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The First Three Bibles that Entered the Early Life of Martin Luther

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The First Three Bibles that Entered the Early Life of Martin Luther.

In Luther's second year in the University of Erfurt, 1503, when he was twenty, wandering through the university library, he found a complete Bible. He said: "*Da ich zwanzig Jahre alt war, hatte ich noch keine Bibel gesehen; ich meinte, es waeren keine Evangelien und Epistolen mehr, denn die in den Postillen sind.*" Naturally his curiosity was aroused. He was surprised that the Bible contained more than the Gospel- and the Epistle-lessons of the church-year. He was pleased with the story of Hanna and Samuel. But he had not had before, nor did he have now or for the next two years, any predilection for the Bible. We know of no instance nor occasion during the years of his adolescence when he ever expressed a desire or eagerness to study the Scriptures.

In the first week of January, 1505, Luther was made Magister Artium. In compliance with his father's wish he began the study of law May 20, 1505. In June he spent some days with his parents at Mansfeld. On his return, when he was near Stotterheim, July 2, 1505, a flash of lightning struck at his side. Anguish and fear of death overpowered him. If God's burning wrath had directed this thunderbolt into his sinful body, what would he have pleaded before God? In fear and trembling he vowed: "I will become a monk." Of his hasty vow he said in later life that it was a sudden and in-

voluntary act, which he made in a moment of extreme terror. Yet his delight was greater than his sorrow. He says: "I made the vow for the sake of my salvation." As a grand *finale* of his worldly life he gave, on July 16, a farewell supper to his friends, consisting of young men and women. Just before the party broke up, he startled them with the declaration: "Henceforth you shall see me no more, for I will become a monk." All efforts on the part of his friends to dissuade him from his purpose were in vain. The next day, Alexius Day, July 17, 1505, a few friends accompanied him to the Augustinian cloister and sorrow-stricken saw the gates close upon him.

The story that a friend by the name of Alexius had been killed by the lightning at Stotterheim lacks all historical verification and no doubt had its origin in the fact that it was on July 17, Alexius Day, that Luther entered the cloister. The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. IX, p. 493, is in error in claiming that in 1899 Oerger was the first who had proved the existence of the friend Alexius and his death by lightning to be a mere legend; for Dr. A. L. Graebner had already in 1883, in his biography of Luther, p. 30, pointed out that the death of Alexius was a legend grown from Alexius Day.

Luther was not assigned to a cell in the Augustinian cloister, but to a cell in the Guest House (*Domus Hospitum*), the first home of the Augustinians in Erfurt, built in 1277. Here the postulant spent the first six weeks of his cloister-life. He was bound by no rule save that of an honorable conduct. The two poets Plautus and Vergil and his guitarre were his only companions to help him overcome lonesomeness within these bleak walls.

In the beginning of September Martin was made a novice. All the cloister inmates took a lively interest in the postulant because they saw in the suddenness of his decision and that flash of lightning a dramatic parallel of the conversion of Paul on his way to Damascus, which led him to cry: "What wilt thou have me to do?" As novice he vowed "to read assiduously, to hear devoutly, and to study diligently the Holy Scriptures." Now that he was made a novice, he was given a Bible bound in red leather for his exclusive use, for his home study, from September, 1505, to September, 1506. This was the second Bible that came into the life of Luther. The zeal he displayed in applying himself with singular concentration of mind to his Bible-study was at first not because of joy and delight in God's Word, but rather to fulfil the vow he had made.

During the four years in the University of Erfurt, 1501—1505, he underwent heavy athletic training of the mind, applying himself assiduously to the various branches of philosophy, plowing through the Latin authors Juvenal, Livy, Cicero, Ovid, Vergil, and Plautus and not only retaining the general contents of their books, but even their exact words, so that he could quote them at will. This training of

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his memory he now applied in his study of the Bible, and thus improved this faculty.

His cloister preceptors were John Nathin and John Genser of Paltz. We imagine they examined him weekly on those sections of the Bible whose study he had completed. Luther's own statement is: "My brothers gave me a Bible bound in red leather, with which I had familiarized myself from first to last, so that I knew the very spot and page where every passage was written. If I could have kept this Bible [it was the property of the cloister and its rule prohibited its removal], I should have been an able *localis biblicus*. No other study so pleased me so much as the study of the Scriptures. Eagerly I read them and impressed them on my memory. Sometimes a single passage of importance would occupy my thoughts the entire day. I remember well that the significant words spoken by the prophets which I was not able to comprehend remained fixed in my mind, and I pondered over them for a long time; for example, to the passage in Ezekiel 'I will not the death of a sinner,' I paid very earnest attention."

He was often so completely carried away by his concentrated Bible-study that he forgot to read the prayers of his breviary and to say the *horae*. The cloister rule required the inmates to spend much of the day in the repetition of the prayers to be read aloud. The prior, however, was instructed to excuse the students of the theological department (not the lay brothers, "*auch Conversen genannt*") from the full-time choir practise, the full-time matins, and other time-consuming exercises. This systematic cutting the corners gave them additional precious time for the prosecution of their studies. However, Martin did not avail himself of the exemption privilege, but in his oversensitive conscientiousness devoted all day Saturday to fasting and prayers.

