

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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LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

THOSE WHO USED TO PORTRAY MARTIN LUTHER ON the grand scale as an outsize Gothic hero figure, viewed him as one who stood like a giant at what Thomas Carlyle in a vivid phrase once described as "the conflux of eternities".¹ In him, it was said, the pressure of the past was gathered up. In him the ferment of the present found its outlet. In him the shape of things to come began to appear. This was only an attempt to indicate in at times excessively hyperbolic terms the plain and hardly deniable fact that Luther was one of those men whom God matches to the hour. It is no longer fashionable to adopt such dramatic, even apocalyptic imagery, but whilst endeavouring to avoid the extremism of Protestant mythology, we may nevertheless find ourselves compelled to conclude on the soberest reflection that the influence of Luther over the last four centuries serves to vindicate a prophetic interpretation of the pioneer reformer.

Our concern at the moment, however, is to amplify the less arresting and therefore less controversial assertion that in the context of his theological development Luther was also affected by the contingencies of time. He was profoundly indebted to the past, as we have seen. He was equally susceptible to the impact of the present. His beliefs were hammered out on the anvil of experience, which means that we cannot consider his maturing theology apart from his spiritual quest. There is an impressive existential quality about Luther's thinking. His doctrinal principles were formulated as and how the actual demands of living determined. This goes far to explain the enormous appeal of Luther's teaching. This was no doctrinaire theory, dreamily conceived in the solitude of a monastic cell but quite out of touch with life. Monk though he was, Luther was no recluse. His duties as a member of the teaching faculty at the University of Wittenberg brought him into contact with the youth of the period with all their vitality and all their frustrations too. It was in these years, when he took up his chair of biblical exegesis in 1512 and embarked on his series of expository lectures until the ferocity of his opponents compelled him to seek refuge in Wartburg in 1521, that his doctrinal position was consolidated.

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle* (Centenary Edition), Vol. II (1896), p. 134. The reference was to 4th May 1789 - "the baptism day of democracy" (*ibid.*, p. 133).

The determinative factor in his advance towards an integrated theology was, of course, his increasing conviction that the Bible alone must be his guide. "The Sacred Scriptures in which his mind became so saturated," explains Vivian Green, "formed the central feature of his study".¹ When Luther was promoted to the doctorate in Wittenberg it is significant that, according to the custom, the ceremony included the presentation of a Bible to the candidate, as a token of his office. The institution was conducted by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, who was later to emerge as leader of what we have now come to call the radical Reformation. After reading a selection of Scripture passages, he handed Luther first a closed and then an open Bible. He placed a woollen beret on his head, and on his finger a silver ring, which can still be seen in the museum at Braunschweig.² Thus was Luther installed as a Doctor of Sacred Scripture. That was on the 19th October 1512. On the 25th. he started his professorial duties with the first lecture of a series on Genesis (so it would seem), and for the next seven years the nature of his vocation compelled him to dig deeper and yet deeper into the Word of God. As yet he had not seen the light, as he himself afterwards confessed.³ But these were to prove the decisive days both for mind and soul.

Before we trace the earlier stages of this development in its theological aspect, up to the time of Luther's spiritual illumination, it is necessary to justify the assumption that he can rightly be called a theologian at all. It is too readily supposed that this was not in fact his forte. He is regarded as a preacher, a prophet, a protester, a reformer, but not as one at all versed in theology. It is conceded that Luther was a genius in religion and that as a historical figure he changed the face of Europe. But it is almost proverbial in some quarters to take it for granted that Luther was no theologian. Even so sympathetic a critic as Sydney Cave could fall into the trap, and announce that to refer to Luther's theology is to use a phrase without a meaning.⁴ Hugh Ross Mackintosh similarly spoke about "Luther's system of belief, if system it may be called".⁵

Such a depreciation of Luther as a systematic theologian is wide of the mark, as Philip Watson shows.⁶ On the other hand, we can see why the impression has gained currency. Luther made no effort to amass anything remotely resembling Calvin's *Institutes* or the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas. But if the production of an exhaustive compendium is a *sine qua non*, then many of the recognized theologians of the past would fail to qualify. Luther coordinated theology in a creative fashion by seizing on the biblical fulcrum of justification by faith and using it to move the entire

¹ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

² Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-6.

