Contents

Abbreviations    vii

Introduction: God’s Word Endures Forever: The Wittenberg School of Exegesis    1

1. The Bible in the World of Luther’s Childhood and Youth    17

2. In the Beginning God Said: Luther’s Understanding of the Word of God    35

3. Nowhere More Present Than in Scripture: Luther’s Perception of What the Bible Is    75

4. Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: Luther’s Hermeneutical Framework    98

5. Search the Scriptures: Luther as Professor    132

6. Faith Comes by Hearing: Luther the Preacher    174

7. Teaching All Nations: Luther as Translator    209

8. Instruction in Sound Teaching: The Wittenberg Curriculum, the Wittenberg Commentary, the Wittenberg Colleagues    239


10. Biographical Interlude: The Later Wittenberg Commentators    302

11. Formulas for Speaking Circumspectly and Avoiding Offense: Hermeneutics for Exegesis and Preaching among Luther’s Students    311
12. Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: *The Late Reformation Wittenberg Commentaries*  347

13. In Season, Out of Season: *The Forms and Methods of Late Reformation Preaching in the Wittenberg Circle*  395

14. With a Firm Grasp of the Word: *The Message of Late Reformation Proclamation*  435

   The Enduring Word of God: *Concluding Reflection*  467

Bibliography   470
Subject Index   506
Scripture Index   510
Author Index   515
Abbreviations


ARG  Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte


EA^2  Dr. Martin Luther’s sämmtliche Werke. Erlangen Ausgabe. 2nd ed. Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1862–85


LuJ  Lutherjahrbuch

LQ  Lutheran Quarterly


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Schling, EKO</td>
<td>Emil Sehling et al., eds. Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts. Leipzig; Reisland; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1902–</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCJ</td>
<td>Sixteenth Century Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>VD 16</td>
<td>Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts [Bibliography of books printed in the German-speaking countries of the sixteenth century] is a project to make a retrospective German national bibliography for the sixteenth century.</td>
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<tr>
<td>WA BR</td>
<td>Briefwechsel [Correspondence]. 18 vols.</td>
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<td>WA DB</td>
<td>Die deutsche Bibel [The German Bible]. 15 vols.</td>
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<td>WA TR</td>
<td>Tischreden [Table Talk]. 6 vols.</td>
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Introduction

*God’s Word Endures Forever: The Wittenberg School of Exegesis*

The maxim “God’s Word remains forever” not only adorned the title page of Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible, published in 1534. It also served as the motto of the Smalcald League, the alliance of Evangelical princes and municipalities formed in 1531. This assertion had by that time become the foundation of a new worldview, a new definition of what it means to be Christian, formulated by Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg.

**Luther’s Redefinition of What It Means to Be Christian**

In 1529 Martin Luther complained of “the whole swarm of clerics in our time who stand day after day in the church, sing and ring bells, but without keeping a single day holy because they neither preach nor practice God’s Word but rather teach and live contrary to it.”¹ This comment on the command to keep the Sabbath holy, as he paraphrased it in his catechisms, “You are to hallow the day of rest,” reflects his fundamental change in the characterization of the nature of the Christian’s faith and life.

Luther had grown up in a world still marked by pagan religious rhythms and forms, which underlay the sometimes quite thin veneer, sometimes quite substantial force, of the biblical message. During the course of the millennium after the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman

¹. *BSELK* 962; *BC* 398, explaining the third commandment in the Large Catechism.
Empire, Christianity came to practically all parts of both that empire and the
Germanic and Slavic populations at and beyond its borders. Mass conversions
of native populations took place without sufficient personnel for the proper
inculcation of that message. As a result, the religious shape of late medieval
German life owed much to Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition, but
its structure and impetus retained much from the pagan patterns on which
the name Christian had been imposed. Those patterns nourished the percep-
tion that human relationship with the divine—with the powers that control
daily life, with God—takes shape when human beings approach the Divine
with their own efforts and achievements, particularly in the performance of
sacred works, of rituals.2
The late Middle Ages witnessed a multiplication of pious ritual practices
and the proliferation of opportunities for more and more of the population to
exercise devotion through them. Rising disposable income contributed to the
increase and intensity of some of these practices, as did the efforts of theolo-
gians and local clergy to ease strict standards that required strenuous devotion
if they were to accomplish any good at all.3 A restlessness that sought new
answers to life’s pressing questions and a new framework for thinking about
divine and human reality infused conversation and action with expectations
of something new.4
In the midst of this explosion of pious practice, Martin Luther gradually
came to the conviction that this form and dynamic for human life did not
promote but rather perverted genuine human living. “Luther’s break with
Catholic tradition concerned the very nature of Christian faith—and there-
fore the very nature of Christian life in the present as well as in the past and
future.”5 Obviously, like all people, Luther never completely left behind the
formation of his youth. His thought was nourished from roots deep in the
medieval world. As Volker Leppin has shown, many of his most scintillating
and compelling ideas fed on the fuel supplied by both scholastic thinkers
and those from the “monastic-mystical” tradition. Luther not only built on
medieval uses of phrases or concepts like “grace,” “law and gospel,” “the
priesthood of believers,” and “two realms,” transforming them to conform
to his own conceptual framework;6 he also reformed the liturgy, the artistic
genre of the time, and the office of pastor or priest rather than rejecting

2. Hendrix, Recultivating the Vineyard, 1–35, provides bibliography on how Christianity
met paganism in Europe.
4. Peuckert, Die Grosse Wende, provides material on aspects of these phenomena.
them. The profound changes that he carried out in his use of these medieval elements often rested on his understanding of how God works through his Word. “God’s Word remains forever” served as the continuo for the entire opus of the Wittenberg theologians.

By the end of 1518 it was clear that Luther’s proposals for reform went beyond the reform programs of the many reformers of the late Middle Ages, who aimed at improvements in the moral and organizational life of the church. The theses he had offered at the assembly of the Augustinian Eremites in Heidelberg in April 1518 unambiguously demonstrated that his central concern focused on righteousness and identity: he redefined God’s identity as, in its essence, mercy and steadfast loving-kindness, expressed supremely in Christ’s death and resurrection. He reformulated the description of the human creature’s identity as a dependent creature, charged by God to care for his creation in love and service to the neighbor. Yet, his earliest Roman critics’ chief concern lay in preserving the ritual path to God for the salvation of sinners; the maintaining of the hierarchical protection of Christendom and the hierarchy’s supervision of the church, under the vicar of Christ; and finally in the ministry of the local priest. It was not so much that the two sides talked past each other as that they spoke two different languages with contrasting grammars, even though many words sounded the same.

By 1520 Luther’s programmatic writings had spelled out the core of his ideas that would remain in place for the quarter-century until his death. Between 1520 and 1522 he issued six major writings that summarized his developing interpretation of biblical teaching. None were commentaries on Scripture, with the exception, if one will, of the first, On Good Works, which presented the life of faith according to the outline of the Ten Commandments. The second, Luther’s Open Letter to the German Nobility of the German Nation, concerning Reform of the Christian Estate, appealed to governmental officials to introduce a series of reforms in church and society. The most important of these treatises, The Freedom of the Christian, discussed the justification of sinners through trust in Christ’s promises, based on his death

7. On his liturgical reform, see his Order of Mass and Communion (1523), in WA 12:205.6–215.6; LW 53:19–32.
8. These ideas sprouted in my mind after being planted by Indian students at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai in 2008. They had grown up surrounded by the ritualistic religious culture of Hinduism and recognized the ways in which Luther’s worldview, at a basic level, differed from that sort of culture. Many of the ideas that emerged from my conversation with these students had been anticipated by Hampson, Christian Contradictions.
and resurrection, and the life of obedience to his commands that this trust produced. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* developed Luther’s view of God’s Word in sacramental form, with sharp critique of the ritualistic and hierarchical diversions from biblical teaching that he saw inherent in the system of pious practice and scholastic theology that had shaped his views. In 1521 his criticism of the monastic system in *On Monastic Vows* expounded his conviction that all good works in the realm of daily life please God if done in faith. This treatise also contended that sacred activities, including many of those performed by the ordained and those in monastic obedience, often led people to disobey God’s commands to love and serve the neighbor, and they also cultivated trust in one’s own doing rather than in the work of Christ. Finally, his replies to critics in the Roman camp, particularly to Jacob Masson (Latomus) of the University of Leuven (Louvain), expanded on his understanding of sin and grace. These works set before the public the foundational core of Luther’s teaching, which remained throughout his career. Nevertheless, he continually experimented with new forms of expression of this core of teaching as new situations and new challenges caused him to alter his focus on particular elements of his exposition of the biblical message.

