

Luther's Preface to His *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513): The Historical Background to Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic

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Luther began lecturing on the Psalms in August of 1513. Each of his students was given a printed copy of the Psalms, at the beginning of which was a preface which began: "Preface of Jesus Christ, Son of God and our Lord, to the Psalter of David."¹

This title, in its simplicity, is startling. For certainly Jesus did not actually write a preface to the Psalms. The preface is Luther's. Yet Luther says this *is* a preface of Jesus. What rationale does Luther follow in order to say this? Is this method of reasoning his own, or is he indebted to someone else? And what kind of hermeneutic for the interpretation of the Psalms is he proposing?

To answer these questions it will be necessary to dip back into the history of the interpretation of the Bible to see what lies in Luther's background. At the risk of oversimplifying the work of many centuries, the characteristic method of biblical interpretation throughout the Middle Ages is exemplified by John Cassian (360–435). Scripture was said to have four senses, the literal or historical, on the one hand, and the spiritual, figurative or mystical, on the other. This latter sense was composed of the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical or eschatological sense. Cassian used an example that became a classic: Jerusalem, literally or historically, was a city of the Jews; allegorically it was the church; tropologically or morally it was the soul of man; and anagogically or eschatologically it was the heavenly city.²

The question of which sense the Bible was employing in a given instance was dealt with by Augustine (354–430). In general, he felt the Bible was speaking literally, giving the literal sense a wide enough meaning to allow for the use of metaphor. But having found the literal meaning of a given text, he tended to find in it also non-literal, spiritual meanings. There were cases, however, when one could not find a literal meaning at all. At that point one would have to resort to some non-literal meaning: "Whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you may take to be figurative."³

Though workable, such a definition was felt to be inadequate because it radically divided the literal sense from the spiritual. Something was either only literal or it was only spiritual. It was felt that these senses should be tied together to prevent unworthy spiritual interpretations.

A viable method was supplied by Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1226–1274). In his *Summa Theologiae* he writes:

That God is the author of holy Scripture should be acknowledged, and he has the power, not only of adapting words to convey meanings (which men also can do), but also of adapting things themselves. In every branch of knowledge words have meaning, but what is special here is that the things meant by the words also themselves mean something. That first meaning whereby the words signify things belongs to the sense first-mentioned, namely, the historical or literal. That meaning, however, whereby the things signified by the words in their turn also signify other things is called the spiritual sense; it is based on and presupposes the literal sense.⁴

God is the principal author of Holy Scripture. Whereas, for human authors, words signify things, for the divine author the things signified by the words may signify still other things. When words signify things, the literal sense is intended. When the things signified by words signify other things, the spiritual sense is intended. But this spiritual sense is based on the literal sense. Thus the literal and spiritual senses are tied together.

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The insights of Thomas Aquinas were expanded by Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349), whose commentaries on Scripture were widely disseminated from the early fourteenth until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Lyra sets forth his hermeneutical principles in his Prefaces. Agreeing with Aquinas, Lyra says: “All [interpretations] presuppose the literal sense as the foundation.”⁵ At the same time Lyra was not adverse to spiritual interpretations *per se*, for later he adds: “With the help of God I intend to adhere to the literal sense, and to include a very few, brief, mystical interpretations sometimes, though rarely.”⁶

Lyra goes beyond Aquinas, however, in what is apparently his own original contribution to hermeneutics. Using as an example 1 Chronicles 17:13, “I [God] will be to him [Solomon] a father, and he shall be to me a son,”⁷ Lyra comments:

Sometimes the same word has a double-literal sense (*duplex sensus litteralis*).... This [passage] is understood of Solomon literally, in so far as he was the son of God by adoption in his youth. Yet the [passage] is introduced by the apostle in Hebrews 1[:5] as spoken about Christ literally. This is clear... because the Apostle introduces it to prove that Christ was greater than the angels. However, such proof cannot be made by the mystical sense, as Augustine says.... The [passage] was fulfilled literally in Solomon, nevertheless less perfectly, because he was the son of God by grace alone.... [It was fulfilled] more perfectly in Christ, who is the Son of God by nature.⁸

