

# MARTIN LUTHER

## on the Bible



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553). 1529.

Martin Luther's deep engagement with Scripture caused the Lutheran Reformation. Writing in 1545, a year before his death, Luther recalled how his meditation on Romans 1:17 had affected him. The words of the apostle Paul, "He who through faith is righteous shall live," led Luther to a new understanding of the righteousness or justice of God. Luther remembered that "a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me." He no longer saw God's righteousness as the righteousness by which God judges us but rather as the way God justifies us, that is, puts us in right relationship with God.

Luther then "ran through the Scripture from memory," he later said, and found similar passages about "the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise . . ." In his "Reformation breakthrough" he came to recognize that God acted in the gospel to give away his righteousness. That was profoundly different from God acting in the law to demand righteousness from

us. Luther's insight had tremendous implications for how we read the Bible, how we engage with the Bible's message, and how we live as Christians in the world.

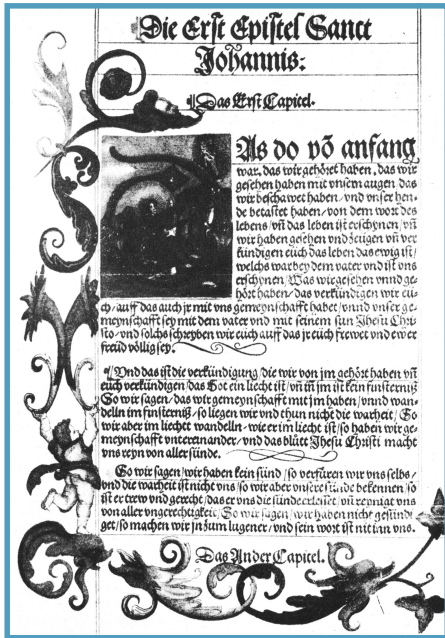
### ☀ How Luther Read the Bible

For Luther, God's two ways of dealing with humans—law and gospel—gave both content and shape to the biblical message and provided the proper lens for reading the Bible. He recognized that truly understanding the biblical text always rested on fundamental principles of Christian teaching or doctrine. But he also understood these principles to arise from the Bible itself rather than from the mind of the reader. Today we may struggle with the idea that certain core Christian beliefs shape the way we read the biblical text. But Luther and other theologians through the centuries recognized that this is true. Luther always tried to make his presuppositions clear, to show his readers that they

originated in the Bible itself, and to show that they truly helped the hearer and reader to understand the biblical message.

## ☀ Law and Gospel in the Bible

Luther recognized both law and gospel as God's good ways of working in the lives of humans. Sometimes he equated the Old Testament with law and the New Testament with gospel, but more often he recognized that law and gospel were found in both parts of the Bible. God gives us the law to teach us to fear, love, and trust in God above all. The law also helps us to order society, to curb evil, and



Facsimile of a page of the New Testament printed in 1523.

to provide a standard of righteousness that guides human life. God gives the law so that we may know what good works please God. Luther recognized that some laws in the Bible were outdated or did not apply in his time and place. But he never dismissed biblical laws lightly and never merely because they were inconvenient or difficult. He taught that the biblical laws were one valid expression of the natural law governing humanity, law that could vary according to time and place. Most importantly for Luther, our failure to live up to God's law also reveals our sin and puts to shame all our assumptions about our own human ability! This function (or "use") of the law drove humans to the promise of the gospel.

The gospel is the gracious promise of God in Christ. It grants forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to the fallen and unworthy sinner. To read the Bible with the gospel as its heart is to "urge Christ" in each biblical text. "The Scriptures," Luther stated, "must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures." And again: "If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law

would have to be let go, not Christ."<sup>2</sup> Like Christian interpreters since the earliest era of the church, Luther understood Jesus Christ to be the center of Scripture. Christ was found throughout Scripture, not just in the New Testament. For many prior interpreters Christ was primarily an example to be imitated. But Luther saw Christ first and foremost as gift (gospel) and only secondarily as example (law). For him, this carried very personal implications:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you . . . recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you . . . This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content . . . Now when you

have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you . . . Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian.<sup>3</sup>

## ☀ Is the Bible the Word of God?

Repeatedly, Luther warned against confusing law and gospel, demand and promise, example and gift, when interpreting Scripture: “It is not yet knowledge of the gospel when you know these doctrines and commandments, but only when the voice comes that says, ‘Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do.’”<sup>4</sup>

