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### Luther's Attitude Towards Allegory

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LUTHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ALLEGORY

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Outline . . . . A Thesis Presented to . . . . . 111

Introduction The Faculty of Concordia Seminary . . . . . 1

I. Department of New Testament Theology . . . . . 4

II. A Brief History of Allegory . . . . . 10

III. Luther and Allegory before 1517 . . . . . 27

IV. Luther and Allegory after 1517 . . . . . 43

V. Luther's final use of Allegory . . . . . 50

Conclusion . . . . In Partial Fulfillment . . . . . 74

Bibliography of the Requirements for the Degree . . . . . 75

Bachelor of Divinity

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by  
George Rode  
May, 1948

Approved by: Martin H. Franzmann  
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Outline

I. Luther always had a high regard for the Scriptures.  
 A. At home and at school he was trained to respect the Scriptures.  
 B. From 1517 until the time of the Leizsig Debate, he held the Scripture to be the highest authority.  
 C. After the Leizsig Debate he states emphatically the abolished, popes, and councils.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Outline . . . . . 111

Introduction . . . . . 1

II. Allegory was used for centuries before Luther's time.  
 I. Luther and Scripture . . . . . 4  
 II. A Brief History of Allegory . . . . . 18

III. Luther and Allegory before 1517 . . . . . 27  
 C. Origen applied allegory to the New Testament.

IV. Luther and Allegory after 1517 . . . . . 43  
 V. Luther's final use of Allegory . . . . . 59

Conclusion . . . . . 74  
 A. His interpretation of the Psalms (1513) show the influence of the traditional school.  
 1. He makes use of the fourfold sense.  
 2. He considers the spiritual sense to be the most important one.  
 3. He interprets the Old Testament Messianically wherever it is possible.

B. In the lectures on Romans (1516-1518) he begins to free himself from the traditional interpretation.  
 1. He makes less use of allegory.  
 2. He makes an effort to find the true meaning of the text.

IV. After 1517 Luther loses his taste for allegory.  
 A. He concludes that the Scriptures are clear in themselves.  
 B. Allegories do not clarify the Scriptures; therefore, they are of no value.  
 C. Each text of Scripture has a single meaning.  
 1. He emphasized the grammatical sense.  
 2. Historical situations must be taken into consideration.

## Outline

- I. Luther always had a high regard for the Scriptures.
  - A. At home and at school he was trained to respect the Scriptures.
  - B. From 1517 until the time of the Leipzig Debate he begins to acknowledge Scripture to be the highest authority.
  - C. After the Leipzig Debate he states emphatically his preference of Scripture over the fathers, the schoolmen, popes, and councils.
  
- II. Allegory was used for centuries before Luther's time.
  - A. Allegories have a Hellenistic and Jewish background.
    1. Homer's writings were allegorized.
    2. Allegories are found among the Rabbinical writings.
  - B. Philo allegorized the Old Testament.
  - C. Origen applied allegory to the New Testament.
  - D. Allegories were also used in the Middle Ages.
  
- III. Luther was fond of allegory before 1517.
  - A. His interpretation of the Psalms (1513) show the influence of the traditional school.
    1. He makes use of the fourfold sense.
    2. He considers the tropological sense to be the most important one.
    3. He interprets the Old Testament Messianically wherever it is possible.
  - B. In the lectures on Romans (1515-1516) he begins to free himself from the traditional interpretation.
    1. He makes less use of allegory.
    2. He makes an effort to find the true meaning of the text.
  
- IV. After 1517 Luther loses his taste for allegory.
  - A. He concludes that the Scriptures are clear in themselves.
  - B. Allegories do not clarify the Scriptures; therefore, they are of no value.
  - C. Each text of Scripture has a single meaning.
    1. He emphasized the grammatical sense.
    2. Historical situations must be taken into consideration.

- D. He formulates the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.
  1. The New Testament interprets the Old.
  2. One book may help to interpret another.
  3. One passage may shed light upon another.
- E. Luther was not influenced by the humanists in his rejection of allegory.

V. Luther made some use of allegory throughout his life.

- A. We find examples of allegory in many of his writings.
- B. When he does use allegory he subjects it to definite principles, however.
  1. Allegories must be deduced from the literal sense of the text.
  2. Allegories must agree with the analogy of faith.
  3. Allegories belong to the category of illustrations.

In the first place, we notice that Luther's exegetical principles were based on his doctrine of the supreme authority of the Bible. His attitude towards allegory changed as his attitude towards the Scriptures changed. For this reason before taking up the matter of Luther and allegory, we shall devote a brief chapter to the discussion of Luther and the Scriptures in general. Here we are not so much interested in the causes for the change in his attitude towards the Scriptures, nor in the factors which influenced him to accept the Bible as the supreme authority, but we do want to point out that even in the early years of the reformatory movement the Bible became for Luther an authority greater than the fathers, the schoolmen, the papal Church, councils, or any human opinion. He considered the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. The task of the exegete is to make that

## INTRODUCTION

Luther's attitude towards Allegory--this topic covers a wide area. One cannot discuss the matter without touching upon subjects which, though not directly connected with allegory, are closely related, nevertheless.

In the first place, we notice that Luther's exegetical principles were based on his doctrine of the supreme authority of the Bible. His attitude towards allegory changed as his attitude towards the Scriptures changed. For this reason before taking up the matter of Luther and allegory, we shall devote a brief chapter to the discussion of Luther and the Scriptures in general. Here we are not so much interested in the causes for the change in his attitude towards the Scriptures, nor in the factors which influenced him to accept the Bible as the supreme authority, but we do want to point out that even in the early years of the reformatory movement the Bible became for Luther an authority greater than the fathers, the schoolmen, the papal Church, councils, or any human opinion. He considered the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. The task of the exegete is to make that

revelation of God understood by the people.

To understand Luther's position on allegory properly we should, in the second place, acquaint ourselves with the exegetical practises of his day. Another chapter will, therefore, be included in order to show the origin and trace briefly the history of allegory. The purpose is to show that this method of interpretation had been used for centuries before Luther's day, and had become the accepted method of expounding the Scriptures. Luther's attitude towards allegory becomes so much clearer as we contrast it with the traditional view on allegory.

Finally, we take up the matter of Luther's position on allegory in particular. It is difficult to speak about allegory without touching upon other principles of interpretation. We cannot speak about a fourfold sense without referring to the single sense. We cannot speak about the typical sense without making reference to the literal sense. For this reason some space is given to the principles of interpretation which are connected with Luther's attitude towards allegory.

In tracing the development of Luther's attitude towards allegory we shall give some attention to writings from three periods of his life. First, the early period, the period of his life in which he is not yet a conscious reformer, will be considered. Here we shall examine especially his "Exposition of the Psalms" (1513-1515) and his lectures on Romans (1515-16). Then we shall examine some of the writings which came from

the pen of Luther after 1517. We shall refer especially to his treatises "On the Babylonian Captivity," "The Liberty of a Christian Man," and "The Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," and to other letters of this period as well as to some of his exegetical writings. Finally, we shall examine one of his latest writings, the "Commentary on Genesis" (1536-1545) to determine his position on allegory at that time.

Our purpose is not to answer the question whether allegory should be used or not. We do not wish to raise the question whether allegorical interpretation should find a place in our exegetical practice. Our purpose is to show what Luther thought of allegorical interpretation. We shall attempt to answer the question whether he considered it permissible to use allegory at any time. If allegory may be used, and we know that Luther made use of it until the last, then what are the principles, the rules, to which it must be subjected?

Scriptures cannot err. A heretical pope, one who departs from the Scriptures, should be deposed, was his opinion.<sup>2</sup>

This viewpoint in itself could not produce reformatory

results. For Occam never doubted that the teachings of

The battle of the Reformation was fought and won with the powerful, two-edged sword which is the Word of God.

Luther's attitude towards this Word will be discussed briefly in this chapter.

It is quite natural that there should be development in Luther's attitude towards the Scriptures. He grew up in an age in which the Scriptures were not very popular. The average man knew very little of them. As a child Luther learned to take part in church services, and probably learned the Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed. How soon he came into contact with the Scriptures is uncertain, but we are told that during his student days he happened to see a Bible and read the account of Hannah in I Samuel. The incident made an impression upon him; the Book an even greater one. He was delighted and thought to himself how fortunate he would be if ever he could possess such a book.<sup>1</sup>

At the university he studied the theology of Occam and Biel. The Occamists had stressed the idea of the authority of the Scriptures. They even went so far as to claim that Scripture had greater authority than popes and councils.

Occam declared that the pope is capable of error, while the

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Loetscher, "Luther and the Problem of Authority" (October 1917), p. 550.

<sup>2</sup> F. H. Reu, "Luther and the Scriptures," p. 14.

1. James Mackinnon, Luther and the Reformation, I, p. 5.

Scriptures cannot err. A heretical pope, one who departs from the Scriptures, should be deposed, was his opinion.<sup>2</sup> This viewpoint in itself could not produce reformatory results. For Occam never doubted that the teachings of the Church and the teachings of Scripture were identical. In fact, he considered the Church to be the judge as to whether his interpretation of the Scriptures was correct. So it was with Luther during his early years. He had a high regard for the Scriptures, but his interpretation of the same was conditioned by the Church and the traditions of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Luther spent considerable time in the study of the ancient fathers and of the schoolmen. At first these were as authoritative to him as were the Scriptures. Gradually, however, we notice a change. One by one he drops the fathers, the schoolmen, the popes, and the councils. He is left with the Scriptures alone. They remain his sole authority in spiritual matters.

As early as the year 1517 when he published his Ninety Five Theses we find that Luther begins to place the Scriptures, if not above, then certainly on an equal level with the authority of the papacy. He is still totally unaware, however, that he is departing from the traditional teachings of the Church. In 1545, when the Theses were republished together

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2. Frederick Loetscher, "Luther and the Problem of Authority in Religion," Princeton Theological Review, XV (October, 1917), p. 555.

3. M. Reu, Luther and the Scriptures, p. 14.

with his other works, Luther permitted them to remain, even though they contained statements with which he could no longer agree. In the preface of 1545 he shows how good a Romanist he had been at the time. We quote the following:

I allow them to stand, that by them it may appear how weak I was, and in what fluctuating state of mind, when I began this business. I was then a monk and a mad papist (papista insanissimus), and so submersed in the dogmas of the Pope that I would have readily murdered any person who denied obedience to the pope.<sup>4</sup>

However, even if Luther did not feel that he was drifting away from the traditional view, the papists certainly did. It was not long before they took action against him. They looked upon the Theses as an effort to undermine the entire papal system.<sup>5</sup> It does not require a very close examination of the theses to note the reason for concern on the part of the Roman hierarchy. Luther's theses question not only the matter of Indulgences but also the validity of the Roman interpretation of Scripture.

The very first thesis strikes the keynote: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying Repent ye, intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence." He does not refer to papal opinions or to the decrees of councils, but to the sayings of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. And so also in some of the other theses he shows that he

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4. Luther, quoted by Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, VI, p. 157.

5. Schaff, op. cit., p. 158.

begins to place the Scriptures above the accepted teachings of the Church. Loetscher makes the comment that it is "no wonder the sharp-eyed Eck complained of their irreverence with respect to the pontiff."<sup>6</sup>

We repeat that Luther in all probability was not aware of his drifting away from the Church at that time. His theses were drawn up in order to bring about a discussion at the University of Wittenberg, not to inaugurate a reformatory movement. In a letter to Pope Leo X, dated May 30, 1518, Luther is still willing to accept the authority of the pope. He says that he is willing to bow down in reverence to the holy Father, and to acknowledge the voice of the pope as the voice of Christ who rules and speaks through the pope.<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to the "Resolutiones" which accompanied this letter, Luther declares that he is willing to advance nothing which is first of all not contained in the sacred Scriptures, and furthermore, nothing which may be contrary to the fathers. Nor is he willing to make any statements which may be contrary to the canons or papal decrees.<sup>8</sup> At the same time Luther firmly makes his intentions known that unproved statements from Aquinas and other schoolmen he will accept or reject as he sees fit. He will follow the advice of Paul, given in I Thess. 5:21: "Prove all things;

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6. Loetscher, op. cit., pp. 575-576.

