

Martin Luther: An Evangelical Professor of the Old Testament



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The modern inheritor of Martin Luther's theological reform tends to think of Luther in New Testament terms. "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom. 3:28). *Sola fide*. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8). *Sola gratia*. Luther was the champion of the clear, unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ, expressed in an especially understandable way by the inspired pen of St. Paul. He rejoiced to at last be at peace when he heard the words *iustitia dei*. Indeed, since the Latin proverb is true ["The New Testament is hidden in the Old. And the Old Testament is revealed in the New."], it often seems that Luther's thought as well as our consideration of his work focus on the complete revelation of saving righteousness in Jesus Christ, the books of the New Testament. Without much trouble, we remember his "September Testament" (the incredibly swift and accurate German translation of the New Testament -- 1522) or Luther's famous lectures on Romans and Galatians. These are quite likely among the few Luther volumes which adorn our bookshelves.

The "setup" is obvious. While it is statistically true that Luther preached "thirty times as many sermons on New Testament texts as Old Testament ones," it is also true that of the thirty-two years he spent as a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg, all but three or four were spent on the Old Testament (Bornkamm 7-8). In fact, if we were asked to categorize the reformer's work as a "Doctor of Theology," it would be most accurate to call him a Professor of Old Testament Studies. We have arrived at the scope of our study. Our goal is to highlight this important aspect of Luther's work which is so often slighted. We will review essential history as we select certain unique perspectives which Luther brought to Old Testament study. We will do our best to let Luther speak. Since we bear the Lutheran heritage, we will do well to learn from Luther a keen appreciation for the Old Testament and the study of Hebrew as he used them throughout his career as a professor at the University of Wittenberg.

Without question, Martin Luther's monastic training, which began in 1505, gave him a working knowledge of the Old Testament. He was schooled in the Latin of the Vulgate. He learned the interpretations of the early church fathers Jerome and Origen. But a knowledge of the original Hebrew was lacking. The medieval curriculum, or *via antiqua*, was not much interested in Hebrew. An unknown French monk of the Middle Ages was quoted by an historian as saying, "...as for the Hebrew language, anybody who learns it becomes a Jew" (Koenig 845). Renaissance learning, however, brought a revival of the language arts. It was the goal of renaissance humanism to get at the true and original text. A

year after Luther's entrance into the Augustinian order, Johann Reuchlin published his Hebrew grammar. From this book Luther gained a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew. Advanced courses at the University of Erfurt furthered his contact with the biblical languages.

Brother Martin's grasp of Hebrew remained rather basic until 1512, when it was decided by the order that Luther should fill the position of "Doctor of Theology" at the Wittenberg University. It would be his responsibility to faithfully lecture on the Old and New Testaments. Conscience and duty forced him into more serious language study. In the university setting he could draw on the knowledge of colleagues who were specialists in the area of language. Wittenberg, in fact, had offered Hebrew since 1502 (Koenig 847).

Luther's initial series of lectures were on the Psalms. While he relied heavily on the Vulgate, he was beginning to realize the value of Hebrew. By 1517, Professor Luther had translated the penitential Psalms into German, not on the basis of the Latin text (as all the German translations had before), but on the basis of the Hebrew. This was just the beginning of Luther's work with the Hebrew text. He did not seriously undertake to begin a complete Old Testament translation until 1522 (LW 35:228). Translation of the Old Testament would continue sporadically until the entire German Bible was ready for its first run in 1534 (Koenig 848).

Rev. Walter Koenig (to whom I am particularly indebted for historical information by way of his 1953 essay "Luther as a Student of Hebrew") found this insightful comment from Luther regarding the study of the O.T. language: "I have learned more Hebrew in my own reading and comparing words and passages in the original than by going merely by the rules of grammar" (847). How do we, modern teachers and preachers, use our knowledge of Hebrew? A review of Luther's Old Testament work can hardly escape the diligence with which the reformer applied himself to Biblical study. The very Word of God was written in Hebrew. It became imperative to be able to truly say he understood what God was communicating through the Hebrew language of the Old Testament writers.

