".[4] This was exactly its effect on Luther. There were also extended

[1] Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1940), p. 299. Cf. I. M. Vosté, *S. Albertus Magnus, ii. In Vetus Testamentum* (1932–1937), p. 6.

[2] LCC. 10. 321. A. Skevington Wood, "Nicolas of Lyra", *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIII (1961), pp. 196–206.

[3] Quanbeck, op. cit., p. 77.

[4] ODCC 1159. Luther obtained Reuchlin's *De Rudimentis* in the early days of his studies at Erfurt (WAB. 2. 547).

philological annotations in Reuchlin's edition of the *Seven Penitential Psalms*, which Luther obtained in 1512.[1] Later he produced a treatise on Hebrew accents and orthography. Lefèvre and Erasmus rendered Luther a similar service so far as Greek was concerned, and afterwards he had Melanchthon to give him expert help. He used the lexicon of Girolamo Aleander, the papal envoy, who introduced humanist studies into France as rector of the University in Paris. Ironically, it was Aleander who officially denounced Luther at the Diet of Worms. Luther was also indebted to John Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed orator of the fourth century, who was no mean scholar and supplied valuable lexical notes in his commentaries.

Thus by providing a better text of the Bible and a number of tools for the job, the biblical humanists enabled Luther to pioneer a new exegetical methodology. It is here that his significance as a commentator lies. Warren Quanbeck summarises the process we have just been describing: "By making available the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Scriptures, Reuchlin and Erasmus opened the way to freedom from the limitations and restrictions of medieval methods. The combination of new theological insights, improved textual and lexicographical tools, and doctrinal controversy with Rome, enabled Luther to outgrow the exegetical methods in which he had been trained. Beginning with the *Operationes in Psalmos* of 1519, Luther began his search for new forms to accord more aptly with his new and almost mature exegetical principles."[2]

Luther not only broke free from the stranglehold of the fourfold sense, and reinstated the original text of Scripture. He also shed the traditional technique of exposition by means of glosses and *scholia*. When he started lecturing, he adopted the conventional approach, as his notebooks show. But he was soon to achieve a much more flexible and effective manner of presentation. In the customary routine, students were given a printed copy of the Latin text of Scripture in a special edition. Luther got Johann Decker from Grünenberg, a fellow monk, to prepare such a book with wide margins and ample space between the lines.[3] The lecturer would then begin by dictating the glosses, to be inserted into the text in the interlinear gaps. By this means, almost every word was paraphrased. Longer notes would be added in the margins. These *glossula* would deal with especially difficult expressions. Much of this material would have been borrowed in the first place from the *Glossa Ordinaria*, ascribed to Walafrid Strabo, a ninth-century abbot of Reichenau, but now thought

[1] This was the first Hebrew text printed in Germany. It was published on the 1st August 1512 by Thomas Anshelm of Tübingen.

[2] Quanbeck, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

[3] Karl A. Meissinger, *Luthers Exegese in der Frühzeit* (1916), pp. 1–2.

to have been a composite work.[1] It was a collection of comments from the outstanding exegetes of the Church, and proved a valuable mine of information for the teacher who either had no opportunity or no inclination to do his own research. This was supplemented by the *Glossa Interlinearis*, linked with the name of Anselm from Laon.[2]

After the lecturer had exhausted the glosses on the text under examination, he turned to more extended and detailed comments on passages of special interest or difficulty. These were known as *scholia*. They gave the teacher much more scope. He could choose whatever portions he wished to dilate upon, and could really spread himself. Yet once again, the tendency was not to indulge in speculation nor even in creative comment, but simply to rehearse what the established expositors had said.[3] Bound up with the *Glossa Ordinaria* and the *Glossa Interlinearis* were to be found in most cases what were known as the *Postilla* and the *Annotationes* or *Additiones*.[4] Six folio volumes altogether comprised this popular set. The *Postilla* were the work of Nicolas of Lyra, and perhaps so named since the comments came "after those, i.e. words of Scripture" (*post illa*).[5] Later, a postil meant a homily on the Gospel or Epistle for the day, or a book of such homilies. The *Annotationes* were the additions to Lyra by Archbishop Paul of Burgos, mentioned by Luther along with Lyra as preferring the Hebrew text to that of the Vulgate.[6]

Although Luther does not explicitly refer to the *Glossae*, it is likely that, in common with his contemporaries, he resorted to them at first. Certainly his early lectures were divided in the traditional way into glosses and *scholia*. This can be seen in the published lectures on Romans and Hebrews. In the translation of the latter in the *Library of Christian Classics*, the editor has used the *scholia* as the meat of the comment, with the glosses incorporated *ad loc.*[7] In his introduction to Luther's commentary on Romans, Wilhelm Pauck sees him liberating himself from the restrictions of this medieval methodology. "In his first exegetical course, the *Dictata super Psalterium*, he was still very closely bound to this established manner of interpretation. Later on, he gradually freed himself from it. Indeed, from 1519 on, he abandoned it altogether. In the lectures on Romans, he exhibits a use of it that we may regard as characteristic of his way of doing

[1] Cf. Smalley, op. cit., p. 56: "a bibliographical legend". J. de Ghellinck accepted the traditional ascription (*Le mouvement théologique du XII siècle* (2nd edn. 1948), pp. 104–12, but J. de Blic administered the *coup de grâce* ("L'oevre exégétique de Walafrid Strabon et la *Glossa Ordinaria*", *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiéval*, Tome XVI (1949), pp. 5–28); cf. ODCC. 1434. In view of this it is surprising to find that the fiction is still perpetuated in some recent works on Luther – e.g. Quanbeck, op. cit., p. 68; LCC. 15. xxvi (Pauck); but cf. LW. 8. 209 n. 9.