Lyra claims to find another example of this double-literal sense in Genesis 15:5, “And he [God] brought him [Abram] outside and said ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” Lyra comments:

It seems that God... intended to signify by this the multiplication of the descendants of Abraham by comparing them to the stars of heaven. Mainly, however, he intended to promise Abraham and his descendants a blessed life.... It seems that in this passage and similar [ones] there is in some way a double-literal sense (*duplex sensus litteralis*). One sense pertains to earthly goods, which are promised less directly and only incidentally. The other sense pertains to spiritual or eternal goods, which are mainly intended....⁹

Thus Lyra is not only tying spiritual meanings to the literal meaning à la Aquinas, but tying them together so tightly that the spiritual senses disappear into the literal sense. One does not have a literal-spiritual dichotomy any more, only a literal-literal.

The idea of a double-literal sense is continued by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (1455–1536), usually known as Faber Stapulensis, but it also undergoes a major adjustment. While admitting that there *is* an initial literal sense, Faber dismisses this as unworthy of attention. Sympathizing with those who dwelt only on this initial literal sense and hence found no spiritual benefit, Faber writes:

I began to consider seriously that perhaps this had not been the true literal sense but rather... a pseudo-sense for the true literal sense. Therefore I went... for advice to our first leaders, I mean the apostles, the Gospel writers, and the prophets.... I seemed to see another sense of Scripture: the intention of the prophet and of the Holy Spirit speaking in him. This I call “literal” sense but literal sense which coincides with the Spirit.¹⁰

Recall that for Lyra one would have a “less direct” literal sense and a “main” literal sense, and thus a double-literal sense, rather than a literal and spiritual sense. Faber on the other hand goes immediately in search of the spiritual sense, looking for what the prophet and the Holy Spirit speaking in him intended, guided by the method of the apostles, Gospel writers and prophets. The result is not merely the spiritual sense, but the “true literal sense.”

Let us call that the literal sense which is in accord with the Spirit and is pointed out by the Spirit....The literal sense and the spiritual sense coincide. This true sense is...the sense the Holy Spirit intends as He speaks through the prophet. It has been our total purpose to draw out of this sense all that the Holy Spirit has put into it.¹¹

One winds up with neither a literal-spiritual sense, nor a literal-literal sense, but only a spiritual sense which *is* the literal sense.

The foregoing represents what lies in Luther's background. We will now proceed to look carefully at Luther's Preface, hoping to determine the rationale which lies behind Luther's statements. At the same time we will be alert for evidence that Luther is being influenced in his method of reasoning by insights derived from earlier interpreters of Scripture.

Luther begins the Preface by mentioning five passages in which Jesus, in Luther's estimation, promises to help us understand Scripture correctly. Three are from the New Testament. In John 10:9 Jesus refers to himself as a "door." Luther's rationale is that Jesus is the door which opens Scripture to us. In Revelation 3:7 the heavenly voice refers to one who has the "key" of David. Luther understands this as a reference to Christ, who is the key unlocking the meaning of David, that is, the Psalms. In John 8:25 Jesus says he has been speaking "from the beginning." Luther's method of reasoning here is that Jesus has been speaking through Scripture from the beginning.

A fourth passage Luther cites (actually the fifth in his listing) is Isaiah 52:6, "Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I." Luther identifies God who speaks in Isaiah's prophecy with Jesus. The sense then becomes: Jesus' people know him, and *here*, namely, in Scripture, specifically in the Psalms, is where Jesus is to be found.

