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Luther on Christ and the Old Testament

JAMES S. PREUS

[Like several other articles in this issue, James Preus' study does not need an introduction to place it in pastoral perspective; it is a study that will immediately prove its usefulness to the pastor in his preaching and counseling work.

Drawing on his extensive study of Luther's hermeneutics, the author shows how the young Luther was influenced by medieval hermeneutics, which Preus puts into a much more favorable light than many Luther scholars do, but also shows how that as he matured, he moved to a radically Christocentric hermeneutics. But Preus argues that Luther's Christocentricity did not concentrate on Old Testament prophecies and their rectilinear fulfillment, as if this was the only proper key, or even the best one, to the relationship between the two testaments. Rather his Christocentric hermeneutics consisted in making Jesus Christ the center of God's promise to despairing mankind (we are all Israelites), and thus drawing men to trust His every word of promise in the very core of their beings.

Careful reading of this article will contribute to getting the hermeneutical debate in our Synod beyond the present impasse that has been created by a non-Lutheran posing of the alternatives by so many who are involved in the debate.

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An intriguing question about Luther's Biblical theology is the apparent contradiction between two well-documented facts: that the Old Testament was a decisive constitutive element of Luther's ref-

ormation theology,¹ and that throughout his lifetime of occupation with the Scriptures, Christ was seen as its interpretive center. What follows is reflection on those two claims, and an attempt to understand how both were true at the same time.

I. AUGUSTINE AND THE MEDIEVAL TRADITION

We begin with a sketch of the hermeneutical tradition within which Luther began as an exegete, focusing on Augustine, formulator of principles which held throughout the medieval period, and Luther's most important theological mentor in his early period of development.

For our purposes, the pertinent principles of Augustine's hermeneutic can be reduced to three: his interpretation of 2 Cor. 3:6, "The letter kills, but the spirit makes alive"; the two kinds of signs in Scripture; and the first rule of Tyconius.

1. Regarding the spirit and letter, this text functioned as much more than the medieval license for allegorical exegesis. The verse easily could be bent so as to say that literal exegesis "kills," but spiritual (figurative or allegorical) interpretation "makes alive." But Augustine's interpreta-

¹ The first two parts of this essay maintain this in a developmental framework, documentation and elaboration of which is available in my book, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, 1969). Heinrich Bornkamm developed the theme in a comprehensive and systematic way in *Luther und das Alte Testament* (Tübingen, 1948); trans. Eric and Ruth Gritsch, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1969).

tion went much deeper, although he sometimes made that equation. Following Paul, he understood that the killing letter was the Law which demands righteousness and manifests sin, without giving "spirit," that grace by which sin may be effectively overcome. Without grace, the letter of the Law kills; with grace, the Law is fulfilled and life-giving. Through the love shed abroad in our hearts, the Law is able to reach its goal. Grace heals the recalcitrant will so that it delights in, and fulfills, the Law.

For Augustine and the entire medieval tradition, this was a fundamental theological principle. Moreover, it revealed the historical meaning of the coming of Jesus Christ in the history of Israel: the Old Testament Law, and by implication, the whole of Old Testament religion, was inadequate and incomplete unto itself as a means of salvation. By itself, it was a killing letter. But with the grace of Christ and the Spirit, the history of Israel's religion was fulfilled, and the redemption toward which it pointed poured forth.

Thus, there is a historical dynamic implicit in the "letter-spirit" distinction, one which invited the interpreter to think in terms of progress in God's revelation, and to resist being locked into static, literalistic exegesis. The advance in the history of salvation from Old to New Testament dispensations warned the interpreter that God's options were not yet played out, and that His Spirit might yet reveal new meanings to His church.

2. The second principle, regarding Biblical signs, reinforced this progressive interpretation. The Bible, says Augustine, has two kinds of signs. The first and most obvious are simply its words: words signify things, being signs that point to events

and things in history. But the peculiar divine quality of the Bible resides in the mysterious fact that it has a second level of signification. The things which its words point to can themselves function as signs of still other — future — things.