7. Luther, St. Louis edition, XV, 404.

8. St. Louis, XVIII, 101-102.

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hold fast that which is good."<sup>9</sup>

In 1513 Luther sent the "Resolutiones" to Hieronymus Scultetus, Bishop of Brandenburg, and in a letter accompanying these he denounced the scholastics who speak without a text, or proof, but he still groups together as equally valid proof the Scriptures, the canons, and the fathers.<sup>10</sup>

Gradually Luther grows in the conviction that the Scriptures must be the only authority. He still makes use of the fathers, but as Koestlin says, "His own expositions, while seeking to remain in harmony with the latter, are not based upon them as the decisive authority."<sup>11</sup> In his discussions with his opponents he quotes Scripture frequently, declaring that they are incomparably preferable to all the words of men.

Early in the year 1519 the issue regarding the supreme authority became more acute. Prof. Dungersheim of Leipzig began corresponding with Luther on the question of papal supremacy. In reply to Dungersheim's second letter, Luther points out that Dungersheim and Dr. Eck quote the fathers too extensively. They are accustomed to interpret the Scriptures in the light of the fathers. They even try to harmonize Scripture with the fathers, instead of reversing the procedure.

9. Ibid., p. 103.

10. St. Louis, XV, 407.

11. J. Koestlin, The Theology of Luther, translated by Charles E. Hay, I, p. 281.

In contrast to this he says, "I am accustomed to follow the example of Augustine and to trace the stream to its source." The fathers must be tried by the Scriptures, and not the other way around. The fountain of all truth is the Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

During the Leinizg Debate Luther opposed Eck by quoting the Scriptures. The latter tried to support his arguments for the divine right of the papacy with quotations from the fathers. Luther answered that the fathers are subordinate to the Scriptures. "Jerome is not so important that I will forsake Paul on his account."<sup>13</sup> He says he venerates St. Bernard and does not condemn his opinion. But he maintains that in a disputation the genuine and specific sense of the Scriptures is more important.<sup>14</sup> Again he repeats the thought expressed in his letter to Dungersheim, namely, that the fathers must be examined in the light of Scripture. The Scriptures should not be shamed to fit the fathers.<sup>15</sup> He accuses Eck of penetrating the Scriptures as deeply as does the water spider the water. Eck, he says, flees from them as does the devil from the Cross. As for himself, Luther maintains that he prefers the Scriptures, and on this basis does he request the future judges to consider the debate.<sup>16</sup>

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12. St. Louis, XVIII, 500.

13. St. Louis, XV, 917.

14. St. Louis, XV, 918.

15. St. Louis, XV, 1079.

16. St. Louis, XV, 1100.

During the course of this debate Luther goes one step farther. The fathers have erred, the Scriptures are superior to the pope, and now he makes a startling statement about the councils. When Eck accused him of being a Hussite, he denied it vehemently. He did not want to be identified with the Bohemians. After deliberating on the matter for a while, however, he expressed an opinion which was so strange at the time that, it is said, Duke George cursed audibly, "The plague take the fellow."<sup>17</sup> Luther maintained that there were articles taught by Hus which were thoroughly Christian and evangelical.<sup>18</sup> In itself this was an astounding statement. Considering the fact that the Council of Constance had declared the teachings of Hus to be heretical, we see that Luther by this time placed the Word of God even above the decrees of any council. Formerly he had stated that a council could err, but now he affirms that a council, the Council of Constance, actually did err. From now on Scripture remains for him the sole authority in matters of faith. In matters not pertaining to faith the decision of the councils are to be accepted.<sup>19</sup>

After the Disputation at Leipzig Luther was attacked from all sides. A pamphlet war was in the making. In one of his tracts against Augustine von Alveld he stated his position

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17. Mackinnon, op. cit., II, p. 136.

18. St. Louis, XV, 941-942.

19. Koestlin, op. cit., I, p. 317.

quite clearly. He accuses the papists of using the wrong approach. For them it is not necessary that any of these should be proved by Scripture or by reason; "it is quite enough that they have been put down in his book by a Romanist and a holy observant of the Order of St. Francis."<sup>20</sup>

The year following the Leinizig Debate Luther published three epoch-making books: "The Open Letter to the Christian Nobility," "On the Babylonian Captivity," and "The Liberty of a Christian Man." In a letter to Pope Leo X, which forms the introduction to the last of these, Luther addresses the pope very politely, but firmly declares that he will recant nothing, nor will he accept rules for interpretation which bind the Word of God. The Word is not to be bound by human opinions. He addresses Leo saying: "They err who exalt thee above a council and above the Church universal. They err who ascribe to thee alone the right of interpreting Scripture."<sup>22</sup>

In the treatise "On the Babylonian Captivity" Luther rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation as taught by Aquinas. He believes that bread and wine are actually received. We quote the following:

I reached this conclusion because I saw that the opinions of the Thomists, even though they might be approved by pope and council, remain but opinions and do not become articles of faith, though an angel from

20. St. Louis, XVIII, 1010.

21. St. Louis, XVIII, 1011.

22. St. Louis, XV, 793.

27. Ibid.

29. St. Louis, XVIII, 1348.

In the year 1523, writing to the Knights of the Teutonic Order heaven were to decree otherwise. For what is asserted without Scripture or an approved revelation, may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.<sup>23</sup>

The "Letter to the Christian Nobility" is designed to break down the walls of the Roman system. In it he declares that popes can err and have erred, and that when the pope does something which is not in accord with the Scriptures, he ought to be reproved and constrained according to the word of Christ in Matthew 19.<sup>24</sup>

Against Emser he reaffirms his preference for Scripture over human teachers, whoever they might be. We quote:

If you should tell me that what the Scriptures teach is light as goose-quills, but what you have soun out of the teachers, who often erred, and out of your own horny head, is strong as chains--please God, I will answer that, too, and silence your slanderous tongue that so wantonly defames and defiles God's Word.<sup>25</sup>

In another article addressed to the same man he makes it clear that traditions, too, must fall into the background. "Learn this, therefore, dear Goat, no custom can change anything that is fixed in the Scriptures and articles of faith."<sup>26</sup> And again: "Be it known then, that Scripture without any gloss is the sun and the sole light from which all teachers receive their light and not the contrary."<sup>27</sup> "You know very well how all the fathers ofttimes erred;...For this reason I want Scripture."<sup>28</sup>

23. St. Louis, XIX, 23-24.

24. St. Louis, X, 276-278.

25. St. Louis, XVIII, 1255.

26. St. Louis, XVIII, 1293.

27. Ibid.

28. St. Louis, XVIII, 1346.

In the year 1523, writing to the Knights of the Teutonic Order, he again stresses the superiority of the Scriptures over councils. He says the following:

Councils may make decisions and pass decrees in matters that are temporal or that have not yet been clearly set forth. But when we can plainly see what is God's Word and will, we will wait neither for councils nor for the decrees and decisions of the Church.<sup>29</sup>

Luther's statement at Worms, namely, that unless he was convinced by Scripture or sound reason he could not recant, is not a new phase in his development. It is simply the culmination.<sup>30</sup> This, however, established once and for all his position on the authority of the Scriptures. This position he retains throughout his life. We continue to give a few examples.

In all the controversies over the Lord's Supper Luther retained the words of Scripture as they were written, thereby identifying the Scriptures with the Word of God. Though reason may seem to tell us otherwise, we do receive the body of Christ and the blood of Christ with the bread and wine because it is a clear teaching of Scripture.

The Epistle to the Hebrews he does not place on the same level with other apostolic writings, nevertheless, he regards it highly because of the doctrines which the author basis so constantly on the Scriptures. The fact that the writer of Hebrews made proper use of the Old Testament is

29. St. Louis, XIX, 1736.

30. Reu, op. cit., p. 28.

enough to make Luther regard the Epistle as one which contains fine gold, silver, and precious stones.<sup>31</sup>

In the interpretation of Isaiah 9:6 Luther indicates that he believes the Scriptures to be of divine origin. A priori he assumes their inerrancy and perfect harmony. "I am certain that everything which the Scriptures teach concerning Christ is true."<sup>32</sup>

Defending his articles condemned by the Roman Bull, he writes the following in 1520:

The holy Scriptures must be clearer, more easily understood, and more certain than any other writing, because all teachers try to establish their teachings through the Scriptures as a clear and standard writing, and would have their own writings supported and explained in the light of Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

Against Latomus (1521) he writes that the fathers were very human, that they erred and contradicted themselves.<sup>34</sup>

Only one is our Master, Christ, and the fathers must be tried according to the Scriptures.<sup>35</sup> The writings of the fathers are dark and must be explained by the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

It does not follow that because the fathers held a certain opinion, or lived in a certain way, that we should do the same. Our example is Christ.<sup>37</sup> Never can the teachings of the fathers become articles of faith.<sup>38</sup>

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- 31. St. Louis, XIV, 126-129.
  - 32. St. Louis, VI, 177.
  - 33. St. Louis, XV, 1481.
  - 34. St. Louis, XVIII, 1073.
  - 35. St. Louis, XVIII, 1150.
  - 36. St. Louis, XI, 2333.
  - 37. St. Louis, XI, 1881.
  - 38. St. Louis, XVI, 2286.

Luther admits that the fathers have done some good but they must be read "cum iudicio".<sup>39</sup> We should not accept their writings simply because they wrote them, but we should hold them up to the light of Scripture.<sup>40</sup> There are times when the fathers have even distorted the Word. God's Word is in itself clear enough, but through the books and writings of the fathers it has become obscure.<sup>41</sup>

Nor does Luther consider papal decrees superior to the Scriptures. Commenting on Gal. 1:9 he reminds us that Paul curses anyone who holds that the "pope is judge over Scripture, and that the Church has authority over Scripture."<sup>42</sup>

His final position on the authority of the councils is just as clear. Councils as well as all other human beings are required to remain with the Word of Christ.<sup>43</sup> Even if the council determines matters which are in accord with the Scriptures, Luther accepts such decisions, not because they are made by councils, but rather because they are in agreement with the Word of God.<sup>44</sup> In one of his carefully prepared essays, that on "Councils and Churches" (1539) he says: "We need something greater and more certain for our faith than the councils. That which is greater and more certain is the Sacred Scriptures."<sup>45</sup>

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39. St. Louis, XXII, 1404.

40. Ibid.

41. St. Louis, XXII, 1355.

42. St. Louis, IX, 86.

43. St. Louis, XI, 1076.

44. St. Louis, XI, 460.

45. St. Louis, XVI, 2247.

was The Scriptures become for him the infallible authority; the teachings therein must be observed, nothing is to be added or removed. "The Scriptures cannot err."<sup>46</sup> "That which is not told us in God's Word we ought to pass by."<sup>47</sup> "One passage of Scripture is worth more than all the books in the world."<sup>48</sup> "In Scripture you do not read the words of man, but the Word of the highest God."<sup>49</sup>

We have but briefly traced the development in Luther regarding his attitude towards the Scriptures until he regarded them as the supreme authority. But that he finally did consider them a higher authority than the fathers, schoolmen, popes, or councils, and would submit only to the authority of the Scriptures, was in itself not a guarantee for the success of the Reformation. The same high regard for Scripture was shown by others. The Roman Church itself taught the inspiration of the Word. However, the Roman Church also taught that God reveals His will directly to the Church. Even the proper interpretation of Scripture is given to the Church. Thus it came about that the decrees of the Church were given greater consideration than the Word of God. Interest in the Bible was lost, and when the Bible was read or studied, the allegorical sense

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46. St. Louis, XIX, 1073.

