

Martin Luther's Biblical Commentary: New Testament

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Summary



Martin Luther's exposition of the Bible was not only fundamental to his academic vocation, it also stood at the very center of his reforming work. Through his interpretation of the New Testament, Luther came to a new understanding of the gospel, expressed most directly in the apostle Paul's teaching on justification. Considering the historical complexities of Luther's own recollections on the matter, it is quite clear that he regarded his time immersed in the writings of Paul as the turning point for his theology and his approach to the entire Scriptures (cf. LW 34:336f). Furthermore, Luther's interpretation of the New Testament was imbued with such force that it would influence the entire subsequent history of exegesis: colleagues, students, rivals, and opponents all had to reckon with it. However, as a professor, Luther's exegetical lectures and commentaries were more often concerned with the Old Testament. Most of Luther's New Testament interpretation is found in his preaching, which, following the lectionary, usually considered a text from one of the Gospels or Epistles. His reforms of worship in Wittenberg also called for weekly serial preaching on Matthew and John for the instruction of the people. From these texts, we have some of the richest sustained reflections on the Gospels in the 16th century. Not only was the substance of his interpretation influential, Luther's contribution to exegetical method and the hermeneutical problem also opened new possibilities for biblical interpretation that would resonate with both Christian piety and critical, early modern scholarship.

Luther's formal occupation was to comment on the Scriptures. For most of his life and throughout his entire academic career, Luther was a member of the University of Wittenberg's theology faculty, a *doctor in Biblia* with the solemn obligation to lecture on the sacred Scriptures. It has been observed that if Luther was in a modern university, he

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would have been a professor of Old Testament exegesis.¹ But of course, Luther was not in a modern university, and although most of his lectures and published commentaries were on Old Testament texts, this had more to do with the divisions of labor among the Wittenberg faculty than some formal distinction. In fact, Luther allocated many of the lectures on the New Testament to Philipp Melanchthon because of his proficiency in Greek. Thus, at Luther's prompting, Melanchthon attained his *baccalaureus biblicus* in September 1519, so that, having the right to lecture on the Bible and its theological content, he could take over most classes on the New Testament.

Nonetheless, Luther's most significant exegetical contribution to the theological reforms in the 16th century come from his expositions of the New Testament. His reassessment of Paul's teaching on justification became the touchstone for an entirely new reading of the Scriptures and a new Christian piety. The development of those crucial early years in Luther's thought are reflected by the principal documents of his first lectures in the New Testament—Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Even in his various lectures on the Old Testament, like the exegetical tradition before him, Luther refused to interpret the text in isolation from its canonical counterpart. Luther's commentary on the New Testament runs through his entire exegetical work.

This last point raises a further complication regarding Luther's exposition of the New Testament. Luther's biblical comment is not limited to his classroom lectures or published commentaries on biblical books. Sermons, devotional tracts, his translation of the Bible and their prefaces, polemical treatises, theological disputations, and personal letters all exhibit considerable engagement with the interpretation of the Bible. It is, in fact, indicative of his overall method and approach to reform that the interpretation of the Scriptures features so prominently in all his work. For example, his early doctrinal treatises on the Lord's Supper are largely fresh, detailed exegeses of Christ's words of institution as found in the synoptic Gospels and 1 Corinthians.² His comprehensive attack on the Roman sacramental system, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), alternates between sharp polemic and the reexamination of key biblical texts. Even his *Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences* leads with an exegetical argument about the meaning of Matthew 4:17: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said 'Repent' [*poenitentiam agite*], willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is

¹ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruch C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 7.

² *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, 1519, Luther's Works*, [hereafter, LW] eds. Lewis W. Spitz and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 45–73; and *Treatise on the New Testament*, 1520, LW 35:75–111.

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administered by the priests.”³ Thus, study of Luther’s New Testament exegesis requires an examination beyond his formal exegetical works.

Luther’s most extensive interpretation of the New Testament is found in his preaching. Luther had various preaching obligations continuously throughout his career, with his most intense responsibilities falling to him while the city pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), was away introducing reforms in other parts of Northern Europe during the years 1528–1529 (Braunschweig, Hamburg), 1530–1532 (Lübeck), 1534–1535 (Pomerania), and 1537–1539 (Denmark). The Sunday lectionary shaped Luther’s exposition, with his usual practice of taking up the assigned Gospel reading at the chief service in the morning and the Epistle reading for the afternoon’s sermon. But Luther also introduced regular serial preaching on weekdays as part of his reform of worship in Wittenberg. On Wednesdays the Gospel of Matthew was read and expounded, and on Saturdays it was the Gospel of John.

Yet even when limited to an examination of his published commentaries, one must be careful not to merge the genres of 16th-century exegesis with modern forms of biblical interpretation. Exegetical works can be presented as “commentaries” but also as “glosses” “annotations,” “*postilla*,” “paraphrases,” “explications,” or “*scholia*.”⁴ Luther preferred to call his published commentary on Galatians in 1519 an *enarratio*—a public telling and application of the text or a public testimony of his faith.⁵ His editors and printers, however, often controlled the title more than he did, casting the work into a genre that may have been strange to its original context or intent. Lecture notes could be collated into a “commentary” by his students, but so could a series of sermons.

Such caveats notwithstanding, the present article on Luther’s New Testament commentary is limited to Luther’s unpublished lectures, his published commentaries, and his sermon series that were published as a continuous commentary or annotation. While the genres of such exegetical works are not uniform, the context of their reception leans toward the formal interpretative task of the scholar and pastor rather than toward the popular devotional use of his other sermon collections (e.g., his various *Kirchenpostille* and *Hauspostille*). After offering a survey of Luther’s exegetical activity, this article provides a brief introduction to Luther’s approach to biblical interpretation to orient the reader to the basic assumptions and goals underlying Luther’s *exegetica*. This introduction

³ LW 31:25.

⁴ For a helpful analysis of the various terminology given to exegetical works see Kenneth Hagen, “What Did the Term *Commentarius* Mean to Sixteenth-Century Theologians?” in *Theorie et pratique de l’exegese*, eds. Irena Backus and Francis Higman (Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 1990), 13–38.

⁵ LW 27:159: “... is not so much a commentary as a testimony of my faith in Christ”; and *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter, WA), eds. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883ff.), 2: 449.

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is then followed by a more detailed synopsis of his various works on the New Testament, attending to some of their more distinctive features and themes.

Overview of Luther's Exegetical Activity

Luther began his career as a commentator on the Scriptures in 1513 with his inaugural lectures on the Psalter, the so-called *Dictata super psalterium*. For two academic years, he lectured on the Psalms, exploring a variety of themes, many of which would be taken up in later lectures. Questions about the biblical concepts of righteousness, justification, repentance, and faith were frequently raised; these questions arguably led him to shift to the Pauline writings in his subsequent lectures.⁶ In the fall semester of 1515, Luther began his lectures on Romans.⁷—a lecture that represents a significant moment in both Luther's personal theological development and in the history of biblical interpretation. New sources—for example, the Amerbach edition of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings (1506), and Erasmus' Greek New Testament, the *Novum Instrumentum* (1516)—combined with Luther's questions contributed to a fresh and critical interpretation of the apostle's doctrine of the gospel as well as his teaching on sin and the place and function of the law. Luther was aware that his particular reading of Paul was at variance with the dominant interpretation, but he was convinced enough of its truth that by the end of the lectures he was ready to correct Erasmus himself (albeit through private correspondence).⁸ Though the lectures were never published, the substance of his interpretation was made known to the rest of Wittenberg's faculty through a public disputation by one of Luther's students, Bartholomäus Bernhardi (1487–1551) on September 25, 1516.⁹

Soon after, Luther began a second set of Pauline lectures, this time on the Epistle to the Galatians.¹⁰ These lectures lasted from October 27, 1516, to March 13, 1517.¹¹ Here, Luther continued to develop themes from the Romans lectures, critically interacting most directly with Jerome's commentary on the epistle. In the following academic year, from the summer semester through the winter, Luther turned to what he believed was yet another Pauline text, the Epistle to the Hebrews.¹² While he conducted these lectures, Luther's critique of indulgence sales also became known with the publication of his *Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences*, thrusting the obscure monk and professor into the public eye. The controversy and legal process that followed disrupted the rhythm of

⁶ Cf. LW 34:336f.

⁷ LW 25:3–524; and WA 56:1–528.

⁸ LW 48:23–26; and WA BR 1:70–71.

⁹ *Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputata*; and WA 1:142–150.

¹⁰ WA 57/II:1–108.

¹¹ Cf. LW 48:27–32; and WA BR 1:72–73.

¹² LW 29:109–241; and WA 57/III:98–238.

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Luther's lecture activities, though it would spur his production of pamphlets, tracts, and treatises.

By the winter semester of 1518, Luther was simultaneously lecturing on the Psalms (for the second time), editing them for publication, and writing a commentary on Galatians based on his previous lectures. After numerous revisions of the latter, the Galatians commentary appeared in print in September of 1519.¹³ A scholarly work received with much anticipation, the commentary also set forth Luther's unique interpretation of Paul as part of his conflict with scholasticism and the papacy.