This characteristic of Scripture is rooted in the history of revelation itself, when one reflects on the relation of the old to the new dispensations, witnessed to in the dual canon of Christian Scripture. There appears the justification for the double system of signification. For example, we are told in the Old Testament that Moses strikes a rock and gets water. On the first level, the word "rock" is the sign, and the rock itself the thing. But St. Paul has noticed a deeper, spiritual meaning: "The rock was Christ." So the first thing signifies the second thing.

Medieval exegetes, following Augustine, applied this broadly. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, reported many things that for Christians seemed devoid of moral or spiritual meaning — if one took as final their immediate meaning. But God so inspired the sacred authors, and has so ordered the course of redemptive history, that these things can signify truths of the faith, or of Christian existence. The hermeneutical task is to ferret out these spiritual meanings.

3. Furthermore, the system of signs — the progressive unfolding of signification — doesn't stop with the New Testament. And this is where the third axiom comes in, the first rule of Tyconius. Tyconius was a fourth-century Donatist theologian who wrote a book of rules for interpreting Scripture; Augustine adapted these rules and incorporated them into his own hermeneutical treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*.

The first rule, which concerns us here, states that Scripture often speaks of Christ and His church, head and body, as one person. Or, as medieval exegetes say over and over: "As with the head, so with the body (or members)."

Thus, extending our example, just as the Old Testament rock finds a spiritual meaning in Christ, so the events in the life of Christ, in their turn, may be signs of the life situations of Christians. What happens with Christ happens also with His church, and with the faithful.

In summary, this hermeneutical scheme embodies the medieval key for unlocking the deepest meaning of redemptive history. There is a continual unfolding from age to age. Meanings hidden in the Old Testament dispensation are revealed in the New, and the church in its ongoing life realizes in its own experience ever fresh springs of meaning from the ancient events of the New Testament. The movement is always from "letter" to "spirit" — from that which is irretrievably past to present and future existence.

It is plainly false, then, to credit the Reformation with the first "historical" understanding of Scripture. The medieval hermeneutic is profoundly historical, and has a built-in safeguard against textual fundamentalism. Medieval men knew that the words of the text were not always and ever going to remain alive in their original meaning. In the course of God's time the Spirit continually reveals new meanings, makes the letter of the text come alive here and now, in the context of the church.

Nor is it fair to criticize medieval exegesis, as a rule, for being capricious and arbitrary. On the contrary, it was carefully ordered and controlled through the

subdivision of the spiritual senses into three: allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical. These three dimensions of the spiritual sense corresponded to the three theological virtues of faith, love, and hope, respectively, which the Bible in its plain and normative literal sense teaches as the sum of Christian life. Thus, any part of the letter that proved not to be useful in its primary meaning might be shown to point beyond itself, first to what we are to believe (allegory, the articles of the faith, including faith in the church and its sacraments); second, to what we are to love and do (tropology, covering all aspects of the Christian's spiritual and ethical life); and finally, to what we are to hope (anagoge, setting our eyes on things which are above and before us).

II. THE YOUNG LUTHER

As Luther applied himself to the Psalms in his first lecture course (1513—15) as a professor at Wittenberg, we find him mainly interested in arriving at the spiritual — especially the existential — meaning of the text for himself and his hearers. Of the three Augustinian principles, the last is the most evident in Luther's earliest Old Testament interpretation — conformity with Christ, under the rubric of the tropological sense.

His interpretation begins in a radically Christological fashion. He believes that Christ is the *literal* content and meaning of the Psalms texts, and, further, that the goal of interpretation is to move from that to a personal application or appropriation of this Christological content in one's own life. For Luther, the tropological meaning exposes what God does in conforming one to both the destiny and attitude of Jesus —

a "theocentric" application of the old rule of Tyconius. The ruling idea is: "God makes all his saints to be conformed to the image of his Son." This is the focus as Luther struggles to explicate how God justifies the sinner.