47. St. Louis, I, 17.

48. St. Louis, XIX, 1734.

49. St. Louis, IX, 1808.

was made to overshadow the literal.<sup>50</sup> With the allegorical sense it was an easy matter to make the Scriptures conform to the dogmas of the Church. Scripture ceased to be the foundation and the source of doctrine; it was used as a support for the rationalistic dogma of the Roman Church. As long as Scripture was interpreted allegorically or typically, there was little chance for a change in the situation. To make the Bible an open Book, and to restore the interest of the people in the Bible it was necessary to establish definite principles of interpretation. It was especially necessary to re-examine critically the traditional allegorical method. Did the allegorical method bring out the true meaning of the Scriptures? Luther reached the conclusion that it did not. It is true that he made use of allegory for a while, but gradually he lost his taste for it. When he did make use of it, he subjected it to definite principles. Never can allegory be used to prove a doctrine. Before we discuss further the development of Luther's attitude towards allegory, let us briefly look at the history of this mode of interpretation.

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50. Francis Brown, "Luther as Exegete," in A Symposium on Martin Luther by the Professors of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, p. 14.

He had few followers. Cf. F. S. Parker, History of Interpretation, pp. 274 ff.  
 St. Louis, Mo., 1905.

development.

The word allegory is used in various senses. From *Allo*, "something else," and *Agpeleō*, "I speak," it is

## II. A Brief History of Allegory

For centuries before Luther's day there was practised a form of exegesis which permitted a practically unlimited perversion of the true sense of Scripture. With the exception of a few who at least made an attempt to interpret the Scriptures properly by taking grammatical constructions and historical situations into consideration,<sup>1</sup> the majority of the schoolmen were accustomed to find a fourfold sense in the Scriptures. They found in the Scriptures the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical sense. The schoolmen delighted in quoting the little rhyme:

Litera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,  
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.

Since Aquinas and the schoolmen followed such principles, we can understand why Luther said that they had not at any time held or taught the correct interpretation of even one chapter of the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup>

Before we discuss Luther's reaction against the traditional method of exegesis, let us examine more closely what is meant by allegorical interpretation, and let us briefly trace its

1. Nicholas of Lyra (died 1340) seized upon some of the best principles of interpretation hitherto enunciated, but he had few followers. Cf. F.W. Farrar, History of Interpretation, pp. 274 ff.

2. St. Louis, IV, 1305.

development. were statements in Homer which, interpreted

The word allegory is used in various senses. From *ἄλλο*, "something else," and *ἄγορεύω*, "I speak," it is

defined by Heraclitus, probably of the first century, as follows: *ἄλλα μὲν ἀγορεύων τρόποσ ἕτερα δὲ ὦν*

*λέγει ἐπημύμων ἐπωνύμως ἀλληγορία καλεῖται:*

"The mode of speech which says other things (than the mere letter) and hints at different things from what it expresses, is called appropriately allegory."<sup>3</sup>

In this sense it may include the various types, symbols, parables, fables, or analogies of any kind. In the technical and historical sense, however, its meaning is more confined.

Massie defines it in the following words:

The system of interpretation by which the most ancient Greek literature, in the one case, and the OT writings (and subsequently the NT), in the other, were assigned their value in proportion as they meant, not what they said, but something else, and could be made the clothing of cosmological, philosophical, moral, or religious ideas.<sup>4</sup>

This definition already tells us that allegorical interpretation did not originate with the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages. It reaches back much farther than that. The method finds its roots in the Greek era, five centuries before the birth of Christ.

Homer's writings were regarded by the ancient Greeks as being absolutely truthful. They became almost sacred books.

3. J. Massie, "Allegory," Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible, I, p. 64.

4. Ibid.

However, there were statements in Homer which, interpreted literally, became offensive, and could not be accepted by some Greeks. Plato could not harmonize Homer with his own philosophic convictions, and, therefore, cast the Homeric poems aside. But there were others who wished to adhere to Homer and yet could not agree with the literal meaning of everything contained in his poems.<sup>5</sup> The result was the allegorical interpretation applied to Homer. The Stoics especially, wishing to harmonize their views with the popular religious opinions of the time, began to publish commentaries on Homer.<sup>6</sup> The allegorical method explained away passages which would otherwise be immoral or impious. Beginning with Anaxagoras, (ca. 450 B.C.) the "actions of Homeric gods and heroes are allegories of the forces of nature;...Or else they are movements of the mental powers and moral virtues."<sup>7</sup> By the time of Augustus the ability to interpret allegorically was a mark of scholarship. The ability to write allegorically was considered a mark of greatness.<sup>8</sup>

But the practise of allegorizing was found among the Jews as well as the Greeks, both among the Jews of Palestine, and among those of the Dispersion, especially among the Jews of Alexandria. The Palestinian Jews tried to find hidden

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5. Farrar, History of Interpretation, p. 135.

6. Ibid.

7. Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible, I, p. 65.

8. Taylor, op. cit., p. 98.

meanings in the minutest details of the Pentateuch; the Alexandrian Jews, on the other hand, adopted the allegorical method in order to make the Old Testament appeal to the Hellenistic mind. They wished to show the cultured Greeks that their Old Testament was neither barbarous nor immoral. What the Greek philosophers taught, had already been said or, at least, anticipated, by Moses, the great lawgiver. "The Hellenistic thinkers desired to be Greek philosophers without ceasing to be Jewish religionists."<sup>9</sup> Again, allegory as used by the Alexandrian exegetes is an effort to reconcile the opinions of their contemporary society with the statements of their ancient authorities. The Alexandrian school is important in this connection because of its influence on the Christian Church.

Though not the first to allegorize the Old Testament, the greatest example of this among the Hellenistic Jews was Philo of Alexandria.<sup>10</sup>

At the outset it must be stated that Philo in no way wished to cast aside the Old Testament Scriptures. The Pentateuch remained for him the inspired Word of God. Torm maintains that the motive for allegorizing was not always an ulterior one. Allegory was not always an effort

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9. Hastings, *op. cit.*, I, p. 65.

10. Aristobulus (ca. 160 B.C.) had set forth two theses: 1) Greek Philosophy is borrowed from the OT, and 2) all the tenets of Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, are to be found in Moses and the Prophets by those who use the right method of inquiring. Cf. Farrar, *Hist. of Int.* pp. 128 ff.

14. Farrar, *Early Days of Christianity*, I, pp. 269-271.

to find one's own thoughts in Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Many of the allegorists adopted their method out of a deep reverence for Scripture. It was a reverence so profound that they doubted whether the Scriptures could relate a commonplace fact.<sup>12</sup> If we keep this in mind, we can understand how a man like Philo could consider the Pentateuch to be the Word of God, and at the same time interpret it in a way which gave free reign to his imagination.

To show how arbitrary were his methods we cite a few examples of his exegesis: The four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2 represent the four virtues, prudence, temperance, courage, justice. The main stream, out of which they separate, is generic virtue, the Wisdom of God.<sup>13</sup> Abram, departing from his people and his father's house, is a typical Stoic who leaves behind Chaldaea of the sensual understanding, and goes to Haran, the land of pure reason. He is the symbol of a soul in quest of God. Abram means, according to Philo, "aspiring father". Later he becomes Abraham, which means "father of sound". Sound is like speech, so the father of sound is like the Spirit which utters speech. Farrar comments, "Abraham is reduced to a cold cypher indicative of mental earnestness."<sup>14</sup> Sarah is Virtue and abstract Wisdom. Hagar represents the

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11. Torn, Hermeneutik des neuen Testaments, p. 216.

12. Ibid., p. 217.

13. Philo, "Allegories of the Sacred Laws," I, 19, given in Taylor, op. cit., p. 99 footnote.

14. Farrar, Early Days of Christianity, I, pp. 269-271.

general sciences of grammar, music, geometry, dialectics, and rhetoric! All Mosaic institutions such as circumcision and the Sabbath, are only allegories.<sup>15</sup> When a statement of Scripture seems unworthy of God, for example, "Adam hid from God," it must be interpreted allegorically. For literally the expression dethrones God who sees everything, and from whom nothing can be hid. If synonyms are used, an allegorical interpretation is intended. For example, if in Genesis 1:27 we find that God "made man" (*ἐποίησεν*) and in Genesis 2:8 He "moulded man" (*ἐμόλασεν*) the first word implies the earthly, the second the heavenly man. At times he forces particles, adverbs, prepositions into the service of allegory. Each word may have all its possible meanings apart from the context. Numbers, names, both of men and countries, animals, birds, streams, colours, are made to stand as symbols for moral and spiritual things.<sup>16</sup>

From the Pentateuch and the Old Testament allegorical interpretation spread to the New Testament. In the Epistle of Barnabas, in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, there are traces of allegorical interpretation. But it is not until we come to Origen that we find systematic allegorical interpretation of the New Testament. Luther attributes the beginning of the practise of manifold interpretation to him. "Dies Uebel hat man dem Origenes, sodann seinem Nachfolger, dem Hieronymus,

15. Ibid.

16. Farrar, History of Interpretation, pp. 149-152.

die (wie ich glaube) heilige und auserwaehlte Maenner sind, zu danken."<sup>17</sup>

Origen accepted the Scripture as the infallible Word in every detail. However, he found discrepancies and even contradictions between the Evangelists. He found commands and prohibitions which seemed unjust. These difficulties he tried to explain away with allegories.<sup>18</sup>

According to Origen many passages in the Scriptures may have a threefold sense, the literal, the moral, and the spiritual. But two of these senses, the literal and the moral, are stressed little. He places the emphasis on the spiritual.<sup>19</sup> Origen's method was little less arbitrary than was that of Philo. The waterpots of stone, containing two or three firkins apiece, are interpreted as the Scriptures which sometimes contain two firkins, i.e. the moral and the literal sense, and sometimes three, namely, also the spiritual.<sup>20</sup>

After Origen the majority of the exegetes adopted the allegorical method. It becomes the standard form until the days of the Reformation. Jerome was the outstanding exponent of Origen's method in the Western Church. Augustine made use of the same method. A few protested, but the allegorical system prevailed. In one of his "Tischreden" Luther laments

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17. St. Louis, IV, 1304.

18. Farrar, History of Interpretation, pp. 192 ff.

19. Later the spiritual was divided into the allegorical and the anagogical senses by the Latin Fathers.

20. Farrar, History of Interpretation, p. 200.

the fact that in his earlier days he, too, allegorized thus, and attributes this fact to the influence of Origen and to St. Jerome. His judgment of the value of the method: "Im ganzen Origene ist nicht ein Wort von Christo."<sup>21</sup>

The schoolmen add nothing to the proper interpretation of Scripture. The Scriptures are made "to speak the language of Church tradition."<sup>22</sup> The fourfold sense of Scripture is taught and accepted. We quote from Luther:

Da nun Christus mit dem Glauben ausgetilgt war, da hat sein (des Pabst) Apostel mit dem vornehmsten, St. Thomas mit Lyra und den Seinigen, angefangen in die ganze Welt den vierfachen Sinn der Schrift auszubreiten; den buchstaeblichen, den sittlichen, den heimlichen und den tieferen Sinn (literalem, tropologicum, allegoricum et anagogicum) und dieses Gewand Christi in diese vier Theile zu theilen, dasz ein jeglicher Theil fuer sich seine Urheber, Erforscher und Lehrer haette, gleichsam als tapfere Kriegsknechte und kuehne Verderber der Schrift.<sup>23</sup>

With this method, adds Luther, they have atomized the Scriptures to such an extent that they find nothing of value to our souls in them.<sup>24</sup>

Such, then, was the practise of the Church at the time of Luther. It was a practise which certainly did nothing towards clarifying the Scriptures and making them understood by the common people. With allegory an interpreter was able to give free reign to his imagination. His only

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21. St. Louis, XXII, 1343-1344.

22. Farrar, History of Interpretation, p. 267.

23. St. Louis, IV, 1304-1305.

24. Ibid.

concern was not to go contrary to the teachings of the Church. We must keep in mind that at this time it was the pope who claimed that he was the judge of doctrine and the official interpreter of Scripture. It was one of the tasks of Luther to destroy the myth that the sole authority to interpret the Word rested with the papacy. We shall now trace the development in Luther to notice how he becomes convinced that the Scriptures are clear, and that everyone has a right to interpret them. Everyone is able to interpret the Word, if he does not play around with allegory. This development was a gradual one.

In October of the year 1512 Luther received the degree of Doctor of Theology. His interpretation at this time was still conditioned by the authority of the Church and by the tradition which the Church sanctioned. There might come a time, however, when he could no longer submit to such authority. He would have to make up his mind for himself. As his knowledge of the Scriptures increased, and as his understanding of the doctrines increased, his interpretation would change to a certain extent. By his own testimony, the knowledge of Christ which he gained through the study of the Epistle to the Romans did much to change his principles of interpretation. He came to understand that allegorical and spiritual interpretation serves no purpose.<sup>1</sup>

When he received his doctorate, he undoubtedly had not yet reached this "understanding" of Christ. He was still ignorant of the Gospel in the Pauline sense. He had not yet come to an understanding of the term "justitia Dei". His earliest exegetical work, however, given about a year later, gives evidence that he had already arrived at the

1. St. Louis, XXII, 1343.

understanding of the "justitia" as an imputed righteousness, a righteousness attributed to a sinner solely by the grace of God. We mention this because we feel that this understanding

### III. Luther and Allegory before 1517

His lectures have something which was lacking in many of the previous expositions given by men of the Church of Rome. Luther's lectures served a purpose. They sought to provide a norm of life. Luther is not interested in idle speculation or in hard academic questions. On the other hand, he is still under the influence of the traditional school of interpretation in certain respects. This should not surprise us. It would, indeed, be strange if we should notice a complete set of hermetically formulated principles formulated and applied by his student. After all, the allegorical mode of interpretation had been employed for centuries. Not only the fathers, according to Saylor, inspired also the eye of the Middle Ages. It was the literature. It influenced the thought of the people. People looked to the spiritual, while they neglected the physical. We should, therefore, not find it at all surprising that Luther should be influenced by the tradition of the past. His statement, to which we have already referred, namely, that after his enlightenment he realized that allegories interpretation serves no purpose.<sup>1</sup>

When he received his doctorate, he undoubtedly had not yet reached this "understanding" of Christ. He was still ignorant of the Gospel in the Pauline sense. He had not yet come to an understanding of the term "justitia Dei". His earliest exegetical work, however, given about a year later, gives evidence that he had already arrived at the

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1. St. Louis, XXII, 1343.

understanding of the "justitia" as an imputed righteousness, a righteousness attributed to a sinner solely by the grace of God. We mention this because we feel that this understanding influenced him in the interpretation of the Scriptures. His lectures have something which was lacking in many of the previous expositions given by men of the Church of Rome. Luther's lectures served a purpose. They sought to provide a norm of life. Luther is not interested in idle speculation or in mere academic questions. On the other hand, he is still under the influence of the traditional school of interpretation in certain respects. This should not surprise us. It would, indeed, be strange if we should notice a new set of hermeneutical principles formulated and applied all of a sudden. After all, the allegorical mode of interpretation had been employed for centuries. Not only was it applied to the Scriptures. The allegorical writings of the fathers, according to Taylor, inspired also the art of the Middle Ages. It dominated the literature. It influenced the thought of the people. People looked to the spiritual, while they neglected the physical.<sup>2</sup>

We repeat, therefore, that it is not at all surprising that Luther should be influenced by the tradition of the past. His statement, to which we have already referred, namely, that after his enlightenment he realized that allegories

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2. Taylor, op. cit., pp. 103-105.

serve no purpose, should not lead us to believe that he was able to discard this form of interpretation immediately after he had come to a proper understanding of the Gospel. In fact, if we examine his early works, even some of those which come after his enlightenment, we find traces of the traditional method of interpretation.

In his later years Luther himself remarked that he once followed the example of Jerome, Origen, and Augustine and tried to interpret everything allegorically.<sup>3</sup> Again, in his interpretation of Genesis he says that in his earlier days he had such delight in allegory that he thought everything must be interpreted allegorically. He was led to this opinion by Origen, Jerome, and Augustine, whose works he held in high regard at that time.<sup>4</sup> Not only did he make use of allegory, but he considered himself a "master" in the art of allegorical interpretation. Let us examine some of his early works to see to what extent he made use of allegory.

The earliest exegetical work of Luther which has been preserved and handed down to us is an Elucidation of the Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Luther probably began this commentary in the year 1513. In his prefatory remarks he makes it evident that

3. St. Louis, II, 557.

4. St. Louis, I, 610.

5. This Elucidation is preserved in the form of a Latin Psalter, (Vulgate) and upon the margin and between the lines are found notations made by Luther. These have been translated into German by Friedrich Eberhardt Rambach, and are found in the Walch edition of Luther's Works, IX, 1468 ff.

6. Walch, IX, 1480.

he intends to lay the emphasis on the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The literal sense seems to have no independent meaning. He censures the practise of those who place too much emphasis on the historical rather than on the prophetic aspect of the Psalter. For that reason they who have searched the Scriptures have not always found in them that which was needful. A good example is afforded by the Rabbinical Jews who could not look beyond the letter.<sup>7</sup>

Individual words in the Scriptures can take on a four-fold meaning. For example, Jerusalem, besides its literal meaning, can be interpreted otherwise. Allegorically it is a designation for good men, tropologically it means the virtues, and anagogically it signifies the reward. In a similar way the word Babylon may be interpreted in the allegorical sense as referring to evil men. Tropologically it signifies vices, anagogically it refers to punishments. Mt. Zion is given two interpretations, first, according to the letter which killeth, and secondly, according to the spirit which quickens. We find the following arrangement:<sup>8</sup>

Mt. Zion (according to the letter)	{	historically - Canaan.
		allegorically - The Synagogue or an outstanding person in it.
		tropologically - Pharisaic or legal righteousness.
		anagogically - The great joy which is to come to the flesh. (Future earthly glory).

6. Luther, Walch ed., Halle im Magdeburgischen, Johann Justinus Begauer, 24 vols., 1740 ff., IX, 1478-1480.

7. Walch, IX, 1467-1477.

8. Walch, IX, 1480.

Mt. Zion  
 (according to the  
 spirit)

{	historically	- The people in Zion.
	allegorically	- The Church, or every teacher, bishop, principal figure in the Church.
	tropologically	- The Righteousness of faith, or any important matter.
	anagogically	- Eternal glory of heaven.

Likewise, in his notes on Psalm LXXI (72) the "judgment" of God is interpreted allegorically, anagogically, and tropologically. The righteousness of God, in the same way has a threefold meaning. Tropologically it is faith in Christ, allegorically it is the whole Church, and anagogically it represents God Himself who is in the Church triumphant.<sup>9</sup>

It is not always, however, that Luther makes a close distinction between the four senses. He does, however, keep a clear distinction between the letter and the spirit. In fact, just this ability to distinguish between the two is a prime requisite of a good theologian. By "letter" he means the historical situation with regard to the Psalms-- the time and the circumstances under which they were written. This has little value. More important is the spiritual sense which interprets the Psalms in reference to Christ or to His work. We must be able to discriminate between the two senses, and not be satisfied with the letter because it has been emptied through Christ. (durch Christum ausgeleeret).<sup>10</sup>

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9. M. Reu, Luther's German Bible, p. 95 of Source Materials gives a translation from Erich Vogelsang, Der Junge Luther, Bd. V, "Luther's Werke in Auswahl."

10. Walch, IX, 1512.

verse. It is for this reason that we find Luther interpreting many Psalms with little regard for the historical situation or the conditions under which they were written. For example, the heading of Ps. 6 has the words, "to the chief musician on Neginoth" (  $\text{לְעֹלֵי מִנְיֹוֹת}$  ) which Luther translates, "auf acht Saiten." According to him, this eight-stringed instrument refers to the Church and to those who believe in the resurrection. "The heavens declare the glory of God," Ps. 19:1, refers to the spreading of the gospel. The heavens represent the Apostles and the Evangelists. The "firmament" is the Apostolic Church.<sup>11</sup> We continue to give some more examples. Ps. 23 is a song of the Church in which it praises Christ for His instruction, rule, and spiritual renewal which comes from the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.<sup>12</sup> The words of Psalm 78,2, "I will open my mouth in a parable" is taken as proof that the Lord will make things known which cannot be interpreted according to the letter alone.<sup>13</sup> Psalm 77 is first interpreted literally, but then Luther goes on to remark that the passage which speaks of God leading the children of Israel through the sea represents the spiritual Israel departing from the world of vanities.<sup>14</sup> He identifies

11. Walch, IX, 1603.

12. Walch, IX, 1640-1645.

13. Walch, IX, 2036.

14. Walch, IX, 2032.

verse 17, which speaks of the skies sending out a sound, with the preaching of the gospel by the apostles and evangelists. The "thunder" of verse 18 is the threat of the final judgment. Luther readily admits that the events described in Ps. 77 found their literal fulfillment in the history of the children of Israel, but a spiritual interpretation should be added so that we might derive some benefit from the Psalms.<sup>15</sup>

Thus Luther goes on. The shadow of the past still keeps the true light from his eyes. Allegories cloud his understanding of the Word. But in all fairness to him we must say that he makes an attempt to derive the meaning intended by the author of the text. He does not lose himself in allegories as some of his predecessors did. The allegorical method, as Fullerton remarks, had been used to "turn the Old Testament into a book of enigmas, an Alice-in-Wonderland species of literature, which needed an authoritative interpreter."<sup>16</sup> Luther, however, keeps his eyes on a definite goal. One question keeps revolving about in his mind: "How can I get right with God?" That is the question which drove him into the monastery. That is the question with which he is concerned throughout his life. Unlike the mystics who were concerned with the relationship

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15. Walch, IX, 2035.

16. K. Fullerton, "Reformation Principles of Exegesis and Interpretation of Prophecy," American Journal of Theology, XII, (July, 1908), p. 423.

between the Creator and the creature, he is concerned with the relationship between the Savior and the sinner. For this reason his lectures on the Psalms, though they do contain allegories, nevertheless, serve a purpose. His purpose is to lead people to know Christ as their Savior. This purpose may have been one of the reasons why he places such a great deal of emphasis on the tropological sense. He had made use of allegories, but it is the tropological sense which becomes for him the most important one. "Tropologicum esse primarium sensum Scripture."<sup>17</sup> By the tropological sense he understood what Scripture has to say to the individual regarding his daily conduct, his attitude, and his life. Therefore, throughout the notes on the Psalter, we find exhortations to exercise faith and Christian virtues. It is Christ speaking in the Church or through In this respect the first Psalm forms the introduction to the entire Psalter. The first verse of Ps. 1 strikes the keynote. The ungodly wander here and there, but the Christian accepts the teachings of Christ and permits these to be his rule in all his undertakings.<sup>18</sup>

Luther realizes even at this time that it is necessary to have more than an intellectual knowledge of the Word in order to interpret properly. The Scriptures cannot be

17. Weimar, III, 531, 33.

18. Walch, IX, 1483-1484.

interpreted like any other book. No one can understand them unless he fears the Lord, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.<sup>19</sup> But if we approach the Scriptures in faith, we find in them valuable messages. Most valuable is the message of God's grace working out our salvation. Laying the emphasis on the tropological sense, Luther finds throughout the Psalms just such messages which speak of the grace of God and the work of Christ.

