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Was Luther a Bible Critic?

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Was Luther a Bible critic? For a conservative Lutheran, asking such a question nearly borders on blasphemy. For even after 500 years, and even though many of Luther's weaknesses and mistakes are widely known, he is still venerated as a saint by many Protestants. Theologians of the Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) cite Luther with great reverence. In scientific lectures and articles, claims are corroborated to a lesser extent by the Bible, but they are consistently corroborated with statements of Luther. In part, one gets the impression that Luther has approximately the same status in the EKD which tradition has in the Catholic Church: on par with Holy Scripture.

Now, Martin Luther's merits are undisputed. The truth of the gospel was again put on the pedestal by him and his comrades in arms, after it had been obscured for centuries by the Catholic Church. The four Reformation Solas (*sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide*) are non-negotiable for all Evangelicals—Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, or Pentecostals. In addition, Luther's Bible translation shaped the German language as no other book has. However, in addition to much light, there is also shadow in Luther. His defamation and spitefulness towards the Jews are common knowledge today and are considered by some scholars to be partly responsible for the catastrophe of the Holocaust.¹ His damning of enthusiasts and Anabaptists caused the flight and expulsion of thousands of righteous Christians.² His harsh behavior in the Peasant Revolt is partly responsible for the death of many.³ Luther was no angel. He was a sinner just like all of us and was, as a child of his time, subject to errors and mistakes.

In addition to these weaknesses of Luther, there is one which is often overlooked: Luther's biblical criticism, which, among other things, can be seen in his critical statements about the canon.

¹Walter Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982); Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers "Judenschriften": Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck, 2011).

²Martin Brecht, *Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, volume 2 of *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 178–85.

³*Ibid.*, 193.

What is Biblical Criticism?

The question whether Luther was a Bible-critic of course depends on the definition of biblical criticism. For example, the previous superintendent of the Rhineland church, Eberhard Röhrig, asserted that Luther was definitely a Bible-critic because the term criticism stems from the Greek word κρίνειν, which means to “distinguish.” In this sense, Luther distinguished between important and unimportant books of the canon and would have loved to banish James from the New Testament because he believed it obscured justification by faith alone.⁴ Theology professor Rainer Mayer disagrees with Röhrig. Someone who distinguishes between important and less important books within the canon is far from being a Bible critic. Biblical criticism must be defined according to Ernst Troeltsch’s principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation, which we know as the “historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.”⁵

The historical-critical method of biblical interpretation goes back to the intellectual-historic era of the Enlightenment. With his classic definition of enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) called people no longer blindly to believe any authorities (Church or State), but rather to form their own judgments: “Enlightenment is man’s leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another.”⁶

Even before Kant, some thinkers began to emancipate themselves from authorities who had, to that point, been believed unreservedly. Especially the Church, its dogmas and the Bible were no longer seen as something God-given; but as products of man which should be critically questioned. From now on Reason would be considered the final authority, before whom faith and man’s actions must explain themselves.

Some of the first representatives of the Enlightenment era include Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), Richard Simon (1638–1712), and Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791). Based on (seeming) discerned contradictions, irregularities, and interruptions in the Bible, they reached the conviction that the official statements of the churches regarding inspiration and the absolute

⁴Eberhard Röhrig, “Auch Martin Luther war ein Bibelkritiker,” *IdeaSpektrum*, June 25, 2014, 42.

⁵Rainer Mayer, “Widerspruch: Martin Luther war kein Bibelkritiker,” *IdeaSpektrum*, July 2, 2014, 43.

⁶Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *From Ancient Times to the Enlightenment*, volume 1 of *Sources of the Western Tradition*, ed. Marvin Perry, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 424.

truth of Holy Scripture could not be true.⁷ They doubted the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, believed they recognized the (outdated) Aristotelean-Ptolemaic conception of the world in the Bible, and, as “enlightened” researchers, could no longer believe in the miraculous world of the Old and New Testaments. Particularly significant and still relevant today is Semler’s distinction between the Bible and the Word of God. By no means, says Semler, may one hold that the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God. Rather it is first of all a man-made work of literature which contains God’s Word in several locations.⁸

