

MARTIN LUTHER,  
THE BIBLE,  
AND THE  
JEWISH PEOPLE

A READER

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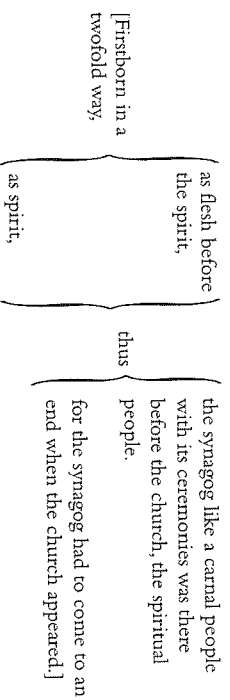
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worthy of punishment and death. Thus we read Rom. 2{:}3, 1}: "You judge those who do such things, etc.," and again, "You are doing the same things which you condemn," that is, you acknowledge and discern evil deeds and things not to be done. Therefore, when we acknowledge such things in ourselves and impose punishment on ourselves because of them, we are passing judgment on ourselves. Therefore the ungodly do not rise in the judgment. *Nor sinners in the council of the righteous*, that is, Jews in the church of the Christians. These alone are righteous, made thus by our only righteous Lord Jesus Christ . . .

### Psaln 78

{LW 11:78-80}

49-51. *He sent upon them the wrath of His indignation, indignation and wrath and trouble, which He sent in by evil angels. He made a way for the pathway of His anger. He spared not their souls from death, and their cattle He shut up in death. And He smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, the firstfruits of all their labor in the tents of Ham.* (10) Here the last plague is described, and it includes the fifth one reported in Exodus, namely, the death of the cattle. But he pictures it as having been done by the ministry of evil angels. And that he is speaking rather of spiritual death he shows by saying "the death of their souls." There is a big difference between "wrath" and "wrath of indignation." For the wrath of indignation is that by which He not only inflicts punishment on the body in a physical sense, but also on the soul in a spiritual sense. Therefore, in order to express the greatness of this evil, he thus repeats and doubles wrath and wrath, etc. This is the last plague, by which the Jews have been destroyed. They were the firstborn, because they had received the Law before the Gentiles. But all this according to the flesh. For the last were made first and the first last. Not



indeed by the election of grace, but by the sequence of nature they were the first for God's people.

[Not what was spiritual but what was physical was first.]<sup>6</sup> Thus, then, God killed all the firstborn, that He might receive something else to be offered as a firstborn, namely, the spirit. The flesh is before the spirit, and the birth of the flesh in wrath is earlier than the birth of the spirit in grace. And by the latter the former is removed and killed. For now it is not those who are sons of the flesh who are born, but those

who are sons of the faith and the promise. Therefore to kill the firstborn is to reject and cast off the people according to physical birth. And whoever does not agree to this rejection is cast forth with it at the same time, as happened to the Jews. Now, the flesh is firstborn before the spirit. And the carnal people are firstborn before the spiritual people (that is, the old before the new). This, then, is that dreadful wrath of God upon them, for God rejected them altogether according to the flesh and killed the standing of the synagog and put the Law to death, in which they nevertheless think they are living, but they are not alive before God. The fact that their sacrifices and ceremonies and works are dead, this God did with the word alone, for He removed them and determined that they should come to an end. But since they were unwilling, the wrath of indignation was sent upon them. For they were punished with endless plagues and given up to the power of evil angels. As the flesh is born before the spirit, which must be reborn, and the firstborn flesh killed by a mystical death, so the carnal people were born before the spiritual. And they, too, had to be killed by a mystical death so that they might be reborn a spiritual people. Therefore the killing of the firstborn of Egypt is nothing else than that the people of the synagog living in the letter come to an end. The letter lives as long as it binds, but it is killed since it has now been fulfilled by Christ, so that it may not bind. Therefore the killed (letter) kills all who cling to it.]

But where our version has "He made a way for the pathway of His anger," the Hebrew has "He built a road for His rage." . . . The sense [of our text] seems to be that He made this a firm policy, and He punishes them permanently without ceasing, not in passing, like the godly, but over and over again. As a road is usually not made by one passing but by incessant footsteps, so by incessant tracks and signs of God's wrath, which we see in them, He has now as it were, made a road, a road worn and indeed made firm. Therefore the path of God's anger is the token and work of the divine wrath which appears in them to us and to them. But for this path He made a way, that is, a persistence and duration and well-worn continuity. The paths of God are the works of God. But the paths of God's wrath are God's works of punishment and vengeance. So the prophet threatens. Therefore in this word a perfect and persevering wrath is described.

{LW 11:86-88}

54. *And He brought them to the mountain of His sanctuary, the mountain which His right hand had purchased.* Thus Is. 2{:}3 says: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob." This is the church, which is the true sanctuary (that is, the mystical temple of God), which His right hand, that is, the Son of God, has acquired. Hence we are called a people of His possession in 1 Peter 2{:}9}.

55. *And He drove out the Gentiles before them and by lot divided to them their land by a line of distribution.* This refers particularly to the Jews. They had been made the seed and people of Canaan, and they took possession of the land flowing with milk and honey (that is, Holy Scripture), from which they were cast out. And this land was divided and distributed to the faithful according to the measure of the gift of Christ, as the apostle says. For to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit in Scripture for profit (1 Cor. 12:7).

...  
*And He made the tribes of Israel dwell in their tabernacles:* These are the beautiful tabernacles of Jacob (Num. 24:5), that is, the books of the prophets and Holy Scripture, as above, in which the true Israel dwells now. Then, as I said in the gloss on the text, they are the bodies or cities or souls, in which demons and vices reigned. Now the apostles and saints dwell in them.

56. *Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God.* The Jews did this first, and then our heretics. They were made crooked arrows, aiming themselves at an evil sense and detracting from the truth, and in a bold and foolhardy manner attacking it with their arrows. Indeed, even with those who cling to the truth, like the Arians and other heretics.

But with regard to the plagues which follow, as they befell the synagog, so they also befell the heretics, and even the faithful who were led astray, killed, and troubled by the heretics. For they fall by the sword (their wicked word) and were not lamented (v. 64).

65. *And the Lord was awakened as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that has been sufficed with wine.* The Lord Jesus Christ slept in the grave and arose when He had been roused. And He was drunk with the drained cup of suffering, for He drank the wine in His suffering to the point of total inebriation and extreme excess. But when this wine which had weakened Him had been assimilated, He arose a mighty man.

66. *And He smote His adversaries in the rear and put them to everlasting shame.*<sup>7</sup> These are the scribes and lawyers with their own, the true Philistines, who at the time of Christ had oppressed the faithful people and led them astray and killed them with false teachings. Besides, they had also captured and killed the ark, that is, the body of Christ, which was then handed over into the hands of the enemy. Or, the ark is Holy Scripture in its own true understanding which they crucified in its words as they crucified Christ in the body], which they place next to their idol, Dagon, that is, twist it to their own meaning, when they ought rather bend their own opinion to conform to Scripture. But the ark causes Dagon to be mutilated with hands, head, and feet cut off. For they see that their own opinion has neither works nor words nor any vital meaning. About this elsewhere.

Therefore the Lord struck them in the rear, when He afflicted them in earthly things, and caused them to trust in what the apostle nevertheless teaches should be

regarded as dung (Phil. 3:8). The rear parts in spirit are, indeed, the body itself, just as the front parts are the souls. Hence the Lord said to Moses, "You will see My back parts" (Ex. 33:23). Second, they are the earthly things to which our rear is turned, namely, the body, and the front parts are the eternal things toward which our front part is turned, namely, the spirit. But at this place what seems to be more expressly denoted is that their *recta*, their innermost bowels, are sticking out through the rear, because the rear is different from the buttocks on which we sit. And there is trouble before me to recognize this. Is it perhaps because the Jews have no definite seat in the world? They are driven like wanderers from place to place.

But since these are our unseemly parts, which we are accustomed to hide, it seems that it may denote the malice and treachery of the Jews, which they perpetrated against Christ, and which is poured out throughout the world with their grief and indignation, so that by this deed they are in disgrace among all nations and without excuse. Yet they make leather seats for themselves, that is, they draw comfort from their physical paternal descent: or from the literal sense of Scripture], on which they rest, sit, and rely, and thus they excuse themselves to the present, though they are unable to deny what was done openly before all. For their *recta* stick out, that is, the innermost feelings of their heart and their desires in opposition to Christ they display to the present. Through these they have then poured out their excrement. Therefore, the *recta* sticking out means that their will to harm and do evil appears, since they are not able to vomit the feces of evils against Him.

But the fact that they offer five golden hemorrhoids and mice to that God whom they do not worship means that they pay riches from themselves to the Christian Caesar. Or the mystery is still hidden for me.

