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Martin Luther's Programmatic Use of Romans 1:1–3 for His Understanding of Christ in the Old Testament¹

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Within the history of interpretation of Holy Scripture, Martin Luther figures prominently as a past voice from whom contemporary Christians can learn much on how to interpret the *sacra pagina* (sacred page).² One of the central principles recognized from Luther's contribution to the development of biblical interpretation remains his powerful and confessional reading of "Christ in all Scripture." Though many assessments respect Luther's rigorous Christocentric approach, it is often the case that his interpreters regard his pervasive Christological reading of the Bible as imposed by his theological commitments rather than a faithful handling of the scriptural text.³

¹ This article is a revised version of the presentation I delivered under the same title at the 2019 ETS Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA. The conference's theme was, "Christ in all Scripture."

² On the characterization of Luther as principally a premodern interpreter of the *sacra pagina*, see the compelling account by Kenneth Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 692–93. For a broader survey and call to return to reading the Bible as the "sacred page," see Hagen, "The History of Scripture in the Church," in *The Bible in the Churches: How Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures*, 3rd ed., Marquette Studies in Theology, ed. Kenneth Hagen (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998), 1–28.

³ I have already weighed in on this discussion with my 2017 monograph, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture*, and I hope to extend some of its findings in this present study. William M. Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture: The Messiah in Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology*, Princeton Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to analyze Luther's programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3 for his understanding of the nature of what it means to say that "Christ is in the Old Testament."⁴ Or perhaps more precisely, this study will seek to illumine how Luther looks to Romans 1:1–3 as an apostolic warrant for regarding the Old Testament as distinctly *Christian* Scripture. The Apostle Paul's statements in Romans 1:1–3 function as what Luther calls in one place, "apostolic precedents [*Exempel*]."⁵ Among key works throughout his writings where he turns to discuss directly the matter of Christ as the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of all Scripture, the Reformer enlists Romans 1:1–3 in order to justify his Christological interpretation of the OT's "letter" according to the communicative intent of the biblical authors.⁶ On several occasions, Romans 1:1–3 serves as a gateway to a network of scriptural texts that form a consistent biblical-theological framework for presenting Christ as the literal sense of the

⁴ By "programmatic," I mean usage that resembles a plan or method.

⁵ *On the Last Words of David* (1543), LW 15:344; WA 54:93, "Darumb man als von offentlichen dieben wider nemen sol die Schrifft, wo es die Grammatica gerne gibt und sich mit dem Newen Testament reimet, wie *die Aposteln uns Exempel* reichlich gnug geben." See Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 186. Mark Thompson calls Luther's deference to the apostles' reading of the OT "a truly biblical theology." He writes, "Throughout his life Luther emphasized the continuing importance of the Old Testament in these terms. In this he felt he was following the practice of the New Testament. As he read them, both the Gospels and the Epistles sought to explain Christ in light of the Old Testament and his apostles illustrated and supported their teaching by quotation of and allusion to the Old Testament. Here then was a precedent for a truly biblical theology." Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture*. Foreword by Alistair McGrath. Studies in Christian History and Thought (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004), 179; italics mine.

⁶ I borrow "communicative intent" from Iain Provan's main contention about how the Reformers understood reading Scripture according to its literal sense in, Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 81–106. Provan indicates that his ultimate argument "will be that to read Scripture 'literally,' in line with the Reformation perspectives on this topic, means to read it in accordance with its various, apparent *communicative intentions* as a collection of texts from the past now integrated into one Great Story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration" (*Ibid.*, 85–86; italics mine).

OT. This collocation of biblical-theological passages, often with Romans 1:1–3 at the helm, appear in a relatively stable pattern of witness across many years and a diversity of Luther’s writings.⁷

To pursue this study, I will begin by introducing Luther’s programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3. In doing so, I will seek to highlight the larger biblical-theological network of scriptural texts that tend to follow behind Roman 1:1–3 that the Reformer leans heavily upon to promote his Christological reading of the OT. In closing, I will offer some reflection upon Luther’s use of “scriptural proofs” that situates him within this ancient practice and brings him into contemporary discussions over the relationship between Scripture and theology.

Door Wide Open: Luther’s Use of Romans 1:1–3

Upon completion of his *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513–1515), Luther transitioned to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, lecturing on the letter from November 1515 to September 1516. These lectures have been preserved in a combination of students’ notes and some from Luther himself. Volume 25 in the American Edition of *Luther’s Works* published the manuscript in a twofold set: *Glosses* and *Scholia*. Observing the former, Luther adds a marginal gloss to his note on “Concerning His Son” from Romans 1:3, announcing, “Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scriptures, that is, that everything must be understood in relation to Christ, especially in the case of prophecy. But Scripture is completely prophetic, although not according to the

⁷ A programmatic use of Romans would be fitting to overall estimations of the normative role the Epistle plays in Luther’s reading of the whole biblical canon. Reformers such as Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin utilized rhetorical analysis learned from the Humanism of their day to locate the *argumentum* for individual books of the Bible, that is, their central message or argument. Interpreters like Erasmus or Luther typically set forth the basic “argument” of a biblical book by giving it a “preface.” At a greater level, Luther strove to discern the *argumentum* of all Scripture. “What Luther and Melancthon argued,” according to Timothy Wengert, “was that Scripture itself contained such an *argumentum* or *scopus*—namely, the book of Romans.” Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 56. See also, Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 162–63.

superficial sense of the letter.”⁸ This early comment captures succinctly the approach Luther will continue to develop throughout his forthcoming lectures on Galatians (1516–1517) and Hebrews (1517–1518) as well as his return to the Psalter (*Operationes*) in his second series on this OT book from 1519–1521.⁹

The Wittenberg professor’s consistent engagement with the interpretation of the Scriptures alongside his early days of reform should not be neglected. Once Luther embarks upon his translation work on the Bible hidden away at the Wartburg in 1521 following his imperial questioning and condemnation at the Diet of Worms, much of his thought expressed in the prefatory material he provided for his German Bible starting in 1522 with the *Preface to the New Testament* manifests established convictions about the nature of Christ’s relationship to both Old and New Testaments. The aforementioned key insight from the marginal gloss on Romans 1:3 several years prior consists in the declaration: “Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scriptures.”¹⁰ Moreover, it previews the way in which the Reformer will utilize the Apostle Paul’s own epistolary prologue to cast a holistic vision for understanding the character of the OT as none other than a *Christian* book.¹¹

⁸ LW 25:4; WA 56:5.

⁹ Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 145–46; cf., Erik H. Herrmann, “Martin Luther’s Biblical Commentary: New Testament.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 29 Mar. 2017. <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-289>.

¹⁰ LW 25:4; WA 56:5.

¹¹ On the opening of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 37–38. For considerations of Paul’s prescript to Romans as a canonical introduction to his corpus, see Robert W. Wall, “Romans 1:1–15: An Introduction to the Pauline Corpus of the New Testament,” in *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism*, eds. Robert W. Wall and Eugene E. Lemicio, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 142–60; Brevard S. Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 65–69.

