



## Grist for the Mill: Luther on the Apocrypha

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The year 2009 marks the second year of the five-year “Book of Faith” initiative in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The initiative arose out of a concern about “how [to] best interpret the Scriptures and to what extent and in what ways biblical authority informs, shapes and norms the life of the individual Christian and the Church,” all of which is aimed at working “toward a consensus on a biblical hermeneutic and the most appropriate methods of biblical interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, congregations, pastors, and individuals are exploring ways to deepen their understanding of Scripture. Naturally, these same folks are encountering and engaging age-old questions about the composition and authority of the Scriptures, as well as questions pertaining to interpretation and meaning. Luther’s views on the Apocrypha offer grist for the mill. In addition to providing insight into his views on the creation and authority of the canon of Scripture, Luther’s words offer a helpful perspective on interpreting Scripture.

<sup>1</sup>For more information about this initiative, go to [http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof\\_new/about.htm](http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/about.htm). The quotations come from p. 1 of the *Memorial Urging the N. C. Synod and the ELCA to Engage in Study and Conversation Regarding Foundational Biblical, Theological and Ecclesial Issues*, RC 05.05, the 2005 North Carolina Synod Assembly, which can be downloaded, in its entirety, from <http://www.nclutheran.org/pdfs/bof/Book-of-Faith-memorial.pdf> (both URLs accessed 8 August 2009).

*Luther valued and translated the Apocrypha—that is, some of it—because he found it to echo canonical Scripture, thus functioning as the word of God and providing pastoral care for Christian souls.*

## THE MIND AND WORK OF A PASTOR

People somewhat familiar with Protestant history and theology likely have encountered a common generalization of Luther's views and treatment of the Bible. Simply put, Luther is characterized as promoting a "canon within the canon." Thus, seeing the terms Luther and Apocrypha in the same sentence may cause one to pause. Additionally, to learn that Luther worked on translating the Apocrypha so it could be included in his translation of the Bible likely raises a question: Why? As a way of beginning to answer the question, it is helpful to understand the impetus behind Luther's work. Generally speaking, a means of gaining further insight into such matters is to look at those things that occupy a person's time. Clearly, Luther's life was not occupied solely with his views on the Apocrypha. That is to say, while the term "multitasking" is a modern colloquialism, the tendency it describes was not foreign to Luther. In fact, looking at the milieu in which Luther penned his opinions exposes two things: the way in which Luther's context shaped the scope of his day-to-day activities, and the concerns that motivated him in his work.

The translation of the Apocrypha was part of a larger project of translating the entire Bible into German. Broadly speaking, Luther and his colleagues hoped to correct some of the shortcomings found in the Vulgate translation and to make the text accessible to a more general readership.<sup>2</sup> This broader translation project took place in a volatile environment. For instance, Luther's first translations, the so-called September Testament, were done while Wittenberg was in turmoil and Luther was holed up in the Wartburg Castle.<sup>3</sup> As Luther prepared to begin the project, his heart was also invested in the treatise *A Sincere Admonition to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion*. The treatise expressed Luther's worries that the devil was at work through the direct and violent action people were taking to dismantle the papal church. As an antidote, Luther exhorted the people to:

[L]et your mouth become such a mouth of the Spirit of Christ....This we do when we boldly continue the work that has been begun, and by speaking and writing spread among the people a knowledge of the rascality and deceit of the pope and papists until he is exposed....For he must first be slain with the words; the mouth of Christ must do it.<sup>4</sup>

These words give us insight into the impetus behind Luther's activities: his rationale for the admonishment against insurrection hinged on his conviction that the swords or hands of humans would not bring about the needed change; a differ-

<sup>2</sup>Numerous German translations of the Bible were already in print by this time. However, they were all based on the Latin Vulgate translation of Jerome. Luther and his colleagues translated the Greek and Hebrew texts into German.

<sup>3</sup>During this time, Luther was confined to the Wartburg Castle because of his status as an outlaw in the Holy Roman Empire. Meanwhile, in Wittenberg, the level of disturbance rose on a daily basis as people acted on their interpretations of Luther's convictions.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *A Sincere Admonition to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1521), in *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 45:67.

ent agent of change was afoot. “Just see what has been accomplished in a single year, during which we have been preaching and writing this truth.”<sup>5</sup> Found here is an underlying assumption of Luther’s thought: the gospel, when set forth, is in itself the active agent of change and renewal. That is to say, the more the gospel was doled out across the countryside, the more change would occur.

