

Martin Luther and Moses

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As a Roman Catholic theologian and professor, Martin Luther did not find it necessary at any time to speak ill of Moses, the Hebrew historian, law-giver, and prophet. One could search his lecture notes and writings from 1508 to 1519 in vain for statements that belittle or castigate the leader of the Exodus movement, with its accompanying incidents and legislation presented to us in Holy Scripture as of divine ordering and intervention. In Luther's *Psalms* (1513-15), there is not a word that belittles anything Mosaic. In his *Romans* (1515-16), Luther used the name Moses six times in a routine manner. This holds also for *Hebrews* (1518-19). But in his *Galatians* (1516), published in 1519, Luther had begun to resolve the relationship of the Law and the Gospel. We are forced to conclude, however, that his heavy assaults on Moses belong to his activity as a Reformer and leader of the new church in Germany.

How did this come about and how was it resolved? In this paper I seek to clarify these questions.

I

The particular school of religious thought that Luther came to espouse was known as "nominalism" or "modern way" (*via moderna*), in contradistinction to the "old way" (*via antiqua*) that Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), with the help of reason and philosophy, had constructed into a majestic edifice of Christian faith. On the contrary, nominalism declared that *in philosophy* reason was supreme, but *in matters of faith* it was next to bankrupt. William of Occam (d.c. 1349) and Gabriel Biel (d. 1495), the finest minds of nominalism, demanded a broader basis than reason could offer for establishing the supremacy of divine revelation, and they found it in the will of God as revealed in the Bible.

All other knowledge is uncertain and dangerous, since it provides no way to God. All activity of God stems from his free will, but God is too great to be grasped by the human mind. To be sure, he is a God of love, and all his acts are founded in love. Faith, truth, and morals, however, are dependent on the dispositions of God, and human reason cannot ascertain or affirm with finality in these realms. Here nominalism asserted without reservation that man's greatest good lay in learning and understanding God's revelation as found in the Holy Scriptures, and it posited the Church as the guardian and expositor of the divine revelation. Man, a pilgrim in this world, must submit to the Church without reservation. In a world of human frailties and shortcomings, the Church is the only certainty. It is also the supreme interpreter of divine revelation contained in Holy Scripture. Man, the pilgrim, can attain justification only with the aid of these authorities and guides, which in reality are one — the Bible and the Church.

Nominalism likes to treat the Bible as Law, the Old Testament being the "Old Law" and the New Testament the "New Law." All, of course, is divine law given by revelation. According to Biel, both Testaments contain God's law. In the Old the emphasis is on ceremonial regulations and legal precepts; in the New these are fewer, since Christ did not impose laws.¹ Biel calls the New Testament an intermediary or a middle epoch in the story of God's dealings with man, for his revelation is completed, not in the Bible, but in the Church.² Nominalism was ever concerned with confirming the authority of the Church, without which none can be saved, and with helping men obtain justification within the sacramental framework that the Church had determined in its long history.

By Luther's time this framework was completed. It can be summed up conveniently as the scholastic law-works-grace sequence of thought and action, which asserted that a sinner could make himself worthy of God's grace. As monk, priest, and professor, Luther was steeped in this thought — a philosophy by which the Roman church gave Moses a distinguished place as God's mouthpiece. Luther knew this and observed it in all his early writings and lectures.

II

What occasioned so drastic a change in his thinking?

In the winter of 1542-43 Luther dealt with some problems in his early theology in an important "Table Talk." "For a long time I went astray," he said, "and didn't know what I was about." He then told of his unfolding understanding of Romans 1:17 and how he became sure of his cause:

I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I lacked nothing before this except that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I regarded both as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection. But when I discovered the proper distinction — namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another — I made myself free.³

Luther's meaning is clear. In discovering what he believed to be the true relationship between Moses and Christ, he had also found full emancipation from the law-works-grace doctrine and practice of the Roman church. Righteousness by good works — that is, by doing all one could to acquire the first grace — was false and a thing to be attacked and destroyed, and Luther led the way in the new warfare.

A second result of the distinction between Christ and Moses was Luther's strange paradox of making Moses both villain and hero in the great dichotomy of the Law versus the Gospel.

