

## LUTHER AND THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

FOR LUTHER, THE SUPREMACY OF THE BIBLICAL revelation arose from its supernatural origin, and this in turn was bound up with the fact of inspiration. Only by a unique work of the Holy Spirit could divine truth be accurately conveyed to men through the medium of writers and writing. All that Luther taught about the authority of the Bible and the nature of revelation found its climax and corollary in his doctrine of inspiration. Seeberg has stressed the connexion.<sup>1</sup> Luther's view of Scripture was all of a piece. We cannot isolate one part from another. Since it is derived from the Word itself, it displays the same coherency as is to be observed in the whole of revelation.

Although the inspiration of the Scriptures was a commonly held belief in Luther's time, on the basis of the Church's own teaching, in practice it tended to be modified so as to accommodate and safeguard the role of the Church as the interpreter. In his *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-15) Luther himself made concessions to this generally accepted adjustment. God did not put his Spirit into the letters of Scripture, he could affirm, but into the ecclesiastical office-holders to whom was entrusted the task of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> To them can be applied the injunction of Deuteronomy 32:7 - "Ask . . . your elders, and they will tell you." But this was an immature conception which Luther soon left behind, as he grew in understanding. It is his developed attitude to inspiration that we must now examine.

The supernatural origin of the Word was a fact which demanded a theory to explain it. "The Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth," Luther declared.<sup>3</sup> All other books are purely of human derivation. The Bible is an exception.<sup>4</sup> Although composed by men and set down in writing, it nevertheless stands out from all other literature as being from God. In Luther's eyes, only by means of inspiration could a book become the channel of revelation in this way. A miracle of the Spirit was required. Luther often saw a parallel between the written Word and the incarnate Word. Just as the fulness of the Godhead was expressed in the humanity of Jesus, so in Scripture the truth of God was disclosed in the words of men. It was by the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Birth that the

<sup>1</sup> Seeberg, *op. cit.*, Bd. III, p. 414.

<sup>3</sup> SL. 7. 2095.

<sup>2</sup> WA. 3. 579.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 24. 228.

incarnation was made possible. It was equally by the intervention of the Holy Spirit that the Scriptures were produced.

Luther employed a number of designations for the Bible, all of which were used interchangeably with the title "God's Word". It is true that he did not always equate the Word of God with Scripture: sometimes it meant the message as preached. But, as Rupert Davies admits, even in his mature thought Luther was still liable to speak and write as if he identified the text of the Bible with the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between God's Word written and God's Word preached, or between God's Word as the text of Scripture and God's Word as the basic message of Scripture, was not consistently made. For the most part Luther adhered to his original practice of using "God's Word" as an equivalent for the Bible. He referred regularly to "Sacred Scripture" or "Holy Writ", each of which he brackets with "God's Word".<sup>2</sup> He spoke of "Divine Scripture" or "God's Scripture", which again he associated with "God's Word".<sup>3</sup> He often called the Bible simply "God's Book".<sup>4</sup> It is the sanctuary in which God dwells.<sup>5</sup> It is man's meeting place with his Maker.

In the Scriptures God Himself addresses us. The articles of faith are therein "handed over and shown to us by the Divinity, without our discovery".<sup>6</sup> "When you read the words of Holy Scripture, you must realize that God is speaking in them."<sup>7</sup> To hear the Scriptures is nothing else than to hear God Himself.<sup>8</sup> It is God who confronts us and lays His command on us. "You are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this."<sup>9</sup> "Holy Scripture says" and "God says" are used alternately as signifying the same thing. Scripture is God's testimony to Himself.<sup>10</sup> Belief in God and belief in His Word are one. "When His Word is changed, He Himself is changed: for He Himself is in His Word."<sup>11</sup>

The Bible is God's Book. It is also Christ's Book. As we shall be noting in our final chapter, for Luther Christ is the centre of Scripture. It is all about Him. He is its heart and He alone is the key to understanding it. In the gospel the Master is present: it is Christ Himself speaking.<sup>12</sup> We are compelled to ask what kind of a book this is which stands in so unique a relationship to the Son of God and the coming Messiah.

<sup>1</sup> Rupert E. Davies, *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers: A Study in Luther, Zwingli and Calvin* (1946), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> LW. 26. 46; LW. 24. 293; LW. 27. 156; LW. 24. 54.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 27. 154, 386; LW. 36. 337. LW. 27. 155, 308; LW. 24. 37.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 3. 297; SL. 9. 1071. Cf. LW. 34. 227, "God's Scriptures"; SL. 1. 1055, "God's Epistle".