By this time, Melancthon began his biblical lectures in the theological faculty, taking over many of the lectures in the New Testament. Luther, however, would continue his lectures on the Psalms over the next several years while navigating the various contingencies of the formal case against him from Rome. In December of 1520, Luther began a German translation and detailed exposition of Luke 1:46–55, *The Magnificat*, as a gift for the young prince of Saxony, John Frederick. This work was finally published in August 1521, while Luther was in exile at the Wartburg, and it represents his first published commentary from the Gospels.¹⁴

After returning to Wittenberg, Luther took up the exposition of 1 Peter through a series of sermons delivered at the Sunday afternoon service.¹⁵ The sermons were probably begun in the spring/summer of 1522 and lasted the better part of the year. Caspar Cruciger (1504–1548), a student at Wittenberg at the time, is credited with having transcribed the sermons and editing them for publication as a continuous commentary in 1523.¹⁶ The publication of the commentary was under Luther's direction and included a preface that contended for the evangelical character of the epistle, namely that 1 Peter "is genuine and pure Gospel." This echoed his *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, published earlier that year with his Christmas sermons written while at the Wartburg, i.e., the *Weihnachtspostille*.¹⁷

Luther continued in this vein the following year, preaching on the epistles of 2 Peter and Jude from January 3 through March 1, 1523.¹⁸ Georg Rörer (1492–1557), another student

¹³ LW 27:153–410; and WA 2:445–618.

¹⁴ LW 21:297–358; and WA 7:538–604.

¹⁵ LW 30:3–145; and WA 12:259–399.

¹⁶ See WA 12:249. Georg Rörer, who arrived in Wittenberg as a student in 1522, notes in the Jena edition of Luther's collected works (1555) that it was Caspar Cruciger who transcribed and edited the sermons for publication.

¹⁷ *Eyn klein Unterricht, was man yyn den Evangelijis suchen und gewahrten soll*; LW 35:117–124; and WA 10/I:8–18.

¹⁸ LW 30:149–215; and WA 14:14–91.

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at Wittenberg who became Luther's most important secretary and amanuensis, was responsible for their transcription, though the editing may have been done by Cruciger or someone else. The publication did not appear until the following spring, and soon thereafter it was published along with 1 Peter as a commentary collection on the Petrine writings.

In addition to his Petrine sermons, Luther prepared a detailed commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 in 1523, which appeared in print in August.¹⁹ The supposed superiority of the celibate life—both monastic and clerical—was traditionally argued from this passage to the disparagement of the married estate. Though Luther had taken up this issue at some length in earlier Latin treatises,²⁰ he now sought to bring his defense of marriage to a wider audience through an exegetical study of the entire chapter. He dedicated the work to the nobleman Hans von Löser as a present for his upcoming wedding.

From 1524 to 1527 Luther lectured on the Old Testament—Deuteronomy, the minor Prophets, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah—most of which he published as commentaries along the way. But in August of 1527 the plague threatened Wittenberg, and the university was moved to Jena for a time, interrupting Luther's lectures on Isaiah. Luther ignored the elector's orders and stayed behind along with the city pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, to minister to the sick and suffering.²¹ For the students who remained, Luther took up a new set of lectures, commenting on 1 John from August 19 to November 7,²² Titus and Philemon from November 11 until December 18,²³ and 1 Timothy from January 13 to March 20.²⁴ These lectures were preserved through the hand of Georg Röser, but they were not published until modern times.

After the passing of the plague, Luther returned to Isaiah in the classroom. However, when Bugenhagen was called away to aid in the reform of churches in Braunschweig and Hamburg, Luther had to fill the pulpit as well. The Gospel of John was designated as the subject of the Saturday evening service, so on June 6, 1528, Luther began preaching on John 16:1, where Bugenhagen had left off. Chapter 17 was handled in a series of sermons from August 8 to October 11 and were preserved by the diligent note taking of Röser. Based on these notes, Cruciger edited the sermons into a continuous commentary on chapter 17—Jesus' "high priestly prayer"—which was then published in 1530 with

¹⁹ LW 28:3–56; and WA 12:92–142.

²⁰ Cf. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 36:3–126; WA 6:497–573; *On Monastic Vows*, LW 44:283–399 XXX; and WA 8:573–669.

²¹ Cf. Luther's treatise on the matter, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, 1527; LW 43:115–138; and WA 23:339–379.

²² LW 30:219–327; and WA 20:599–801.

²³ LW 29:3–105; and WA 25:6–78.

²⁴ LW 28:215–384; and WA 26:4–120.

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Luther's preface.²⁵ The remaining sermons on John 18–20:18, completed in 1529, were edited and published as a commentary after Luther's death by Andreas Poach in 1557.²⁶

In 1530, Luther resumed his lecture activity on the Old Testament—this time the Song of Songs—though with the diet of Augsburg came interruptions as well. But Augsburg also occasioned further reflection on how best to articulate the doctrine of justification. Consequently, Luther took up Galatians once again, his last formal classroom lecture on the New Testament. In 1531, from July 2 to December 12, Luther delivered what would become his most popular biblical commentary. Röser faithfully took notes throughout the lectures, which were then edited by Cruciger for publication in 1535.²⁷ Luther added his preface, which functioned as a summary of what he believed to be both the central message of Paul's epistle and the entire New Testament: salvation in Christ through the righteousness of faith.

From the fall of 1530 to the spring of 1532, Bugenhagen was once again absent for the sake of reform work elsewhere (this time, Lübeck). And once again, Luther took over many of the preaching responsibilities. Luther's sermons on Matthew 5–7, preached sometime during Bugenhagen's absences between 1528 and 1532, were published as a commentary in the spring of 1532 as *The Sermon on the Mount*.²⁸ Luther also preached on John 6–8 which were published posthumously by Johann Aurifaber (1519–1575) in 1565 in the Eisleben edition of Luther's collected works.

Luther had increasing bouts of illness and weakness during these years, so his preaching and lectures were more sporadic. In March of 1532, Luther began a series of lectures on selected Psalms, but his preaching was relegated to a small circle in his home due to his health. However, when the elector died in August, Luther began a series on 1 Corinthians 15 in the church on Sunday afternoons. These sermons on Paul's teaching on the resurrection lasted until April 27, 1533. Again, Röser transcribed the sermons and Cruciger edited and published them in 1534, dedicating the text to the elector's son, John Frederick.²⁹ Cruciger also edited Röser's notes on Luther's serial preaching on John 14–16, preached after Bugenhagen's return from 1534 to 1535. These were published as a continuous commentary in 1538/1539.³⁰

²⁵ See LW 69:3–9.

²⁶ For more historical detail of Luther's serial preaching on John, see the introduction to LW 69:xv–xxii by Christopher Boyd Brown.

²⁷ LW 26:3–461; LW 27:3–149; WA 40/I:33–688; and WA 40/II:1–184.

²⁸ LW 23:3–294; and WA 32:299–544.

²⁹ LW 28:59–213; and WA 36:478–696.

³⁰ LW 24:7–422; and WA 45:465–733.

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Bugenhagen was soon gone again to help in reform efforts, this time to his native Pomerania from 1534 to 1535. During that time, Luther began a new cycle of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew in the Castle Church. After preaching the first several sermons, the responsibility was handed off to the recently appointed preacher of the Castle Church, Hieronymus Weller (1499–1572), a doctoral student at Wittenberg.³¹ At the request of Weller, who lacked confidence in his own preaching abilities, Luther produced notes on the Gospel of Matthew to help his student develop his sermons. The notes became increasingly detailed (at Weller's request), and they span chapters 1–18. Without Luther's knowledge, students and colleagues decided to publish the notes even though they had initially been written for private use. The bulk of the editing work fell once again to Rörer, and chapters 8–17 appeared in print in November of 1536. Afterward, a preface from Luther was sought, which he reluctantly provided, and the entire set of *Annotations on Matthew* appeared in print in October 1538.³²

In 1537, Bugenhagen went to Denmark at the invitation of King Christian III to provide guidance for reform. From this period we have Luther's serial preaching on Matthew 18–24³³ and John 1–4.³⁴ The first two chapters of John were published as a commentary after Luther's death in 1565, but the rest of the sermons from this period, both from Matthew and John, were not published until the 18th and 19th centuries.

Luther's final set of academic lectures returned to the Old Testament, with an exposition of the entire book of Genesis. The most lengthy of all his *exegetica*, the lecture series began on June 3, 1535 and were completed November 17, 1545, only three months before Luther's death. His final words in the lecture hall were these: "That is now the book of Genesis. May our Lord God grant that another comes after me who will do it better. I can do no more; I am weak. Pray to God for me that he may grant me a good, blessed final hour."³⁵

Luther's Approach to Biblical Interpretation

Luther was an heir of the Western exegetical tradition and worked within the various methods and assumptions of that tradition throughout his lifetime. This tradition was not monolithic, however, and Luther's relationship to it was an eclectic one. Sometimes he remained in continuity, at times he was its critic, yet at other times his work provided

³¹ For an excellent account of the historical circumstances of the *Annotations*, see the Introduction to LW 67:xv–li, by Christopher Boyd Brown.

³² LW 67:3–328; WA 38:448–667; and WA 60:66–70.

