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# “LUTHER AS INTERPRETER: CHRIST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT”

*John R. Wilch*

The first major part of this study<sup>1</sup> treated, first, Martin Luther's early exegetical method in interpreting the Old Testament, and then, the most important reasons that influenced a change in his hermeneutical method. He moved toward a historical-literal exegesis without abandoning his essential Christology. By so doing, Luther undercut traditional medieval exegetical methods, especially allegory and typology. This change evidently helped him arrive at his evangelical understanding of Christ and the Gospel. The remainder of this study concentrates on major principles of Luther's theology which enriched his treatment of Christ in respect to the Old Testament and discusses the prospect of appropriating Luther's Old Testament hermeneutic today.

## LUTHER'S CHRIST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT Christ and the Unity of the Bible

In the New Testament, "Scripture" refers only to the Old Testament; Luther contrasted Scripture = Old Testament with proclamation = New Testament. Thus, the Old Testament, according to its nature as promise, had to be written down and safeguarded until the time of its fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Luther therefore recognized and consistently emphasized the inner unity of the Bible. "There is no word in the New Testament that does not look back into the Old, in which it was proclaimed before. The New Testament is nothing more than a revelation of the Old . . . The whole New Testament . . . flows out of Moses".<sup>3</sup> "Is the New Testament anything else but a

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1. *Consensus* 9 (July 1983): 3-9.

2. See Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, tr. Eric W. & Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 81-85.

3. WA 10/1/1:181; 54:2.

public sermon and proclamation of the sayings that were sent in the Old Testament and fulfilled by Christ?"<sup>4</sup>

As Volkmar Hertrich put it, for Luther, the New Testament is the exegesis of the Old. "The Gospels and Epistles of the Apostles have been written to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament, so that we might read and see for ourselves how Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger—that is, how He is contained in the writings of the prophets".<sup>5</sup>

For Luther, then, the Old Testament by itself is incomplete, for it points toward the New Testament. Since it contains many promises of Christ and salvation through Him, it does, like the New Testament, possess the essential Gospel.<sup>6</sup> "The books of Moses and the prophets are also Gospel, since before Christ they proclaimed and described that which the Apostles preached and wrote after Christ".<sup>7</sup>

God's act of salvation was promised in the Old, but in the New Testament, it was certified as fulfilled. For all his appreciation for differences between the Testaments, Luther was thus more essentially concerned with the unity of all of Scripture. It is Christ who gives Scripture its unity: The Old Testament points toward Him (like a paper John the Baptist), and the New Testament proclaims Christ as the fulfilment of the Old (as the Apostles did). Christ is therefore both essentially the subject of both Testaments as well as the bond that unifies them. It is as Luther put it succinctly and programmatically: "Christ is the goal of the whole Scripture".<sup>8</sup>

## Christ the Word of God

It was natural for Luther to adopt the traditional doctrine of the Church that Christ is the Word of God, based primarily on John 1:1, 14. Of course, he did not espouse this doctrine merely because of ecclesiastical tradition, but because it was clearly taught in Scripture. This is obviously set forth, e.g., in Genesis 1. "God speaks, and through His speaking Creation occurs . . . This Word must be God Himself, because He made creatures through this Word; thus the Word is God. He who speaks and the Word are two persons, yet one God . . . It says, 'God spoke.' Yet speaking and God are not one and the same thing."

"The Son of God Himself spoke in the first prophecy" [Gen. 3:15]<sup>9</sup>

Christ is not merely prophesied in the Old Testament, but He Himself is the One who speaks. In the Old Testament, the eternal Word proclaims His future Incarnation.<sup>10</sup>

The logical extension of this is that, wherever there is in Scripture a report about God speaking to man, it was Christ who spoke. Wherever prophets and psalmists

4. WA:DB 5:2-3.

5. WA 10/1:15; LW 35:22; s. V. Hertrich, "Luther und das Alte Testament," *Lutherjahrbuch* 20 (1938): 96-7; Kurt Aland, "Luther as Exegete," *The Expository Times* 69 (1957): 68.