In the time that followed, more and more scholars endeavored, with their (really very limited) reason, to find what was right and wrong in the Bible and to prove its (alleged) mistakes and contradictions. Since this time, particularly in the universities but even in many free-church theological institutions, one is taught not to view the Bible as God’s inerrant Word, as Lutheran orthodoxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries maintained. Rather its authors were human, who as children of their time also incorporated the faulty ideas of that time into the Bible. Furthermore, they were not trying to communicate objective truths but saw everything through the glasses of their faith and ultimately pursued the goal to awaken faith in the readers. The Bible for them is a book of faith but not a book which consistently narrates objective facts. Therefore, one must read the Bible critically and initially question and doubt everything. At most, one may accept that which makes sense to enlightened Reason and what has been confirmed by archeological or secular-historic “proofs.” Accounts about miracles which do not make sense to human Reason are simply reinterpreted. For example, at the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1ff), no multiplication of loaves had in fact taken place. Rather, the willingness of the child to place his five loaves and two fish at their disposal had inspired others, who then also offered the supplies they had brought along so that eventually everyone was satisfied. Some theologians “harmonized” the report of Jesus walking on the water (Matt 14:22ff) with Reason by claiming that right under the water’s surface—nearly invisible—there lay large stones on which Jesus walked. From a distance it then appeared as if he was walking on the water.⁹

Therefore, there are two fundamental pillars of the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis. First, the distinction between Bible and Word of God, which Semler already called for, in which one may naively believe, based on 2 Timothy 3:16, that the Bible unqualifiedly contains the Word of God. At best, one can assume that in some passages the voice of God can be

⁷Karl Heinz Michel, *Anfänge der Bibelkritik. Quellentexte aus Orthodoxie und Aufklärung* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1985); Hans Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982).

⁸Michel, *Anfänge der Bibelkritik*, 101.

⁹Heinrich E.G. Paulus, *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament: Die drey ersten Evangelien zweite Hälfte bis zur Leidensgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Lübeck: Bohn, 1801), 299–327.

heard; there thus exists a canon within the canon, which one must discover through critical research. Radical Bible critics even go so far as to view the Bible as a purely human book, which merely provides information about the origin and development of the Jewish and Christian religions but without meaning for today.

Second, Holy Scripture must, according to Bible critics, be treated exactly as every other book—it must be read critically and skeptically. Its content and claims of authorship must not be naively trusted; they must be critically reviewed because they were written by fallible humans. In the same way that we also do not uncritically accept antique works of Greek or Roman literature unevaluated, we must also subject the Bible to critical Reason. The criteria for such an examination were set out by theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) in his essay “On the historical and dogmatic methods in theology” in the year 1898.¹⁰ Every literary work, including the Bible, must be examined using the three criteria: critique, analogy, and correlation. It means that all historical traditions, including biblical traditions, must be critically examined by human reason to discover their veracity. Then will emerge what can be accepted as probable and what must be discarded as unhistorical. It means that only that which still occurs before our eyes today can be seen as historical. (In this way miracles such as the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc., must be classified as myths and legends.) It means that every earthly event is part of an interrelation, in other words, every occurrence stems from another one. There exists a seamless causal nexus. As such, a direct intervention in history of the world by God, an angel, or a prophetic prediction of an event occurring only after five hundred years is, for Troeltsch, unthinkable.¹¹ In this point, Troeltsch stands completely within the tradition of the Enlightenment and rationalism, which in the deistic sense, does not want to believe that God is still a God who speaks and acts today, and who wants to do all scientific research with the premise of *etsi deus non daretur* (as if there were no God).¹²

Speaking in the Troeltschian philosophical tradition, which asserted itself and has remained decisive to today in German—and to some extent international—academic theology, Marburg theology professor Rudolf Bultmann stated some decades later: “In any case, modern science does not

¹⁰Ernst Troeltsch, “On the historical and dogmatic methods in theology,” trans. Jack Frostman, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/hhit/Troeltsch,%20On%20the%20Historical%20and%20Dogmatic%20Methods.pdf>.

¹¹Joachim Cochlovius and Peter Zimmerling, eds., *Evangelische Schriftauslegung: Ein Quellen und Arbeitsbuch für Studium und Gemeinde*, (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1987), 172–76.

¹²At the same time it must be emphasized again and again that there exist no compelling reasons to engage in research under this atheistic premise. This principle, postulated by secular science, is arbitrarily set and may seem to atheists to be the only alternative. They thereby voluntarily deprive themselves of important insights however, for seeking to explain this world without God obscures their ability to see central truths. But why should a theologian, who by definition professes to believe in God, assume that God is not one who acts or speaks? Such a theologian does not deserve the name “theologian”; at best he is a religious scholar.

believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated by supernatural powers.”¹³

The majority of German university theologians adopted this position and consider the miracles in the Bible to be myths and legends.¹⁴ Even more conservative theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg believe “with complete certainty” that they must classify the virgin birth as a “legend.”¹⁵ However, the “modern science” of which Bultmann speaks and which still haunts the thoughts of many scholars is in reality the pre-modern science of the 19th century, which advocated a mechanical worldview in which miracles were considered inconceivable. The exploration of the atomic world by physics researchers in the first half of the 20th century has, however, expanded the horizon so far that one of the leading German physicists of the 20th century commented critically on Bultmann’s beliefs in 1970:

In the present, Bultmann has—as a late heir of the Enlightenment—advocated this solution and has attempted to justify it with extensive critique of the biblical record. Undoubtedly the basic axioms upon which Bultmann builds his observations are in crass opposition to modern natural science.¹⁶

This modern science, by all means, holds that the principle of causality to be valid in the macrocosm. However research in the area of microphysics, which only became possible in the 20th century, leads to the realization that we can no longer speak of seamless causality, consequently, making the principle of causality an absolute was a mistake. This, however, means nothing less than the end of the materialistic worldview. Henceforth, no scientist can claim from the heights of scientific knowledge that heaven and hell cannot exist. Rather, everything has become conceivable again: God, miracles, the virgin birth, resurrection, angels, demons, etc.

However there is more to biblical criticism than just the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, whose ideological premises were just demonstrated and which is concretely expressed in the steps of: text criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition criticism. Even canon critical approaches are ultimately to be classified as a form of biblical criticism. Whether the canon of the Bible is to be expanded

¹³Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 15.

¹⁴The retired Heidelberg professor for New Testament, Klaus Berger, claimed in an interview, that, from 100 university theologians in Germany, maybe two believe the Christmas story (virgin birth, born in Bethlehem, angel visions, etc.) to be true. Marcus Mockler, “Weihnachten—‘Appetithappen’ auf das Heil Gottes,” *IdeaSpektrum*, December 2004, 16.

¹⁵Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles Creed in Light of Today’s Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 73. Citation refers to the Wipf and Stock edition.

¹⁶Pascual Jordan, *Schöpfung und Geheimnis. Antworten aus naturwissenschaftlicher Sicht* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1970), 157. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

or cut down—both are biblical criticism. For in the last book of the Holy Scripture, there is an unmistakable warning against additions to or removals from the biblical text. Of course this passage (Rev 22:18f.)¹⁷ initially applied to the book of Revelation itself. But it is not without reason that divine providence placed this warning at the end of the whole Bible in order to declare, “No one is permitted to change the canon of the Bible.” Accordingly, as a consequence of the authority of divine inspiration inherent to it (2 Tim 3:16), the canon has asserted itself in Christian churches. It was not determined by the church councils but merely confirmed by them.¹⁸

In contrast to the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, which is a product of modern times, theologians critiquing the canon already existed in the old church. As early as the second century AD, Marcion questioned parts of the Holy Scripture. He rejected the Old Testament; from the gospels he accepted only Luke (even this only after it had been “cleansed”). He even wanted to ban some epistles of Paul.¹⁹ Today theologians like Hartmut Gese or Klaus Berger are thinking about expanding the canon. Gese desires that the Old Testament Apocrypha, which is accepted by the Catholic Church as Scripture, would also be accepted by the Protestant churches.²⁰ Klaus Berger expresses his desire for the New Testament Apocrypha to be more strongly considered and published a book in which he printed the New Testament together with early Christian writings.²¹

What Does Luther’s Attitude Towards the Bible Look Like?