The Old Testament as Holy, Christian Scripture

Luther was unabashed in his confessional outlook upon the OT Scriptures as well as its characters like Moses, whom he identified as a “Christian” in his 1543 treatise, *On the Last Words of David*.¹² In his later years of intense polemic against fears of the influence of rabbinic biblical interpretation to the supposed detriment of the Christian faith, Luther devoted extra exegetical effort to demonstrate with force that the proper interpreters of the OT are Christians since, “We . . . have the meaning and import of the Bible because we have the New Testament, that is, Jesus Christ, who was promised in the Old Testament and who later appeared and brought with Him the light and the true meaning of Scripture.”¹³ All of the so-called *Judenschriften*¹⁴ feature lengthy exegetical defenses of how the OT “letter” prophesies and proclaims Jesus Christ.¹⁵ As valuable

¹² LW 15:299; WA 54:55.

¹³ *On the Last Words of David* (1543), LW 15:268; WA 54:29. For a study on the intersection of Christian Hebraism with Luther, see the thorough work of Stephen G. Burnett, “Reassessing the ‘Basel-Wittenberg Conflict’: Dimensions of the Reformation-Era Discussion of Hebrew Scholarship,” in *“Hebraica Veritas?” Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 189–95.

¹⁴ Standard writings of Luther that are identified as *Judenschriften* are: *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523; LW 45:199–229; WA 11:314–336), *Against the Sabbatarians* (1538; LW 47:65–98; WA 50:312–37), *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1539; LW 47:137–306; WA 53:417–552), *On the Ineffable Name and On the Lineage of Christ* (1543; WA 53:579–648), and *On the Last Words of David* (1543; LW 15:265–352; WA 54:28–100). For additional works from Luther pertaining to his Jewish polemics as well as a helpful introduction to the vast and complex field of research on “Luther and the Jews,” see Brooks Schramm and Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna, eds., *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). Part one of *On the Ineffable Name* appears in a new English translation by Brooks Schramm, “On the Shem Hamphoras and On the Lineage of Christ,” in *The Annotated Luther: Christian Life in the World*, vol. 5, ed., Hans J. Hillerbrand (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 609–66. A full English translation is set to appear in Volume 61 of the expanded American Edition of *Luther’s Works*.

¹⁵ For example, John Slotemaker traces the development of Luther’s exegesis of 2 Samuel 23:1–7 from *Against the Sabbatarians* to *On the Jews and Their Lies* to its culmination in *On the Last Words of David* (1543), in John T. Slotemaker, “The Trinitarian House of David: Martin Luther’s Anti-Jewish Exegesis of 2 Samuel

as these engagements with the biblical text for the sake of Christ might seem, observers on this side of the Enlightenment and the rise of the historical-critical methods have tended to dismiss Luther's biblical interpretation as "unhistorical, unreasonable, unscientific, and just plain wrong," as Luther scholar John Maxfield laments.¹⁶ For instance, OT scholar Ralph Klein suggests in an article, "Reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther—and Without Him," that to read the OT *without* Luther "means that we recognize that the Old Testament does not literally proclaim Christ."¹⁷ Additionally, Klein repeatedly indicates throughout the essay that Luther, as well as others in the precritical tradition of biblical interpretation, implement exegesis that is "excessively Christological."¹⁸

Probably regarded as the definitive study on Luther's handling of the OT, Heinrich Bornkamm in his book, *Luther and the Old Testament*, minces no words in his "Postscript" concerning the doubtful, abiding relevance of the Reformer's interpretive approach:

Modern historical research differs from Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament especially in that it can no longer revive the radical prophetic-Christological interpretation of many parts of the Old Testament which were self-evident to Luther. . . . [A]ny research which thinks historically will have to give up, without hesitation or

23:1–7," *Harvard Theological Review* 104 (2011): 233–54. He categorizes Luther's approach as "polemical exegesis." *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁶ John A. Maxfield, "The Enduring Importance of Luther's Exposition of the Old Testament as Christian Revelation," in *Defending Luther's Reformation: Its Ongoing Significance in the Face of Contemporary Challenges*, ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 125. Childs similarly responds, "Of course, Luther as a sixteenth-century interpreter did not make the clear distinction between an exegesis that worked from an original historical context, and one that had consciously shifted to a theological context provided by the full corpus of canonical scripture. Ever since the Enlightenment, Luther's Christological approach has often been rejected as a naïve distortion of the text's true meaning because he imposed an alien dogmatic system on the biblical text. *Such a criticism has failed to grasp the heart of Luther's approach.*" Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 203; italics mine.

¹⁷ Ralph W. Klein, "Reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther—and Without Him," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 (2009): 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

reservation, Luther's scheme of Christological prediction in the Old Testament.¹⁹

Shortly afterwards, in the final words to the book, Bornkamm affirms that, "It is an urgent matter for Christians to interpret the Old Testament correctly," and perhaps, the best lesson learned from Luther is what *not* to do.²⁰ In Bornkamm's estimation, Luther remains guilty of "Christianization," and thus, "We cannot use [his work] 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."²¹

The historicist approach opens up another assessment of Luther's Christian reading of the OT, namely, that of supercessionist or anti-Semitic.²² A case in point would be Eric Gritsch's intimation that Luther's intensification of "the traditional view of the church that Christ was prefigured in the Old Testament" for further concretization of "the unity of the Bible as the Christ-centered Word" led him to distinguish the "faithful synagogue" in Israel from a supposedly accursed "Talmudic Judaism" due to their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.²³ "The

¹⁹ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 262. Clearly at work in Bornkamm's assertion that modern "historical" exegesis must "give up" Luther's "radical prophetic-Christological interpretation" of the OT is the sort of "methodological naturalism" that Darren Sarisky disputes in his case for *Reading the Bible Theologically*. "The basis of this exclusionary principle," Sarisky describes, "is that, whether the text ultimately is holy or sacred or whatever else, Christian doctrine is not necessary in order to grasp the features that give it the meaning it has: doctrine does not tell a reader what the text is insofar as its nature informs how it should be read." Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 354–55.

²⁰ Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 266.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Maxfield, "Luther's Exposition of the Old Testament," 132–35.

²³ Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 35. A notable comment from Gritsch in this

distinction between ‘faithful Israel,’ known through the prophets, and an anti-Christian Judaism,” according to Gritsch, “is the foundation of Luther’s anti-Semitism.”²⁴

Maxfield acknowledges that “Luther’s anti-Jewish mentality and prejudiced opinions must be rejected and left in the past where they unfortunately were more commonplace than unique”; nevertheless, what ought not to be missed is that the underlying motivation for Luther’s exegetical efforts in these later years was driven by “fears” that “the very heart and lifeblood of Christian faith and life” were under attack, namely, “Christ and the Gospel as witnessed and proclaimed through the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, and through Christian preaching.”²⁵ Wider study of patristic and medieval biblical interpretation will show that Luther continued standard messianic, exegetical arguments for “Christ in the OT,” so to speak.²⁶ “What distinguished Luther’s interpretation as a new and significant contribution to interpretation in his day,” proposes Maxfield, is the Reformer’s “christocentric and Gospel-centric understanding of the Old Testament in its *entirety*.”²⁷ Put another way, Maxfield believes Luther has “enduring importance” as a biblical interpreter because he expounded the OT as uniquely Christian “revelation.” Luther’s conviction that “the Old Testament . . . teaches Christ and the Gospel of Christ” is to make the

passage adds that Luther takes this “Christ-centered” approach instead of following “the new, historical-critical hermeneutics of the Humanists.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35–36. See also Eric W. Gritsch, “The Cultural Context of Luther’s Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 272–74.

