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Müntzer's Translation and Liturgical Use of Scripture

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If one were to adhere to the popular myth about Thomas Müntzer, one might expect few or only negative results of a study devoted to Müntzer's use of Scripture. The legend begun by Müntzer's enemies and perpetuated over the centuries is that Müntzer had little use for Scripture and relied mainly on dreams and personal inspiration for his source of divine revelation.¹ This view receives its most extreme formulation among general historians or scholars in tangential fields who rely on secondary literature. For instance, the Germanist Paul Böckmann says: "With Müntzer the revolutionary attitude gets out of bounds because it renounces any connection with Scripture and wants to follow only the heavenly voice, the revelation in one's own spirit, in order to erect a kingdom of elect Christians."²

Even some Reformation specialists express an only slightly more moderate opinion. G. H. Williams identifies Müntzer as a revolutionary spiritualist,³ and

Walter Klaassen classifies Müntzer as the most spiritualistic of the left-wing reformers.⁴ Though in general Klaassen rejects the antipodal separation of spirit and word as a description of left-wing theology, he sees Müntzer as leaning farthest in this direction. According to him, Müntzer's main emphasis is on personal revelations of the Spirit with a consequent devaluation of Scripture.

There is, of course, a certain amount of truth in such a view. Müntzer vigorously attacked Luther's *sola scriptura* principle on the grounds that it led to a dead reliance on the letter rather than a living faith in God's Spirit. He also spoke of the need for personal spiritual experience in the form of revelations. In the Prague Manifesto he writes: "All true pastors should have revelations in order that they be certain of their task."⁵ Again: "The sheep do not know that they should hear the living voice of God. That is, they should all have revelations."⁶

¹ See especially the contemporary biography traditionally ascribed to Melancthon, "Die Historia Thomas Müntzers des Anfängers der Thüringischen Aufruhr," *D. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. J. G. Walch, vv. by F. A. Hoppe, XVI (St. Louis, 1907), 166 ff.

² Paul Böckmann, "Der gemeine Mann in den Flugschriften der Reformation," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, XXII (1944), 202.

³ George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 45.

⁴ Walter Klaassen, "Spiritualization in the Reformation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXXVII (1963), 67—75.

⁵ *Thomas Müntzer: Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Günther Franz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), p. 498, 11 f.: "Dan es sollen alle rechte pffaffen auffenbarunge haben, das sie yres dinges gewiss sein."

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 501, 15 f.: "Dann dye schaffe wissen nicht, das sie dye lebendigen stimme Gots horen sollen. Das ist, sye sollen alle offenbarung haben."

But this is only one aspect of a relatively complex picture. A brief glance at Müntzer's writings reveals another aspect—the wealth of Biblical citations which he uses to support his points. In fact, when he defends himself against the charge of ignoring Scripture for the sake of extra-Scriptural revelation, he is able to make quite the opposite claim. Against Luther he writes in his *Hochverursachte Schutzrede*:

He makes much idle talk and mockery out of the divine Word and says I call it a heavenly voice and the angels speak with me, etc. I answer that I cannot boast of what the almighty God does or speaks with me, but only of that which I tell the people out of Holy Scripture through the witness of God. God willing, I do not want to preach my own phantasies.⁷

Actually, Luther, in his "Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit," to which Müntzer's tract is a reply, indicates a greater awareness of the tensions, if not actual inconsistencies, in Müntzer's teachings. Although Müntzer demands that everyone hear God's voice for himself, he nevertheless proceeds to teach his followers by conventional means of communication what they should believe. Luther writes: "I am amazed how they thus forget their spirit and want to teach the people by word and writing, even though they brag that each must hear God's voice for himself."⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 338, 17 ff.: "Vil unnutz gespayss und spot machet er auss götlichem wort und spricht, ich hayss es eyn hymmelische stymme und die engel reden mit mir etc. Antwort, was der almechtig Got mit mir machet oder redet, kann ich nit vill rümens von; dann allayn was ich durchs gezeügnuss Gottes dem volck auss der heyligen schrift vorsage, und will, ob Got will, meinen dunckel nit predigen."