³³ LW 67:331–422; LW 68:3–341; and WA 47:233–627.

³⁴ LW 22:5–530; WA 46:538–789; and WA 47:1–231.

³⁵ LW 8:333; and WA 44:825.

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a creative contribution to the whole. As already noted, Luther's vocation as a doctor of the church was to interpret and teach Holy Scripture. But Luther also exhibits an extraordinary, personal devotion to the Bible that can be demonstrated from the earliest sources. In 1509, as a student of theology progressing toward the doctoral degree, he complained to an old friend of those curricular requirements that pull him away from the study of Scripture—for only through the study of Scripture, he said, would he find a theology that got at “the meat of the nut, the kernel of wheat, the marrow of the bones.”³⁶

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Thus, Luther's approach to the Bible was at once scholarly and spiritual. To carry out his task, he familiarized himself with a variety of patristic commentaries and medieval glosses.³⁷ He utilized the most recent scholarship in biblical languages, textual criticism, and rhetorical analysis. Yet within these labors he sought answers to his own personal questions and concerns, consolation for his spiritual anxieties, and assurances that what he taught and preached was the will and word of God. Again, such assumptions about the Bible were not unique to Luther, but the intensity with which he held and practiced them was striking nonetheless.

It is common to describe Luther as a theologian of the word of God. This is quite true, but to say this is to say something more than that he was an exegete or a biblical theologian. Luther's concept of the word of God was much broader than his view of the Bible, though it certainly encompassed that as well.³⁸ For Luther, God's word was, first of all, the primordial word of creation that brought into being all things from nothing. Yet this same word of creation was not simply a thing from the ancient past but continued to sound throughout creation, sustaining, making new, making possible life without which no life could be. But this word, incomprehensibly, also *became flesh*, and the life and light of creation became inseparable from Jesus who embodied and proclaimed this creative word to a broken and chaotic world. This was, for Luther, the primary sense of “the word of God.” Thus, when it came to the Bible, it too was the word of God, but especially because it was a witness to this same Jesus. Through its recorded histories, its laws, its poetic and prophetic utterances, and its apostolic testimonies, the Bible is the word which presses on toward Christ, i.e., “*was Christum treibet.*”

³⁶ In a letter to Johannes Braun in March 1509, Luther wrote, “*Sum itaque nunc iubente vel permittente Deo Wittenbergae. Quod si statum meum nosse desideres, bene habeo Dei gratia, nisi quod violentum est studium, maxime philosophiae, quam ego ab initio libentissime mutarim theologia, ea inquam theologia, quae nucleum nicis et medullam tritici et medullam ossium scrutatur,*” WA BR 1:17:39–44, no. 5.

³⁷ For Luther's use of traditional sources see Erik Herrmann, “Luther's Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers,” in *The Oxford Handbook to the Theology of Martin Luther*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71–90.

³⁸ Cf. David Steinmetz, “Luther, the Reformers, and the Bible,” in *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice*, ed. James E. Bowley (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 163–176.

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This distinction also holds for Luther's understanding of the New Testament. For Luther the New Testament is first and foremost a *promise*. It is God's promise to save humankind from its own destructive path—a promise that stretches back to Eden and runs through the lives of the patriarchs, prophets, and kings until its fulfillment arrives in Christ. Thus, this promise is God's testament—his *last will and testament*, in fact—and in making it, God has set forth the scope of the whole redemption of Christ: "For if God is to make a testament, as he promises, then he must die; and if he is to die, then he must be a man. And so, that little word 'testament' is a short summary of all God's wonders and grace, fulfilled in Christ."³⁹ At its heart, then, the New Testament is not set of writings but the fulfillment of a promise, a declaration of grace, an announcement of good news—that God has reconciled us in his Son: "it is the manner of the New Testament and the gospel that it must be preached and performed by word of mouth and a living voice. Christ himself has not written anything, nor has he ordered anything to be written, but rather to be preached by word of mouth."⁴⁰

This theological definition of the New Testament also became the critical lens through which Luther reevaluated the New Testament canon. The specific Christological content shaped his determination of a writing's apostolicity, but the fundamental oral character of the apostolic witness invited a certain freedom as one dealt with the written texts. For these reasons, Luther could agree with the assessment of some in the early church that certain writings were doubtful in their apostolic origin and consequently less useful for maintaining the apostolic faith.⁴¹

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Luther's dealings with New Testament are largely in his sermons, rather than lectures or commentaries. In the sermon, the living voice of the New Testament finds its home, that is, in the faith of the one who hears. This notion may also shed some light on another characteristic of Luther's interpretation. Even in the lecture hall or the published commentary, Luther's exegesis is deeply embedded in the context of his hearers. He mentions his opponents by name, or he cites recent events or stories that connect to the message of the text. With such an existential horizon for his interpretation, there is no expectation that his exegesis should be the last word—Luther repeatedly states that he expects others to surpass him.⁴² His interpretation is timely, not timeless.

The timeliness of his exegesis also freed Luther from striving after a universal meaning. The traditional methods of exegesis used allegories to abstract some universal relevance

³⁹ LW 35:84. Cf. also LW 35:358–361.

⁴⁰ Cf. WA 5:537; WA 10/I:48; WA 10/I:625f.; and WA 12:275f.

⁴¹ See, for example, his prefaces to the epistles of Hebrews, James, and Jude, LW 35:393–398.

⁴² Cf. LW 27:160; WA 2:449; LW 8:333; and WA 44:825.

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out of biblical texts that appeared to be irreducibly particular and confined to their own distant contexts. Allegory was often a vehicle for relating the text to Christ, but for Luther it was too vague and too arbitrary to reliably direct one to what made Christ “good news,” that is, “gospel.” Instead, Luther would discover that the writings of the New Testament themselves—especially those of Paul—offered a better key to this problem. With Paul’s teaching on the righteousness of faith, the singular and unique death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the cosmic pattern through which God’s word recreates the world. So it is that faith, which hears this same word, begins the dying and rising of the believer in the here and now.

Reading Luther’s commentary on the New Testament is not always easy. Knowledge of the intellectual and ecclesial context is often necessary to catch the fullness of his argument. On the other hand, reading Luther is never tiresome. His commentary is quite vibrant and dynamic—his quick mind and his passion are unmistakable. And though many themes and emphases appear throughout his writings, one theme remains fairly constant throughout. As he noted in the preface of his Galatians commentary, “I myself can hardly believe that I was so verbose as this book shows when I publicly expounded this letter of St. Paul to the Galatians. However, I can see that all the thoughts that I find in this treatise are mine, so I must confess that I uttered all of them, or perhaps more than all of them. The one article of faith that I have most at heart is the faith of Christ. All my studies in theology, by day and night, continually go back and forth from him, by him, and to him.”⁴³

Pauline Epistles

Luther’s exposition of Paul is rightly regarded as his greatest contribution to the history of exegesis. With it he not only answered his own pressing spiritual questions and anxieties but he shaped a school and legacy of biblical interpretation. In Luther’s day, the Wittenberg interpretation of the apostle would not only offer a new perspective on Paul for the history of exegesis, but also a reformation of theology that sought to place Paul’s teaching on justification into the center of the church’s understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

Early Lectures: Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews

Luther’s early Pauline lectures are the occasion for some of the most significant turning points in his theological development. First, they are the context in which Augustine’s

⁴³ WA 40/I:33.

⁴⁴ On a Wittenberg school of exegesis see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2016).

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anti-Pelagian writings were initially studied. Though precise dates are difficult to determine, it appears that Luther first turned to the Amerbach edition of these writings in preparation for his lectures on Romans in 1515.⁴⁵ Given developments within late medieval scholasticism and its tendency to grant unaided human efforts a form of merit, Augustine's writings were a perfect foil. In this regard, Luther was particularly influenced in these lectures by Augustine's teaching on original sin and how he interpreted the role and purpose of the law in Paul's writings.⁴⁶ By 1518, after having used Augustine extensively during these lectures, Luther embraced the church father as Paul's *interpres fidelissimus*—his “most faithful interpreter.”⁴⁷

In addition to the appropriation of Augustine, these early lectures on Paul helped Luther to clarify and galvanize his critique of late medieval scholastic theology. Luther was not alone in his criticism—humanists frequently engaged in anti-scholastic rhetoric—but his concern was rather different. While humanists scorned the scholastic abstruse dialectic and crude Latinity, Luther focused on what he perceived to be a fundamental misreading of the Scriptures. In particular, the Aristotelian ethical framework and concepts imposed on the reading of Paul suddenly appeared incongruous with the message of Romans. Philosophical ethics focused on external habits and the cultivation of behaviors that avoided extremes. But Paul's teaching on sin and justice were decidedly different: not only were they focused on the inner stirrings of the heart, but they were also a unique theological description of the person standing *coram deo*, in the presence of God. Likewise, the law that revealed humanity's moral failings was broader and deeper than the Mosaic code of the Old Testament, but it struck at the core of the human condition, which remained inescapably turned in on itself (*incurvatus in se est*). Thus, Paul had his own *modus loquendi*, his own way of speaking, which contrasted sharply with the *modus loquendi* of the philosophers and scholastics.⁴⁸ The consequences of confusing these two ways of speaking was disastrous: the depth of sin was hardly understood, and thus the nature of redemption and forgiveness was superficial and misguided. The penitent were taught that sin could be entirely removed merely by thorough and contrite confession, as if it were a kind of external dirt to be easily brushed off. Priestly absolution then became a description of an act of self-cleansing rather than a word of Christ the physician whose declaration of forgiveness calls forth faith in the promise of a future free from the moribund malady. The consolation and confidence that the gospel was intended to give was lost to a theology that cultivated a piety opposite Paul's doctrine—a piety of “works-

⁴⁵ Luther indicates which edition he has been studying in a letter to his friend Georg Spalatin, on October 19, 1516, LW 48:23–26; and WA BR 1:70–71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Heidelberg Disputation*, LW 31:39; and WA 1:353.