³ WA. 45. 86.

⁴ Sydney Cave, *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (1925), p. 148.

⁵ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (1912), p. 230.

⁶ Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (1947), pp. 4-6.

structure of belief into a new position. Whereas others have systematized the doctrines of the Word by arranging them in logical sequence with impressive cohesion, Luther did so by using a single though crucial article to interpret the whole.

Here is the apposite comment of Joseph Sittler on this matter. "There is, to be sure a sense of the term *systematic thinker* before which Luther would not qualify – which in fact he would not understand. If, that is, the connotation of system which is proper to propositional logic is made absolute, then Luther was not systematic. But we must decidedly reject any such presumption. There is a system proper to the dissection of the dead; and there is a system proper to the experience and description of the living. There is a system proper to the inorganic; and there is a system proper to an organism. A crystal has a system. But so does a living personality in the grip of a central certainty. If, then, by system one means that there is in a man's thought a central authority, a pervasive style, a way of bringing every theme and judgment and problem under the rays of the central illumination, then it must be said that history shows few men of comparable integration."¹ For Luther, of course, the "central authority" and the "central illumination" was the truth of justification, which he declared is "master and prince, lord, ruler, and judge over all kinds of doctrine, which preserves and governs all ecclesiastical doctrines".²

It was once presumed that a great gulf was fixed between the earlier and later Luther. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that this is not the case. Luther's theological development took place, as we have already noted, within a comparatively brief space of time. Indeed, the basic principles were established as he worked on Romans shortly after his decisive encounter with God, and can even be detected incipiently at least in his *Dictata Super Psalterium* (1513-1515). To be sure, there were further advances within this framework, especially under the impact of controversy. But, as Regin Prenter makes clear, "the development is within the new evangelical view of life and not away from it. It is a development, therefore, which does not signify any modification of the basic view, but is rather a progressive and final struggle with the traditional views based on the unchanged fundamental conclusion."³

Whilst the Bible was the major factor in bringing about Luther's reorientation, we must not overlook the help he received from some of his mentors. In a letter to Jodocus Trutvetter – nicknamed "Doctor Eisenach" after his native town – Luther admitted that it was from him he first learned that Christian faith must be based only on the Bible, and that all other writers must be tested by it.⁴ Trutvetter, however, became

¹ Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word in the Structure of Lutheran Theology* (1948), pp. 3-4; cf. LW. Companion Volume, pp. 42-43.

² WA. 39. i. 205.

³ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (E.T. 1953), p. xvi.

⁴ End., i. 189-90.

so obsessed with Aristotelian logic – Luther dubbed him “the king of dialectic philosophers in our day” – that he failed to heed his own advice.¹ Bartholomeus Arnoldi from Usingen, another of Luther’s teachers at Erfurt, insisted that the Scriptures must be accepted as the unerring guide to truth and that the tradition of the Church and the works of the fathers must be evaluated in relation to the Word. Arnoldi, it seems, was infected by the same virus as Trutvetter and succumbed to the fever of dialectic philosophy, for which Luther had to take him to task.² But he continued to send a kindly greeting to him in his letters.³