During the course of the 1510s, Luther’s study of the Scriptures, as one called to teach the Bible, coalesced with his training in the schools of philosophical and theological thinking initiated by William of Ockham two centuries earlier, and with his own personality. These factors led him to redefine what it means to be Christian as a relationship initiated by God rather than by the human being. That relationship took form in God’s speaking to his human creatures, who had fallen into revolt against him, and it took form in the trust that responds to God’s promise, as he had expressed it bodily in becoming human as Jesus of Nazareth. The flow of traffic between God and human beings was reversed: “To be God is not to be the receiver of good things but to give them.”

The roots of his redefinition of being a Christian lay in his perception of who God is. Luther came to see God as a God of conversation and community, a God of intense emotions, a God who likes to talk and who acts through his own speaking. His word creates and destroys, kills and makes alive, buries and resurrects. This perception of God arose from his reading of Scripture. Luther’s life in the monastery had led to his integrating the words of the Psalms, as the basic prayer book of monastic life, into his way of speaking and thinking. His initial lectures as a “Doctor of Bible” with degree in hand

treated the Psalms, and there he found a God who displayed emotions, ranging from wrath to mercy and love.

Furthermore, Luther’s training in scholastic theology reflected certain ideas of the Ockhamist school or schools of thinking. They emphasized God’s almighty power. Usually scholars have focused on Luther’s rejection of Ockham’s view of salvation, shared by most of his followers of various streams of thinking, which emphasized the necessity of human contribution to gain initial aid from God and capitalize on this grace to complete the process of attaining righteousness in God’s sight. But Luther also took from his Ockhamistic background this belief that God is the totally sovereign Lord of his creation, and as the creator who speaks, God communicates with his people in his own words, which ultimately are not subject to human judgment. Gabriel Biel (ca. 1408–95), for example, defined God’s revelation as his informing and exhorting, addressing mind and will. Reason cannot grasp that which is above it, God and his will, and therefore human beings rely on “the authority of the Scripture, Church, tradition, or preacher.” Biel distinguishes, in the scholastic way, acquired faith from infused faith. Acquired faith is established by these authorities as they are heard and grasped by human beings whose minds and wills accept what God says through his authoritative voices. This acquired faith must be turned to trust by infused faith, which is given by the Holy Spirit.13

The object of acquired faith is found, Biel argues, both in Scripture, which contains all doctrine necessary for salvation, and also in tradition, both as the fathers interpreted the Bible and as the church—its bishops and particularly the pope—has received supplementary revelation.14

To what extent Luther’s own emotional profile influenced his perception of God is difficult to discern across boundaries of time and culture. Certainly Luther also experienced strong emotions of somewhat the same contours as those he found attributed to God in the biblical text. Some attention has been devoted to Luther’s relationship with his father. If one looks beyond his complaints about parental strictness (common to most children in human history), Luther’s relationship with Hans Luther must have been quite positive. Little Martin turned out, insofar as can be observed, to be a rather good father himself, and his experience of being a father seems to have shaped his own depiction of God as a strict and loving parent.15 He was not creating God in his own image, as Ludwig Feuerbach speculates on the origins of religion;16 he read in Genesis that human beings are the way they are because

15. Stolt, “God as Father.”
God fashioned them in his image. In the end his faith, his worldview, arose from and was anchored in the biblical text.

By 1520 the chief elements in Luther’s personal “body of doctrine” or “rule of faith” had settled into place. Therefore we find the core of his biblical way of thinking appearing in somewhat the same form over the final quarter-century of his life. However, he never ceased experimenting with his manner of expressing these core truths. Different circumstances, further study, and various personal experiences and developments continually were firing his theological imagination and strengthening his communicative power and skills. Citations from the years between 1520 and 1546 give insight into his mature thinking, but each comes from a creative mind that was still searching for the most effective way of conveying God’s Word in the particular situation that confronted him at that time.

The Wittenberg Team

The church called Luther to teach, to prepare pastors and teachers for service in the church and in society. The call came through monastic superiors who had observed that already as a monk, Luther had deeply immersed himself in scholarly study of Scripture and the fathers of the ancient and medieval church. He was beginning to combine this knowledge from both the monastic and the scholastic traditions of Bible study with added insights from the biblical humanists of his own day. He also deeply immersed himself in the devotional reading of the Bible. That prepared him for all of his daily duties, not only at the monastery, in the university, and in the Wittenberg congregation, but also later in his family as well as in his relationships with colleagues, students, and the populace that he encountered as he walked the streets of Wittenberg. When the assignment came to him to complete doctoral studies and then teach Bible, he had absorbed a deep respect for Holy Scripture from the medieval church. However, as he began to practice this vocation under the title Teacher in Bible (Doctor in Biblia), he was also beginning to shift the framework of his thinking about God and being human. His reverence for God’s Word deepened, and he discovered new tools for mining its riches.

As he was expositing Scripture in the lecture hall, Doctor Luther, as his students often called him, had multifaceted relationships with his students. Some lived in his home and enjoyed table conversation with him. Others heard his lectures and his preaching and came into conversation with him in the lecture hall and on the streets of the small town of Wittenberg. In many
cases the relationship between mentor and student did not cease with their leaving the university for pastorates or teaching positions. They returned to visit, and they exchanged letters with the instructor, whose authority and wisdom they trusted on a wide spectrum of subjects.

His interactions with students took place within the context of his serving with other professors, in theology and in the other faculties of the university. Luther arrived as the successor to his mentor Johannes von Staupitz and the junior member of a faculty that included Thomists Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Petrus Lupinus, alongside Nikolaus von Amsdorf, as well as his friend and fellow Augustinian Wenzeslaus Linck. Lupinus died in 1521, Karlstadt left Wittenberg shortly thereafter in revolt against Luther’s teaching, and Linck and Amsdorf departed for service to his reform elsewhere. Philip (Philipp) Melanchthon came to Wittenberg as an instructor in Greek in 1518 but quickly was teaching Bible even though he remained only in the arts faculty until 1526, when he also assumed a theological professorship. Justus Jonas arrived in 1521 to teach canon law but quickly moved to exegetical lectures. Johannes Bugenhagen intended only to study in Wittenberg but became pastor of the town church in 1523; he had begun offering exegetical lectures at the university in 1522. The influx of students moved Elector John to call a fifth member of the team, Caspar Cruciger, in 1528.

Without the team around Luther, there would have been no Wittenberg Reformation. The cross-fertilization that arose from conversations has long since disappeared into thin air, but it can be sensed in the writings of all of them as well as in their personal recollections. Indeed, Luther’s mind and talk sparked and shaped the thoughts of his colleagues more than the reverse. But as is ever the case, the professor also learned from his students and colleagues. Melanchthon’s thought and methods of communicating certainly also played a significant role in the thinking of his colleagues as well as their students.

The rich stew of Wittenberg reform simmered and brewed in the cauldron of teamwork that involved students as well as professors in joint projects for the delivery of the Wittenberg proclamation of the gospel. Twentieth-century scholarly complaints that Luther’s published works too often do not reflect his thinking but that of his editors miss two points. He approved of most of his edited works published during his lifetime and expressed disapproval when he had reservations. Luther did not think that he held proprietary rights to the proclamation of the gospel and was delighted to have his trusted students

17. Friedensburg, Universität Wittenberg, 49–51.
improve his expression of the Wittenberg message; he was concerned about that message, not about personal renown.19

Luther did stand at the center of the Wittenberg team, however. His rhetorical gifts and his facile mind, along with his imagination and creativity as he looked at both contemporary world and biblical text, made him the mover and shaker at the heart of the developing Wittenberg way of perceiving reality. His masterful command of the German language; his ability to paint word pictures and fire the imaginations of his hearers and readers; and his sensitivity to the real-life pressures and pleasures, needs and hopes, of ordinary people all combined to make him a beloved preceptor in his own right, alongside his very gifted colleague and friend Melanchthon. He directed his penetrating gaze to the biblical text and to daily life, introduced the text into real life, and brought real life into the text.

The Implications and Impact of Luther’s New Definition of Being Christian

Although the Wittenberg team regarded instruction in Scripture as their primary calling, studies of the phenomenon labeled “Reformation” rightly highlight a variety of aspects of what made this movement function. Liturgy, polity, relationships with economic forces and political powers, social well-being, educational policy and methods, and developments in the visual and graphic arts all played important roles in what constituted the movement. Nonetheless, the Bible served as center of his entire enterprise, combining with elements in these several components of life to forge plausible answers to the questions and challenges of daily life.20 Without the Bible, there could be no preaching and therefore no evangelical church life. Without the Bible, there would be no guidelines for applying natural law to a variety of situations in everyday life, no perception of how to fit together the various elements and experiences of life in a village or neighborhood. Permeating the whole of life for the Wittenberg theologians was the presence of God, particularly of God in conversation with his people in, through, and by means of Holy Scripture.