<sup>5</sup> LW. 14. 250.

<sup>6</sup> LW. 12. 53. The article under consideration here in Luther's exposition of Ps. 2:7 is the Virgin Birth.

<sup>7</sup> SL. 3. 21.

<sup>8</sup> SL. 3. 21.

<sup>9</sup> LW. 9. 22.

<sup>10</sup> WA. 3. 1. 4; cf. WA. 4. 318.

<sup>11</sup> LW. 24. 173; LW. 34. 227.

<sup>12</sup> WA. 4. 535.

Luther also alluded to the Bible as "the book of the Holy Spirit".<sup>1</sup> It was written through Him.<sup>2</sup> "The entire Scriptures are assigned to the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> "The Holy Scriptures have been spoken by the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> The words were "not born in our house, but are brought down from heaven by the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> It is indeed only this miraculous work of the Holy Spirit which accounts for the unique character of Scripture. A book which is so different from all others can only be explained in terms of inspiration. For Luther, inspiration was at once a truth revealed in Scripture itself, and the only reasonable hypothesis by which to account for the evidence presented by the phenomenon of God's Book.

Luther could refer to "the sayings of the Holy Spirit" or "the writings of the Holy Spirit".<sup>6</sup> "The Holy Spirit says" was a frequent expression with him.<sup>7</sup> He could interpret "Scripture" in Galatians 3:8 as "the Spirit in Scripture".<sup>8</sup> He could even talk about "the rhetoric of the Holy Spirit".<sup>9</sup> "The Holy Spirit speaks" was a recurring formula.<sup>10</sup> Within this context, Luther resorted to a multiplicity of variations. Within a few pages of his exposition of the Second Psalm, he runs almost through the whole gamut. In Scripture, the Holy Spirit teaches, consoles, mentions, omits, forewarns, explains, advises, reassures, admonishes, comforts, designates, considers, sees, calls, demands, adds and forbids.<sup>11</sup> These instances not only indicate Luther's firm convictions about the inspiration of Scripture, but also reflect his awareness of the Spirit's personality.

The promises of Scripture are "proposed by the Holy Spirit".<sup>12</sup> Scripture is "the Holy Spirit's proclamation".<sup>13</sup> It is "the vehicle of the Spirit".<sup>14</sup> Its contents are "written by the Spirit", or "recorded by the Spirit".<sup>15</sup> So close is the connexion between the actual words of the Bible and the instrumentality of the Spirit that it must be concluded that Luther believed not only in inspiration, but in verbal inspiration. It is noticeable that recent scholarship is recognizing afresh that this element in Luther's attitude to Scripture cannot be ignored. In an able study, Brian A. Gerrish of Chicago agrees that Luther never really questioned the traditional theory of inerrant Scripture, and speaks of his "strict view of verbal inspiration".<sup>16</sup>

Luther stated unambiguously that Scripture consists of "divine words without whose authority nothing must be asserted".<sup>17</sup> We must "honour the Holy Spirit by believing His words and accepting them as the divine

<sup>1</sup> SL. 9. 1775.<sup>2</sup> LW. 3. 342.<sup>3</sup> SL. 3. 1890.<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1895.<sup>5</sup> LW. 12. 124.<sup>6</sup> LW. 26. 169; LW. 8. 74.<sup>7</sup> LW. 12. 76, 278; LW. 14. 8.<sup>8</sup> LW. 27. 253.<sup>9</sup> LW. 3. 34.<sup>10</sup> LW. 12. 340; LW. 26. 266, 270; LW. 37. 310.<sup>11</sup> LW. 12. 10, 14, 18, 20, 23, 32, 36, 43, 68-69, 77, 89-92.<sup>12</sup> WA. 13. 100.<sup>13</sup> LW. 22. 286.<sup>14</sup> LW. 30, 321.<sup>15</sup> LW. 3. 316; LW. 12. 255; LW. 8. 74.<sup>16</sup> Brian A. Gerrish, "Biblical Authority and the Reformation", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. X (1957), p. 344.<sup>17</sup> LW. 32. 315.

truth".<sup>1</sup> There is no differentiation between the inspiration of the message and the inspiration of the terms in which that message is conveyed. Indeed the one depends on the other. We cannot be sure that we are in possession of God's revelation unless we can be satisfied that it has been brought to us in the very language He intended. If only some of it comes from Him and some of it is no more than what man has said, by what means can we distinguish between the two? Luther would not be content with anything less than plenary inspiration.

The Holy Spirit was concerned not merely with the inspiration of the writers or of their message. He descended to details and was responsible for the words and even the letters. "All the words of God are weighed, counted, and measured," Luther declared.<sup>2</sup> Every word of Scripture is precious since it comes from the mouth of God, is written down and preserved for us and will be proclaimed until the end of the age.<sup>3</sup> The prophets are those "into whose mouth the Holy Spirit has given the words".<sup>4</sup> "When you read the words of Holy Scripture, you must realize that God is speaking them."<sup>5</sup> We have already quoted that injunction of Luther in order to show that he regarded Scripture as a book in which God spoke. We repeat it so as to draw attention to the fact that it is in the actual words of Scripture that God speaks, in Luther's view. The Holy Spirit writes, "pen in hand, and presses the letters into the heart."<sup>6</sup> In all the Bible there is not a superfluous letter.<sup>7</sup>

In a moving passage in his commentary on Genesis, Luther wrote: "Concerning the letters of princes it is stated in a proverb that they should be read three times; but surely the letters of God – for this is what Gregory calls Scripture – should be read seven times three, yes, seventy times seven, or, to say even more, countless times. For they are divine wisdom, which cannot be grasped immediately at the first glance. If someone reads them superficially like familiar and easy material, he deceives himself."<sup>8</sup> Later in the same series of lectures, Luther repeated the analogy. "It is correct to say that the letters of princes should be read three times and that the letters of God should be read far more frequently. There is a difference between the thoughts and opinions of princes and those of private individuals. All the concerns of princes are grand, but those of private persons are small

<sup>1</sup> LW. 22. 10.<sup>2</sup> WA. 3. 64.<sup>3</sup> WA. 4. 535.<sup>4</sup> WA. 3. 172.<sup>5</sup> SL. 3. 21.<sup>6</sup> LW. 22. 473. Luther believed that the Holy Spirit was not only at work when the Scriptures were originally indited, but also whenever they were read or preached.<sup>7</sup> LW. 26. 227.<sup>8</sup> LW. 3. 114. Luther elsewhere quoted the proverb about the letters of princes, cf. LW. 3. 126; WATR. 3. 383. No. 3537. For Gregory the Great on "the letters of God" cf. *Epistolae* 5. 46: "The Emperor of heaven, the Lord of men and of angels, has sent you His epistles for your life's advantage – and yet you neglect to read them eagerly. Study them, I beg of you, and meditate daily on the words of your Creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God. . . ." Augustine similarly spoke of the Bible as "a letter from our Fatherland" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* Ps. 64).

and insignificant. Therefore if princes either write or say something, it must be carefully pondered. But with how much greater propriety we do this in those matters which divine wisdom prescribes and commands!"<sup>1</sup> There follows immediately an allusion to "God's own words" as recorded in Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Luther claimed that inspiration covered not only vocabulary, but construction as well. The letters of God are altogether in the language of God. "Not only the words but also the expressions used by the Holy Spirit and Scripture are divine."<sup>3</sup> Inspiration extends to "phraseology and diction".<sup>4</sup> As he dealt with the text of Scripture, Luther analysed the way in which the Spirit had done His distinctive work. For example, in expounding Psalm 51:10, Luther was at pains to point out how carefully each phrase was shaped as David prayed: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The ability to acquire a clean heart does not rest in man's nature. It comes by divine creation. Only God can give it. "This is why the Spirit wanted to use the term 'create' here," explained Luther, "for those are vain dreams that the Scholastics foolishly thought up about the cleansing of the heart."<sup>5</sup> Passing on to the second part of the clause, Luther dilated upon "the adjective which the Spirit adds here" – namely, "right". He showed that it meant "stable, solid, full, firm, certain, indubitable", and was thus a fitting description of the human spirit when steadied by the Spirit of God.<sup>6</sup> It is all the more remarkable that Luther should discern the Spirit's supervision in a passage like this, containing as it does a recorded prayer. It looks as if he saw a double inspiration: first in David as he prayed, and then in the transcription. Even the more extreme literalists today would hardly go so far as Luther. They would probably find it sufficient to be assured that David's prayer was faithfully preserved, without committing themselves to the further belief that it was verbally inspired when first uttered.

Without attempting to defend Luther's doctrine of inspiration to the last detail, it cannot be denied, surely, that in principle it expressed a profound and necessary conviction. It is significant that one of the younger contemporary Scandinavian Luther scholars, Per Lönning, has conceded this. "Even the doctrine of verbal inspiration may be said to contain a not unimportant element of truth. The different biblical books are something far more than what the authors understood and planned. The full Bible, which none of its authors ever knew they were contributing to, was planned and produced by the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup> This is so in the sense "that the totality of Scripture given to us is a message from God, to which the

<sup>1</sup> LW. 3. 126–7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>3</sup> WA. 40. iii. 254.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 22. 119.

<sup>5</sup> LW. 12. 379.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Per Lönning, *The Dilemma of Contemporary Theology, Prefigured in Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche* (1962), p. 139.

authors have contributed far beyond what they personally understood. Our time has to break the bounds of historical exegesis and march back to truly theological exegesis. We must proceed from the question, What does the author intend to say? – although this may be significant enough – to another question, What does God intend to say? And this question can only be answered when the single verse or chapter or book is considered within the fulness of the Scripture, that is, when interpreted *to* and *in* and *by* Christ the Word Himself.”<sup>1</sup>

It has already been made apparent that Luther’s doctrine of inspiration is inseparably linked with that of inerrancy. Because the Word of God was given by the Spirit of God it was inconceivable that it should be subject to human fallibility. To receive it as indeed from God was *ipso facto* to treat it as in every way reliable. The God of truth could not authenticate a book which contained even the slightest element of falsehood. Such was Luther’s argument. “The Scriptures have never erred,” he claimed categorically.<sup>2</sup> The Bible is the only book in the world in which inaccuracies do not occur.<sup>3</sup> It is not man’s word which could lie and be wrong.<sup>4</sup> It is God’s Word which must be true.<sup>5</sup> Even when we might think we have detected a loophole, Luther is quick to correct himself. “If Scripture is true here,” he says of Galatians 3:12; but he hastens to add: “as it must be.” “The Scriptures cannot lie,” he insisted.<sup>6</sup>

Such unequivocal assertions are to be found even when the text under review is problematical. In handling Genesis 11:11, Luther tackled the chronological technicalities involved in the birth of Arpachshad, Shem’s third son. Some exegetes supplied one answer, some another, Luther admitted.<sup>7</sup> He proceeded to venture his own explanation. But he did not think that any great harm would result if there were no information available about such things.<sup>8</sup> “Our faith is not endangered if we should lack knowledge about these matters. This much is sure: Scripture does not lie. Therefore answers that are given in support of the trustworthiness of Scripture serve a purpose, even though they may not be altogether reliable.”<sup>9</sup> That was Luther’s unshakeable position. He never doubted the trustworthiness of the Bible. Just because he himself could not find a fool-proof resolution of some of its difficulties, he was not tempted to imagine that one did not exist and that therefore Scripture itself was discredited. He preferred to retain his faith in the inerrancy of Scripture, and to await further light on some of its apparent discrepancies. He clung to the premise that “the Word of God is perfect: it is precious and pure: it is truth itself. There is no falsehood in it.”<sup>10</sup> God’s Word “is such perfect

<sup>1</sup> Lönning, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>2</sup> LW. 32. 11.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 14. 18; LW. 23. 390.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> SL. 14. 491.

<sup>6</sup> LW. 27. 258.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 23. 95.

<sup>7</sup> LW. 2. 232.

<sup>10</sup> LW. 23. 236.

truth and righteousness that it needs no patching or repair; in its course it makes a perfectly straight line, without any bends in any direction".<sup>1</sup>

"One letter, even a single tittle of Scripture means more to us than heaven and earth," Luther announced. "Therefore we cannot permit even the most minute change."<sup>2</sup> There is no deception in the Scriptures – not even in one word. "Consequently, we must remain content with them and cling to them as the perfectly clear, certain, sure words of God, which can never deceive us or allow us to err."<sup>3</sup> Luther's complaint against the Enthusiasts was that they did not really believe that the Scriptures enshrined the very words of God Himself. With reference to the dominical institution of the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26:26, Luther said of the fanatics: "If they believed that these were God's words, they would not call them 'poor, miserable words', but would prize a single tittle and letter more highly than the whole world, and would fear and tremble before them as before God himself. For he who despises a single word of God certainly prizes none at all."<sup>4</sup>

