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Mickey L. Mattox

Over the course of his relatively long and emphatically eventful life, Martin Luther was many things. Born to God-fearing German parents, he became a precocious young student whose talent and hard work led him on to university studies, where he completed a master's degree. Surprising everyone, he next became a monk, then later a priest and preacher as well as a father confessor. Much later, and just as surprisingly, he left the monastic life to become a happily married man and the father of six children. He made his most decisive contributions to history and theology, however, as a professor and theologian at the recently founded University of Wittenberg, where his primary task was to lecture on the Bible.

Classroom lectures in the universities of Luther's day were heavily dependent on authority. That is, professors typically based their lectures on a text written by a recognized authority. Most of these texts were quite old. In the case of philosophy, for example, standard texts included works by the ancient Greek writers Aristotle and Plato or the early medieval philosopher Boethius. In theology, likewise, lectures were based on the various books of the Bible itself (e.g., Genesis, Hebrews), or on commentaries on the Bible penned by writers of recognized authority, as well as on such standard theological books as the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1166). Luther's biblical commentaries were typically derived from a series of lectures he had given on one of the authoritative books of the Bible. In these lectures, he not only offered his own interpretation of a biblical book but also interacted with a wide range of previous commentators. In working through the New Testament book of Romans, for example, he focused on Paul but also frequently drew on the so-called anti-Pelagian writings of St. Augustine. But he did not simply accept what Augustine had said; instead, he focused

on understanding Paul's meaning, which included deciphering Paul's distinctive theological mode of speaking. Luther's biblical exegesis (i.e., interpretation) was thus oriented primarily toward understanding the Bible as divine revelation given in the words of its human authors. At the same time, his own theological brilliance led him to interpretations of the text that were every bit his own, even if at the same time they were grounded both in the Bible and in the works of great Christian thinkers like Augustine.

This means that Luther's interpretations of the Bible were broadly traditional, even as he leveraged the tradition and developed his own readings in conversation, so to speak, with a varying cast of long-dead commentators. The distinctive theological ideas that made Luther a great theologian and church reformer were forged not only by his study of philosophy and theology, then, or by his experiences as a member of the Augustinian order, but in his own powerful wrestling with the biblical text in the company of the Christian saints. In the first decade or so of his academic career, Luther developed both his theological ideas and his own singular voice as a reader of the Bible. For purposes of his lectures and commentaries on the Bible, he concluded most importantly that the chief function of scripture is to witness to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Luther would later put it, the key to understanding the Bible is ever to search for the meaning of the text that "promotes Christ."

LUTHER'S EARLIEST LECTURES, 1508–1511

Shortly after he completed the master's degree in the arts at the University of Erfurt (1505), and only a few weeks after he had entered a graduate program in law, Luther suddenly changed course and presented himself as a candidate to become a friar (monk) at the cloister of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt. There was much to learn, and apparently he learned quickly. In 1506, he was allowed to take his monastic vows, and in 1507, he was ordained a priest. His superiors clearly recognized his talent (and were perhaps also looking for something to keep their scrupulous young monk busy!), for at the same time, they assigned him to the study of theology, setting him on the path would eventually lead to his career as a professor.

In 1508, even while he continued to read and study theology, Luther was sent to Wittenberg on behalf of the Augustinians to fill a vacant position in philosophy in the faculty of arts. There he gave his first academic lectures – in philosophy, specifically, the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. These lectures were not preserved, and little is known about them. In light of his later criticisms of Aristotle and philosophy, however, it is important to recall that Luther began his academic career as a lecturer on Aristotle's ethics.

In spring 1509, still "on loan" to Wittenberg and apparently under the tutelage of Johannes von Staupitz (who held the Augustinian's chair in theology there), Luther received a bachelor's degree in Bible (*baccalaureus biblicus*). This degree permitted him to lecture on the Bible. In the fall of that same year, he was also certified as a "bachelor of the *Sentences*" (*baccalaureus sententiarus*). Soon back in Erfurt, he was allowed to lecture on Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*, which had been the standard advanced textbook in theology for more than 300 years. Unlike his lectures in philosophy, the notes Luther took in preparation for his lectures on the *Sentences* were preserved (with the exception of Book Four). Until modern research began systematically to assemble and categorize Luther's writings, however, these rather cryptic lecture notes were not published. Nevertheless, they stand today as an important source for understanding Luther's early theological development. Thus when he received the doctor's degree in October 1512, Luther had already been delivering university lectures for several years. Rather than taking up a faculty position in Erfurt, as his colleagues there had apparently expected, he was instead named to fill the chair in theology at Wittenberg left vacant by the departure of his mentor and father confessor, Staupitz.

PROFESSOR LUTHER'S FIRST LECTURES, 1513–1521

The religious life of medieval monastic communities such as the Augustinian one Luther had joined and lived in as a monk up until 1524 was centered on the Old Testament book of Psalms. The 150 chapters of the Psalms had been the religious songbook of ancient Israel. These poetic texts had become, if anything, even more central to the daily life of Christian monks and nuns, where they were read or chanted by the gathered community several times each day. In a little more than a week, they would have prayed together all 150 of these Psalms. Once finished, they would start all over again. The Psalms were the heartbeat of medieval monastic life.

So it is not surprising that Luther began his academic career with lectures on this familiar and much loved book. In fact, even from this early period in his career, we have not one but two sets of lectures on the Psalms: a complete series given from 1513 to 1515, the *Dictata super psalterium*, and an incomplete one (interrupted by the indulgences controversy) from 1519 on Psalm 1–21, the *Operationes in Psalmos*. In the *Dictata*, the young professor adopted new methods but still followed an ancient path. Taking advantage of the latest technology, for example, he arranged for a Wittenberg printer (Grunenberg) to print out copies of the Psalms containing only the Latin

text, widely spaced at the center of the page, with very large margins all round. These margins would allow the students to take down Luther's "dictations" in the classroom. In short, he put the recently invented printing press to work innovatively in support of his students' efforts to understand his lectures. He prepared for those lectures, however, in very traditional ways. Much as one would find in such standard medieval works as the *Glossa Ordinaria* (a complete version of the Bible, with accompanying commentary from recognized authorities), Luther first wrote out short "glosses," which briefly answered questions about particular words or phrases. Next he wrote out longer comments in the form of "scholia," where he examined at greater length various theological or spiritual concerns raised by the text. In the classroom, he would typically have read out these comments, which the students would then have written down verbatim on the mostly blank pages of their copy of the text. It is unknown, however, exactly what procedure Luther followed in the classroom – whether he stuck closely to his prepared text or lectured more extemporaneously.

Luther also followed an ancient method of interpretation, the *quadriga*, or four-fold method, which had been developed out of the writings of Origen of Alexandria and John Cassian. This was an "allegorical" approach to interpretation that recognized four levels of meaning in the Bible: first the literal, or story level, of the text, then three further symbolic meanings. This method taught the biblical reader to look beyond the literal meaning of the text to identify first a meaning directed toward the faithful soul (how should I live?), then one oriented to the church (what should I believe?), and finally one oriented toward heaven (what should we hope for in the life to come?). Luther clearly followed this method, but he found that all four meanings converged in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This accurately suggests that Luther "Christianized" the Psalms, so to speak, by making Christ both their subject matter and their speaker.

Luther next turned his attention from the Old Testament to the New, specifically to the writings of St. Paul. He lectured first on Paul's letter to the Romans (1515-1516), then Galatians (1516-1517), and finally Hebrews (1517-1518). With this, he also turned from David's witness to Christ to St. Paul's *ex post facto* reflections on the meaning of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Paul's writings had played a crucial role in Western theology since at least the time of Augustine, for it was Paul who provided Western Latin theologians with their distinctive language of grace and gift, faith and works, law and gospel. Luther clearly found these concepts fascinating and essential for the task of understanding the message of the Gospel as such.

Indeed, Luther's early lectures on Paul are some of the most energetic and daring lectures of their kind ever produced. They brim with a distinctively paradoxical language that is all Luther's own. For example, Luther asks with Paul how a sinner can become righteous in the eyes of God. By doing good works and so earning God's recognition of the sinner's own righteousness? Not at all, Luther argued. Instead, one becomes just before God when, in an act of humility, she hears and agrees with God's judgment of her as a sinner. The Christian's first duty is to acknowledge that whatever God says is true. Therefore, when the word of God judges her to be a sinner, she answers not with a self-justifying denial – "That's not true!" – but, to the contrary, with a resounding "Yes!" The Christian, therefore, is righteous precisely insofar as she "justifies God" (that is, she agrees with God) in his righteous judgment of her. Moreover, this is not, in Luther's understanding, a one-time event but a moment-by-moment reality. The sinner's ongoing surrender to God's justice becomes for Luther the abiding foundation for the Christian life. Thus Luther famously describes the Christian as one who is just through faith but at the same time a sinner in fact. The Latin phrase in which this conviction is codified, first found in the Romans commentary, runs *simul iustus et peccator* – that is, "a sinner and a saint at the same time."

It would be misleading, however, to characterize this work, or any of Luther's other early lectures for that matter, as a commentary. Yes, these were classroom lectures that consisted of Luther's comments on these New Testament writings. And when published in modern editions, these lectures are given the appearance of a modern commentary. But they are far too spiritual and even homiletical to stand as commentaries in the modern sense. There is nothing here of the cool, detached reader searching for an original meaning that has little to do with his own existential situation in the present. To the contrary, Luther feels himself and his hearers addressed directly by the words of scripture. Their meaning is for him a matter of life and death. More than that, only the lectures on Galatians and the later lectures on the Psalms were published during Luther's lifetime; neither the early lectures on the Psalms nor his lectures on Romans or Hebrews were published until many years after Luther's death. What we find on the page when we read them today, therefore, is simply the written witness to an oral event, the living voice of the author sounding out in the classroom. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, these texts were published in critical editions and translated into modern languages. As a result, they became widely known and played an important role in the development of twentieth-century theology.

LUTHER'S LATER LECTURES AND
COMMENTARIES, 1522-1546

Scholars of Martin Luther have always been taken with the story of the young man, his pious life and training as a monk, his protest against indulgences, and at last his courageous stand before Emperor Charles V at Worms in 1521. The bulk of Luther's work as a professor and biblical expositor, however, was done not before but after these climactic events. Luther himself believed that as an older man, and through a great deal of hard work, he had come to a much better understanding of scripture. While in hiding at the Wartburg, for example, he had continued his work on the scriptures, writing postils (model sermons) and beginning his translation of the Greek New Testament into German. Shortly after his return to Wittenberg, he published a complete New Testament in German, the so-called September Testament (based on the month of its publication). In the following years, he continued his biblical translation work, which at last in 1534 resulted in the publication of the complete German Bible. Luther had used Hebrew and Greek resources in his earliest lectures on the Bible, but in the 1520s and 1530s, his skills with the languages and his knowledge of the biblical text increased significantly. In preparing his Bible translation, he also wrote prefaces for each of its books. These prefaces offer a *précis* of each book's content, and they function as a kind of mini-commentary that guides the reader into the book's meaning. Thus the older man found himself ever more skilled. Armed with an improved understanding of the biblical languages and an ever-broadening grasp of the Bible as a whole, he continued to read scripture anew.

During these same years, he also continued to lecture on the Bible and preach his way through various biblical texts. The difference between his sermons and his lectures is subtle at best. It is probably most accurate to say that as a preacher, Luther tended also to teach, while as a teacher, he tended to preach. Moreover, the pace at which he covered (and sometimes re-covered!) the books of the Bible in these varying venues is astonishing, especially when one recalls that during this time, he continued to author lengthy topical and polemical tracts, preach several times a week, and be involved in every way in advancing the evangelical cause.

After his return to Wittenberg in 1522 (following his condemnation at the Diet of Worms in 1521), he lectured regularly at the university until November 1545, just a few months before his death. The full list of his lectures is too lengthy to recite here, but suffice it say, he missed very few. Add to that the fact that he also preached several times each week on a wide range of biblical

texts, and the scope of Luther's achievement as a biblical expositor becomes clear. Some of the more prominent lectures and/or sermon series given during these years include a commentary on I Corinthians 7 (1523); sermons on Genesis (1524; published 1527); lectures on Deuteronomy (1525); lectures on Ecclesiastes (1524; published 1532); lectures on the Minor Prophets (1524–1526); lectures on I John, I and II Timothy, and Philemon (1527–1528); lectures on Isaiah (1527–1530); lectures on the Song of Solomon (1527–1530); sermons on the gospels of John and Matthew (1530–1532); lectures on Galatians (1531; published 1535); lectures on selected Psalms (1532–1535); and finally a massive series of lectures on Genesis (1535–1545).

Luther's lectures were also very popular. The indulgences controversy had made him Europe's most (in)famous man, and his brilliance as a theologian and biblical interpreter attracted many to Wittenberg to study theology. Indeed, the energetic students around him wanted to catch his every word and make his works available as widely as possible. Thus they worked out a system in which some of them would take shorthand notes while Luther lectured or preached. Later they would assemble these to produce a text suitable for printing. Luther himself cooperated with this venture. Although what is found in the published versions of these later lectures and commentaries has been reshaped by his editors for publication, the works nevertheless give us Luther's voice as the man himself wished it to be heard.

Of the lectures listed previously, the 1531–1535 Galatians and the 1535–1545 Genesis are arguably the most important. The Galatians lectures provide perhaps the nearest approximation to a systematic treatise on justification Luther ever produced. Prized for their clarity and precision, these lectures showcase Luther's argument for justification by grace and through faith alone. Luther was quite fond of Galatians. Indeed, he could refer to it as "my own little letter, to which I have betrothed myself." In short, Galatians was for Luther "my Katie von Bora" (i.e., his own beloved wife). The argument of this letter, Luther claimed, is that the "righteousness of faith" must be distinguished from any other kind of righteousness, whether civil or religious. The Good News of the Gospel of Christ means precisely a "passive righteousness" imputed to the sinner by grace through faith alone. Christ, therefore, is not a "new Moses," a lawgiver, but the one who brings a Gospel that sets sinners free from the condemnation of the law. The law brings wrath, the Gospel salvation, and just so Christian freedom: peace with God. Luther thus identified his own stand for the Gospel over against what he saw as the legalism of the Roman Church with Paul's stand for the "freedom of the Gospel" over against the "Judaizers" mentioned in Galatians (including, apparently, the apostle Peter).

While the Galatians lectures were focused tightly on justification, the massive lectures on Genesis offered something more like a comprehensive statement of Luther's worldview. Genesis itself told the story of the world's creation out of nothing, of Adam and Eve's fateful fall into sin, of Noah's ark, the Tower of Babel, and the histories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants down to the twelve tribes of Israel. Luther's readings of these stories showcased his understanding of creation and fall, the promise of Christ given already to "our first parents" (Adam and Eve), and the holy households of the patriarchs and matriarchs as they received with faith God's promise of a savior (Genesis 3:15, the "protevangelium") and awaited its fulfillment. In the latter case, ironically, Luther made the patriarchal households the model for the new Protestant household, including that of the married Protestant minister. In the classroom, Luther brought imaginatively to life a vision of faithful Christian living as situated by divine design within the household. He placed the joys and challenges of family life – father, mother, and children – at the center of the Christian's struggle to live a life of faith and faithfulness. Here again we find in Luther a mixture of both the traditional and the forward looking. On the one hand, like his predecessors, he saw this life as a perilous journey of faith toward holiness. On the other hand, he posited a different prototypical setting within which this struggle would take place. The challenge of the Christian life most properly takes place not within the single-sexed societies of the religious orders but within the divinely ordained partnership of man and woman in the Christian home.

In Luther's readiness to meet the challenges of his day creatively while at the same time abiding within the traditions of the faith, we find one of his most enduring contributions as an interpreter of the Bible. This is the very task to which as professor of Bible he was committed. It was a task, moreover, whose end he could not foresee within the horizons of this worldly existence. Indeed, in his last recorded words, Luther wondered aloud that even a lifetime was insufficient to probe the depths of scripture. Until Christ returns, to Luther, the Bible ever beckons the reader further up and further in.

FURTHER READING

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 [Selections from Luther's *Dictata* on the Psalms (1513-1515)]
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 Vols. 22-24. "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John." [1530-1532]

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