Timothy Wengert has called the Wittenberg Reformation a “Reformation of preaching.”21 Luther’s redefinition of being Christian inevitably led to transformation of the framework in which the sermon, central to Christian

19. See chap. 5, under “The Editing of Luther’s Commentaries and Sermons.”
20. On the importance of exegesis in reciting the church’s history, see Ebeling, “Church History.”
21. Wengert, Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses.
worship in its first centuries as it had been in the synagogue service earlier, again became center of the liturgy. As David Steinmetz has observed, the sermon in the late medieval period was becoming ever more prominent, particularly in towns that could afford establishing an office of preacher alongside its priestly staff. But at best the sermon still served as preparation for participation in the sacramental ritual. Furthermore, Luther redefined the goal of the sermon. Most medieval sermons had served as moral admonition and instruction. Luther aimed the Word, which he held to be a performative instrument of the Holy Spirit, at minds and hearts so that hearers, by the Holy Spirit’s power, would be brought to repentance and trust in Christ—and to living the life of faith that trust in Christ elicited. The church building became, in the words of David Daniel, “kerygmatic space,” a place claimed by God present in the proclamation of his Word.

This meant that Luther’s redefinition of the life of faith also transformed theological education. First, the pastorate demanded more than learning the rules for ritual and proper administration of the parish. Being a pastor, exercising the office of preacher, demanded skill at teaching the Word of God from the text of Scripture and translating the ancient words of the text into effective pastoral care for both rebellious spirits and troubled, fearful hearts. Professors had to prepare students to mediate God’s conversation with their congregations and cultivate their proper responses in word and deed, in prayer and praise to God, and in daily service in love to the neighbor. Congregational life continued to find a certain center in the church building, but that sacred space no longer served as a ladder to heaven but rather as the “mouth house,” which shaped the entire conversation between God and his chosen people, as it continued on a daily basis in their entire lives. Therefore, in the reconstruction of the Wittenberg theological curriculum that took place informally from 1518 onward and formally from 1533, the Bible constituted the subject matter to be learned. The faculty colleagues divided the lectures, each focusing on one Testament or the other, though not in any restrictive way.

This book assesses both the roots and the fruits of the exegetical exploration and instruction at Wittenberg in the critical years of Luther’s and Melanchthon’s lifetimes. It begins with Luther’s understanding of God’s Word, which stood at the heart of his entire theological enterprise; reviews his hermeneutics; surveys his biblical lecturing; and then examines his transmission of the biblical message through his preaching and through his translation of the Bible. Luther learned and taught amid the accompanying team in Wittenberg as well

as from conversation partners near and far. Thus, to understand his dealing with Scripture, it is necessary to set forth other contributions to the Wittenberg formation of adherents, input by Melanchthon, Jonas, Bugenhagen, Cruciger, and a circle of students around them. This formation led to the creation of a Wittenberg school of exegesis that extended over two generations. The exegesis and the preaching of these students of the Wittenberg team reveal that their university instruction had not only shaped their understanding of Scripture and their practice of conveying it to their students and congregations but also unleashed a dynamic that continued what those who sparked the Wittenberg Reformation intended for the church.

But Was There Really a Wittenberg School of Exegesis?

Luther and his colleagues defined afresh what it means to be human and to be Christ’s church. They also created a scholarly subculture that bore the stamp of their way of thinking. A broad spectrum of colleagues, students, and also enthusiasts who had not studied in Wittenberg (such as Johann Spangenberg, Friedrich Myconius, Johannes Brenz, Paul Speratus, and even Andreas Osiander) received impulses from Wittenberg for their thinking and acted together to support the spread of Luther’s writings. Despite differences at varying points of their own reform efforts, to a significant extent they shared common teachings, methods, and goals in their interpretation of Scripture and their practice of church life and plans for society, common enough to justify grouping them together. That does not at all mean that they did not exhibit differences in expression and emphasis. Nonetheless, they regarded themselves as disciples of Luther, and most recognized a great debt to Melanchthon and their colleagues in Wittenberg. They supported one another, and even when they disputed, they argued about how best to pursue a common cause.

To be sure, some Wittenberg students diverged from what they had learned there, actively rejecting their teachers’ conception of the faith or of specific components of the body of biblical teaching. Thomas Müntzer was not persuaded to cast aside his spiritualistic understanding of the Christian faith and railed bitterly against the “soft-living flesh at Wittenberg.” Georg Witzel and Friedrich Staphylus are examples of those who sampled Lutheranism and returned to the old faith. The vast majority of those who heard the Wit-

24. S. Burnett (“Luther and Hebrew”) rightly rejects Mickey L. Mattox’s assertion that Luther regretted creating this subculture, in “From Faith to the Text,” 283–84.
tenberg exegetes, however, imbibed and digested this way of thinking. These followers and students were as creative as any generation in adapting this message to the specific communities and changing circumstances in which they were called to minister.

Life in Wittenberg was certainly not always idyllic, even among those who continued to adhere to Luther’s teaching and program for reform. As in any movement, disagreements arose about the implications of core ideas held in common. The first serious dispute broke out in the late 1520s, when Johann Agricola, one of the brightest and best of Luther’s earliest students, criticized Melanchthon’s treatment of the necessity of proclaiming the law to the people of faith.27 A decade later the dispute erupted again, this time with Luther as Agricola’s chief opponent, and led to a permanent break, although Agricola continued to represent Wittenberg teaching in his new home in Brandenburg in a peculiar way.28 Melanchthon invited criticism from his and Luther’s friend Nikolaus von Amsdorf on a series of issues.29 Furthermore, Luther and Melanchthon did not always share the same expressions of their teaching, although the differences between the two seem to have made much more difference to later scholars than to the two of them. Both tolerated no deviation from what they considered fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but they continued to work together, to support each other, and to issue common opinions when faculty opinions were solicited.30 After Luther’s death the defeat of the Evangelical Smalcald League led to the inevitable extension of the disputes over the Wittenberg message, a type of processing that refines every intellectual movement. A generation of the brightest and best of Wittenberg students struggled over how to interpret and apply their preceptors’ insights to specific questions. The feelings of betrayal evoked by criticism of the attempts of Melanchthon and other colleagues in Wittenberg to save Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran preachers in the face of imperial military action against the Evangelical churches made these disputes often bitter, and Melanchthon’s own feeling of betrayal by some of his best students-turned-critics deepened the crisis within the Wittenberg movement. Within the parties that scholars later labeled “Gnesio-Lutheran” and “Philippist,” disagreements broke out and led to serious divisions among associates.31

31. A good summary of the period is found in Dingel, “Culture of Conflict.” The idea that actual “schism” divided, for instance, Gnesio-Lutherans and Philippists after the collapse of
In view of such frictions among those associated with Wittenberg reform, is there enough commonality to speak of a “Wittenberg circle” or a “Wittenberg school of exegesis”? Tilemann Heshusius spoke of “the Wittenberg theologians” frequently being driven into exile; he may have drawn the circle more closely around his own interpretation of his mentors than this book does, but he and his contemporaries sensed that such a circle or school existed. Indeed, at the end of the next generation, two-thirds of those shaped by the Wittenberg team between 1520 and 1550 found accord in the Formula of Concord. In addition, the churches in some other principalities or towns shared its theology even if for political reasons they did not accept the Book of Concord, the collection of Lutheran confessional definitions that concluded with the Formula. Even in the midst of these disputes, the antagonists shared a common agenda, set by Luther’s change in the definition of Christian faith and life. Similar understandings of biblical teachings—including justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ, the new obedience that flows from that faith, and the centrality of God’s Word for the life of believers and the church—united them and at the same time provoked discussions and even discord about how best to define and apply these central truths.

They all strove to employ the same method of reading Scripture and delivering its content and impact to their congregations, namely, through the distinction of law (regarding God’s plan for human performance) and gospel (regarding God’s saving action in behalf of sinners). They further shared the fruits of humanist learning that they had harvested in the lectures heard in Wittenberg and that the professors there had delivered in textbooks on rhetoric and dialectic and in biblical commentaries and other theological writings. They knew the church fathers and engaged them critically; they could cite the wisdom and the stories of ancient Greece and Rome. They endeavored to reach their audiences through rhetorical skills cultivated particularly by Melanchthon yet also by his colleagues. They did all this because of the common goals of bringing their hearers and readers to repentance for their sins and the forgiveness of those sins as won through Christ’s death and resurrection. They were sometimes unclear on how to balance the Wittenberg insistence on God’s total responsibility as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier for everything with the parallel but paradoxical insistence on God’s holding.

the Colloquy of Worms in 1557 is false (as advanced by Thomas Kaufmann, Das Ende der Reformation, 420). Theologians and governing officials representing the two groups immediately began other efforts to establish concord within the Wittenberg circle, e.g., through the Frankfurt Recess of 1558 or the Weimar Book of Confutation of 1559.