We consider Moses first as villain.

The most important result of Luther's discovery that the "law is one thing and the gospel is another" was his breakup of the traditional unity of Holy Scripture. In his clash with Erasmus in 1525 over free will, he distinguished between the two Testaments thus: "The New Testament, properly speaking, consists of promises and exhortations, just as the Old, properly speaking, consists of laws and threats," and he added that the Old gives us "nothing anywhere but laws and comments, by which men may be moulded in good manners, while the gospel is entirely free, given by the mercy of God the Father alone."⁴ This distinction between the Testaments necessarily included a sharp distinction between Moses and Christ. The Hebrew law-giver found himself in the position of a religious villain. He became "the minister of death," "the doctor of the treadmill," and "the minister of death, sins, and sorrow." He became "a tormentor and cruel executioner and torturer, who torments us and troubles us with his terrors, threatenings, and displays of wrath."⁵ In one of his sharpest comparisons of Christ with Moses, Luther denounced the Hebrew leader as "rough, severe, biting, who looks like the very devil and speaks in a way that our heart almost vanishes before him. For he has lips overflowing with gall and wrath, that have been embittered with laurel and gall, in fact, with hellish fire. So away forever with Moses!"⁶

What did Moses do to deserve such castigations? In the cosmic struggle between good and evil — that is, between Christ and Satan — Moses stood on the side of sin and Satan. Hence Luther could say: "I won't tolerate Moses, because he is an enemy of Christ. If he appears with me before the

judgment I'll turn him away in the name of the devil and say, 'Here stands Christ.' " Moses will acknowledge, of course, that Luther was right.⁷

In this cosmic struggle between Moses and Christ, there can be no compromise. Luther's logic is remorseless. In his *Galatians* (1535) he stated the problem thus: "Therefore anyone who teaches that faith in Christ does not justify unless the Law is observed makes Christ a minister of sin, that is, a teacher of the Law, who teaches the same thing that Moses did. Then Christ is not the Savior and Dispenser of grace; but He is a cruel tyrant, who, like Moses, demands the impossible, which no man can produce."⁸

But Luther could not permit this to happen. His way of escape was to separate Christ as far as possible from Moses.

Let Moses remain on earth; let him be the teacher of the letter, the taskmaster of the Law; let him crucify sinners. But the believers, he [Paul] says, have another teacher in their conscience, not Moses but Christ, who has abrogated the Law, overcome and endured sin, wrath, and death. He commands us to look to Him and believe. Then it is time for the Law to go away and for Moses to die in such a way that no one knows where he is buried (Deuteronomy 34:6). Neither sin nor death can harm us anymore. For Christ, our Teacher, is the Lord of the Law, sin, and death; therefore he who believes in Him is liberated from all these things.⁹

In 1532 Luther gave a series of lectures on Psalm 45, which he interpreted as relevant to Christ as King and Bridegroom (the Church as his bride).¹⁰ His comments on the psalm contain some of his most severe strictures on the Law and help us to understand the intensity of his feelings on the subject.

The law has been done away, in order that faith may rule the conscience. If the conscience is not injured by the delusion of righteousness, then in external circumstances it can be kept, like other laws of civil society. Since in this section we are treating the article that Christ is our King and our head, it is not simply human traditions that are abrogated and rejected here but the whole divine Law as well so that this single King Christ may be retained in the purest faith. The Law does not stop troubling faith and the conscience in the baptized. Rather than permit this, Christ abrogates it also physically. Therefore the whole Law has been taken away, first spiritually, from the conscience, but then also physically; though it did not have to be taken away there, He has nevertheless taken it away because of its peril to faith.¹¹

If the Law, perchance, should enter the royal chambers in heaven, Luther gives advice for such an emergency. "If the Law comes, throw it out of this chamber of the Bridegroom. Tell it to stay on earth and go to Damascus or to Sinai, where it has a place."¹² "Moses is dead." "For not one little period in Moses pertains to us." Such is Luther's final judgment on the Hebrew lawgiver.¹³

III

Could Luther really support his statements rejecting Moses? The answer must be an unqualified *yes*.

