

A SURE GROUND ON WHICH TO STAND: THE
RELATION OF AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETIVE
METHOD IN LUTHER'S APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE

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This book presents an analysis of Martin Luther's approach to the Bible, focusing on four key areas, *Inspiration of Scripture*, the *Unity of Scripture*, the *Clarity of Scripture* and the *Sufficiency of Scripture*. Using these categories to organise his subject matter, Mark Thompson presents a wealth of material and shows great mastery of the primary sources. In this respect, together with its helpful indices and extensive bibliography, his book will be an invaluable resource for the student of Luther's hermeneutics for many years to come.

On the basis of this material, Thompson proceeds to a theological examination of Luther's thought on this subject matter, in the context of Luther's own theology and of his time, the sixteenth century (9). Thus Thompson wants to present Luther on his (i.e. Luther's) own terms and in his own context; in short, he wants to "let Luther be Luther" (2).

The success of this endeavour needs to be measured against Thompson's own criteria, i.e. reading Luther in the context of sixteenth century Christian thought and understanding his hermeneutics in the light of the whole of his theology, and not projecting modern concerns into Luther's writings.

In order to set the scene for such an interpretation of Luther, Thompson begins with a section on the theological background of the sixteenth century and the tradition that led there. Thus he begins with a short overview of the understanding of the Bible as it is presented within the Bible itself on the basis of the *prima facie* evidence (12), and then proceeds to present an overview of the interpretative praxis during Antiquity and the Middle Ages. For obvious reasons, such a presentation can only be somewhat

sketchy. However, it needs to be accurate and balanced, as much of the later interpretation of Luther will depend on it.

In this context it is not entirely clear what Thompson tries to achieve when he presents the *prima facie* evidence of the Bible's self-understanding. Clearly he does not mean the self-understanding of the authors of the New Testament, as they were not aware at all that they were writing what was to become Holy Writ. It is also not the understanding of Scripture which Luther would have held in the sixteenth century, as this is the subject of the book as a whole, and it is also not a modern scholarly discussion of the issue, because it leaves critical questions generally unexplored.

In the passage on the interpretation of the Bible in the early and mediaeval Church, Thompson seems to be playing down the significance of allegorical interpretation. It is presented as if it were an optional extra, introduced to Christian theology by the Alexandrian theologians. Thompson mentions that biblical authors made use of it, yet limits its significance by saying that "it took on a new significance in the face of the early Christian debates with both Jews and heretics" (24) without further substantiating this claim. However, as the use of allegory by Jewish, pagan and Christian authors shows, allegorical interpretation of texts was an essential part of interpretative practice, and much more widely practised than Thompson makes the reader believe. In fact, allegorical interpretation was an important critical tool for the interpreter. If the literal sense of a text did not make sense, then one would resume to allegorical interpretation. Even Augustine taught in *On Christian Doctrine*, which was to become the main guide for biblical interpretation for the Middle Ages, that the dark passages of scripture – i.e. "anything in the divine discourse that cannot be taken either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative" – needed to be interpreted allegorically (cf. *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.10.14).

The great achievement of Renaissance humanism was not to condemn the excessive use of allegorical interpretation, but to deny its legitimacy in principle. However, a straightforward application of an exclusive literal sense posed theological difficulties, as Thompson points out (40); to interpret the Old Testament in a purely literal sense would lead to a "Jewish" interpretation. Thus a typological (christological) interpretation of the Old Testament was introduced and claimed not to be allegorical, but supposed to be drawing on a second, prophetic literal sense. Thompson takes the claim that this is not a form of allegorical interpretation at face value without any critical examination (cf. 40). Here, as in many other places, a greater critical awareness in relation to his sources would have been desirable.

Soon after the Renaissance and Reformation, it became obvious that the literal sense of Scripture contradicted the new experience of the world and of humankind, and the inner tensions within the Scriptures of Christianity, which could not be interpreted allegorically any more, became a problem. Thus a new critical method was developed, which was historical criticism. Thus Luther lived in a short period which had a nearly naïve optimism regarding the literal sense of Scripture and other texts. In order to gain a proper historical perspective on Luther's achievements, it would have been helpful to have painted this, or an alternative, big historical picture. In isolation from the big picture, Luther can never appear as the sixteenth century man that he was.