6. See Bornkamm, pp. 82-4.

7. WA 12:275; s. Hertrich, p. 97.

8. WA 24:16; s. Johannes Hempel, "Das reformatorische Evangelium und das Alte Testament," *Lutherjahrbuch* 25 (1958): 12; Fritz Hahn, "Luthers Auslegungsgrundsätze und ihre theologischen Voraussetzungen," *Zeitschrift fuer systematische Theologie* 12, p. 208; Hertrich, p. 96; Bornkamm, pp. 84-6.

9. WA 14:100; WA:TR 5:361 (#5800); cf. LW 1:18.

10. Bornkamm, pp. 200-1.

were inspired to speak the Word of God, it was the words of Christ which were spoken through them: "Wherever God's Word is, there is Christ."<sup>11</sup> It was even Christ who gave Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in the Old Testament prophecies, Christ is "always present in double measure, as it were, . . . as the one who speaks and the one prophesied."<sup>13</sup> Through his Hebrew studies, Luther realized that the term *debar* meant not only the spoken word but also the deed referred to by the spoken word. God's Word not only reveals, but is also His deed of redemption. Thus, the Word of God in the Old Testament is the anticipated Christ, and in the New Testament the historical Christ.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that Luther does not here succumb to the temptation to deny the inseparability of the two natures of Christ, as if the eternal Son of God were prophesying of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Where Christ as God is present, so also Christ as man. In fact, "Jesus Christ is Jehovah, God and man."<sup>15</sup> Luther is realistically consistent: the whole God-man is not just symbolically present in the Old Testament. Rather, He is fully there in His whole person, imparting Himself wherever His promise is believed—"there is no God outside of Christ."<sup>16</sup> It is both the coming historical Jesus as well as the eternal divine Son of God who is present.

Heinrich Bornkamm sees that, in Luther's interpretation, the "unity of the Word of Creation and the Word become flesh gives the figure of Christ its infinite divinity. And the historical person of Jesus gives to the revelatory action of God in the Old Testament a direction to a goal in time and thus its true historicity".<sup>17</sup>

## The Christ of Promise and Fulfilment

Luther realized that the believing psalmists prayed for the divine Saviour, or were even inspired to utter promises of the Christ to come. In fact, he saw that God's Good News to His people in all times is essentially the promise that He comes to man in Christ. As James S. Preus puts it, God's Word as Gospel is always in the form of promise, and faith is always the same whether in the Old or New Testament, taking the promise seriously.<sup>18</sup> Thus Luther can declare: "This alone is sin: unbelief."<sup>19</sup>

Carrying this insight logically further, it becomes obvious that Christ is not, like other historical persons or events, the sign of something else, e.g., of the Christian's

11. WA 17/II:132; s. WA 19:595-7; LW 14:257-9; Raymond F. Surburg, "Luther and the Christology of the Old Testament," 1982 Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College and Theological Seminary, Mankato, Minn. (to be published in *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, 1983), §80.

12. WA 54:66-7; LW 15:313; s. Surburg, §§63, 70-1.

13. Bornkamm, pp. 211-4.

14. WA 40/II:231; 47:65; LW 12:33; 22:339; s. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings*, companion volume of *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), pp. 54-6, 60.

15. WA 54:79; LW 15:328.

16. Bornkamm, pp. 202-3, 206; cf. WA 54:66-7; LW 15:313; Surburg, §106.

17. Bornkamm, p. 207; cf. WA 39/II:103.

18. "Old Testament *promissio* and Luther's New Hermeneutic," *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 156-8; *ibid.*, "Luther on Christ and the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972): 493; s. WA 43:103; Aland, p. 69; Pelikan, p. 59; Hempel, p. 26.

19. Quoted by Hempel (EA 12:345), p. 27; s. WA 5:398; Bornkamm, p. 172.

humiliation of faithfulness. Instead, as Preus says, "He is the *goal*, the One toward whose coming the *text* always points, because He is the One to whom *history* always points as its end and goal."<sup>20</sup> This highlights how Luther came to appreciate the historicity of the Old Testament as the more sure element that directs toward Christ, for both God's promises and the examples of believers are given in historical situations. Thus he could simply declare: "Faith rests upon history."<sup>21</sup> Christ is no longer understood by Luther as the model of the Christian faith and life, but is now recognized as the true object of faith, for He is the One promised for the future who then fulfills the promise with His act of salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Since the Second Person of the Trinity as Saviour is the real content of the promise, even for the Old Testament believers, it naturally follows for Luther that they actually believed in Christ. With his "obedience of faith, Abraham gave a supreme example of an evangelical life."<sup>23</sup> Thus the Old Testament offers Christians many "valuable examples of faith, love and every virtue," as well as "examples of unbelief and vice, from which one can learn to recognize God's grace and wrath."<sup>24</sup> It was by their faith in the promise of the Saviour that the Old Testament believers were saved.<sup>25</sup> Even Adam "was a Christian" because "he had the same faith in Christ that we have. For time makes no difference to faith; faith is the same from the beginning of the world until the end."<sup>26</sup>