Or, their rear parts are the reputation of their works, which is now rotting and stinking throughout the world, since the Gospel is being revealed. And their *recta* stick out because the Gospel makes known even the innermost evils of their heart, showing what kind of people they were inwardly. And this is their everlasting reproach.

new—and in his view, the correct—way of reading Scripture. Looking back on this experience many years later, he would write about Rom. 1:16–17: “Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.”<sup>5</sup>

As most interpreters have recognized, Romans 9–11 plays a central role in Paul’s epistle. In these chapters he meditates on the “mystery” of Israel according to the flesh and attempts to account for the conundrum of the Gentile world’s receptivity to the gospel while Israel has overwhelmingly rejected it. At the end of this meditation he makes the claim that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). What exactly this means has been a bone of contention for Christian interpreters from the beginning, and remains so today. In his lectures on Romans 9–11, Luther admits to being puzzled by what Paul intends to say, but he nevertheless articulates a guarded optimism with respect to the future of the Jewish people, cautious against Christian maledictions directed toward the Jews, and speaks strongly against attempts to convert the Jews by force. Romans 11:25–26 would be a career-long “discomfort” for Luther, and what he writes here will not be his last word on the subject.

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### Romans 11:25–36 = Gloss

{LW 25:101–3}

11.25. *Last you be wise in your own conceits, by being proud and complacent over against them, I want you to understand, for this is necessary in order to curb pride, this mystery, this holy secret, brethren: a hardening {of unbelief} has come upon part of Israel, the people of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles, the completed predestination of the Gentiles, come in, into the church of God. 26. And so all Israel, all of Israel who are to be saved, will be saved, as it is written, Is. 59{:}20–21{:}: The Deliverer, as He has done in the case of the rest of the firstfruits, will come from Zion, that is, Christ into the flesh, and He will banish ungodliness from Jacob, that is, the unbelief of the Jews. He will do this at the end of the world. 27. And this will be my covenant with them, namely, a new covenant in faith for both, when I take away their sins,<sup>7</sup> through the suffering of Christ; for in this way “He banishes ungodliness.” 28. As regards the Gospel, because they do not receive what you have received, they are enemies of God and of the apostles, for your sakes, you Gentiles who have been taken up by God, that is, through you, because you have been accepted as friends; but as regards election, by which many of them have been chosen, they are most dear, “beloved,” for the sake of their forefathers, from whom they have been born. 29. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable, that is, He does not revoke or change what He has predetermined to give and call. Therefore He will give, and He will call, and He will not be changed. 30. For just as you, Gentiles, were once disobedient to God, that is, you were blinded, while they were enlightened and obedient, but now have received mercy, so*

that you might have what they had, because of that is, “through,” or as a result of, not because of, their disobedience, 31. So they have now been disobedient, that is, they have become unbelieving (and the Word has been taken away from them) while you have become believers, in order that by the mercy shown to you, that is, in, or according to, the mercy you have received, they also may receive mercy, so that they might have what you now possess. 32. For God has consigned, that is, He has testified through His Word that all men are in disobedience, in sin, in unbelief. He has shown that all have been thus consigned and surrounded by sins, all, namely, the Jews now and the Gentiles previously (in the Greek it reads “all men”), to disobedience, that is, to sin, that He may have mercy upon all, that is, so that they might come to faith through His mercy. 33. O the depths,<sup>8</sup> the profundity, or the abyss, of the riches and wisdom, by which He dispenses all things and rules them, and knowledge of God, that is, of His understanding, because He knows, or sees, all things; How unsearchable are His judgments, because there is no way to render a judgment over the things which we see done by Him, and how inscrutable, that is, how unsearchable, His ways! that is, His works. 34. For who has known, 1 Cor. 2:11: “No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God,” the mind of the Lord, that is, His thinking and ideas by learning from Him so that a person might know them, or who has been His counselor, by giving Him counsel, so that He might give counsel. 35. Or who has given a gift to Him, for He Himself first gives to all whatever they possess, that He might be repaid by Him? No one has first given to Him, and the reason is: 36. For from Him and through Him and in Him (in the Greek it reads “to Him”) are all things. To Him, alone, be glory forever. Amen.

### Romans 11:22, 25–29 = Scholia

{LW 25:428–32}

11.22. *Note then the kindness: On the basis of this passage we teach that when we see the fall of Jews or heretics or others, we should consider not those who fell but the work of God in them, so we may learn to fear God by the example of the misery of others and in no way be proud. For this is the noble teaching of the apostle, who urges us to a consideration more of the one who works by his work than to a comparison of ourselves with others.*

In opposition to this many people are proud with marvelous stupidity when they call the Jews dogs, evildoers, or whatever they like, while they too, and equally, do not realize who or what they are in the sight of God. Boldly they heap blasphemous insults upon them, when they ought to have compassion on them and fear the same punishments for themselves. Moreover, as if certain concerning themselves and the others, they rashly pronounce themselves blessed and the others cursed. Such today are the theologians of Cologne, who are so stupid in their zeal, that in their articles, or rather their inarticulate and inept writings, they say that the Jews are accursed.