So Luther never simply equated the Word of God (both law and gospel) with the written Scriptures. On the contrary, he taught that the word of God is essentially oral in character; it is a “living voice.” In a famous passage from the *Church Postil* of 1522, Luther contrasts Moses as a writer of “doctrine” with Christ, who commanded that his teaching “should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written.” That the New Testament finally took written form is, for Luther, evidence of “a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us....”<sup>5</sup>

Where is the Word then? Luther believed that all humanity, all institutions, including the church, are affected by the hurly-burly of events and infected with sin. God’s Word is mingled with and hidden under the forces that oppress the church at all times and places. God’s Word is realized in the community of faith only because the Word itself acts in us. It forms in us confession of faith, a loving response to divine grace. Although that has been true from Adam to the present day, knowledge and proper understanding of God’s Word are not a continuous, unbroken achievement of the church. Rather, our knowledge of God is best understood as God’s gift, which draws the spontaneous response of the Christian community to the gospel. It is a response created within the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit’s work in the Word. God, not doctrinal propositions, a pope, or a succession of bishops, provides faithfulness in the church. Therefore, under the guidance of the Spirit, responsible faith requires critical discernment of the text of Scripture, not just listening to the traditions of the church.<sup>6</sup>

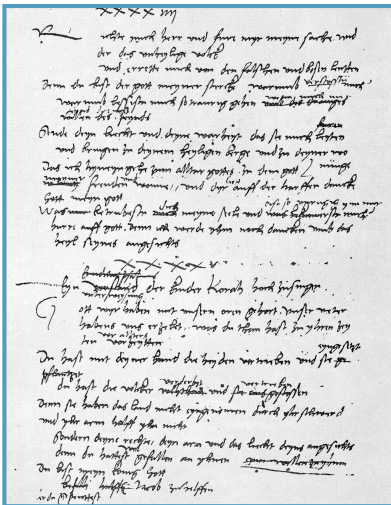


Genesis. Fontispiece Depicting the Creation,  
From the Luther Bible, 1st edition, 1534.

## Discerning the Scriptures

Luther sought to discern or understand the meaning of biblical texts within his overall theological framework. At the same time he paid close attention to a number of factors, including historical context and literary style. “For before one learns the reason and the motive for what a man says, it is only letters, the shouts of choristers or the songs of nuns. . . .There are many passages in Holy Scripture that are contradictory according to the letters; but when that which motivates them is pointed out, everything is all right.”<sup>7</sup> This sense of context even extends to individual authors of Scripture and their differences. In speaking of understanding Paul, for example, Luther declares:

The histories in the Scriptures are often concise and confused so that they cannot be easily harmonized, as, for example, the denials of Peter and the history of Christ’s Passion, etc. Thus Paul is not reciting the entire history here. Therefore I do not expend any labor or concern on harmonizing these things, but here pay attention to Paul’s purpose and intention.<sup>8</sup>



Luther’s manuscript of Psalm 43 from his translation of the Bible.

Luther generally rejected the medieval method of interpreting Scripture, which sought four meanings—literal, allegorical, moral, and eschatological—in every text. He used and encouraged others to use the latest and best critical tools for understanding Scripture and making it available to everyone. His own translations of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts into German are one of the greatest achievements of his age. But while emphasizing the literal meaning, Luther was open to understanding texts in other ways when necessary, and he was willing to admit that he did not fully understand some biblical texts. He realized his readers might have trouble with the style of some texts, but he encouraged them to persevere in understanding Scripture, confident that Christ, the true center and treasure of Scripture, will shine forth. In his *Preface to the Old Testament* he wrote:

I beg and really caution every pious Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and stories frequently encountered there, but fully realize that, however simple they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the majesty, power, and wisdom of the most high God. For these are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple . . . Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling cloths

and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.<sup>9</sup>

Luther's focus on Christ as the true treasure of Scripture and the Bible as the "swaddling cloths" that contain Christ does not in any way demean Scripture or lessen its importance. Luther exalted the authority of Scripture in no uncertain terms. The Word of God was his primary weapon against all the powers that threatened him—whether the cosmic powers of sin, death, and the devil, or the earthly powers of a corrupted church, scheming politicians, or inept or heretical theologians. Leaders of the church, regardless of rank, must subordinate themselves to its witness: "The Pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture."<sup>10</sup>

## Scripture Interprets Itself

Luther believed that Scripture was clear. If humans do not understand it, the problem is the interpreter, not Scripture. His belief in the clarity of Scripture had two important aspects. First, the literal sense of Scripture is identical with its historical content. There is no going behind the text in order to discover a different event than the event reported. Indeed, the question does not even arise. Second, the Bible has a universal and immediate sense, granted by the Holy Spirit and recognized by the eyes of faith that rises above historical conditions and events.