⁴⁸ E.g., LW 25:322f.; WA 56:334f. See Leif Grane, *Modus Loquendi Theologicus. Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie 1515–1518*, *Acta Theologica Danica*, vol. 12 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1975).

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righteousness" that leads to hubris or despair rather than the righteousness of faith. It is in this context that Luther first explicitly describes the Christian condition as a sinner who is nevertheless wholly righteous because of faith, i.e., *simul iustus et peccator*.⁴⁹

Luther also came to realize that it was not only the scholastic use of Aristotle that had confounded the interpretation of Paul but also the confusion within the exegetical tradition. The medieval glosses tended to stress the harmony of the moral law with the gospel so that justification was a righteousness of faith formed by works of love. Conversely, Luther understood Paul as positing a polarity between works of all kinds on the one hand, and the faith that lives solely by Christ's word of absolution and promise on the other. Likewise, the law and the gospel were not two forms of the same call to virtue but were two distinct messages:

For the law shows nothing except sin, makes guilty, and thus distresses the conscience; but the gospel proclaims the desired remedy to those with anguish of this kind. Therefore the law is evil, the gospel good; the law announces wrath, the gospel peace. The law says (as the apostle cites in Gal. 3): "Cursed be everyone who does not abide in all things written in the book of the law that he might do them" ... But the gospel says: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." The law burdens the conscience with sins, but the gospel frees it and brings peace through faith in Christ ... Therefore, there are two sets of contraries: *Law—Sin*; it shows sin and makes one guilty and sick; indeed proves him damned. *Gospel—Grace*; it offers grace and forgives sin and cures the sickness unto salvation.⁵⁰

The record of Luther's Romans lectures has been preserved in various sets of student notes as well as Luther's own hand-written preparations.⁵¹ This combination permits one to look over Luther's shoulder, as it were, and compare the lines of development in his own thinking with what he deemed fit to share in his public lecture. A preliminary comparison of texts indicates that Luther's harshest criticisms of scholastic theology as well as his most advanced and provocative ideas regarding faith and justification were generally withheld from his students at that time.⁵² Nevertheless, there was enough novelty in these lectures to cause disturbances among the Wittenberg faculty when a

⁴⁹ LW 25:260; WA 56:272: "Now, is he perfectly righteous? No, for he is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man (*simul peccator et iustus*); a sinner in fact but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God, that he will redeem him from sin until he heals him totally."

⁵⁰ LW 25:416, 417–418; WA 56:424, 8–17; and 426:5–9.

⁵¹ Student notes, WA 57/I:3–232; Luther's manuscript, WA 56:3–528; and LW 25:3–524.

⁵² See Gabriele Schmidt-Lauber, *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/16: Ein Vergleich zwischen Luthers Manuskript und den studentischen Nachschriften. Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers*, vol. 6 (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1994).

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student based his public disputation on Luther's material in 1516.⁵³ In this way, the Romans lectures set in motion the first wave of theological reform at the university.

The lectures on Galatians in the following academic year continued to build on the themes handled in the Romans lectures.⁵⁴ In many ways, Galatians only underscored what for Luther was the disparity between much of the exegetical tradition and Paul's true meaning. Jerome's commentary on the epistle was the primary foil for this realization, confirming what he had already suspected in the Romans lectures: namely, that Augustine's later writings remained a shining light for the interpretation of Paul. The interpretation of the law and its deficiency for justification was one that primarily concerned the moral law and not just the Mosaic ceremonial commands: "One must be on his guard against that crude and uninstructed exposition of those who understand 'law' only as the ceremonial commands or figural types of the law, as though its moral commands and the Decalogue were 'from faith!'" (i.e., Gal. 3:12, "the law is not from faith").⁵⁵

The lectures on Galatians also represent the first instance in which Luther formerly criticized the usefulness of the traditional fourfold interpretation of Scripture.⁵⁶ Paul presents an "allegory" in Galatians 4:24, and Luther used the opportunity to redefine the traditional four senses of Scripture (i.e., literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical), molding them into various applications of law and grace and thereby setting the foundation for a new hermeneutical approach to Bible.

During the summer and winter semesters of 1517–1518, Luther took up the Epistle to the Hebrews.⁵⁷ At this time, Luther still regarded the letter as authored by Paul even though he was aware of various positions on this matter. By the time of his first translation of the New Testament in 1522, he expressed greater doubt about its authorship, even though he still commended it as "a marvelously fine epistle."⁵⁸ Uncertainty of authorship notwithstanding, Luther saw the central message in a similar vein to Romans and Galatians, namely as the contrast of grace to "the arrogance of legal and human righteousness."⁵⁹ In these lectures, Luther more deeply developed the concept of the gospel as a "promise," connecting it to the exposition of "testament" in Hebrews. In turn,

⁵³ WA 57/II:1–108.

⁵⁴ WA 57/II:5–108; WA 59:371–383. Luther's own manuscript is not extant; we only have two sets of student notes for Luther's lectures on Galatians.

⁵⁵ WA 57/II:80, 21–24.

⁵⁶ WA 57/II:96, 6–25.

⁵⁷ LW 29:109–241; WA 57/III:3–238. Like the Galatians lectures, only student notes are extant for Luther's lectures on Hebrews.

⁵⁸ LW 35:395–396; WA DB 7:344, 631–632.

⁵⁹ WA 57/III:5, 10–16.

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this direction gave Luther the opportunity to reflect on the relationship of “promise” to the sacrament, especially the Lord’s Supper, which, as a last will and testament, promises an eternal inheritance to those who receive it in faith. Thus, the hope of eternal life is not a distant reality but is “possessed” now by faith (Heb. 11:1, “But faith is the substance/possession of things hoped for”), for clinging to the Word of God is a possession of everlasting goods.⁶⁰ The reflections on faith, promise, and testament in these lectures mark further progress in Luther’s theology of the Word as the means of conveying grace, forgiveness, and justification—a fundamental characteristic of Luther’s theology that would feature prominently in his reformatory writings of 1520, especially *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.⁶¹

1 Corinthians 7 and 15

Two very different circumstances—a wedding and a funeral—occasioned Luther’s comment on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. However, this commentary is directed toward greater goals than the edification of the merry and the mourning. Larger questions about Christian piety shaped Luther’s treatment of these texts, and Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian church provided ample opportunity to explore their broader implications.

In 1523, Luther published a verse-by-verse analysis of 1 Corinthians 7 to give a more explicit exegetical critique of one of the most basic and ubiquitous assumptions in the history of Christianity: the preeminence of virginity and celibacy over married life. Luther had touched on the question earlier when dealing with the sacrament of marriage in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) and more directly in his critique of compulsory monastic vows *On Monastic Vows* (1521). But a then-recent polemic posited against Luther—Johann Faber’s *Opus adversus nova quaedam ... dogmata Martini Lutheri* (1521)—had raised the issue sharply. Although Luther did not respond to Faber directly (that was left to his colleague, Justus Jonas), his comments on 1 Corinthians dealt with the common opinions reflected in Faber’s treatise.

Luther begins by setting forth what he believes to be the original context of the question in Corinth. Because marriage was the moral standard in Israel (due to the promised child of Genesis 3:15 and 15:1f.), the new Gentile Christians were fearful that celibacy was unacceptable and condemned it. Paul, therefore, speaks about the freedom and goodness

⁶⁰ LW 29:229–231; and WA 57/III:227–228.

⁶¹ See especially Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex auditu: Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1958), and Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

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of chastity in a context in which it is generally disparaged. In other words, Luther argues that the original assumptions about marriage and celibacy among the Christians in Corinth were completely reversed from what most of the subsequent tradition would hold. Consequently, Paul's commendation of chastity had been overdrawn by St. Jerome and others who used this text to argue for the inferiority of marriage to virginity. But Luther argues not only that marriage was commanded and rooted in creation but also that it is the true religious life, for its inherent difficulties and anxieties require the exercise of faith. Celibacy was, as Jesus also indicated (Matt. 19:12), a rare gift and was not to be expected.