Why? Because they have forgotten what is said in the following chapter: "Bless and do not curse" (Rom. 12:14), and in another place: "When reviled, we bless; when slandered, we try to conciliate" (1 Cor. 4:12-13). They wish to convert the Jews by force and curses, but God will resist them.

25. *I want you to understand.* On the basis of this text it is commonly accepted that the Jews at the end of the world will return to the faith, although the text is so obscure that unless one is willing to follow the authority of the fathers who explain the apostle in this way, no one would seem to be convinced of this purely on the basis of the text. But the Lord also agrees with this idea of the apostle in Luke 21:23-24, when He says: "For great distress shall be upon the earth, and wrath upon this people; and they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled;" that is, as he says here: *until the full number of the Gentiles come in.* And Moses in Deut. 4:30-31, when he had prophesied that they must be led through all nations, followed by saying: "In the latter days you will return to the Lord your God and obey His voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God." Likewise we read in Hos. 3:4-5: "For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to His goodness in the latter days." Again in Hos. 5:12: "I am like a moth to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah." And again (5:15): "I will go and return to My place, until you are consumed and seek My face." Again, the Lord says in Matt. 23:38-39: "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" According to this interpretation, therefore, the meaning of the apostle is: "I want you to understand this mystery, brethren," that is, "Do not be proud; it is a holy secret why the Jews fall, a secret which no man knows, namely, that the Jews who are now fallen shall return and be saved, after the Gentiles according to the fullness of their election have entered. They will not remain outside forever, but will return in their own time."

A very clear figure of this is Joseph, the symbol of Christ, who was sold by his brothers into Egypt (Gen. 37:28) and there elevated to the position of a ruler and in the end recognized unexpectedly by his father and brothers, as Genesis so beautifully puts it near the end of the book. So also the Jews who threw Christ out to the Gentiles, where He now has the position of ruler, will finally come back to Him, drawn by hunger for the Word, and they will receive Him among the Gentiles.

The apostle indicates this when he cites Isaiah in connection with the statement: *And so all Israel will be saved* (v. 26). In our version Isaiah reads thus in chapter 59:20: "And there shall come a redeemer to Zion, and to them that return from iniquity in Jacob." But they will not return from iniquity unless they are in it, as the

Jews now are. For "impiety" or "iniquity," the Greek *ἀσέβεια* does not signify just any kind of sin, but a sin against the worship of God, that is, against faith, through one's own self-righteousness. In Hebrew this is called *עֲוֹן* as in Eccl. 8:18: "Godlessness will not save the ungodly," that is, one's own righteousness (as he thinks) will not save a person, because it is not righteousness but ungodliness.

Furthermore, he adds the expression *when I take away their sins* (v. 27), which is not in Isaiah but is added by the apostle or brought in from other prophets. And this indicates the difference between the two testaments. For the former testament was one in which we increased sin. But the New Testament is the one under which God takes away sin. Therefore he is trying to say: "This is the testament of the remission of sin," in which "He will banish ungodliness from Jacob," just as the other is the testament of the commission of sin, under which men were turned to ungodliness. Therefore Christ has not yet come to the Jews, but He will come, namely, at the Last Day, as the writers cited above show. Thus it is necessary that we interpret the apostle as speaking of the mystical coming of Christ to the Jews. In other places this word of Isaiah is clearly fulfilled in the physical coming of Christ. Therefore I said that the apostle speaks in an unclear way and we could not determine his meaning from the text if we did not believe the interpretation of the fathers. Thus in our time "a partial blindness has befallen Israel," but in that future day not a part but all Israel shall be saved. Now only in part are they saved, but then all shall be.

#### Corollary

This term "mystery" is taken at this point in an absolute sense, indicating that which is unknown, but not in the ordinary sense in terms of the "figurative" or "literal" meaning, as when, for example, we speak of the "mystical sense," where there is one meaning on the surface and another in the depth. But this is a mystery in the absolute sense, because it is hidden to all, namely, that the fullness of the Gentiles is going to come in while certain Jews fall. He says the same thing elsewhere, as in Rom. 16:25: "According to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages." And also in Col. 1:26.