32. Heshusius, In librum Psalmorum (1586), 363b.
33. Kolb, “Philipp’s Foes but Followers.”
human beings responsible for being the creatures he had created them to be. That was the dilemma that generated the distinction of law and gospel, the crux of human life that spawned disagreements. It was also the key to their effective application of the biblical message to the lives of their people, they believed. That is why they could disagree so passionately and exert such effort at finding proper solutions to their conflicts. They felt themselves akin.

This book focuses on the German disciples of Luther. Parallel developments to these were taking place at the same time in the kingdoms of Denmark (including Norway and Iceland), Sweden (including Finland and some Baltic territories), the Baltic principalities under German leadership, Poland, and Hungary (Slovakia included). Research into the impact of Wittenberg exegesis in these lands and their languages invites research. Such a survey and call for further research draws some lines around its subject that are arbitrary. Some significant figures associated with Wittenberg exegesis are not discussed here. Although they later drifted away from a Wittenberg orientation, Johannes Oecolampadius and Franz Lambert contributed to the early spread of ideas coming from there. At the end of the sixteenth century, Wittenberg professor Aegidius Hunnius and Tübingen professor Lucas Osiander are among several who form a transition to a new generation of Lutheran exegesis. Some at the Crypto-Philippistic34 edge of the Wittenberg circle, who later associated themselves with Calvinist churches, do reflect aspects of its exegetical work but later moved outside the circle, such as Jena professor Viktorin Strigel and Wittenberg professor Heinrich Moller. Their *modus interpretandi* and its relationship to the larger Wittenberg school also invite study. Noteworthy also is the energy and skill invested in the editing of the biblical text itself, in the original languages and in Latin and vernacular translations, but this topic deserves a separate study in itself.

The Wittenberg school of exegesis may be observed in both lectures and sermons (translation of Scripture came largely to rest after Luther’s and his colleagues’ efforts, although some work on the text of Scripture continued). The sermons of the sixteenth century fit more or less into the common understanding of the term *Predigten* or *Homiliae*, as called in German. Care must be exercised with the term *sermo* itself since it often titled a treatise rather than a sermon.

34. The term Crypto-Philippist is a recent correction to the term Crypto-Calvinist, applied from the sixteenth century into the late twentieth century to a group of Melanchthon’s followers, chiefly in electoral Saxony, who affirmed a spiritualized definition of the presence of Christ that departed from Luther’s teaching. Though their doctrine of the presence of Christ resembled that of theologians in Geneva, they believed that they were developing Melanchthon’s position at the end of his life. Contemporaries including David Chytraeus, Martin Chemnitz, and Paul von Eitzen disagreed with their interpretation of Melanchthon.
than an actual orally delivered message. The term “commentary” is more problematic. Kenneth Hagen has shown that no common definition of this designation was articulated or in practical use in the sixteenth century. This book follows common usage in designating as “commentary” works titled by both the singular *commentarius* and the plural *commentarii* as well as *annotationes, expositiones, explicationes, enarrationes, glossae, lectiones,* and similar titles. Homiletic commentaries on biblical books often bore the title “sermons” or “homilies.” The title chosen for any given work does not indicate specific characteristics or contrasts with expositions of Scripture bearing another of these designations.

Hagen has tried to classify sixteenth-century interpreters according to a medieval distinction among those who regarded Scripture as *sacra pagina, sacra doctrina, or sacra littera.* “The sacred page was seen as directly from God, about God, and for the pilgrim’s journey to God.” Sacred doctrine defined biblical study as the presentation of doctrine. Sacred letter, a product of biblical humanism, focused on the study of the text as literature, with careful attention to its linguistic and historical characteristics.35 Like Luther and Melanchthon, the Wittenberg exegetes of the late Reformation combined all three points of view in varying measures. Above all, they too experienced the Bible as a trysting place with God. They were convinced that he had written the Scriptures together with the apostles and prophets and that he was present in its words, continuing to speak through its pages. In Scripture these preachers and professors encountered the Holy Spirit addressing them and engaging them as means and instruments through whom he exercised his power for the salvation of hearers and readers.

This second generation, and even the majority of those among the contemporary followers of Luther and Melanchthon, have been labeled “epigones,” second-rate thinkers whose work is not of much interest compared with the giants who ignited the innovations that the second generation could only nurse and sustain. That is, of course, the fate and vocation of almost all human beings. As Jaroslav Pelikan recognized, it is beneficial to listen to the choruses and not only to the soloists and the virtuosi among the soloists.36 Those who carried the Wittenberg message to hearers and readers far and wide dare not be lightly dismissed. They reveal how movements such as the reform launched in Wittenberg functioned, matured, and evolved. They exhibit the exercise of creative imagination in applying Wittenberg theology to new and different situations and challenges as the century moved on.

35. Hagen, “What Did the Term Commentarius Mean?”
Presenting This Study

This book brings together the author’s own research over the past quarter-century with new examination of various aspects of Wittenberg exegesis. Some published studies are reproduced here, at least in part. The volume also attempts to synthesize significant parts of the vast, almost boundless, literature in both English and German, particularly regarding the earlier stages of the exegetical work at Wittenberg. Among several standard treatments of the subject, readers should consult Johann Michael Reu’s work. A less formidable introduction appeared in English two decades later by Willem Jan Kooiman. Most valuable is the recent study of Joachim Ringleben, *Gott im Wort: Luthers Theologie von der Sprache her*.

This volume does not offer a detailed study of the full use of Wittenberg method, much less a full exploration of precisely how biblical exegesis related to dogmatic formulation as the Wittenberg theologians and their immediate heirs mined insights from the pages of Holy Scripture. Such studies will, it is hoped, emerge from the challenge of these pages. This present book is designed to provide a digest of existing analyses of various aspects of biblical interpretation and proclamation in the Wittenberg circle. The overview is designed to stimulate new research, and it attempts to provide bibliographical orientation for such new studies of many of the subjects discussed. When possible, it employs documents for which English translations are available so that readers who do not read German or Latin can, via translations, have access to the originals and to cited passages in their fuller contexts. Quotations are taken from originals, and they reflect the author’s reading of the text, not always in precise accord with previous translations. In running text, English titles alone may refer to German works never translated.

Throughout Luther’s writings, readers encounter evidence of his understanding of Scripture and his ways of studying it and applying it to his own life and his hearers’ lives. References to Scripture, arguments from it, exegetical comments on it—these fill his evening chats with students and his correspondence. All of his polemical and devotional writings provide biblical exposition. This volume concentrates on his formal exegetical and homiletic efforts to convey the biblical message as these efforts were recorded in written or printed form. The boundless manuscript sources for the preaching of pastors and lectures of professors invite study and will provide new angles.

37. Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*; Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*.
38. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*.
40. Cf. the excellent bibliography in Herrmann, “Medieval Biblical Interpretation.”
and insights into early modern use of Scripture. This book seeks to analyze how Luther’s new definition of being Christian changed theological education and parish life, and how Luther with his colleagues and students all pursued the task of serving as God’s instruments in his conversation with sinners, unrepentant and repentant.

Luther’s story and impact did not cease with his death. His engagement with God’s Word lived on in his students and followers. To view the full significance of what Luther did with the Bible, he must be seen in the context of his colleagues, followers, and students. The final chapters of this volume continue the story of Luther’s immersion in Scripture to the last years of the sixteenth century. The amount of printed materials that give twenty-first-century readers impressions of the proclamation and analysis of Holy Scripture alone is overwhelming; this study has not incorporated the largely unexplored manuscript sources. Published sermons and commentaries may not precisely reflect what was typically preached by “average” pastors and professors, but they do reflect something of the method, style, and content that others conveyed. Furthermore, they helped to shape what was said and written by others whose words did not find their way into print.

This volume aims to serve as an introduction to this world of thinking and its inhabitants’ experience of the Christian faith.
Traces of the Bible, its narrative, and its view of human life filled the world of Martin Luther’s younger years. “The Bible was the most studied book of the Middle Ages,” comments Beryl Smalley at the beginning of her pioneering study of the use of Holy Scripture in medieval Europe. “Bible study represented the highest branch of learning.” The frequently encountered image of the medieval world as a world without Holy Scripture is quite false.

