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Actions and Words: Luther and James through an Alternative Hermeneutical Lens

Daniel Maoz¹

Martin Luther's Posting of the ninety-five Theses

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 – February 18, 1546) publicly challenged current policies of the Catholic Church – of which he was an Augustinian monk (Erfurt, 1505) – by nailing to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church the thereafter famous ninety-five theses which invited public discussion principally about disputed indulgence misuse.

Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place.²

500 years later, scholars are increasingly engaged in critical analysis of this and all other writings of the founder of the Christian Protestant church movement, a movement that has grown from a circle of scholars and clerics in Luther's day to over 9,000 Protestant denominations³ comprised of a staggering 801 million members.⁴ Lutherans make up 9.7 percent of that figure or seventy-two million members⁵ – an equally staggering number when compared with its humble beginnings in the sixteenth century.

Luther was well positioned to leave such permanent global impact on history because of his articulate communication talents, his resolute and efficacious challenges to the Roman Catholic Church, and especially because of the synchronous influence of Gutenberg's press which Luther was situated to exploit extensively.⁶

Luther earned a Doctor of Theology (Wittenberg, 1512) and assumed the position of Theology Professor in the same year, whereby he lectured on the Psalms (August 1513-Summer 1516), Romans (Summer 1515-Summer 1516), Galatians (1516-1517), and Hebrews (April 1517-March 1518) before or during the year that he posted the theses.⁷ He

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²<http://www.uncommon-travel-germany.com/martin-luther-95-theses.html>, accessed 15 February, 2017.

³<http://www.ncregister.com/blog/scottericalt/we-need-to-stop-saying-that-there-are-33000-protestant-denominations>, accessed 15 February 2017.

⁴<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>, accessed 15 February, 2017. These figures reflect PEW Foundation's December 2011 published figures.

⁵<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/member-churches>, accessed 15 February 2017.

⁶By mid-fifteenth century, Gutenberg's press was fully operational as evidenced by the publication of the first "Gutenberg Bible" in 1455.

⁷The timing of Gutenberg's press coordinated nicely with Luther's life: his lectures were subsequently printed and thereby preserved.

also preached Sunday sermons as priest for Castle Church (Wittenberg, 1514-1517) and engaged in public theological debates during this formative period (e.g. Disputation against Scholastic Theology, September, 1517).

Of particular interest to this study are several aspects of Luther's involvement with the book of James. First, Luther is said to have engaged in textual critical decision-making regarding the twenty-seven traditional books of the New Testament, canonically challenging four of these books, including the Book of James. Second, Luther never wrote a commentary on James, suggesting that he found other New Testament texts worthy of explanation – in some cases repeatedly so (e.g. Psalms, Romans) – as set against his views of James.⁸ Third, scholars have culled Luther's various writings to extract his negative comments about the Book of James in order to substantiate the claim that he dismissed the book outright. Fourth, and most importantly, this study will contextualize and analyse Luther's use of James set against the above categories in order to challenge traditional consensus on Luther's attitude toward the Book of James.

What appears in this study is a reframing and critical advancement of a thesis I wrote under my birth name while a graduate student in the United States thirty-five years ago.⁹ While researching my thesis, I was in correspondence with Roland Bainton, author of the classic work, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Having shared my thesis proposal and findings in correspondence with Professor Bainton, I eagerly awaited his replies. I remember the exhilaration I felt when his first letter began with the words: "Power to you!" Thereafter, Bainton explained that his biography sought to include the most currently reliable research on Luther and that, had my work preceded his, he would have integrated my findings into his biography of Martin Luther.¹⁰

I have divided the structure of the article into Luther's use of James in his published writings (lectures, commentaries, letters, sermons, treatises); former critical consensus regarding Luther's views on James; and critical contextualization of these scholarly interpretations.

Words and Action

We are familiar with the expression, 'Action speaks louder than words,' an adage often employed to emphasize that words alone are hollow and ineffectual when not accompanied by action. However, the expression by itself may wittingly or unwittingly deemphasize and in some cases delegitimize the value of the very words it seeks to transform into action. In the case of commonly circulated dismissive statements about the book of James among Lutheran circles, one could presumably expect the reformer to have ignored the contents of James completely or at least to have employed them minimally throughout his career, be it in letters, sermons, treatises, lectures, or commentaries. However, Luther not only actively engaged with the writings of James throughout the entire span of his career,

⁸We will see, however, that Luther did write a commentary on Hebrews which also counted among the four Antilegomena that critics say Luther dismissed outright. The strength of their dismissal of James based on lack of commentary is diminished when the commentary on Hebrews is factored in.

⁹"Martin Luther's Exegetical Use of the Epistle of St. James: Towards an Understanding of Luther's Viewpoint of the 'Epistle of Straw'" (MA diss., Trinity Graduate School, 1982).

¹⁰In personal correspondence with me at that time, Bainton explained to me that historians repeat their predecessors' findings until new research based on new data, refined methodology, and different presuppositional bases further advance the discussion.

in fulsome manner he also utilized its teachings to interpret, support, clarify, and further develop scriptural teachings from the entire New Testament as well as from the Hebrew Scriptures. And yet his words about James the person as well as concerning interpreted Catholic theologies derived from select portions of the contents of James present a challenging and dichotomous portrait of James to the contemporary reader. To simply consider that Luther's actions speak louder than his words would wholesale subvert current thinking that Luther rejected James from the canon, representing a complete discrediting of the longstanding tradition that he thought poorly of the book, wanted to dismiss it from the canon of Scripture, and marginalized the value of its content throughout his life. It is not my intention here to reverse the historical and theological stance of this matter. However, in light of the preponderance of evidence relating to Luther's affirmative use of James – evidence that flatly contradicts contemporary evaluation of Luther's view of James – I herein offer a reconciling path in an attempt, not to harmonize what could very well be irrevocable inconsistency within the mind of the reformer but rather to deal honestly with all evidences – words and action – in order to better represent what more likely approaches what Luther thought about James. Accordingly, I will modify the above adage to state: 'Action puts meaning into words.' In combination with historical context, Luther's actions – how he used James – should then, in some informative manner – clarify many of Luther's statements about James.