Rather than merely predicting, the prophets were proclaiming Christ to their contemporaries, holding "the people in faith in the coming Christ. And so they clung to Christ with the Word; they believed in Him as well as we now believe in and cling to Him."<sup>27</sup> Because, even for the Christian, faith is trust in God's promises and justification is being declared righteous by God because of this faith in His promises, promise is the "chief and most important part of the doctrine."<sup>28</sup> So Preus concludes: "As Word and faith are formally the same before and after Christ, the function of Israel and the Church are the same: they are to be a prophetic, living witness to the promise."<sup>29</sup>

The same Christ is the subject of both the Old Testament promise and the New Testament fulfilment. It is Christ who gives meaning, substance and validity to the

20. "O.T. *promissio*," p. 158 (emphasis by the author).

21. WA 31/II:242; LW 16:327; s. WA 31/II:97; LW 16:136-7; Bornkamm, pp. 90-1.

22. See Preus, "Luther on Christ," p. 491.

23. WA 57/III:236; LW 29:238; s. Karl Brinkel, *Luthers Hermeneutik in seiner Uebersetzung des Alten Testaments und die gegenwaertige Revision der Lutherbibel*, *Luthertum* 24 (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960), pp. 12-17.

24. WA 18:81-2; LW 40:98; s. WA 16:391; 24:10; LW 35:173; Hempel, p. 9; Bornkamm, pp. 163-4; Aland, p. 69; Brinkel, pp. 36-7; James S. Preus, "From Promise to Presence: The Christ in Luther's Old Testament," *Bulletin of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg* (1973): 3, 10.

25. WA 24:99f.; 42:87, 180, 186, 299; LW 1:114-5, 242, 250-1; 2:54; Pelikan, p. 58; Brinkel, pp. 18-22, 27-8, 33-4; Preus, "Luther on Christ," pp. 493-4; §§40, 88-90.

26. WA 24:99-100; s. WA 42:147; LW 1:197; Hempel, p. 29; Hertrich, p. 98; Surburg, §§85-6.

27. WA 19:388; LW 19:190-1; s. WA 54:84-5; 55:1; 47:66; LW 15:334-5; 22:339-40; Bornkamm, pp. 109, 149-51.

28. WA 42:562, 565; 44:601; LW 19:23; 8:30; s. Preus, "From Promise," p. 6.

29. "Luther on Christ," p. 494.

hermeneutical key of the promise-fulfilment scheme. Because the redemption of the world promised to Israel was ultimately accomplished in Christ, many passages of the Old Testament that did not specifically mention the promised Saviour could be interpreted Messianically by Luther.<sup>30</sup>

## The Christ of Law and Gospel

Luther not only saw that God's Word can promise evil as well as good, but also that the Law may give a unique support to the promise. That is, it may have the purpose to increase the believer's petition for the fulfilment of the promise, namely, the advent of the Saviour. Thus the Law "drives toward Christ."<sup>31</sup> Luther saw not only the essential Gospel present in the Old Testament, but the whole truth of the wisdom of God, the complete truth of Law and Gospel. A prime example of the essential Gospel in the Old Testament by which he who believes in it is justified, is Hab. 2:4 which, by being quoted by Paul in Rom. 1:17, helped lead Luther to his great evangelical insight.<sup>32</sup>

