

3. LUTHER'S PREFACE TO THE EPISTLE OF JAMES IS NOT PROOF FOR ANOTHER ATTITUDE

But did not Luther's translation of the New Testament appear in September of the same year, and do not the prefaces that are here prefixed to the New Testament as a whole, to the individual letters, and to Revelation contain statements concerning several books, especially James and Revelation, which presuppose an entirely different evaluation of Scripture than the one we have been led to believe in what was said before? ^{80a} Attention has ever and again been called to this, and since it is Luther's opinion of the letter of James that above all seems to stand in direct contradiction to the results of our preceding investigation, we take time and space to go into this matter somewhat in detail.

The preface to the Epistle of St. James, as it appeared in the September Testament of 1522, reads thus: ⁸¹ "Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and regard it as a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God's law. But to state my own opinion about it, though without injury to anyone, I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows:

"First: Flatly in contradiction to St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture it ascribes righteousness to works and says that Abraham was justified by his works in that he offered his son Isaac, though St. Paul, on the contrary, teaches, in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified without works, by faith alone, before he offered his son and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15. Now, although this Epistle might be helped and a gloss be found for this work-righteousness, it cannot be defended against applying to works the saying of Moses in Genesis 15, which speaks only of Abraham's faith and not of his works, as St. Paul shows in Romans 4. This fault, therefore, leads to the conclusion that it is not the work of any apostle.

"Second: Its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all its teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. The writer names Christ several times but he teaches nothing about Him and only speaks of common faith in God. But it is the duty of a true apostle to preach about the foundation of faith, as He, Himself says, in John 15, 'Ye shall bear witness of me.' All the genuine sacred books agree in this that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test by which to judge all books when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (Romans 3), and St. Paul is determined to know nothing but Christ (I Corinthians 15). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it.

"But this James does nothing more than to drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles' disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else on the basis of his preaching. He calls the law a 'law of liberty' though St. Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death, and of sin (Galatians 3, Romans 7).

"Moreover, in chapter 5 he quotes the sayings of St. Peter, 'Love covereth the multitude of sins' (I Peter 4) and, 'Humble yourselves under the hand of God' (I Peter 5), and of St. Paul (Galatians 5), 'The Spirit lusteth against hatred,' and yet, in point of time, St. James was put to death by Herod, in Jerusalem, before St. Peter. So it seems that he came long after St. Peter and Paul.

"In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works and is unequal to the task in spirit, thought and words, and wrests the Scriptures and thereby resists Paul and all Scriptures and would accomplish by insisting on the law what the apostles accomplish by inciting men to love. Therefore I cannot put it among the chief books though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting it where he pleases and regarding it as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in it."

To the preface of the whole New Testament of 1522 we find added, with the special heading, "What are the true and best books of the New Testament," the following section:⁸²

"From all this you can now judge all the books and decide which are the best among them. John's Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's First Epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought rightly to be the first books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most and by daily reading make them as familiar as his daily bread.

"In them you find not many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard.

"If I had to do without one or the other—either the works or the preaching of Christ—I would rather do without His works than His preaching; for the works do not help me, but His words give life as He himself says. Now John writes very little about the works of Christ but very much about His preaching, while the other Evangelists write much of His works and little of His preaching; therefore John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and of St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

"In a word, St. John's Gospel and his First Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's First Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know even though you were never to see or to hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw compared to them (*eyn rechte stroern Epistel gegen sie*); for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in other prefaces."

Since in the later editions of his New Testament Luther did not repeat this section, some argued that in later years he changed his opinion concerning the Epistle of St. James. But this is not correct. Wilhelm Walther of Rostock showed that fact in his article, "Luther's Later Opinion Concerning the Epistle of James."⁸³ He based his arguments on notes that Luther added to his copy of the New Testament of 1530. These notes are plain enough. With reference to James 2:12 Luther remarked, "O this chaos!" with reference to James 3:1, "Oh, if you had observed this likewise" (and had not tried to be a teacher)! But we have still better proofs than these notes quoted by Walther. In the *Table Talks* we find this remark of the year 1532:⁸⁴ "Many have tried hard (*valde sudant*) to make James agree with Paul, as also Melanchthon did in his Apology, but not seriously (*serio*; does that mean successfully?). These do not harmonize: Faith justifies, and faith does not justify. To him who can make these two agree I will give my doctor's cap and I am willing to be called a fool." The strongest remark is from the year 1540 (?):⁸⁵ "Only the Popists accept James on account of the righteousness by works, but my opinion is that it is not the writing of an apostle, especially because it calls faith body and the works, soul. This is apparently absurd and against Scripture. Some day I will use James to fire my stove (*Ich werde einmal mit dem Jekel den offen hitzen*). We can adorn and excuse it, but only with great difficulties." From the year 1542 we find this notation:⁸⁶ "The Epistle of James we have thrown out from this school (Wittenberg) because it has no value (*denn sie soll nichts*). It has not one syllable about Christ. It does not even mention Christ once except in the beginning. I hold it is written by some Jew who heard only a dim sound concerning Christ but no clear, distinct message (*welcher wohl hat hoeren laeuten von Christo, aber nicht gar zusammen schlagen*); and because he had heard that the Christians put great emphasis on faith in Christ, he thought, I will oppose them and emphasize works. And this he did. Of the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ, this heart of the preaching of all apostles, he does not say a word. Then, there is no order nor method. Now he speaks of clothes, now of wrath, jumps from one thing to another. He uses this simile: As the body does not live without the soul, so faith is nothing without works. O Mary, Madonna! What a poor simile! He compares faith with body while it should rather be compared with soul. Already the ancients saw this, therefore they did not number this Epistle with the Catholic Epistles." And again:⁸⁷ "Here at Wittenberg we nearly thrust James out of the Bible." In a disputation in 1543 Luther refused to

cept a quotation from James because this Epistle lacks the necessary authority.⁸⁸