By beginning with Luther's statements about James, Luther scholarship has developed a hermeneutical lens through which treatment of his usage of the content of James has become negatively (mis-)shaped. Prior to this study, to my knowledge no-one has engaged in the comprehensive task of poring through the scores of volumes of Luther's works to analyse what is Luther's usage of James, thereby creating a *crux interpretum*, an interpretive pivot by which to understand his words and after which to return to his statements about James and consider them afresh within their historical context.

Luther's Use of James

Commentaries

A former comprehensive study¹¹ of Luther's lectures commenting on specific texts of the Christian Bible, ranging from 1513 to 1536, demonstrated that Luther freely engaged in citing James for clarification of Christian teachings, support and substantiation of biblical principles, and on occasion introduction to ideas not addressed elsewhere in the Christian Scriptures. The study revealed that while Luther never gave a lecture series on James, he interacted with up to half of its 108 verses well over one hundred times in his commentaries alone throughout the span of his career as witnessed in the fifty-five volume American Edition of *Luther's Works*.¹²

¹¹*Luther's Works*, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, represents a generous albeit in no means complete selection of translation drawn from the enormous corpus of Luther's *Werke*. By comprehensive study, I mean to indicate that the statistics are based on every citation of James in the American Edition of *Luther's Works* (55 Volumes) supplemented by partial collections of Luther's works in translation (e.g. James Atkinson's *Early Theological Works*).

¹²Fifty-one specific verses of the 108 verses of James were employed multiple times by Luther in his commentaries and scores more references in Luther's non-lectures addressed more than fifty-eight percent of James' content. It should be noted here that most of Luther's published commentaries were initially

From August 1513 through the summer of 1516 Luther gave a series of lectures on the Psalms. The publication of these lectures became his early commentary on Psalms. Sixteen separate references to James in these lectures attest to Luther's tendency to employ James to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures as well as to support and clarify New Testament readings of the same. Concerning Psalm 104:13, "You water the hills from the upper rooms," Luther adds:

This phenomenon of nature denotes that our teaching and wisdom is from above, chaste, etc. (Jas 2:17), not carnal from below.¹³

Elsewhere, when considering good and evil addressed in Psalm 7:3, Luther joins James with a Gospel text to reinforce the nature of Christianity regarding even-handed non-respect of persons:

For this is the Christian religion, to be just to all without a selection according to the person and physical partiality. Just as the fig tree produces figs, whether it stands among thorns or among roses, so it is with the vine (Jas 3:12). "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit" (Matt. 7:18). But those who are friends only to their friends are confused. Concerning them the Lord says (Matt. 7:16): "Are figs gathered from thistles?" Thus they do not gather figs from thorn trees, because they are thorny to enemies, but gentle to friends. Hence they are not whole and rounded and the same for all.¹⁴

Following lectures on Psalms, Luther taught the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans from 1515 to 1516. Early in these lectures, Luther identified James with other New Testament sources as the pertinent statements of Scripture which assert that we are all in our sins.¹⁵

Luther then cited Genesis, Exodus, 1 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, 2 Chronicles, Romans, Philippians, James, 1 John, and Revelation. In another passage, where the Apostle Paul teaches, "The one who believes in him will not be put to shame" (Rom. 9:3), in contrast to many who were receiving Paul's teaching Luther points out that

Likewise some are swift and eager to judge others, to teach others, to be heard by others, but slow to be judged, to be taught, or to hear. Not so the man who believes in Christ, but he is, as the blessed James says (Jas. 1:19): "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak."¹⁶

Two years following his lectures in Romans, Luther addressed Hebrews. Interpreting Hebrews 6:1 "going on to maturity," Luther links a statement from James with the very words of Jesus:

presented as lectures. Thus, for example, his lectures on Romans later appeared in print as his commentary on Romans.

¹³Luther, *Works*, 11:332.

¹⁴*Ibid.* 10:83.

¹⁵*Ibid.* 25:276.

¹⁶*Ibid.* 25: 402.

But what that life is St. James explains when he says in ch. 1:4: “Patience has a perfect work.” Therefore Christ also says that this good ground will bear fruit in patience (cf. Luke 8:15).¹⁷

Further to the 1517-1518 lectures, in speaking to deliberate sinning and no longer having a sacrifice, a matter contemplated in Hebrews 10:26, Luther adds:

One can simply say that the words are to be understood as meaning what is stated in the last chapter of James (5:14ff.), namely, in the way that the apostle says that love “never ends, bears all things, etc.” (1 Cor. 13:8).¹⁸

Next, Luther lectured on Galatians, tellingly attending to the question of faith alone justifying (Gal. 5:19-21) by validating the point with reference to 2 Corinthians 3:5 and James 1:17.

The above examples of Luther’s commentary works represent fairly and proportionately how Luther engaged in James’ teachings in manner similar to how he addressed other Christian Scriptures.