The prime Christian virtues are those of Christ: especially love, obedience, humility, and humiliation under the damning judgment of God against sin. Through His conforming work, God justifies us. For example, Christ's cry of abandonment from the cross signifies tropologically "that everyone who casts himself away from God, and humbles himself, will be heard all the more," just as Christ did and was.²

In time, Luther radically revised his mode of dealing with his text. What has been described is not the basic hermeneutical mechanism in his later Psalms interpretation, nor is the reality of justification always so closely associated with God's work of reshaping men after the image and fate of Christ. *That* work of God would be treated more under the rubric of sanctification (to invoke a distinction made later). Luther gradually but decisively broke out of the medieval scheme of literal/spiritual interpretation and moved to another fundamental understanding of the text, in which "word" (especially promise) and "faith" became the key words, rather than signs and things. Christ's function shifted from that of a model or sign of Christian life to the object of faith, the One who is promised for the future and then fulfills the promise with His real presence.

Already in Luther's first lectures (the *Dictata*), we can see this shift taking

² *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513—16), *WA* 3, 171, 22 f.

place. Luther had started by making Christ the literal sense (he called it "prophetic-literal" in polemical contrast to the commonplace historical-literal sense), and proceeded by making Christ the exemplar of Christian existence. Consequently, he brushed aside the original historical and religious sense of the Old Testament text and history itself as something radically irrelevant to Christians, only a shadow, or sign, of the overwhelming reality of Christ.

But a new understanding began to appear when Luther listened more closely to his text, becoming personally and theologically involved with Israel's own predicament before Christ's coming, as it longed for the fulfillment of God's promises. Luther began to make Israel, or at least a faithful remnant, the new model and exemplar for his own Christian faith. In place of the rule of Tyconius, the principle became, "as with *Israel*, so with us."

For Luther, this meant abandoning the original meaning that he had assigned to the "prophetic-literal sense," and laying aside his antagonism to the "Jewish" historical sense. By no means did Luther abandon the notion that Christ was somehow the goal and center of Scripture, but the relation of Christ to the text changed. David, rather than a mouthpiece for Christ, became a model for Christians, and along with other Old Testament figures, a prototypical man of faith.

Luther discovered that his own existence as a believer matched the situation of the faithful Israelites, both in the kind of Word they heard and in the kind of response the Word elicited. God's promise sustained them in tribulation, held them in petition and hope, and set their eyes on the future, in spite of all evidence to the

contrary. This theme, first sounded in 1514 and 1515, became a constant dimension of faith throughout Luther's life. Thirty years later, reflecting on the Genesis account of Abraham, Luther wrote:

God keeps his promises and he can never be changed. Nevertheless, he confronts us with something that is the very opposite. With this he tries us. This is God's wonderful government.³

Luther had moved quite beyond the usual medieval apprehension of the Old Testament. There, the Old Testament was predominantly seen as a sign, or figure, or shadow of the New Testament, and it everywhere prefigured evangelical mysteries. "The whole Old Testament is allegory," one late medieval exegete asserted. And this meant that Israel's religious life was relegated to oblivion, both theological and historical, as the mere shadow of that which Christians are as reality.

Once Luther had learned how to pray the prayers of Israel as his own, he could not any longer share such a view. Rather, he identified in faith with a remnant which he began to call the "faithful synagogue." Pray this psalm, he says at one point late in the *Dictata*, "as though" you were still in the synagogue, for you too have no visible supports, no props, but only the sheer promise.