²⁵ Maxfield, “Luther’s Exposition of the Old Testament,” 138.

²⁶ Brooks Schramm, “Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People,” in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader*, eds. Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 12–13. On the other hand, others such as Mickey Mattox have noted Luther’s somewhat unprecedented selection of 2 Samuel 23:1–7 to demonstrate Christological and Trinitarian exegesis in light of the history of Christian biblical interpretation. Mickey L. Mattox, “Luther’s Interpretation of Scripture: Biblical Understanding in Trinitarian Shape,” in *The Substance of the Faith: Luther’s Doctrinal Theology for Today*, Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey L. Mattox, and Paul R. Hinlicky (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 47–49.

²⁷ Maxfield, “Luther’s Exposition of the Old Testament,” 143; italics mine.

assertion “that it is a *prophetic revelation* of God.”²⁸ For Maxfield, describing Luther’s view of the OT as “Christian revelation” conveys the confessed character of these “sacred writings” for the Reformer. In other words, Luther upholds a pervasive, holistic understanding of the nature of the OT Scriptures as distinctly Christian “revelation,” which grounds his exposition of it “in the conviction that God has spoken and continues to speak through the Old Testament, that the Bible as a whole is the revelation of God that has come to its completion in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh (John 1:1, 14).”²⁹ The OT is a “Christian Book,” and Luther’s use of Romans 1:1–3 serves a programmatic purpose to commend this confession to the church and the world.³⁰

Luther’s Scriptural Proofs

Interestingly, Romans 1:1–3 fails to appear in the later so-called *Judenschriften*. At the other end of his career as a Reformer around 1521, however, clear indication occurs that these verses played a programmatic role in Luther’s thought as he labored to acquaint new evangelical ears to the unified witness of Holy Scripture to Jesus Christ and his gospel of grace. As the “new Wittenberg theology” gains popularity, Luther strives to clarify the truth of the gospel in distinction from his inheritance of the Later Medieval church and scholastic theology. In these moments, Luther’s intent appears to be aimed at establishing the nature of the gospel as “promise” (*promissio*), which originates in the manner of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130; italics mine. See also Maxfield’s prior attempt to portray Luther’s understanding of the OT (i.e., Genesis) as “Christian Revelation” in his fine study, John A. Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 59–63.

²⁹ Maxfield, “Luther’s Exposition of the Old Testament,” 135.

³⁰ For studies that give particular attention to Luther’s holistic vision of the OT as a “Christian Book,” one should consult, Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 197–99; James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 76–99; A. S. Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Great Britain: The Paternoster Press, 1969), 169–78; Schramm, “Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People,” 13; John Goldingay, “Luther and the Bible,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 47–51.

OT's literal sense testimony to Christ.³¹ The gospel that Luther seeks to promote must not be perceived as a "new teaching." In fact, he wants his hearers to recognize that this "new evangelical theology" is "the old [gospel] that you had from the beginning. The old [gospel] is the word that you have heard" (1 Jn 2:7), to borrow John's manner of speech.

In the *Glosses of the Lectures on Romans*, Luther declares that Paul's words, "Concerning his son," serve as the wide open door for understanding all of the Holy Scriptures.³² The *Scholium* provides further expression to Luther's thought here. On Romans 1:2, "Which He promised beforehand," Luther submits, "This is the greatest power and the proof of the Gospel, that it has the witness of the old Law and Prophets that it would be so in the future. For the Gospel proclaims only what prophecy has said it would proclaim."³³ The "power" and "proof" of the gospel of God "concerning His Son" originates with the Law and the Prophets, namely, the OT Scriptures. When he comes to Paul's phrase, "Through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures," he roots the prophetic Word's proclamation of the gospel even further back than the OT Scriptures:

For this promise is the predestination *from eternity* of all things to come. But through the prophets the promise is given in time and in

³¹ On Luther's hermeneutical development in relation to understanding the OT Scriptures as *promissio*, see Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 226–71; See also Brevard S. Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 86, "In sum, it was the letter of the text properly understood as promise, that joined the two testament in the one message of the Gospel." Childs is dependent upon Preus' study. Cf. Oswald Bayer's proposal of how Luther's understanding of the Word as God's direct and effective promise places *promissio* at the center of his theology and interpretation of Scripture in, Oswald Bayer, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," trans. Mark Mattes, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75–77; idem., *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 50–58. It should be noted that Bayer locates Luther's shift to his centralizing commitment to *promissio* in 1518, which would put this "Reformation discovery" later than the *Lectures on Romans*.

³² LW 25:4; WA 56:5.

³³ LW 25:144–45; WA 56:165.

human speech. This is a wonderful proof of the grace of God, that above and beyond the eternal promises He gives the promise also in human words, not only in spoken words but also in written ones. All this has been done so that when the promise of God has been fulfilled, it should in these words be apparent that it was His plan to act thus, so that we might recognize that the Christian religion is not the result of a blind accident or of a fate determined by stars, as many empty-headed people have arrogantly assumed, but that it was by God's definite plan and deliberate predetermination that it should turn out so.³⁴

What the "old Law and the Prophets" proclaim is the Word of promise God has spoken "from eternity" delivered not merely in oral speech, but authoritatively and definitively in the "temporal mission," we might say, of the "Holy Scriptures" [*in Scripturis sanctis*].³⁵

Next, Luther considers Romans 1:3–4, and presents Paul's teaching in these verses as the central subject matter of the prophetic Word expressed by the OT Scriptures. On God's gospel concerning his Son, Luther explains, "The contents, or object, of the Gospel, or—as others say—its subject, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of the seed of David according to the flesh and now appointed King and Lord over all things in power, and this according to the Holy Spirit, who has raised Him from the dead."³⁶ Although other features could weigh in, one central factor in this statement that exhibits Luther's dependence upon the OT for his definition of the gospel is the description, "born of the seed of David according to the flesh." Luther recognizes that what makes Jesus Christ the central subject matter of Scripture, or more specifically, the literal sense of the OT's "letter," is its messianic hope promised from "the seed of the Woman," beginning in Genesis 3:15.³⁷ In the following series of comments, Luther will emphasize this point by adding, "This is the Gospel, which deals not merely with the Son of God in general but *with Him who has become incarnate and is of the seed of David*."³⁸ He will, then,

³⁴ LW 25:145–46; WA 56:166.

³⁵ LW 25:145; WA 56:166.

³⁶ LW 25:146; WA 56:167.

³⁷ Marsh, Martin Luther on Reading the Bible, 100–22; Kolb, Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God, 126–27.