The initial context for Luther's seventeen sermons on 1 Corinthians 15 was the illness and death of the elector in August of 1532. Even so, Luther's exposition of the chapter goes well beyond the traditional *ars moriendi* literature that addressed the spiritual preparations for Christian death. Taking up the chapter, verse by verse, Luther focused closely on the background and rhetorical structure of Paul's argument, offering one of his most thorough treatments of the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Moreover, Luther drew parallels between the Corinthian controversy and the more radical representatives of the Reformation movement, Luther's so-called "fanatics" and "Enthusiasts." As the philosophical and practical problems with the doctrine of the resurrection dogged the Corinthian Christians, so it is with those who question the doctrine of Baptism or the Lord's Supper. Both contexts call for faith in God's Word rather than the judgments of human reason. Similarly, the attack on Paul's apostolic authority as a preacher of this Word comes as a warning to those who would neglect preaching or its office publicly to proclaim the Word. Various interpretative difficulties in the text are also dealt with directly. For example, he explains what Paul means by being baptized *pro mortuis*, "on behalf of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:29) as well as the nature of a "spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44–47) and the subjection of the Son to God (1 Cor. 15:27–28). But throughout the work, Luther stressed the great consolation of the resurrection and its insoluble relation to the whole of the Christian faith and hope: "for where this article is surrendered, all the others are gone too; and the chief article and the entire Christ are lost or preached entirely in vain."⁶²

Pastoral Epistles: 1 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon

The lectures on 1 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon represent a break from Luther's usual lecture activity on the Old Testament in the mid-1520s. When the plague forced the university to move to Jena in 1527, Luther expounded on 1 John and then the "pastoral" epistles to those who remained. Although contemporary scholarship largely ascribes

⁶² LW 28:60; and WA 36:483.

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post-Pauline authorship to the epistles of Timothy and Titus, Luther continued to assume their authenticity along with the exegetical tradition. However, Luther does recognize some of the internal stylistic and vocabulary divergences from Paul's other writings, explaining the differences as stemming from the personal nature of the correspondence and the context of the addressee.

Luther's comments on 1 Timothy and Titus focus especially on the importance of sound doctrine, the nature of the episcopal office, and the centrality of the Word. Paul's admonition to guard against schismatics is applied by Luther to the growing divisions among Protestants, especially those who diverge from Luther in their teaching on the sacraments. His remarks on the teaching authority of women (1 Tim. 2:11f.) is unsurprisingly traditional in stressing their submission to men, but at the same time he wishes to recognize that the Scriptures give many examples of wise women gifted in administration, e.g., Huldah, Deborah, Jael, etc. Luther interprets the limitations of such authority primarily in the context of public prayer where men and women are both present. But in the privacy of the home, Luther wishes to celebrate the gifts of women, where often "she rules" and exercises her wisdom and ingenuity.⁶³

Another notable comment is Luther's interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4, "[God] desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."⁶⁴ Turning away from the usual interpretation of this passage, which ended in jousting among questions of predestination and free will, Luther refers the text to God's temporal provisions rather than a statement about eternal salvation: "... through our prayers [God] wants to save even the wicked, to give peace, life, etc. Paul is not speaking about God's incomprehensible will—a topic forever secret, as here regarding the will of his command."⁶⁵ Although it is not completely unique, Luther's interpretation appears to have followed the French humanist, Lefèvre d'Étaples (i.e., Faber Stapulensis, c. 1455–1536), who glossed this passage as a prayer for all people to be permitted to lead a "tranquil and peaceable life."⁶⁶ Luther's comments encourage the students to move beyond the speculative to the practical: "these questions are too deep for you to explore. Adam broke his neck over them."⁶⁷

⁶³ LW 28:276–277; and WA 26:46.

⁶⁴ For a helpful analysis of Luther's interpretation of this text in the context of the history of exegesis, see Lowell C. Green, "Universal Salvation (I Timothy 2:4) according to the Lutheran Reformers," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9.3 (1995): 281–300; *idem*, "Luther's Understanding of the Freedom of God and the Salvation of Man: His Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4." *Archiv Für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 (1996): 57–73.

⁶⁵ LW 28:262; and WA 26:36.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ LW 28:263; and WA 26:36.

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These lectures were never prepared for publication by Luther's students, so they remain somewhat rough and raw. Thus, at times conjecture must be undertaken when sentences end abruptly or trail into ellipses. On the other hand, an impression of Luther's lecture style becomes clearer with these comments, which, if more heavily edited, may have been dampened.

Galatians Commentaries: 1519 and 1531/1535

18

Luther's greatest achievements in his exposition of the New Testament are undoubtedly his Galatians commentaries. Both Luther's early and later commentaries display his originality, his scholarly acumen, and his exegetical and pastoral insights. His first Galatians commentary was published in 1519 and represents his first complete published exegetical work. The commentary came at a relative high point in Luther's popularity among the educated and the German humanists who eagerly anticipated its publication. The commentary self-consciously appeals to this audience with a preface and afterward authored by Melancthon, several poetic epigrams, and numerous citations of Erasmus throughout, including the very first sentence, which praises him as "*theologicissimus*" — the finest of theologians.⁶⁸ But of greater consequence is the specific form of his Pauline interpretation. In his first commentary, Luther presents to the public his new understanding of the apostle won through his labors in the early lectures, where he interacts with the exegetical tradition — critiquing Jerome's interpretation explicitly — and sets forth a new, sharper picture of the apostle's teaching on justification. Further, Paul's polemic against those who would erect the law of Moses among Gentile Christians is viewed by Luther as a welcome voice in a religious climate where papal laws threaten to crowd out the centrality of faith. This polemic is not just a naïve anachronism; Luther is aware of the contextual differences between the conflict in 1st-century Galatia and late-medieval piety. Nevertheless, if Paul's uncompromising centering of the "truth of the gospel" over and against the divine law could be claimed by Augustine in his own conflict against the Pelagians, then it should have relevance, *mutatis mutandis*, in an age where the church's laws had grown to dominate Christian piety.

Central to this interpretation was Luther's transfer of Paul's antithesis of law and faith from a salvation-historical framework to an existential one.⁶⁹ The law's inability to justify was not limited to its covenantal role in Israel but was grounded in its universal capacity to expose sin and unbelief — a role that Luther argued extended even into the life of the baptized. Consequently, the piety of "works" that Paul condemns could be generalized

⁶⁸ LW 27:163; WA 2:452. For Luther's strategic use of Erasmus in the commentary see Cornelis Augustijn, "*Erasmus von Rotterdam im Galaterbriefkommentar Luthers von 1519*," in *Luther Jahrbuch* 49 (1982): 115–132.

⁶⁹ See Erik Herrmann, "Why then the Law? Salvation History and the Law in Martin Luther's Interpretation of Galatians, 1513–1522," (PhD Diss., Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, MO: 2005).

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beyond the original insistence of Jewish ceremonial works to every context in which faith is deemed inadequate or incomplete.

Luther's Galatians commentary of 1535 was a publication by students of his university lectures given in 1531. These lectures have a more discursive character than the earlier commentary, with recurrent departures into more devotional and pastoral reflections. Nonetheless, the commentary exhibits some of Luther's most memorable and poetic expressions of his understanding of the gospel.⁷⁰ For example, in the Pauline passages that speak of Christ becoming a "curse" for us, Luther invokes the powerful image of the *duellum mirabile*—Christ's remarkable battle in which his divine nature overcomes the powers that claim humanity.⁷¹ Here, Christ is the *maxima persona*, standing in for all humanity, for all sins, for all sufferings. In this way Luther is able to join Christ's substitution with the believer's participation in Christ, bringing the language of *imputation* and *unio* together. Thus, while the 1519 commentary interprets the elements of salvation history toward the contemporary experience of the conscience, the 1535 commentary tends to run in the reverse direction, interpreting one's present experience as a participation in the past events of salvation history.

The richness and vividness of Luther's lengthy exposition moves his Galatians commentary beyond the traditional forms of exegetical *opera*. In his preface, he admits that this "verbose" work is more like a "treatise" (*publica tractatione*) and meditation on Christ than an exegetical commentary.⁷² Nevertheless, despite what he might deem as a shortcoming of the work, the 1535 Galatians commentary became the most influential of his exegetical writings, reprinted more than any of his other exegetical works, and attaining almost normative status in the Lutheran confessional writings.⁷³

Petrine and Johannine Epistles

Of all Luther's writings on the New Testament, those on the Pauline corpus have always been the most prominent and influential. However, Luther did take the opportunity to interpret other writings as well. In 1522, shortly after coming back to Wittenberg from his

⁷⁰ For an examination of the theological content of the two commentaries see Karin Bornkamm, *Luthers Auslegungen des Galaterbriefs von 1519 und 1531* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963).

⁷¹ For a detailed study on this motif in Galatians and the rest of Luther thought see Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Duellum mirabile: Studien zum Kampfmotiv in Martin Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

⁷² WA 40/I:33.

⁷³ E.g., Kolb-Wengert, SD, III, 67: "For any further, necessary explanation of this lofty and sublime article on justification before God, upon which the salvation of our souls depends, we wish to recommend to everyone the wonderful, magnificent exposition by Dr. Luther of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, and for the sake of brevity we refer to it at this point."