We make one more observation in his early interpretation of the Psalms. His interpretation is Christocentric. Wherever possible, he interprets the Psalms Messianically. Christ is the key to the interpretation of the Scriptures, and He is also the centre of the Scriptures. In the Psalms Christ is usually the speaker, or it is David as a figure of Christ; at times it is Christ speaking in the Church or through His followers, the faithful in the Church. Wherever it is at all possible, he makes the Psalms refer to Christ. As Holl remarks, it is not a question whether the Psalm refers to Christ, but rather whether it speaks of his humiliation or exaltation, his human or divine nature.<sup>20</sup>

In the "Introduction to the Psalms"<sup>21</sup> Luther makes it

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19. Weimar, IV, 519,1.

20. K. Holl, "Luther's Bedeutung fuer den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst," Gesammelte Aufsaeetze zur Kirchengeschichte, I, pp. 545-546.

21. Walch, IX, 1474-1479.

quite evident that he considers the New Testament to be the key to the Old. Some try to avoid Christ, but he, when confronted with a difficult text will interpret it in the light of Christ. "Ich aber, wenn ich einen Text habe, der, gleich einer Nusz, eine mir allzu harte Schaale hat, so schmeisse ich ihn gleich an den Felsen, und finde den suessesten Kern."<sup>22</sup>

Luther then begins to follow this principle through. Thus regarding Psalm 3 he says Christ is the speaker, confessing three things to His Father, namely, the Father is His shield, the Father has honored Him, and the Father has lifted up His head. This last statement refers to the resurrection of Christ.<sup>23</sup> When the Psalmist says: "Lord, how are they increased that trouble me" (Ps. 3:1) Luther makes the speaker to be Christ in His human nature (angenommener menschliche Natur).<sup>24</sup> "I laid me down and slept; I awakened; for the Lord sustained me" (Ps. 3:5) refers to the death and resurrection of the Lord.

It is interesting to note that in a later exposition of the Psalms, given in 1519-1521, Luther again interprets this Psalm Messianically. The title "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom" is not to be taken only historically but must have another purpose. The writer of the Psalm realized

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22. Walch, IX, 1476.

23. Walch, IX, 1504.

24. Walch, IX, 1506.

that these historical titles had reference to future events.<sup>25</sup> However, after interpreting the entire Psalm Messianically, Luther gives it a second interpretation. Those who do not agree with the Messianic interpretation may refer this to David as a type of Christ, as one who also suffered, and who was of the mind of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes Luther tries to make individual passages, if not the entire Psalm, refer to Christ. So in Psalm 4, the last verse: "I will lay me down and sleep," once again is interpreted to speak of the death and the resurrection of the Lord.<sup>27</sup>

We need but glance casually at the headings Luther gives the Psalms to notice how frequently he attempts to interpret them Messianically. Thus Psalm 6 becomes a prayer of Christ, which He as the Mediator between God and man offered up through His suffering and sacrifice for sins.<sup>28</sup> Psalm 13 is a prayer of the suffering Christ.<sup>29</sup> Psalm 17 becomes a prayer of Christ against the Jewish nation, at the time of His suffering.<sup>30</sup> Psalm 18 is a song of triumph of Christ at the time of His resurrection.<sup>31</sup> Psalm 26 is a prayer of Christ to the Father, in which He asks to be separated from

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25. Walch, IV, 366.

26. Walch, IV, 398.

27. Walch, IX, 1515.

28. Walch, IX, 1520-1521.

29. Walch, IX, 1564.

30. Walch, IX, 1580 ff.

31. Walch, IX, 1588 ff.

the Jews who follow the letter and not the spirit.<sup>32</sup> These examples are sufficient to show us, on the one hand; that Luther still was under the influence of the traditional school. Others before him had interpreted in a similar way. From Augustine to Faber Stapulensis (Lefevre), from the fourth century to the time of Luther, there had been men who made Christ the speaker of many of the Psalms.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, we perceive a true evangelical note in Luther's exposition. He interprets the Psalms Messianically because through faith in this Christ we become righteous before God. We keep in mind that the question which is uppermost in his mind is still, "How can a sinner become righteous before God?" The imputation of righteousness by God upon the sinner is not an arbitrary act, but takes into account the saving work of Christ. That is his reason for laying so much stress on the Messianic interpretation of the Psalms.

Luther made progress as an exegete when, a short while after his exposition of the Psalms, he began his lectures on Romans. He began the lectures on Romans in the fall of 1515, and continued them until the following summer.

Regarding these lectures, Mackinnon says: "The Commentary

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32. Walch, IX, 1658 ff.

33. F. Hahn, "Luther's Auslegungsgrundsätze und ihre theologischen Voraussetzungen," Zeitschrift fuer systematische Theologie, XXI (1934), pp. 201-202.

35. Holl, op. cit., 550.

on Romans is an attempt to interpret the actual meaning of the text. Though he still recognizes the conventional assumption of a recondite, in addition to the obvious meaning of Scripture, he makes a more restricted use of this method and concerns himself mainly with the actual thought of the Apostle."<sup>34</sup>

Holl likewise says that "Luther grows as an exegete." Though he does make use of the fourfold sense at times, he loses his taste for allegories.<sup>35</sup>

It is true, he does make use of allegories at times. For example, regarding the very first verse where Paul calls himself a "servant of Jesus Christ," Luther speaks of the various senses, giving the tropological and allegorical interpretation. But we note at the same time that he does not spend a great deal of time on these different senses. The moral and tropological sense signifies the servant of God as he is by himself. (*jeder an und fuer sich*). This is general; all people are really servants of God. In the allegorical sense doulos refers to the servant in his relation to others (*einer fuer andere und ueber andere und um anderer willen*). This is something specific, has definite duties, and certain limitations. So Paul was a servant of the Lord in a special sense; he had received his office to administer the Word not as a lord, but as a servant. Actually, we can hardly call this an allegory in the sense in which it was

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34. Mackinnon, op. cit., I, p. 169.

35. Holl, op. cit., 550.

3. Kilsch, Luther's Werke, II, p. 8.

used by early interpreters, and even by Luther in some of his other works. He simply goes into the full meaning of doulos, and shows that the allegorical interpretation involves honor and dignity (Wuerde und Hoheit) whereas the first simply refers to the humility (Unterordnung und Demut).<sup>36</sup>

In the same verse "separated unto the gospel of God" is given a twofold meaning, but even so the emphasis here and throughout his lectures again lies on the tropological sense, which, according to Luther, is the message of God for the individual today. And that message is God's wrath over man's sin, and God's grace in Christ.

His procedure in interpreting Romans is much the same as that in his lectures on the Psalter. He explains the text grammatically, and then gives a detailed commentary on the important themes. But we note, at the same time, a more conscientious effort to improve over the older commentators and their systems. Beginning at chapter 9:10, Luther makes use of the newly-published Greek text of Erasmus. The quotations from the Old Testament are compared with the LXX and even with the Hebrew text. He makes use of former commentators, quotes Augustine, refers to Nicholas of Lyra, and to the Sentences of Lombard, but he does not bind himself to their interpretation. He is not afraid to state his findings. In support of his conclusions he quotes the Scriptures, and directs his readers to the text itself.

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36. E. Ellwein, Luther's Werke, II, p. 8.

Commenting on Romans 1:17, he explains his understanding of the term "righteousness of God." He differs from Aristotle, who speaks of righteousness arising out of and following man's action. It is different with God. Righteousness precedes man's work. Man's works arise from and flow out of the righteousness.<sup>37</sup> In the same verse, regarding the expression "from faith to faith" he makes mention of the fact that various interpretations have been given. But he is not moved by the opinion of others. Lyra's interpretation is rejected. It cannot be accepted because it is contrary to the expression found in the same verse: "as it is written, the just shall live by his faith." So we see that he already begins to make use of a principle which he formulated later, namely, "Scripture must interpret Scripture."

His opinion that the fathers and the schoolmen have erred is again brought out in his comment on Romans 4:7. He challenges the scholastic idea that sin is removed after baptism, and takes his stand with Augustine on this point because he followed "Scripture rather than Aristotle and his ethics."<sup>38</sup>

The emphasis which he placed upon the tropological sense, together with his study of the grammatical construction of the text, would quite naturally lead him away from the

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37. Ibid., pp. 23-24.

38. Ibid., p. 172.

the manifold sense of the Scriptures. As Reu says: "He only needed to discover the real bond between these two, the sensus grammaticus and the sensus tropologicus and the explanation of Scripture with a single meaning was attained."<sup>39</sup>

This single meaning of Scripture Luther begins to emphasize more and more in his works following the year 1517. Let us trace his development further.

The years following 1517 mark a great advance in Luther's principles of exegesis. This is the period in which, even by a few, he departed from Rome, not only in his theology, but also in his method of interpreting the Scriptures. The 95 Theses, the correspondence following the publication of the Theses, the Leipzig Disputation, the Diet at Worms, all of these mark certain stages in the development of his attitude toward the Scriptures and the interpretation of the same. He reached the conclusion that the Scriptures alone constitute the final authority. If we want the truth in spiritual matters, we must go to the Word of God. And if the Word is to be the sole source of our doctrine and the norm of our life, we must acquaint ourselves with the text of Scripture. In the exposition of Romans Luther began to make an effort to derive the true meaning from the text. He was still cramped by a limited knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. After his exposition of Romans he set himself energetically to master these languages. Perhaps this was due partly to the influence of Melancthon, who lectured at \_\_\_\_\_ this time, and partly due to Luther's great

<sup>39</sup>. M. Reu, Luther's German Bible, p. 129.

#### IV. Luther and Allegory after 1517

The years following 1517 mark a great advance in Luther's principles of exegesis. This is the period in which, step by step, he departs from Rome, not only in his theology, but also in his method of interpreting the Scriptures. The 95 Theses, the correspondence following the publication of the Theses, the Leipzig Disputation, the Diet at Worms, all of these mark certain stages in the development of his attitude toward the Scriptures and the interpretation of the same. He reached the conclusion that the Scriptures alone constitute the final authority. If we want the truth in spiritual matters, we must go to the Word of God. And if the Word is to be the sole source of our doctrine and the norm of our life, we must acquaint ourselves with the text of Scripture. In the exposition of Romans Luther began to make an effort to derive the true meaning from the text. He was still cramped by a limited knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. After his exposition of Romans he set himself energetically to master these languages. Perhaps this was due partly to the influence of Melancthon, who lectured at the University at this time, and partly due to Luther's great undertaking of translating the Bible into the language of the

people. At any rate, he came to realize more and more that the Bible is the only norm of faith and life, and that, therefore, a greater effort must be made to find the true meaning of each particular passage.

There is another factor which drove Luther to a more exact study of the text of Scripture. He had a struggle on his hands. Not only did he have to contend with the men of Rome, but on the other hand, there were those who, breaking from the authority of Rome, refused to submit to any authority, even that of the Word of God. Fanatics began to threaten the work of the Reformer. There was a great deal of confusion in the minds of men, even those men who wanted to take the stand with Luther against the papacy and the Church of Rome. Luther always was interested in the Scriptures, but a controversy of such a nature could not leave a person like Luther unaffected. He began an even more exacting study of the Word. There he must find the principles which are to guide him. And to do this he must arrive at a clearer understanding and a better application of exegetical rules. Luther's principles of interpretation are based on the assumption that the Scriptures are in themselves clear. His viewpoint in this matter is quite different from that of the papacy. The difficulty of interpretation, he believed, lies with the interpreter, not in the Scriptures. Difficult passages appear to be difficult, not because of their content, but because of our own ignorance of the language and our lack

of spiritual apprehension.<sup>1</sup>

Because the Scriptures are in themselves clear we do not need an authoritative interpreter. Every man has the right to interpret the Scriptures for himself. This, according to Luther, meant that the interpretation of the Church is not essential. Nor is the help of the fathers necessary. Luther emphasized this proposition especially in his "Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (1520). The claim of the Romanists that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to the pope alone Luther calls a wall which must be torn down.<sup>2</sup> He objects to the Roman claim that interpretation belongs to the pope alone, because it may well happen that the pope and his followers fall into error. They may be wicked men, not taught by God. Hence, they would have less understanding of the Word than an ordinary godly person.<sup>3</sup> It is a wickedly invented fable, he maintains, that the interpretation of the Scriptures or the confirmation of such interpretation belongs to the pope alone.<sup>4</sup> In the letter against Emser (1521) Luther states his case in even stronger terms. He censures his opponents for a lack of knowledge of the Scriptures, and accuses them of inventing new lies when they declare that the Scriptures are so obscure

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1. Koestlin, *op. cit.*, I, 504.

2. St. Louis, X, 269-270.

3. St. Louis, X, 277.

4. *Ibid.*

5. St. Louis, IX, 1362.

6. St. Louis, IV, 165 ff.

7. Weimer, I, 507, 35, translated in *Hau, Luther's German Bible*, p. 348.

that they cannot be interpreted apart from the holy fathers, and that we must, therefore, follow the glosses of the fathers.<sup>5</sup> Luther maintains that II Pet. 1:20 forbids us to rely on the interpretation of the fathers unless their interpretation is in accord with the clear teaching of the Scriptures.<sup>6</sup> The Scriptures are so clear, Luther concludes, that any Christian can interpret them. From this principle it follows that any passage of the Bible can have but one meaning. For the Scriptures are certainly not made clear by interpreting each passage in various senses. The allegorical sense leaves room for speculation; it conceals the clear meaning of the text. It is chiefly on this account that Luther develops a strong dislike for allegory. In the "Exposition of the Seven Penitential Psalms" (1517) Luther does not make use of allegory.<sup>7</sup> This is no indication by itself that he rejects allegory at this time, but in the "Exposition of the Ten Commandments," given about the same time, he speaks of this mode of interpretation as a "sport for children." Those who interpret thus he calls "witless and incompetent dreamers who quibbled with the sensus literalis, allegoricus, moralis, anagogicus." Such a practise may be amusing, but it deceives and misleads people.<sup>8</sup>

5. St. Louis, XVIII, 1292.

6. St. Louis, IX, 1362.

7. St. Louis, IV, 165 ff.

8. Weimar, I, 507, 35, translated in Reu, Luther's German Bible, p. 348.

Throughout the following years his distaste for allegories grows stronger. His statements against the practise of allegorizing become more pronounced. Commenting on Ps. 22:18, he speaks of the interpretation of a text in a fourfold sense as an evil practise (Bosheit) and a godless art, and criticizes Origen for interpreting in such a manner.<sup>9</sup> In the lectures on Genesis, given from 1523-1524, and published in 1527, he says that by means of allegories we lose the proper understanding of the Scriptures. Allegories are idle speculations which deceive the people.<sup>10</sup> St. Jerome used allegories and thought he had produced good expositions, but actually he has given us only the empty shell and not the nut, only the pod and not the peas in it.<sup>11</sup> Anyone who wishes to interpret in such a way should keep away from the Scriptures. He may play around with Homer, Ovid, Virgil, or other poets.<sup>12</sup> It is a dangerous matter to play around with allegories in respect to Christian life. For allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, especially seductive to idle men.<sup>13</sup> Those who allegorize believe they are in paradise, in the very bosom of God, but actually they are engaged only in idle speculation.<sup>14</sup>

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9. St. Louis, IV, 1304.

10. St. Louis, III, 693.

11. Ibid.

12. St. Louis, III, 693-694.

13. St. Louis, XXII, 1342.

14. St. Louis, II, 559.

17. St. Louis, XII, 55.

19. St. Louis, XVIII, 1308.

Allegory is worthless. Through the use of allegory the Scripture no longer remains clear. Properly interpreted, however, Scripture is a clear book. Our aim must be to get the single, literal sense of each text of the Scriptures. For there is life and power. Allegory is the work of fools, even though it may appear to be a noble art.<sup>15</sup>

With the rejection of the fourfold sense, Luther arrives at what Holl calls the "Eindeutigkeit der Bibel."<sup>16</sup> The text has only one meaning. That is the simple, literal sense. In the treatise "On the Babylonian Captivity" (1520) Luther writes that "no violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel; but they are to be retained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids."<sup>17</sup> In the letter to Emser to which we already referred Luther maintains that the spiritual sense is not valid in any controversy, it does not hold water, nor would it matter if no one knew anything about it.<sup>18</sup> The "spiritual" sense to which he makes reference here is the allegorical sense as it was used by the fathers. The Scripture texts do not have a twofold meaning, he concludes. Those who would give each text a twofold meaning have been faced with all sorts of difficulties, as can be seen from

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15. St. Louis, XXII, 1344.

16. Holl, *op. cit.*, I, p. 551.

17. St. Louis, XIX, 25.

18. St. Louis, XVIII, 1306.

the example of Origen. It is much better to remain with the single sense of the Word.<sup>19</sup>

Luther's insistence on the single meaning of a text led him to lay a great deal of emphasis on the grammatical constructions, and on the historical sense. We have already made mention of the fact that he began to study Hebrew and Greek, and used these languages as the basis for his interpretation. Meanings are derived from words. Words express the idea, and therefore, it is necessary that we examine the individual words. In the preface to Romans (1522) Luther defines such terms as grace, faith, righteousness, flesh, and spirit, because "without an understanding of these words, you will never understand this letter of St. Paul, or any other book of Holy Scripture."<sup>20</sup>

According to Luther, emphasis on the grammar implies at the same time an examination of the context and of parallel passages. For Scripture may seem to contradict itself unless this is done. On the other hand errorists have often based their error on a single word or on a grammatical construction of a single phrase.<sup>21</sup> Errorists pick up a phrase here and another there, and thereby pervert the Scriptures so that the people no longer can see what Scripture actually teaches.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, one should not

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19. St. Louis, XVIII, 1307-1308.

20. St. Louis, XIV, 94 ff.

21. St. Louis, XVI, 2185.

22. St. Louis, VIII, 380.

tear a word out of its context, but examine that which precedes and follows the text.<sup>23</sup>

Together with the grammatical sense Luther emphasized the historical sense. This implied a study of the historical circumstances as well as the content. For example, in the preface to Isaiah Luther says the following:

To him who despises or does not understand the title, I say that he should let the prophet Isaiah alone, or, at least, that he will not understand him fully, for it is impossible to understand or observe the prophet's word and meaning rightly and clearly without a fundamental knowledge of the title.<sup>24</sup>

He continues to explain what he means by "title."

When I speak of title, I do not mean only that you read or understand the words "Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Kings of Judah;" but that you take up the last book of Kings and the last book of Chronicles, and take in the whole contents of them, especially the stories, speeches, and events that occurred under the kings named in the title, clear to the end of those books.<sup>25</sup>

For a proper understanding of a given text, he continues:

It is necessary to know how things were in the land, how matters stood, what was in the mind of the people, and what kind of intentions they had toward or against their neighbors, friends, and enemies; and especially what attitude they took to God and the prophet, toward His Word and His service.<sup>26</sup>

Again in his preface to the Book of Jeremiah he says, "not many comments are required for an understanding of the

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23. St. Louis, VIII, 381.

24. St. Louis, VI, 4.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

prophet Jeremiah, if one will only regard the events that took place under the kings in whose time he preached."<sup>27</sup>

In his comments on Exodus Luther specifically tells his readers to learn the Scriptures according to the historical sense.<sup>28</sup> The historical sense must be established first.<sup>29</sup> One of the reasons, according to Luther, why Jerome and Origen could not interpret the passage in Genesis 32, which speaks of Jacob wrestling with the angel, is their lack of consideration of the historical sense.<sup>30</sup> He maintains that Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and Bernard made too much of allegories and thereby directed people away from the historical sense and from faith.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, we ought to direct our efforts to this end that we get one, single, definite historical sense from the Scriptures.<sup>32</sup>

Here we have to keep in mind that the literal, grammatical, and historical, were for Luther, not three different senses, but one and the same sense. Each text of Scripture has one meaning only. It is difficult to find a term suitable for the one sense. At times Luther calls it the grammatical, at other times the literal, and at times the historical. At times he avoids the term "literal" because some confuse it with the bare letter. This single

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27. St. Louis, XIV, 40.

28. St. Louis, III, 694.

29. St. Louis, II, 560.

30. St. Louis, II, 774.

31. St. Louis, I, 626.

32. St. Louis, I, 950.

sense, however, is not a dead letter; it is a spiritual sense. The single sense, in the first place, teaches us what happened. We could, therefore, call it the historical sense. But more than that, it teaches us what we are to believe, and creates faith in us, and therefore, we need no allegory. This single sense tells us how we are to live, and therefore, we need no tropological interpretation. This single sense gives us the hope of a hereafter, tells us what we can expect in the life to come, and therefore, we need no anagogical interpretation. This one sense may at times be the allegorical sense. It may happen that certain passages must be interpreted only in an allegorical way. That still does not alter the truth that each text of the Scriptures has but one sense.

It has already been mentioned that Luther held the Scriptures to be a clear book. Any Christian can understand it, especially if he pays attention to the grammatico-historical sense. On the other hand, intelligence and education alone, says Luther are not sufficient for a proper understanding of the Bible. Grammar and history alone do not furnish the key to the understanding of the Word. Only a Christian can interpret properly. Only he in whom the Spirit of God dwells is able to understand the Scriptures.

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33. Hahn, op. cit., p. 163.

34. St. Louis, 1760, 1861.

35. St. Louis, XIV, 15.

A person who studies the Scriptures is able to interpret them properly, not because any special powers of interpretation were given to him, in the sense in which the papacy claimed to possess special powers, but rather because he approaches the Bible with the knowledge that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. All Scripture, therefore, must be true. One portion cannot contradict another. Rather, one portion clarifies another. By comparing various parts we get a better understanding of the doctrines taught. And so Luther arrives at an important principle: "Scripture must interpret Scripture."