³⁸ LW 25:146; WA 56:167; italics mine.

close this section on Romans 1:3–4 with a summary of the message God promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures (Rom 1:1–2):

The Gospel deals with His Son, who was born of the seed of David but now has been manifested as the Son of God with power over all things through the Holy Spirit, given from the resurrection of the dead, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. See, there you have it: The Gospel is the message concerning Christ, the Son of God, who was first humbled and then glorified through the Holy Spirit.³⁹

The logic of God’s promise “through the prophets” located “in the Holy Scriptures” (i.e., the OT) about the gospel “concerning his Son” will function in a programmatic way in Luther’s thought and instruction in the years to come as he seeks to introduce others to the Bible’s primary subject matter, Jesus Christ, whose incarnation and cross are for sinners “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). This practice can be clearly observed in the analysis of the writings to follow.

A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521)

Luther wrote this piece to serve as a preface to the publication of the *Church Postils* in 1521. Two sections within the writing include Luther’s use of Romans 1. In the first place, Luther suggests a certain grasp of the gospel by positing, “For at its briefest, the gospel is a discourse about Christ, that he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as a Lord over all things.”⁴⁰ From here, Luther makes an intriguing point that Paul explains as much in his epistles, yet without recourse to the “four gospels” while still expressing the “whole gospel.”⁴¹

Why raise this distinction? Because Luther desires to commend the OT as sufficient on its own terms to provide the saving hope of the gospel in God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ. He does so by immediately quoting Romans 1:1–4, and afterwards responding, “There you have it. The gospel is a story about Christ, God’s and David’s Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell. Just as

³⁹ LW 25:148; WA 56:168–69.

⁴⁰ LW 35:118; WA 10.1.1:9.

⁴¹ LW 35:118; WA 10.1.1:9.

there is no more than one Christ, so there is and may be no more than one gospel. Since Paul and Peter too teach nothing but Christ, in the way we have just described, so their epistles can be nothing but the gospel.”⁴²

As one can see, Luther wishes to apply the label “gospel” to writings other than the Fourfold Gospel. Paul and Peter’s letters could be regarded as “gospel,” since they tell of “God’s and David’s Son,” and furthermore, Yes even the teaching of the prophets, in those places where they speak of Christ, is nothing but the true, pure, and proper gospel—just as if Luke or Matthew had described it. For the prophets have proclaimed the gospel and spoken of Christ, as St. Paul here [Rom. 1:2] reports and as everyone indeed knows. Thus when Isaiah in chapter fifty-three says how Christ should die for us and bear our sins, he has *written* the pure gospel.⁴³

The apostolic gospel begins in the prophetic Word. In particular, Luther believes Romans 1:2 supports the outlook that the OT Scriptures, like Isaiah 53, paint a portrait and proclaim a promise of the saving person and work of “God’s and David’s Son,” and thus should be regarded as “pure *Euangelium*.”

In the second section, Luther returns to this subject after a discussion on Christ as “gift and example,” and the warning not to turn the Lord Jesus into a Moses. He laments “the sin and shame” of how neglectful Christians in his day have become of the gospel, requiring “other books and commentaries” to show “what to look for and what to expect in it.”⁴⁴ Now Luther will reintroduce the significance of the OT as the primary source for understanding the true nature of the gospel, but in this occasion, Romans 1 does not hold the first position whereas in the prior section, it stood alone in programmatic fashion. Rather than his own “preface,” Luther says,

Now the gospels and epistles of the apostles were written for this very purpose. They want themselves to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament so that

⁴² LW 35:118; WA 10.1.1:10.

⁴³ LW 35:118; WA 10.1.1:10; italics mine. Scriptural references that appear in brackets represent exact biblical citations provided by editors, or in some cases, myself (outside of direct quotation of Luther) in order to refer to Luther’s use of various texts where a citation (e.g., Book, chapter, verse) is not given.

⁴⁴ LW 35:122; WA 10.1.1:14.

we might there read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger [Luke 2:7], that is, how he is comprehended in the writings of the prophets.⁴⁵

The apostolic writings are intended to function as “guides” back into the Law and the Prophets to see how they garment Christ.⁴⁶ To recognize that he is “wrapped in swaddling clothes” is to discern how Christ Jesus should be “comprehended” according to the terms of “the writings of the prophets.” And so Luther exhorts his readers, “It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.”⁴⁷

To support this claim, Luther enlists a series of “scriptural proofs,” or “apostolic precedents/warrants,” starting with John 5:[46] and [5:39]. Next comes Romans 1 quoting only from vv. 1–2 to reiterate the point, “This is what St. Paul means in Romans 1[:1, 2], where in the beginning he says in his greeting, ‘The gospel was promised by God through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures.’”⁴⁸ In light of the Apostle Paul’s “guidance” here, Luther responds, “This is why the evangelists and apostles always direct us to the Scriptures and say, ‘Thus it is written,’ and again, ‘This has taken place in order that the writing of the prophets might be fulfilled,’ and so forth.”⁴⁹ He continues to undergird this approach by alluding to and quoting from an anticipated grouping of NT

⁴⁵ LW 35:122; WA 10.1.1:15.

⁴⁶ On how the NT provides a “guided” reading of the OT in Luther’s thought, see Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 156–61. Thompson suggests that Luther regarded the NT as a sort of “hermeneutical control” upon the OT, yet not in such a way that subordinated the first Testament to the second with respect to content and authority. As Thompson reflects upon Luther’s practice, “Apart from Christ the Old Testament remained a sealed book. . . . Yet in Christ the light has shone and the purpose of the New Testament is to drive us back into the Old Testament. . . . Of course, the New Testament was more than simply an aid to be consulted when the interpreter was faced with *prima facie* obscurity in the Old Testament text. The New Testament was to operate as a control whenever one sought to understand the teaching of the Old.” Thompson, *A Sure Ground*, 180–81.

⁴⁷ LW 35:122; WA 10.1.1:15.

⁴⁸ LW 35:122; WA 10.1.1:15.

⁴⁹ LW 35:122; WA 10.1.1:15.

texts: Acts 17:[11], [1 Pet 1:10–12], Acts 4 [3:24], Luke [24:45], and John 10:[9, 3].⁵⁰ “Thus it is ultimately true that the gospel itself is our guide and instructor in the Scriptures,” Luther says, “just as with this foreword I would gladly give instruction and point you to the gospel.”⁵¹

Still, Luther regrets the “fine lot of tender and pious children we are.”⁵² His concern pertains to his readers’ reception of the OT as “Christian revelation,” or lack thereof, when he writes, “In order that we might not have to study in the Scriptures and learn Christ there, we simply regard the entire Old Testament as of no account, as done for and no longer valid. Yet it alone bears the name of Holy Scripture.”⁵³ If one wants to know what to look for or expect in Gospels, then he or she cannot and must not dispense of the OT, for it is the Triune God’s speech concerning the promise of his Son by the prophets. The apostles proclaim nothing else than what has already been promised by God beforehand in these *Christian* Scriptures. Luther remains convinced on this matter because of various “apostolic precedents,” particularly in his programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3 in this preface.