Correspondence

The Weimar Edition of Luther’s *Werke* preserves approximately 2,580 extant letters in eleven volumes, as Luther’s own testimony concurs.¹⁹ On October 26, 1516, one day prior to beginning a series of lectures on Galatians, Luther corresponded with then prior of the Augustinians at Erfurt, John Lang:

Greetings. I nearly need two copyists or secretaries. All day long I do almost nothing else than write letters; therefore I am sometimes not aware of whether or not I constantly repeat myself, but you will see. I am a preacher at the monastery, I am a reader during mealtimes, I am asked daily to preach in the city church, I have to supervise the study (of novices and friars), I am vicar (and that means I am eleven times prior), I am caretaker of the fish (pond) at Leitzkau, I represent the people of Herzberg at the court in Torqau, I lecture on Paul, and I am assembling (material for) a commentary on the Psalms. As I have already mentioned, the greater part of my time is filled with the job of letter writing.²⁰

Private and personal communication between colleagues can reveal what motivates the thoughts and actions of those who are involved. The following sample from Luther’s correspondence shows that Luther acknowledged James to have authority over the church. Dated from Wittenberg, July 21, 1525, Luther corresponded with Albert, Archbishop and Elector of Mayence in response to the Peasant’s Revolt in which multitudes of citizens were crushed. In deference to Christian moral behavior Luther, appealed to Archbishop Albert to “act as a Christian,” that is, do as James taught.

¹⁷Ibid. 29: 181.

¹⁸Ibid. 29: 228.

¹⁹Maoz, “Luther’s James,” 73.

²⁰Luther, *Works*, 48: 27-28.

It is not good for a lord to raise displeasure, ill-will and hostility among his subjects, and it is likewise foolish to do so. It is right to show sternness when the commonality are seditious and stubborn, but now that they are broken down they are a different people, worthy that mercy be shown them in judgment. Putting too much in a bag bursts it. Moderation is good in all things, and, as St. James says, mercy rejoices against judgment. I hope your grace will act as a Christian in this matter. God bless you. Amen.²¹

Luther insisted on an immediate favourable response from Albert. By calling on a passage from James to emphasize the Christian obligation of mercy in such a socially dynamic and volatile situation, Luther not only indicated his dependence on the supremacy of Scripture to appeal to Albert's Christian sensibilities, at the same time he acknowledged a high view of Christian authority invested in the book of James.

Sermons

As we learned earlier, Luther's week was full of preparation for service as well as fulfilment of obligation. Throughout his monastic life he prepared and delivered sermons that characteristically were centrally based on Scripture. That the book of James played such a pivotal role in Luther's thought and theology, the very wording of his sermons attests. Examples are too many to include in a study of this nature; however, the following selected extracts offer a fair sampling of the mind of Luther toward James as he conveyed to his congregants the Word of God and the mind of God as Luther understood it. In an early sermon on the Gospel account of Jesus stilling the sea,²² Luther drew from James to reinforce a metaphor of the world as a raging storm of darkness and wickedness and the church as the ship that provided shelter from the storm:²³

to repose in oneself and forget God is the very cesspool of all evil; on the other hand, to seek after God is the sum of all good. As St. James says in his first chapter, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" (Jas. 1:2).²⁴

Continuing his sermon with a stern warning to those who positioned themselves outside the ship of faith, Luther charged those who oppressed the poor and afflicted the needy to repent.

"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (Jas. 5:1). And Isa. 47 (verses 8-9) says, "Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children': these two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood, etc." And again he says, "Ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you know nothing" (Isa. 47:11).²⁵

²¹ Smith, *Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968 reprint), 269-70.

²² Matthew 8.23-27; dated February 1, 1517, eight months prior to the posting of ninety-five theses on the door of Castle Church.

²³ Luther supported use of this metaphor with Ephesians 6:12: "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

²⁴ Luther, *Works*, 51: 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

Here we gain representatively a sense of the frequency of Scripture references delivered in Luther's sermons. This particular sermon is characteristic of the extant corpus of sermons in which nearly every sentence contains a biblical reference, validating a claim by Luther framed in his oft-repeated response to a demand for him to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521 that echo the words of the Apostle Paul – "My conscience is captive to the Word of God."²⁶

Treatises

In thesis twenty-eight of his "Disputation against Scholastic Theology," Luther established that God's grace precedes any and all human thought and action: God's prevenient grace prepares the human heart even before any appeal to come to, return to, seek after, or otherwise find God. For Luther, any deviation from divine preeminence bordered on Pelagian heresy.

If it is said of the Scripture passages, "Return to me, ... and I will return to you" (Zech. 1:3), "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (Jas. 4:8), "Seek and you will find me" (Matt. 7:7), "You will seek me and find me" (Jer. 29:13), and the like, that one is by nature, the other by grace, this is no different from asserting what the Pelagians have said.²⁷

In defense of the doctrine of sovereign grace toward all humanity, Luther cited what he termed "Scripture passages" that included Hebrew prophetic writings from Jeremiah and Zechariah, Matthew's Gospel, and James. Once again, Luther did not prevaricate when identifying James as Scripture alongside other Christian Scriptures in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Following his Heidelberg theses²⁸ which contained twenty-nine theological as well as twelve philosophical theses, replete with references to James, Luther offered published explanations of the ninety-five theses in August 1518²⁹ after the requested disputation of the 95 theses failed to take place.

²⁶ Smith, *Luther's Life and Letters*. See also 2 Cor. 10.4-5: "for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ." Scholars debate whether Luther actually voiced these words, but for our purposes the sentiment affirms the written and recorded evidence of Luther's dependence on Scripture to corroborate his own words.

²⁷Luther, *Works*, 31: 11.

²⁸The theses were prepared beforehand by Luther and defended on the stated date by Leonhard Beier with Luther presiding. For example, in demonstrating from Genesis 8.21 that the human will is in bondage to sin, with the corollary that the unrighteous person sins much more by doing good, "since there is no righteous person on earth who in doing good does not sin," Luther proved this corollary by citing the Scriptural authority of Isaiah 64:6, Psalms 21 and 32:2, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 7.22-23, and James 3:2 ("For we all make many mistakes"). Ibid., 58-59.

²⁹Defending himself against the charge of misrepresenting ecclesiastical and biblical authority, Luther set out to explain the ninety-five theses late in 1517, with a manuscript publisher-ready by February 1518. Bishop Schulz, his superior, banned their publication which led to Luther delaying their public appearance until August.

With characteristic backing of Scriptural support for his reasoning, Luther included James liberally in the explanations. For example, in thesis five where the matter of the chastening of the Lord was addressed, Luther opposed papal remission of penalties:

Yet I will admit that through prayers of the church some such punishments could be lifted from the weak, namely, sickness, cares, plagues, and fevers; for St. James taught the elders of the church to bring in and anoint the sick one in order that the Lord might relieve him through the prayer of faith (Jas. 5:14-16). But why do I delay, as if there should be any doubt in the mind of a Christian that the rod of God can be removed, not by the power of the keys, but by tears and prayers ...³⁰

Luther demonstrated that not only was the prayer of faith when combined with a contrite heart the true basis for healing – not a proof-text for extreme unction as the church would have it – it also took precedence over any consideration of papal authority to bypass contrition and personal repentance as a sole means of healing the sick.

Elsewhere, in thesis 15, Luther supported Augustinian theology that “the places for refuge for souls are hidden and so obscure that we know nothing about them,”³¹ neither refuting nor defending the church’s teaching of purgatory. Luther did concede, however, that souls have the capacity to feel dread, citing Scriptural validation from Deuteronomy (28:65), Psalms (1:4; 2:5; 13:5; 14:5; 112:7), Proverbs (1:33; 28:1), Song of Solomon (8:6), Isaiah (28:16), and James (2:19).³²

Table Talk

During the waning years of Luther’s life, one contemporary describes the often crowded meal table at the Luther household as boisterous, even chaotic.

A miscellaneous and promiscuous crowd inhabits Dr. Luther’s home and on this account there is great and constant disturbance.³³

Some of the most damning statements undermining a high view of James are ascribed to Luther in the unsubstantiated and unauthorized dialogues collected under the heading of “Table Talk.” While these reports are interesting and, needless to say, entertaining, their historical value is at best suspicious. The most unfavourable accounts relating to James will be addressed below.

³⁰Ibid., 79.

³¹Ibid., 125.

³²In addressing thesis fifty-eight, Luther opposed distribution of papal merit as reward for pilgrimage to Rome and other holy sites, including papal favour for those who viewed sacred relics possessed by the Roman Catholic Church, instead advancing true reward and merit promised by God to those who “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials” (Jas. 1.2). For Luther, true spiritual treasure come exclusively from “the crucified and hidden God” through “punishments, crosses, and death” endured by the faithful. *Ibid.*, 225-26.

³³Luther, *Works*, 54: ix.

Critical Consensus³⁴

In order to appreciate the overwhelming scholarly consensus on Luther's rejection of James from the canon and dismissal of authoritative value of its contents, I begin by listing the stated evidences provided by his interpreters. Later in this study I will revisit them, considering each statement's context. In not adding any comment here on these critical citations I hope to reconstruct the negative impact that scholarship has had on this topic. My only imprint on Luther's citations in this section is to arrange them chronologically in accordance with Luther's life events. Only after seeing the decontextualized statements by Luther on James and hearing scholarship's rationale for drawing the conclusion will I address the contexts of the reformer's quotes and seek to confirm my thesis that James was held in high regard by Luther.

Luther's Statements

The more prominent statements about James that Luther pronounced throughout his career, which scholars have repeatedly transmitted to establish and support a negative view of James, are listed here without context – just as they have usually been presented in decontextualized manner throughout history. I do so to emphasize the collective negative sense that can and has been gained when the effects of these statements are received cumulatively. Below, I will revisit each statement and introduce its context which tends to diminish or even eliminate a general sense of dismissal.

1. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (October 1520):

Either the apostle (James) lies in making this promise (prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up) or else this unction is no sacrament. For the sacramental promise is certain; but this promise fails in most cases. ... If this is not madness, I ask you what is?³⁵

If ever folly has been uttered, it has been uttered especially on this subject: I will say nothing of the fact that many assert with much probability that this epistle is not by James the apostle, and that it is not worthy of an apostolic spirit; although, whoever was its author, it has come to be regarded as authoritative. But even if the apostle James did write it, I still would say that no apostle has the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament, that is, to give a divine promise with a sign attached. For this belongs to Christ alone. Thus Paul says that he received from the Lord (1 Cor. 11:23) the sacrament of the Eucharist, and that he was not sent to baptize but to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17). And nowhere do we read in the gospel of the sacrament of extreme unction. But let us pass over this point. Let us examine the words of the apostle, or whoever was the author of the epistle, and we shall see at once how little heed these multipliers of sacraments have given to them.³⁶

³⁴A generation of scholars has passed since I completed my initial investigation of Luther's use of James. The current generation of scholarship bases its findings largely on conclusions established by these predecessors. My hope is that the next generation of scholars will consider the following challenge to consensus before determining their own set of judgments regarding Luther and James.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 36: 120.

³⁶*Luther's Works*, 36: 118.