All diligence aside, many scholars have and will continue to criticize Luther as a second-rate Hebrew scholar. They maintain that he was largely indebted to his Wittenberg friends -- Melancthon, Aurogallus, Amsdorf, Jonas, Bugenhagen and Cruciger, to name a few -- for the difficult decisions involved in translating Hebrew. It is true that Luther requested and used the advice of other scholars. He as much as admits this, for instance, when he uses "we" and "our" throughout his *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms* (LW 35:209-223). At the close of his *Preface to the Old Testament* Luther states: "For I too have not worked at this alone, but have used the services of anyone whom I could get" (LW 35:250,251). But the chief task of translation was his. It was he who struggled to make Moses and the Prophets speak German. "I freely admit that I have

undertaken too much, especially in trying to put the Old Testament into German. ...Though I cannot boast of having achieved perfection, nevertheless, I venture to say that this German Bible is clearer and more accurate at many points than the Latin" (LW 35:249).

He was quite confident that the translation that would bear his name was in line with the sense of the original Hebrew. Luther took the lead in defending his translation of the Old Testament and was willing to match wits with anyone who challenged him on the basis of the Hebrew, even Jewish rabbis and grammarians (LW 35:209). Generally a modest man, Luther was quite sure of the skill with which his German translation of the Old Testament was rendered. He wrote at the close of the *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms*:

Well there is no need to give such justification for every word. We have truly spared no energy or effort. Whoever can do it better, more power to him. But I expect that if he does not make use of our little Psalter, he will translate the psalms in such a way that there will not be much German or Hebrew left in them. If you compare his psalter with this one of ours, you should be able to see that. You will discover his peculiar skill, that of stealing our words. He is a disgraceful and repulsive fellow, this Master Know-it-all (LW 35:221).

We must also remember that Luther's work on the translation underwent constant revision. He wanted to retain the literal rendering of the Hebrew and, at the same time, clearly express the meaning. His principle: understand the Hebrew, then ask how the German would say it. In order to do this well, the translator will seek the counsel of fellow scholars. Certainly Luther's interest in Hebrew was a practical one. But that does not make him less a scholar. We should not doubt that Professor Luther knew his Hebrew. This point becomes especially important when we explore Luther's Old Testament exegetical method. His lectures were not bound to the work of previous interpreters. His interpretation was based on the literal, grammatical Word set in historical context. He could speak with assurance, "Thus saith the Lord."

Luther's Old Testament accomplishments included much more than just translation. As stated above, the great majority of his classroom lectures concentrated on Old Testament books. We may ask at this point, "What did Luther find so specially attractive in the Old Testament?" Indeed, it seems that Luther did sense a certain kinship with the Old Testament. Celebrated Luther scholar, Heinrich Bornkamm, whose book Luther and the Old Testament is a standard in the field of Luther studies, details this phenomenon in a concise chapter under the heading "The Old Testament as Mirror of Life" (11-44). The title is an accurate summary. For Luther, the Old Testament was not just "worthless

and dead talk" (LW 35:265). It was life. It showed a living God in action. Much more than the New Testament, the Old Testament was filled with examples of kingdoms that rose and fell under the control of the almighty God. The Old Testament explored the wonder and power of nature, a theme rarely present in New Testament writing. The Old Testament offered full and complete pictures of faith in action. Luther loved these concrete stories of the patriarchs and kings and prophets. This was reality and history, not philosophy. He began his *Preface to the Psalter*:

I hold, however, that no finer book of examples or of the legends of the saints has ever come, or can come, to earth than the Psalter. If one were to wish that from all the examples, legends, and histories, the best should be collected and brought together and put in the best form, the result would have to be the present Psalter (253,254).

Luther completed this *Preface* with the following comments:

Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts of fair and happy thoughts toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them....In a word, if you would see the holy Christian Church painted in living color and shape, comprehended in one little picture, then take up the Psalter. There you have a fine, bright, pure mirror that will show you what Christendom is. Indeed you will find in it also yourself and the true *gnothi seauton*, as well as God himself and all creatures (255-257).