As far as the Mosaic law is concerned, Luther held that it is not merely the law of the one people Israel. Christians are also bound to it, insofar as it corresponds to natural law. This is not necessarily to be identified with the Decalogue (note the Sabbath law) or the moral laws, but may include any type of law, including ceremonial law. "Where Moses' law and natural law are one, there the law of Moses remains and is not removed."<sup>33</sup> Although the natural law is written in all men's hearts, it needs to be awakened by the preaching of the Word of God.<sup>34</sup> Beyond this, the Law stands not just alongside the Gospel of Christ, but is even bound up with it. "How would anyone know what sin is, where there is no law and conscience? And how would one learn what Christ is and what He has done for us, where we do not know what the Law is (which He fulfills for us) or what sin is, which He has satisfied?"<sup>35</sup>

In order to fully appreciate the Gospel, we must not only be prepared for Christ by the Law, but also need the Law "so that we can see in it how far the Holy Ghost has brought us, and how much is still lacking, so that we may not become confident and suppose that we have already accomplished everything, but that we may continually grow in sanctification and always become ever more a new creature in Christ."<sup>36</sup> So Christ, as Lord and goal of all Scripture, is also Lord and goal of the Old Testament

30. Pelikan, p. 59; s. Bornkamm, pp. 86-103.

31. WA 40/III:706; s. Hempel, p. 11; Bornkamm, pp. 143, 148-9; James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969), p. 191.

32. See Willem J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, tr. John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), pp. 209, 211; Lowell C. Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook, Cal.: Verdict Publ., 1980), pp. 37, 41, 65; cf. Franz Hesse, "'Reges eos virga ferrea, ut vas figuli confringes eos': Zu Luthers Auslegung des 2. Psalms," *Lutherjahrbuch* 25 (1958): 28.

33. WA 18:81; 16:390; LW 40:98; 35:172.

34. WA 16:447, 374; 11:279; LW 45:128; s. WA 39/I:454; 42:360; Hertrich, pp. 102-7; Bornkamm, pp. 127-32; Aland, p. 69.

35. WA 50:473; LW 47:113; s. Hertrich, pp. 116, 122.

36. EA 25:377; LW 41:166; s. Hertrich, p. 114.

Law—its limitation, end and fulfilment. Insofar as it is related to Christ, it is necessarily valid for Christians.<sup>37</sup>

## Christ the Head of the Church

For the young Luther, the Church was assumed to be relevant to the Old Testament according to the rule that wherever Scripture speaks of Christ, it also speaks of His Body, the Church.<sup>38</sup> With his natural pastoral concern, Luther early saw that this ought to be the primary goal of exegesis—tropologically interpreting passages to apply to a Christian's faith and life. According to J.S. Preus, "Luther discovered that his own existence as a believer matched the situation of the faithful Israelites, both in the kind of Word they heard and in the kind of response the Word elicited. God's promise sustained them in tribulation, held them in petition and hope, and set their eyes on the future, in spite of all evidence to the contrary."<sup>39</sup>

The first time Luther ventured to suggest that Israel's prophets were not only preaching for the sake of the Church in the New Testament sense, but also to their contemporaries, was in his exposition of Psalm 74 (not first on Ps. 89, as Preus claims).<sup>40</sup> Soon thereafter, evidently through reflection on the covenant with Abraham as an "eternal testament," he came to see that, on the basis of faith in this promise, the Old Testament fathers in effect "were held to believe in Christ and would have eternal life."<sup>41</sup> This faith of Israel, founded in the Word of promise, is not only still valid, but is even normative for Christians as well.<sup>42</sup>

Luther saw that the Old Testament testified to God's saving activity. This was a theocentric faith in salvation, trust in God's sovereign will to save that would even transform history to do so. This solidarity in faith unites Israel's faithful with those of the Church. For it centres in Christ, who is the Saviour of the world only as the Messiah of Israel. Thus the Apostles preached Christ to the Gentiles on the basis of His fulfilment of Israel's Law and history as well as of its promises, for both the history leading toward Christ as well as that which follows is a unified one.<sup>43</sup> So Luther learned to pray Israel's prayers as his own, identifying with the faith of the "faithful synagogue," for the Christian likewise has no visible support, but only sheer promise.<sup>44</sup>

Until then, like the medieval exegetes, Luther had seen in the Old Testament persons and events merely signs, figures or shadows of those of the New Testament (as one of them expressed it, "the whole Old Testament is allegory").<sup>45</sup> Now, Luther could declare that the Old Testament histories "possess reality in and for themselves. They are not merely meant to be considered as hull, but as the true kernel of the matter. . . . Understand this clearly, that they are not concerned with a foreshadowing or

37. Hertrich, pp. 113, 117, 122-3; cf. WA 31/II:324-5, 415; LW 17:81, 198-9; Bornkamm, pp. 154-6.

38. Preus, "Luther on Christ," p. 490.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 491-2.

40. See Luther on Ps. 74:3, as well as on 76:2 and 77:1, 7, in: WA 3:508, 524, 532, 535, 540; LW 10:452; 11:6-7, 12, 17, 24; vs. Preus, *From Shadow*, p. 205 (s. WA 4:50; cf. LW 11:194).