Martin Luther did not practice any biblical criticism in the sense in which the present historical-critical method of biblical interpretation does. Luther lived before the Enlightenment and read the Bible not fundamentally critically and questioningly, but sympathetically-faithfully, although elements of a biblically critical approach are discernable in Luther. Luther scholar Armin Buchholz notes that:

For Luther the Bible which lay before him was as such and as a whole in the literal and word-for-word sense, God’s own Word. Therefore he considered everything the Bible said as for that reason valid and true simply because it was said by the Bible and therefore by God himself.²²

¹⁷See similar passages in the Old Testament: Deut 4:2; 13:1.

¹⁸Gerhard Maier, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1990), 133.

¹⁹Adolf Martin Ritter, *Alte Kirche*, volume 1 of *Kirchen und Theologiegeschichte in Quellen*, 4th ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1987), 25f; Armin Sierszyn, *Von den Anfängen bis zum Untergang des weströmischen Reiches*, volume 1 of *2000 Jahre Kirchengeschichte*, 4th ed. (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, 2004), 99f.

²⁰Hartmut Gese, *Zur biblischen Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977), 13.

²¹Klaus Berger and Christiane Nord, *Das Neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1999).

²²Armin Buchholz, *Schrift Gottes im Lehrstreit. Luthers Schriftverständnis und Schriftauslegung in seinen drei großen Lehrstreitigkeiten der Jahre 1521–1528* (Gießen: Brunnen

A distinction between Bible and Word of God as has been customary in theology since Semler, was unknown to Luther. Since the whole Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is also wholly the Word of God and therefore authoritative for faith and life.²³ In his Table Talk the reformer says:

That the Bible is God's word and book I prove thus: All things that have been, and are, in the world, and the manner of their being, are described in the first book of Moses on the creation; even as God made and shaped the world, so does it stand to this day. Infinite potentates have raged against this book, and sought to destroy and uproot it—king Alexander the Great, the princes of Egypt and of Babylon, the monarchs of Persia, of Greece, and of Rome, the emperors Julius and Augustus—but they nothing prevailed; they are all gone and vanished, while the book remains, and will remain for ever and ever, perfect and entire, as it was declared at the first.²⁴

In his famous *Assertio omnium articulorum*, which he composed as a response to the papal bull of Leo X, Luther even confesses his belief in the infallibility of Scripture:

This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred.²⁵

Luther took the Bible at its word, interpreted it (whenever possible) in accordance with the simple wording, and saw no difference between the grammatical-historic and the divine meaning of the Scripture. For Luther, “all statements of Scripture describe reality even in their literal and immediate sense and require only simple faith and obedience on the part of the interpreter.”²⁶ This shows itself especially strikingly in Luther's disagreement with other reformers on the Lord's Supper. Luther insisted that the word “is” really meant “is” and that it should not be understood merely symbolically. Under no circumstances was it acceptable for Luther to use one's own reason as an assessor of the truth of the Bible. Approaching the text in this way, as

Verlag, 2007), 279. “Für Luther war die schriftlich vorliegende Bibel als solche und als ganze im buchstäblichen, wortwörtlichen Sinne Gottes eigenes Wort. Deshalb war ihm alles, was die Bibel sagte, schon darum gültig und wahr, weil es von der Bibel und also von Gott selbst gesagt war.”

²³Buchholz, *Schrift Gottes im Lehrstreit*, 8f.

²⁴Martin Luther, *Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), 1.

²⁵Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 79 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–2016), 32:11 (hereafter cited as *LW*).

²⁶Buchholz, *Schrift Gottes im Lehrstreit*, 279.

interpreters have generally done since the Enlightenment, Luther saw as presumptuous and blasphemous. Human reasoning must stand under and not over Scripture. The reformer expresses this in his inimitable way:

The Bible should be regarded with wholly different eyes from those with which we view other productions. He who wholly renounces himself, and relies not on mere human reason, will make good progress in the Scriptures.²⁷

However there are some statements of Luther which stand opposed to his esteem of Scripture, which should be deemed as biblical criticism and which show that the reformer was definitely not without contradictions in his thinking and teaching.