[2] ODCC. 59. Cf. Smalley, op. cit., pp. 60–62; Lcc. 15. xxvi.

[3] Quanbeck, op. cit., p. 61.

[4] Ibid., p. 69.

[5] ODCC. 1094.

[6] WA. 3. 518.

[7] LCC. 16. 29–250.

intellectual work» under his hands the interlinear gloss often becomes a very succinct restatement of the words and ideas of the apostle. For he explains the individual passages of the letter by illuminating them through reference to its other parts. Moreover, he formulates his explanatory comments and paraphrases so as to exclude meanings that the apostle could have had in mind when he wrote the letter.

As far as Luther's marginal glosses are concerned they are no longer mere collectanea from the writings of the fathers, but brief incisive comments on selected short passages or individual terms or phrases. He combines them with quotations from Scripture or with critical or commendatory remarks on the writings of certain ones of the fathers (chiefly Jerome, whom he makes the butt of many criticisms, and especially Augustine, on whom he generally bestows high praise) or with references to the interpretations of recent scholars (mainly Faber Stapulensis and Erasmus)."[1] In the *scholia*, too, Pauck tells us, Luther's style is often highly impassioned and personal, quite unlike the conventional academic manner of his day.[2]

By the time Luther came to handle Galatians in the autumn of 1516, he rid himself more completely of the legacy he had inherited. The *glossae* and *scholia* have disappeared altogether. The *quadriga* has been largely replaced by a major stress on the literal sense, in conjunction with a spiritual interpretation arising from it. But Luther criticized the accepted notion of a spiritual sense, since it ignored Augustine's distinction between the spirit and the letter. It was not until after his confrontation with the papal theologians, however, that Luther finally discarded the multiple pattern of exegesis, and relied on what he came to call the historical sense. In this Luther may rightly be hailed, not only as the father of Protestant exegesis, but of modern exegesis too.

The gains he made in these formative years were developed in the lectures he gave so regularly until his death in 1546. His presentation grew more free and flexible. His method of preparation changed, for, as experience increased, he no longer required the extensive notes on which he formerly relied. His mind was so stored with scriptural content that, as Kooiman puts it, "he could lecture from the overflow".[3] His mastery of the material had left far behind the cramping impediment.. of medieval exposition, with its microscopic scrutiny of the text. Luther now ranged freely over the whole of Scripture, and stressed the need for a synoptic view of each book in itself and of each book in its setting. "I am the first to place primary emphasis on the importance of laying hold upon the meaning of the book, that which it wants to say, the essential viewpoint of the author," he wrote, when he was working on Ecclesiastes. "If we

[1] LCC. 15. xxvi–xxvii.
[2] Ibid., xxvii.
[3] Kooiman, op. cit., p. 193.

do not know this central fact, it is impossible to understand a book."[1] Whilst realizing the significance of the minutiae in Scripture – since he believed each single word to be inspired – Luther sought in his later years to see the whole as well as the part.

When in 1535 he started on his study of Genesis he had a premonition that it would be his swan song as a commentator. "This will be my last work," he wrote, "with which, if God wills, I will end my life."[2] Already in a lecture on Psalm 90, he had announced his intention of devoting the remaining years which the Lord might still grant him to an exposition of the books of Moses.[3] When he had completed this course, he promised: "Later we shall if the Lord lengthens my life, interpret Genesis; thus, when our end comes, we shall be able to die joyfully, being engaged in the Word and work of God."[4] And when the first part of Genesis was published, he reiterated the conviction that this would be his final commentary.[5] Luther's last lecture on Genesis was on the 17th November 1545. "So Joseph died. . . and was put in a coffin." (Gen. 50: 26): that was the verse with which he closed. It seemed to be prophetic. "This is now the dear Genesis," he concluded. "God grant that after me others will do better. I can do no more. I am weak. Pray God for me that he may grant me a good and blessed last hour."[6] Luther finished as he began – as a Doctor of Sacred Scripture. But his best commentary was not written with pen and ink, nor printed in a book. It was his life, lived in obedience to God and to his Word. In his faithful, though not faultless, witness to the truth he had embraced, Luther was a living commentary, known and read by all.

[1] Ibid., p. 194. [2] Ibid., p. 197. [3] LW. 13. 75.
[4] Ibid., 141. [5] Kooiman, op. cit., p. 197. [6] LW. 8. 333.