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The relationship between Luther’s *Sincere Admonition* and the September Testament helps us see the connection between his theological perspective and his day-to-day activities. It is evident that Luther’s motivation for translating the Scriptures was identical to his motivation for implementing practical reforms. Rooted in a bona fide concern for the laity, the primary goal and function of his work and words focused on the pastoral care of souls, namely, the proclamation of the gospel.

The dynamics described here framed Luther’s translating project as a whole, including his work on the Apocrypha. During the twelve years it took to translate the Bible completely, Luther was stretched in multiple directions. Yet, in addition to being embroiled in conflicts and controversies, he also maintained a full schedule of writing pastoral letters, preaching, and teaching. As many scholars have noted, within the vast number of his pastoral and polemical writings, one constant is found: a practical concern for the souls of the people.

Understanding the motivation behind Luther’s multitasking helps us draw a connection between the broader project of translating the Bible into German and Luther’s work on the Apocrypha. In short, with no respite from controversies and duties, the fact that Luther, with the aid of his colleagues, continued to translate noncanonical texts suggests that Luther valued these texts enough to make them accessible to the general population. Recognizing that the pastoral care of souls was at the center of Luther’s work, we can see how his treatment of the apocryphal texts arose out of this same concern. In short, they warranted translation because they had pastoral value.

#### APOCRYPHA: SOME WHEAT, SOME CHAFF

Luther’s treatment of the Apocrypha could be likened to the threshing of grain. As is evident in the prefaces Luther wrote for each book, he clearly found both wheat and chaff. A closer look at Luther’s analysis and praise of some apocryphal books, criticism and outright dismissal of others reveals distinctions in Luther’s opinions regarding the authority, value, and meaning of Scripture.

<sup>5</sup>LW 45:69.

Luther's favorable comments about some of the apocryphal books likely come as a surprise to many readers reared in the Protestant tradition. Simply put, Luther didn't shackle a Christian to reading only canonical books. This does not suggest, however, that Luther believed all reading to be beneficial for the Christian faith. To be sure, even among the apocryphal texts he translated, some garnered higher praise than others. For example, Luther's posture toward the book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, was essentially neutral. While it warranted translation, Luther concurred with the opinion of the ancient fathers who did "not include this one amongst the books of sacred Scripture, but simply regarded it as the fine work of a wise man. And we shall let it go at that."<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Luther regarded the book of Judith more favorably, as "a noble and fine book, and should properly be in the Bible" if it were not for some historical deficiencies.<sup>7</sup> Luther expressed similar sentiments for the book of Tobit, a book "useful and good for us Christians to read...and whose writings and concerns are extraordinarily Christian."<sup>8</sup> Seemingly, Luther regarded the first book of Maccabees more highly. The

words and speech adhere to the same style as the other books of sacred Scripture. This book would not have been unworthy of a place among them, because it is very necessary and helpful for an understanding of chapter 11 of the prophet Daniel....This is why the book is good for us Christians to read and to know.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, in regard to the second book of Maccabees, Luther was much more critical.

To sum up: just as it is proper for the first book to be included among the sacred Scriptures, so it is proper that this second book should be thrown out, even though it contains some good things. However, the whole thing is left and referred to the pious reader to judge and to decide.<sup>10</sup>

According to Luther, then, most apocryphal texts warrant some consideration. Yet, not all hold equal value. The reasons for such differentiated valuation remained quite consistent. This becomes clearer if we consider Luther's comments on the book of Baruch and the Wisdom of Solomon. The Wisdom of Solomon, while having a number of deficiencies, is noteworthy because the wisdom it promotes "is not the clever or lofty thoughts of pagan teachers and human reason, but the holy and divine Word."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the book of Baruch is "very skimpy...however, we shall let run with the pack" because it sets forth the law of Moses.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Baruch and the Wisdom of Solomon are not valued as highly as the first book of Maccabees; nevertheless, the merit in all three books comes from the fact that they reflect and echo the word of God and not simply natural law, reason, or other pa-

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the Apocrypha* (1533–1534), *LW* 35:347.

<sup>7</sup>*LW* 35:337.

<sup>8</sup>*LW* 35:347.

<sup>9</sup>*LW* 35:350.

<sup>10</sup>*LW* 35:353.

<sup>11</sup>*LW* 35:344.

<sup>12</sup>*LW* 35:349–350.

gan wisdom writings. In fact, despite their apocryphal status, Luther simply dismissed writings that paralleled pagan wisdom, as is evident in his opinions about the third and fourth books of Esdras (1 and 2 Esdras in the present Old Testament Apocrypha), “books which we didn’t translate into German because they contain nothing one could not find better in Aesop or in still slighter works.”<sup>13</sup> In short, a text warranted translation insofar as it echoed the word of God.