41. WA 4:193.

42. See Preus, *ibid.*, pp. 205-7.

43. Hempel, pp. 28-31; s. Hertrich, p. 120.

44. Preus, "Luther on Christ," p. 492.

45. *Ibid.*

image, but with an example."<sup>46</sup> "The essence of Scripture is given us in its histories, which can serve us as examples of faith, love and the cross. One must take from Scripture its true treasure, kernel, power, might, sap and taste, namely, its examples of faith and love. From these one can see God's purpose in writing them."<sup>47</sup>

The Old Testament, then, is not the figure of a future antitype, but a testimony to what is always true between God and man. Relevant here is Luther's historical rule of application: "God's Word here, God's Word there—I must know and respect to whom the Word of God is spoken. It may be far from it that you are the people to whom God has spoken."<sup>48</sup>

Luther's discovery of the historical validity of Israelite piety and faith helped bring him in principle (if not always in practice) to eventually reject the traditional allegory and typology as hermeneutical principles in favour of analogy—the analogy of the actual situation and faith of Old or New Testament believers to that of Christians today. For God's activity transpires for the believer in the sphere of history.<sup>49</sup>

We have seen above how Luther taught that the believers of the Old Testament actually believed in the promised Saviour, i.e., in Christ. Luther did not shrink from carrying this insight to its logical conclusion: they, too, are Christians, for they had a faith identical to ours. They, too, "were justified by faith in Christ, just as we are—they by faith in the One who was to come, we by faith in the Christ who is present." "Abraham's Christ is our Christ, and . . . Christ died for Abraham's sins as well as for ours."<sup>50</sup> "Moses was a true Christian and a teacher of Christians. . . . In his heart, faith and confession, he embraced Christ the Son of God and joined himself unto Him."<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, the experiences of the Old Testament believers were "experiences of Christ," because He is "present wherever God's mercy overcomes a human heart."<sup>52</sup> Through identifying Israel's faith with that of Christians, Luther early began to lay the groundwork for his later dialectic of *simul justus et peccator*: the believing Israelites "were at the same time upright and still in shadows; . . . So also are we now . . . With them as with us, faith alone makes upright (*sola fides rectificat*)."<sup>53</sup>

With the whole story of God's people becoming immediately relevant for Luther, Preus concludes: "The Bible became not so much the telling of a story with beginning, middle and end, as the depiction of a perpetual *situation* of men and women struggling with life. Before God, all believers stand equally near to salvation, because it always comes in the same way—through the Word of promise when it is believed."<sup>54</sup>

Luther did not go the way of *Heilsgeschichte*, by which a qualitative difference between segments of time is delineated and the geometrical metaphor is an upward

46. WA 16:276.

47. WA 16:70; s. 16:72, 391; Hempel, p. 9.

48. WA 16:384; LW 35:170; s. Hertrich, p. 101; Preus, "Luther on Christ," p. 493.

49. See Hempel, pp. 13-14, 23.

50. WA 40/I:378, 385; LW 26:239-40, 244; cf. WA 24:99; Apol. XII, §73; XXIV, §55; Hertrich, p. 98.

51. WA 54:85; LW 15:335.

52. Bornkamm, p. 263.

53. WA 54:247, 251; LW 15:386; s. Preus, *From Shadow*, pp. 209-10.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 497 (emphasis by the author).

moving time line with decisive points, especially that of the Christ-event. Instead, without detracting from the historical significance of the Biblical persons and events, Luther draws from the ubiquity and centrality of Christ.<sup>55</sup>

## Christ the Centre of Scripture

In one respect, Luther never departed from the traditional approach, for Christ and Christology always remained for him the heart and core of his theology. However, the change noted above in his exegetical approach to the Old Testament resulted in a different view of the Christ of the Old Testament.