This word of promise does not fit the old scheme as either "letter" or "spirit"—a distinction depending upon the assumption that the Law of God became viable as a means of salvation by grace, and that the required grace and Spirit normally unavailable to Israel before the Incarnation, became available in the New Testament

³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535—45), WA 44, 637, 22 f.; LW 8, 79.

time. Luther acknowledged that Israel's remnant lived before the fresh outpouring of grace that the tradition pictured as flowing from the side of Christ and to the faithful through the Christian sacraments. Israel had to depend on a "naked word." But it was no mere "letter" either—it was not Law, but Promise, coming full of its own power. Its power could elicit confidence that God had committed Himself unconditionally, and God was satisfied and honored best by the people when they simply and firmly believed Him.

Luther now became less interested in those New Testament things that the Old Testament events and words were supposed to foreshadow; now he wanted to see what God said and how Israel responded. So he became absorbed in the Old Testament history itself, the real struggle of life to which God spoke and to which the psalmists responded with expectation, hope, and petitions for the coming of salvation. As Luther later wrote,

The essence of Scripture is given us in its histories, which can serve us as examples of faith, love, and the cross. One must take from Scripture its true treasure, kernel, power, might, sap, and taste, namely, its examples of faith and love. From these one can see God's purpose in writing them.⁴

The total contrast with an allegorical approach is clearly seen, for

although we can understand all histories in a double sense and, by means of metaphorical [=allegorical] interpretation, cause them to apply to Christ, they nevertheless possess reality in and for them—

⁴ *Sermons on Exodus* (1524—27), WA 16, 70, 1—8; 72, 13—15; quoted from Willem J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, tr. John Schmidt (Philadelphia, 1961), 218.

selves. They are not merely meant to be considered as hull, but as the true kernel of the matter . . . Understand this clearly, that they are not concerned with a foreshadowing or image, but with an example.⁵

The Old Testament is not, then, a figure of what shall be, but rather a testimony to what *always* holds true between man and God.

While historical-critical interpretation of the Old Testament as we know it cannot be attributed to Luther, he provided a fresh theological motivation for such study by his intense interest in the concrete existence of Old Testament men of faith. By getting at their real history, one entered deeper into real theology, which could not, in Luther's mind, be abstracted from "living, dying, and being damned."

III. OBSERVATIONS ON LUTHER'S FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Luther's original recovery of the Old Testament goes hand in hand with his development of Law and Gospel as the fundamental dialectic of all his theology. In the medieval tradition, working with the duality of letter and spirit, or Law and grace, the Old Testament — both as a history and as a book — tended to be subsumed under categories of letter, figure, sign, and so forth, since only in the New Testament was grace and Spirit to be found. Applied exegetically, this meant that normative theological and religious authority rested almost exclusively in the New Testament.

But with Luther's Law and Gospel a different hermeneutical situation prevailed,

cutting across Old Testament-New Testament lines. The promises of the Old Testament stand over against the Old Testament Law in an antithetical way as Gospel over against Law. Here Paul's Galatians gave the needed instruction: the Law was given long after Abraham was justified by merely "believing God." In a 1522 sermon, Luther warns his hearers to watch out for the difference between Law and Promise, or Law and Gospel:

Pay careful attention to this distinction no matter which book you may be reading, whether in the Old or in the New Testament. Whatever contains promises is a book of gospel; where commandments are found, we have a book of law.⁶

Luther's recovery of the Old Testament thus has as one of its consequences a tendency to collapse customary distinctions between the two testaments based on eras of time. God's Word is always the same kind of Word — a promise — and faith is always formally the same — taking the promise seriously despite its apparent absurdity. The promise is frequently — almost always in the later writings — referred to as the historical advent of Christ, yet "Christ" seems to function more as a principle than as a chronological event in history. Thus, whether Luther is talking about Adam, Abraham, David, Paul, or himself, the situation before God is the same, and faith is qualitatively identical.

This seems to be the starting point for Luther. Only in the later writings does the question of the specific *content* of the promise arise — for example, what it means to say that Abraham or Moses believes "in Christ," or are "Christians."

⁵ *Ibid.*, WA 16, 276, 26—32; quoted from Kooiman, 218.