Luther’s debt to his vicar-general, Johann von Staupitz, was much more substantial. We have seen how he acted as a spiritual counsellor. His theological advice was equally profitable. Luther could allude to him as “my very first father in this teaching” – that is, the doctrine of justification which lay at the heart of the Reformation.⁴ In a letter he wrote to Staupitz in May 1518, he recalled his superior’s “most delightful and helpful talks, through which the Lord Jesus wonderfully consoled me”.⁵ Then he went on to remind Staupitz that it was through him that he began to grasp the real meaning of repentance. As a result of the conversation, Luther set out to explore the biblical connotation of *metanoia* and was eventually led into the light. It was Staupitz, too, who dragged Luther out of the seclusion of the cloister, almost against his will, and convinced him that his most effective sphere lay in teaching the Bible. He gave up his own chair so that Luther could take it. Referring to the mystical devotions to which he was then attracted, Luther wrote: “These are mere Satanic illusions, among which I would have been imprisoned as a monk had not Staupitz recalled me to the public profession of theology.”⁶ In his last letter to Luther in 1524, Staupitz was not ashamed to describe himself as “a precursor of the evangelical doctrine”.⁷ Giovanni Miegge doubts whether Staupitz can be claimed in the strict sense of the word as a forerunner of the Reformation, but he agrees that Luther’s obligation to him was considerable.⁸ The debt, however, was reciprocal, as Staupitz acknowledged when in the same letter he told Luther: “You have led us from the husks of swine back to the pastures of life.”⁹

The critical period in Luther’s theological development fell between his promotion to the doctorate with the Wittenberg chair and his spiritual awakening in the tower experience, in the autumn of 1514 most probably. After his enlightenment, he was working from a turning-point as he continued to prepare his lectures on Romans, and later those on Galatians, Hebrews and the second set on Psalms. Prior to the *Türmerlebnis*, he was

¹ LW. 48. 57.

⁴ Dok. 512.

⁷ Boehmer, op. cit., p. 108.

⁸ Giovanni Miegge, *Lutero* (1946), p. 110; cf. Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 118.

⁹ Boehmer, op. cit., p. 108.

² Ibid., 52; cf. End. 4. 31.

³ LW. 48. 65.

⁵ LW. 48. 139, 151.

⁶ Dok. 472.

straining towards that watershed. "When I became a doctor, I did not yet know that we cannot expiate our sins."¹ Despite the objections of Uuras Saarnivaara, it would appear that Luther is there referring to the fact that he had not as yet fully gained his evangelical insight into the nature of justification.² But he was on the way to doing so.

It is not at all certain which was the first course of lectures delivered by Luther as a professor in Wittenberg. There is reason for thinking that it may have been on the book of Genesis.³ Luther himself included it in the list when he looked back on this period in 1539, in his treatise *On the Councils and the Churches*. "I, too, read the fathers, even before I opposed the pope so decisively. I also read them with greater diligence than those who now quote them so defiantly and haughtily against me; for I know that none of them attempted to read a book of Holy Scripture in school, or to use the writings of the fathers as an aid, as I did. Let them take a book of Holy Scripture and seek out the glosses of the fathers; then they will share the experience I had when I worked on the letter to the Hebrews with St. Chrysostom's glosses, the letter to Titus and the letter to the Galatians with the help of St. Jerome, Genesis with the help of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, the Psalter with all the writers available, and so on."⁴ In his footnote in the American edition, Eric W. Gritsch assigns these lectures to the period between 1513 and 1517.⁵ The rest can be checked, but there is no direct evidence about a series on Genesis. It is argued that if Luther did in fact tackle it, then it can only be fitted in during 1512-1513. This would make it the course which he commenced as soon as he was appointed as a professor. Boehmer believes that he began on the 25th. October, 1512.⁶ There are no extant manuscripts, however, and the riddle must remain unsolved. The last commentary Luther published from 1535 to 1545 was on Genesis and may conceivably have incorporated some of the previous material.

We are on more solid ground when we come to deal with Luther's *Dictata Super Psalterium* of 1513 to 1515.⁷ These lectures are to be distinguished from a set Luther gave from 1518 to 1521 entitled *Operationes in Psalmos*. They were prepared during the summer of 1513 and begun on the 13th August. The journal of Johann Oldecop, a priest from Hilder-

¹ WA. 45. 86.

² Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light on Luther's Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith* (1951), p. 57. Saarnivaara prefers to relate Luther's statement to "the reviving of faith in the forgiveness of sins and grace in Christ" which he thinks occurred under the influence of Staupitz late in 1512. Luther's illumination, by which he came to grasp the meaning of justification by faith, Saarnivaara places as late as 1518, and equates with the *Türmerlebnis*.

³ Schwiebert, op. cit., pp. 196, 282; cf. Heinrich Boehmer, *Luthers erste Vorlesung* (1924), p. 4.

⁴ LW 41. 19. ⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 17.

⁶ Boehmer, *Luthers erste Vorlesung*, p. 3.

⁷ For an analysis of these lectures, vide Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, pp. 138-57, from which material has been drawn.

sheim, confirmed that Luther was lecturing on the Psalms in 1513.¹ He used an edition of the Psalter which came from the press of Johann Decker from Grünenberg in 1510. It is still preserved in the library at Wolfenbüttel. Luther's notes are there for visitors to see. But we are not at present concerned with Luther's methods of exposition: we are enquiring about his theological development. It was his study of the Psalms that led Luther to a new comprehension of God's righteousness which was to prove determinative in his thinking.

The exegetical factors, however, were not altogether unrelated to the doctrinal. Erich Vogelsang saw in the combination of Christological and tropological interpretation, reflected in these lectures, the key to Luther's ultimate discovery of God's righteousness.² It came when Luther applied the concept of divine justice first to the work of Christ and then to the soul on the ground of faith. Taking a hint from Jacques Lefèvre, he was enabled to transcend the limitations of medieval exegesis and eventually to penetrate to the heart of the gospel. Lefèvre distinguished a twofold literal sense: the literal-historical which relates to the time when the Psalmist wrote, and represents the letter which kills, and the literal-prophetic which points to Christ and reflects the intention of the Spirit. It was this grounding of the prophetic interpretation – which in itself was familiar enough in the Middle Ages – on Augustine's differentiation between the letter and the spirit which constituted Lefèvre's contribution. Through it Luther was able to equate the righteousness of God – which he had formerly regarded exclusively in terms of punitive justice – with the person of Jesus Christ, whom he had now come to recognize as full of grace and integrity. This made it possible for him to take the further step of relating righteousness to the individual through faith by applying the tropological rule. In this curious intermingling of the exegetical and the theological, Luther began to move towards a resolution of his doubts and fears.

Vogelsang discerned signs of tension early in the *Dictata*. But, he went on, "the real wrestling begins from Psalm 30/31 onwards".³ Yet even here the solution and goal were not reached. The climax was to come with Psalm 70/71. We have an indication of Luther's preconceptions in a report from the *Table Talk*. "When under the papacy I read, 'In thy righteousness deliver me' (Ps. 31:1) and 'in thy truth', I thought at once that this righteousness was an avenging anger, namely the wrath of God. I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17)."⁴ Later, in the tower experience, to which this extract is related, Luther came to realize that the righteous-

¹ WA 3. 1.

² Erich Vogelsang, *Die Anfänge von Luthers Christologie nach des ersten Vorlesung* (1929), p. 50.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴ LW. 54. 309. No. 4007.

ness of God is His mercy through which He makes us righteous by faith. This was to prove the remedy for his affliction. But as yet he was only beginning to glimpse it.