The Bible in German Society at the End of the Fifteenth Century

However, despite this focus on Scripture at the university and in the monastery, its presence within the context of daily life in the villages and towns, where most of the population lived, blended into a larger religious landscape. Scripture never appeared alone. It was heard alongside, and often mixed together with, the sacred stories of the saints, conveyed in several oral and written forms, especially the *Legenda aurea* of Jacob of Voragine, who edited earlier stories (in the manner of the Brothers Grimm) in the thirteenth century. These stories largely reflected a worldview in which human performance of certain...
rituals or good deeds mingled with a sense of divine power that sometimes embraced the magical to prescribe or explain how the good might be attained and evil avoided or overcome. Thus the structures within which the biblical stories were absorbed often reflected another way of perceiving reality than did the words of the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament evangelists and apostles. This framework into which the biblical narrative fell, in young Martin’s worldview, stood quite in contrast to the framework that Luther later found in Scripture. His parents’ world lacked an understanding of God as the God of conversation and community, engaged personally with his people, and an understanding of the human creature centered on trust in God’s goodness and mercy, as well as on love and service to other human beings, all of which shaped Luther’s mature worldview.

Physically, the Bible was not present in the world of most medieval Europeans. No book was. Most households in the Germany of Luther’s ancestors had no need of a bookshelf. Literacy was rising slowly in Germany around 1500, but the ability to read and write remained characteristic of only a very few into Luther’s own time. The cost of books the size of a Bible, or even a New Testament, exceeded the disposable income of most. By the late fifteenth century, however, some German merchants and artisans had acquired basic skills in Latin and accumulated sufficient money to purchase a Latin Bible—and as they began to appear, German translations—for household use. From 1350 onward, German translations had been available although not widely distributed. To the greatest extent, however, access to books in general and specifically to Scripture remained the province of those in holy orders. Into the late Middle Ages, for the common people Scripture remained but one of many tools for cultivating piety, albeit in clerically governed settings and circumstances.

The first printed Bible in any European vernacular language appeared in 1465 or 1466, in German. Church leaders did believe that the people of God should not try to delve into the biblical text itself. Most famous, but not by any means unique, is the edict of Archbishop Berthold of Mainz, issued March 22, 1485, and reissued January 4, 1486, that forbade translations of the Bible, as well as other books, from Greek or Latin. He imposed penalties of excommunication and fines on those who published such translations without official approval. In addition, Berthold established a commission consisting of four masters, representing each of the four faculties of his university in Erfurt, to

govern translating these texts. Popular Strassburg preacher Johannes Geiler von Kaisersberg (1445–1510) explained the necessity of the trained clergy’s interpreting Scripture to the common people: “It is dangerous to place the knife in the children’s hands to cut bread for themselves; they could cut themselves. So the Holy Scripture, which contains God’s bread, must be read and explained by those who have knowledge and experience.” Only they can deal with the inevitable difficulties that some texts present. The words themselves could easily be spoiled as the nourishment of faith. Widespread illiteracy rendered an actual prohibition of reading Scripture unnecessary; yet with the advent of cheaper books and advancing literacy in the early sixteenth century, such reading became a problem for ecclesiastical officials.

Although church officials were cautious and hesitant about reading Scripture in one’s own language, they wanted Christians to know what it contained. In the monastery, passages from Scripture filled the day, framed by seven hours of prayer. Significant percentages of the population lived the monastic way of life or at least a lay imitation of it. Some laypeople also could absorb some Scripture passages from the liturgy, although in Latin. By 1500 a majority of parish priests still ministered without benefit of formal theological training. Some were illiterate and learned by rote the basics of liturgical practice in order to conduct the Mass and administer the other sacraments. Most with some rudimentary education had neither tools nor training to enable them to construct sermons. However, by Luther’s time preaching was touching the lives of more people than a century earlier as towns commissioned special preachers and as mendicant brothers conducted preaching services in villages. Some peasants and townspeople ventured occasionally into a local monastery to hear sermons even though preaching normally took place in Latin there. Literate local priests could obtain postils, books of sermons on the appointed lessons, to aid them or provide them a text to read aloud to the congregation. Hughes Oliphant Old reports the variety of forms and styles in medieval preaching, the difficulty that preachers had in interpreting texts, the anchoring of preaching in the liturgical calendar, and its rhetorical style, using outlines filled with examples. Stephen Webb argues that medieval sermons made deep impressions on “impressionable” hearers “because their experiences were more concrete and tangible.” He also concedes that “the sound that most

8. Ibid., 137.
9. Ibid., 79–84.
impressed the medieval mind was the bell, not the sermons,”12 perhaps because of the lack of a unitary framework that allowed application of the individual sermonic narratives to life as a whole. Luther complained that “having lost the Bible, they had nothing else to preach” than the lives of the saints,13 and these stories “were not written in accordance with the standard set by Scripture.”14 Thus biblically based sermons did not play as important a role in religious consciousness or practice as the sacraments and, above all, the Mass, which remained the central focal point of piety and penance. Sermons simply aided preparation for reception of the grace bestowed in the sacraments.15

A number of other media also inculcated elements of the biblical message and narrative into the minds of the populace. The ubiquitous altars, the main altar and side altars or chapel altars for saying masses for the dead, presented unique visual images in the medieval village. Thus they made a great impact on the people’s thinking. There too depictions of the saints reminded people of their particular powers to grant relief and assistance alongside the images of biblical narratives. In the second half of the fifteenth century a cheaper alternative to works set in movable type, the so-called block books, presented pictures of the heroes of the faith along with some text, both from Scripture and from the stories of the saints. The “Bibles of the Poor” and works such as the Speculum humanae salvationis (The Mirror of Salvation) and Concordantia caritatis (Harmony of Love), as well as depictions of King David’s life, the allegory of the Song of Solomon, or the Apocalypse—these reached a more limited audience. All these vehicles cultivated some sense of the story of salvation, the models for Christian behavior, and the terrors to be expected at the end of the world.16

Basic biblical knowledge was transmitted, as it had been for centuries, in a core curriculum that consisted of the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and/or lists of virtues and vices, and the Ave Maria. The ancient church had designed this program of instruction, dubbing it with the Latin term “catechism” (from Greek katēchēsis), intended to cultivate knowledge of the foundational elements of the biblical faith. Augustine summarized this program with reference to 1 Corinthians 13:13 as instruction in

13. WA TR 3:489–90, §3654.
16. Rost, Bibel im Mittelalter, 211–54; on the expanding use of artistic works in cultivating popular piety, see Hamm, Religiosität im späten Mittelalter, 425–45, with an appendix of illustrations, 563–94; and Schmidt, Illustration der Lutherbibel, 31–92.
faith (the Apostles’ Creed), hope (the Lord’s Prayer), and love (lists of virtues and vices). That catechism was carried on in the Middle Ages by preachers, but listening to occasional sermons on these fundamentals of the faith did not integrate its worldview into children’s worldview the way Luther advocated and cultivated with his catechetical handbooks, Large and Small. His little books redefined the word “catechism” as a printed text to be memorized and mastered as well as integrated into daily thinking, so that thinking in its structures would become second nature.

Medieval Christians who had mastered this catechetical instruction had at their disposal a variety of works to aid further learning, including poetic summaries of Bible stories, collections of Bible stories in prose form, and dramatic productions, particularly in the Passion parades and plays conducted before Easter. In summary, the world of Luther’s grandparents was saturated with Scripture, but its words were intermingled with sacred accounts of saints of various kinds and framed by presuppositions regarding God and human life that Luther considered contradictory to the message intended by the prophets and apostles.

The Bible in Luther’s Childhood

Only seldom did Luther report stories from his childhood and youth. It is not clear to what extent his parents could read and write, and there are no indications that his home possessed a Bible, an unlikely occurrence in late medieval villages. His parents raised him in what was probably a typical medieval piety, overshadowed by the threat of death and focused on confession and absolution in the sacrament of penance and on the Mass. No record of his memories of local Mansfeld preaching exist. Like most preaching of the time, it probably emphasized pious behavior and preparation for death, especially through using the sacrament of penance. Finally we are left to speculate regarding how Luther began to absorb the biblical narrative as a baby, in the rhythm of daily life, the liturgy, and the visual images around him in Mansfeld, the town where he grew up. There, in the church, dedicated to Saint George, he encountered a high altar, which depicted the birth of Christ. Each time he entered the sanctuary, he also saw Saint George slaying the dragon as a representation of Christ defeating the devil. The little boy may

17. Robinson, “Lord, Teach Us to Pray.”
19. Siggins, Luther and His Mother, 53–70.
have had a difficult time sorting out the difference between the confrontations of Daniel or Samson with lions and Saint George’s meeting his dragon. He never commented on how the church of his youth shaped his consciousness. At a minimum, he later reported, the reading of the Gospel lessons rather than sermons had kept the faith alive under the papacy, “for the Holy Spirit is present in the word of Christ, giving life when he wills and to whom he wills.”20 Perhaps that comment reflects his own experience in Saint George’s church, but its visual impact must have had its effect as well.