First of all, Luther allows himself the freedom to be critical of authorship. James claims without a doubt to be written by James, the half-brother of Jesus, for, of the five men with this name that the New Testament mentions, only the brother of the Lord is a possibility.²⁸ However, Luther disputes this and places himself on the side of modern, biblically critical interpreters, who view the epistle as “not genuine,”²⁹ meaning not written by James. Luther asserted: “I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle”;³⁰ rather the author of the James was “some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper.”³¹ Luther thus denies the apostolicity of the epistle. In fact, he holds that the author was not even a disciple of the apostle, but an unknown man, who compiled statements of disciples of the apostles. The reformer proceeds in a similar manner with the Revelation of John. Even though John identifies himself clearly as the author (Rev 1:1–4), Luther adjudicates: “I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic.”³² He therefore contests that the apostle John is the author of Revelation and believes Revelation to not be a prophetic book, even though Revelation speaks unmistakably about future things. Luther condemns Jude even more sharply. He holds it to be an “extract or copy of St. Peter’s second epistle”³³ and believes that it was written long after the apostles.³⁴ Nor does Luther hold back when dealing with Hebrews. It was written neither by Paul nor any other apostle. Most likely it was written long after the apostolic

²⁷Luther, *Table Talk*, 4.

²⁸Werner Georg Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 21st ed. (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1983), 363; Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 6th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 422ff.

²⁹Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 363.

³⁰*LW* 35:396.

³¹*Ibid.*, 397.

³²*Ibid.*, 398.

³³*Ibid.*, 397.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 397–98.

time.³⁵ Luther's contempt of Hebrews and James led to Luther Bibles (up to today) placing them in a different canonical order after 3 John.

However, Luther does not just doubt the authorship claims of biblical books, occasionally he critiqued the Bible's content. The most famous example is probably his verdict on James, which he calls "an epistle of straw."³⁶ He states his rule for evaluating the content of biblical books as, "whatever emphasizes, drives, or pushes Christ."³⁷ Thus, for Luther, the canon does not just have its validity due to its apostolicity or ecclesiastical legitimization, but also due to the witness to Christ contained within it.³⁸ And this witness to Christ is viewed by Luther as the norm for critiquing canonicity and content. If a biblical Scripture does not proclaim and teach Christ clearly and explicitly, then this Scripture is inferior in Luther's eyes. It may be tolerated in the canon, but one should not focus one's attention primarily on such a writing.

Without a doubt Luther's principle of "whatever drives Christ" is completely subjective and arbitrary and must be critically questioned. Ever since Luther, and the Enlightenment especially, the search for the canon in the canon has not contributed to finding God's Word in the Bible, rather every theologian has "found" his own canon, leading to confusio and even chaos to reign. "The canon within the canon is undiscoverable,"³⁹ concluded Gerhard Maier in 1974. If the *providentia divina* has determined that a book like Esther is included in the canon, in which the word "god" (let alone the sacred name of the Lord YHWH) does not even appear and in which we find no witness for Christ, who is a man that he should question this? As recipients of God's Word, it behooves us to receive these words with humility and respect. Even though Luther fundamentally sees this in the same way, he sometimes forgets it in the heat of combat and places himself over Scripture. He often goes so far as to make statements which are simply nonsense: "Whatever does not teach Christ that is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod were doing it."⁴⁰ Even if Herod really had said something true about Jesus, it is still far from being apostolic and would therefore also not be included in the canon.

The main reason why Luther does not like James is the famous fact that he does not find the doctrine of justification in James. An extensive

³⁵LW 35:394.

³⁶Ibid., 362.

³⁷Timothy Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 5. (The German verb "treiben" is etymologically related to the English drive but has a wide variety of meanings around that central sense of "push" or "drive." So I chose this source, since the English translation of the Preface did not account for those meanings, which are central to this part of the article.)

³⁸*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, eds. Gerhard Müller, Horst Balz, and Gerhard Krause, vol. 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), s.v. "Luther, Martin."

³⁹Gerhard Maier, *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode*, 4th ed. (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1978), 10.