That Luther wants the "I" to refer to Christ is substantiated by a gloss he inserted at this point: "If the Old Testament can be interpreted by human wisdom without the New Testament, I should say that the New Testament has been given to no purpose. So Paul concluded that 'Christ died to no purpose' if the Law were sufficient (Ga 2:21)." Luther's point is this: if the "I" referred only to God, then there would be no need for a New Testament. But there *is* a New Testament—proof that God wants the Old Testament understood in a higher sense, that is, about Christ.

The remaining passage that Luther quotes (the third in his listing) invites us to make use of the insight derived from Faber Stapulensis. Luther quotes Psalm 40:7, "In the roll of the book it is written of me." A literal understanding of "me" might well be David, the Psalm's author. But no Christian exegete worth his salt would be satisfied with that. John Cassian or Augustine might find a spiritual meaning in the passage. Thomas Aquinas, if he found a spiritual meaning, would tie it to the literal meaning to give it substance. Lyra might find a double-literal meaning, "me" referring to David and then to Christ. But Faber Stapulensis would, if true to his principles, find the spiritual meaning of "me," namely, Christ, and then call this the true literal meaning. And this seems to be Luther's rationale also. The "me" for Luther refers to Christ, so that it is Christ saying in the Psalm a thousand years before he walked on earth, "I am being written about here."¹²

This initial examination of Luther's Preface shows us his rationale for the statements he makes, and we note a similarity between what Luther says and at least one element in the hermeneutical tradition, the method of reasoning employed by Faber Stapulensis. Of course, similarity does not prove dependence, yet dependence is often the simplest explanation for similarity.

Continuing in our study, we note that Luther now quotes four "witnesses" as he calls them, two prophets and two apostles. Here the reader should recall the quotation from Faber (above), in which Faber says he was led to his method of interpretation by "our first leaders, I mean the apostles, the Gospel writers and the prophets." Luther seems to be using his four witnesses in the same way. In Luther's mind these four witnesses have led him to understand the first five passages as Jesus' own statements about how the Psalms should be interpreted. Putting it another way, the first five passages, in Luther's estimation, are what Christ says about correctly interpreting the Psalms; the four witnesses which follow, in Luther's estimation, *support* what Christ says.

The first witness is Moses in Exodus 33:15, 14: “If Thy presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from here” (v 15). “And the Lord said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’” (v 14). For Luther, God’s “presence” in the passage is to be understood as God’s Spirit, which gives true direction and, in this connection, true understanding of Scripture. Luther will be helped by God’s Spirit to find the spiritual meaning of Scripture, which will then be the true literal meaning. This true literal meaning will revolve around Christ, just as Christ said in the first five passages. So this first witness, in Luther’s estimation, supports what Jesus himself has said.

The second witness is the prophet Zechariah, apparently Zechariah 9:1. This is a difficult passage to translate, “The Lord [Jesus Christ] is the eye, [the light and the vision] of man and all the tribes of Israel.” By the words enclosed in brackets Luther indicates how he wants this passage understood: The Lord Jesus enlightens men and gives true spiritual vision.¹³ In the context of the interpretation of the Psalms Luther means that if a person focuses on Christ as he reads the Psalms, he will get the correct understanding.

That this is what Luther wants us to derive from this witness is substantiated by a gloss which Luther adds at this point: “Ps. 34:5: ‘Look to Him and be radiant; and your faces will never be ashamed.’ But others make a detour and purposely, as it were, avoid Christ, so do they put off approaching Him with the text [i.e., fail to reach Christ via the text]. As for me, when I have a text that is like a nut with a hard shell, I immediately dash it against the Rock [i.e., Christ] and find the sweetest kernel.” Luther’s point is that this witness, like the first one, in his estimation, supports what Christ says about himself in the first five passages, namely, that the Scriptures speak of him.

The third witness is in Acts 3:25, “All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days.” The words are from Peter’s sermon at the temple after healing the cripple. For Luther they mean that the prophets in fact spoke about Christ, or, in this connection, that David in the Psalms is actually speaking about Christ. This witness then also, as far as Luther is concerned, supports what Christ says of himself in the opening passages.