In the year of his noviceship he was formally introduced to Dr. John Staupitz, the Vicar-General of the Augustinian Order of the Observantine group. Staupitz was at once attracted to Luther by his skeleton form and sparkling eyes and discovered in his conversation the genius, the powerful intellect, and recognized his talents, his gifts, and made it his business to mold and develop this rare acquisition, who already had taken the degree of Master of Philosophy.

Staupitz had the fixed purpose of taking Luther away again from his cloister retreat and to give him back to the public as a finished product, a teacher of Biblical lore. He encouraged young Martin to continue mining the Scriptures, to make the study of the Bible his specialty, so that he would become an able *localis* and *textualis* of the Holy Scriptures. Thus he in a high degree contributed toward shaping and preparing Brother Martin for his future career. The skilful manner in which he directed Luther's Bible-study was Staupitz's life-work. He was a man of fine culture, of scholarly attain-

ments, of a suave disposition, of an attractive presence, of pleasing address, and a good judge of human nature. Although he moved in the society of learned doctors, of princes, bishops, and cardinals, he was not distant to his inferiors. As Vicar-General he exercised his office with skill and fairness and did not shirk the responsibilities thrust upon him.

Luther's concentrated study of the Bible during the year of his probation was of inestimable value to the great work he was destined to perform. However, he had not yet found Christ, the Savior, in the Bible because his mind was beclouded by wrong definitions of the simplest, but important words of the Bible. Without reservations he accepted the Catholic definition of the grace of Christ. The Bible statement "By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves," was wantonly ignored by the papists. The prevalent definition of theirs was: Grace is the infused potentiality by which man himself can fulfil the Law, satisfy the wrath of God, earn his own righteousness, and merit salvation.

Although Luther exerted himself to the utmost to live a life in accordance with the divine Law, he was ever conscious of not having attained perfection, and because he felt assured that he could not do more than he was doing to appease God, he believed that he was without grace; and that made him groan: "When will I ever have a gracious God?" Similarly to Paul, Phil. 3, Luther could say: "As a monk I was blameless."

Every word spoken, read, or sung in the cloister chapel he absorbed. From the very first day of his entering the cloister as a postulant, July 17, 1505, the words chanted in the complin "*In iustitia tua libera me*," "In Thy righteousness deliver me" (Ps. 71, 2), were indelibly fastened on his mind. In this Bible-passage the Reformation lay hidden. Concerning it Luther said in his *Commentary on Genesis*: "While reading and praying in times past Ps. 71, 2: 'Deliver me in Thy righteousness,' I was terrified, and in my heart I hated the words,' for my thought was: By no means deliver me in Thy righteousness by which Thou art righteous (actively). It is therefore important to understand rightly the righteousness by which I am made righteous (passively)." (St. L., II, 1487.)

While studying the Bible the analogous passage, Rom. 1, 17, "*Iustitia Dei in Evangelio revelatur*," also greatly disturbed his mind. He was taught to understand the righteousness of God in the philosophic sense, the formal or active righteousness, by which God punishes the sinners and the unjust.

And now a word about the third Bible. After the expiration of one year and one day Luther's novitiate came to a close, and he was solemnly admitted to the Order of the Augustinians as a monk. As

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he prostrated himself before the altar steps, the prior addressed him: "Dear brother, the time of your probation is now ended. You have been treated as one of us and barred from nothing but our council-meetings. The time has now arrived when you will either withdraw from us or deny the world and consecrate yourself to God and to our order. After your consecration your vow is irrevocable, and you will no longer be permitted to throw off the yoke of obedience." Luther answered: "I will consecrate myself to God and your order." The closing act was the administration of the monk's vow. Luther was handed an open copy of the rules of the order. He placed the copy on the knees of the prior, knelt before him, laid his folded hands on the open copy, and slowly made the vow:—

"I, Brother Martin, make profession and promise obedience to Almighty God, to the holy Virgin Mary, and to you, Brother, the Prior-General of the Order of the Eremites of the Augustinian Brothers, and your successors, promising that I will unto death live in poverty and chastity according to the rule of the holy Father Augustine."

When the ceremony was over, Martin Luther had fulfilled the vow he had made in his death anxiety near Stotterheim.

Luther's preceptors considerer his Bible-study completed and assigned to him the study of Gabriel Biel's voluminous exposition of the Mass; in this way he was within the next six months to prepare himself for the priesthood. The Bible, his inseparable companion, they took away, possibly to hand the copy to a newcomer. The cloister possessed but a limited number of Bibles, not enough to give every inmate a copy. Another reason was that he was expected to devote his whole time and attention to Biel. Relating this incident in 1540, Luther said: "When I [in September, 1506] made the vow, they took away from me the Bible and gave me sophistic books. Nevertheless, at intervals I secreted myself in the library and gratified my delight by studying the library Bible."

This library Bible was the third copy of the Scriptures that entered into Luther's life. With irresistible urge he continued the study of the library Bible from September, 1506, until his removal to Wittenberg in December, 1508.

Not any of these three Bibles with which Luther had come in contact were chained.

After September, 1506, Luther studied Hebrew. His fellow-monk Lang taught Luther elementary Greek.

Akron, O.

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