This may mean, in the first place, that the New Testament interprets the Old. There certainly is a definite relationship between the two. Luther points out that many incidents in the New Testament occurred in order that "the Scriptures might be fulfilled."<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, one book of the Bible may help to interpret another. In his introduction to the Old Testament Luther says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is almost sufficient by itself to interpret the figures of Moses.<sup>35</sup> More than that, one passage may shed light on another. In his exposition of Deuteronomy 1, where it is stated that the people came to Moses asking him to send spies ahead to the land of Canaan, Luther points out that in Numbers 13:2

34. St. Louis, XIII, 1760, 1861.

35. St. Louis, XIV, 15.

it is stated that God instructed Moses to send the spies ahead. There may seem to be a contradiction here, unless we permit Scripture to interpret itself. That is the situation throughout the Bible. It interprets itself. We need but compare one passage with another, but the final authority, even in interpreting the Scriptures, is the Scripture itself.<sup>36</sup>

In a sermon on Matt. 20:20-23, Luther attacks the papists for having made Scripture an obscure book which, according to them, must be interpreted in the light of the fathers. No, he says, the fathers do not make the Scriptures clear, for the Scriptures are clear by themselves. Scripture is its own light.<sup>37</sup>

In a sermon on Mark 16:1-8, Luther points out that human reason is not a factor which determines the meaning of a text. He says the following:

The Bible is not a book which flows out of human reason or wisdom....therefore, anyone who attempts to understand Moses, the prophets with his own reason, and tries to make Scripture agree with his own reason, departs from the doctrines of Scripture.<sup>38</sup>

In another sermon he makes mention of the fact that St. Augustine confessed that for years he tried to understand the Scriptures with his own reason, but the more he studied,

36. St. Louis, III, 1386.

37. St. Louis, XI, 2335.

38. St. Louis, XIII, 1889.

39. St. Louis, XIII, 1902.

40. Ibid.

41. Koll, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

the less he understood of it. Finally he reached the conclusion that his reason must be out aside, and whatever the Scriptures say should be accepted with a believing heart.<sup>39</sup> Luther quotes the saying of Gregory that Scripture is a stream which an elephant tries to swim and drowns, but a lamb is able to ford.<sup>40</sup> No, he concludes, the interpreter must not depend on his learning, education, or reason, but in faith must examine all of Scripture and interpret one passage in the light of another. The clear passage must interpret the difficult one.

Here is a point where a difficulty presents itself. Just what is a clear passage? A passage may be clear to one person and not to another. Luther would reply that to the natural man no passage is clear. He has no understanding of Scripture. But to the spiritual man the Scripture is clear, for the Spirit working through the Scriptures makes the matter clear to the individual. Here we seem to run up against a contradiction. The Spirit is needed to understand the Word, but only through the Word does the Spirit work to give us understanding. But, as Holl points out, this is not a vicious circle, but rather the way all interpretation is given. "Es ist derjenige Kreislauf, in dem sich alles Auslegen, alles geistige Verstehen, ja auch alles Verstehen im taeglichen Verkehr unvermeidlich bewegt."<sup>41</sup> The

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39. St. Louis, XIII, 1909.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 567.

principle as applied by Luther set interpretation free from the bonds of the mere letter, by which the Rabbinical school, and, to a certain extent, the humanists had bound it. And on the other hand, it also set interpretation free from the confusion of allegorical interpretation and idle speculation. This principle of replacing the fourfold sense of Scripture with a single sense, a sense which, nevertheless, is spiritual, since it is given by the Holy Spirit, and is the way through which the Spirit comes to man, is new with Luther. One would expect the humanists who concerned themselves with the study of language to cast off the practise of the manifold interpretation. But such is not the case. The humanists studied the language, very often, merely for the sake of the language. For Luther language had only one purpose, that was, to bring to light the single meaning of Scripture. And the purpose of this single sense is to bring the Gospel to men in order that they might obtain salvation. Furthermore, he differs from the humanists in his approach to the language of Scripture. Mere human intelligence and learning alone cannot interpret the Word. The Scriptures must be approached with humility, and only God, through the Cross of Christ, can work this humility in people.<sup>42</sup>

Just a glance at the exegesis of a humanist like

42. Hahn, op. cit., pp. 169-170.

Erasmus, for example, will give us an idea how far removed his principles were from those of Luther. Six months before the Leipzig Disputation Erasmus published his Methods in which he followed the method of allegory employed by Origen. That is the only way to interpret the Old Testament, he says, for thus you can penetrate the hull and get at the kernel.<sup>43</sup> Erasmus makes the comment that without a mystic sense the Book of Kings would be no more profitable than Livy. He gives the advice that we give heed to those expositions which depart as widely as possible from the letter.<sup>44</sup> As Mackinnon points out, Erasmus begins to handle Scripture in the light of history, admitting that the books of the Bible are coloured by the historic circumstances in which they were written and by the personality of their authors. But, adds Mackinnon, Erasmus "still clings to the allegoric method of interpretation."<sup>45</sup>

Luther appreciated the learning of Erasmus, but when it comes to the latter's interpretation of the Scriptures, Luther is dissatisfied. In a letter to Lang, March 1517, he says that in Erasmus the human prevails more than the divine. Simply approaching the Scriptures as the humanists did, with their own knowledge, does not guarantee a proper interpretation. Jerome, says Luther, knew five different languages, yet his

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43. Holl, op. cit., I, p. 552.

44. Farrar, History of Interpretation, p. 321.

45. Mackinnon, op. cit., II, p. 247.

interpretation is inferior to that of Augustine.<sup>46</sup>

Now we certainly cannot deny that the humanists were of help in preparing for the Reformation. Nor does Luther deny that. He made use of the work of Reuchlin, Lefevre, Erasmus and others, but in this matter of allegorical interpretation Luther stands by himself. He is really the first to come to the conviction that the fourfold sense is unsatisfactory. The Scriptures can have but one meaning. Each text has but one sense, and it is the work of the exegete to discover that one true sense.

We are not to conclude that in practice Luther failed to follow the very principles he pronounced. It is not as though the practice of the traditional school remained with him even after he had formulated his principles of interpretation. When he uses allegories it is not as though "they cling to him as an eggshell to a newly-hatched chick" as Holl points out.<sup>1</sup> Luther's condemnation of allegory, and his warning against its use were directed against those who used it on no principles, and who concealed the true meaning of the text by their speculations. Allegories, said Luther, may be used in line with certain principles. They must be subject to

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1. Holl, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 553-554.

certain limitations. An examination of but a few of his writings will show us just what these principles and limitations are.

#### V. Luther's final use of Allegory

Luther's principle that every text can have but one meaning did not rule out entirely the allegorical form of interpretation. He himself made use of it throughout his life. It is true that in his later writings we find few allegories, but the fact that we do find some is an indication that he did not consider it wrong to use allegories under all circumstances. We are not to conclude that in practise Luther failed to follow the very principles he propounded. It is not as though the practise of the traditional school remained with him even after he had formulated his principles of interpretation. When he uses allegories it is not as though "they cling to him as an eggshell to a newly-hatched chick" as Holl points out.<sup>1</sup> Luther's condemnation of allegory, and his warning against its use were directed against those who used it on no principle, and who concealed the true meaning of the text by their speculations. Allegories, said Luther, may be used in line with certain principles. They must be subject to

1. Holl, op. cit., I, pp. 553-554.

2. St. Louis, III, 152-153.

certain limitations. An examination of but a few of his writings will show us just what these principles and limitations are.

In the first place, we want to examine some of his allegories as they are found in his later writings. We find allegory used in his "Sermons on Genesis" (1523-1524). When he comes to the matter of Noah's ark and the account of the flood he says that various allegorical interpretations have been given. For example, the ark has been interpreted to represent the wounds in the side of the crucified Savior. Luther comments that such an interpretation is not necessarily wrong. He does not like it for various reasons. The better interpretation, he says, is to make the ark represent the Christian Church. The door through which Noah and those who were saved entered is the Word of God. For it is through the Word that we enter into the Christian Church. The window in the top of the ark, according to Luther's allegory, typifies the light of the Gospel. The fact that the ark was divided into stories is an indication that there are different gifts in the Christian Church.<sup>2</sup>

In his exposition of Genesis given in the closing years of his life, 1536-1545, Luther goes into greater detail in his allegory of the account of the flood. He points out that in I Cor. 10:2 Paul says that the "fathers were all baptized in the cloud and in the sea." The Egyptians, observes Luther,

<sup>2</sup>. St. Louis, III, 152-153.

were also baptized in that sea, but that baptism meant death for them. So also is the case of the flood. The same waters which destroyed the earth and its inhabitants saved Noah and his family. Wherein lay the difference? Luther answers that those who were saved had faith. The story of the flood is given, therefore, in order to point out to us that faith is necessary if we are to be saved.

After such general remarks he goes into detail giving the allegorical interpretation of the flood. First he gives us the interpretation of the fathers. Some of them reasoned thus: The human body is six times as long as it is wide. The ark, fifty cubits wide, and three-hundred cubits high, was in the same proportion. Therefore, the ark typifies the body of Christ. Even as the people who fled to the ark found refuge, so also those who trust in Christ shall be saved.<sup>3</sup>

Luther says such an interpretation may stand. He does not care for it, however. The reason it may stand is that there is nothing in the allegory which is directly contrary to Scripture. He continues to give his own interpretation in detail. First he takes up the matter of the raven, the dove, and the olive branch.

The fathers, he says, used the allegory of the raven, and said that because ravens delighted in eating dead bodies,

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3. St. Louis, I, 616.

they represent carnal men who delight in carnal pleasures. The Epicureans were an example. Luther calls this a fair explanation but inadequate because it is merely of the moral and philosophical sort which Erasmus and Origen gave.<sup>4</sup>

Luther says we must look for a theological explanation. According to him, the raven typifies the ministry of the Law. The color of the bird is black. Black is also a token of sadness. The sound of the raven's cry is unpleasant. These are also characteristics of the preachers of the Law. Their message is unpleasant. Their doctrine of justification through the Law is destructive. But even as the raven was sent forth from the ark by Noah, so the Law must be preached.<sup>5</sup>

The raven, he continues, is an impure bird, black in color; it has a strong beak and a harsh, shrill voice. It scents bodies from a great distance, and therefore, men fear its voice as a certain omen of impending death. The popish priests are like those ravens. Even at best they do nothing but wound the conscience.<sup>6</sup>

To the raven Luther contrasts the dove. The incident of the dove is a delightful picture of the Gospel. He then enumerates ten characteristics of the dove. They are as follows: 1) The dove is without guile. 2) It does not bite with its beak. 3) It does not scratch with its claws. 4) It

4. St. Louis, I, 618.

5. St. Louis, I, 619.

6. St. Louis, I, 622.

7. St. Louis, I, 623.

eats no unclean thing. 5) It nourishes the young of others. 6) Its song is a sigh. 7) It abides by the waters. 8) Doves fly in flocks. 9) The dove nests in a safe place. 10) Its flight is swift. These characteristics he sets forth in the following verse:

Friedlich und still ein Taublein ist,  
 Ohn allen Zorn und Hinterlist.  
 Ihr Fusz nicht kratzt, ihr Schnabel nicht wundt,  
 Das reinste Koernlein liest ihr Mund.  
 Mit ihrem G'fieder schwingt sie sich  
 Zu frischem Wasser behendiglich.  
 Ihr Liedlein und ihr bester G'sang  
 Ist Seufz'n und Kirr'n ihr Lebenlang.  
 Eines andern Jungen sie erzeucht,  
 Nichts anders denn mit Haufen fliegt.  
 Ihr Nest sie macht und allda heckt,  
 Da es sicher ist und unbefleckt.<sup>7</sup>

The New Testament tells us that the Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Therefore, argues Luther, we are justified in using the dove as an allegory of the ministry of the Gospel.

The first dove is a picture of the prophets sent out to teach the people, but the time of the Law (the flood) had not yet passed away. David, Elias, Isaiah, having delivered their message, returned to the ark, without seeing the New Testament era, but they were saved by faith in the Seed for which they longed.

The second dove which returned with the olive branch represents the New Testament ministry. The green freshness of the olive branch is a type of the Gospel, which endures

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7. St. Louis, I, 623.

forever and is never without fruit.