Clearly Luther relished the opportunities to speak about the Psalms -- it was quite probably his favorite Old Testament book -- but he also spoke in similar ways about the rest of the Hebrew Scripture. Luther saw the Old Testament describe not only the external events of the world but also the inner conflicts of mankind. Since he had himself experienced the inner struggles of *Anfechtung*, he appreciated the soul-bearing of the Psalms and the internal turmoil of the Prophets. Bornkamm astutely comments, "...he never shrank from finding himself and his world directly addressed and described by Scripture" (19). That is why much of Luther's Old Testament interpretations seems so timely, fresh and

pointed. The reader of Luther is always impressed by his ability to apply the Scripture. For him the conditions in Germany, the apostasy of the papacy and the threat of the Turk could be clearly understood by what was described as already having historically happened in the Word of God. He was not afraid to interpret current events in light of Scripture, even if the events of Scripture happened thousands of years before. Circumstances may change, but mankind and God do not. While today's exegetes admire Luther's courageous applications of Scripture, many tend to think that he was too bold. General applications are safer than specific. But it is precisely Luther's ability to be specific which makes his often tedious and long-winded explanations interesting. Perhaps we can learn this art from Luther.

It is also quite true that Luther perceived a close association with the Prophets. On occasion, he likened himself to Isaiah (Bornkamm 29). He was particularly in tune with the work and messages of Habakkuk, because of the confidence with which the prophet held to the Word, and Jonah, because of the inner conflict involved.

Luther the linguist loved the picture language of the Hebrew. Images, for example, of the "horn" for "strength," or the expression "soul" for "man," stirred Luther's already vivid imagination (Bornkamm 40,41). He recognized the art involved in the conventions and tendencies of the language. Hebraisms like parallelism and the use of concrete words to explain abstract ideas (eg. "heart" for "faith") particularly impressed him as a student of language. Dr. Luther's lecture notes are filled with vivid word studies and analyses. There was a certain "earthy," common quality about the language of the Old Testament which appealed to him.

And never mind that the Old Testament could seem to repeat the same message so often so as to produce boredom (one might be tempted at times to suggest the same of our beloved Luther! -- his 1532 "lecture" on Psalm 2 covers 90 pages in the American Edition); Luther as much as admitted this. Boring or not, the Old Testament was still the Word of God. Consider Luther's comments from his notes on Deuteronomy:

It is certainly an extensive and wordy exhortation. Here, just as elsewhere, he often repeats the same thing. If an ordinary reader who does not understand what it is about were present, he could not help being offended. It is for us to restrain the feeling of boredom, for we know that it is the Word of God we hear. To hear God is joy, even if he were to sound out the same syllable all the time; how much more so when he speaks such a variety of things and with such care! Therefore we must, with trembling, pay attention not only to the words, but most especially to the person of the speaker, namely, God (Bornkamm 39, quoting LW 9:48).

According to Luther's understanding, what did God say in the Old Testament? Against the background of the historical sketch which highlighted Luther's interest in Hebrew, we attempt to outline a couple of Luther's insights into the Old Testament, his unique approach to commentary on the Hebrew Scripture, as well as his view of the Old Testament as the Word of God. Excuse any shortcomings of progression as we proceed. There are truly so many profitable comments and insights in Luther's work that it can be difficult to pick out a relevant few for our study.