Erasmus had demanded: "Nothing is to be sought in Scripture but Christ."<sup>56</sup> However, Christ was the centre of Scripture for him as the best model of the moral life. Whereas for Luther, Christ is the centre because as the crucified and risen One He brought about forgiveness, righteousness and life, and gives this to us without any merit on our part. His watchword became: "*Unum praedica, sapientiam crucis*" (preach one thing, the wisdom of the Cross). "I see nothing in Scripture except Christ crucified."<sup>57</sup> He completed the shift from the Roman *theologia gloriae* (that the believer must climb up into God's fellowship by means of grace infused through the Church) to the *theologia crucis* (salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ crucified alone). "All of Holy Scripture, from beginning to end, points solely to Christ as our source of grace and truth."<sup>58</sup>

With this, Luther's hermeneutical circle becomes evident. If a person is to understand Scripture, he must have Christ; but if one is to have Christ and justification through Him, "he must have the Christ whom the Scriptures preach, and no other." "The Scriptures must be understood in favour of Christ, not against Him."<sup>59</sup> Eventually, Luther described Christ as the *punctus mathematicus* about which everything revolves in concentric rings. "Christ is the point in the circle from which the entire circle is drawn. Whoever is attached to Him belongs also in the ring. For He is the central point of the circle and all the histories of Holy Scripture—when they are rightly understood—point to Christ."<sup>60</sup>

Luther is not just placing the Bible in a central position, but is placing Christ in the centre of the Bible, which had never been done before. He hammered away incessantly upon this single anvil.<sup>61</sup> Already early in his career he noted: "Others make a detour and purposely, as it were, avoid Christ, so they put off approaching Him with the text. As for me, when I have a text that is like a nut with a hard shell, I immediately dash it against the Rock and find the sweetest kernel."<sup>62</sup> Luther shot the

55. Preus, "Luther on Christ," p. 497.

56. Quoted by J. Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1944) reprint: *The Springfielder* 24 (Aug. 1960): 28.

57. WA 1:52; 54:29; s. WA 1:219; 46:727; WA:TR 5, #5585; Reu, p. 28; Eugene F. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz: On Scripture and the Word* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1971) reprint: Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1981, pp. 45, 48-9; Surburg, §§35, 38.

58. WA 10:2; LW 22:125; s. WA 10:72; LW 22:304; Klug, pp. 41, 46-7; Surburg, §50; cf. Hesse, pp. 24, 28, 32-33.

59. See WA:TR 1:489 (#967); 2:439 (#2383); WA 18:607; quoted by Klug, pp. 48-50.

60. WA 47:66; LW 22:339; s. Bornkamm, p. 206; Surburg, §§33-4.

61. Kooiman, p. 208.

62. WA 3:13; LW 10:6.

retorical question at Erasmus: “When you take Christ out of the Bible, what do you have left?”<sup>63</sup> Conversely, whoever has Christ, has everything, since the truth of Scripture is a “perfect, seamless ring of gold; it comprises only one doctrine, Christ.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, Luther’s unique and overriding hermeneutical principle was “was Christum treibet” (what furthers Christ).<sup>65</sup>

A change in Luther’s exegetical method seems, then, to have helped prepare the way for his soteriological breakthrough. And his *theologia crucis* directed him from his previous spiritual Christological hermeneutic that de-emphasized the historical aspect, to this historically centred Christocentric hermeneutic. The Good News of the justification of sinners is the heart and goal of Scripture; every word must be understood from this central point. Only then can the Bible be understood in accordance with its own intention and nature. Only then is Scripture its own interpreter.<sup>66</sup> Scripture is no longer a book of theoretical teaching or of rules of practical morality—as if it could be treated and dissected just like purely human books. It is rather God’s message of His judgment and grace.