⁴⁰LW 35:396.

discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, however an impartial reader of James notices very quickly that James in no way disparages faith. Rather, he wants to make clear that faith without works is dead. Thus he places the focus of his teaching on the effect that Christ-centered faith must have. While Paul primarily emphasizes justification through faith, James' concern is to emphasize the works flowing from justification. What is reprehensible about that? May the epistles of the New Testament not place different points of emphasis and complement each other?

The second reason why Luther is unable to understand James is his conclusion that Christ's suffering and resurrection are not addressed in it. However, Philemon does not contain this either, nor do 2 and 3 John, yet nevertheless these books belong without doubt in the New Testament canon. Not every book of the Bible has to cover the subject of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus' death. God's wisdom has allowed these central truths to be elaborated extensively in several epistles (Romans, Galatians, etc.) In other epistles God allows other topics relevant for the recipients at the time to be treated. Thus he covers a large spectrum of topics that have guided Christians in all centuries.

When Luther calls Jude a book which one may not count "among the chief books" of the New Testament, he is without a doubt correct.⁴¹ This short epistle does not desire or claim to be a central book but exists concisely to encourage Christians to contend for their faith when threatened by false doctrines (Jude 3ff.). When, however, the reformer then says that Jude is an "extract or copy of St. Peter's second epistle" and therefore, because it contains topics found nowhere else in the Bible, must be regarded critically, he once again overshoots the mark.⁴² First, it is not certain which letter is dependent on which or even if there is any dependency whatsoever.⁴³ Second, who determines that only an epistle that contains nothing new is good and canonical? Why should the Spirit of God not have moved Jude to write about topics which we otherwise do not find in the New Testament?

In his preface of 1522 to the Revelation of John, Luther also employs a strong *Sachkritik*—material or subject criticism. First, the many visions of Revelation bother him. The apostles, so holds Luther, did not have any visions "but with clear and arid words"⁴⁴ proclaimed the gospel of Jesus. This statement, however, is not true. Saul became Paul through a vision (Acts 9). Peter received the instruction to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles through a vision (Acts 10). Paul had additional visions in Troas (Acts 16:9), Corinth (Acts 18:9), etc.

⁴¹LW 35:398.

⁴²Ibid., 397.

⁴³Today's research claims, that 2 Peter had Jude as a template. See for instance Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 464f.

⁴⁴*Die Schriftauslegung*, ed. Kurt Aland, 65.

Next Luther complains that the author of Revelation attaches too much importance to his own book, because he threatens retribution to those who add or remove anything (Rev 22:18f.). Luther, by contrast, holds that because no one really understands what the author even wants to say, one should not view the entire book as very important—one could do without it and not experience any problems.⁴⁵ Ultimately, he does not value Revelation highly because “Christ is not taught or known in it.”⁴⁶ This is without a doubt an audacious statement which Luther disseminates here. The claim that Christ is not taught in the book of Revelation is unconvincing. On the contrary, already in chapter 1:5ff., Christ’s death, resurrection, and return as well as salvation from sins through the blood of Christ are attested so strongly that one must ask oneself if Luther intensively studied this book at all. Later chapters also repeatedly address salvation through Christ’s death (5:9; 7:14; 12:11), so that one truly is unable to deny that the book contains the true gospel.

The fourth book disparaged by Luther is Hebrews. Due to Hebrews 2:3 Luther believes that Hebrews was definitely not written by an apostle but rather by an apostle’s student.⁴⁷ What especially bothered the reformer was that the writer of Hebrews seemingly “flatly denies and forbids to sinners repentance after baptism.”⁴⁸ This was “contrary to all the gospels and to St. Paul’s epistles.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Luther exercises clear literary criticism when he claims that the epistle was assembled from many different pieces, meaning the writer fell back on different sources and then composed his work. Nevertheless, the epistle should stay in the canon because it “discusses Christ’s priesthood masterfully and thoroughly, out of the Scriptures, and interprets the Old Testament finely and richly.”⁵⁰ Heinz Flügel comments on this:

I’ve always had a hard time with systematic thinking; in spite of scholastic training, I have never been able to organize my thoughts, my inspirations and my objections like the great Aquinas did, into a uniform system with a common denominator. In contrast to philosophy I have always practiced theological thinking as something immediate, spontaneous, something evoked by present distress, by a subjective plight, a concrete danger. When it mattered, I threw out words as if they were stones or firebrands. The doughty Melanchthon understood how to afterwards order everything nicely. How should I myself combine the different

⁴⁵*Die Schriftauslegung*, ed. Kurt Aland, 65.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁷That today’s exegetes also consider it possible, that Paul had written Hebrews, is shown by the commentary of David Allen, *The New American Commentary: Hebrews* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2010).

