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Edited by S. L. Greenslade

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE BIBLE IN THE REFORMATION

‘SOLA SCRIPTURA’

The reformers dethroned the pope and enthroned the Bible. This is the common assertion; but when so stated it is not valid, because a book cannot replace a man. A book has to be interpreted. This was the main reason why authority had come to be ascribed to the pope in faith and morals. Catholics argued that if there were no infallible interpreter, there could be no infallible revelation. Scripture at many points is not clear, and when a difference of opinion arises as to the meaning, unless there be some authoritative way of knowing which is right, the inevitable result will be uncertainty. If then God desired to make a revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, and the record of that revelation is a document in some respects obscure, God must have ensured the revealing quality of the revelation by establishing an inerrant interpreter, who is able to declare the truth partly because he is the custodian of the tradition and partly because he is guarded from error by the Holy Spirit. This role was assigned by God to the bishop of the church of Rome, founded by the two martyr apostles, Peter and Paul. Her bishop is the successor of Peter to whom were given the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Such claims Luther roundly denied. In his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, in the summer of 1520, the reformer prayed that he might be given the trumpet of Joshua with which to tumble down the three walls of the modern Jericho. The second of these walls was the claim that the popes

alone are the lords of Scripture, though by their lives they have learned nothing about it. . . . With shameless words they conjure up the assertion that the pope cannot err in the faith, be he good or bad, and for this they adduce not a single letter [of Scripture]. . . . Since they assert that the Holy Ghost has not deserted them however ignorant and bad they may be, they venture to decree just what they please. But if this be so, what need or use is there for holy Scripture? Why not burn it all, and content ourselves with

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these unlearned lords at Rome, who have the Holy Ghost within them, though in truth the Holy Ghost can dwell only in a godly heart. . . ? They must admit that there are many among us, godly Christians, who have the true faith, spirit, understanding, word and mind of Christ, and why then should one reject their word and understanding and follow the pope who has neither faith nor spirit? . . . Since we are all priests and all have one faith, one gospel and one sacrament, why then should we not have the authority to test and determine what is right or not right in the faith? The word of Paul stands fast, I Corinthians ii, 'A spiritual man judges all things and is judged of none'. . . . Abraham had to listen to Sarah who was more subject to him than we are to anyone on earth, and Balaam's ass was wiser than the prophet himself. If then God could speak through an ass against a prophet, why can he not speak through a godly man against the pope?¹

Luther here asserted both that the Scripture is the ultimate recourse, and that the pope is not the sole interpreter. Luther was not entirely original at this point, though he gave a sharper edge to positions previously taken. William of Occam had already said that to be saved a Christian is not called upon to believe that which is not contained in Scripture or to be derived from Scripture by manifest and inescapable logic. At the same time Occam was no drastic insurgent. His divorce of theology and philosophy left him without a rational undergirding of the faith, and threw him back upon the authority of the Church. For that reason, he declared himself ready to submit his judgment to hers, should anything in his book be deemed repugnant to received teachings.

Again, the conciliarists appealed to the Bible against the pope. One of them in particular, Nicolo de Tudeschi, known as Panormitanus, made the statement, very congenial to Luther's spirit, that 'in matters touching the faith, the word of a single private person is to be preferred to that of a pope if that person is moved by sounder arguments from the Old Testament and the New Testament'.² This saying was so often quoted by Luther, and sometimes without the source, that it came to be attributed to him; but it did not express his full mind, which went far beyond that of the conciliarists, who were concerned to diminish the authority of the pope in order to exalt the authority of councils. And anyone who impugned this authority might be sent to the stake: witness the execution of John Hus with the entire approval of that great

¹ Bonn edition I, 870–2, Weimar ed. 6, 411–12 (abbreviation hereafter W).

² *Abbatis Panormitani Commentaria* (Venice, 1571), Tom. I, 142. Compare my article 'Probleme der Lutherbiographie', in *Lutherforschung Heute* (1958), p. 27.

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conciliarist, Cardinal D'Ailly. Luther found himself driven to challenge the authority not only of the pope but also of councils as interpreters of Scripture.