Now does this evaluation of the Epistle of James endanger any of the preceding results of our investigation concerning Luther's attitude toward Scripture? By no means. One must read these quotations in their full context, then it becomes apparent that Luther did not class this epistle among the canonical writings; all, however, that we heard him say about his attitude toward the Bible refers to the canonical books. How can Luther's opinion about a non-canonical book change our findings concerning his attitude toward the canonical books? We may personally reject Luther's opinion about the canonicity of James, we may even stand in horror because of a word such as this, "*Ich werde einmal mit dem Jekel den Ofen heizen,*" but this gives us no right whatsoever to permit ourselves to be influenced in the least by his judgment concerning a non-canonical writing when we are about to answer the question as to his attitude toward the canonical writings. Only a little fairness is necessary to see that we must rule out all the objections against our results as far as they are based on Luther's opinion concerning James. That Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation were not considered canonical by Luther is also proved by the fact that in his September Testament he did not add numbers to them and that he put a space between them and the others and thus made it quite obvious to everyone that in his estimation these four books do not stand on the same level with the other New Testament books. In the complete Bible of 1534 this is made even more pronounced by the fact that in the index of the Biblical books they are dealt with in the same way as the Old Testament Apocrypha.⁸⁹

And as far as the statement is concerned that James is "a letter of straw," it certainly does not speak well of the scientific trustworthiness of all those Protestant writers who hold this expression up as a proof for Luther's changed attitude toward Scripture. Especially since Kahnis in his *Lutherische Dogmatik* (III, 142ff.), under his mighty array of proofs for Luther's freedom concerning Scripture, quoted this statement,^{89a} many Lutheran writers thoughtlessly or under the influence of their liberal bias adopted it until it became nearly a household word with them when they characterized Luther's attitude toward the Scripture. They not only forgot that James was not a canonical writing to Luther; they also overlooked the fact that according to the context the statement is not an absolute statement. Only when one compares James with John and Paul and Peter can it, according to Luther, be called a letter of straw because it speaks so little of Christ and His redeeming work. And at the same time, when Luther put down this statement, he conceded that it contains *viel guter Sprueche*. In 1917 Wilhelm Walther said:⁹⁰ "It is a strong misrepresentation of Luther's statement if one writes, Luther called the Epistle of James a *stroherne Epistel*. With the same right Catholic writers declare that Luther considered gross immorality a thing of little importance because he once wrote, blasphemy is such a terrible thing that compared with it 'a sexual sin is only a trifle.'"

In the Introduction to the Epistle of James we also find these words: "All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test by which to judge all books when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (I Cor. 15). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; what preaches Christ would be apostolic even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it." Luther did not first come to realize in 1522 that everything in Scripture depends upon that which teaches Christ. He expressed this view already in his first exposition of the Psalms, 1513-1514. Already there we read, "I see nothing in Scripture but Christ crucified" (*Ego non intelligo usquam in Scriptura nisi Christum crucifixum*);⁹¹ and in a fragment of a sermon delivered on November 11, 1515, Luther says: "He who would read the Bible must simply take heed that he does not err, for the Scripture may permit itself to be stretched and led, but let no one lead it according to his affects but let him lead it to the source, i.e., the cross of Christ. Then he will surely strike the center;"^{91a} and in his Exposition of the Penitential Psalms, 1517, he says in conclusion: "This I confess for myself, whenever I found less in the Scripture than Christ I was not satisfied; whenever I found more than Christ, I never became poorer myself, so that even that seems true to me, that God, the Holy Spirit, does and will know no more than Jesus Christ, as he says of Him, He will glorify me."^{91b} And according to Luther also in the Old Testament writings Christ can be found.

The *thought* itself is not new. Erasmus already said, "Nothing is to be sought in Scripture but Christ."⁹² But the viewpoint is new. For Erasmus Christ was the center of the Scriptures because he is the best model of the moral life; for Luther, because He is the crucified and risen One who brought about forgiveness, righteousness, and life and gives it to us, as he continues in his Exposition to the Psalms, 1517, "Christ is God's grace, mercy, righteousness, truth, wisdom, power, comfort, and salvation, given us of God without any merit."⁹³ We speak of this at this place for the reason that some have interpreted the sentence, "What teaches Christ" in connection with the Old Testament as though, according to Luther, only that in the Old Testament came into being under divine influence of which it can be said that it teaches Christ. That is a serious misunderstanding. It is not a matter of the origin of the Old Testament Scripture and its parts but of the value and the significance which it still has for the Christian. That the Old Testament, too, in its totality, in the opinion of Luther, was the Word of God needs no further proof. Yet, let this at least be quoted from his Introduction to the Old Testament: "I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to stumble at the simplicity of the language and the stories that will often meet him there. He should not doubt that, however simple they may seem, there are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the high Majesty, power, and wisdom of God; for this is Scripture, and it makes the wisdom of God that He, lays before you in such simple and foolish (Matt. 11:25). Therefore let your own thoughts and feelings go and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the

rest of mines, which can never be worked out, so that you may find the wisdom of God that He lays before you in such simple and foolish things, in order that He may quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angels point the shepherds. Simple and little are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them." ⁹⁴