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exile at the Wartburg, Luther began serial preaching from 1 Peter, most likely on Sunday afternoons. The result was a large and detailed commentary on the epistle that was published in Wittenberg at the end of 1523.⁷⁴

Luther's exposition of 1 Peter is one of several early efforts to lead people into the proper reading and understanding of the Scriptures. In 1521, Luther wrote a preface to his "Wartburg postils" (i.e., example sermons based on the lectionary readings for Christmas and Epiphany), which tried to define clearly the heart of the apostolic message and the gospel.⁷⁵ In a similar fashion, Luther repeatedly highlights passages in 1 Peter as examples of apostolic, evangelical preaching, contrasting them with much of the traditional preaching and commentaries. Deeply connected with this evangelical message is the reality of suffering and the Christian cross, a major theme of the commentary.⁷⁶ The sanctifying significance of Christian suffering, already delineated in Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* and in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, is further developed here as a constituent element of Luther's picture of the Christian life. For Luther, suffering comes as result of following Christ and his word, but it also drives one deeper into faith: "God has imposed the cross on all Christians to cleanse and to purge them well, in order that faith may remain pure, just as the Word is, so that one adheres to the Word alone and relies on nothing else."⁷⁷ Luther argues that anticipation and reception of such sanctifying suffering ought to characterize Christian piety more than the common practices of pilgrimages and relic veneration. In fact, the Christian cross brings more spiritual benefit than any relic—even a gold ensconced relic of the true cross of Christ: "What good does it do to put the cross in monstrances? Christ's cross does not save me. To be sure, I must believe in his cross, but I must bear my own cross. I must put His suffering into my heart. Then I have the true treasure. St. Peter's bones are sacred. But what does that help you? You and your own bones must become sacred. This happens when you suffer for Christ's sake."⁷⁸

After concluding his series on 1 Peter (most likely at the end of 1522), Luther continued with 2 Peter and Jude from January to March of 1523. These sermons were likewise

⁷⁴ For a detailed analysis of Luther's 1 Peter sermons see Martin Brecht, "Die Entwicklung der Theologie Luthers aus der Exegese, vorgeführt an der Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt (1522/1523)," in *Luthers Erben: Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der reformatorischen Theologie Luthers*, eds. Notger Slenczka and Walter Sparn (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–24.

⁷⁵ Cf. *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, 1521, LW 35:117–124; and WA 10/I.1:8–18.

⁷⁶ See Kenneth Woo, "Suffering as a Mark of the Church in Martin Luther's Exegesis of 1 Peter," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 77 (2013): 307–325.

⁷⁷ LW:30:17; and WA 12:272.

⁷⁸ LW 30:129; WA 12:381. Cf. Luther's letter to the Elector (an avid collector of relics) on his desire to return from the Wartburg (February 22, 1522), LW 48:387–388; and WA BR 2:448–449.

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collected and published as a continuous commentary in the following year, going through several editions. Later in the same year, all three—1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude—were published together as a collection. Like 1 Peter, Luther considered the author of 2 Peter to be the apostle, whereas Jude is regarded as a pseudonymous work dependent largely on 2 Peter. For Luther, the themes of these two epistles assume the teaching on faith found in 1 Peter and thus give additional emphasis to good works, which gives evidence of that faith. The repeated warnings against false teachers seems all too relevant for Luther, who finds clerics, schoolmen, and the pope as their contemporary fulfillment.

Nearly three years after Luther's exposition the Petrine epistles, Luther turned to another of the "catholic" epistles in his university lectures: the First Epistle of John. An irregular lecture introduced for the students who remained in Wittenberg during the plague, Luther turned to 1 John for its ability to "buoy up afflicted hearts" through its beautiful style and its kindly picture of Christ.⁷⁹

The lectures, as we have them, proceed phrase by phrase with relatively brief reflections, clarifications, and applications along the way. Several passages of note include Luther's handling of the potential contradiction in 1 John 1:8f., "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," and 1 John 2:1, "My little children I am writing this to you so that may not sin." Luther navigates the first by following Augustine's interpretation, which stresses original sin rather than actual sin: "'To have sin is one thing; to sin is something else.' ... For although we have become a new creature, nevertheless the remnants of sin always remain in us. We still have sin, and the poison is still in us."⁸⁰ On the other hand, the apostle's exhortation in the second chapter is aimed at presumption or idleness and calls Christians to battle against the flesh: "The apostle wants us to be careful and walk in the fear of the Lord ... You should wage war against sin and walk carefully. Do not be like the priests and the monks." In this context, the Christian life exhibits both truths, that although sin remains, Christians have been called by the Spirit to resist sin. Even so, John is quick to point to Jesus Christ, who is and remains the expiation for sin. Here, Luther allows a variation of his well-known *simul* formula to assist his interpretation of the text: "The condition of Christians is wonderful. For the same person is a sinner and is righteous (*idem homo est peccator et iustus*)—a sinner because of the infected flesh he bears, righteous because of the Spirit, who holds him in check. Reason can by no means understand that condition."⁸¹

Another noteworthy set of passages includes the warnings against "antichrist" in chapters 2 and 4. There, Luther acknowledges the various heresies against which the

⁷⁹ LW 30:219; and WA 20:600c.

⁸⁰ LW 30:228; WA 20:620c. Cf. Augustine, *perf. just.* 18, 39; 21, 44.

⁸¹ LW 30:236; and WA 20:635c.

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apostolic church had to struggle—the Ebionites, Cerinthians, the Nicolaitians; these were all in some form “antichrist” and forerunners of the eschatological Antichrist. But for Luther, the final Antichrist is the papacy, which denies the flesh of Christ—not the existence of his flesh, like the ancient heresies, but its *effect*, its benefit for sinners: “The spirit of the pope is the subtlest. He acknowledges the coming of Christ and keeps the apostolic words and sermons; but he has removed the kernel, namely, that Christ came to save sinners ... Skill and guile are needed to pollute everything under the best guise, to say that Christ suffered for us and yet to teach at the same time that we render satisfaction. All the rest of the heretics are antichrists in part, but he who is against the whole Christ is the only true Antichrist.”⁸²

Gospels

Assessing Luther’s interpretation of the Gospels is complicated by the fact that most of this work is homiletical, preserved through the edited and published *postils* of his lectionary preaching.⁸³ While the distinction between preaching and the academic commentary is not set as sharply in Luther’s work as it is today, there are still differences of form and audience that ought to shape one’s evaluation. Apart from the *Magnificat*, all of Luther’s expositions of Gospel texts originated as sermons. However, his weekly serial discourses on Matthew and John were handled differently from his Sunday lectionary sermons, and they often appeared as continuous commentaries on Scripture. Below are detailed some of the more significant publications.

Magnificat

Luther’s translation and exposition of Mary’s *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55) is one of his most beautifully written commentaries. Begun late in 1520, his progress was interrupted by the summons to the Diet of Worms in April of 1521 and his subsequent forced exile to the Wartburg. From there he finished the work, anxious to send it to the elector’s nephew, the young John Frederick, to whom it was dedicated. Despite being one of the most tumultuous times in his life, the *Magnificat* is a part of some of Luther’s most creative and influential work. His translation and comments on Mary’s song coincide with his larger translation efforts for a German New Testament. As such, the commentary exhibits Luther’s close meditative approach to translation; he strives to clarify and communicate the meaning of each word and phrase in the text. This method of interpretation and

⁸² LW 30:287; and WA 20:729c–730c.

⁸³ On Luther’s interpretation and preaching of the Gospels see Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1942); Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954); and Christopher Boyd Brown, “Introduction,” LW 67:xv–li.

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translation is perhaps indicated in Mary herself: only through *experientia*—Mary's experience of God's dealings with the noble and the lowly in her own person—can she rightly understand God and his word.⁸⁴

Theologically, the experience of God's humbling the proud and exalting the lowly is the major theme of the work. Mary's praise is an insight into the nature and character of God himself, who from the beginning of creation until now creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The dialectic of his strange and proper work—that is, bringing down to raise up, killing to make alive—is the dialectic of salvation, the dialectic of the cross itself. Thus, Luther's theology of the cross in which divine works are hidden *sub contrario*—under the opposite—becomes the *Leitmotif* of the entire work. In this context, Mary and the consequent Marian piety is recast. Like Luther's Christmas postil,⁸⁵ written around the same time, Luther's Mary is not the queenly *mediatrix* of late medieval piety; rather, she is the paragon of humility and lowliness, the true "Cinderella."⁸⁶ In this way, she is a fitting recipient of God's grace, mercy, and salvation.

Sermon on the Mount

Luther's commentary on the *Sermon on the Mount* was derived from his Wednesday serial preaching on Matthew, begun during Bugenhagen's absence in 1528. It was probably sometime between 1530 and 1532 when Luther began preaching on chapters 5–7. Like his other serial preaching, Luther proceeds phrase by phrase, entering into textual clarification and theological reflection throughout. Central to his interpretation is his critique of the monastic appropriation of Jesus' instructions as "evangelical counsels" or "counsels of perfection." Underpinning this interpretation was the long ascetic tradition that strove to embody these commands as part of the intrinsic call to discipleship. However, for the wider tradition the narrow path of the monk could not be the boundaries of the whole church. The solution was domestication through accommodation: the radical demands of Jesus' sermon belonged only to a narrow elite. For the rest of Christendom, it was enough to attend to the Ten Commandments and the faith of the church. This effort to embrace and control the ascetic interpretation of Matthew 5–7 had the unfortunate result of withholding Jesus' most extensive instruction to his disciples from most Christians. On the other hand, then-recent Anabaptist sects had

⁸⁴ LW 21:299; WA 7:546. Cf. Luther's *Open Letter on Translating*: "Translating is not everyone's skill as some mad saints imagine. It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, educated, and experienced heart. So I hold that no false Christian or sectarian spirit can be a good translator"; and WA 30/II:640.

