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All Scripture Is Pure Christ: Luther's Christocentric Interpretation in the Context of Reformation Exegesis

Charles A. Gieschen

As we give thanks for Martin Luther's epic witness to Christ in this momentous 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we who are the spiritual sons and daughters of Luther do well to ask ourselves the question: "What were Luther's central contributions to the life of Christ's church?" There are several important contributions that could be cited in answer to this question. Luther rediscovered the central truth of the Scriptures that we are justified by grace alone because of Christ's work alone and all of this is received through faith alone. Luther challenged the church to return to the Scriptures as the sole source and norm of the Christian faith and life, rather than have tradition as a second source of authority alongside the Scriptures. Luther translated the Bible into German and put it into the hands of people to read and learn. Luther translated and simplified the Latin liturgy and wrote hymns in German in order that the people could understand the truths they were singing in liturgy and hymns. Luther wrote the Small and Large Catechisms as tools to educate Christians in the basic teachings of the Scriptures. Luther brought biblical preaching back into the service as a central activity of worship, emphasizing the proper distinction between law and gospel in proclamation.

As one can easily see, all of Luther's major contributions grew out of his devotion to the Scriptures. What, therefore, especially characterized Luther's interpretation of the Scriptures? It will be argued below that it was his ability to see and read Christ from any text of Scripture, as he explains here.

Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God's and Mary's Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son, Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.¹

¹ Martin Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543): vol. 15, p. 339, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter *AL*.

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Luther saw and proclaimed Christ from all the Scriptures, be they the four Gospels or the Epistles, but also Moses and the Prophets, the Psalms, and even Proverbs. Luther stated elsewhere, “God is particularly concerned about our knowledge of the revelation of His Son, as seen throughout the Old and the New Testament. All points to the Son.”² His interpretation has properly been characterized as a christocentric interpretation of the Scriptures. He taught that individual words and phrases are to be interpreted in light of the central reality revealed in the Scriptures, the saving action of Son’s incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return for the redemption for the world.³ It is through Christ, his person and work, that we are to understand all revelation in the Scriptures. This study will demonstrate that the central distinctive of Luther’s approach to the Scriptures is his christocentric interpretation: “All of Scripture . . . is pure Christ.” In doing this, this study will focus primarily on what Luther wrote about scriptural interpretation in his “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543).

I. Jesus in the New Testament as the Hermeneutical Basis of Luther’s Christocentric Interpretation

If one had to pigeonhole Luther into a faculty position at a modern seminary, he would be labeled a Professor of Biblical Theology, specializing in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was the source for much of his teaching and published works. Luther’s christocentric interpretation of the Scriptures was based upon the conviction that the books of the New Testament, especially the four Gospels, function as our interpretative guide for the Old Testament. Knowing the identity of the Lord God of Israel in the Jesus who died and rose again led Luther to see Christ throughout the Old Testament, not merely in messianic prophecies. He even uses the vivid image of the open Old Testament as “the manger” in which we behold Christ.

[The Gospels and Epistles] want themselves to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament so that we might there read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger, that is, how he is comprehended in the writings of the prophets. It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves,

² Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:338.

³ Martin H. Franzmann, “Seven Theses of Reformation Hermeneutics,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1969), 235–246, esp. 235–237.

and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.⁴

The revelation found in the New Testament, especially the ministry of Jesus narrated in the four Gospels, was Luther's starting point for understanding the rest of the Scriptures. When we know the Christ of the Gospels well, then we see and hear him readily elsewhere in the Scriptures. This flesh and blood Jesus who graciously lived and died for the salvation of mankind is the God who acts, speaks, and promises to come in Moses and the Prophets. Luther, known for his polemics, argues that even some Christians who have the New Testament still miss Christ's thoroughgoing presence in both the New and Old Testaments.

We Christians have the meaning and import of the Bible because we have the New Testament, that is, Jesus Christ, who was promised in the Old Testament and who later appeared and brought with Him the light and the true meaning of Scripture . . . For that is the all-important point on which everything depends. Whoever does not have or want to have this Man properly and truly who is called Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom we Christians proclaim, must keep his hands off the Bible—that I advise. He will surely come to naught. The more he studies, the blinder and more stupid he will grow, be he Jew, Tartar, Turk, Christian, or whatever he wants to call himself. Behold, what did the heretical Arians, Pelagians, Manicheans, and innumerable others amongst us Christians lack? What has the pope lacked? Did they not have the sure, clear and powerful Word of the New Testament? What do the factions of our day lack? Do they not have the New Testament clear and reliable enough? If the New Testament had to be translated in accord with each stupid devil's mind, how many New Testaments, do you suppose, we would have to have?⁵

Luther understood that the New Testament is our hermeneutical key to understanding the Old Testament, including seeing not only Christ, but the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

That is the doctrine and the belief of the New Testament, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, David's and the virgin Mary's Son, is true Man and God's natural, eternal Son, one God and three distinct Persons together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And since David's words in this passage [1 Chr 17:17] amply reflect that meaning in accord with the general usage of the Hebrew tongue, we Christians must not seek or heed any other significance in them but regard this as the only correct one and look upon all other interpretations as worthless

⁴ Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521), AE 35:132. See similar statement in his "Prefaces to the Old Testament" (1523/1545), AE 35:236.

⁵ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:268.

human imagination. The New Testament cannot err, nor can the Old Testament where it harmonizes and agrees with the New Testament.⁶

Such christocentric interpretation is by no means new with Luther; it was done by Jesus and New Testament writers. A vivid example of this interpretation is present at the conclusion of the narrative in John 5. There Jesus speaks to Jews who knew the Old Testament Scriptures very well but did not see him in them: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of me; and you are unwilling to come to me, in order that you have life” (John 5:39–40). Jesus says here, “these . . . bear witness of me.” Because Jesus is the eternal Son who reveals the Father throughout time, he is the very Lord who spoke to Moses and delivered Israel.⁷ Jesus expresses this in John 5:45–47: “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” Citing what John 5:46 says about Moses, Luther explains:

In the first place we want to give Moses, the fountainhead, the source, the father and teacher of all prophets, a hearing. We want to test him to see whether we find him to be a Christian, whether he supports our position, since Christ Himself mentions him by name and says in John 5:46: “Moses wrote of Me.” And if he wrote of Christ, he must, of course, have prophesied and proclaimed Him and enjoined all prophets who followed him to write and to preach of Christ. This they have done diligently, so that all Jews, young and old, know that a Messiah was to come. But Moses lies buried and is hidden from them, and no one knows where he is interred. Therefore we shall authorize and commission two faithful and reliable legates, or ambassadors to look for him, find him, rouse him, and fetch him hither. These two are the evangelist John and the apostle Paul. I wager that these two will hit the mark and not miss. However, I do not want you to forget what I said earlier, namely, that I would like to discuss here the proposition: Whenever the Hebrew text readily yields to harmonize with the New Testament, this is must be the only right interpretation of Scripture. All else, whatever Jews, Hebraists, and anybody else

⁶ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:287.

⁷ See further Charles A. Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology,” *CTQ* 68 (2004): 103–126, and Charles A. Gieschen, “The Descending Son of Man in the Gospel of John: A Polemic against Mystical Ascent to See God,” in *The Open Mind: Essays in Honour of Christopher Rowland*, ed. Jonathan Knight and Kevin Sullivan, Library of New Testament Studies 522 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 105–129.

may babble against this to make it agree with their stippled, tormented, and coerced grammar, we must certainly consider sheer lies.⁸

Luther later draws this succinct conclusion about testimony to the Son's presence and prophecy of his future coming as messiah found in the Books of Moses: "He [Moses] indeed wrote of Christ throughout his entire book, in which he speaks of God and Messiah."⁹ This latter phrase, "God and Messiah," is very important to understanding Luther's approach. He not only understood Christology in the Pentateuch in terms of prophecy ("Messiah"), but also in terms of God's visible and tangible presence ("God").

Luther saw the importance of interpreting everything in Scripture as related to Christ, even where there are no direct references to God or Messiah, such as in all commands that are directed to God's people. We may be tempted to interpret commands in the Scriptures as having little to do with Christ because of applying the law-gospel distinction too quickly in the interpretative process. Listen, however, to what Luther writes on this matter.

Briefly, Christ is the Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law, of all things. The Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures. As, for example, 'keep the commandments' must be understood as with Christ commanding, plainly, keep them in Christ or in faith in Christ. 'You shall love the Lord your God' etc., obviously, in Christ or in faith in him, for 'apart from me you can do nothing'. 'Do this and you will live,' of course, 'do it in me,' otherwise you will not be able to do it, but will do the very opposite.¹⁰

Luther did not see Christ merely as a golden thread woven through the Scriptures. This is clear from his pronouncement: "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?"¹¹

II. Luther's Trinitarian Understanding of the Old Testament

A factor that played a significant role in the prominence of Luther's christocentric interpretation was his understanding that the Trinity is reflected in many Old Testament texts.¹² While Luther affirmed the importance of Old Testament

⁸ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:299.

⁹ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:326.

¹⁰ Luther, "Theses Concerning Faith and Law" (1535), AE 34:112.

¹¹ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1526), AE 33:26.

¹² See especially Christine Helmer, "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament," *Modern Theology* 18.1 (January 2002): 49-73. Although focusing less on exegesis of the Old Testament, she developed this line of inquiry further in Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and*

prophecies concerning the coming Christ, he also understood that the Son was central to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. Luther knew that the God who is heard and seen in the Old Testament is heard and seen through the Son. He asserted that the trinitarian revelation by Jesus in the New Testament needs to shape the interpretation of the Old Testament. Not only did Luther take John seriously when he writes that “no one has seen God, the only begotten Son has made him known” (John 1:18), but he took Jesus himself seriously when he says, “not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is from the Father, that one has seen the Father” (John 6:46). And he took Paul seriously when he calls the eternal Son “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

With such an understanding from the New Testament, Luther, like many interpreters in the early church, understood appearances of the God of Israel in the Old Testament as appearances of the Son.¹³ He expressed this understanding very forcefully and explicitly, as he does here.

It follows cogently and incontrovertibly that the God who led the children of Israel from Egypt and through the Red Sea, who guided them in the wilderness by means of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, who nourished them with bread from heaven, who performed all the miracles recorded by Moses in his books, again, who brought them into the land of Canaan and there gave them kings and priest and everything, is the very same God, and none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Virgin Mary, whom we Christians call our Lord and God. . . . Likewise, it is He who gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, saying (Ex 20:2, 3), “I am the Lord your God who led you out of Egypt . . . you shall have no other gods before Me.” Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, who died for us on the cross, is the God who says in the First Commandment, “I, the Lord, am your God.” How the Jews and Mohammed would rant if they heard that! Nevertheless, it is true and will eternally remain true. And he who disbelieves this will tremble before this truth and burn forever.¹⁴

Heinrich Bornkamm has observed this emphasis in Luther on the presence of Christ and draws the following conclusion, “Luther’s Old Testament theology was only an application of his faith in the omnipresence of Christ, which, in a special manner, is

Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther’s Works (1523–1546) (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005).

¹³ For examples in early Christianity, see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), and Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son before Christ,” 105–126.

¹⁴ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:313–314.

also applied in his doctrine of the sacraments. For Christ is ‘God for us.’ Wherever God turned his face toward men, be it ever so veiled, it was the face of Christ.”¹⁵

This christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament, however, does not mean that Luther only saw and heard the Son in the Old Testament to the exclusion of the other two persons of the Trinity. To the contrary, he lays out his methodology for interpreting testimony to the Father and the Holy Spirit as well as the Son in the Old Testament by looking for textual markers, especially speech between the Father and the Son or speech by one of them about the other.¹⁶

In other words: Let each one take the prophets in hand, read them diligently, and note where the Lord, YHWH, Jesus Christ, speaks distinctively and where He is spoken of. You have now heard that it is He who speaks with Moses on Mount Sinai, who guides Moses and the people, and who performs miracles. And although He does not act alone here, but the Father and the Holy Spirit work with Him and do the same work, He nevertheless reveals Himself in those words and deeds to show that He is a Person distinct from the Father in the one, divine essence. And whoever observes so much in Scripture (which not everybody does) that he notices where one Person speaks of the other, indicating that there are more than one present, will soon discern which is the Person of the Father and which is that of the Son. And if you have mastered the distinction of the Father and the Son, then the distinctive presence of the Holy Spirit is also established immediately.¹⁷

The speech patterns found in some Old Testament texts were the basis for Luther’s christocentric and trinitarian understanding of these texts. The Psalms were an especially rich quarry for finding such speech. Christine Helmer argues that “Luther roots his trinitarian understanding in the grammatical and syntactical features of the royal Psalms. The Psalms’ speech structure renders a trinitarian grammar of transparency.”¹⁸

Luther concluded that if there is a record of the Father speaking to the Son or one of them speaking about the other, then logically the Holy Spirit is also present. Helmer states: “For Luther, access to the inner-trinitarian mystery is granted solely

¹⁵ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 260.

¹⁶ Evidence of this kind of interpretation of the Old Testament as including dialogues between members of the Trinity, sometimes referred to as “prosopological exegesis,” is found in early Christianity; see esp. Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:335–336.

¹⁸ Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” 50.

by the third person of the Trinity.”¹⁹ He expressed his theological rationale for such a trinitarian reading that includes the Holy Spirit in this manner.

We hear before that whenever Scripture speaks of the two persons of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, the third person is also present; for it is He who speaks those words through the prophets. Thus a believing heart finds powerful and well-grounded proof and testimony in this passage that God, the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth, is the one true God, that there can be no other god beside Him, that there are, at the same time, three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit yet in this way, that only the Son became and David’s son.²⁰

A representative example of this approach is Psalm 2, where Luther understands the primary speaker in the psalm to be the heavenly Father speaking to the Son who is the Christ when he says, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7). Luther finds all three persons of the Trinity in these words, even though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned. Luther understands the Holy Spirit to be the one who composed the entire psalm.

Thus we again find two distinct persons here, the Father and the Son; and the Holy Spirit is present although not especially mentioned. It is He who composed and put into words this psalm, introducing the Father and the Son in their own words. Thus the distinctive trinity of person in one indivisible divine essence is professed here together with the fact that the Son is Man and Messiah, just as this is professed in the last words of David. A carnal heart will pass over these words casually or suppose that David composed them in his capacity as a pious man about himself or about others. That is what the blind Jews do.²¹

Luther gives other examples of seeing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in particular texts. He understands words in Isaiah 60 to be the Father speaking about the Son all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In Is. 60:19–20 we read in like manner: “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; the Lord will be your everlasting Light, and your God will be your Glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting Light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.” Here it is clearly stated that the Lord and our God Himself will be our everlasting Light. Here the one Lord speaks about the other. Indeed, in the entire chapter it is not Isaiah

¹⁹ Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” 54.

²⁰ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:282–283.

²¹ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:279.

who is speaking but the Lord. It is He who says; “The Lord will be your everlasting Light.” Who is the Lord who speaks these words? Without a doubt, God the Father. Who is the Lord of whom He says: “The Lord will be your everlasting Light”? Without a doubt, God the Son, Jesus Christ. For here we find the great name of God, YHWH, which our Bibles print with capital letters, LORD, in contradistinction to the other names. Who is it who speaks these words by the tongue of Isaiah? Without a doubt, God the Holy Spirit, who speaks by the prophets introducing the Person of the Father, who, in turn, speaks of the eternal Light, that is, of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David and of Mary.²²

Another well-known example of testimony to the Father and the Son in the Old Testament is Genesis 19, the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. “The Lord” (on earth) raining down brimstone and fire “from the Lord out of heaven” in Genesis 19:24 grabbed the attention of many Christian interpreters, including Luther, as evidence for the Trinity with its testimony to two Lords. If there is testimony to at least two of the three persons of the Trinity, according to Luther, the third person is implied.

Whenever in Scripture you find God speaking about God, as if there were two persons, you may boldly assume that three Persons of the Godhead are there indicated. Thus in the passage under discussion we hear the Lord say that the Lord will build a house for David. Likewise we read in Gen. 19:24: “Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.” For the Holy Spirit is no fool or drunkard, who would speak one iota, much less a word, in vain. If the Lord, that is, the Son rains fire and brimstone from the Lord, that is the Father, the Holy Spirit is simultaneously present. It is He who speaks these words by Abraham, or whoever it might be, about the two Lords. And still these three are one Lord, one God, who rains fire and brimstone.²³

Another intriguing example given by Luther concerns the very significant Sinai revelation recorded in Exodus 33. Luther understands the Father as the one speaking to Moses, but it is the Son whom Moses sees when he sees the backside of God in the form of a man walking by him. Here is Luther’s explanation.

Moses continues his report with these words (Ex. 33:21–23): “And the Lord said, ‘Behold, there is a place by Me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while My glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and

²² Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:289–290.

²³ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:280.

you shall see my back; but My face shall not be seen.” Here, too, there are two Persons named YHWH speaking. One says: “While My glory passes by.” This is the Father, who speaks of the passing by of His glory, that is, of the Son. And the Son Himself says that it is He who is passing by. As we heard before, this is all said of Christ, God and man, who walked here on earth.²⁴

Luther often looked for something in the text that served as the basis for a trinitarian interpretation that has Christ as the focal content. But what about texts where it is not outwardly clear who is speaking because there is only one speaker whom the text simply identifies as YHWH? In the following excerpt, Luther summarizes his thoughts about the Son being YHWH when it is not apparent in the text that two different persons of the Trinity are speaking or acting.

But where the Person does not clearly identify itself by speaking and apparently only one Person is involved, you may follow the rule given above and be assured that you are not going wrong when you interpret the name YHWH to refer to our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son. A fine illustration for this is Is. 50:1: “Thus says the Lord: Where is your mother’s bill of divorce, with which I put her away?” Here the word “Lord” designates the Person of the Son, although His Person is not distinctively mentioned. Thus it is interpreted by Lyra and also by others. I was very pleased many years ago to see Lyra write so definitely: “‘Thus saith the Lord,’ that is Jesus Christ.” And if you read the entire chapter following this verse (for Isaiah is not uttering a single word here, but all is spoken by the Lord), it will be found that the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, is talking here, and not only according to His deity but also His humanity. For He says (Is. 50:6): “I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not My face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God helps Me, etc.” Read the whole chapter, and you will discover that it is God the Lord who suffers and receives help from the Lord God. This is proof that Christ is true God and man.²⁵

These examples from Luther of reading Christ or even the full Trinity from Old Testament texts are illustrative and by no means exhaustive. He advocates for such a Christological interpretation very strongly, as visible in these words.

I believe that we are given examples of this type to spur us on to seek Christ in Scripture, since He is assuredly God and Creator together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus anyone who affirms that Christ is He who created heaven and earth is certainly not mistaken. And yet we must diligently look for the

²⁴ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:329–330.

²⁵ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:336–337.

distinctive revelations pertaining to the Person of the Son and carefully examine the words that indicate and reveal His Person.²⁶

Obviously, we should not stop with Moses, for just as the New Testament helps us to interpret the Old Testament, we must lead people forward to see that the Son's words and work in the Old Testament climax in the incarnate Christ of the New Testament who was crucified, died, and rose again on the third day. Jesus not only revealed YHWH to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but gave the ultimate revelation of who YHWH truly is by mounting the cross and giving his life for the life of the world. He is the very Jesus whose work continues in our lives through the means of grace. Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament never stopped at the time of the text and original author; he interpreted the text in light of the revelation of Jesus in the New Testament and the ongoing revelation of Jesus in the sacramental life of the church. Read his Genesis commentaries.²⁷ There Luther is interpreting Genesis, but the Christ of the New Testament and the Christ of the sacramental life of the church is on page after page of his interpretation.

III. Luther's Christocentricity in the Context of Reformation Exegesis

Much is said of Luther's rejection of the medieval four-fold sense of scripture and return to the historical or literal sense of the text, but in this he was by no means a trailblazer.²⁸ This had been happening in a fairly widespread manner in the centuries prior to Luther with exegetes upon whom he was dependent. Scott Hendrix observes that there was an effort during the high Middle Ages to recover focus on the literal sense, pointing to examples such as the school of St. Victor in northern France, Nicholas of Lyra, Thomas Aquinas, Jacob Peres of Valencia, and Jacques Lefèvre.²⁹ These latter two late-medieval exegetes influenced Luther's Christological interpretation of Psalms.³⁰ A christological interpretation of the Old Testament, therefore, is by no mean new to the scene with Luther, but he is certainly the major exegete who furthered such an exegetical approach during the Reformation period.

Unlike medieval exegetes who reverted to allegory to read spiritual meaning out of texts and like some of his predecessors, one of Luther's major contributions to Reformation exegesis was his ability to read spiritual meaning, especially testimony to Christ and his saving work, out of historical or literal sense of the text. He used

²⁶ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AI: 15:337.

²⁷ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535-1545), AE 1-8.

²⁸ This is widely acknowledged by scholars; e.g., Randall C. Gleason, "'Letter' and 'Spirit' in Luther's Hermeneutics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000): 468-485.

²⁹ Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 232.

³⁰ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," 232.

the history and grammar of the text to express this meaning, rather than offering an interpretation that was edifying but had no direct relationship to the history or grammar of the text. Hendrix summarizes Luther's interpretative approach in contrast to others.

For Luther himself, however, the appropriate interpretation of a text lay neither in the recovery of the unique literal sense nor in the unfolding of multi-level meanings, but in the discovery of the legitimate meaning, based on grammatical and historical analysis, informed by theological reflection, and applied to one's own life and the church of the present.³¹

Within the wider context of Reformation exegesis, it is important also to contrast Luther with Reformed exegetes. Heinrich Bornkamm notes the distinctiveness of Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament by emphasizing that it was christocentric, not merely characterized by christological prophecy.³² Bornkamm's distinction between christological prophecy and the christocentricity of Luther's exegesis is a window to understand different trajectories in Reformation exegesis. Contemporary Reformed interpreters, like John Calvin, who focused on the historical or literal sense of the text certainly had christological interpretation in the sense of emphasizing that the Old Testament was pointing forward to the coming of Christ.³³ Luther, however, interpreted Christ as the eternal son who is the YHWH speaking and acting in the Old Testament. To see and hear God in the Old Testament is to see and hear the Jesus who was crucified, risen, and present in the preached word and the sacraments.

G. Sujin Pak's study of the interpretation of messianic psalms by Luther, Bucer, and Calvin, helpfully illustrates the contrast between Reformation exegetes when it comes to christocentric interpretation.³⁴ Pak notes that Luther continues the late medieval focus on Christological exegesis, but Calvin focuses primarily on interpreting the messianic psalms in light of David as the primary referent. Pak offers this conclusion to his extensive comparison.

In the context of prior Christian readings of these eight Psalms, Calvin makes a number of surprising exegetical shifts. Although he does interpret portions of most of these Psalms in reference to Christ, he give much more limited and less frequent Christological readings. In some key places, such as the interpretations of Psalms 8 and 16, he actually explicitly rejects the Christol-

³¹ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," 238.

³² Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 263.

³³ See especially G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*. Luther is discussed on 31–53 and Calvin on 77–101.

ogical reading of the Psalm. Furthermore, he not only breaks with the prominence given to these Psalms in Christian exegesis as literal prophecies of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension but also does not use these Psalms to teach the doctrines of Trinity and the two natures of Christ. . . . Calvin's primary interpretations of these Psalms are readings through the person of David that bring comfort and teach true Protestant piety (over and against Roman Catholic piety) and expound upon the doctrines of the goodness of god, election, and divine providence.³⁵

In contrast to Luther's reading of these messianic Psalms as prophecies of Christ's passion that teach about the Trinity and two natures of Christ, Calvin and Bucer focused on how they teach the beneficence of God, election, faith and Christian piety.³⁶ Pak notes that recognition of this difference in Old Testament exegesis among Reformation exegetes drew the attention of others in subsequent decades, notably the Lutheran Aedignus Hunnius who labeled such exegesis that steered clear of Christology as "the Judaizing Calvin."³⁷ This charge came in part because Calvin and Reformed exegetes who followed him often drew on Jewish exegesis for the Old Testament interpretation, as noted by Stephen Burnett: "This humanist concern for historical context was a clear break from traditional Christian interpretation of these texts and raised the specter of Judaizing, particularly when Calvin and other Reformed interpreters made extensive use of Jewish biblical commentaries."³⁸

IV. Conclusion

Christocentric interpretation is not a science; it is an art taught by the Holy Spirit as seen practiced by Jesus, the apostles, and later interpreters like Martin Luther. Luther is known for his dictum that you cannot properly interpret the *verba* of a given text unless you interpret it in light of the *res* or central teaching of the Scriptures, namely God's saving work in Christ.³⁹ The understanding that one is to read the central reality of Christ and his saving work out of all of the Scriptures is found in these words of Luther.

³⁵ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 99–100.

³⁶ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 101.

³⁷ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 103–124.

³⁸ Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning*, Library of the Written Word 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 119.

³⁹ For example, this approach of Luther is discussed as the first thesis in Franzmann, "Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics," 235–237.

And God is particularly concerned about our knowledge of the revelation of His Son, as seen throughout the Old and the New Testament. All points to the Son. For Scripture is given for the sake of the Messiah, or Woman's Seed, who is to remedy all that the serpent has corrupted, to remove sin, death, and wrath, to restore innocence, life, paradise, and heaven.⁴⁰

Luther's christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament should encourage us in our own christocentric interpretation. Luther readily admits that he has not said the last word on these matters, as he makes clear on more than one occasion.

Others can and will, I hope, improve on this and diligently seek and find the Lord Jesus in the Hebrew Old Testament; for He lets Himself be found there very readily, especially in the Psalter and in Isaiah. Try it according to the rule given above, and I am sure that you will agree with me and thank God.⁴¹

Let this be my translation and exposition of David's last words according to my own views. May God grant that our theologians boldly apply themselves to the study of Hebrew and retrieve the Bible for us from those rascally thieves. And may they improve on my work. They must not become captive to the rabbis and their tortured grammar and false interpretation. Then we will again find and recognize our dear Lord and Savior clearly and distinctly in Scripture. To Him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory and honor in eternity. Amen.⁴²

How, therefore, are we, the spiritual sons of Luther, to express Christ from any given portion of the Scriptures? Four suggestions are offered here, most of which are reflected in Luther's own exegetical practice.

First, interpret the content of every text in light of the Christ event. Always keep in mind that God's actions and words in history and in the Scriptures are grounded in the central act of God for humanity: the Son's incarnation, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and return for the salvation of the world (the Christ Event). The Gospels, where the mystery of God's love in Christ is revealed, help us to interpret all the rest of the Scriptures. Therefore, the grace that God shows before the Christ Event (e.g., to the patriarchs and Israel) or after the Christ Event (e.g., to the Church) is grounded in the Christ Event. God could not have loved and forgiven Adam and Eve, he cannot love and forgive us in the here and now, apart from the atonement offered in time by Jesus Christ. The gospel proclamation in any text is none other than Christ; where you hear the gospel in the Scriptures, there is also the person and work of Christ. Do not only speak of God's love and forgiveness from a

⁴⁰ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AI: 15:338.

⁴¹ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:344.

⁴² Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:352.

text, but use it to proclaim explicitly Christ whose atoning work at the cross is the basis for this love and forgiveness all through history. Do not ever tire of this proclamation; it is the very lifeline that sinners long to receive Lord's Day after Lord's Day, even day after day.

Second, interpret the Old Testament with attention to the presence of the Son as well as the promise of his coming as the messiah. The visible image of YHWH throughout the Old Testament is the Son (John 1:18). Thus one does not encounter the Father in the Old Testament and the Son in the New Testament, but the Son is central to the revelation of the Triune God throughout time, especially since the fall and until the last day. Not only is the Son present with his people, but he also promises that he will come at the end of the ages to deliver the world from sin. The promises of his coming are found in various messianic prophecies as well as in prophetic patterns involving individuals, institutions, and events that reflect Christ (typology). As Luther stated, the Son is throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, not merely in a few scattered prophecies.

Third, interpret every text in its broader context, especially if it lacks explicit christological content. Lectionary readings used for sermons do not exist in isolation from one another; they are meant to be interpreted in the context of the book from which they are taken and also from the wider context of all of God's revelation given in the Scriptures. Therefore, we must sometimes make the implicit christological content of each text explicit from the wider context.

Fourth, unite your proclamation of the Christ present in the Scriptures with the Christ that your congregation is receiving sacramentally in the church. He is the one and same Christ, Lord of all history. Luther was a master of this kind of pointed application of biblical texts. Much like Jesus helped the Emmaus disciples learn that the Old Testament Scriptures spoke of him, we help our congregations learn that the Jesus of the Scriptures is he who continues to be truly present in his church, those baptized into him, with the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The goal of this study was to demonstrate that christocentricity was the central distinctive of Luther's interpretative approach to the Scriptures. It concludes, therefore, with Luther's profound pronouncement from start of this study: "Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ."⁴³

⁴³ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:339.