When Dr. Luther set about the task of preparing an Old Testament translation, he also included (as had past translations) a few words of introduction. These *Prefaces* are an invaluable resource since Luther was forced to give concise historical and theological background to the Hebrew canon. These give the heart of Luther's theology. As a starting point we offer this well-known gem from his *Preface to the Old Testament*:

Know, then, that the Old Testament is a book of laws, which teaches what men are to do and not to do--and in addition gives examples and stories of how these laws are kept or broken--just as the New Testament is gospel or a book of grace, and teaches where one is to get the power to fulfil the law. Now in the New Testament there are also given, along with the teaching about grace, many other teachings that are laws and commandments for the control of the flesh--since in this life the Spirit is not perfected and grace alone cannot rule. Similarly in the Old Testament too there are, beside the laws, certain promises and words of grace, by which the holy fathers and prophets under the law were kept, like us, in the faith of Christ. Nevertheless just as the chief teaching of the New Testament is really the proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, so the chief teaching of the Old Testament is really the teaching of laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good. You should expect this in the Old Testament (LW 35:236,237).

Essentially, Luther confesses that the Old and New Testaments both proclaim law and gospel. While he professes a distinction in the "chief teaching" of the two Testaments, he also clearly maintains that there is a unity between them. In other words, contrary to the understanding of some, the Old Testament did not declare one way of salvation and the New another. Luther saw salvation in Jesus Christ present everywhere in the Scripture. He was fond of declaring that "Moses was a Christian." There is hardly a preface to any book of the Old Testament which does not mention how the particular book preaches Christ. But this is not always clear from the Old Testament text itself since Christ is hidden by way of promise and prophecy. So Luther spent a tremendous amount of time and ink to rightly explain the law and gospel of the Old Testament. In order to do this Luther had to break with the hermeneutical method of the

past which saddled the church with spiritualizing at the expense of reality. The hermeneutics of the ancient church followed a pattern of four meanings: 1) the literal, 2) the allegorical or "spiritual" sense which referred to the church, 3) the tropological or "moral" sense with special reference to the individual, and 4) the anagogical, the future or end-time meaning (Bornkamm 87,88). It was the allegorical and tropological senses of the Scripture that were championed by the church fathers, at the expense of the literal and historical meaning. Their interpretations tended to moralize. Scholars have lauded Luther for his ability to throw off the shackles of this hermeneutical formula. He let the Word of God speak for itself. Luther stressed the literal understanding of the words and the historical context. Luther's general principle of interpretation is summarized in his opening commentary *On the Last Words of David*:

In brief, if we do not apply all diligence to interpret the Hebrew Bible, wherever that is feasible, in the direction of the New Testament, in opposition to the interpretation of the rabbis, it would be better to keep the old translation (which, after all, retains, thanks to the New Testament, most of the good elements)...(LW 15:270).

We will return for a closer review of Luther's principles of interpretation after a look at Luther's special gift for insight into the text of Scripture. Since so many scholars had difficulty understanding Moses (Luther's term for the Pentateuch) and his lawgiving with New Testament eyes, Luther offered this bit of logical wisdom:

So Moses himself has told us that his office and teaching should endure until Christ, and then cease, when he says in Deuteronomy 18[15-19], "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brethren--him shall you heed," etc. This is the noblest saying in all of Moses, indeed the very heart of it all. The apostles appealed to it and made great use of it to strengthen the gospel and to abolish the law [Act 3:22; 7:37]. All the prophets, as well, drew heavily upon it. For since God here promises another Moses whom they are to hear, it follows of necessity that this other one would teach something different from Moses; and Moses gives up his power and yields to him, so that men will listen to him. This [coming] prophet cannot, then, teach the law, for Moses has done that to perfection; for the law's sake there would be no need to raise up another prophet. Therefore this word was surely spoken concerning Christ and the teaching of grace.

It was not to be argued that the Old Testament contained many laws and commands from the mouth of God. As such they were also the Word of God. But, Luther contended, the interpreter must

understand to whom they were written. These applied only to the Jews according to God's divine plan. This was the "old covenant." Christ ushered in the "new covenant." All of the Old Testament law code, except for God's enduring moral will, was abolished in Christ. This was historical exegesis; this was Christological exegesis. On this very subject of understanding the Old Testament law, Brother Martin's treatise *How Christians Should Regard Moses* is a must-read for every Bible student. We may begin to realize why Luther seems to have preferred to use terms like "old covenant and new covenant" rather than the chronological division of the Old and New Testament as books written during a certain time period. Or if he used the term "testament," he would not use it in a chronological sense. We return to his commentary on Deuteronomy.