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#### REFLECTIONS ON LUTHER’S VIEWS ON THE AUTHORITY AND MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

On one level, Luther’s opinions about the apocryphal texts provide insight into what he believed determines the value of noncanonical texts. On another level, these very same opinions open a window into his views on the Scriptures as a whole. Recognizing that our treatment here can only skim the surface, we will proceed by looking at only one aspect of Luther’s comments, the level to which Luther deemed important the historicity of the text. What Luther grappled with here is something that continues to trouble the consciences of contemporary readers. Thus, as modern readers face questions about how the historicity and canonicity of the Scriptures determine their authority, value, and meaning, Luther’s views are both insightful and thought provoking.

To begin with, Luther’s views on the apocryphal texts provide insight into his process of determining the authoritative status of a text. The historical reliability of the text seemingly played a role. For example, Luther’s negative assessment of the book of Baruch is due in part to the fact that the book’s chronology does not agree with other accepted histories.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Luther regarded the historical discrepancies in Judith and Tobit as among the reasons why these texts are not canonical.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, Luther’s determinations should not be understood as novel; he was simply repeating similar concerns of the church fathers.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, while historicity played a significant role in Luther’s judgment regarding a text’s *authority*, it is misleading to conclude that this same factor determined a text’s *value* for Christian consumption. In this regard, Luther’s comments on the book of Judith are illustrative. The book is valuable because authors like Judith “wanted to teach their people and youth to trust God, to be righteous, and to hope in God for all help and comfort, in every need, against all enemies, etc. Therefore this is a fine, good, holy, useful book, well worth reading by us Christians.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>LW 35:350.

<sup>14</sup>LW 35:349.

<sup>15</sup>LW 35:345.

<sup>16</sup>LW 35:340.

<sup>17</sup>LW 35:339.

Luther made a distinction between the historical authority of a text and the value of a text. Independent of its historicity, the value of a text and its merit for being read are found in its depiction of the relational character of God with God's chosen people.

Luther's further comments on Judith are especially insightful because there he outlined the rationale for this distinction. The root of the distinction lies in what Luther saw as a difference in the genres found in Scripture. One genre serves the purpose of giving an account of historical events (*Geschichte*). The other is "a beautiful religious fiction [*Gedicht*]." <sup>18</sup> Religious fictions have value because they offer a sketch and depiction of God's favor granted to God's people. In short, a broader perspective beyond the historical accuracy of the text determines its value; namely, whether or not the text cultivates and nurtures a faith in God as witnessed in the broader narrative of the Scriptures.

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At this point, we can see how Luther's comments on the authority, value, and meaning of the Apocrypha can inform our understanding of his views on the canonical Scriptures. In fact, Luther was consistent in his assessments of both canonical and noncanonical texts. Part of his consistency may be attributed to the fact that Luther did not consider his distinctions of genre (*Geschichte* versus *Gedicht*) and his assessment of the merit and value of texts as novel or untested. For example, Luther pointed to a wide range of canonical texts as a precedent for his assessment of the genre of Judith. The *Gedicht* (religious fiction) composed in Judith is "similar to the way Solomon in his Song poetizes and sings of a bride," and "St. John, in his Apocalypse, and Daniel likewise sketch many pictures....And Christ our Lord himself likes to make use of parables and fictions like this in the gospel." <sup>19</sup> Moreover, Luther thought "that the poet deliberately and painstakingly inserted the errors of time and name in order to remind the reader that the book should be taken and understood as that kind of a sacred, religious, composition." <sup>20</sup>

To illustrate further the consistency in Luther's treatment of the Apocrypha and the canonical texts, we simply need to look at his preaching on the Gospel of John in 1538. Recognizing the historical difficulties lodged in the Gospel texts, Luther suggested that one is best served by focusing on the broader message of the gospels: "If one account in Holy Writ is at variance with another and it is impossible to solve the difficulty, just dismiss it from your mind....All the evangelists agree on this, that Christ died for our sins." <sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>LW 35:338.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1538), LW 22:218–219.