⁸⁵ WA 10/I.1:58–95.

⁸⁶ LW 21:310; and WA 7:557.

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emphasized a more politically subversive interpretation, renouncing oaths, military service, and the magistrates.

Luther's solution was to allow Jesus' words to stand as a radical claim on all of Christianity—a true interpretation of God's law and its righteousness. As such, one comes to face its impossibility and is drawn instead to Christ, not Christ the lawgiver, but Christ the fulfillment of the law. Against the Anabaptist interpretation, Luther continues to distinguish the person in themselves and the person within an office. Because the office—whether prince or preacher—is God's office, its works are also divine. Yet Jesus does not speak of such offices in this text, but only of the individual. Such an interpretation was already explored by Luther in 1519 in his *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness*,⁸⁷ but now, having experienced the Peasants' War and the Anabaptist movement, Luther develops this distinction even further.

Constructively, Luther's interpretation of the *Sermon on the Mount* represents an extensive reflection on the two greatest commandments: to love and trust in God and to love the neighbor. Throughout this work, he critiques multiple forms of contemporary piety and sets forth a new picture of Christian spirituality.

Annotations on Matthew 1-18. Sermons on Matthew 18-24

As mentioned above, the *Annotations* are unique in that they were written by Luther as exegetical aids for another preacher, Hieronymus Weller, who was appointed to preach in the Castle Church in 1534. Although they were edited and published for a wider audience in 1536 and 1538, they were originally a private work, and Luther insisted that they should be read as such. On the other hand, because they were written for another teacher of theology, the *Annotations* have a technical character that is more in line with a university lectures.⁸⁸ In particular, Luther observes rhetorical features of the text, which in turn offer models for preaching.⁸⁹ For Luther, both Matthew and Jesus are intentional in how they present their arguments—Matthew in his choice and arrangement of stories, Old Testament passages, and dialogue; Jesus in his amplification through parables and analogies, and also through his harsh rebukes of the scribes and Pharisees. In particular, the methods of Jesus provide a model for the evangelical preacher who is to teach and exhort. Classical rhetoric also shapes Luther's engagement, with evidence that he uses Quintilian and Cicero as well as medieval translation of rhetorical terminology. The role of rhetorical "amplification," i.e., how tropes and the arrangement of words create emphasis, was particularly important for Luther because it indicated the rhetorical center

⁸⁷ LW 31:293–306; and WA 2:145–152.

⁸⁸ Brown, "Introduction," xxxix–xl.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxv–xliv.

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of each Gospel pericope and thus gave the preacher a key to Matthew's chief theological point.⁹⁰

Luther's Wednesday serial preaching on Matthew began again during Bugenhagen's travels in 1537. Because the sermons were never published until the 18th and 19th centuries and were not translated into English until 2014,⁹¹ it is not surprising that little scholarly work has been done on these texts. However, several distinctive themes in these sermons stand out immediately. First, Luther is aware that a portion of his audience—the younger generation—has largely experienced the church separated from pope. Nevertheless, Christianity is in a tumultuous state. Not only does the papacy continue to make universal claims on Christianity and threaten those who dispute that claim, but the church also seems to be splintering into numerous sects. Luther feels obligated to warn against false expressions of the church and the havoc that pride and power can foist upon Christianity. The “greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1) is so starkly different from what the world would expect. The simplicity and humility of a child—like the simple faith of a common peasant—stand as a judgment against all the assertions and saber rattling of those who make the church a higher or greater thing than the gospel: “what do children know of the pope when they are carried from the font? The child is baptized into Christ and not into the pope ... So let the pope with his cronies and crown go back where he came from ... For I hear nothing special from them except about food, drink, clothing, and shoes—this is what they build their church upon. What a fine church that is, I say! ... A child lives and dies without the pope, for he lives and dies in Christ.”⁹² Likewise, Jesus' harsh words against the pride of Pharisees (Matt. 23:1f.) are simultaneously a comfort for the people who have been subjected to their numerous laws and traditions. With the increasing urgency and conflict in the chapters leading up to Christ's passion, Luther finds a similar urgency in his daily Christendom. As he turns to the eschatological discourse in Matthew 24, Luther is attentive to the complexity of referents, knowing that, in part, Jesus is speaking of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Eventually, however, the text seems to stretch into the final days of the world, a time that, for Luther, appears as near now as it ever was. Even so, because the gospel is now preached, the time of the end ought to be received by Christians with joy: “Good-hearted people do not just say, ‘Christ will come,’ but also wish that He were at the door now and already here. These are truly the right words; it was not like this under the papacy. If you heard talk of the Last Day, you were terrified and had no desire to die;

⁹⁰ See the list of examples in LW 67:xli, note 127.

⁹¹ LW 67:331–422; and LW 68:3–341.

⁹² LW 67:346–347; and WA 47:245.

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everyone wished that the Last Day would never come. Now it is quite the opposite; many good-hearted people say and desire, 'Come, dear Lord Jesus Christ!'"⁹³

Sermons on John

The serial preaching on John's Gospel in Wittenberg was, according to the recommendation of Luther, delivered on Saturday evenings.⁹⁴ During Bugenhagen's extended absences, Luther would, among the other responsibilities, take up the task of preaching on the fourth evangelist—his favorite. This provided several opportunities for notes on Luther's expositions to be edited and published as commentaries.⁹⁵ Only his sermons on chapters 14–16 (preached in 1534–1535) and on chapter 17 (preached in 1528) were published during his lifetime. His sermons on chapters 18–20:18 (also preached in 1528 and 1529) were published in 1557, and those one chapters 1–2 and 6–8 were included in the Eisleben edition of Luther's collected works in 1565. Thus, Luther's sermons were not presented as a continuous exposition of the Gospel but, rather, came out in sections relatively near the time that they were delivered.

Luther's approach to the Gospel was similar to that in his serial preaching elsewhere. He handled the text phrase by phrase, showing conversance with the patristic and medieval exegetical tradition as well as the work of some of his colleagues.⁹⁶ The most popular publication from these sermons was his exposition of John 17, the so-called "high priestly prayer" of Jesus, printed in 1530 and reprinted in 1534, 1538, and 1540.⁹⁷ The late 1520s provided the backdrop for his reflections as he dealt with spread of those he called *Schwärmer*. Although there certainly were differences between his former colleague, Andreas von Karlstadt, the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, and the emerging Anabaptist movements, Luther perceived a common ambivalence to the external means through which God communicates his will and favor. For this reason, Luther returns repeatedly in this work to the importance of the externality of God's word, especially in the places where Christ prays, "You gave them to me, and they have kept your word. For I have given them the words that you gave me" (17:7–8).

Chapters 18–20 represented Luther's most detailed exposition of the passion narrative. The resources for passion sermons were many, and Luther was clearly familiar with the

⁹³ LW 68:332; and WA 47:616.

⁹⁴ LW 53:68.

⁹⁵ For a detailed account of Luther's preaching activity on John and the publication history see Christopher Boyd Brown's "Introduction" in LW 69:xv–xxii.

⁹⁶ Philipp Melancthon's *Annotationes in Iohannem* were published in 1523; Johannes Bugenhagen published a harmony of the passion narratives, *Die historia des leydens und der Aufferstehung unsers Herrn Jhesu Christi ...* 1526; and Johannes Brenz published his Johannine commentary in 1527.

⁹⁷ For more detail on the publication of John 17, see the Introduction, LW 69:3–9.

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traditional style of preaching that surrounded Holy Week. But he was also quite critical of the detailed focus on the enormous physical suffering of the Christ. For Luther, this kind of preaching only encouraged sympathy and perhaps sorrow, but it did not point clearly to the benefit of the cross, namely the forgiveness of sins. Consequently, Luther's interpretation is far more reserved, aligning closely with the text and avoiding allegories. Still, the profundity and mystery of Christ's death for humanity is not lost: "For here it comes to pass that there is no one on earth as wicked as Christ; he must be the worst. No one sees the robbers anymore; rather, all eyes and every venomous dart are directed at Christ. The devil forgets everyone else, he is so eager to do violence to Christ, for he wants to have revenge on him ... So it is meant to happen: all ruthlessness is meant to fall upon Christ and his Gospel, so that the devil pours out all his wickedness and all his power upon Christ and in him becomes powerless, for the salvation and comfort of us who believe in Christ."⁹⁸

Luther's handling of the first chapters of John's Gospel are indicative of his positive relationship to the catholic tradition as well as some of his most creative contributions to theology. Christ as the Word invites Luther to reflect on the ancient Trinitarian and Christological formulations that confess the divinity of Christ and affirm the coequality of the Son with the Father. That the Word became "flesh" prompts Luther to expound on the soteriological significance of Christ's divinity and incarnation over and against the ancient heresies. But Christ as the Word is also fitting in the context of Luther's theology of the word of God. Christ as the Word is not just a statement about his divinity but also indicates his office and work. Christ has come to speak, to preach, to reveal the heart of the Father. "From eternity he was within God's paternal heart, and through him God resolved to create heaven and earth. But no man was aware of such a resolve until the Word became flesh and proclaimed this to us."⁹⁹ Thus, the soteriological significance of Luther's Logos-Christology is traditional in its deep connection to ontology, but it bears a unique stamp in that salvation begins with the prophetic voice of the incarnate one. Christ has come to preach, and in that Word is life. This fact draws the Gospel of John into his "inner canon" as the preeminent Gospel: "If I had to do without one or the other—either works or the preaching of Christ—I would rather do without the works than without his preaching. For the works do not help me, but his words give life as he himself says. Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about his preaching ... therefore John's Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ LW 69:264; and WA 28:404.