Johannes Mathesius (1504–65), Luther’s student in 1529–30 and 1540–42, composed a series of sermons that constituted one of the first longer biographical treatments of Luther’s life. Mathesius had lived with the Luther family. He reported that in the primary school at Mansfeld, Luther had learned the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, along with his Latin grammar, arithmetic, and music. Instruction in grammar and music also broadened and deepened his acquaintance with Scripture since examples in Latin exercises used Bible passages. The hymns, liturgical sequences, psalms, and antiphons that the school boys sang in church services implanted the words of Scripture in their minds and perceptions of the world.21

At age fourteen, when Martin left Mansfeld to advance his preparations for the university study that his father coveted for him, he went to the metropolis of Magdeburg, among the largest cities of the German lands, with its population of twenty-five thousand or more. There he attended school with his Mansfeld friend Hans Reinecke, under the supervision of an official of the archbishop, Paul Mosshauer, a Mansfeld native who had connections with the Mansfeld smelters. As Luther reported, the boys attended the school of the Brethren of the Common Life.22 Since the Brethren had no school of their own in Magdeburg, it may be that they influenced the cathedral school near their house. Reinecke and Luther probably lived in the Brethren community. There they were exposed to the simple piety of this lay order, which cultivated Bible reading and prayer, though specific lasting influences are difficult to identify.23

Like many pupils at secondary schools away from home, Luther transferred schools after one year, moving to Eisenach, the town from which his mother came. This town of about four thousand provided his final four years of education preparing him for the university. Three churches and three monasteries graced the town. For much of his stay there, he resided with the family of Heinrich Schalbe, a leading citizen who was familiar with developments in

humanistic education of the time and was active in a group of pious Eisenach residents led by the local Franciscan monks. This group and a vicar at the local foundation church of Saint Mary, Johannes Braun, played a significant role in Luther’s life during these four years. From them he undoubtedly deepened his biblical knowledge. The sources, however, lack precise details.24

Luther’s Encounter with Scripture in the University and Monastery

The next station on Luther’s educational journey was Erfurt; with its population of twenty thousand, it was another metropolis for the boy from little Mansfeld. There he ran the “undergraduate” course of the arts faculty, moved into the monastery, where he regularly heard lectures on Scripture, and then was ordered by his superiors to pursue formal study leading to the doctorate. The thought world of Mansfeld and Eisenach expanded within the intellectual traditions inherited from ancient Greek and Roman cultures, but they only supplemented the framework for his thinking inherited from his Thuringian grandparents.

This framework joined the pre-Christian religious heritage of the traditional Germanic religions with elements carried over the Alps by missionaries whose worldview had been formed by a similar Mediterranean mixture of pre-Christian inheritance and biblical concepts. The framework also took on new characteristics from the intellectuals who strove to make the faith intelligible in the ancient structures of Platonic and Aristotelian thinking. By Luther’s time, Christian theologians at the university and, to a certain extent, also in the monastery thought largely in Aristotelian categories. The exchange with Jewish and Muslim scholars in Spain begun in the twelfth century had revived knowledge of Aristotle in the Christian West. By the mid-thirteenth century the structure within which biblical concepts took shape reflected the worldview of Aristotle to a significant extent. In the midst of this process, though not always as a direct reflection of Aristotelian method, a number of helps for Bible study developed.

The lecturers on biblical books at the university and in the monastery could rely on collections of Bible passages, each group called a *catena* (chain) or a *florilegium* (bouquet), gathered to explicate a specific subject. Concordances had existed since the thirteenth century, and encyclopedic works on biblical subjects since the twelfth. The *Glossa ordinaria*, which originated out of the circle around Anselm of Laon (ca. 1070–1117), placed brief comments from

the church fathers around the text on the center of a page and supplied lectures on biblical books with a handy guide to the tradition of interpretation.25 The *Glossa* was the most important of an increasing number of biblical commentaries that monastic and university lecturers read in preparing to compose their own treatments of the text.

Two settings shaped medieval biblical interpretation: the monastery and the university. Similar methods informed the exegesis practiced in each setting, yet in the course of the Middle Ages, different accents did develop. The prevailing modern view that medieval exegetical method centered on the “allegorical” exploration of potential meaning in the texts is not false, but it must be tempered by two factors. “Allegorical interpretation” embraced varying approaches to construal of the text and its application to hearers’ lives;26 particularly in the monastery the literal words of the biblical writers were receiving ever more serious attention.27 In its narrow sense “allegory” is to be distinguished from typological and figural interpretations. Allegory, according to Erich Auerbach, was originally a means whereby abstractions of a cosmological or a mystic and moral nature could be drawn from ancient classical myths and poetic texts. In contrast, “figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events,”28 but they complement each other, for instance, in the Old Testament’s providing images of New Testament events, or the New Testament’s pointing to the eschaton. Typology, Auerbach posits, regards an actual historical experience as a genuine prophecy of another actual future historical event, a prophecy anchored in history and pointing to what is coming as history unfolds.29 Gerhard Krause deems *figura* “the most comprehensive category of interpretation in the Middle Ages,” which interpreted God’s actions and the providential unity of the world’s history in terms of earthly events. Luther often used “figural interpretation” in the form of typology in his Old Testament interpretation.30 In actual usage, “figure” and “type” are

26. Luther used the word “allegory” in a variety of ways, including roughly as a synonym for metaphor or for any pictorial image in words; cf. WA TR 2:649–51, §2272a–b.
often made quite similar or identical, and late medieval authors sometimes employed any three of these terms even for metaphors.

Allegorical approaches to the biblical text uniformly embraced the idea that God had hidden deeper truths behind popular stories, particularly in Old Testament narratives that had little sense for later readers or even contained offensive and unexplainable components. Jewish interpreters, most prominently first-century Alexandrian thinker Philo, had turned to this approach before the time of Christ. Christopher Ocker observes the irony in the ancient Christian resort to allegory, a method that they borrowed from their contemporary Platonists, who used it to make the poetic myths of their culture relevant in their thought world. Biblical narratives presented another kind of literature and another approach to explaining life grounded in the historical account of God’s interaction with human beings. Allegory developed in tandem with an attitude that regarded the ability to interpret the text faithfully as a gift of “spiritually heroic individuals who through a rigorous discipline achieved divine knowledge.” The method presumed the necessity of the literal text but focused on rising above the dreary or dramatic details of specific times and places to revel in the profound, abstract, “universal” ideas (as conceived of in a Platonic or Neoplatonic worldview), which could render such narratives relevant long after their concrete details allegedly no longer bore significance. Alexandrian theologian Origen (185–254) found this method especially ideal for interpreting the Old Testament in line with his mixture of New Testamental and Neoplatonic thought. His successors found various ways to classify allegorical levels of meaning. Augustine sought to treat faith, hope, and love on four planes of meaning: beyond the literal or historical were the allegorical (figurative interpretation), analogical (the correlation of Old and New Testaments), and etiological (causal explanation). His contemporary John Cassian (360–430/435) employed the categories of tropology, which made individual moral application of what was symbolized in the text; allegory in its precise sense, which pointed toward the future, especially to Christ, the sacraments, and the church; and anagogy, which unlocked the mysteries of heaven. These categories became standard for most medieval interpreters.

The dominance of allegorical exegetical method did not go unchallenged, particularly in certain streams of monastic exegesis. Since the twelfth century, proceeding from the Victorine tradition of interpretation, some monastic lecturers rejected the separation of the literal reading of the text from the internal, divine truths that allegorically “cast their shadows on the reader’s world, allowing the reader to move from shadow to image and from image to divine source.” The Victorines departed at least somewhat from this Platonic basis for understanding what the text was intended to convey. Transformations in “religious and social expectations” during the High Middle Ages eased the way for this transformation of exegetical practice as monastics strove to bring their piety to a broader public. Some decided that not just those in sacred orders but also “any well-intending reader could place himself into the conversation of God, prophets, apostles, and saintly commentators, inserting himself into a textual scene that encompassed sacred literature broadly conceived (the Bible and commentaries together), inserting himself like a patron figure at the foot of a painted cross or before a painted pieta.” This made sense because those who took the literal sense of the Scriptures more seriously presumed “the communion of (divine and human) writers with (past and present) readers, and a sense of continuity between all religious writers and readers. This attitude assumed a continuity of meaning that extended subjectively and inter-subjectively outside the Bible” and “a conviction of profound similarity, an aesthetic similarity of literatures, a shared biblical poetic.” Such interpreters found a common basis for understanding life in the contemporary world and the literal text of Scripture. It spoke directly out of its narratives to the experiences of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century readers and hearers.