Here Moses points out the difference between the New and the Old Testament. The New Testament is the older one, promised from the beginning of the world, yes, "before the times of the world" as St. Paul says to Titus [1:2], but fulfilled only under Christ. The Old Testament, promised under Moses, was fulfilled under Joshua. However, there is this difference between the two: the New Testament is founded wholly on the promise of the merciful and faithful God without our works; but the Old Testament is founded also on our works.... The promises of Moses, therefore, do not last longer than the statutes and judgments serve. For this reason the Old Testament finally had to become obsolete and had to be put aside; it had to serve as a prefiguration of that New and eternal Testament which began before the ages and will endure beyond the ages. The Old Testament, however, began in time and after a time came to an end (Bornkamm 81, quoting LW 9:63).

We also witness Martin Luther's keen Old Testament mind in his interpretation of the First Commandment. An understanding of how Luther explained the First Commandment is important when we recognize that much of Luther's Old Testament commentary makes reference to the First Commandment as a standard by which to measure and judge the rest of Scripture. He liked to take what we have come to consider the prologue in Exodus 20: "I am the LORD your God," and the commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me," together. He saw in this commandment both command and promise. This brief verse offered both law and gospel. It was an invaluable key to understanding the unity of Scripture as it constantly directed the sinner toward Christ. Professor Luther's lecture notes on Psalm 90 contain this insight:

This is the rule and certain principle: wherever Scripture refers to the First Commandment, it is to be applied to Christ, who says in Matthew 22[:32], "God is not a God of the dead." Wherever there is a reference to the First

Commandment, you should know for certain that eternal life and the resurrection of the dead is referred to in veiled language. Thus there are other passages in this psalm [indicating] that the lawgiver teaches and shows, in veiled but unmistakable language, a remedy against death (Bornkamm, 167, quoting LW 13:81).

With such an understanding, the First Commandment can have application to the whole of Scripture, sin and grace, judgment and salvation, wrath and love. What seems to be a contradictory picture of God in this view of the First Commandment, is only comprehended in Christ, by faith. While it is natural to emphasize the law aspect of this great command, we might learn from Luther to teach the complete picture of command and promise contained in a wider view of the First Commandment.

The bold generalization that Luther interpreted the Old Testament with New Testament vision is entirely true. He was, of course, not the first to see Christ revealed in the pages of the Old Testament. What seems to make Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament unique is the completeness and clarity with which he saw Christ in the Hebrew Scripture. Without a doubt Luther saw Christ absolutely everywhere in the history and prophecy of the Old Testament. We might even argue that he often stretches the imagination to interpret in view of Christ. But for Luther God was both a hidden (*deus absconditus*) and an omnipresent God. Indeed, since God revealed himself in the "hiddenness" of simple signs and promises, and since Christ was true God, described by the apostle John as the Word, Luther found Christ present everywhere in the history of Old Testament. Bornkamm offers this insight: "He [Luther] never faltered for even a moment in finding the Christ of the new covenant already promised and anticipated in overwhelming profusion in the old covenant. ...Luther made such comprehensive use of the prophetic application, in his firm conviction that all of Scripture is filled with secret references to Christ, that it can in no way be sufficiently documented through single examples. ...The preponderance of this Christocentric sense of the text was so great that Luther even decided that debatable passages conformed to it" (96,97). As a "single example," we might consider Luther's notes on Psalm 19:5. The psalm contains David's fanciful picture of God's glory in the wonder of the "heavens." The last part of verse four (NIV) reads: "In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun." Luther interprets:

Here David returns to the symbolic description and as is customary in jolly poems, he gaily mingles symbolic and literal language. By "sun" he means a symbolic reference to Christ. Previously he had thought of heaven. Therefore he now mentions the prince of heaven, the sun, and indicates by this that His kingdom will extend under all the heaven. For he says that a tent has been set for the sun in heaven, that

is, that Christ will reign and rule in all the lands that will believe in Christ, and that the holy Christian Church will be as broad as the world (LW 12:141).