The stages by which Luther reached this conclusion may be briefly reviewed. In his early period he was influenced by the mystics, who held that the way of salvation is the way of humility and humiliation. God grants his grace only to the humble. Humility does not earn his grace. Humility cannot be a good work. If it made any pretence to be a good work, it would not be humility. But only to the humble can God grant his grace, only to those who make no claim, who accept humiliation. To be saved, one must first be damned.¹ This position demolished the entire concept of merit and excluded the possibility of superfluous credits accumulated in the treasury of the merits of the saints, transferable by the pope to others, even to those in purgatory. The entire theory of indulgences was thus undercut. This attack on the very concept of merit constituted the heresy in Luther's ninety-five theses. When in consequence the Master of the Sacred Palace, on the pope's behalf, declared Luther to be a heretic on the ground that the Church consists representatively in the cardinals and virtually in the pope, and that he who dissents from what the Church actually does is a heretic, Luther retorted that the Church consists representatively in a council and virtually in Christ. The pope may err, so too may councils. The only authority is to be found in the canonical Scriptures. This was in August 1518. In that same year Luther was examined at Augsburg by Cardinal Cajetan who confronted him with the bull *Unigenitus* of Pope Clement VI in which the doctrine of the treasury of the superfluous merits of the saints was set forth. Luther was driven to reject the authority of this bull and thereby, of course, to impugn the authority of its author. 'The new adulators in our day', said Luther, 'have put the pope above a council. They make everything depend upon one man, the pope. There are those who put the pope above Scripture and say that he cannot err. In that case, the Scripture perishes and nothing is left in the Church but the word of man.' The question came up again at the Leipzig debate in 1519 when John Eck told Luther that his teaching betrayed the Bohemian virus, in his reliance 'more on sacred Scripture than on the supreme pontiffs, councils, doctors and

¹ On these themes in Luther's early theology compare Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex Auditu* (1958).

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universities...inasmuch as the Holy Spirit does not desert the Church'. Luther replied that he did not disdain the opinions of the most illustrious Fathers, but that clear Scripture is to be preferred. The authority of Scripture is beyond all human capacity, 'councils can err, have erred, and may not institute new articles of faith'.¹ Finally at Worms Luther asserted that unless refuted by Scripture and manifest reason, he would not recant.

The principle of *sola scriptura* had thus come to be affirmed. Nothing as to the faith can be asserted which contradicts or goes beyond Scripture. The Bible is not to be, as it had not been, infallibly interpreted by popes and councils. The true sense has even sometimes been better grasped by godly, though unlearned, laymen.

This position was basic for all the Protestants. Zwingli took his stand on this ground at the first Zurich disputation in 1523 before the city council. The delegates of the bishop of Constance protested that such an assembly could not judge of doctrine and change ancient custom. This only a general council could do. A village like Zurich could not legislate for Christendom. What would Spain, Italy and France and the northern lands have to say on the subject? The universities must be consulted, Paris, Cologne, Louvain. Zwingli facetiously interjected, 'Erfurt and Wittenberg'. Then, when the laughter subsided, he turned to a serious refutation. The present assembly, he declared, was perfectly competent to judge of doctrine and usage, because an infallible judge lay on the table in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, namely Holy Writ. And there were those present quite as conversant in these languages as any at the universities named. Here, the humanist Zwingli assumed that the understanding of Scripture required philological competence. Yet he went on, after the manner of Luther, to say that the assembly contained also Christian hearts who through the spirit of God could tell which side rightly and which side wrongly interpreted Scripture.²

Confronted with the charge of innovation, Zwingli replied that he was teaching nothing but that which was fifteen hundred and twenty-two years old. 'We shall test everything', he affirmed, 'by the touch-

¹ W, 1, 2, 391–2. W, 2, 282. *Ibid.* 309, line 34. *Ibid.* 303, lines 16–21.

² Zwingli, *Sämtliche Werke*, 1, 479–569 (abbreviation hereafter Z). English translation in S. M. Jackson, *Selections from Zwingli* (1901), pp. 49–57.

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stone of the Gospel and the fire of Paul.’ The Catholics retorted that the Church must be the lord of Scripture because the Church made the Scripture, inasmuch as the Church determined what books should be included in the canon of Scripture. Zwingli replied that the Gospel did not owe its existence to the sanction of the Fathers. The Gospel of Christ is ‘the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth’. To say that this Gospel derives its sanction from an assembly of men is blasphemy. The Church did not create the Gospel. The Church merely decided that some books did not proclaim the Gospel, precisely as the reformers themselves were removing corruption.¹

Calvin had to wrestle with the same objections, which in the meantime had been fully formulated and published by Catholic opponents. ‘If the Church had not given its approval,’ he demanded, ‘would there never have been the doctrine without which the Church would never have existed?’ If it be asked how we may know that this doctrine is from God unless we have recourse to a decree of the Church, this is like asking, ‘How do we know light from darkness, black from white, bitter from sweet?’² One notes that Luther appealed to the Spirit to validate and interpret Scripture. Zwingli added philology, and Calvin adduced plain common sense.

Of all the parties in the Reformation, the Anabaptists were the most scriptural. They were the ones who formulated and adhered to the principle often attributed to Zwingli, that only that which is expressly allowed in the Bible is permissible. The vicar of Constance attempted to pin Zwingli down on this point, and asked him whether he would admit only that which was written in the Gospel. In that case, how could he subscribe to the Apostles’ Creed and how could he retain the word *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed?³ Zwingli’s reply was evasive, but that of Conrad Grebel, the Anabaptist, was not, for he said, ‘What we are not told to do in clear words and examples [in Scripture] we are to consider forbidden as if it were written “thou shalt not”.’⁴

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England include one article ‘Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation’.

¹ *Architeles*, art. LX. Z, 1, 319; art. xxxvi. Z, 1, 293–4. English translation, *The Latin Works . . . of Huldreich Zwingli*, ed. S. M. Jackson, vol. 1 (1912), pp. 250, 280.

² *Instit.* 1, vii, 1–2.

³ Z, 1, 553 footnote. *Selections*, ed. S. M. Jackson, p. 98.

⁴ Harold Bender, *Conrad Grebel* (1950), p. 277, note 89, citing *Epistel*, p. 94.

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‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.’

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

But if the Scripture were the authority, what then was the Scripture? That question might seem long ago to have been settled because the canon, both of the Old Testament and of the New, had been fixed since the days of the early Church. But if, as the reformers said, the Gospel was prior to the canon and only those books should be received which proclaimed the Gospel, might not the canon be re-examined? Many strictures were actually passed upon the books of the Old Testament and even of the New, both by humanists and reformers. And the outcome might have been a reduction of the canon, but this did not occur. Conceivably the rise of the radicals who disparaged the entire written Word made its defenders more rigid.

Erasmus threw out a disquieting remark in the course of his controversy with Luther over the freedom of the will. In favour of this doctrine Erasmus cited a passage from Sirach in the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. ‘I think no one should detract from the authority of this book because Saint Jerome indicated that it did not belong to the Hebrew canon, since the Christians received it into their canon, and I cannot see why the Hebrews excluded it when they included the Parables of Solomon [presumably Ecclesiastes rather than Proverbs] and the amatory Canticles.’¹ The point of Erasmus was to defend Sirach rather than to reject Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. But another, reading his words, might have been disposed to take the other alternative.

Luther did not. He answered that though he might exclude Sirach, for the moment he would accept it rather than become involved in a controversy with regard to the canon of the Old Testament ‘which you, Erasmus, gnaw and ridicule’. But on other occasions Luther behaved as if he were minded to open a controversy on the canon not only of the Old Testament but also of the New. ‘I so hate Esther and

¹ *De Libero Arbitrio*, ed. J. von Walter, *Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Protestantismus*, VIII (1935), IIa 1, pp. 19–20.