When he came to Psalm 70/71, Luther found the same phrase staring at him again in v. 2 - "In thy righteousness deliver me." He was led to comment at greater length than he had done in Psalm 30/31, where he had merely underlined "thy righteousness" by adding: "not in mine, which is nothing."¹ Now he expanded on this theme. "The righteousness of God is wholly this: to humble oneself to the depths. Here he speaks properly of Christ, who is the power and righteousness of God through His utter and profound humility."² Then he showed how he had been influenced by Lefèvre's interpretative principles. "The righteousness of God when considered tropologically, for thus it is most often regarded in Scripture, is that by which God condemns us and makes us condemn what we are in ourselves, the old man as a whole with all his works (even our righteousness, Isaiah 64). So humility is actually humiliation. . . . For this is called the judgment of God, as the righteousness, power and wisdom of God are those by which we are made wise, strong, righteous and humble, or by which we are judged."³ "Thus whoever wants to understand the Scriptures wisely needs to understand all these things tropologically. The truth, wisdom, salvation, righteousness are those by which he makes us strong, saved, righteous, wise. So the works of God and the ways of God are all in the literal sense Christ. In the moral sense, all this is faith in Him. . . . In fact the old law only prophesied the first coming of Christ, in which He reigns in a benign and salutary judgment, because it is the advent of grace and loving kindness. Therefore the apostle says in Romans 3, 'The righteousness of God . . . through Jesus Christ.'⁴ "No one can . . . 'be delivered by the righteousness of God' unless he hopes in the God who justifies the ungodly. . . . He does not say that he desires to be freed by something other than righteousness. For we are delivered from unrighteousness by righteousness, just as we are delivered from sickness by health, and from ignorance by knowledge."⁵

It is apparent that, when he reached this point in his *Dictata Super Psalterium*, Luther had come very close to an evangelical appreciation of righteousness. He was on the edge of it, but not yet quite there. We do not go all the way with Vogelsang in identifying Luther's notes on Psalm 70/71 as the specific moment of his illumination, preferring to connect this with the tower experience; but we can agree with Rupp and others that Luther in all likelihood came to a fuller insight into the meaning of God's righteousness at some time during his lectures on Psalms.⁶ Wendorf's

¹ Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 64.

² WA. 3. 458.

³ Ibid., 465.

⁴ Ibid., 458.

⁵ Ibid., 453.

⁶ Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 136; cf. Vogelsang, op. cit., p. 50.

attempt to push the transition even further back to the exposition of Psalm I is hardly convincing.¹

Attention must also be drawn to Luther's reaction to Psalm 21/22 with its unmistakable anticipations of the cross. It begins with the words which Christ took upon his own lips as he hung on the tree: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Luther was brought to a halt by that cry of dereliction. Whatever could it mean? Christ had evidently felt Himself to be deserted, abandoned and estranged from the Father. This was just what Luther himself had gone through. But why should it happen to the Lord Jesus? Luther knew very well why he felt forlorn: it was because his sin separated between him and God. But Christ had no sin to sever Him from the Holy One. Why then was He forsaken? And the answer dawned on Luther with the force of a fresh revelation. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for the sake of sinners. He so identified Himself with sinful humanity that he took upon Him the iniquity of us all. This introduced Luther to a totally new conception of Christ, as Bainton enables us to appreciate. "The judge upon the rainbow has become the derelict upon the cross. He is still the judge and must be, so long as truth judges error and right judges wrong. But in the very act of judging the sinner He has made Himself one with the sinner, assuming His punishment and sharing in his very guilt."²

But a new view of God is involved as well. The All-Great is the All-Loving too.³ At the cross righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Wrath and mercy meet. Redemption is achieved by the only availing sacrifice, and pardon is made possible for guilty men. "Luther, as no one before him in more than a thousand years, sensed the import of the miracle of divine forgiveness," declares Bainton.⁴ That was the heart at once of Luther's theological reorientation and his spiritual renewal. Henceforward he was to realize that "the cross of Christ runs through the whole of Scripture".⁵

There is no extended discussion of original sin in the *Dictata*, as there was in the lectures on the *Sentences*. Luther was to take up this theme more thoroughly in dealing with Romans. "Luther's doctrine of sin was in a transition stage," Adolf Hamel declared, with reference to the *Dictata*, and "remnants of Occamist teaching and Augustinian notions are mingled

¹ Hermann Wendorf, *Der Durchbruch der neuen Erkenntnis Luthers im Lichte der handschriftlichen Überlieferungen* (1932), pp. 124, 285; Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, pp. 136-7.

² Bainton, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

³ *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Augustine Birrell (1896), Vol. I, p. 515, "An Epistle".