Furthermore, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Luther's entire reform was based on a proper distinction between law and gospel. As such it was necessary that he have a clear command of the Old Testament. An error of interpretation would mean an error of doctrine. So he sought to dig into the depths of the Old Testament without clouding the text in finding "meaning." It is at this point that he parted company with church fathers like Jerome and Origen whose "spiritualizing" of the Old Testament eventually led to a misunderstanding of God's command and promise, and ultimately of Christ.

This point takes us into the realm of hermeneutics and exegesis. And this will lead us into the primary area of controversy among Luther scholars.

Our prior comments regarding Luther's hermeneutics need further explanation. While it is true that he stressed the literal interpretation of the words together with an understanding of the context in which the Word was written, it is also true that he saw a "spiritual sense" in much of the Old Testament. It was difficult to abandon allegory altogether. If Luther is to appear "schizophrenic" anywhere in his writing, it will be on this point. On the one hand, he could say in his lectures on *Genesis*, "His [Moses'] purpose is to teach us, not about allegorical creatures and an allegorical world but about real creatures and a visible world apprehended by the senses" (LW 1:5). Or use as a motto for his students: "Beware of allegories" (LW Intro. to Exegetical Writings:89). On the other hand, we could find him launching into an allegorical interpretation of Deuteronomy in which Moses not crossing the Jordan meant that the law does not lead to the kingdom of God (Bornkamm 93). Luther defended his use of allegory in his notes on Deuteronomy.

This is done [the use of allegorical interpretation] when, according to the injunction of Romans 12[:6], prophecy is according to the analogy of faith. You first take a definite statement in the Scriptures, explain it according to the literal sense, and then at the end connect an allegorical meaning which says the same thing, not as though the allegory proved or supported the statement of doctrine, for it is proved or supported by the statement, just as a house does not hold up the foundation but is held up by the foundation (Bornkamm 92,93 quoting LW 9:25).

Can we understand from this why Luther would occasionally make use of allegory? Luther might occasionally be found exploring a deeper insight into a section of Scripture, especially the picture language of the Old Testament, to

emphasize and illustrate what was already established as true and fact on the basis of the rest of Scripture. In a lecture on Isaiah he explained:

One should think much, and magnificently, about history, but little about allegory. You should use allegory like a flower, for it illustrates the sermon rather than strengthens it.... In history you have complete as well as incomplete promises. Allegory does not establish doctrine, but like color, can only add to it. The painter's colors do not build the house. The human body does not consist of a wreath of flowers, or a beautiful garment, etc. This proves that faith is not grounded in allegories (Bornkamm 90, quoting from WA 31:97).

It has been taken for granted to this point that Dr. Luther believed that the Old Testament was the Word of God. If he did not have this understanding, he would not have considered the Old Testament Scripture to be authoritative. But it is at this point that many Luther scholars struggle to understand the reformer. They ask, "What does Luther mean by the Word of God?" I have, admittedly, leaned heavily on Bornkamm's overview of Luther's Old Testament work. This distinguished professor presents very helpful insights into Luther's study of Hebrew Scripture. It was, therefore, troubling and disheartening to read the "Postscript" of his book. He final paragraph reads:

It is an urgent matter for Christians to interpret the Old Testament correctly. Today [Bornkamm wrote during the 1930's and 40's] it is even more urgent than before because of the crisis that overshadows our relationship to it. Yet, our use of Luther's work has made this proper interpretation more important now than ever. His work has Christianized the Old Testament thoroughly, as we have seen. We cannot use it with a clear conscience much longer if we cannot give clear and new reasons to justify such an interpretation. If we take this task just as seriously as we take the inviolable truthfulness of historical research, then we can let go of the "swaddling clothes" of Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament and once again salvage the treasure in the manger (266).