2. Preface to James in Luther's December 1522 New Testament:

Therefore, St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others.³⁷

3. "That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics" (1527):

So St. James asserts, "Whoever offends in one point is guilty in all respects." He possibly heard the apostles say that all the words of God must be believed or none, although he applies their interpretation to the works of the law.³⁸

4. Lectures on Genesis (1536-1544):

Abraham was righteous by faith before God acknowledged him as such. Therefore James concludes falsely that now at last he was justified after that obedience; for faith and righteousness are known by works as by their fruits. But it does not follow, as James raves: "Hence the fruits justify," just as it does not follow: "I know a tree by its fruit; therefore the tree becomes good as a result of its fruit." Therefore let our opponents be done away with their James, whom they throw up to us so often. They babble much but understand nothing about the righteousness of works.³⁹

5. Licentiate Exam (July 7, 1542):

The epistle of James gives us much trouble for the papists embrace it alone and leave out all the rest. ... Accordingly, if they will not admit my interpretations, then I shall make rubble also of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did.⁴⁰

6. Table Talk (1542):

We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning (Jas. 1:1, 2:1). I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, "Wait a moment! I'll oppose them and urge works alone." This he did. He wrote not a word about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, although this is what all the apostles preached about. Besides, there's no order or method in the epistle. Now he discusses clothing and then he writes about wrath and is constantly shifting from one to the other. He presents a comparison: "As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (Jas. 2:26). O Mary, mother of God! What a terrible comparison that is! James compares faith with the body when he should rather have compared faith with the soul!⁴¹

³⁷*Luther's Works*, 35: 362.

³⁸*Luther's Works*, 37: 26.

³⁹*Luther's Works*, 4: 133-34.

⁴⁰*Luther's Works*, 34: 317.

⁴¹*Luther's Works*, 54: 424-25ss.

Scholarship's Interpretive Voices

The following notable scholars of Luther whose works lay the foundation for many areas of current Luther scholarship share a common view regarding the Book of James. Church historian Philip Schaff estimated that Luther

disliked, most of all, the Epistle of James because he could not harmonize it with Paul's teaching on justification by faith *without* works, and he called it an epistle of straw compared with the genuine apostolic writings.⁴²

Roland Bainton himself vacillated on Luther's view of James:

Once Luther remarked that he would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul. Yet he did not venture to reject James from the canon of Scripture, and on occasion earned his own beret by effecting a reconciliation. "Faith," he wrote, "is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith." This was simply to put a Pauline construction upon James. The conclusion was a hierarchy of values within the New Testament. First Luther would place the Gospel of John, then the Pauline epistles and First Peter, after them the three other Gospels, and in a subordinate place Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.⁴³

Elsewhere, Bainton further problematizes his sense of Luther's view of James by contrasting Luther's reason for marginalization of James with that of that of Aleander.

Aleander unquestionably made a very good case against Luther ... and set out again to prove Luther was "a heretic who brought up John Huss from hell and endorsed not some but all of his articles. In consequence he must also endorse Wycliffe's denial of the real presence (which he did not), and Wycliffe's claim that no Christian can bind another by law. This point Luther claimed to have asserted in his "Freedom of the Christian Man" (which he did not). He rejects monastic vows. He rejects ceremonies. He appeals to councils and rejects the authority of councils. Like all heretics he appeals to Scripture and yet rejects Scripture when it does not support him. He would throw out the Epistle of James because it contains the proof text for extreme unction (which certainly was not Luther's reason). He is a heretic, and an obstinate heretic."⁴⁴

Distinguished Luther scholar Philip Saville Watson cautiously observed that

The epistle of James may be an "epistle of straw;" but even straw is not an entirely valueless commodity.⁴⁵

Preserved Smith, American historian of the Protestant Reformation, began his academic career by writing a dissertation on Luther's "Table Talk." His influence while teaching at Amherst College, Cornell University, Harvard University, and Williams College spawned

⁴²Schaff, *History*, 7:35.

⁴³Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 259.

⁴⁴Bainton, 137-38.

⁴⁵Watson, "Texts and Contexts," *Expository Times* 52 (1941), 313.

budding Luther scholars in their own right. In the words of one of Smith's students, Smith confirmed his own view that Luther "questioned the authenticity of the Epistle of James"⁴⁶ in citing Luther's alleged view of James in *Table Talk*:

That is the only good place in the whole epistle. Others grafted it, not this James. What a chaos. That is false.⁴⁷

Reformation scholar Ernest George Schwiebert presented a more conciliatory judgement that Luther's stance on James mellowed in his life, though Luther retained a doubtful stance regarding authorship.

But Luther's criticism of the Biblical canon was not fully developed until his publication of the New Testament in 1522. In this work he included a general introduction and individual introductions to each of the books of the New Testament. He compared James with the other books of the New Testament, such as Romans, the Gospel of John, the First Epistle of Peter, and concluded that James seemed like "a straw epistle." As his knowledge of the entire Bible matured, he modified this position somewhat, but he was still doubtful about the authorship of James, Hebrews, and Revelation.⁴⁸

Historian and biblical hermeneutics scholar Willem Jan Kooiman estimated that when Luther produced his September Testament he was fully convinced that James was inauthentic and non-canonical: by 1520, he is convinced that this epistle is not genuine.⁴⁹

Luther's choice to frame James more positively in his completed translation of the entire Bible (1534) elicited Kooiman's rationalization that

After 1530 he had already extracted his more critical comments from his Preface to James. This was not because he had changed his mind about this author, but only because he wished to avoid unnecessary offense.⁵⁰

Jaroslav Pelikan, eminent scholar abundantly familiar with Luther's entire literary corpus as translator and editor the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, went so far as to state that

Never, even at the height of his criticism of James, did he drop it from his editions of the Bible, any more than he dropped the Old Testament Apocrypha.⁵¹

For Pelikan, Luther's concern hinged on the matter of apostolic authority as did his hesitancy to assess James negatively:

⁴⁶Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 422. Schwiebert was Preserved Smith's student.

⁴⁷Smith, *Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, 269-70.

⁴⁸Smith, *Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, 422.

⁴⁹Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, 111.

⁵⁰Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, 115.

⁵¹Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, 70.

Luther's attitude toward the Epistle of James did illustrate his unwillingness to determine the apostolicity of anything – be it an epistle or an episcopate – on simple chronological grounds.⁵²

In arguing for Luther's rejection of James from the canon of Scripture, Althaus framed Luther's hierarchal schemata of Scripture in terms of Gospel-centeredness.

If the text of Scripture is opposed to Luther's gospel-centered interpretation of Scripture, his interpretation becomes gospel-centered criticism of Scripture.⁵³

To this end, Althaus concludes that Luther's final verdict on James was captured in Luther's dramatic exclamation, "Away with James!"⁵⁴ Wood summarized Luther's perceived dismissal of James as characteristic of scholarly consensus. Every theological student knows that Luther dismissed it as an epistle of straw.⁵⁵ In the end, however, Wood took a conciliatory position in acknowledging that dismissal should be distinguished from rejection, stating that much of the offensive nature of Luther's statements would be diminished if each of their contexts were taken into consideration.⁵⁶

Above we have looked at why Luther scholars estimate that Luther dismissed or outright rejected James from canonical authoritative status. As Schaff lavishly noted,⁵⁷ James ascribes righteousness to works, contrary to Paul and all other Scripture; James omits the Passion and Resurrection, the Spirit of Christ, names Christ only twice, teaches nothing about Christ, and yet undertakes to instruct Christians in the law of liberty which Paul calls a law of bondage, wrath, death, and sin; Luther could not harmonize James and Paul with regards to justification; Melancthon became an object of Luther's jest as he attempted to reconcile the matter; the insertion of "sola" within the text of 3:28 made the justification contradiction "unnecessarily stronger;" Luther attacks the whole epistle of James in "De Captivitate Babylonca," 1520; and Carlstadt referred to Luther as *bonus sacerdos amicitiae nostrae* (our good priest-friend) who presented *frivola argumenta* (an empty proof) against the Epistle of St. James in his book *De Canonicis Scripturis* (The canonical Scriptures), Wittenberg, 1520.⁵⁸

From scholarship's selective referencing of Luther's interaction with the Book of James, combined with the non-critical and often decontextualized quotations from Luther himself, one can appreciate the evaluation that Luther rejected James but downplayed this rejection for the sake of peace among traditional beliefs in the canon of the Bible. However, when we look at the literary contexts of Luther's statements about the Book of James, combined with the historical contexts of the dynamics in play when they were made, quite another understanding will become clear – one that lends credence to the fact that Luther

⁵²Pelikan, "Luther the Expositor," *Luther's Works*, Supplement, 86.

⁵³Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 81.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Wood, *Captive to the Word. Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture*, 155.

⁵⁶Wood, 156.

⁵⁷Schaff, *History*, 7:35ff.

⁵⁸As I noted originally, Luther did not publish "De Captivitate Babylonca," until October 6 while Carlstadt's critique was published in August: Maoz, "Luther and James," 16n10.

never rejected the Book of James but highly regarded it, though not for reasons that the Catholic Church valued its teachings.⁵⁹

Critical Contextualization

It was Erasmus who initially weighed in critically on the exclusion of the Antilegomena (Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation) by not providing a critical apparatus for these texts and by listing them unnumbered after the 23 books considered canonical. Luther's September Testament was based on Erasmus' critical work and therefore Luther followed both Erasmus' judgement of order of New Testament texts as well as non-inclusion regarding numbering the Antilegomena. But three months later, in the December Testament, Luther had reworked these four books back into their proper order and numbered them along with the rest of the New Testament canon. Kooiman interpreted this as Luther's reliance on Erasmus' canonical assessment, reinforcing the unsubstantiated view that Luther agreed with Erasmus:

In his investigations of these matters, it came to Luther's attention that from early days there had been opposition to Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. He himself thought he found in these same writings expressions that seemed difficult to bring into harmony with evangelical truth. In some cases they seemed to lack what was, in his eyes, the most important truth. For these reasons he placed these four books at the end of the New Testament. In his table of contents he divided them from the rest by a small space and did not carry through the numbering of the books.⁶⁰

In summary, Luther's September 1522 translation of the New Testament listed and numbered 23 of the 27 New Testament texts, separating this list from the four books with which Erasmus did not critically engage:

1. Matthew	11. Philippians	21. 1 John
2. Mark	12. Colossians	22. 2 John
3. Luke	13. 1 Thessalonians	23. 3 John
4. John	14. 2 Thessalonians	
5. Acts	15. 1 Timothy	
6. Romans	16. 2 Timothy	Hebrews
7. 1 Corinthians	17. Titus	James
8. 2 Corinthians	18. Philemon	Jude
9. Galatians	19. 1 Peter	Revelation
10. Ephesians	20. 2 Peter	

Three months later, Luther re-introduced his translation of the New Testament with three major additions: 1) Prefaces introduced each New Testament book; 2) the four

⁵⁹One scholar further noted, "Many have tried hard to make James agree with Paul, as also Melanchthon did in his Apology, but not seriously (successfully). These do not harmonize: Faith justifies, and faith does not justify. To him who can make these two agree I will give my doctor's cap and I am willing to be called a fool." Weimar, *"Tischreden"* (3), 3292. See Mark F. Bartling, *"Luther and James: Did Luther Use the Historical-Critical Method?"*

⁶⁰Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, 110-11.

Antilegomena were re-inserted into the list of canonical texts; and 3) all 27 books of the New Testament were ordered numbered as they had been prior to the September 1522 edition:

1. Matthew	10. Ephesians	19. Hebrews
2. Mark	11. Philippians	20. James
3. Luke	12. Colossians	21. 1 Peter
4. John	13. 1 Thessalonians	22. 2 Peter
5. Acts	14. 2 Thessalonians	23. 1 John
6. Romans	15. 1 Timothy	24. 2 John
7. 1 Corinthians	16. 2 Timothy	25. 3 John
8. 2 Corinthians	17. Titus	26. Jude
9. Galatians	18. Philemon	27. Revelation

Luther weighed in on the re-insertion of James by providing the following Preface to the Epistle of St. James for the December 1522 edition:

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle.⁶¹

Luther's Preface began, not by rejecting the book, but by praising it highly. His stated concern addressed apostolic authorship rather than canonical authority. In the long line of Christian tradition about authorship, James the brother of Jesus, not James the apostle, was considered foremost, while the prologue to the book itself references James without indicating which one: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..."⁶² Early Church tradition ascribed authorship to "James, the brother of the Lord" rather than to James, the brother of John and a son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21) or James the younger, son of Alphaeus (Mark 15:40).⁶³ In the December 1522 Preface to the Epistle of St. James, Luther challenged apostolic authorship, not its canonical status or its Scriptural authority.

Contextual Clarification of Former Scholarly Consensus

In the section above titled Luther's Statements, we saw several "evidences" presented in past scholarship upon which scholars tended to base their conclusions on Luther and James to undermine treatment of James with Scriptural authority. This section returns to the aforementioned statements with a view to contextualize each of them and consider alternate interpretations of Luther's words in light of the actions he took to engage with the contents of James in a manner that respected their authority.

⁶¹Luther, *Works*, pp. 395-96.

⁶²James 1.1a.

⁶³From 253 CE until modern critical assessment, James' authorship was generally ascribed to James the Just, Jesus' brother. This would also have been the standard position during Luther's day. See Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, 1982), *in loc.* Early Catholic scholarship, however, identified this James son of Alphaeus.

1. “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (October 1520):

For Luther, either James lied in promising that the “prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up” or else extreme unction was no biblically-based sacrament. The Catholic sacrament of extreme unction could not be based on James because James promised resultant healing, not resultant death. Luther called not James but Catholic doctrine falsely based on James “madness.” In other words, Luther carried his disagreement with the Catholic church’s teaching on extreme unction into his treatise comments, offering acceptance of a plain reading of James that refuted either their ecclesiastical sacrament or denounced “their James” – including its teaching, practice, and related influence.⁶⁴

Further to this particular treatise, Luther’s challenge was not to the authenticity or authority of James the book, but to the apostolic claim advanced toward the person James. Luther was not alone in antecedent Catholic or subsequent Protestant theology by making such a claim and distinguishing authority of text from apostolicity of author, not for James alone but for other Christian Scripture texts and authors, including the Gospels.⁶⁵

2. Preface to James in Luther’s December 1522 New Testament:

In labelling James as “an epistle of straw,” Luther compared the content of James that would lead a believer to Christian maturity with Gospel-centered texts such as the Fourth Gospel, Romans, and 1 Peter that would lead a person to faith.⁶⁶ In fact, Luther began his preface most assuredly:

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God.⁶⁷

By his own testimony, Luther clearly did not reject or discard James.

3. “That These Words of Christ, ‘This is My Body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics” (1527):

So St. James asserts, “Whoever offends in one point is guilty in all respects.” He possibly heard the apostles say that all the words of God must be believed or none, although he applies their interpretation to the works of the law.⁶⁸

4. Lectures on Genesis (1536-1544):

Luther expressed concern toward any appearance of the Pelagian heresy that purported a claim to righteousness apart from God’s grace, including any merit gained from acts of righteousness that were not preveniently acted upon first by the grace of God. Luther deemed as heretical (Catholic) teaching that declared Abraham righteous by means of his own faith prior to acknowledgement first from God. Therefore the James of Luther’s former

⁶⁴Luther, *Works*, 36: 120.

⁶⁵Ibid., 36: 118.

⁶⁶Ibid., 35: 362.

⁶⁷Charles M. Jacobs, transl., *Prefaces to the New Testament* (Revised by E. Theodore Bachman. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary, n.d.), 44.

⁶⁸Ibid., 37: 26.

religion, in concluding (falsely) that Abraham was justified after obedience fed into the charge that (their) James raved: “Hence the fruits justify.” Therefore, Luther concluded, “let our opponents be done away with their James, whom they throw up to us so often. They babble much but understand nothing about the righteousness of works.”⁶⁹ Clearly, Luther’s argument was with church teaching and interpretation of James, not against “Luther’s James.”

5. Licentiate Exam (July 7, 1542):

Once again, Luther makes it clear that the reason why the “epistle of James gives us much trouble” is because “the papists embrace it alone and leave out all the rest.” Luther felt compelled to “make rubble” of their James “if they will not admit my interpretations.” When he cites a common story about a Kalenberg priest who was found in a cabin in winter’s midst with no more fire wood for his stove, having already tossed eleven apostle figurines into the fire and left with the statue of James alone, admitted to being forced to throw even James into the stove.⁷⁰ Context needs to re-think the lesson, given that the statue of James was kept until the last, supposedly due to his value above the other eleven apostles. And it was with reluctance, even then, that the figurine of James was allocated to practical service. Context considered, should not Luther’s point be understood to be that James was of more value rather than of lesser import?