Scholastic theology had created a culture and conversation on the basis of ground rules dictated by Aristotle’s conception of reality. It concerned itself with a range of questions different from those considered by the practically oriented piety of monastics. The Scholastics were often searching for mystical experiences, sometimes described in Neoplatonic language that strove to enhance the faith of those who continued to practice their childhood piety, which mixed certain biblical images with activities characteristic of pre-Christian traditional Germanic religion under a Christian veneer. But it was in the monastic tradition that Luther heard his first lectures on Scripture in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt beginning in 1505. In the

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35. Reventlow, Biblical Interpretation, 2:160–70.
36. Ocker, Biblical Poetics, 217; cf. Thompson, Sure Ground, 38–44.
37. Ocker, Biblical Poetics, 216.
course of his university training in the scholastic tradition, further lectures could not obliterate the tendencies cultivated by this more literal and historical approach to the biblical text. His formation as an exegete took place in two convergent but also contrasting worlds of thought. His experience at the university and in the monastery only deepened a sense of awe for the Bible as he learned to know its contents more fully, an awe inherited from the simple peasant piety shaped by his parents, grandparents, and the priests of Mansfeld.

When Luther arrived in Erfurt for his university studies in 1501, he found lodging in Saint George’s student residence. There one student read from the Bible each day while the others ate. The Bible framed the routine of students of the liberal arts, not only of students of theology.\(^{39}\) Luther later reported that he had given up all his books when he entered the monastery, with the exception of his copies of Plautus and Virgil. Since he probably did not possess a Bible at the time, this is no indication that he gave away a Bible of his own.\(^{40}\)

In the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites, the largest and the most influential cloister in the Thuringian-Saxon province of the order, Luther was incorporated into the monastic-mystical piety of the time.\(^{41}\) Regular hearing of Scripture was part of the daily discipline of reading the Bible, the lives of the saints, or other sacred literature at mealtimes as well as in the context of daily prayers. The rules of the order (1287) dictated that the brothers were to “industriously read, thoughtfully hear, and carefully study” the Bible. Luther immediately began to hear lectures on Scripture and Lombard’s *Sententiae*, part of the Augustinian routine. His comments on the vanity and burden of the strict observance of the seven “canonical hours”\(^{42}\) do not offer clues about which specific order of the Breviary, the program of readings and prayers, the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt followed. Precisely how much exposure to Scripture the rhythm of liturgical life in the monastery gave the young monk cannot be determined. The liturgical life he experienced was enmeshed in a program that cultivated regular use of the sacrament of penance, meditation (also on the lives of the saints), and prayer; the Eremites gained a reputation of neglecting study in order to pray, although some counterevidence exists on this last point for the Erfurt cloister.\(^{43}\) Within the Augustinian Eremites at this time, two tendencies—in addition to the more

\(^{39}\) Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, 9.

\(^{40}\) WA TR 1:44, §116.

\(^{41}\) See Leppin, “Monastic-Mystical Piety.”

\(^{42}\) E.g., WA TR 2:11, §1253.

\(^{43}\) On the liturgical practice, see the study of Häusling, “Luther und das Stundengebet.”
general flavor of monastic-mystical piety—may have influenced Luther’s developing way of thinking: the Augustinians focused particular interest on the Epistles of Paul, and the new “humanist” approaches to biblical studies fascinated some of them. 44

Nonetheless, Mathesius told of the young novice’s earliest encounter with a Latin Bible as a physical, tangible object. Wonder filled him as he discovered many more passages than he had known from the preaching he had heard. He told his students that he slipped into the monastery’s library to read Scripture in his battle against melancholy. 45 Looking through the Old Testament, he came upon the story of Samuel and his mother, Hannah, and read it eagerly and with joy. 46 Luther himself recalled that he immediately wanted to have his own copy of the book. Instead, he purchased a postil, which he liked because it contained many Gospel lessons that were to be read during the year. 47 His fellow monks apparently respected his interest in Scripture, for they gave him a Latin Bible bound in red leather. One of them told him that if he studied it, he would be the monastery’s good Biblicus, the local expert on finding texts and interpreting them. Thirty years later he reported that he had gained precisely that reputation. 48 He recalled that his reading of physics provided no pleasure, but he diligently read the Bible. Amid reading the judgments of the prophets, the words of Ezekiel, “I do not wish the death of the sinner” (cf. 18:32), impressed themselves on his memory. 49 His early encounters with Scripture were not typical for even those with further theological education; his Wittenberg colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt did not possess

44. See also Gutiérrez, Die Augustiner vom Beginn der Reformation, 116–54; Kunzelmann, Geschichte der Deutschen Augustiner-Eremiten, 5:4–104; on Johannes von Paltz, the Augustinian who strove to cultivate a piety that could more easily obtain the grace that would enable the believer to perform the necessary works to please God, see Hamm, Frömmigkeitstheologie.

45. WA TR 3:439.2–6, §3593. The doubt expressed by Kooiman (Luther and the Bible, 3) over Luther’s claim that he had not seen a complete Bible until he was twenty years old seems naïve. The fact that some 20,000–27,000 copies of the Vulgate, along with some copies of German translations, were in circulation at the time, along with manuscripts, certainly does not make it probable that the smelter’s son from Mansfeld had seen a copy. Kooiman’s misgiving about his library reading because monastery rules would not have permitted private use of the library in this manner presumes strict observance and enforcement of all monastery rules; furthermore, it does not take into account Mathesius’s description of Luther “hiding” (versteckt) himself in the library; see note 51 below.

46. Mathesius, Historien, IIIb.

47. WA TR 1:44, §116. Kooiman (Luther and the Bible, 7–8) suggests that this “postil” was probably a “plenarium,” a collection of pericopal texts with brief comments on them. Kooiman regards the price of a plenarium at four or five groschen (in comparison to the cost of a fattened ox at fifteen times that price) as “not extraordinarily high.” For that price he could have bought a bushel of wheat, a not insignificant investment for a young monk.

48. WA TR 4:433, §4691.

49. WA TR 1:44, §116.
a Bible for a long time, which is one reason why Luther’s knowledge of its text so impressed Karlstadt.  

Luther’s enthusiasm for the Bible did not go without criticism from his instructors in Erfurt. Mathesius reports that after his ordination the Augustinian brothers “took the Bible away from him,” that is, they insisted on his studying the “sophists and scholastics.” It was apparently in this context that he sneaked away to read the Bible in the monastery’s library. In 1531, Luther recalled a conversation with Bartholomäus Arnoldi of Usingen, one of his fellow Augustinians and also his instructor at the university. “He saw that I loved the Bible and enjoyed reading in the Holy Scriptures, and said to me, ‘Well, Brother Martin, what is the Bible? One should be reading the ancient teachers, who extracted the sap of the truth from the Bible. The Bible just causes disturbances.’” When retelling the incident to his students, Luther dismissed that advice as “talking the way the world talks.” He did not mention his reaction at the time.

Once his superior Johannes von Staupitz had determined that the young monk was well suited for teaching at the university, Luther was propelled in a direction that he had not intended for himself. In fostering the intellectual and theological development of the reluctant young monk whom he would choose to succeed him on the Wittenberg faculty, Staupitz had encouraged Luther’s reading and his practice of the art of formal disputation. He also guided him into the use of the Scriptures in preaching. Luther began the pursuit of the degrees that permitted him to lecture on the Bible beyond the monastery. The normal medieval route to academic advancement began with completing requirements for the degrees of bachelor and master of arts via successful disputations. Luther had accomplished all that before he entered the monastery. Probably soon after his ordination, his superiors launched him into theological studies, which required five years of hearing lectures and taking part in disputations. The Sententiae of Peter Lombard, the master text for systematized theology, stood at the center of such study. Alongside these exercises the young hopeful seeking an academic career was required to lecture initially in philosophy. Luther conducted his first such lectures in Erfurt, but then from the fall of 1508 to mid-1509 he lectured at the infant university of Wittenberg, where at the same time he heard lectures from his former Erfurt professor in the arts faculty, Jodocus Trutvetter. In March 1509 he earned the degree of bachelor of Bible. Staupitz’s eagerness to have Luther assume

51. Mathesius, Historien, V1a.
52. WA TR 2:5–6, §1240.
53. WA TR 5:75–76, §5346.
his professorship of Bible in Wittenberg may have contributed to Luther’s rather swift progress, to the degree of bachelor of (Lombard’s) *Sententiae* in autumn 1509. In 1509–10 he lectured, as required by the statutes of the Erfurt theological faculty, on the *Sententiae.*

In Erfurt at Luther’s time, a promoter of the so-called humanist educational reform, Conrad Mutian Rufus (1471–1526), had gathered young students around himself outside the regular curriculum and program of the university. Luther certainly had acquaintances in this circle, but it is not clear that he participated in its activities, and Mutian had left Erfurt by the time Luther became a student there. During and after Luther’s time in Erfurt, several who later became his disciples—including Justus Jonas, Johann Spangenberg, Justus Menius, and Georg Spalatin—participated in this humanist circle. Mutian himself did not openly embrace Luther’s reform program. But he undoubtedly contributed indirectly to the appreciation of those in his circle for what return to original languages and texts and the fostering of good rhetorical skills could mean for the tasks of theology. Although Gerhard Ebeling’s observation that “Luther’s hermeneutical position neither owes its beginning to humanistic influence nor is it finally congruent with humanistic hermeneutics” may be true for his theological guideposts, the young scholar of Erfurt and Wittenberg certainly embraced the linguistic program of the humanists—“back to the original sources”—and their emphasis on effective communication through sound rhetorical principles.