The third dove did not return. Herein is certainty, says Luther, that the Gospel shall remain until the end of the world. The text tells us that Noah waited seven days after he sent out the first dove. This has reference to the period of the Law which preceded the New Testament era. The second dove returned at dusk. That means the Gospel has been assigned to the last age in the world. We should not look for another kind of doctrine before the coming of night. Rather, the Christian should wait patiently until, with the third dove, he will fly away to that other life, never to return to this vale of tears and grief.<sup>8</sup>

Before attempting to determine what principles Luther followed in this allegory we should like to cite a few other instances where he made use of this mode of interpretation.

We find him using allegory again in his "Interpretation of Isaiah," chapter six. These short expositions (scholia) on Isaiah were given from 1527-1530. In this particular allegory he deals with the vision of Isaiah. The Lord in the temple is Christ, the seraphim represent the apostles and the ministers. The wings represent the office of the Word, the preaching of the Law and the Gospel. The flying points to the spread of the Gospel. The covering of the

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8. St. Louis, I, 623-626.

9. St. Louis, VI, 64-67.

10. St. Louis, III, 1391-1398.

face and the feet with the wings is symbolic of the life of the Christian. It is also hidden in Christ. The "face" is the faith, the feet refer to the life of the Christian. This is actually hidden, because even hypocrites do what seem to be good works. The seraphim arise and cry: "Holy, holy, holy." That indicates that the apostles are continually prepared to preach. The proper preaching of Christ will move people even as the posts of the door were moved. The house was filled with smoke. That represents faith in the Word of the preacher. Through it our reason, which we consider to be light, becomes as smoke. It becomes darkened. The Gospel takes the place of reason. Only after we make confession that our lips are unclean does the Spirit with the Gospel, which is a burning coal, create faith in our hearts, so that we desire to tell others about the saving work of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

His commentary on Deuteronomy, given from 1523-1525, also contains allegories. In the first chapter "on this side Jordan" refers to the time when the Law was preached, before the Gospel was openly proclaimed. Moab, the Red Sea, Paran, Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, Disahab, all of these are given allegorical meanings.<sup>10</sup>

These allegories of Luther, beautiful as they are, and strange as they may seem to us, were given with certain definite principles in mind. And if allegories are subject

9. St. Louis, VI, 64-67.

10. St. Louis, III, 1391-1395.

to principles, we cannot rule them out entirely, says Luther, because Christ and the apostles used allegories at times.<sup>11</sup> Peter made use of an allegory when he interpreted the flood. Christ uses allegory in John 3:14, when He speaks of the serpent which was lifted up in the wilderness. Paul uses it in I Cor. 10:4 and in other places.<sup>12</sup> Before giving his allegory on Deut. 1, which we cited above, Luther specifically states that we are permitted to allegorize here because in II Cor. 3:7 ff. Paul sets the pattern for us.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, because Christ and the apostles used allegory its use cannot be altogether condemned. But, adds Luther, "it is not for every man to use allegories at his pleasure, for a goodly outward show may soon deceive a man and cause him to err."<sup>14</sup> There are certain regulations which must be kept in mind and which the interpreter must observe if he wants to present something which is of value and not mere speculation.

The first observation is that allegories by themselves do not teach basic truths. Therefore, they must not stand alone. Never should we make the allegorical our chief sense. By allegories, says Luther, nothing definite is taught whereon we can build, and, therefore, we should remain with the clear sense of the text.<sup>15</sup> Again, allegories do not

11. St. Louis, I, 611.

12. Ibid.

13. St. Louis, III, 1391.

14. St. Louis, IX, 572.

15. St. Louis, XXII, 1343.

prove anything; we should use them sparingly. First the doctrine must be established as a firm basis.<sup>16</sup> By itself allegory is unable to build up our faith.<sup>17</sup> It does not prove the passage; but rather must be supported by the clear passage.<sup>18</sup>

Luther reminds us in the commentary on Galatians that allegories do not convince, or prove anything in matters of divinity. We ought to follow the example of Paul who first convinces the Galatians with words and then presents the allegorical picture.<sup>19</sup> He says the following:

If Paul had not proved the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of works by stronger arguments, he should have little prevailed by this allegory. But because he had fortified his cause with invincible arguments, taken of experience, of the example of Abraham, the testimonies of Scripture and the like; now, in the end of his disputation, he adds an allegory.<sup>20</sup>

Luther himself does follow this principle of Paul. In each of the instances of allegorical interpretation which we cited above he is careful to establish the historical sense first of all. In the allegory of the flood he states specifically that he feels he ought to say a few words on allegory in addition to the historical interpretation, but he is not particularly fond of allegories.<sup>21</sup> After he had

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- 16. St. Louis, XXII, 1339.
  - 17. St. Louis, III, 1390.
  - 18. St. Louis, III, 1391.
  - 19. St. Louis, IX, 568-569.
  - 20. St. Louis, IX, 569.
  - 21. St. Louis, I, 610.

completed his allegorical interpretation of the flood, he speaks almost apologetically for having done so. "I have set the matter down briefly," he says, "because we should not tarry with allegories as we do with history."<sup>22</sup> Before interpreting Isaiah 6 allegorically he reminds us that often he has stated that the historical sense should be followed, but he gives this allegorical interpretation only as a pattern for those who might be inclined to allegorize. Allegory, however, is not the foundation of faith.<sup>23</sup> His statement concerning Deuteronomy 1 is very similar. "What I have said in other places, I repeat here," he says. "The Christian reader should before all things direct his effort toward finding the literal sense which is the foundation of faith and Christian theology."<sup>24</sup> But in using allegory he states he will follow the example of Paul who made of allegories a secondary matter. So also in his exposition of Exodus 1, (1524-1526) Luther interprets allegorically, only after having given the historical interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

Allegorical interpretation by itself does not convince, nor does it afford conclusive proof for a doctrine. It does not form a strong enough argument. First the doctrine must be established, and this is done by emphasizing the historical

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22. St. Louis, I, 626.

23. St. Louis, VI, 64.

24. St. Louis, III, 1389.

25. St. Louis, III, 691 ff.

26. St. Louis, II, 774.

or literal sense. Allegories are, in fact, harmful if they do not agree with the historical presentation, or when one uses them instead of the historical sense.<sup>26</sup> Allegories must agree with the historical sense, for thereupon we build as upon the proper foundation which is gold, silver, and precious jewels. Allegory, even at best, is still stubble.<sup>27</sup> Yes, he even goes farther than that and says where allegories do not have the historical sense as the foundation, they are nothing but fables, no more valuable than the fables of Aesop.<sup>28</sup> Allegories cannot be used to establish or teach a doctrine which is not taught in the literal sense.

Since allegories teach no truth that is not clearly stated somewhere in the literal sense, it follows that allegories must agree with the analogy of faith. Luther followed this principle: whenever an allegory is not contrary to the analogy of faith he allows it to stand, but even there allegory is not desirable unless it, in some way, strengthens the faith, or illustrates the doctrine taught elsewhere.

For example, let us go back to the allegory of the flood. Luther definitely states that he avoids allegories which people invent in their own minds. Others, which are based on the analogy of faith are useful, for they comfort

26. St. Louis, II, 557.

27. St. Louis, II, 560.

28. St. Louis, II, 774.

us and adorn the interpretation.<sup>29</sup> He says he likes the allegories of Peter and Paul for this very reason, but dislikes the allegories of Jerome, Origen, and Augustine because they are only philosophic speculations, and have no connection with faith.<sup>30</sup> Luther does not oppose the interpretation of the fathers who taught that the ark typifies the body of Christ. Such an interpretation can be accepted because "it is in keeping with the analogy of faith."<sup>31</sup> He continues to emphasize very strongly that allegories must be based on the analogy of faith. Referring to the creation story he says that if someone should allegorize and say that the sun represents Christ, and the moon the Church, which receives its light from Christ, such an interpretation may not be absolutely correct, but it is acceptable because it is not contrary to faith. On the other hand, he rejects entirely the interpretation of the pope who teaches that the sun represents the papacy while the moon represents the temporal power, or the government. That is foolish and contrary to faith, and therefore, we must consider such allegories as having their origin in Satan.<sup>32</sup>

In his interpretation of Exodus he again states that

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29. St. Louis, I, 611.

30. St. Louis, I, 612.

31. St. Louis, I, 616.

32. St. Louis, I, 616-617.

33. St. Louis, III, 682.

34. St. Louis, III, 683.

35. St. Louis, III, 152.

allegories must agree with faith.<sup>33</sup> He did not like Origen's allegories. They did not conform to the doctrines clearly taught in Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding the interpretation that the ark typifies Christ and the door represents the wound, Luther comments that such an allegory, though not necessarily wrong, cannot be held as an article of faith. His own interpretation of the passage, namely, that the ark represents the Church, he does not press. Anyone who does not want to accept the interpretation, he says, may pass it up, because he cannot prove it by Scripture.<sup>35</sup>

If allegories must be based on the literal sense, and if they do not establish a doctrine and dare not go contrary to any doctrine taught in Scripture one may ask, Why use allegories at all? Do they serve a purpose? Luther would answer in the affirmative. Allegory, properly used, is of some value, but it does not belong to the body of the exposition. It belongs to the category of illustrations. The allegory must be examined from the viewpoint of the person who uses it. And if we examine the allegories which are found in Scripture we find that they are used to illustrate and adorn, to present a pleasing picture, to explain the truths of Scripture to the people.

This Luther states clearly in his exposition of Galatians.

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33. St. Louis, III, 692.

34. St. Louis, III, 695.

35. St. Louis, III, 152.

Allegories, he says, make a deep impression on the common man. For they are, as it were, pictures which set things forth as though they were painted before the very eyes, and therefore, they move the hearts especially of the simple and ignorant people.<sup>36</sup> He points out that only after Paul had proved his point does he use the allegory in Galatians "to give beauty to all the rest." He continues with the following remarks:

For it is seemly, when the foundation is laid and the matter is established elsewhere, sometimes to add an allegory. For even as a painting is an ornament in a house which is complete without it, so an allegory is the light for a doctrine or a matter which is already otherwise stated and established as true.<sup>37</sup>

In his "Table Talks" he compares allegory to rhetoric which only adorns something which is established by dialectics.<sup>38</sup> Again, in his interpretation of Is. 6 he expresses the same thought.<sup>39</sup> Allegories serve only as decorations and ornaments.

We should keep in mind that Luther was primarily the reformer and not a systematic exegete. Therefore, in his commentaries, his sermons, his letters, he was interested chiefly in presenting the doctrines clearly to the people. If allegories help in doing that, they may, in his opinion,

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36. St. Louis, IX, 565.

37. Ibid.

38. St. Louis, XXII, 1339-1340.

39. St. Louis, VI, 64.

be used, but they must be subjected to certain principles. They do not prove a point by themselves, but must be based on the historical sense. Never should an allegory express a thought which is contrary to the analogy of faith, but rather it should strengthen, support, and sustain our faith in Christ.

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In conclusion we can only sum up what has already been said. Luther grew as an exegete. As he advanced in his conviction that the Bible was the suopreme authority in matters of faith, his principles of interoretation became ever clearer, and his distaste for allegory ever stronger. By gradual steps he broke away from the century-old tradition of interpreting the Scriptures in a fourfold sense. He once more made of exegesis a science whose object it is to derive the true meaning from the text. He it is who cast aside allegory, which leads to idle speculation, in order that he might derive the single meaning intended by the Holy Spirit, the Author of all Scripture. This single sense is sufficient to guide us here on earth, and to point out to us the way of salvation. If allegories are used at all, they must serve as ornaments, illustrative material, and the like, but never can they be used to establish or to prove a doctrine. It was his principles of exegesis which helped him to make of the Bible an open book which could be closed no more.

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