## LUTHER’S CHRISTOCENTRIC HERMENEUTIC TODAY

A. Heinrich Bornkamm identifies Luther’s hermeneutical approach to the Old Testament as “Christocentric.” This he contrasts to the “Christological-prophetic” hermeneutic, which is “formed to carry the concepts of the New Testament revelation into the Old Testament and put them into the mouths of the patriarchs and writers.”<sup>67</sup> Although Luther continued to employ such interpretation frequently, it is Bornkamm’s contention that he had actually rejected it in principle. Bornkamm is influenced here by higher-critical presuppositions, pointing out that “truly historical exegesis” can find no Christological prophecy in the Old Testament: “We are not prepared to follow his textual procedure, since our modern exegesis is directed toward finding historicity.”<sup>68</sup>

To evaluate Bornkamm positively, however, his distinction between spiritual Christological prophecy and Christocentricity in Luther may well be both valid as well as rewarding. For the Christocentric interpretation may “induce the exegete to use the view of the Christian, enlightened through the New Testament, to illumine the situation of man and his encounter with God on the manifold Old Testament levels. If the Old Testament is understood in the light which falls back on it from its end, then true historical understanding is not contradicted. For no historical epoch can be understood through itself; rather, in a different and deeper sense, it can only be understood from the goal at which it arrives.”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, this appears to be the way in which the mature Luther evaluated the

63. WA 18:606; LW 33:26; s. Klug, p. 48.

64. Quoted by Kooiman, pp. 207-8; cf. WA 2:361; Reu, pp. 10-11; Preus, “From Promise,” p. 11.

65. WA:DB 7:384, 404; LW 35:396, 400; s. Aland, pp. 47-8.

66. Kooiman, pp. 208-9.

67. Bornkamm, p. 263.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 100; cf. Friedrich Baumgaertel, *Verheissung* (Guetersloh: Bertelsmann, 1952), pp. 128-9.

69. Bornkamm, p. 263.

history of Israel as set forth in the Old Testament—illuminated from its goal, which manifestly is Christ. Bornkamm the historian appreciates Luther's true historical insight, which preserves the historical and theological integrity of the Old Testament and makes possible a positive consideration of his Christocentric hermeneutic.

B. Franz Hesse also judged Luther's manner of Messianic-Christological interpretation as outdated and impossible for modern scientific hermeneutics.<sup>70</sup> However, he sees the Reformer Luther with his historically oriented doctrine of the *theologia crucis* as already having overcome that kind of Christological exegesis. Using Luther's interpretation of Psalm 2 as an example, Hesse shows that Christ and His Kingdom did not fulfill the hope expressly stated by the Old Testament prophets, namely, a rule of political power. Instead, He rules by service and suffering. Thus, according to Hesse, the Reformer Luther calls us away from the Exegete Luther—away from the Christological interpretation to a Christocentric one. Although the Old Testament hope bound itself to a physical fulfilment, it is rooted in the certainty that the God of Israel, who is the God of promise and of assured fulfilment, would bring the history of Israel to the goal of salvation. Since this promise was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the "yes" of Israel's hope is not nullified by the manner in which Christ fulfilled it, but is rather certified. For the salvation for Israel was indeed effected—not politically, but spiritually and eternally.<sup>71</sup> Hesse is incorrect in attempting to contradict Luther's Christological exegesis with his Christocentric *theologia crucis*. For Luther's hermeneutic remained Christological to the end. But in receiving both a Christocentric and a literal-historical emphasis, it differed markedly from his Roman predecessors and contemporaries.

Hesse does, however, make a significant contribution here. He emphasizes how Luther's different hermeneutic retained the New Testament as the norm for interpreting the Old. The goal of the Old Testament is the vantage point for properly understanding it. Does this compromise the full historical validity of the Old Testament? To the contrary, its history is thereby confirmed as well as full appreciation for its persons, events and institutions. They are not mere shadows, figures or types. The fully historical faithful of the Old Testament, from Adam and Eve on, believed in God's promise of eventual salvation. Because the fulfilment of this promise took the form of Christ incarnated, crucified and resurrected, it was really this Christ in whom they believed.

C. Luther's Christocentric hermeneutic of the Old Testament preserves its historical integrity, while at the same time making it theologically and existentially relevant for the Christian. This method examines the Old Testament not just from within itself or in comparison with other similar documents, peoples or religions (*religionsgeschichtlich*), but rather historically from the vantage point of its goal, which is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. This is therefore a credible and viable hermeneutic for today that every historically oriented Christian exegete may appreciate, and perhaps even appropriate.

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70. Op.cit., pp. 39-40.

71. Hesse, pp. 31-2, 36-41.