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II Maccabees that I wish they did not exist. There is too much Judaism in them and not a little heathenism.¹ II Maccabees was not a great problem, because it belonged to the Apocrypha of the Old Testament which Luther placed in a lower category as suitable for edification but not for disputation. He had good reason to exclude this particular book from disputation because it contains the text on which the Catholics base the doctrine of purgatory (xii. 40–6); but Esther belongs to the canon.

Even more serious was the disparagement of books in the New Testament. Luther's caustic remark about the Epistle of James is notorious: he characterized it as an 'epistle of straw'. As for Revelation, in 1522 he declared that he could not regard it as prophetic or apostolic or even as the work of the Holy Ghost because so replete with visions and images. The worst was that in this book Christ was neither taught nor known. Luther would not impose his own opinion upon others, but for himself his spirit could not find its way into this book.²

Yet despite these strictures he did not exclude any of these books from the canon. Whether they were actually written by apostles was to him of no consequence. The whole question of authorship was indifferent. Carlstadt had impugned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch on the ground that Moses could not have written the account of his own death.³ Luther agreed that this portion must have been appended by another hand, but accepted Moses as the author up to that point. The question, however, was for him entirely immaterial. Luther could not regard Revelation as apostolic or Hebrews as Pauline, but dislodged neither from the canon. The test was whether a book proclaimed Christ. 'That which does not preach Christ is not apostolic, though it be the work of Peter or Paul and conversely that which does teach Christ is apostolic even though it be written by Judas, Annas, Pilate, Herod.'⁴

By this token, however, he should have left out Esther and also Revelation if his statement about it were correct; and James too might well have gone. But they were all retained. The reason in the case of

¹ W, 18, 666, lines 18–22; *Tischreden* (TR), 1, no. 475, p. 208.

² Erlangen edition (abbreviation hereafter EA), 63, 115, 169. The Erlangen edition is at this point more convenient for speedy reference because all of the prefaces are collected in a single volume, whereas in the Weimar edition they are attached to the successive editions to which they refer.

³ Herman Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, 2 vols. (1905), 1, 193.

⁴ EA, 63, 156f.

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Esther may have been sheer conservatism. In the case of the other two Luther was able to discover words of palliation. 'James', he would concede, 'was a good man who jotted down some remarks made by the disciples of the Apostles. His book is not to be forbidden, because it does contain some good sayings.'¹ The castigation of Revelation cited above is from the preface to the New Testament in 1522. In 1545 it was superseded by another preface which contrived to find in the book a condemnation of Thomas Müntzer and summed up the message of Revelation as this: 'That Christ is with his Saints to the end of the world despite plagues, beasts, and evil angels.'² The canon, then, was to be retained.

An actual attack occurred at Geneva in Calvin's circle where Sebastian Castellio, an Erasmian in the courts of the Lord, was denied ordination to the ministry on the ground among others that he rejected the inspiration of the Song of Songs. The ministers of Geneva including Calvin gave this account of the incident:

Castellio said that it was a lascivious and obscene poem in which Solomon described his indecent amours. We told him first that he should not be so rash as to despise the perpetual consensus of the Church universal. There was no book of doubtful authenticity which had not been debated, and those books which we now receive without question were at first disputed. But this book has never been openly rejected by anyone. We told him also that he should not trust so to his own judgment, especially when he advanced nothing which had not been obvious to every one before he was born. As for the book we contended that it was an epithalamium not unlike Psalm 45. The only difference is that the one gives briefly what the other develops in detail. The Psalm of Solomon sings the beauty and adornment of the bride, so that the substance is the same. The difference is merely a matter of style.

When this did not weigh with him we considered what we should do. We were all agreed that it would be dangerous and would set a bad example if he were admitted to the ministry on this condition. To begin with, good people would be not a little offended if they heard that we had ordained a minister who openly rejected and condemned a book accepted as Scripture by all the churches. Further the door would be open to adversaries and detractors who seek to defame the Gospel and disrupt this church. Finally we should be without an answer for the future to any one who wanted to repudiate Ecclesiastes or Proverbs or any other book, unless we wanted to debate whether or no the book were worthy of the Holy Spirit.