Luther wrote similarly in a later treatise on the Holy Sacrament in 1544. "Is it not certain that he who does not or will not believe one article correctly (after he has been taught and admonished) does not believe any sincerely and with the right faith? And whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so wilfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed. The Holy Spirit does not suffer Himself to be separated and divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely."<sup>5</sup>

Luther's recognition of biblical inerrancy was confined to the original autographs, and was not tied to the transmitted text. This gave him the freedom to query the accuracy of the existing readings and on occasion to offer emendations of his own. Reu listed a number of relevant instances of Luther's uninhibited treatment of the text in translation.<sup>6</sup> At times he would alter the conventional verse divisions, which were by no means sacrosanct, and in any case were a comparatively recent innovation.<sup>7</sup> He did not accept all the superscriptions to the Psalms as authentic.<sup>8</sup> He deviated from the traditional pointing of the Hebrew text in numerous passages, and even urged the Christian Hebrew scholars to produce a new

<sup>1</sup> LW. 13. 268.

<sup>2</sup> WA. 40. ii. 52; cf. LW. 27. 41, for a variant translation.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 47. 308.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 37. 308.

<sup>5</sup> WA. 54. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, pp. 103–8. The examples are derived from the protocols of the commission for the revision of Luther's Bible translation published in WADB. 3. 167–577.

<sup>7</sup> WADB. 3. 121. 127. Ps. 25:6, 7; 102:25.

<sup>8</sup> WADB. 3. 117. Ps. 92 was regarded as correct, but the assumption is that others were not so.

Hebrew Bible which would no longer perpetuate the distortions of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Luther also took liberties with the *textus receptus* and in places reconstructed it, usually in conformity with the Septuagint and the Vulgate.<sup>1</sup> He was not afraid to indicate where the traditional text was simply an error in copying.<sup>2</sup>

But it must be emphasized that Luther allowed himself this freedom only within the limits already prescribed – namely, that infallibility attaches solely to the original autographs of Scripture. He had no thought of doubting the reliability of the underlying text. His aim was to reach it – if necessary by conjecture, if no clear evidence was forthcoming. It was within the same sanctions that Luther was able to sit loose to matters of what we now call higher criticism, where the testimony of Scripture itself was not impugned thereby. He was reported by Mathesius as saying that in his opinion “Genesis was not by Moses, for there were books before his time and books are cited – for example, the Book of the Wars of the Lord and the Book of Jasher”.<sup>3</sup> “I believe that Adam wrote for several generations,” he added, “and after him Noah and the rest, to describe what happened to them. For the Jews were writers in very ancient times.”<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, Moses took this material and organized it. He may have borrowed some items from the tradition and practice of the fathers and even from the records and customs of neighbouring nations, yet nevertheless the law is rightly named after him and, whether he actually wrote it all or not, the Pentateuch belongs to him.<sup>5</sup> It was at God’s command that Moses acted, and the Holy Spirit arranged the narrative and caused it to be recorded for our instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning some of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, Luther expressed views which strikingly anticipate the discoveries of more recent research. Hosea is a case in point. Luther suggested that this prophecy “was not fully and entirely written, but that pieces and sayings were taken out of his preaching and brought together into a book”.<sup>7</sup> The utterances of Isaiah were collected and committed to writing by others and it is uncertain as to whether Isaiah himself or his amanuenses arranged his material.<sup>8</sup> The Psalter was compiled by a number of contributors.<sup>9</sup>

In dealing with the New Testament, Luther not only showed himself aware of problems relating to authorship, as in the case of Hebrews which

<sup>1</sup> WA. 53. 646. Is. 9:6.

<sup>2</sup> WADB. 3. 459, 502, 514. 2 Chron. 18:29; Job 33:17; 40:21.

<sup>3</sup> WADB. 3. 377, 402, 415, 419. 1 Sam. 13:1; 2 Sam. 14:26; 23:8; 1 Kgs. 5:19; WA. 40. iii. 664; Ps. 54:5. Cf. Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, pp. 162–5.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 54. 373. No. 4964.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> LW. 3. 250; WATR. 3. 23. No. 2844a.

<sup>6</sup> WATR. 1. 21. No. 291; 174. No. 402; LW. 5. 67, 290; LW. 8. 6–7.