⁶ *Sermon on Matt. 11:2-10* (1522), WA 10/1/2, 159, 13—17; quoted from Kooiman, 213 f.

In the early writings, Luther was concentrating on faith itself as the constitutive reality of Christian identity. He was creating a new form of piety and struggling to put it into clear theological language for his time.⁷ Old Testament faith is immediately relevant, without qualification, in this task, and without any particular attention to the precise content of the promises.

We see this by comparing Luther's treatment of the patriarchs in the earlier writings and the later. In the early Romans commentary, for example, Luther sees the immediate relevance of Abraham's faith to his own reflection:

The believer makes God truthful and himself a liar. For he believes his own mind as something false in order to believe the word of God as the truth, even though it goes utterly against all he thinks in his own mind.⁸

And in Hebrews also, Luther sees Paul setting forth the Old Testament fathers as supreme examples of existence in faith. Faith's glory, Luther explains, is

not to know where you are going, what you are doing, what you are suffering, and, after taking everything captive — perception and understanding, strength and will — to follow the bare voice of God and to be led and driven rather than to drive. And thus it is clear that with this obedience of faith Abraham gave a supreme example of an evangelical life. . . .⁹

⁷ See the recent study by Jared Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace: Luther's Early Spiritual Teaching* (Washington, 1968).

⁸ *Lectures on Romans* (1515—16), *WA* 56, 296, 7—10; *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 15, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia, 1961), 151.

⁹ *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517—18), *WA* 57/3, 236, 1—5; *LW* 29, 238.

The perfection of the patriarchs' faith lies in the fact that it "has been exercised in all trials, so that it became worthy of being described with such great glory as an example for the whole church."¹⁰

In the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in the course of his fundamental redefinition of sacraments, Luther noted that Adam and his descendants died without having any idea who the seed would be to crush the serpent's head, but that they were saved by their faith in the promise, God's word of power that upholds all things.¹¹

This unchanging nature of faith was more important than the gradual predicative clarification about what the promise entailed. As Luther commented more than 20 years later on Gen. 15:6, faith is assent to God's promises, concluding that they are true. And righteousness is believing God when He makes a promise. Indeed, this is the "foremost article of faith," and promise is "the chief and most important part of the doctrine."¹²

As Word and faith are formally the same before and after Christ, so the function of Israel and the church are the same: they are to be a prophetic, living witness to the promise.¹³ Luther's basic theological complaint against the Jews is that they, in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233, 25—27; 236.

¹¹ *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), *WA* 6, 514, 26—34; *LW* 36, 39.

¹² *Lectures on Genesis* (1535—45), *WA* 42, 562, 19 and 565, 12; *LW* 3, 19, 23. The editor suspects the hand of Melancthon, who favored the language of "assent." But assent to promise does not sound as "Melancthonian" as assent to doctrinal propositions.

¹³ *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), *WA* 53, 438, 15—29; *LW* 47, 163. This idea was already developed eloquently in the *Dictata*, *WA* 4, 403, 1—13, discussed in Preus (above n. 1), 224 f.

Luther's opinion, have made God and his prophets liars by acting as though the Old Testament promises remain unfulfilled, despite the harmony between Old and New Testaments so apparent to Luther.¹⁴

Luther's later writings tend to make the Old Testament more and more specifically a Christian book. Assessing Luther's works over more than 30 years, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that in the beginning, Luther discovered the extent to which he was a Jew, while later, he went to extravagant lengths to make the Israelites Christian.