The Gospel for the Main Christmas Service, John 1[:1–14] (1521–1522)

It is fitting that the next significant sample of verses from the Apostle Paul’s own prologue to Romans for outlining Luther’s understanding of Christ’s relationship to the OT appears in a sermon from the *Church Postils* for which *A Brief Instruction* prefaced. Luther begins this Christmas sermon displaying his fondness for John’s Gospel: “This is the most important Gospel of all.”⁵⁴ And despite perceptions of it as obscure, Luther calms his hearers that nothing else is required to exposit “the Gospel’s meaning” than “simple and plain attention to the words of the text.”⁵⁵ So then, how might one proceed with this instruction? The first step Luther prescribes is, “We should know that everything taught and written by the apostles comes from the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament all is prophesied which was to be fulfilled in Christ and to be

⁵⁰ LW 35:122–23; WA 10.1.1:15–16.

⁵¹ LW 35:123; WA 10.1.1:16–17.

⁵² LW 35:123; WA 10.1.1:17.

⁵³ LW 35:123; WA 10.1.1:17.

⁵⁴ LW 52:41; WA 10.1.1:181.

⁵⁵ LW 52:41; WA 10.1.1:181.

preached, as St. Paul says in Romans 1[:2]: ‘God promised the gospel concerning his Son Christ through the prophets in Holy Scripture.’⁵⁶

Similar to the first enlistment of Romans 1 in *A Brief Instruction*, key verses (vv. 1–2) from Paul’s prologue appear by themselves, playing a programmatic role for Luther to cast a vision for his readers of the Christian character of the OT Scriptures. On the basis of Romans 1:1–2, Luther contends for the inseparable relationship between the gospel and the OT explaining, “Thus their preaching is based on the Old Testament, and there is no word in the New Testament that does not look back into the Old Testament where it was first told. We have noted in the Epistle how the divinity of Christ is confirmed by the apostle from the Old Testament passages. For the New Testament is nothing but a revelation of the Old.”⁵⁷ It would be difficult not to suspect that Luther’s description of the NT as a “revelation” of the OT either brought to mind or came from his plan to incorporate the image from the Book of Revelation itself that he mentions next. “It is as if somebody had a sealed letter and later on broke it open,” imagines Luther. He goes on, “In like manner the Old Testament is a last will and testament of Christ; after his death he had it unsealed and read through the gospel and preached everywhere. This is signified in Revelation 5[:1–5] where the Lamb of God alone opens the book with the seven seals which, otherwise, nobody could open up, neither in heaven, nor the earth, nor under the earth.”⁵⁸

For Luther, the OT certainly proclaims Christ on its own terms, out of its own grammar, yet a Christian reading of it now lies at the disposal of every believer because of the spiritual, epistemic illumination available through the Lamb of God who has “unsealed” this Book with his cross and resurrection. And so, Luther encourages his hearers, “In order that this Gospel might become clearer and brighter, we must go back to the Old Testament, to the passages on which this Gospel is based.”⁵⁹ But where might one start? With little surprise given this sermon’s focus text is John 1, Luther recommends, “That means going back to Moses, to the first chapter and beginning of Genesis; there we read: ‘In the beginning

⁵⁶ LW 52:41; WA 10.1.1:181.

⁵⁷ LW 52:41; WA 10.1.1:181.

⁵⁸ LW 52:41–42; WA 10.1.1:181–82.

⁵⁹ LW 52:42; WA 10.1.1:182.

God created heaven and earth.”⁶⁰ Once again, Luther returns to Romans 1:1–2 to set up this understanding of the OT as “Christian revelation.”

The Gospel for the Sunday After Christmas, Luke 2[:33–40] (1521–1522)

Another rich example of Luther’s use of Romans 1 occurs in a sermon from the *Church Postils*. From the start, Luther aims to make sense of Joseph and Mary’s amazement at Simeon’s prophetic words about their son, Jesus (Lk 2:33). Although one could be distracted by the miraculous wonders surrounding their child like the angelic annunciation or that “[Mary] had conceived him of the Holy Ghost,” Luther locates their amazement within the knowledge of faith in response to Simeon’s words.⁶¹ In a sort of “spiritual” sense interpretation, Luther suggests that for his parents “to bring Christ into the temple means nothing else than to follow the example of the people in Acts 17[:11]. When they had accepted the gospel with complete desire they went into Holy Scripture, examining daily whether things were so.”⁶² Even though miracles have surrounded their child, Joseph and Mary recognize they possess no ordinary son. In Luther’s assessment, they are models of faith because they resolve to wonder at this young boy in “disregard [to] the *external evidence* [i.e., miracles] and cling to Simeon’s *words* with a firm faith; therefore, they marvel at his speech.”⁶³ Next, Luther strives to link Simeon with the distinctive ministry of the OT prophets as those who spoke of Christ “carried along” by the Holy Spirit supporting this view with scriptural proofs from Acts 4[3:24] and Matthew 11[:13], and the added reflection, “Luke says of Simeon that he is a personification of all prophets filled with the Holy Ghost.”⁶⁴ Like Joseph and Mary, all Christians should know, “If we come into the temple in this manner with Christ and the gospel and look at Holy Scripture that way, then the statements of the prophets take their places warmly next to him [Simeon].”⁶⁵

For those who take up this interpretive counsel, Luther encourages that they shall find the prophetic Word in the OT Scriptures offering up

⁶⁰ LW 52:42; WA 10.1.1:182.

⁶¹ LW 52:104; WA 10.1.1:382.

⁶² LW 52:105; WA 10.1.1:384.

⁶³ LW 52:104; WA 10.1.1:383; italics mine.

⁶⁴ LW 52:105; WA 10.1.1:384.

⁶⁵ LW 52:105; WA 10.1.1:385.

“beautiful testimonies” of “how this Christ is the Savior, the light, the consolation and glory of Israel—and everything else that Simeon is saying and preaching.”⁶⁶ How can Luther be confident of this result? Quickly Luther turns to his choice programmatic passage, assuring his hearers that, “Concerning this St. Paul says in Romans 1[:2] that God promised the gospel through the prophets in Holy Scripture. He explains the meaning of Simeon and the temple.”⁶⁷ The invocation of Romans 1:1–2 sets in motion a familiar pattern of scriptural proofs that seem to be a part of a larger network of biblical-theological texts that ground his approach to and understanding of the OT as entirely Christian Scripture. The scriptural proofs in view from this portion of the sermon are: Rom 3:[21]; Jn 5:[39], [46]; Deut 18[:15]; Acts 8[7:37], 13[3:22]; Isa 28[:16]; Rom 4[:23], 15[:4]; 1 Pet 1[:12].⁶⁸

Preface to the New Testament (1522/46)

This preface exhibits structural and material similarities to *A Brief Instruction* (1521). One instance can be observed in that both writings feature (1) a statement of the gospel followed by (2) use of Romans 1:1–3, and then (3) a restatement of the gospel to form an *inclusio*.⁶⁹ Additionally, Luther’s formulation of the gospel in these places shares affinities to his comments on Romans 1:1–4 in the previous *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516). In the *Preface to the New Testament*, Luther’s first definitional summary of the gospel proceeds as: “Thus this gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who

⁶⁶ LW 52:105; WA 10.1.1:385. Prior to this point of the sermon, Luther has already described the gospel as preached by Simeon in related terms: “Thus the evangelist wants to say that Simeon delivered a heartwarming, beautiful sermon, preaching nothing but the gospel and God’s word. What else is the gospel but a sermon about Christ, declaring that he is a Savior, light, and glory of all the world; such a sermon fills the heart with joy, and it marvels joyfully at such grace and consolation, provided it is received in faith.” LW 52:104; WA 10.1.1:383.