As we see, it is evident that Luther distinguished a text's value from its validity as history (*Geschichte*). His overall concern was for the broader narrative. Consequently, texts that are religious fiction (*Gedicht*) were seen as useful and edifying for Christians. In fact, as early as 1517, Luther articulated the parameters that give merit to a Christian narrative by connecting the work and person of Christ with the language depicted in the Psalms. While commenting on the penitential psalms, specifically Ps 143, Luther wrote, "Christ is God's grace, mercy, righteousness, truth, wisdom, power, comfort and salvation given us of God without our merit."<sup>22</sup> In short, Luther valued a text insofar as it was in harmony with the broader narrative or story of the Scriptures.

### GRIST OR GRIT FOR TODAY?

It is not uncommon for modern/postmodern exegetes and preachers to assume that as a pre-Enlightenment fellow, Luther's views regarding the authority and exegesis of Scripture would have limited application for today. However, the insight gained from his comments on the apocryphal texts may suggest otherwise. In fact, as Christians reengage the "Book of Faith"—grapple with its authority and meaning in their lives—Luther's approach and insight offer possible solutions to many contemporary quandaries. Particularly helpful, especially from the perspective of a modern reader, is Luther's interest in the broader narrative of Scripture as well as his ideas about the genre of religious fiction (*Gedicht*) found within that narrative. That is to say, from a perspective that follows in the wake of Copernicus, Darwin, Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, and others, Luther's interest in the Scriptures not only as history but also as story, including his understanding of *Gedicht*, offers grist for the modern reader's mill.

As a means of demonstrating this point, a sampling of Luther's exegesis of a canonical text is instructive. No better example exists than the book of Jonah. The story itself, even for a premodern exegete like Luther, seems to be fraught with questions about its historicity and its fictional quality. In fact, Luther's treatment of the text leaves ambiguous whether he viewed the story as history (*Geschichte*) or religious fiction (*Gedicht*). Yet, it is for this reason that Luther's perspective offers aid to the modern reader. Why? Simply put, his exegesis and subsequent lectures render the distinction moot. Luther's treatment moved beyond such concerns by simply focusing the interpretive attention on *the story* of Jonah. In fact, Luther's method of looking at the Scriptures from a narrative vantage point closely resembles the work of modern exegetes who apply the method of narrative criticism.<sup>23</sup>

The details speak for themselves. Rather than following the typical verse-by-verse format of historic and modern commentaries, Luther's lectures simply retell

<sup>22</sup>Martin Luther, *The Seven Penitential Psalms* (1517), LW 14:204.

<sup>23</sup>The research and conclusions regarding Luther's use of narrative criticism in his *Lectures on Jonah* were first presented in an unpublished paper by Richard Bowman and Chris Croghan at the annual meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature in November, 2008.

the story. In that retelling, Luther wove in comments on its theological significance. With this approach, Luther focused on the literary features of the narrative such as the setting, characters, plot, and point of view. In addition, he regularly noted the ways in which the narrator told the story so as to move it forward. Luther's overall goal was to reveal the book of Jonah as a "pleasant and wonderful account" of sin and forgiveness, penalty/punishment, and grace.<sup>24</sup>

With his method in mind, equally telling is Luther's rationale for choosing to lecture on Jonah. The choice was deliberate so as "to expound the holy prophet Jonah, for he is indeed well-suited for the situation and represents an excellent, outstanding, and comforting example of faith and a mighty and wonderful sign of God's goodness to all the world."<sup>25</sup> Making Luther's choice all the more salient is the context of these words. While he lectured on Jonah, Luther was embroiled in a polemic against Erasmus over the authority of Scripture and the bondage of the will. The correlation of his lectures on Jonah and his debate with Erasmus reminds us of the inseparable nature of Luther's pastoral, exegetical, and polemical work. In short, as we noted above, the impetus behind Luther's expositions on the Scriptures, including the Apocrypha, stemmed from his overall motivation, namely, a practical pastoral concern for the people. It is likely that many today who find themselves grappling with the authority, meaning, and interpretation of the sacred Scriptures have a similar concern.

With that said, before contemporary readers, exegetes, and preachers consider whether or not they might apply Luther's method, a final caution should be heeded. Given the remarkable consistency and interconnection found in Luther's motivations, assertions, and work, one needs to recognize that subscribing to Luther's particular approach regarding a particular issue, in this case the authority and interpretation of Scripture, likely brings with it Luther's stance on a variety of other weighty issues. Luther's concern and care for souls was inextricably linked to his views on the bound will, *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinner), *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpret* (sacred Scripture interprets itself), and the doctrine on which the church stands or falls: justification by faith alone. There we have a little more grist for the mill. ⊕

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<sup>24</sup>Martin Luther, *Lectures on Jonah* (1525), LW 19:6.

<sup>25</sup>LW 19:36.