Finally, the fourth witness is 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” For Luther these words of Paul mean that the Word as proclaimed, as well as in written form, specifically here in the Psalms, is about nothing but Christ. Thus this witness too, to Luther’s satisfaction, supports what Christ says about himself in the opening five passages.

As in the case of the five passages, so here with the four witnesses Luther seems to be deriving his rationale from the exegetical tradition, specifically Faber, who like Luther was guided by “the apostles, Gospel writers, and prophets.”

But aside from seeking Luther’s rationale and his likely dependence on Faber, something else begins to emerge from our study, namely, the outline of the hermeneutic that Luther is suggesting. Luther’s hermeneutic is derived from Christ as Luther understands the opening five passages, and it is supported by Scripture as Luther understands the four witnesses he has quoted. Hence it is a fully biblical hermeneutic.

The next section of Luther’s Preface brings this into focus. Luther goes out of his way to separate himself from a particular hermeneutical method lying in his background, and he affixes a particular name to the kind of hermeneutic he is proposing.

The method Luther separates himself from is that of those “following certain Hebrew rabbis who are falsifiers and inventors of Jewish vanities.” One such person seems to be Lyra, who admits his debt to Jewish rabbis such as Solomon ben Isaac, usually referred to as “Rashi” (ca. 1030-ca. 1105).¹⁴ Luther’s criticism of Lyra seems unduly harsh, however. Though Lyra used such writers in order to arrive at the literal sense of the text, Lyra does not follow them slavishly. Lyra says that “one should not adhere to the statements of the Hebrews except in so far as they agree with reason and the truth of the text.”¹⁵ As a matter of fact, in his Psalms commentary, Luther refers to Lyra by name thirty-two times, at least twenty times favorably. In at least seven instances, however, Luther faults Lyra for doing the very thing Lyra said one should not do, that is, adhere to the statements of the rabbis.¹⁶

More importantly, it is in this section that Luther affixes a name to the kind of hermeneutic he is proposing. Those who follow the Hebrew rabbis (presumably like Lyra), says Luther, “explain very many

psalms not prophetically, but historically.” It is the prophetic sense of the psalms that Luther is looking for, not the historical. The similarity of Luther’s prophetic sense to Faber’s spiritual sense is striking. For Faber and for Luther the literal or historical sense is not the true literal sense of Scripture. For Faber, the spiritual sense—and for Luther, the prophetic sense—is the true literal sense. The value of the Psalms lies not in what they seem to say about the time they were written. Their value lies in that toward which they point in the future, namely, Christ. Thus Luther, following a rationale quite likely dependent on Faber, arrives at a biblical hermeneutic which is prophetic in nature.

In the remainder of his Preface Luther at first glance may appear to slip back into an earlier method of biblical interpretation. Luther gives three examples of literal, allegorical and tropological interpretation of Scripture, thus seeming to employ a method from his historical background which he has apparently moved beyond.

But Luther’s regression is only apparent, not real. The first example is Psalm 1:1, “Blessed is the man who walks not...” Luther says that “*literally*” (emphasis added) this means the Lord Jesus made no concessions to the designs of the Jews, “*allegorically*” it means the church, and “*tropologically*” it means the spirit of man. In view of the biblical hermeneutic which Luther has developed, however, it is obvious that “*literally*” refers to the “truly literal” meaning of the Psalm, and is a synonym for “*spiritually*” or “*prophetically*.” “*Literally*” the Psalm is *not* about Christ. It is about an Old Testament Jew, but “truly literally,” that is, “*spiritually*” or “*prophetically*,” it *is* about Christ. By extension, then, “*allegorically*” it is *not* about the church (which, of course, had not come into existence when the Psalm was written), but “truly allegorically” it is. “*Tropologically*” is it *not* about the spirit of a New Testament man (since there was as yet no such person), but “truly tropologically” it is.