He eliminated Moses by the simple expedient of confining to Israel his competence as a lawgiver. The Ceremonial Law, which was Mosaic, pertains to Israel alone. The Decalogue and the Natural Law both antedated Moses and therefore cannot be ascribed to him. He merely edited the Decalogue, which does not "pertain to us."¹⁴ However, in editing the Decalogue, Moses introduced two commandments to which he gave ornamental trimmings so as to make them Jewish. One was the commandment on images, which cannot be supported in Holy Scripture; the other was the seventh-day Sabbath commandment, which was strictly Jewish and was "annihilated as regards the crude external observance" in the New Testament.¹⁵

II

Nowhere is Luther's capacity for slanting Scripture (to make it agree with his assumptions) seen better than in his exegesis of Isaiah 66:23: "From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord" (RSV). In his comments Luther makes the stern Sabbath-defender Isaiah, representing the prophets of Israel (who held "that the Sabbath of the Jews would be abolished"), say: "When the Savior comes, then such will be the time, one sabbath after the other, one month after the other," etc. This is as if he were trying to say, "It will be the sabbath every day, and the people will be such that they make no distinction between days. For in the New Testament the Sabbath is annihilated as regards the crude external observance, for every day is a holy day."¹⁶

It would seem that the Reformer is confused as to time, place, and tenor of thought of the Old Testament prophets when he makes the strong Sabbath-defending Isaiah their spokesman and through him makes them say that the "Sabbath of the Jews would be abolished." This borders on pure theological assumption.

IV

At this point we must go to Luther's interpretation of the origin, purpose, and use of the seventh-day Sabbath given in his *Genesis* (1535). In Genesis 2:1-3 Moses recorded the Sabbath origins. Luther observed that God sanctified it for himself. "This has the special purpose of making us understand that the seventh day in particular should be devoted to divine worship. For 'holy' is that which has been set aside for God and has been removed from all secular uses."¹⁷

It follows, therefore, from this passage that if Adam had remained in the state of innocence, he nevertheless would have held the seventh day sacred. That is, on this day he would have given his descendants instructions about the will and worship of God. . . . On the other days he would have tilled his fields and tended his cattle. Indeed, even after the Fall he kept this seventh day sacred; that is, on this day he instructed his family, of which the sacrifices of his sons Cain and Abel give the proof. Therefore, from the beginning of the world the Sabbath was intended for the worship of God.

Unspoiled human nature would have proclaimed the glory and the kindnesses of God in this way: on the Sabbath day men would have conversed about the immeasurable goodness of the Creator; they would have sacrificed; they would have prayed, etc. For this is the meaning of the verb "to sanctify."¹⁸

Eden did not remain, but the Sabbath did. Luther is specific: "And yet, because the Sabbath command remains for the church, it denotes that spiritual life is to be restored to us through Christ."¹⁹ The Eden Sabbath was a day for preaching, prayer, and praise. These, too, remain. Says Luther: "This is what the Sabbath, or the rest of God, means on which God speaks with us through His Word and we, in turn, speak with Him through prayer and faith. . . . This is the real purpose of the seventh day: That the Word of God be preached and heard."²⁰

Such were Luther's remarkably calm but pertinent comments on the Mosaic account of the origin of the seventh-day Sabbath in Eden. The Sabbath was not made by the Creator's command; God blessed it and "sanctified it for Himself" and gave it to man for a weekly day of worship. If this is so (and we have used Luther's comments on Genesis 2:3 to support Moses), it must follow that, insofar as the seventh-day Sabbath is concerned, Luther's assertion that Christ annihilated the day is ruled out. Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath, as he is Lord of all things in heaven and on earth, not its destroyer.

Luther's eminently sober comments on the seventh-day Sabbath in and after Eden follow the Mosaic account in detail. There is nothing in the origin of the Sabbath about its being based on natural law. That the day was altered later with Mosaic trimmings and ornamentations so as to make it solely Jewish in character is pure fancy.

V

Now we must take up briefly Luther's rehabilitation of Moses. So charmed was Luther with Moses' achievements — as historian, inspired chronicler, leader of Israel, and lawgiver — that he gave him the most detailed attention of any Old Testament character.²¹

First, we observe that when Luther denied Moses as the lawgiver for Christians, he used the word *Christians* in a restricted sense — that is, as ap-

plying to such as understood and appropriated to themselves the gospel revealed in Romans 1:16, 17, namely, the elect. This limited the term greatly.