<sup>7</sup> LW. 35. 317.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 277. For similar theories about Jeremiah, *vide* pp. 280–1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 253–4. Luther did not deny that the Holy Spirit was the ultimate compiler.



he regarded as non-Pauline, but also of the difficulties involved in harmonizing the Gospel narratives.<sup>1</sup> In the *Lenten Postil* of 1525 he discussed the temptations of Christ and came to the conclusion that their order cannot be determined with absolute assurance since the evangelists do not appear to agree.<sup>2</sup> What Matthew places in the middle, Luke places at the end, and what Luke places in the middle, Matthew places at the end. He wondered whether these were not three successive temptations, but three recurring temptations which came now in one order and now in another. Again, in expounding the opening chapters of John's Gospel, Luther frankly faced the fact that the cleansing of the temple was there placed at the outset of our Lord's ministry, whereas in Matthew it is said to have occurred at the end. He advanced one or two hypotheses, but he did not pretend that they were altogether convincing.<sup>3</sup> "These are problems and will remain problems. I shall not venture to settle them. Nor are they essential. It is only that there are so many sharp and shrewd people who are fond of bringing up all sorts of subtle questions and demanding definite and precise answers. But if we understand Scripture properly and have the genuine articles of our faith – that Jesus Christ, God's Son, suffered and died for us – then our inability to answer all such questions will be of little consequence. . . . If one account in Holy Writ is at variance with another and it is impossible to solve the difficulty, just dismiss it from your mind."<sup>4</sup> Luther's attitude might well be dismissed as obscurantist today, but in his own age he would hardly be regarded as such. Without for one moment querying the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, Luther kept an open mind as to how the dilemmas might be resolved. But his inability to light on an immediate explanation did not lead him in the direction of doubt. Instead, he clung the more tenaciously to the vast proportion of Scripture which he could quite clearly understand, and trusted that one day the few rough places would be made plain.

In closing this discussion of Luther's view of inspiration, it needs to be stated that he was not committed to any stereotyped theory of dictation which overlooked the co-operation of the human authors of Scripture. "They are not, in his opinion, mechanical instruments and dead machines, mere amanuenses who set down on paper only what was dictated to them by the Spirit of God," affirmed Reu. "He regarded them rather as independent instruments of the Spirit who spoke *their* faith, *their* heart, *their* thoughts; who put their entire will and feeling into the words to such an extent that from what Luther reads in each case he draws conclusions concerning the character and temperament of the authors."<sup>5</sup> Joel, for example, is "a kindly and gentle man" who "does not denounce

<sup>1</sup> For Hebrews, *vide*, p. 394.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 22. 218.

<sup>5</sup> Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, p. 109. He cited the examples which follow.

<sup>2</sup> WA. 17. ii. 196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-19.

and rebuke as do the other prophets, but pleads and laments".<sup>1</sup> Amos, on the contrary, is violent, "and denounces the people of Israel throughout almost the entire book until the end of the last chapter. . . . No prophet, I think, has so little in the way of promises and so much in the way of denunciations and threats. He can well be called Amos, that is, 'a burden', one who is hard to get along with and irritating."<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah was a "sad and troubled prophet who lived in miserably evil days" and had "a peculiarly difficult ministry".<sup>3</sup> He shrank from the harshness of the message God gave him to deliver, and for this reason Luther likened him to Melanchthon. Paul was sometimes given to excess of fervour and near incoherence, which led him on occasion to infringe the rules of grammar.<sup>4</sup>

Reu has shown how careful Luther was to eschew the terminology of dictation.<sup>5</sup> In medieval writers and nouns *calamus* and *secretarius* and the verb *dictare* are frequently found in connexion with the inspiration of Scripture. Only once, it appears, did Luther refer to a biblical writer as the pen of the Spirit, and this was in one of his earliest writings.<sup>6</sup> It was left to some of Luther's contemporaries and the later dogmaticians to formulate a more rigidly mechanical theory of inspiration.<sup>7</sup> He himself refused to be tied down by any such doctrinaire account of the Spirit's operation. He knew that He is the Spirit of liberty, and that He works in as well as through man to achieve His purpose. Luther was content to recognize the results of the Spirit's inspiration without attempting to provide an analysis of the methods involved. Both in what he affirmed and in what he refrained from affirming, his only aim was to reflect the attitude of Scripture itself.

<sup>1</sup> LW. 35. 318.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 26. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1515), WA. 3. 256.

<sup>7</sup> The theory of the dogmaticians was not in all cases so hidebound as has sometimes been supposed, cf. Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture. A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (1955), pp. 66-73.