In a similar way Luther treats Psalm 2:1, “Why do the nations conspire...” “Truly literally,” that is, “*spiritually*” or “*prophetically*,” the nations are the Jews and Gentiles conspiring against Christ. “Truly allegorically” the psalm is directed against tyrants, heretics and ungodly leaders in the church. “Truly tropologically” it has to do with the carnal and outer man tormenting the Christian’s spirit.

Finally, Psalm 3:1, “O Lord, how many are my foes...” is “truly literally,” that is, “*spiritually*” or “*prophetically*,” Christ’s complaint against the Jews, “truly allegorically” the church’s complaint against tyrants and heretics, and “truly tropologically” the devout Christian’s complaint during trials. In summary, the person who is guided by Luther’s biblical hermeneutic to find the “truly literal” meaning of the Old Testament, namely, the “*prophetic*” or “*spiritual*” meaning, will also find the “truly allegorical” and “truly tropological” meaning as well.

We began by inquiring about the rationale Luther uses whereby he is able to make the startling statement that his own Preface to the Psalms is actually the Preface of Jesus Christ. Our method was to examine what lay in Luther’s exegetical background and then to see the similarity between this and what Luther is doing. We discovered that the hermeneutical principles of Faber Stapulensis—principles themselves dependent on earlier interpreters such as Nicholas of Lyra—quite likely played an important part in the development of Luther’s method of reasoning. We especially noted the similarity between what Faber called the spiritual sense, meaning the true literal sense, and what Luther calls the prophetic sense. The rationale Luther follows is apparently not wholly his own. He seems to have made use of the rationale of Faber to arrive at a biblical hermeneutic which can best be described by the term he himself employs, namely, prophetic.

Luther’s Preface to his *First Lectures on the Psalms* stands at the beginning of his career as an interpreter of Scripture. If one wishes to understand Luther’s hermeneutical principles and exegetical methods, this is where one must begin.

Endnotes

¹ This study is based on the translation of the Preface in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, various dates), Vol 10, pp 6,7, hereafter cited as *LW*, which is based on the Latin text found in *D. Martin Luther’s Werke* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau’s Nachfolger, 1881f), Vol 55, 1, 1, pp 6–11, hereafter cited as *WA*. I also acknowledge my

dependence on the excellent introduction to *LW* Vol 10 by Hilton Oswald, pp ix–xii. Attention is also drawn to Gerhard Ebeling, “*Luthers Psalterdruck vom Jahre 1513*,” in *Lutherstudien*, I (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971), especially pp 109–131, “*Die Praefatio*.”

² Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952; reprinted, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), pp 27–29.

³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p 88.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1969), Vol 1, pt 1, quest 1, art 10, p 59.

⁵ Migne, J.-P., *Patrologiae, Series Latina*, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1878 f), Vol 113, col 29, hereafter cited as *PL*. My translation.

⁶ *Ibid*, col 30.

⁷ All biblical quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

⁸ *PL*, Vol 113, cols 31, 32. Though Hebrews 1:5 shows how 1 Chronicles 17:13 is to be interpreted, it is Lyra who apparently coins the term “double-literal sense.”

⁹ Nicholas of Lyra, *Biblia cum postillis [Postilla litteralis]*, 3 vols (Venice: Franz Rener, 1482), Vol 1, fol 16 verso, col a, line 43 f. My translation.

¹⁰ *Quincuplex Psalterium* (Paris: 1509), quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p 298; hereafter cited as Oberman. See also David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) pp 43–52.

¹¹ Oberman, p 300.

¹² The editors of *LW* indicate their belief that the “me” refers to Christ by a capital “M.”

¹³ In *WA* the words in brackets are in lighter type.

¹⁴ Ebeling agrees, p 121.

¹⁵ *PL*, Vol 113, col 30. My translation. See also Herman Hairperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963).

¹⁶ *LW* Vol 10, pp 42,54,116,463; Vol 11, pp 189,290,384.