Second, for all the rest of mankind the Law of God remains, we might say, as an instrument of spiritual torture. It hammers the sinner's conscience into a recognition of sin. The Law is a tool to kill, and Moses is made its user. As soon as the Law has convinced of sin, the gospel takes over with its healing message. *The two must always work together, one wounding, the other healing.*²²

Third, having made Moses an emissary of sin and death, Luther must, of course, exonerate him; and that he does in delicate humor and appreciative speech:

Finally, Let us take Moses, the chief source, father, and master of all the prophets, and let us see if he would let himself become a Christian and support us while Christ baptized him in John 5 and said, "Moses wrote concerning Me." For if he wrote concerning Him, he most surely prophesied, preached, and commended all the prophets after him to write and to preach of Christ, which they also did with all diligence, so that all Jews, young and old, know that a Messiah must appear. Finally, Moses was buried, but so that they do not know where he lies. However, we will set up two genuine legates and ambassadors and direct them to search, find, awaken, and bring him back. They are named John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle. What will happen? They will find him and will not fail.²³

VI

In this study, the purpose has been to understand and evaluate Luther's shift in his approach to the Bible when he learned that "the law is one thing and the gospel is another." This led him to break with the Roman Catholic traditional unity and continuity of God's revelation in Holy Scripture — in its place creating the great dichotomy of Law versus Gospel, two unequal but necessary forces in the struggle between Satan and Christ in sacred history.

How far this led Luther in making theological distinctions of doubtful scriptural validity is seen in his *Galatians* (1516-17). In comments on Galatians 2:17 he said that sin and transgression, but not grace (John 1:17), have come through Moses. Then follows the comment: "Christ is not a lawgiver; He is the Fulfiller of the Law. Every lawgiver is an agent of sin, because through the law he sets up the occasion for sin. For this reason God did not institute the old Law through Himself; He instituted it through angels."²⁴ The trouble here is that Luther places unnecessary restrictions on both Christ and God. None can deny that Christ was the "Fulfiller of the Law" — that is, Savior — but he was also "Sovereign Lord, who didst

make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 4:24 ARV). To separate him from the Law, who was the Lord of the Law, is faulty theology; and to say that God the Father "did not institute the old Law through Himself" but "through angels" is not sufficiently clarified.²⁵ Satan and sin are the antagonists of both God's Law and God's Gospel in sacred history, whereas God presents Law and love as continuous and uniting forces. Moses anticipated Christ, as did the Law that he received on Mount Sinai. Christ recognized this fact when he said: "He wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words" (John 5:46, 47 ARV). This was the scriptural unity and continuity that Jesus espoused.

When Luther rejected the Roman Catholic sequence of law-works-grace, he took a giant step toward spiritual liberty. When he set up the sequence of grace-works, he broke the unity of Holy Scripture. He might have posited, with full biblical support, the sequence of law-grace-works, thereby preserving the biblical unity that is imperative in complete Christian faith and service.

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- 7 Volume fifty-four, p. 128, number 1242.
- 8 Volume twenty-six, p. 150.
- 9 Volume twenty-six, p. 151.
- 10 Volume twelve, pp. 197-300.
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- 12 Volume twelve, p. 276.
- 13 Volume thirty-five, pp. 165-166.
- 14 Late in 1524 and again in 1525 Luther expostulated on Moses. The first statement was a long attack "Against the Heavenly Prophets," found in volume forty, pp. 79-223; the second was a sermon on "How Christians Should Regard Moses," found in volume thirty-five, pp. 157-174.
- 15 Volume thirty-five, p. 166.
- 16 Volume thirty-five, pp. 165-166.

- 17 Volume one, pp. 79-80.
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- 20 Volume one, p. 81.
- 21 See volumes one through ten.
- 22 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, translated by Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1969), pp. 103ff.
- 23 Martin Luther, *Werke* (critical work, Weimar edition) Weimar: H. Bolhlan 1883).
- 24 Volume twenty-seven, p. 226.
- 25 Exodus 32:16 says: "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables."