

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



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PART I

The Bible and Luther

LUTHER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURES

IT WAS AS HE OPENED THE PAGES OF CHAPMAN'S Homer, and feasted on the riches he found there, that John Keats became aware of his poetic vocation. The experience gave birth to the now familiar sonnet in which his genius first revealed itself. Previously Keats had read Homer only in Alexander Pope's rather formal translation. When he was introduced to the more exciting version of George Chapman and heard him "speak out loud and bold", he tells us that he felt

... like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star'd at the Pacific - and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise -
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.¹

Such was Martin Luther's reaction to the Word of God. His discovery of the Scriptures marked the decisive turning-point in his career, and destined him to be a reformer. Before he began to use the Bible to such good effect as he set about his task of calling the Church to renewal, the Bible had already transformed him. This, indeed, is the key to Luther's ministry and mission.

But we cannot be sure just when it was that Luther first held a copy of the Scriptures in his hands. The precise facts which lay behind Keats' discovery of Chapman's Homer have been laid bare by the literary historians.² It was on a summer evening in the year 1817 that his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, son of his former schoolmaster, brought him the precious volume. We even know that it was the folio edition of 1616, loaned to Clarke by Alsager of *The Times*. The two young enthusiasts were intoxicated by what they read. Keats more than once shouted aloud in the intensity of his delight. All through the night they pored over the pages, and the grey light of dawn found them still engrossed. That very day Keats penned the sonnet which launched him as one of the immortals.

Luther's first acquaintance with the Bible was similarly determinative

¹ *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod (1939), p. 45.

² Cf. Albert Erlande, *The Life of John Keats* (E.T. 1929), pp. 60-61; *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. Sir A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, Vol. XII, *The Nineteenth Century*, Pt. I (1915), Chap. IV "Keats" (C. H. Herford), p. 79.

for him, and of considerably greater consequence to the world. But the recorded details are much less exact. We cannot name the day, nor can we be altogether certain about the circumstances. According to a traditional story, Luther was astonished to find a copy of the Scriptures in a library whilst he was at Erfurt. One version identifies this with the University library and places the incident in the period when he was a student prior to his entry into the monastery, that is to say sometime between May 1501 and July 1505.¹ Here is how the event was described by Johann Mathesius of Joachimstal, who helped to compile the *Table Talk*. He also published the first extended biography of Luther, based on a series of sermons, from which this is an extract.

"When there were no public lectures he spent his time in the University library. On one occasion when he was carefully examining the volumes one after another, so that he might learn to know the best among them, he happened on a copy of the Latin Bible, which he had never in his life seen up to this time. Then he noticed with great amazement that it contained many more texts than those that were in the ordinary postils or were ordinarily explained from the pulpits of the churches. As he was looking through the Old Testament, he chanced to see the story of Samuel and his mother, Hannah, which he rapidly read through with great enjoyment and delight, and, because it was all new to him, he began to wish from the bottom of his heart that our good Lord would at some time bestow on him such a book as his own."²

Alongside this must be set a report in the *Table Talk* during the summer of 1540. "In my youth I saw a Bible in the University library and I read part of the story of Samuel, but then it was time to attend a lecture. I would very gladly have read the whole book, but at that time I had no opportunity to do so. But when I had forsaken everything to go into the cloister I once again asked for a Bible, since I had lost hope in myself."³

A variant of the tale appears to transfer the location from the University library to that of the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, which would demand a date after Luther was received as a novice on the 17th July 1505. In the *Table Talk* for the 22nd February 1538, Luther is reputed to have made the following statement: "When I was twenty years old I had not yet seen a Bible. I thought that there were no Gospels and Epistles

¹ Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (E. T. 1961), p. 1.

² Johann Mathesius, *Historien von des ehrwürdigen Manns Gottes, Doctoris Martini Luthers, Anfang, Lehr, Leben und Sterben* (1566), p. 20; cf. J. Michael Reu, *Luther's German Bible* (1934), pp. 79-80.

³ WATR. 5. 75. No. 5346. References to Luther's own writings are supplied throughout in abbreviated form, the first number indicating the volume and the second the page. In the case of the *Table Talk*, as here, the number of the extract is cited also. Wherever possible English translations of Luther are used, principally the new American Edition: the standard Weimar Edition, or other German collections, are only annexed where an English translation is not readily available. For a list of abbreviations see pp. 179-80.

except those which were written in the Sunday postils. Finally I found a Bible in the library and forthwith I took it with me into the monastery. I began to read, to reread, and to read it over again, to the great astonishment of Dr. Staupitz."¹ The reference to the monastery seems to be sufficiently explicit, although at the age of twenty Luther was still pursuing his preparatory studies at the University. He did not come into contact with Johann Staupitz, the vicar-general of the reformed order of Augustinian *Observantists* until later.

These discrepancies indicate that the narrative rests on an insecure historical foundation. It has, moreover, acquired a number of purely fictitious accretions, designed to underline the alleged neglect of the Scriptures during the Middle Ages. The Bible which Luther discovered was said to be chained up, hidden away, enveloped in dust, or altogether overlooked. Legendary details of this kind appear as soon as the end of the sixteenth century, as, for instance, in the editions of Luther's German translation of the Bible, which contain a brief biography of the reformer as an introduction. Most of them are hardly probable. One, however, was no doubt accurate – namely, that such a Bible would be chained. But the implication that this precaution was taken in order to prevent it being examined is the reverse of the truth. It was the valued books of constant reference which were thus permanently fastened to a reading desk.²

The story was further embellished with the even more unlikely suggestion that Luther's monastic superiors were displeased with his eagerness to consult the Word of God, and burdened him with extra chores in order to prevent him from fulfilling his desire. In the end it was only when his professors intervened that he was allowed to study it without interruption.

Much of this clearly belongs to Protestant legend of Luther. Some of the suspicious features were noticed by Charles Beard as far back as 1889, although he did not entirely dismiss the account.³ Julius Köstlin and Georg Kawerau corrected several errors in 1903.⁴ In point of fact, the Bible was not so seriously ignored in the Middle Ages as had been formerly imagined, and certainly not in the monasteries where its reading figured prominently in the discipline. The Augustinian Eremites in particular, like their patron, greatly revered the Scriptures. When Luther was admitted to the novitiate, he was presented with his own Latin Bible, with the accompanying injunction "industriously to read, thoughtfully to hear, and carefully to study" God's holy Word.⁵

¹ WATR. 3. 598. No. 3767.

² Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Ernest G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (1950), p. 122.

³ Charles Beard, *Martin Luther and the Reformation in Germany* (1889), p. 143.

⁴ Cf. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁵ Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Cf. Georg Oergel, *Vom jungen Luther* (1899), p. 82.

There are comparable difficulties involved in accepting the earlier date during Luther's University days. The regulations governing the Erfurt library did not permit undergraduates to wander in at will. They could only make use of it if escorted by a member of the teaching faculty, and in order to consult or withdraw a book they would have to enjoy a special privilege and pay a deposit.¹ It is possible, as Heinrich Boehmer hints, that a professor might have taken young Luther in with him and thus introduced him to the Bible.²

The majority of scholars today, however, having re-examined the Erfurt story, are extremely dubious about its authenticity as it stands. The *Table Talk* is a far from reliable source, composed as it was in a somewhat haphazard fashion by "a motley club of inferior Boswells", as Gordon Rupp has characterized them.³ Admittedly the manuscripts which came to light at the turn of the present century have provided a much more trustworthy text than Aurifaber's original edition of 1566. But even these do not offer us verbatim reports and need to be treated with considerable caution. A careful comparison of the *Table Talk* extracts with other evidence both from Luther's own writings and elsewhere leads to the conclusion that the best-informed account of the reformer's introduction to the Bible is that supplied by Veit Dietrich who acted as Luther's amanuensis for some time, before returning to his native Nürnberg as preacher in St. Sebald's Church.

This is his version of what occurred. "Once when he was a boy he happened upon a Bible. In it he read by chance the story about Samuel's mother in the Books of the Kings. The book pleased him immensely, and he thought that he would be happy if he could ever possess such a book. Shortly thereafter he bought a postil; it also pleased him greatly, for it contained more Gospels than it was customary to preach on in the course of a year.

"When he became a monk he gave up all his books. Shortly before this he had bought a copy of the *Corpus iuris* and I do not know what else. He returned these to the bookseller. Besides Plautus and Vergil he took nothing with him into the monastery. There the monks gave him a Bible bound in red leather. He made himself so familiar with it that he knew what was on every page, and when some passage was mentioned he knew at once just where it was to be found.

"If I had kept at it," he said, "I would have become exceedingly good at locating things in the Bible. At that time no other study pleased me so much as sacred literature. With great loathing I read physics, and my heart was aglow when the time came to return to the Bible. I made use of the

¹ Schwlebert, *op cit*, p 121

² Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation: Martin Luther to the Year 1521* (E.T. 1946), p. 30.

³ E. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (1953), p. 6.

glossa ordinaria. I despised Lyra, although I recognized later on that he had a contribution to make to history. I read the Bible diligently. Sometimes one important statement occupied all my thoughts for a whole day. Such statements appeared especially in the weightier prophets, and (although I could not grasp their meaning) they have stuck in my memory to this day. Such is the assertion in Ezekiel, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked," etc. (Ezek. 33: 11)."¹

This account by Veit Dietrich would seem to place Luther's first contact with the Scriptures in his boyhood, and yet to allow a ripening of interest during his term as a monk. Schwiebert is justified in assuming that such a sequence is most consistent with other known facts.² However, a technical question of textual criticism is involved. It is only in the earliest texts that Luther is referred to as a boy (*puer*) when he "happened on a Bible". Soon it was altered to *adolescens* or *baccalaureus*, presumably to fit in with the later tradition that he was already a young man or had taken his bachelor's degree.³ But both Otto Scheel and Henri Strohl, amongst others, insist that the original reading is the most probable, and thus conclude that Luther's encounter with the Scriptures occurred neither in the Erfurt cloister nor during his University career.⁴

On the face of it, the likelihood that he should never have set eyes on a complete Bible until so late seems small. The facts of circulation militate against such a circumstance. It has been estimated that between twenty and twenty-seven thousand copies of the Vulgate were printed in Germany alone before 1520.⁵ In addition to these, many thousands of handwritten facsimiles must have been available. Furthermore, the German translation of the Bible printed by Johann Mentelin of Strasburg in 1466 ran into fourteen editions in fifty years. With such an abundance, it is difficult to believe that Luther did not even catch a glimpse of one until he was out of his 'teens.

If we accept the reading of *puer* in the Veit Dietrich narrative, then we are compelled to conclude that it was whilst he was still at school that Luther made his initial acquaintance with the Scriptures. Schwiebert takes the view that it was probably whilst he was at Magdeburg that Luther was introduced to the Bible at first hand.⁶ But even before this he must have had some knowledge of it. What we now know about medieval schooling dispels the impression that he could have been completely unaware of God's Word.

Until he was fourteen young Martin attended the *Ratschule*, or City School, at Mansfeld, next to St. George's Church in the central square.

¹ LW. 54. 13-14. No. 116.

² Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 121.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Otto Scheel, *Martin Luther, Vom Katholizismus zur Reformation* (1917), Bd. I, pp. 91-92; Henri Strohl, *L'Évolution religieuse de Luther jusqu'en 1515* (1922), pp. 47-49.

⁵ Reu, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

⁶ Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 119.

The school was later named after the reformer. He was probably under five years of age when he enrolled. Here he would be drilled in the *Trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric. The school was divided into three *Hausen*, or groups. In each the lad would come to know something about the Bible and its contents. The *Tabulisten*, or beginners, learned the rudiments of Latin from a primer called the *Fibel*. But they also learned the *Benedicite* (the prayer before meals) and the *Gratias* (the thanksgiving after meals), the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Confession of sins, and the Hail Mary. Three times a day they went through their recitations. The second group was composed of *Donatisten*, so named after the Latin textbook, the *Donat*, published with a German interlinear.¹ The pupils soon began to construe whole passages, and these were invariably taken from Scripture – either a Psalm or some other selection from the Vulgate. "Doubtless, Luther's later mastery of the Latin Bible, his ability to quote verbatim almost at will even late in life," comments Schwiebert, "dates back to the Mansfeld days."² Luther often complained afterwards about the harsh discipline, but there can be little doubt that he gained much. The upper division was known as the *Alexandristen*, from the *Doctrinale* by Alexander de Villedieu, which contained more advanced Latin grammar and syntax. These pupils also served as choirboys at matins and vespers each day, and in the Sunday services. In order that they might sing praises with understanding, they were taught the hymns, versicles, responses and Psalms along with an explanation of the Scripture lections. The impression left by some of Luther's biographers that there was little or no biblical instruction during his schooldays obviously needs modifying.

Luther may not have reached the third stage before he was moved from Mansfeld to Magdeburg. Historians have tried to establish what school it was that Luther attended. It was once thought to be the celebrated *Stadtschule*, but this did not exist before the Reformation. Amongst the parochial schools of Magdeburg, that of St. John's was the most outstanding, but it seems doubtful whether Luther was ever a pupil. Luther himself supplies a clue, for he once disclosed the fact that he had gone to school with the *Nullbrüder*, or Brethren of the Common Life. Their nickname was derived from their self-abnegation – making themselves null and void.³ These Zerobrothers, as we might now call them, did not have a school of their own in Magdeburg, but it has been established that three

¹ LW. 41. 350; 54. 235. No. 3566a. It was named after Aelius Donatus who lived in the fourth century. Luther described him as "the best grammarian" (LW. 54. 211. No. 3490).

² Schwiebert, op. cit., pp. 111-12.

³ Schwiebert (op. cit., p. 119) thinks that the name *Nullbrüder* was connected with their low singing or "lollen" in their devotions. He quotes EA. 29. 370; End. 3. 402. n. 3 and Scheel, op. cit., Bd. I, pp. 78-82. The names of Lollards or Nollards seem to have been supplied by their enemies, cf. NSH. 3. 174; 7. 69. For the contribution of the *Nullbrüder* to education, vide Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. II, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty A.D. 500-A.D. 1500* (1959), p. 393; CE. 4. 167.

or four of their community taught at the *Domschule*, or Cathedral School. It would look as if this was where Luther was registered.

If so, he could hardly have escaped the strongly biblical influence of the *Nullbrüder*. The Brethren of the Common Life had their rise in Holland. The principal figures in their foundation were Geerte de Groote, a Canon of Utrecht, and his friend Florentius Radewijns. Their aim was to foster a higher level of Christian life and devotion in the Church. Thomas à Kempis was of their company. They laid unusual emphasis on the Scriptures and were active in the distribution of Bibles in the language of the people. It would appear that whilst at the *Domschule* Luther not only gained his first sight of a complete volume of Scripture, but also through the Brethren came to know more of its content and significance. It is understandable that he had not actually seen a Bible for himself before this, for his instruction at Mansfeld would be by the blackboard and wax tablets. The boys did not use many books themselves.

According to Veit Dietrich, Luther bought a postil very soon after he had come across the Bible. This would be a collection of Scripture passages used in the liturgy of the Church (later termed pericopes), together with glosses or abbreviated expositions of them. The official title was the *Plenarium*. Luther must have heard about it at Mansfeld, but now he managed to get one for himself. It would contain considerably more selections from Scripture than the Epistles and Gospels for each Sunday. There were about five times the number of those used at the normal weekly service, including many from the Old Testament. In the first German *Plenarium* to be printed there were no less than two hundred and forty extracts. In addition there were another two hundred and seventy related to saint's days. When he got hold of his postil, Luther was able to read a great deal of the Bible as often as he wished.

We know that dozens of such books were printed in German from 1743 onwards. They were a help to those who had to preach, as well as to worshippers who would prepare themselves for divine service in this way and to others who, like the youthful Luther, wanted to brood on the Word of God. There were so many of the postils available that the cost was not exceptionally high. Five were sold in Leipzig in 1510 for a gulden: a fatted ox fetched three gulden in the market.¹ Nevertheless, it was quite a sum for a schoolboy. It is a mark of his keenness that he was ready to save his pocket money and maybe take on some jobs so as to be able to buy one.

After only a year at Magdeburg, Luther's parents transferred him, for some reason still not clear, to the parish school of St. George's at Eisenach in Thuringia. Later he always thought of Eisenach as "his beloved town".² The *Georgenschule* had not been particularly distinguished in the fifteenth

¹ Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 9

² WA. 30. ii. 576.

century, but just about the time when Luther went there the standard had been raised by the advent of several notable new teachers. Two of them made a marked impression on the boy. One was the rector, Johann Trebonius, who was rather extravagantly praised by Melanchthon. Matthäus Ratzeberger, court physician to the Count of Mansfeld, who later acted as guardian for Luther's children, spoke of Trebonius as a highly respected man of learning. The tale of his raising his hat in front of his scholars since he did not know what any one of them might eventually become, bears the stamp of *post factum* fabrication. The other teacher of calibre was Wigand Gueldenkampff of Fritzlar, who was to serve afterwards as a pastor at Waltershausen. Luther recalled his indebtedness to him and endeavoured to secure a pension for him from the Elector in 1526. The curriculum was that of the typical *Trivialschule* and Luther would be classed amongst the *Alexandristen* at this period. Some have wondered whether it was at Eisenach that he came into touch with the humanism of the renaissance, but this is improbable. He was, however, influenced by Johann Braun, the vicar of St. Mary's and superior of the Franciscan monastery at the foot of the Wartburg. It may well have been that Braun noted the youth's zeal and devotion, together with his love for the Bible, and planted a seed in his mind which led to his entry into the cloister at Erfurt.