⁹⁹ LW 22:9f.

¹⁰⁰ LW 35:362.

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Review of the Literature

The scholarly consideration of Luther as a biblical interpreter fully began with Karl Holl's seminal 1921 essay, "Luther's Significance for the Advance of the Art of Interpretation."¹⁰¹ Holl gave a general assessment of Luther's early exegesis, looking specifically at the use and critique of the traditional allegorical method as a pathway toward modern approaches to biblical interpretation. This work generated several studies on Luther's exegesis, the most important of which was Gerhard Ebeling's *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung* (1942).¹⁰² Like Holl, Ebeling was interested in the hermeneutical question of Luther's use of allegory and focused particularly on his interpretation of the Gospel texts, especially in his preaching and postil collections. His argument, that Luther developed a method of interpretation that made allegory unnecessary, which could be further corroborated by his progressive eschewal of the same, continues to be the most influential line of disputation on the question. Further, Ebeling's work inspired a new approach to Luther studies that considered his writings within the context of history of biblical interpretation. Alongside Ebeling resides the work of Walther von Loewenich, who published a study on Luther and Gospel of John—*Luther und das johanneische Christentum* (1935)¹⁰³—and then a longer work on Luther's interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker* (1954).¹⁰⁴ In this work, von Loewenich attends to the postil literature and considers both methodological and theological issues in Luther's exegesis. Finally, Jaroslav Pelikan authored the introductory volume to the American edition of Luther's works, *Luther the Expositor* (1959).¹⁰⁵ Pelikan gives a penetrating survey of Luther's approach to the Scriptures and the various assumptions and themes that make his exegesis so distinctive and influential.

¹⁰¹ Karl Holl, "Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst (1921)," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. I (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932), 44–582. Contributing to this early research are some others including a few important antecedents, namely, K. A. Meissinger, *Luthers Exegese in der Frühzeit* (Leipzig, 1911); Ferdinand Hahn, "Luthers Auslegungsgrundsätze und ihre Theologischen Voraussetzungen" *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 12 (1934–1935): 65–218; and idem, "Faber Stapulensis und Luther" in *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 12 (1935), 165ff, and in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 57 (1938): 356–432.

¹⁰² Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1942).

¹⁰³ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther und das johanneische Christentum* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1935). Other early works on Luther's interpretation of John include: Carl Stange, *Der johanneische Typus der Heilslehre Luthers im Verhältnis zur paulinischen Rechtfertigungslehre* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1949); and James Atkinson, "Luthers Einschätzung des Iohannesevangeliums" in *Lutherforschung heute: Referate und Berichte des 1. Internationalen Lutherforschungskongresses, Aarhus, 18–23 August 1956*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), 49–56.

¹⁰⁴ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954).

¹⁰⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959).

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The research on Luther's early Romans lectures was initiated by Heinrich Denifle's multi-volume *Luther und Luthertum* (1904–1909) and his critical assessment of a set of student notes from the lectures, newly discovered in the Vatican library. The scholarly response included the rediscovery of Luther's own handwritten manuscript of the lectures and some initial research, though the question of Luther's theological breakthrough tended to dominate the interpretation. Leif Grane produced several helpful studies on Luther's Romans lectures and use of Augustine, especially *Modus Loquendi Theologicus* (1975).¹⁰⁶ Gabrielle Schmidt-Laube made a close comparison of Luther's manuscript with the several versions of student notes to glean some insights into the content and method of the oral lectures themselves.¹⁰⁷

The first major study on Luther's interpretation of Galatians was composed by Karin Bornkamm in 1963, who compared both the early and late commentaries, highlighting points of theological and methodological continuity and development.¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Hagen, critical of the tendency in Luther research to assess Luther according to the canons of modern exegesis, examined the original printed editions (rather than the modern critical Weimar Ausgabe) and argued that both of Luther's Galatians commentaries have more in common with the medieval, monastic reading of the *sacra pagina* than the beginnings of a modern critical method.¹⁰⁹ A few other studies—Augustiji in 1982, Kunze in 2000—have looked at Erasmus' influence on Luther's early interpretation of Galatians (and the reverse).¹¹⁰ Erik Herrmann has written a detailed examination of Luther's early interpretation of the law in Galatians 3 and 4. Analyzing Luther's earliest lectures from 1513 to his postils in 1522, Herrmann documents a fundamental change in his

¹⁰⁶ Leif Grane, *Modus Loquendi Theologicus. Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie 1515–1518*. *Acta Theologica Danica*, vol. 12 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1975); and cf. also Dorothea Demmer, *Lutherus Interpres: Der theologische Neuanfang in seiner Römerbriefexegese* (Wittenberg, Germany: Luther Verlag, 1968).

¹⁰⁷ Gabrielle Schmidt-Laube, *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/16: Ein Vergleich zwischen Luthers Manuskript und den studentischen Nachschriften*. *Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers*, vol. 6 (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1994).

¹⁰⁸ Karin Bornkamm, *Luthers Auslegungen des Galaterbriefs von 1519 und 1531* (Berlin, 1963). See also the earlier work on the 1516 lectures, Hans Volz, "Eine neue studentische Nachschrift von Luthers erster Galaterbriefvorlesung von 1516/17" *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 66 (1954–1955): 72–96.

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture As Seen in His "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519–1538* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993).

¹¹⁰ Cornelis Augustiji, "Erasmus von Rotterdam im Gal.Kom. Luthers von 1519" *Lutherjahrbuch* (1982): 115–132; and Johannes Kunze, *Erasmus und Luther: Der Einfluß des Erasmus auf die Kommentierung des Galaterbriefes und der Psalmen durch Luther 1519–1521* (Münster: LIT, 2000).

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interpretation of Galatians, indicative of a new theological and hermeneutical perspective on Paul.¹¹¹

In the effort to better understand the nature and timing of Luther's theological development a few studies made some close observations on Luther's Hebrews lecture. Most important was Axel Gyllenkrok's 1952 study on justification and the certainty of salvation, and Ernst Bizer's *Fides ex auditu* in 1958.¹¹² Kenneth Hagen also published a study of Luther's lectures on Hebrews, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther* (1974).¹¹³ Attending to his exegetical sources, Hagen interprets Luther against the backdrop of the patristic and medieval exegetical tradition. He concludes that Luther's concept of faith is shaped by the way the Epistle to the Hebrews talks of "testament," especially as Luther engages the late medieval theology of covenant (*pactum*).

Apart from the early studies of Ebeling and von Loewenich, the vast majority of work on Luther's New Testament interpretation focused on the Pauline epistles. Furthermore, new research in Pauline exegesis over the last fifty years has only generated more interest, especially because Luther has been used as a foil for the so-called "new perspective" on Paul.¹¹⁴ Although this interest has led to some fairly egregious misrepresentations of Luther's exegesis,¹¹⁵ it has also encouraged more efforts in the history of exegesis in Luther and in general.¹¹⁶ Still, research on Luther's interpretation of other New Testament

¹¹¹ Erik Herrmann, "Why then the Law? Salvation History and the Law in Martin Luther's Interpretation of Galatians, 1513–1522." (PhD Diss., Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, MO, 2005). See also Herrmann, "Luther's Absorption."

¹¹² Axel Gyllenkrok, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung in der frühen evangelischen Theologie Luthers* (Uppsala, 1952); Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex auditu. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1958). On further analysis of Hebrews under this theme, see Oswald Bayer, *Promissio. Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

¹¹³ K.A. Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1974).

¹¹⁴ The early seminal works that initiated this "new perspective" include Krister Stendahl, "The apostle Paul and the introspective conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56.3 (July 1963): 199–215; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); and James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul (1982)," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 123–133. For an overview in light of the Luther/Lutheran critique see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: the "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

¹¹⁵ Cf. Erik M. Heen, "A Lutheran Response to the New Perspective on Paul," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24 (2010): 263–291; and Timothy Wengert, "The 'New' Perspectives on Paul at the 2012 Luther Congress in Helsinki," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27 (2013): 89–91.

¹¹⁶ A series of collected comments on Scripture from the Reformation period is under production; namely, *The Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, eds. Timothy George and Scott Manetsch (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011). Other examples include, *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*,

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texts is rather sparse and continues to invite further exploration. The *Annotations on Matthew* as well as the various serial sermons on John are particularly rich sources for understanding Luther's exegetical method and his place in the history of biblical interpretation.

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