⁸ "Ein Brief an die Fürsten zu Sachsen von

Scripture, in fact, plays a much greater role in Müntzer's writing than do any visions, dreams, or revelations divorced from Scripture. References to the latter are only occasional, while references to Scripture fill every paragraph. It is completely misleading, therefore, to assert that Müntzer depends on dreams and rejects the written Word. What he does require is an experienced faith—one in which the truth of Scripture is borne out in personal experience. Without this experience, Scripture is, to be sure, only empty words with little value. With such experience, however, Scripture is important as an objective standard against which the subjective experience should be evaluated. Müntzer writes in one place: "If a Christian among the poor masses said he had learned the Christian faith from God Himself, no one would believe him unless his judgment agreed with Scripture."⁹

Müntzer, to his own way of thinking, could be said to base his theology entirely on Scripture, for he found the requirement of an existential trial of faith in Scripture itself. He attacks Luther's concept of promise on the basis that it excludes the Law and the suffering which are equally prominent in Scripture and are prerequisites to an acceptance of the promise. Abraham and Moses, for instance, did indeed receive the promise, but they were not yet ready

dem aufrührischen Geist," *WA*, XV, 216, 12 ff.: "Ja es wundert mich, wie sie yhrs geysts so vergessen und wöllen die leut nu mündlich und schriftlich leren, so sie doch rhümen, es müsse eyn iglicher Gottes stym selbs hören."

⁹ Franz, p. 277, 11 ff.: "Wenn eyn christ unter dem armen hauffen sprech, das er den christenglauben von Gott selber gelernet het, würde man im nit glauben, . . . wenn er mit der schrift durch seyn berechen nicht übereynstympte."

to believe it. Abraham had to become miserable and forlorn so that he would depend on no one but God. "He was tormented with the promise of God."¹⁰ Only after great suffering and distress did he become worthy of the promise. Nor did Moses want to believe the living promise. His disbelief was so great that he thought God was the devil deceiving him. At no point in Scripture does one find that faith came by a simple word of promise; rather, one finds that "all the fathers, patriarchs, prophets, and especially the apostles came to faith with great difficulty."¹¹

Scripture, then, may be described as the record of God's activity with men in history. As such, it is not to be valued for its own sake, as if it were sacred in itself, but as a guideline, a testimony of faith. Müntzer contrasts his view of Scripture with what he regards as Luther's view when he writes: "The Son of God said, 'Scripture gives witness'; the scribes say it gives faith."¹²

Granted, then, that Scripture does not suffice for faith, one cannot deny that the written Word serves a very important function for Müntzer. Its importance is seen nowhere better than in his liturgical reform. His foremost goal in revising the liturgy was to make the Scriptures available to the common folk in their own language. Restructuring the form of the liturgy or changing its theological content could only

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 219, 5 f.: "Darumb wart er mit der zusage Gotis gepeiniget."

¹¹ Ibid., p. 220, 3 ff.: "So wirt er befinden, das alle vether, die patriarchen, propheten und sunderlich die aposteln gantz schwerlich zum glawben kommen seint."

¹² Ibid., p. 276, 34 ff.: "Der sun Gottes hat gesagt: die schrift gibt gezeügnuss. Da sagen die schriftgelerten: sie gibt den glauben."

succeed after this primary task had been begun. It was only by hearing and understanding Scripture that the peasants, who were at this time so reliant on the ceremonies of the church, could be made to see the superstition involved in some ceremonies and the lack of necessity for ceremonies in general. Müntzer wrote as follows in his explication of his order of the Mass:

We always read a whole chapter instead of the Epistle and Gospel, in order that the holy writings of the Bible may become accessible to the people and that the superstitious ceremonies or gestures among them may become unacceptable through constant hearing of the divine Word. By breaking off the indicated ceremonies gently and mildly, all insolence will be mitigated and the people will be led in their own language with customary songs as children raised with milk.¹³

Although the Bible cannot grant faith, it can prepare the way to faith by providing instruction in correct belief:

By changing Latin into German in psalms and songs, we may come to the Word of God and to a correct understanding of the Bible as well as of the opinions of the good fathers. Such songs have often prepared the way for the edification as well as the advent of faith. Also, through such songs consciences may be torn away from the pretences of the church and drawn

¹³ Ibid., p. 209, 26 ff.: ". . . das wir altzeit ein gantz capitel anstat der epistel und evangelion lesen, auff das . . . die heilige schrift der biblien dem volck gemein werde, ia auch die affterglewbischen cerimonien oder geberde im selbigen hinfellig werden durch stetlich anhören der götlichen wort, und dis alles doch mit senfttem und gelindem abbrechen bemelter cerimonien, also gelindert werde alle frecheit, und die leut mit gewonlichem gesange, in eigener sprache geleytet werden, wie die kinder mit milch ertzogen."

toward the Word of God in the Bible so that they will no longer be as coarse and stupid as a chopping block.¹⁴

Thus, since Müntzer's purpose in revising the liturgy was more pedagogical than theological or aesthetic — he apparently intended a more thorough reform later when the peasants were sufficiently prepared for it—its importance is not so much in its structure as in its language. He considered the structure flexible and was insistent "only that the psalms be sung and read to the poor laity."¹⁵

It is because of this retention of most of the traditional liturgical structure that most liturgical scholars have considered Müntzer's reform quite conservative.¹⁶ What they have failed to notice is that for Müntzer the mere fact of translating the liturgy and the Scripture was an act of protest against the Roman church and its clergy. Müntzer accused the clergy of hiding the knowledge of God under an insidious covering ("unter dem hinterlistigen

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 164, 1 ff.: ". . . mit voranderung des Lateins ins Deutsch, mit psalmen und gesengen zum wort Gottis und rechtem vorstant der biblien sampt der meynung der guten veter, wilche solche gesenge etwan zu erbawung des glaubens als zur ankunfft angericht haben, kommen mögen, ja auch darumb, das durch solch gesenge und psalmen die gewissen von larven der kyrchen abgerissen, und zum wort Gottis, in der biblien voffasset, gezogen werden, und nit so grob und unvorstendig wie ein hackebloch bleyben."

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 164, 21 f.: ". . . allein das die psalmen den armen leyen wol vorgesungen und gelesen werden."

¹⁶ See, for example, Friedrich Wiechert's description of Müntzer as "der Hüter der Tradition der abendländischen Kirche in Bereich der Reformationskirchen." Oskar Joh. Mehl/Friedrich Wiechert, *Thomas Müntzers Deutsche Messen und Kirchenämter* (Grimmen/Pommern, 1937), p. 82.

deckel") so that the poor who could not understand Latin were kept in ignorance of the faith. Popish clerics stole the Bible from the laity just as they had stolen their material goods; Müntzer's translations were the beginning of an attempt to rectify this situation:

Therefore it is my earnest intention yet this present day to help poor falling Christendom with German offices, whether they be Masses, matins, or vespers, so that every good-hearted man may see, hear, and learn how the depraved popish villains have stolen the Holy Bible from the poor Christians to their great disadvantage and have suppressed their true understanding and even beyond this have maliciously consumed the material goods of the poor people.¹⁷

It is because of Müntzer's concern for the common people that he found the task of translation to be the most urgent need:

It can no longer be endured that we ascribe a power to the Latin words, as do the magicians, and let the poor folk leave the church much more ignorant than they entered.¹⁸

(Luther, it might be noted, waited three

¹⁷ Franz, p. 163, 17 ff.: "Derhalben ist meine ernstliche wolmaynung noch diesen heutigen tag, der armen zurfallenden christenheyt also zu helffen mit Deutschen ampten, es sey messen, metten oder vesper, das ein itlicher guthertziger mensch sehn, hören und vornemen mag, wie die vorzweyffelten beptischen bösewicht die heylge biblien der armen christenheit zu grossem nachteyl gestollen und yren rechten vorstandt vorhalten haben, und doch gleichwol armer leuteh güter darüber bösslich vorschlungen haben."

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 162, 14 ff.: "Es wird sich nicht lenger leiden, das man den Lateinischen worten wil eine kraft zuschreiben, wie die zaubrer thun, und das arme volck vil ungelarter lassen aus der kirchen gehen dan hyneyn."

years after his first liturgical proposals to advocate the translation of the Mass.)

Although his interest in the common man had a theological basis in his assertion that all men are to learn faith directly from God rather than through priestly mediation, it went beyond pure theology to a social concern for the lower class. He aimed his liturgical reform at the intellectual level of the German peasants, consciously making an effort to speak their language through the use of colloquialisms and crude expressions. "I have, for the sake of improvement, translated according to German style and patterns," he wrote.¹⁹

This characteristic of Müntzer's translations has not gone unnoticed. As early as 1708 Valentin Ernst Löscher²⁰ complained of such phrases as "O meine seele, warumb rympfestu dich" for Ps. 43:5 ("Why are you cast down, O my soul?"), and Christian Wilhelm Aurbach in 1716 wrote a dissertation on *Müntzer's Foolish Eloquence*²¹ which dealt with Müntzer's language in all his writings.

But more revealing for understanding the significance of some of his unusual renderings is what follows the previous quotation. "I have translated the Psalms through the immovable mystery of the Holy Spirit, more according to the meaning than according to the words."²² It is, after

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 162, 19 f.: "Drumb hab ich zur besserung nach der Deutschen art und musterung . . . vordolmatzsch."

²⁰ "Thomas Müntzers deutsche Evangelische Messe," *Unschuldige Nachrichten von Alten und Neuen theologischen Sachen* (Leipzig, 1708), pp. 393—99.

²¹ Christian Wilhelm Aurbach, *De Eloquentia Inepta Thomae Munzeri* (Wittenberg: Joh. Gottfried Meyer, 1716).

²² Franz, p. 162, 20 ff.: ". . . in unvorruglicher geheym des heyligen geists vordol-

all, through the guidance of the Spirit—the key to the knowledge of God—that Scripture is opened up for the individual. Passages which are unclear or seemingly contradictory are clarified by the aid of the Spirit.

This, of course, means that the clarified version might deviate considerably from the original and had the effect of making Müntzer's Scriptural translations expressions of his own theology. Rather than using precise German equivalents, Müntzer often substituted words or phrases characteristic of his own peculiar terminology. The mystical aspect of his theology comes through in the occasional use of such terms as *abgrund der seele* and *langeweile* and such concepts as the birth of Christ in the soul and the indwelling of Christ or the Spirit in the depths of the soul. Also, Müntzer's concept of spiritual baptism—that man comes to faith through an ordeal likened to a violent flood—is expressed through a dramatization of flood-water imagery, as, for example, in Psalm 93. A related theme which prevails in many of the psalms through the frequent use of such words as *clagen* and *schreien* is that of the suffering which the Christian must endure as the initiation and proof of his faith.

Merely to point out such themes, however, is to ignore half the picture. The significance of Müntzer's translations is not simply that he used terminology arising from his theological framework, but also that he used the Scriptures as an occasion for polemics. Just as the fact of translation was partially a protest against Rome, the content of the translations was, to a great extent, an attack on Luther. Ref-

matzsch die psalmen, mehr nach dem sinne dan nach den worten."

erences to the ground of the soul are important not only because they express Müntzer's experiential understanding of faith but because they serve to refute Luther's *sola scriptura* principle. Luther, as Müntzer represented him, made Scripture into a vehicle of grace, a role which for Müntzer only the ground of the soul could play. Scripture, then, became in Müntzer's hands a witness against its own self-sufficiency. Some of Müntzer's favorite accusations regarding the Lutheran view of Scripture—that it “steals Scripture,” that it is a contrived, purely human form of faith—appear in subtle form in Müntzer's version of Ps. 93:5: “There his testimony is not betrayed by contrived truth; there a man sees that he is a dwelling of God in the tranquility of his days.”²³ (Compare, for example, the Revised Standard Version: “Thy decrees are very sure; holiness befits Thy house, O Lord, for evermore.”)

To Müntzer's way of thinking, anyone who had not come to faith through tribulation and suffering could only mouth empty words in the matter of faith. One of Müntzer's most persistent criticisms of Luther was that he taught a “honey-sweet Christ” instead of the “bitter Christ.” Müntzer lent expression to this demand for a trial of faith through suffering in his translation of Ps. 140:10: “O God, give them the tribulation of faith, test them as red gold in glowing coals. There they must stand fast, lest they fall into a pit from which no one can help them.”²⁴ (Compare the

²³ Ibid., p. 115, 16 ff.: “Do werden sein gezeugnis nicht voruntrewet in erfundener warheit, do siht der mensch, das er ein wonung Gottis sey in der lanckweil seyner tage.”

²⁴ Ibid., p. 98, 6 ff.: “O Got, gib yn die anfechtung des glaubens, vorsuche sie wie das rothe golt in glüenden kollen, do müssen sie

RSV: “Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be cast into pits, no more to rise!”)

The next verse goes on to indicate the futility of theological erudition unsupported by spiritual experience: “The untested man, even though he may prattle much about God, will find nothing good at his end.”²⁵ (Compare the RSV: “Let not the slanderer be established in the land; let evil hunt down the violent man speedily!”)

The Lutherans were included by Müntzer among the members of the godless because of their concern for theological precision to the neglect of genuine spirituality. Their teaching was all the more pernicious, however, because they claimed to be preaching the Gospel as it had not been taught by the church for centuries. In this way they misled the faithful who relied on them, and kept the light of faith hidden. This is the apparent meaning of verse 8 of Ps. 140: “O Lord, leave the godless alone no longer, for their evil-doing, with which they have raised themselves above others in worth, hinders the whole world.”²⁶ (Compare the RSV: “Grant not, O Lord, the desires of the wicked; do not further his evil plot!”)

Verse 9 of Psalm 140 bears no obvious relation whatever to the original and seems to be an allusion to Müntzer's refusal on theological grounds to engage in formal

stehn, das sie fallen in eyne grube, auss wilcher yn nyemant kan helffen.”

²⁵ Ibid., p. 98, 9 f.: “Der unversuchte mensch, so er von Got wil vil schwatzen, wirt er in seynem untergang nichts gutes erfinden.”

²⁶ Ibid., p. 98, 1 ff.: “Ach Herr, lass die gotlosen nit lenger bezemen, dann ire missethat vorhindert die gantze welt, mit wilcher sie sich vor andern in wirdigkeit empöret haben.”

theological debate with Luther. Müntzer objected in principle to such tests of erudition on the basis that they placed the authority in matters of religion with the learned rather than with the spiritually receptive. To debate Luther would in itself have signified an acceptance of Luther's standards: "If I sit at table with them, I must feed upon their godless manner from the plate."²⁷ (This is Müntzer's version of "Let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!")

Just as "godless" was used here to describe Luther's manner, the word also found its way into Müntzer's translation in many other instances where the original would not necessarily warrant it. He often used it for "sinner," "evildoer," or "enemy." Similarly, the opposite of the godless — the "elect" — appears as the translation for "the just," "the saints," "the seed of Israel." By means of this simplification of terminology Müntzer effectively conveyed his belief that mankind is quite clearly divided into two opposing groups — the godless and the elect. Throughout his other writings we find his insistence that the tares can, in fact, be separated from the wheat here on earth. He would have nothing to do with Luther's *simul justus et peccator*. This is communicated through the psalms both in the use of clear-cut terms which classify men as belonging to either one camp or the other and also by the choice of psalms which themselves are concerned with the struggles of the Hebrews against their pagan enemies.

For Müntzer the Christian life, then,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 98, 4 f.: "Wann ich mit yhn zu tische sitze, so muss ich ir gotlose weyse fressen auff dem teller."

took on the character of a continual battle — not between the forces of evil and those of good in one's own soul, but between good men and evil men. These could be identified because godly men could testify to actual spiritual experiences, to the birth of Christ in their own souls, and not simply to the Word of promise offered to all indiscriminately, as it were.

Spiritual birth, by bringing men into the kingdom of the Spirit, releases them from any dependence on or allegiance to the kingdoms of this world. They are the God-fearing, which indicates that they fear nothing but God.²⁸ All intermediaries between the godly and God are done away with, and earthly rulers may be, and even should be, opposed if their policies are in conflict with the Gospel.

This denial of allegiance to earthly authority found expression in Müntzer's version of Psalm 48 through the imagery of the opposing forces. Although the psalm in the original makes no mention of warfare, Müntzer revised verse 4 to read: "Behold, the kings of the earth gathered for the purpose of war and achieved agreement on it."²⁹ The earthly kings were overcome with fear and destroyed by the force of God's appearance, but the faithful who survived took their delight in the presence of God and served Him alone. The psalm concludes with a verse which under the circumstances must be considered potentially highly subversive: "God alone is our Lord in eternity; he alone is

²⁸ Compare Müntzer's "Ausgedrückte Entblössung"; see Franz, p. 292.

²⁹ Franz, p. 137, 9 f.: "Nym war, die künge der erden haben sich mit vortracht des krieges vorsamlet und seint im selbigen eintrechtig worden."

our duke, under whose banner we shall fight unto death."³⁰

Müntzer carried this idea of God's exclusive reign over the godly into the collect for the Mass of the Birth of Christ in a plea for deliverance from the rule of the ungodly: "O almighty God, grant that the new birth of Thy only Son, carried out in the flesh, deliver us from the antichristian regime of the godless, which we earned through our sins."³¹

Such theologically based expressions of disrespect for political authority (of which the examples given are only the most explicit) make it easy to understand Duke George's uneasiness regarding the large number of peasants attracted to Müntzer's Masses and daily offices. Hans Zeiss could, of course, honestly say he knew of no Mass Müntzer had put together in which the Gospel said the princes should be killed.³² After all, the most obvious threats were in

³⁰ Ibid., p. 137, 26 f.: "Das Gott allein unser herr sey byss in ewigkeyt, er ist alleyn unser hertzog, unter wilchs panir sollen wir Kempffen byss in den todt."

³¹ Ibid., p. 183, 3 ff.: "O almechtiger Gott, vorley, das die new gepurt deynes eynigen sones im fleysch volfuret, uns erlöse vom enthichristischen regiment der gotlosen, das wyr durch unser sunde vordinet haben, . . ." Compare the *Liber Usualis*: "Concede, quaesumus omnipotens Deus: Ut nos Unigeniti tui nova per carnem Nativitas liberet; quos sub peccati jugo vetusta servitus tenet."

³² Letter of Hans Zeiss to Duke John, Aug. 25, 1524, in Günther Franz, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), p. 488.

the psalms and collects and were slightly less blunt. But it is clear that Müntzer had gotten his point across when, in a report from the citizens of Sangerhausen to Duke George, it was related that many citizens insisted on attending Müntzer's services in spite of the Duke's prohibition of attendance, saying that the princes were princes over body and possessions but not over souls.³³

The step from this rebellious assertion to the larger peasant revolt of 1525 came quite naturally. The theological groundwork had been laid, reinforced securely by Scriptural support, even though that support came through a highly original version of Scripture. It had been used to assert the authority of the godly peasants over that of the ungodly clergy, Lutherans, and princes. Although these attacks had been made by other means and on other occasions, the effect of hearing the attacks from God's Word itself, presented within the context of sacred worship among God's own people, no doubt granted them an impulse and an authority which they otherwise might not have had. A struggle which might have been restricted to economic and social goals was given religious justifications and took on the character of a holy war.

Athens, Ga.

³³ *Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges in Mitteleuropa II*, ed. Walther Peter Fuchs (Jena, 1942), p. 38.