¹ EA, 63, 157.² *Ibid.* pp. 161 and 168.

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That no one may suppose that there was any other reason for Sebastian's leaving we wish to attest wherever he goes that he gave up his position as schoolmaster of his own free will. He has so conducted himself that we deem him worthy of the ministry. He has been rejected not because of any blemish in his character, nor because of failure to accept the fundamentals, but simply for this reason which we have mentioned. The ministers of the church at Geneva. Signed in the name and by the mandate of all, John Calvin.¹

Yet when Castellio translated the Bible both into Latin and into French, the Song of Songs was not left out. The canon stood.

As for the Old Testament Apocrypha, though retained at a lower level, certain portions were very highly esteemed and none more so than the smallest of all its books, the Prayer of Manasses, because it is so filled with the spirit of contrition. The following portion well exhibits its spirit and shows why Luther and the reformers should have esteemed it so highly. The prayer celebrates the majesty and mercy of God and continues:

Surely thou, O Lord, the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance for the just, for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance for me a sinner: for I have sinned above the number of the sand of the sea. My transgressions are multiplied, O Lord, they are multiplied, and I am not worthy to look at or see the height of heaven, for the multitude of my iniquities, being bowed down by many iron bonds, so that I cannot uplift my head, and there is no release for me, because I have provoked thy anger, and have done evil before thee, not doing thy will, nor keeping thy commandments, but setting up abominations and multiplying offences. And now I bend the knee of my heart, beseeching thy goodness: I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge my transgressions: but I pray and beseech thee, release me, Lord, release me, and destroy me not with my transgressions; keep not evils for me in anger for ever, nor condemn me to the lowest parts of the earth: because thou art God, the God of the repenting; and in me thou wilt shew all thy benevolence, for that me unworthy thou wilt save, according to thy great mercy: and I will praise thee continually all the days of my life: for all the host of the heavens sings to thee, and thine is the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Significantly a woodcut by Holbein portrayed on one side the indulgence traffic and on the other three sinners who because of their penitence were acceptable to God, and one of these was King Manasses.

¹ *Cal. Op.* xi, 674–6 (= *Corpus Reformatorum* 39). See p. 72 below.

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THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

With the canon settled, next came the question of the text. Reuchlin had shown the necessity in the case of the Old Testament of going behind the Vulgate to the Hebrew, and Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus had insisted in the case of the New Testament that one must have recourse to the Greek. Erasmus cannot be considered a great textual critic. He used only a few manuscripts for his edition of the Greek New Testament, and did not correctly evaluate those employed. But his contribution is not to be minimized, for it was he who first made universally accessible any text whatsoever of the New Testament in the original tongue. The first edition came from the press of Froben in 1516. Cardinal Ximenes rendered the same service for the Old Testament in the Complutensian Polyglot published in 1522, though it had been printed earlier by the Jews. These publications disclosed discrepancies from the Vulgate, in some instances not because the original had been misunderstood but because the same text had not been employed. Nigri made the preposterous proposal that the Jews had falsified the text of the Hebrew in order to eliminate references to Christ.¹ He did little more thereby than to call attention to the problem.

In the case of the New Testament Erasmus shocked contemporaries by omitting the famous proof text for the Trinity in I John v. 7 where the genuine text reads: 'There are three that witness, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three are at one.' The spurious addition amplifies thus, 'There are three that witness on earth, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three are one in Christ Jesus, and there are three that give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit'. Erasmus could not find this form in any Greek manuscript, and therefore omitted it. Such was the outcry that he rashly promised to insert the reference to the heavenly witnesses could it be found in any Greek manuscript. One was discovered at Dublin, late and worthless. Erasmus, having sworn to deliver the head of John the Baptist, made the insertion in his second edition in 1519. Happily Luther in his translation did not follow him at this point. But others did, including the King James Version. As late as 1897 the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, with the endorsement of Pope Leo XIII, declared the passage to be authentic. Forty years later this decision was

¹ W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation* (1955), pp. 63-4.