Luther went to Erfurt from school, but not to go into the religious community immediately. He matriculated from the University in May 1501, and occupied a hall of residence, the *Georgenburse*. There he would hear a chapter from the Bible each day at table, and he himself would take his turn in reading the lessons. His studies for the law included logic which, as in the case of John Wesley, equipped him for his future ministry and made him one of the most acute controversialists of his time. When in 1505 Luther fulfilled his vow and entered the Augustinian monastery, he was presented, as he himself tells us, with his own copy of the Bible in Latin, bound in red leather.¹ The rules of his order required him to devote himself to the mastering of its contents. This stipulation had been re-emphasized by the vicar-general in 1504 with respect to the German communities. The master of novices had the responsibility of seeing that it was observed. In view of these facts, we cannot accept the truth of the tradition that Luther as a newly-fledged monk fell foul of his superiors through his longing to search the Scriptures.

When he was ordained to the priesthood in 1507, Luther was enrolled in the theological school of his order where he embarked on a course of study which included exegesis as well as dogmatics. This was no doubt the time to which he referred when he gained such an intimate knowledge of the Bible, and when no other pursuit was so pleasing to him as sacred

¹ LW. 54. 14. No. 116.

literature. When he moved over to Wittenburg in 1508, he had to leave his beloved leather-bound copy in the cloister, much to his sorrow. But he found others in the monastery in Wittenburg, and was thus able to continue his daily reading of the Word.¹ In 1509 as a *baccalaureus ad Biblia* he began to lecture in biblical subjects, and in 1512 he was appointed for life to the *lectura in Biblia*. His doctorate in sacred Scripture equipped him to take up the post from which he launched the Reformation – the chair of biblical exegesis at the University of Wittenberg.

A collateral question to the one we have been seeking to answer about Luther's introduction to the Scriptures concerns the time when he first began to use the original text of the Old and New Testaments. The Vulgate, of course, was the accepted version in the Church of his day. Luther began to learn Hebrew soon after the publication of Johann Reuchlin's *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* in 1506. This combined grammar and dictionary heralded a new era in the acquisition of the language, and Luther was quick to take advantage of it. By 1509 it was evident that he had made good progress and had profited from his application, for in the marginal notes to the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, on which he lectured, he began to show the signs of his skill.² When he referred in his *Dictata Super Psalterium* (1513–1515) to the "Hebraeus", he meant simply Jerome's Latin translation of the Psalms, and not the Hebrew text itself. But it is equally clear that very soon he used Reuchlin's *Septem Psalmi Poenitentes* (1512), with its setting out of the original Hebrew along with a Latin translation and short expository notes. By the time he came in 1517 to compose his own exposition of the Penitential Psalms designed for laymen, he no longer adhered to the Vulgate as authoritative, but turned to the Hebrew in Reuchlin's edition instead. In his *Operationes in Psalmos* (1518 to 1520) Luther was completely emancipated from the Vulgate and worked on the Hebrew text as the basis of his comments. He had received the edition of the entire Psalter in Hebrew, published in 1516, as a gift from his friend Johann Lang, prior of the Erfurt cloister. Luther had evidently mastered the language sufficiently to start out from the original. From this point on, as Michael Reu brings out, it was decisive for him.³

Luther took up the study of Greek at a later date than his wrestling with Hebrew. First Johann Lang, who had taught at Wittenberg, and then Philip Melancthon, who became Professor of Greek there in 1518 acted as his tutors. In February 1516, Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament appeared: when it came to Wittenberg in August of the same year, Luther made use of it right away in preparing his course on Romans. Henceforward he always worked from the original text. His Bible translation bears ample testimony to his familiarity both with Hebrew and

¹ J. Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (1944), pp. 7–8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Greek.¹ Luther was a man of one book, the best of books, and he knew it through and through in the languages in which it was written. The Church was to be reformed according to the Word of God. Providence saw to it that the one who was chosen to lead that Reformation was himself steeped in the Scriptures.

¹Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, pp. 114-24.