Babylon burning. From the *Apocalypse of Saint John* (Rev. 18).  
Luther Bible. First edition. ca. 1530.

Luther heard biblical texts as speaking both to the time in which they were written and to his own time. On the basis of these assumptions, especially the second, Luther attacked the theology of his time and the church of the papacy. He did so with the confidence that his doctrine was identical with the doctrine of Scripture, which is the doctrine of God. "Doctrine is heaven; life is earth."<sup>11</sup>

According to Luther's view of revelation, history—or at least "true" history, the history that brings knowledge of God, is sure and certain. This is the *historia sacra* (sacred history) of Bible and church that is eternal, unchanging, and ever-present. It is the word of God contained in the Scriptures and the community of those who respond to this word. It may be hidden because of the ways of the world and even the power of the church, but it is there for the eyes of faith.

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## ☀ Scripture for the People

Luther wanted all Christians to hear, read, learn, and understand the Bible. He worked hard to aid them in this endeavor. He wrote his *Small Catechism*, in part, as an introduction to the Scriptures. He wrote prefaces for the Old and New Testaments as well as prefaces for biblical books to help readers focus on the central themes concerning law and gospel.<sup>12</sup> He inserted marginal notes; some of

these simply identified persons, places, and terms while others dealt with theological issues, chiefly “issues of law and gospel, faith and works, Christian freedom and promise.”<sup>13</sup> Illustrations (woodcuts) with teaching themes furthered the reader’s understanding.



Title page of the first edition of Luther’s translation of the Bible, 1534.

Luther made clear that some parts of the Bible were more important and/or clear than others; Luther suggested that Christians devote themselves especially to John’s Gospel, Paul’s epistles (especially Romans), and 1 Peter, remarking:

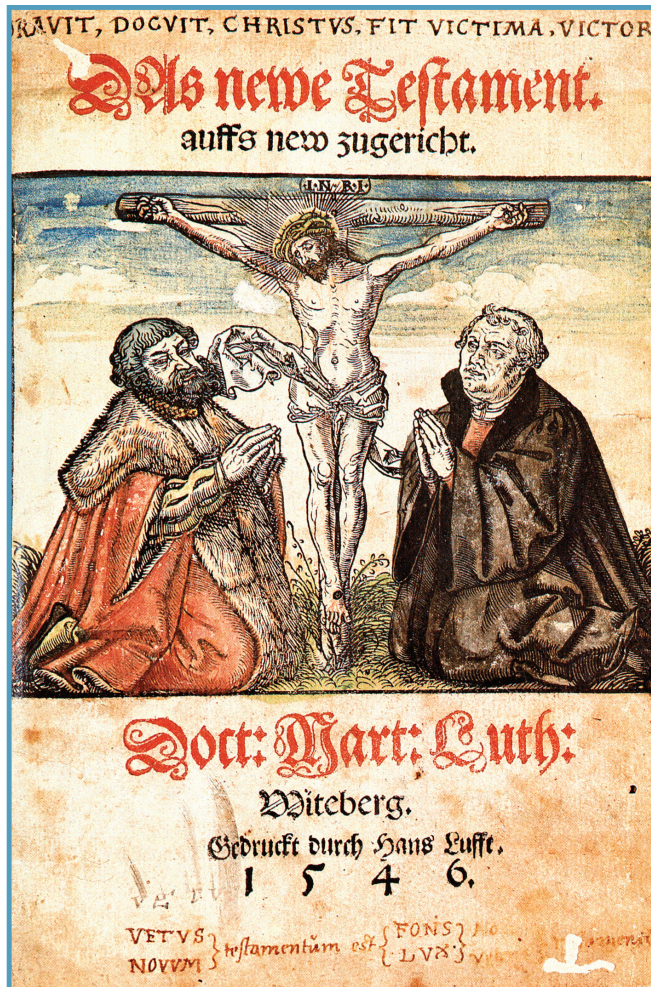
They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard.<sup>14</sup>

Luther worked on and completed his translation of the New Testament into German while in hiding at the Wartburg Castle in 1521-22. He translated from Erasmus’ Greek text, rather than the Latin Vulgate used by medieval scholars. After returning to Wittenberg, he and other reformers worked on the translation of the Old Testament. They published portions of it as they finished them; the entire Old Testament was not completed until 1535. Luther’s was not the first translation of the Bible into German, but it was the first to gain wide acceptance. This was due largely to Luther’s skill as a translator and his desire to make his translation truly speak the language of the people:

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German. . . . Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.<sup>15</sup>

Luther was convinced that God would continue to use Scripture to speak to and work among individuals and communities. As he wrote in his *Large Catechism*:

God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy . . . At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints.<sup>16</sup>



Luther and his last elector John Frederick kneel at the foot of Christ's cross. Color woodcut from the 1546 Wittenberg edition of the New Testament, which Luther had himself edited. The top line is in Latin: "He prayed, he taught, Christ the Victor gave himself as victim." At the bottom, also in Latin, are the obviously handwritten words: "The Old and New Testaments are font and light."