⁴⁸*LW* 35:394.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 395.

Luthers with each other? Each of them fights against the other. That would be a great trick, if I would allow all the Luthers I have been to make an appearance! The one Luther would then have to banish and excommunicate the other!⁵¹

We know Luther only from his books and the records of his contemporaries and are only able to attempt to develop a personality profile from these. Most likely, Flügel's amusing attempt is very close to the truth. Luther's own writings, as well as the Table Talk transcribed by witnesses, convey a picture of the reformer which can be described as "a man with his contradiction."⁵² He was not a systemetician. Orderly thinking does not seem to have been his strong point. Different illnesses—known today as *Morbus Menère* (tinnitus with dizziness) and depressive phases—created problems for him and probably, in one way or another, influenced his thinking and his theology, so that for us much seems incomprehensible, illogical and unacceptable.⁵³ Therefore, wisdom cautions us from attaching ourselves too closely to any person.⁵⁴

Summary

Who now is correct? The superintendent Eberhard Röhrig, quoted at the beginning, with his claim that Luther had been a Bible critic, or the theology professor Rainer Mayer with his belief that Luther was not a critic of Holy Scripture? After all that has been said, the answer must be: Both are correct.

As it has been stated, Luther only practiced biblical criticism in the sense of the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis to a limited extent. According to Luther, one's reason must be ranked beneath Scripture, even if Luther himself did not always abide by this stipulation. To be sure, we still should and must use our understanding to examine others' teachings and opinions. For ever since the fall, people are often mistaken because their understanding is darkened (Eph 4:8), and many consciously deceive us, because they are evil (Rom 3:10ff.) and desire to harm us. Therefore, it is essential critically to examine each word of man, even the word of preachers and prophets (1 Thess 5:21). But what applies to man may not apply to God at all. The Bible is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16), which is trustworthy. The Bible only reveals itself to the student of Scripture

⁵¹Heinz Flügel, "Ein erdachtes Grußwort Dr. Martin Luthers an die Christen heute," in *Luther kontrovers*, ed. Hans Jürgen Schultz (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1983), 13.

⁵²Walter Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982), 190.

⁵³*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, eds. Gerhard Müller, Horst Balz, and Gerhard Krause, vol. 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), s.v. "Luther, Martin."

⁵⁴Paul's words in 1 Cor 1:12ff should give us pause in this regard, whether it is applied to Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites, etc.

who reads it humbly and in prayer. Someone who, on the other hand, believes himself to be able to evaluate the Bible for what is right and wrong based solely on his own acumen has already lost from the start.

Opposed to this clear biblical attitude of Luther's stand other statements, which make the reformer seem inconsistent. Even if he cannot be labeled a Bible critic in today's sense, because he neither distinguishes between Bible and Word of God nor urges skeptic-critical reading of the Bible, he nevertheless employs certain elements of biblical criticism. We are not talking about the differentiation between important and less important books of the Bible. Such a distinction is legitimate and not biblical criticism. Rather, Luther practiced biblical criticism not only by doubting authorship claims of biblical books but also by challenging biblical content. To this extent Gerhard Ebeling is not wrong when he sees biblical critical thinking as inherent to the Reformation. In his famous essay "Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche" (The importance of the historical-critical method for Protestant theology and Church), Ebeling defends the thesis that "The affirmation of the historical-critical method stands in a deep inner factual relation with the Reformation's doctrine of justification."⁵⁵ One may indeed question whether the doctrine of justification necessarily results in biblical criticism. However, Luther's ambivalent example in dealing with the Bible can easily be used by Bible critics of the present to justify their behavior. In the Bible itself we do not find any such behavior. The Word of God given under the direction of the Holy Spirit must be respected and not criticized by the believer, even when he does not understand everything.

⁵⁵Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950), 41.