⁶⁷ LW 52:106; WA 10.1.1:385.

⁶⁸ LW 52:106–07; WA 10.1.1:385–86.

⁶⁹ For further analysis, see Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 106–07.

were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil.”⁷⁰ The apostolic proclamation of this “new testament” in Christ delivers forgiveness of sins and righteousness without merit to “poor,” sinful men and women, who “can hear nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ; from the bottom of his heart he must laugh and be glad over it, if he believes it true.”⁷¹ The consolation and certainty of this gospel promise in the “true David” receives further strengthening, Luther says, in the reality that, “God has promised this gospel and testament in many ways, by the prophets in the Old Testament, as St. Paul says in Romans 1[:1], ‘I am set apart to preach the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David,’ etc.”⁷² As has been demonstrated so far, when Luther resorts to Romans 1 in programmatic usage, a pattern of scriptural proofs tend to come with it that appear to function as a kind of biblical-theological hermeneutic. In this instance, Luther endeavors “to mention some of these places” that he believes the Apostle Paul envisions in Romans 1:1–2: Gen 3[:15]; Gen 22[:18]; Gal 3[:16], [3:8]; 2 Sam 7[:12–14]; Micah 5[:2]; Hosea 13[:14].⁷³ What Luther conveys by sampling this network of biblical texts is his conviction that the affirmation of Christ as the literal sense of Scripture finds ultimate warrant in the prophetic witness to the Messiah in the OT’s “letter.” The substance of the Reformer’s definition of the gospel is formed by the OT’s prophecy of the messianic hope.⁷⁴ And so, Luther restates his summation of the gospel against this backdrop: “The gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching about Christ, Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all men who believe in him.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ LW 35:358; WA DB 6:4.

⁷¹ LW 35:359; WA DB 6:4.

⁷² LW 35:359; WA DB 6:4.

⁷³ LW 35:359–60; WA DB 6:4, 6. The list of scriptural proofs for the messianic hope from the OT does not appear in *A Brief Instruction* in between the structure of (2) and (3) outlined above.

⁷⁴ Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 105.

⁷⁵ LW 35:360; WA DB 6:6.

Sermons on The First Epistle of St. Peter (1522).

Alongside his fervent translation efforts, Luther continued to preach regularly on the Bible. In his 1522 sermons on 1 Peter, Luther found occasion to illumine again the Christian character of the OT during his comments on 1 Peter 1:10–11. Luther explains that “St. Peter refers us to Holy Scripture in order that we may see there how God keeps His promise not because of any merit on our part but out of pure grace.”⁷⁶ Scripture’s end is “to tear us away from our works and to bring us to faith. And it is necessary for us to study Scripture well in order to become certain of faith.”⁷⁷ Diligent study of Scripture yields the certainty of faith, in Luther’s view, because of his confidence in what the OT promises. Luther puts these pieces together through his pairing of Romans 3:21 with Romans 1:1–2 while he invokes the latter in his programmatic manner to grant understanding of the OT as “Christian revelation.” “Thus St. Paul,” Luther preaches, “also leads us into Scripture when he says in Rom. 1[:2] that God promised the Gospel ‘beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.’ And in Rom. 3[:21] he says that the Law and the prophets bear witness to the faith through which one is justified.”⁷⁸ Fitting to practice, a network of scriptural proofs follow Luther’s recourse to Romans 1 that present Christ as the literal sense of Scripture on the basis of the OT’s messianic hope: Acts 17[:2]; Jn 5[:39], [46]; Matt 7[:12]; Gen 22[:18].⁷⁹ These “apostolic precedents,” in particular, warrant a Christian reading of the OT as faithful to its own nature, for “the books of Moses and the prophets are also Gospel, since they proclaimed and described in advance what the apostles preached or wrote later about Christ.”⁸⁰

Preface to the Old Testament (1523/45)

Romans 1 does not loom as large in this preface, though it appears in similar usage nonetheless. With the first translation of the German New Testament (*Septembertestament*) in 1522 behind him, Luther’s rendering of the Pentateuch in German was published in mid-1523.

⁷⁶LW 30:18; WA 12:274.

⁷⁷LW 30:18; WA 12:274.

⁷⁸LW 30:18; WA 12:274.

⁷⁹LW 30:18–21; WA 12:274–77.

⁸⁰LW 30:19; WA 12:275.

This preface likely sought to introduce recipients to a Christian reading of the OT as well as to the individual books of the Pentateuch.⁸¹ In this light, one should note the strong tone with which Luther begins the preface repudiating any suspicions that the OT has no abiding value for Christians. He acknowledges two points of misunderstanding that might lead some people to disregard the OT. First, Luther wants to dispel a historicist view of the OT “as a book that was given to the Jewish people only and is now out of date, containing only stories of past times.”⁸² The second concern is the attitude that, “They think they have enough in the New Testament and assert that only a spiritual sense is to be sought in the Old Testament.”⁸³ To reveal the falsity of both of these views, Luther cites Christ himself who says, “in John 5[:39], ‘Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me.’”⁸⁴ He calls Jesus to witness in objection to these unhealthy postures towards the OT, but then moves quickly to the apostles starting with Paul’s charge to Timothy to “attend to the reading of the Scriptures [1 Tim. 4:13], and in *Romans 1[:2]* he declares that the gospel was promised by God in the Scriptures, while in 1 Corinthians 15 he says that in accordance with the Scriptures Christ came of the seed of David, died, and was raised from the dead. St. Peter, too, points us back, more than once, to the Scriptures.”⁸⁵ Taken together, these scriptural proofs “teach us that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are not to be despised, but diligently read. For they themselves base the New Testament upon them mightily, proving it by the Old Testament and appealing to it.”⁸⁶ Luther upholds the “Thessalonians” [i.e., the Bereans] in Acts 17[:11] as examples to follow in recourse to discerning the gospel promised beforehand in the OT.⁸⁷ For all true “Bereans,” according to Luther, should confess that, “The ground and proof of the New Testament is surely not to be despised, and therefore the Old Testament is to be highly regarded. And what is the New Testament but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ?”⁸⁸ Undoubtedly, Romans 1 informed Luther’s thought here in agreement with other “apostolic precedents/warrants” that make similar claims about the nature of the OT Scripture. A possible way to construe Luther’s outlook upon the gospel’s relationship to the OT from these selections could be to say that the OT is what explains the NT. This interpretive dynamic is made possible because the OT itself is a “Christian Book.” As Maxfield posed, such statements from Luther show that one could argue that the