Bornkamm has digested historical criticism. Not surprisingly, this same viewpoint is upheld in the companion volume to Luther's Works entitled *Introduction to the Exegetical Writings*. The author, Luther scholar Jaroslav Pelikan, makes a number of references to Bornkamm's book. They are of the same confused mindset. (Have you ever tried to comprehend exactly what a historical critic means to say!) Suffice it to say, they cannot believe in verbal inspiration. (Bornkamm calls inspiration a "crutch" that Luther did not use.) They cannot accept Luther's concept of history. They cannot embrace his

interpretation. They must, of necessity, question his understanding of Christ. These influential scholars propose that Luther would have allowed this. They bring Luther into their camp. So we ourselves are forced to wrestle with the question: What did Luther believe concerning the Old Testament? And how is it that we tend to nod approval at Luther's interpretation, while those in Bornkamm's camp "cannot use" Luther's interpretation?

Historical critics argue that Luther's stress on the historical gives license to their quest for the historical setting of the Hebrew Scripture. Luther, they might argue, did not know any better. But if he had, he certainly would have taken up their cause. As evidence they cite the fact that Luther questioned the accuracy of the Old Testament text. But text criticism is altogether different than piecing together the origin of the text. Luther's comments about the canon of Scripture (chiefly New Testament books) are taken to mean that he did not have a static understanding of inspiration and God's Word. The critics mistakenly "suppose that the Lutheran dogmatists of the age of orthodoxy were responsible for introducing the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration into the Church of the Augsburg Confession and thereby departed from Luther's attitude to Scripture" (Carter 520).

The inquisitive mind of the historical critic interprets Luther's interpretation. Luther's exegesis of the Hebrew word **דבר**, explains that the Hebrew mind conceived of more than the "uttered word," it also denoted a "thing" (LW 1:16). From this it is drawn that "Word of God" means much more than Scripture. We do not argue with this. There is certainly much more to the "Word" than only the written Scripture. Anglican Luther scholar, Douglas Carter, clearly explains in a 1961 paper entitled *Luther as Exegete*:

Scripture is therefore the Word of God, though the Word of God is not synonymous with Scripture. At this stage it becomes necessary for us to enquire more closely what Luther means by "the Word of God." He knew that to the Hebrew mind a word is action and event and that the most distinctive characteristic of the true God is that He speaks. Through His eternal Word He created the world, thereby setting the pattern for His future dealings with the world. In Jesus Christ the Word was made flesh: In Him God spoke the Word which redeems and creates. This same Word is continually recalled and enunciated in the church's proclamation. Scripture is this same Word in written form, necessary to sustain the oral proclamation and preserve it from error. God's Word comes to us therefore in twofold form, preached and written (520,521).

The critics, however, tend to stress Luther's understanding of the "thing" -- "deed" and "proclamation" -- at the expense of revelation and inspiration. So Christ becomes an "event" or "encounter" in the course of history. Since they view the

Scripture as a human account of God's history, it is not reliable. Interpretation, therefore, becomes relative and based on historical research.

What is outlined above is only a very brief attempt to understand how and why Lutheran theologians like Bornkamm and Pelikan can accurately describe Luther's thought and reject it at the same time. This topic clearly provides material for a future Luther study.

We would resolve any concern regarding Luther's belief in verbal inspiration by stating that his relative silence on the issue does not mean that he did not regard the Old or New Testaments to be inspired. He simply took that for granted. (Consult Luther's comments in the *Preface to the Scholia* from his first series of lectures on the Psalms -- LW 10:9,10.) At Luther's time no one ever really questioned the doctrine. Unlike the critic, we can nod assent to Luther's view of the Old Testament because by faith we accept it as he did -- as the Word of God.

Bornkamm may wish to "throw off the 'swaddling clothes' of Luther" in his ultimate quest for the truth. He was playing on words Luther used in his *Preface to the Old Testament*. As inheritor's of Luther's reform, we hold them dear.

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. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them (LW 35:236).

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