"The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too -"

⁴ Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁵ WA. 3. 63.

together".¹ In commenting on the *Sentences*, Luther had denied the continuance of original sin beyond baptism, in spite of what Peter Lombard had written on the matter. But now he could quote the Master of the *Sentences* with acquiescence. The guilt of sin may indeed have been remitted in the sacrament, but the "misery of infirmity" remains as a "weakness in the memory, a blindness in the intellect, or a disorder in the will", as well as "a dolour of conscience."² These are only gradually healed by grace, in the inn where Christ as the Good Samaritan has lodged us.³

Thomas McDonough sees in the relationship between law and gospel "not a mere aspect of Luther's theology but the very heart and core of his basic conviction".⁴ In the *Dictata* this feature of Luther's developed doctrinal synthesis is already discernible, though not yet so definitive as, for instance, in his great commentary on Galatians of 1535. "For in this the difference between the gospel and the law is indicated," Luther wrote. "The law is the word of Moses to us; the gospel, on the other hand, is the word of God in us."⁵ "All that pertains only to the body and the senses and not to the spirit is letter. . . . But the new law conveys spiritual gifts and grace, by which the carnal and literal things are made void."⁶ The clear-cut distinction between law and gospel, so vital for the biblical concept of justification, was not yet fully drawn by Luther. He tended to interpret it in terms of the Augustinian and neo-Platonic contrast between the shadow and the reality. The law "stays outside, speaks in figures and in the shadows of what will one day become visible".⁷ The gospel, on the other hand, "comes inwardly and speaks of inward, spiritual and true things".⁸ "All that the law says and does is but mere words and signs. The works of the gospel, however, are the works and reality thus signified."⁹

For Luther the gospel flows out of the law. "The gospel was hidden in the law and was therefore unseen, like water in a rock, until Christ tore it apart and broke it open."¹⁰ "The new law was hidden, enclosed in the old law, but it was intended to be brought out and disclosed by the advent of Christ."¹¹ It may be concluded that on the whole Luther's idea of the connexion between law and gospel at this time was basically Augustinian.¹²

Lennart Pinomaa reports that the *Dictata* are "almost drenched" with the theme of divine wrath.¹³ It must be borne in mind, however, that there are few books in the Bible in which this aspect of God's nature is more

¹ Adolf Hamel, *Der junge Luther und Augustin*, Bd. I (1934), p. 129; Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 153, n. 3.

² WA 3. 453, 231.

³ WA. 4. 211.

⁴ McDonough, op. cit., p. 146.

⁵ WA. 4. 9.

⁶ WA. 3. 37.

⁷ WA. 4. 9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ WA. 3. 258.

¹⁰ Ibid., 271.

¹¹ WA 4. 285.

¹² Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 70. But cf. Hamel, op. cit., Bd. I, pp. 169-78 for minor differences.

¹³ Lennart B. Pinomaa, *Der Zorn Gottes in der Theologie Luthers* (1938), p. 19; Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 155.

prominent than the Psalms. Augustine's commentary on the Psalms, on which Luther drew, makes repeated reference to the wrath of God and its implications. As Rupp points out, Luther was at pains to safeguard this conception from anthropomorphic association.¹ "For His wrath is not as He is in Himself."² "For the punitive effects of God are His wrath – not as He Himself is in Himself."³ Luther also followed Augustine in distinguishing between the merciful wrath of God and the wrath of His severity. The former is shown to the saints and brings them to repentance and faith. The latter is reserved for the ungodly and impenitent, leading up at last to the eternal punishment of hell itself.⁴

It will be realized that, even in the brief period between his entry upon his duties as a professor at Wittenberg and the tower experience in the autumn of 1514, Luther had come, in the course of his scrutiny of the Scriptures, within sight of his theological goal. Not all was yet sharply defined, but his eyes were unwaveringly focused on the vision of the King in His beauty and the land that once seemed so very far off.

¹ Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 155; Pinomaa, op. cit., p. 80.

² WA. 3. 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 591.

⁴ Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 156; Pinomaa, op. cit., p. 73.