In his late writings, he stressed the identity of faith not only as a quality of existence, but also in terms of its contents, as faith "in Christ." Thus, in 1531, Luther contended that

Abraham and the other patriarchs were justified by faith in Christ, just as we are — they by faith in the One who was to come, we by faith in the Christ who is present.¹⁵

. . . the blessing and faith of Abraham are the same as ours, . . . Abraham's Christ is our Christ, and . . . Christ died for Abraham's sins as well as for ours.¹⁶

Later, he argued also that

Moses, with full consent, so agrees with me and with all who have given in their names for Christ, that he ought to be held a true Christian and a teacher of Christians . . . in his heart, faith, and confession, he embraces Christ the Son of God, and joins himself unto him."¹⁷

¹⁴ See especially *The Last Words of David* (1543), *WA* 54, 79, 24 ff.; *Select Works of Martin Luther*, tr. Henry Cole, vol. 2 (London, 1826), 288 ff.

¹⁵ *Lectures on Galatians* (published 1535), *WA* 40/1, 378, 30—32; *LW* 26, 239 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 385, 21 f.; 244.

¹⁷ *The Last Words of David* (1543), *WA*

Two concrete cases confronting Luther in the early 1520s may help explain his developing notion of the Old Testament worthies as Christians.

The first occasion came in the disagreement among reformers over Christian participation in secular affairs, more specifically, the question whether Christians may wield the sword. The Old Testament provided ample precedent, but Luther himself had argued elsewhere that its ethic had no bearing on Christian conduct, and his opponents felt that the New Testament forbade it. In his treatise on secular authority (1523), Luther stressed instead the similarity of the Old Testament situation to the present:

Should anyone contend that the Old Testament is abrogated and no longer in effect, and that therefore such examples [of OT fathers wielding the sword] cannot be set before Christians, I answer: That is not so. St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 10, "They ate the same spiritual food as we, and drank the same spiritual drink from the Rock, which is Christ." That is, they had the same spirit and faith in Christ as we have, and were just as much Christians as we are. Therefore, wherein they did right, all Christians do right, from the beginning of the world unto the end. For time and circumstances make no difference among Christians.¹⁸

The argument seems to be that Christians are *permitted* to do anything that the Old Testament people could do, by virtue of our equal standing before God; on the

54, 85, 11 ff.; *Select Works* 2, 300 f. Bornkamm (n. 1 above) discusses Luther's imaginative scenario for calling on John and Paul to search out Moses; pp. 149 ff.

¹⁸ *On Temporal Authority* (1523), *WA* 11, 255, 31 to 256, 2; *LW* 45, 96 f.

other hand, Christians are not to be coerced by any Old Testament ordinance.

A second occasion on which Luther found it useful to stress the Christian character of Old Testament faith was his engagement in converting the Jews. In his irenical 1523 treatise, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther presumed to instruct the Jews in the Scriptures so that they would "become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs."¹⁹ Thus, the strategy of Luther's approach to the Jews hinges on arguing that the patriarchs were Christians. The basis of Old Testament "Christianity" is the promise of Christ first given shortly after the Fall. (Gen. 3:15).²⁰ The fathers, according to Luther, believed and handed on "this Gospel," being "sustained through faith in Christ" and existing as "true Christians like ourselves."²¹ The only distinction drawn between the patriarchal situation and the Christian one is that the Gospel was not universally spread until the coming of the Messiah.²²

The theological basis for the unity of faith in both testaments is discovered already in Luther's *Dictata*: he acknowledges an "eternal" covenant — an unconditional promise made to Abraham — that is both temporally and theologically prior to the covenant made with Moses, with its tem-

¹⁹ *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), *WA* 11, 315, 14—17; *LW* 45, 200; cf. 96 f. and 203. The same point is argued at length in *The Last Words of David*.

²⁰ *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), *WA* 11, 316, 5 ff.; *LW* 45, 201.

²¹ *Ibid.* 317, 23—26; 203.