This indicates a serious weakness in Thompson's book, which is the tendency to look at issues in isolation and not within the context in which they are set. Another instance of this inherent problem is that the analysis of Luther's hermeneutics is not sufficiently grounded in a discussion of his theology. One of the great themes in Luther's theology is the paradoxical identity of worldly things and actions with divine realities – this is exemplified most clearly in Luther's sacramental theology. It has been argued that what stands behind this is Luther's realistic understanding of the communication of idioms (*communicatio idiomatum*). This originally christological figure of thought assumes that the attributes of the divine and human natures of Christ are communicated to the respective other. Luther's view of the communication of idioms is highly realistic, with the consequence that, for Luther, divine attributes can be communicated to human actions. It is arguably the centre of Luther's theology, his understanding of the incarnation, his hermeneutics, his theology of proclamation, pastoral practice and more (cf. A. Steiger, 'Die *communicatio idiomatum* als Achse und Motor der Theologie Luthers: Der "fröhliche Wechsel" als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zu Abendmahlslehre, Anthropologie, Seelsorge, Naturtheologie Rhetorik und Humor' *NZStH* 38 [1996]: 1–28). It is based in Luther's understanding of the incarnation, which has often, not entirely without cause, been compared with Monophysitism of old. However, the whole concept of the *communicatio idiomatum* is given only one mention, in passing when dismissing an argument (cf. 106). Thus a crucial aspect of Luther's understanding of the relation between the divine and the human, a question which is essential for our understanding of Luther's view of the relation between the eternal Word of God and the human words of Scripture, is not considered.

This is repeated elsewhere. Thompson claims that he has discussed Luther's attitude towards Scripture in the light of the latter's theology of

the cross (cf. 284), yet in the book, there are only three pages (cf. 109–12) dedicated to this issue – hardly a thorough discussion.

There are a number of occasions in the book where the reader would expect a critical discussion of Luther's thought. For example, in the context of the great liberty Luther takes in his Bible translations, Thompson raises the point of Luther's rendition of Romans 3:28 as "by faith *alone*" (237–39). After a short description of the issue – i.e. Luther's addition of the word "alone" – in which Thompson reiterates Luther's own defence, he concludes by saying, "While Luther's defence of his translation may not have settled the matter (then and now), he was himself convinced that he had acted responsibly and without compromise" (239). Thus Luther's own argument, taken at face value, settles the issue. However, points like this, where Luther provokes a critical (even if in the end possibly positive) response, emphasise the need for a more critical engagement with Luther. Here, as elsewhere in the book, a critical discussion of Luther's thought would have brought to light some of the underlying issues and deeper theological motivations. In their absence, the argument is reduced to an uncritical description of Luther's thought at face value.

Towards the end of the book, in the discussion of Luther's famous words at the Diet of Worms, Thompson begins such a discussion, and identifies the Nominalist and Augustinian influence on Luther's thought (cf. 267, 270). Unfortunately, the implications of this insight for Luther's attitude towards Scripture are not explored any further.

Finally, Thompson tends to underplay statements by Luther which do not fit his picture of a consistent approach to Scripture. For example, Thompson presents Luther's strong criticisms of the Epistle of James, only to continue by showing how Luther's opinions mellowed with age. Again, at such a point a deeper interaction with Luther's thought, and not only his own statements at face value, would have been profitable, as this might have led the discussion towards a deeper understanding of the theological dynamics underlying Luther's approach to Scripture.

In sum, Thompson presents a valuable tool for the student of Luther in compiling an impressive collection of primary material regarding Luther's understanding of Scripture. However, it lacks context and critical discussion of the material. As a result, the Luther of this book is far from being Martin Luther the edgy sixteenth century man; he is a Luther in the image of his twenty-first century interpreter.

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