Mathesius suggests that by 1508 Luther had already begun to criticize principles found in the “sophism” of William of Ockham, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Albertus Magnus as the foundation for the practice of theology. He embraced “the prophetic and apostolic Scripture, which proceeds from God’s mouth, as the principle more sublime, more basic, more certain than all the sophism and scholastic theology.” Luther’s critique had certainly not developed into a mature theological alternative at this point. However, a March 17, 1509, letter to his former mentor in Eisenach, priest Johann Braun, indicates that he gladly took theology, which contains “the flesh of the nut and germ of the wheat and the marrow of the bone,” in exchange for his philosophical studies since “God is God; the human being often errs in judgment.”

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57. WA BR 1:17.40–45.
be wrong and will bring out a new teaching and reform the Roman church. For he bases his thinking on the prophetic and apostolic Scripture and stands on the word of Jesus Christ.”

As unlikely as such a prognostication seems, the late medieval longing for change may have combined with the recognition of the new colleague’s gifts to provoke some kind of hope for his potential.

In its first years the University of Wittenberg, founded in 1502, gathered its students largely from electoral Saxony; Elector Frederick the Wise had created it to serve first of all the needs of his domains. Several leading figures formed the initial image of the university, including Pollich, jurist Henning Göde, and the first theologian, Augustinian Eremite vicar general Johannes von Staupitz. Staupitz had begun his studies in Tübingen in 1497, two years after the death of Gabriel Biel, perhaps the most influential German theologian of his era. Thus Staupitz had studied under Biel’s disciples, including Konrad Sommenhart, Heinrich Bebel, and Wendelin Steinbach; he formed a friendship with Johannes Altensteig, whose theological dictionary gathered citations from many medieval theologians to define the important terms of his trade. Staupitz drew his nephew, Nikolaus von Amsdorf, to his side in Wittenberg to teach “in the Scotist way,” as well as a student who had begun his studies in Wittenberg in 1504, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, trained in Ockhamism at Erfurt and in Thomism at Cologne. Jodocus Trutvetter came from Erfurt to represent the Ockhamist tradition while Karlstadt taught “in Thomas’s way.”

On the festival of Saint Luke (October 18) 1512, the final step on Luther’s academic ladder took place. After a successful disputation chaired by his colleague Karlstadt, Luther took his oath as a Doctor in Biblia. This permitted him to lecture on biblical texts at the university. He did just that and did not return, as was common among the Doctores in Biblia in previous generations, to commenting on Lombard’s Sententiae. Mathesius summarizes the content of his oath: he promised “to study the Holy Scripture his entire life, to preach it and to defend the Christian faith in formal university disputations and in his writings against all heretics.” The medieval church characterized a Doctor in Biblia as “highly gifted, devoted to study, humble in judgment, and untouched by vice.” His doctoral oath, and the fact that he had resisted attaining the office of “teacher of Bible” but instead had it imposed on him, comforted Luther as he withstood attacks in later years. “I would not

58. Mathesius, Historien, V1b.
60. Steinlein, Luthers Doktorat.
62. Altensteig, Vocabularius Theologie (1517), LXIXb.
trade my doctorate for all the wealth in the world. For in the long run I would certainly lose courage and despair if I had undertaken these important and serious matters without call or command. But God and the whole world bears testimony that I entered into this work publicly and by virtue of my office as a teacher and preacher.”

In August 1513, Luther began his lectures, on the Psalms, much in the manner of most theological professors of his time. Suggestions that he had already lectured on another book, perhaps Genesis, cannot be documented. He was following the usual method of exposition, loosely to be labeled “allegorical,” which he had mastered in Erfurt and Wittenberg. Luther recalled being “a master of spiritual interpretation, allegorizing everything” until the Epistle to the Romans gave him a little knowledge of Christ. Then he gave up allegorizing, he claimed, although his rejection of the method was indeed not a total abandonment of its use.

One source for Luther’s viewing the text in more historical fashion, remaining closer to the literal text, may have been one of his predecessors in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Hermann of Schildesche, who had briefly inhabited his cloister nearly two hundred years before Luther’s arrival there. Hermann’s *Compend on the Meanings of Sacred Scripture* set forth an extensive analysis of the historical and nonhistorical divisions of the literal sense of Scripture, and the use of persons or events as prefigurations of the future in each. Whether it was from Hermann or from others that Luther gained the resources to develop his approach to reading the biblical text, Christopher Ocker believes that late medieval interpreters, Hermann included, “lacked a literary method for handling the narrative construction of the Bible as a whole.” Luther found such a method in his understanding of God’s conversation with his human creatures that he launched at creation and continued after humankind’s fall into sin. That conversation aimed at recultivating the vineyard of his people through the life of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. This conversation was taking place when he preached and lectured, Luther believed. He intended his preaching and teaching to be an instrument through which God grasped his hearers and engaged their entire lives.

Luther’s instructors had taught the young monk that the Bible was the authority on which his teaching was to be based. They believed that the Holy Spirit had inspired the Bible, referring to 2 Timothy 3:16, and viewed its

64. WA TR 1:136–37, §335.
66. Ibid., 21–22, 211.
purposes in terms of this passage and Romans 15:4 as the source of teaching, admonition, and consolation. Early in his lecturing he highlighted the words of Richard of Saint Victor, “Every truth not confirmed by the authority of the Scriptures is suspect” (suspecta est omnis veritas, quam non confirmat scripturarum auctoritas), in a statement on the canonization of Bonaventure, and he called Holy Scripture “heaven” in a brief marginal note: Scriptura etiam divina dicitur celum. But his instructors had defined biblical authority within the context of their Ockhamist understanding that God had not only spoken through the prophets and apostles but also continues to speak through the authorities of the church’s tradition—first and foremost, through the ancient fathers but also the leading theological voices of the Middle Ages—and through the contemporary leadership of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In addition, as always, the worldview or presuppositions exercised an unspoken and sometimes unrecognized authority in framing questions and supplying modes of argumentation that shaped the processing of the biblical voices for sixteenth-century audiences. An observation of Cistercian Alain de Lille (1116/30–1202/3)—“Authority has a waxen nose, in that it can be bent to a different sense and must be reinforced by reasons”—identifies the power of the one citing any authority in all ages. Luther’s education taught him the skill of citing many authorities, biblical and patristic, classical and medieval. It gave him the Aristotelian tools and the Lombardian questions that shaped his use of them. As his perceived audience shifted from fellow theologians to the people of God and their crises in spiritual and daily life, Aristotle and Lombard became ever less useful. He began to formulate what Ocker saw lacking in the best of medieval interpreters, including those who strove to accept the discipline of the literal text. Echoing Alain, Ocker observes, “Their best tool was logic,” the proper and effective rhetorical and hermeneutical tool for delivering the goods of Scripture, they were certain. However, the lack of “a literary method for handling the narrative construction of the Bible as a whole” weakened their ability to apply the message effectively. From humanist treatments of rhetoric, Luther was able to gain an alternative to Aristotle’s “reasons.” In his focus on the needs of the faithful for genuine conversation with God, Luther found the distinction of law and gospel as “the place where discrete biblical meanings congealed in a coherent body of knowledge” (as Ocker described the deficiency of late medieval theology).

68. Altensteig, Vocabularius Theologie, CCXXXa.
69. Luther, Erfurter Annotationen, 106.14–1; 142.10.
70. PL 210:606. I am grateful to my colleague Paul Robinson for insights regarding the concept of authority in the Middle Ages.
71. Ocker, Biblical Poetics, 211.
Luther’s development of this method for treating the whole of the biblical construction of God’s narrative and the human story took place gradually, not as a “breakthrough” or a sudden discovery. Elements of this new view of reality that he gained from the prophets and apostles can be found by those who seek them in the early 1510s, to be sure. This new biblical worldview slowly took shape over the entire decade; by 1520 most of its parts found the places they would occupy in the body of his thinking, teaching, and interpretation for another quarter-century. That worldview retained many elements of the medieval way of thinking, some with little change, others transformed by his shift to centering theology on God’s Word in the several senses he found in that term.

For the world of Luther’s childhood and youth had been anything but a world without the Bible. But he set aside some elements of the medieval way of practicing Christianity, such as veneration of the saints; he reordered the importance and impact of others, such as ritual and hierarchy, to build his view and way of thinking about reality, taking Scripture as the authoritative voice and Word of God.