Reformer's "new" and "significant contribution" to biblical interpretation in his context was "his christocentric and Gospel-centric understanding of the Old Testament in its *entirety*."⁸⁹

On Bound Choice (1525)

Several years after Luther's initial output as a condemned heretic and established Reformer, Luther found himself embroiled in a public dispute with the Humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam. In a popular section of Luther's "Comments on Erasmus' Introduction," concerning the "internal" and "external" clarity of Scripture as the proper "test of truth," Luther's programmatic use of Romans 1 reappears. By the time he has reached the NT, Luther has already examined the principle of "divine light" that the OT promotes regarding the ability of the external Word, particularly the Law, to shed "clear and certain" light upon right judgments and actions.⁹⁰ When he consults the NT on this matter, Luther's first turn is to none other than Romans 1:1–2. He writes, "Paul says in Romans 1[:2] that the gospel was promised through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, and in Romans 3[:21] that the righteousness of faith is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets. Now, what sort of witness is it if it is obscure?"⁹¹

The certainty of the gospel of Jesus Christ depends upon the clarity of its scriptural witness. In view of the pattern established in earlier writings, the next set of scriptural proofs that appear comes to little surprise, once Romans 1 has been invoked. Luther asks,

⁸¹Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible*, 53.

⁸²LW 35:235; WA DB 8:11.

⁸³LW 35:235; WA DB 8:11.

⁸⁴LW 35:235; WA DB 8:11.

⁸⁵LW 35:235; WA DB 8:11; italics mine.

⁸⁶LW 35:235–36; WA DB 8:11.

⁸⁷Luther has the practice of pointing to the "Thessalonians" in Acts 17:11 to highlight them as models for engaging the Scriptures, principally the OT. For Luther, to be a "Berean" is to be someone who understands the OT as "Christian revelation," a witness to Christ in its literal sense instead of the popular notion of "Bereans" as people who search the Bible to ground a truth claim.

⁸⁸LW 35:236; WA DB 8:11.

⁸⁹Maxfield, "Luther's Exposition of the Old Testament," 143; italics mine.

⁹⁰LW 33:91–92; WA 18:654.

⁹¹LW 33:92–93; WA 18:654.

And what are the apostles doing when they prove their own preachings by the Scriptures? Are they trying to obscure for us their own darkness with yet greater darkness? Or to prove something well known by something known less well? What is Christ doing in John 5[:39], where he tells the Jews to search the Scriptures because they bear witness to him? Is he trying to put them in doubt about faith in him? What are those people in Acts 17[:11] doing, who after hearing Paul were reading the Scriptures day and night to see if these things were so?⁹²

To assign obscurity to biblical interpretation clouds the scriptural witness to the consoling promise of the righteousness of faith through the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed ultimately not in the NT, but in the Law and the Prophets, that is, the OT. And so Luther continues to probe at Erasmus, “Do not all these things prove that the apostles, like Christ himself, point us to the Scriptures as the very clearest witnesses to what they themselves say? What right have we, then, to make them obscure?”⁹³ The “Scriptures” in this case are the OT, and once again, Romans 1 (esp. vv. 1–2) serves a programmatic purpose to portray Luther’s understanding of the OT as “Christian revelation,” the origin and ground of the one gospel.

Sermons on Jeremiah 23:5–8 (1526)

On November 18, 1526, Luther preached a sermon on Jeremiah 23:5–8 for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity, making it no further than v. 5. One major backdrop to the sermons during this period was Luther’s role in the Eucharistic Controversy, which gave him concern that Zwingli and others would fail to confess properly the divinity of Christ, or either outright deny it.⁹⁴ The first lines of the sermon enter this topic. Luther moves quickly to direct attention to how Jeremiah testifies to the identity of Jesus Christ, when he opens the sermon, “In this Epistle reading or prophecy of Jeremiah, we are told who Christ is, what His kingdom is, how He will reign, and how those who are subject to His

⁹²LW 33:93; WA 18:655.

⁹³LW 33:93; WA 18:655.

⁹⁴One will find a concise introduction to the Eucharistic Controversy of 1520s from Luther’s perspective in Amy Nelson Burnett, “Luther and the Eucharistic Controversy,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (2017): 145–50.

kingdom will dwell in safety.”⁹⁵ “Who Christ is,” for Luther, starts with his identity as the promised Messiah; thus, Luther declares,

First, the prophet says that Christ is the Shoot and Seed of David. Likewise, St. Paul says to the Romans (1[:1–4]) that God caused the prophets to announce His Gospel concerning His Son beforehand in the Scriptures, namely, that He would be a Lord who would descend from the seed of David according to the flesh, and yet be declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit who sanctifies [Rom 1:4].⁹⁶

Romans 1, then, offers a twofold service for the sermon: In the first place, the Apostle Paul’s teaching in his own prologue lends warrant for faithful recourse to the OT in order to discern the truth about Jesus. And in the second place, Romans 1:1–4 provides a doctrinal norm for the type of Christology one ought to find in both the prophetic and apostolic Word across the two Testaments. The latter will continue to be explored for much of the remainder of the sermon. Primarily in view for our purposes is the former.

Following the invocation of Romans 1, Luther immediately enlists two key scriptural proofs of Jesus’ identity as the long-promised Messiah that often gravitate to Luther’s programmatic use of Romans 1:1–2: [Gen 22:18] and [Gen 3:15].⁹⁷ For a brief moment, Luther weaves together these two texts to demonstrate the full divinity and humanity of Christ according to the OT messianic hope. Then, he reflects,

In all these passages, we plainly see that Christ must be God and man, that He will have to die and rise again and receive an eternal kingdom here on earth, and that this will happen by His Word alone. Although this is not stated with explicit words in these passages, nevertheless it is certainly contained in them, and the words give good indication of it if the text is examined and reflected upon properly.⁹⁸

The character of the OT as Christian Scripture, in Luther’s view, allows it to make its own material contribution to the faith confessed.⁹⁹

⁹⁵LW 56:184; WA 20:549.

⁹⁶LW 56:184; WA 20:549.

⁹⁷LW 56:184–85; WA 20:549–50.

⁹⁸LW 56:184; WA 20:550.

⁹⁹Christine Helmer critiques the historical-critical method’s dominance precisely for its preclusion of the OT to make an independent material contribution to

“Apostolic precedents” like Romans 1 especially support this understanding. Thinking of the way that Jeremiah 23:5 will witness to Christ in the manner that the Apostle Paul attests in Romans 1:1–4, Luther asserts, “The *whole* Old Testament, moreover, serves to show us that everything we now preach and believe happened as it had been made known and foretold.”¹⁰⁰

Scriptural Proofs as the Interpretation of Scripture

The practice of “proof-texting,” or rather, the use of “scriptural proofs,” has ancient roots.¹⁰¹ Luther’s participation in this interpretive activity fit with his medieval inheritance and the conviction that *sacra doctrina* must come from the *sacra pagina*.¹⁰² In recent years, “proof-texting” has become a term often regarded with disdain, but not all recommend its dismissal. Michael Allen and Scott Swain come to proof-texting’s “defense,” at least the kind that best resembles its use within the history of biblical interpretation.¹⁰³ With an understanding to its classical function, they suggest that revived practice of proof-texting can “serve as a sign of lively interaction between biblical commentary and Christian doctrine.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, they clarify that the practice

Christian theology in, Christine Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” *Modern Theology* 18 (2002): 49–50.