- 1 Preface to the Old Testament (1545); *Luther's Works (LW)* 35: 242.
- 2 Theses concerning Faith and Law (1535); *LW* 34: 112.
- 3 A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521); *LW* 35: 119-120.
- 4 Preface to the New Testament (1546); *LW* 35: 360-361.
- 5 Church Postil, Sermon on the Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matthew 2[1-12] (1521), *LW* 52: 205-206.
- 6 On the Councils and the Church (1539), *LW* 41: 139.
- 7 *LW* 41: 53-54.
- 8 Lectures on Galatians (1535), *LW* 26: 62.
- 9 *LW* 35: 236.
- 10 Lectures on Galatians (1535); *LW* 26: 58.
- 11 Lectures on Galatians (1535); *LW* 27: 41.
- 12 Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 116.
- 13 Edwards, 118.
- 14 Preface to the New Testament (1522); *LW* 35: 362.
- 15 On Translating: An Open Letter (1530); *LW* 35: 189.
- 16 The Large Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 399.



# CHRONOLOGY

## Luther and the Bible

1483	November 10: Born in Eisleben, Germany	1524	January: Old Testament translation—Joshua to Esther—published
1502	September: Is awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree		Luther's sermons on 2 Peter and Jude from 1523 published
1505	May: Receives his Master of Arts degree and begins study of law		September: Psalms published
	July: Enters Augustinian cloister in Erfurt		October: Job and Song of Songs published
1507	Is ordained and celebrates his first Mass	1524–26:	Lectures on the minor prophets
1512	October: Receives Doctor of Theology degree and becomes Professor of Bible at Wittenberg	1526	March: Jonah published
1513	Fall: Begins lectures on Psalms		June: Habakkuk published
1515	Fall: Begins lectures on Romans		Lectures on Ecclesiastes
1516	Fall: Begins lectures on Galatians	1526–28:	Luther's Postil on the Gospel and epistle texts for the church year and festivals appear
1517	April: Completes first biblical translation of seven penitential psalms	1527	February: Begins translation on Isaiah Lectures on 1 John, Titus, Philemon
	Fall: Begins lectures on Hebrews	1528	January: Publication of Zechariah
	October 31: Posts 95 Theses		October: Isaiah and revised Psalm translation published
1521	April: Appears at Diet of Worms		Lectures on 1 Timothy
	May: Begins his stay at the Wartburg Castle		Begins lectures on Isaiah (completed 1530)
	Luther's commentary on the gospel texts appointed for Advent, the Advent Postil in Latin	1529	June: Wisdom of Solomon published Provides preface to the German translation of Philip Melancthon's commentary on Colossians
	December: Begins translation of the New Testament	1530	Daniel published
1522	March: Sends completed translation to Philip Melancthon for proof and correction	1530–31:	Lectures on Song of Solomon
	Summer: Translation of New Testament printed Begins translation of Old Testament	1531	Lectures on Galatians
	September: New Testament translation published	1532	Complete translation of Old Testament Prophets published
	December: Revised and improved New Testament translation published	1532–35	Lectures on selected Psalms
1523	July: First part of Old Testament translation—the Five Books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy)—published	1533	Apocryphal books Sirach, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and First Maccabees published
	At Luther's insistence, a printer in Haguenau, France, publishes Philip Melancthon's lectures on the Gospel of John	1534	September: Full Bible with most of the Apocrypha published in Wittenberg
	Sermons on 1 Peter from 1522 are published	1534–45	Eleven editions of the full Bible in High German published
	Lectures on Deuteronomy	1535–45	Lectures—with interruptions—on Genesis
		1544	A revised edition of Luther's Postil on the Gospel and epistle texts for the church year published
		1546	February 18: Dies at age 62 in his hometown of Eisleben, Germany

For information in the chronology see, James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 21–28; D. Martin Luther, *Die gantze Heilige Schrift Deudsch*, Wittenberg 1545, ed. Hans Volz, Heinz Blanke, Friedrich Kur (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972) 138–142.

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