²² *Ibid.* 318, 36 to 319, 2; 204.

poral threats and promises.²³ As Luther writes later, the new covenant "is the very oldest, promised from the beginning of the world—nay, even before earthly time." The mosaic covenant, however, "began in time, and after a certain time has ceased."²⁴

But if the new covenant did *not* begin with the Incarnation, then what is *new* about the time of the New Testament, with the coming of the Christ? Luther's considered judgment rests on a distinction between the Christ and Jesus—that is, between the salvation or *Messiah* to come, in whom all the Old Testament faithful believed but about whose actual historical identity they were ignorant, and the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

Eve, for example, upon receiving the promise that her Seed would crush the serpent's head, mistakenly thought that her son Cain was meant.²⁵ Although deceived in this belief, she was not adversely affected in her relationship to God. Like the patriarchs and prophets after her, she was saved by her faith in promises at once very clear—that God would come to the rescue—and very obscure, since the manner of His coming remained unclear.

With this general knowledge they were satisfied, and they were saved even though they did not know how He would have to be conceived and born. This had to be reserved for the New Testament as a clearer light and had to be announced to the first world rather obscurely because of Satan, whom God wanted to mock and ir-

²³ Cf. Preus (n. 1 above), 206 ff.

²⁴ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), *WA* 14, 602, 34 f., 603, 36; *LW* 9, 63.

²⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535—45), *WA* 42, 144, 27 ff.; *LW* 1, 193. Cf. *The Last Words of David* (1543), *WA* 54, 71, 28 ff.; *Select Works* 2, 270 f.

ritate in this fashion so that he would be ill at ease and would fear everything.²⁶

No one in the Old Testament goes so far as to name the Christ, although ever clearer clues are given about Him. Throughout the time before Christ's advent, "there was something to be left for that wonderful revelation which was to be made under the New Testament, where this mystery was to be set forth more clearly. . . ." ²⁷

The story of Cornelius' conversion in Acts provides Luther with occasion for further comment on this subject. Peter's only task was to identify for Cornelius who the Messiah was. For already

by faith in the coming Messiah he worshiped the same God as the patriarchs. But because the Messiah had come, it was necessary now that He be shown to him by the apostle Peter, not only as One who was still to be expected but as One who had already come.²⁸

The "new faith" of the New Testament is, then, that the promised Messiah is Jesus, and that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

One final observation: it is often claimed that Luther discovered the historical sense of the Bible as opposed to the "allegorizing" tendencies of medieval exegesis. But it is more accurate to say that Luther set forth a different historical understanding in which *Heilsgeschichte* was less important (with its attention to prophecy and fulfillment, to the qualitative difference

between segments of time, or to the decisive theological importance of the historical advent of Christ), but in which the whole story of God's people became immediately present and relevant. The Bible for Luther thus became not so much the telling of a *story* with beginning, middle, and end, as the depiction of a perpetual *situation* of men and women struggling with life. Before God, all believers stand equally near to salvation, because it always comes in the same way — through the Word of promise when it is believed. Hence Luther has little interest in plotting the progress of *Heilsgeschichte*, or in drawing upward moving lines with decisive points. That is why his geometrical metaphor of the place of Christ in Scripture (and in believing existence) is not a point on a line at all, but the *punctus mathematicus* which is the center of a circle.

. . . Christ is the point in the circle from which the entire circle is drawn. Whoever is attached to him belongs also in the ring [whether Moses or ourselves]. For he is the middle point of the circle and all the events (*Historien*) of Holy Scripture — when they are rightly understood — point to Christ.²⁹

Christ is equally present everywhere and to all times by way of the promise. This is the broader meaning of Luther's insistent confidence in the ubiquity of Christ.

Cambridge, Mass.

²⁶ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535—45), *WA* 42, 145, 13—18; *LW* 1, 194.

²⁷ *The Last Words of David* (1543), *WA* 54, 67, 35 ff.; *Select Works* 2, 261.

²⁸ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *WA* 40/1, 339, 17—19; *LW* 26, 210.

²⁹ *Sermons on John* (1538—40), *WA* 47, 66, 21—24, quoted by Kooiman (n. 4 above), 222; cf. 207, n. 16. Bornkamm (n. 1 above), 263, makes a helpful distinction between "Christocentric" interpretation and one whose key is Christological prophecy.