¹⁰⁰LW 56:184; WA 20:550; italics mine.

¹⁰¹For leading studies on this practice within the history of interpretation and doctrinal development, see Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile*, *Novum Testamentum, Supplements* 56 (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Frances Young, “Exegetical Method and Scriptural Proof: The Bible in Doctrinal Debate,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 19, ed. Elizabeth Livingstone (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 291–304.

¹⁰²On Luther’s reception of medieval biblical interpretation, see the excellent treatments from Erik Herrmann, “Luther’s Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L’ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71–90; Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184–213.

¹⁰³R. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, “In Defense of Proof-Texting,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54.3 (2011): 589–606.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 589.

historically was not meant to convey that “a cited proof-text should be self-evident to the reader apart from the hard work of grammatical, historical, literary, and theological exegesis.”¹⁰⁵ Instead, theology was taken to be a “sacred science, whose ‘first principles’ are revealed by God alone and therefore that constructive theological argumentation must proceed on the basis of God’s revealed truth, particularly as that revealed truth is communicated through individual passages of Holy Scripture, often as *sedes doctrinae*.”¹⁰⁶

As this study has shown, Luther’s programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3 tied to a network of other scriptural passages that form a biblical-theological hermeneutic for discerning Christ as the literal sense of all Scripture works in the twofold manner outlined above. His use of scriptural proofs assume the prior hard work of interpretation and manifest that theological argument must flow directly from the *sacra pagina* of Holy Scripture.¹⁰⁷ Luther scholar Kenneth Hagen contends that actually, “One needs to know the full page of Scripture in order to follow Luther’s argument. . . . Only a few words had to be supplied in print in order to trigger the memory of the whole text, chapter, and letter. For Luther, the whole sacred page is a part of his argument.”¹⁰⁸ Not always concerned with an exact proof-text, Hagen says that Luther did not think of the biblical text as a “series of chopped-up verses.”¹⁰⁹ The Reformer’s practice of elliptical reference or scriptural proofs was meant to offer “a portion of some text [as] shorthand for a whole piece.”¹¹⁰ Luther was accustomed to the medieval tradition of interwoven Scripture and

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 589–90.

¹⁰⁷Concerning the latter, Robert Kolb notes, “Luther used biblical citations as the deciding factor in his polemics. In this context Luther’s understanding of the epistemological principle that the Revealed God is to be found ‘in Scripture alone’ (*sola Scriptura*) must be understood. Parallel to the humanist demand for a return to the sources, Luther expressed his intent to remain faithful to all that flowed from the biblical text.” Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 85.

¹⁰⁸Kenneth Hagen, “It Is All in the Et Cetera: Luther and the Elliptical Reference,” in *The Word Does Everything: Key Concepts of Luther on Testament, Scripture, Vocation, Cross, and Worm*. Also on Method and on Catholicism, *Marquette Studies in Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016), 207.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 208.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

commentary. Hagen exposes the common bad habits of contemporary reading on Scripture in contrast to Luther's medieval approach to the *sacra pagina*, when he remarks, "The modern scholar is trained to skip over the citations and look for the interpretation. Through the use of quotation marks, Scripture is set apart."¹¹¹ If this reading strategy is applied to how one follows Luther's programmatic use of scriptural proofs like Romans 1:1–3, then Hagen believes the point of the practice has been missed. "The use of Scripture in such a manner," Hagen corrects, "is the 'interpretation.'"¹¹²

The invocation of scriptural proofs was an enactment of the pattern of the Bible's own self-reference, its own self-interpretation. For Luther, Scripture was already "a *catena*, a chain of scriptural citations and allusions. Scripture is full of echo."¹¹³ Yet, the use of biblical reference in Luther's hands had less to do with "proof" than it did "promotion." Through scriptural proofs, according to Hagen, Luther promoted "what Scripture promotes throughout: GOD."¹¹⁴ Biblical reference confronted readers with the "performative power" of God's Word(s), allowing Luther "to drive (*was Christum treibt*) . . . the same that Paul was seeking to promote, namely, Jesus Christ."¹¹⁵ "As a theologian," Hagen advances, "Luther was conscious of his task to publish an *enarratio*, to go public with the voice of the Gospel, the words of Christ, the Word of God."¹¹⁶ The Reformer's programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3 to demonstrate

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid., 209. Allen and Swain make a similar point, "All of the charges brought against the use of proof-texts in Christian theology could be lodged against the Bible's own use of the Bible." Allen and Swain, "In Defense of Proof-Texting," 597.

¹¹⁴Hagen, "It Is All in the Et Cetera," 216.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁶Ibid. For background on Luther's understanding of the genre of *enarratio*, see the standard treatment by Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians, 1519–1538* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), 1–18, 49–66. David Fink has disputed some of Hagen's forceful points of interpretation concerning *enarratio* over commentary as the primary way to view Luther's own understanding of his engagement with Scripture in, David C. Fink, "Martin Luther's Reading of Galatians," in *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis*, eds. Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Linebaugh (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 32–37.

God's promise concerning his Son by the prophets is an interpretive practice that aims to promote what the Triune God preaches in all of Scripture.

Conclusion

This study has endeavored to analyze Luther's programmatic use of Romans 1:1–3 to gain a better grasp of the way he approaches the matter of "Christ in all Scripture." Undeniably, Luther's practice of exegesis takes a Christological course from Genesis to Revelation. On the other hand, Luther operates as a biblical interpreter out of a more fundamental commitment to the ontological reality of the OT as "sacred writings," as "Holy, Christian Scripture." Thus, a more precise understanding of how Luther envisions the OT in relation to Jesus Christ will seek to grapple with his confession of it as distinctly Christian Scripture, or as Maxfield has put it, "Christian revelation." Examination of his dependence upon Romans 1, particularly vv. 1–2, for this position before and around 1521 manifests how he might be permitted to fling the "door wide open" for a proper "understanding of the Holy Scriptures" according to "the gospel of God concerning His Son."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷In a recent update to some of his earlier work on Luther's "Christological principle" of biblical hermeneutics, David Dockery has entertained the idea that instead of Romans 1:17 or 3:21–26, Romans 1:1–4 might have played the most significant role in shaping the Augustinian friar's interpretive method manifest in his "new evangelical" understanding of the gospel, preaching, and theology. David S. Dockery, "Martin Luther's Christological Principle: Implications for Biblical Authority and Biblical Interpretation," in *The Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God: Interpretation, Theology, and Practice*, ed., Scott M. Manetsch (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 41–42. Dockery credits this insight to Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology, Doing Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 13–26. For Dockery's older contribution, see David S. Dockery, "Martin Luther's Christological Hermeneutics," *Grace Theological Journal* 4 (1984): 189–203.