6. Table Talk (1542):

Apart from two apparently unrelated notions, the Table Talk testimony of Luther seems to be unredeemable. It is at best difficult to argue against the plain words, “We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school.”⁷¹

The first notion relates to eyewitness testimony that “A miscellaneous and promiscuous crowd inhabits Dr. Luther’s home and on this account there is great and constant disturbance.”⁷² Such testimony cannot bear the same weight of authenticity and merit as validated quotations from Luther’s lectures, commentaries, treatises, letters, and sermons.

And secondly, Luther justified James with the Apostle Paul in his commentary work on Galatians when he established identity of thought between “faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:14) and “faith that works itself out through love” (Gal. 5:6). He made this connection several times;⁷³ on two particular occasions he went into such detail as to have earned his own doctor’s beret, that is, to bring the teachings of faith and works by James and Paul into reasonable harmony according to Luther’s understanding of the Gospel.

On the first occasion, in the published version of his “Lectures on Romans,” Luther acknowledged that faith alone would not offer the hope of salvation but rather “living faith” alone was necessary. The catch phrase *sola fidei* then required clarification against those who would simplify the term faith and remove from it its redemptive authority.

⁶⁹Ibid., 4: 133-34.

⁷⁰Ibid., 34: 317.

⁷¹Ibid., 54: 424-25ss.

⁷²Ibid., ix.

⁷³Maoz, “Luther and James,” 109.

Therefore justification does not demand the works of the Law but a living faith which produces its own works.⁷⁴

Later in his life, in 1535, Luther responded to the church's position on justification with a treatise, "Disputation Concerning Justification" in which he offered an exegetical and grammatical rejoinder to the argument

Faith without works justifies. Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17, 26). Therefore dead faith justifies.⁷⁵

Luther distinguished between a grammatical connection between faith and works, justification and works, existent faith, and efficacious faith.

In the major premise, "faith" ought to be placed with the word "justifies" and the portion of the sentence "without works justifies" is placed in a predicate periphrase and must refer to the word "justifies," not to "faith." In the minor premise, "without works" is truly the subject periphrase and refers to faith. We say that justification is effective without works, not that faith is without works. For that faith that lacks fruit is not an efficacious but a faith. "Without works" is ambiguous, then. For that reason, this argument settles nothing. It is one thing that faith justifies without works; it is another thing that faith exists without works.

For Luther and his circle of reformers, the matter of faith in respect to justification is not directly linked to the concept of works. While a faith without works may exist, it is not a faith that justifies, not a saving faith.

7. Luther's Doctoral Beret

I would add one final point here. As we saw Bainton point out earlier,⁷⁶ Luther challenged anyone to reconcile Paul and James. Context should help here. Professor Dr. Martin Luther was in oversight of graduate students who defended themselves publicly in order to attain their doctorate. In order to succeed in their doctoral defense they would be required to answer a number of questions posed by the doctoral jury, including how one could bring into reasonable harmony the teaching of the Apostle Paul, "faith alone justifies" with that of James, "faith without works is dead." When taken out of context, this statement could be construed to indicate that no-one could earn his doctor's beret because no-one could reconcile James and Paul. As Bainton assessed and this study concurs based on substantial evidence from his writings, Luther never attempted to discard James from the canon of Scripture.

Finally, at the outset of this study, we noted that Luther had never delivered a lecture series on James and hence no commentary on James was published. To this we can add, however, that Luther did write a commentary on Hebrews, a New Testament book that was

⁷⁴Luther, *Works*, 25:235. Here and elsewhere (Ibid., 175-76) Luther gave detailed grammatical and exegetical interpretations of James 2.17, 26, reinforcing the fact that Luther accepted the teachings of James when they were read with proper grammatical and exegetical acumen..

⁷⁵Ibid., 34:125.

⁷⁶Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 259.

also counted among the four Antelegomena that critics say Luther dismissed outright. The strength of their dismissal of James based on lack of commentary is diminished when the commentary on Hebrews is factored in.

Conclusion

What a person does puts meaning into what a person says. As is often the case, action speaks louder than words, for words have contexts while actions stand on their own merit. Luther included generously much of the content of James in all of his work throughout his life, treating James like all other Scripture. It would be of interest to see what percentage and frequency Luther exercised with other books of the New Testament that he did not fully lecture on. I expect that, for example, his use of the Gospel of Mark would not approach a 50% of verse representation, nor would many of the letters of Paul, and so on.

What Luther did with James certainly challenges scholarly consensus as to what Luther is said to have thought about James. That Luther treated James like all Scripture can be borne out reasonably and with ample substantiation from his own writings, as this study has briefly demonstrated.

Postscript

During my graduate years of study in Chicago, I added Church History to my major of New Testament Studies largely due to the dynamic nature of a professor combined with the compelling intrigue of the riddle that Luther and James posed. In support of my decision, two friends – a doctor and a lawyer – gifted me with *Luther's Works*. As a result, I took three years off after my graduate course work was completed to read the volumes cover to cover three times before setting out to write my findings on the topic. The resultant analysis thereafter determined where I would engage in doctoral studies: the University of Strasbourg, France offered a full-year course in “Histoire Modern” on *Luther en Europe* in 1983 in celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth. I would not miss this great opportunity! In an ironic “bookend” situation, I now find myself revisiting the study prompted by another 500th anniversary: the posting of the ninety-five theses in 1517, for an academic journal housed at a graduate school about to change its name to Martin Luther University College. Surely, there must be a God in heaven who resides over my daily affairs.