For this entire text has the purpose of persuading his people to return. Therefore in order that the apostle may be understood correctly, we must understand that his remarks extend over the whole mass of the Jewish people and refers to the good among them, both past, present, and future. Although some among them are lost, yet the mass of them must be respected because of the elect. Just as any community must be honored because of the good citizens, even though they are less in number than the wicked ones. Hence this one rule applies regarding the interpretation of Scripture, namely, that it speaks at the same time about the good and the wicked who exist in the one mystical body—for thus the Jewish people are a "holy mass" because of the elect, but "broken branches" because of the lost; thus they are a "fulfilling" and

a "lessening"; likewise they are "enemies because of the Gentiles" and at the same time "the well-beloved because of the fathers"—the Scripture speaking all the time about the same people because of the diversity found among them. This sounds as if the apostle wished the same people to be considered both his personal friends and personal enemies, while he still distinguishes between persons, but asserts that they belong to the same mass. Therefore he uses the term "mass," so that he may show that he is speaking not of individual people but of the entire race, in which are many unholly people.

28. *As regards the Gospel.* This term *enemies* in this passage is taken in the passive sense, that is, they are worthy of being hated, and God hates them, and for this reason so do the apostle and all who are of God. This is clearly indicated by the antithesis *but they are beloved*, as if to say, they are hated and yet loved, that is, the mass is loved and hated; hated "as regards the Gospel . . . for your sake," that is, because you have been loved according to the Gospel, and thus they are hated as regards the Gospel; but yet they are beloved *for the sake of their forefathers*, that is, because the election adopts some from among them to this very day; therefore they are beloved because of the forefathers, because they, too, are friends.

29. *For the gifts of God are irrevocable.* This is a remarkable statement. For the counsel of God is not changed by either the merits or demerits of anyone. For He does not repent of the gifts and calling which He has promised, because the Jews are now unworthy of them and you are worthy; He is not changed just because you are changed, and therefore they shall turn back and be led again to the truth of the faith. Hence in the Greek we read ἀμετατρέτητα, that is, "God's gifts are irreversible, etc." Hence it is not a matter of our repentance, but of God, who repents of what He changes and destroys.

## Text #4

### Lectures on Galatians (1519)

Language:	Latin
Critical Edition:	WA 2: (436), 445–618
English Translation:	LW 27: (ix), 151–409

Luther's third lectures on Bible focused on Galatians and were delivered from October 1516—March 1517, and then with significant revisions published in 1519. It is noteworthy that the Gloss/Scholia format is no longer in use. This is the epistle that Luther would later equate with his beloved wife: "The Epistle to the Galatians is my dear epistle. I have put my confidence in it. It is my Katy von Bora."<sup>1</sup>

Having just discovered in Paul's Romans what was for him an entirely new, faith-centered lens to the Scriptures, these first lectures on Galatians coincide with the most formative period in Luther's life, both theologically and spiritually. By the time the lectures were published, he had already launched his scripturally argued attack on his church's penitential practices (95 *Theses*, 1517) and had challenged the foundations of scholastic theology (*Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, 1517); in 1518 in Heidelberg he had the opportunity to explicate his groundbreaking, and troubling, theological insights to his Augustinian peers (*Heidelberg Disputation*).<sup>2</sup> Luther had found a new face of God in the Scriptures and had begun to see the futility of older constructions of faith and human-made requirements for grace. With Galatians he could explicate his exhilarating discoveries of Christian freedom, Christian knowledge of divine truths, and the overwhelming Christian message of salvation: a restored relationship with God, even to the point of oneness with God, because of Christ. Luther's opponents—be they scholastics, fellow monks, or Jews—were guilty of trusting in their own effort in respect to a gift that only God can choose to give. The freedom of the gospel over against servitude to the law was the theme that Luther would emphasize for the rest of his life, and this was why from his own perspective he was in perennial tension with Judaism.

Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal. 4:21–31 (the only passage in the entire New Testament that contains the term "allegory") has been one of the most influential texts in Christian history for the construal of the relationship, or rather the antithesis, between church and synagogue. Illustrative of this antithesis are the sharp

## Text #6

## Magnificat (1521)

Language: German  
 Critical Edition: WA 7: (538), 544-604  
 English Translation: LW 21: (xvii), 295-358

Luther's treatise on Mary's "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55) was begun in early 1521, but the writing was delayed by his summons to Worms. He completed the work while in hiding on the Wartburg in June 1521, and it was in print by August/September 1521. The work was quite popular, and it circulated in several editions and translations.

The final portion of the treatise, Luther's treatment of Luke 1:54-55, contains in a nutshell numerous fundamentals in his understanding of the natural seed of Abraham, that is, the Jews, and the proper Christian attitude toward them. The Magnificat is the song of the mother of God, the one who is experiencing in her own body the long-awaited fulfillment of the promise of the Seed, first uttered in Gen. 3:15, and then further clarified in Gen. 12:3 and 22:18. Mary is the Woman spoken of in Gen. 3:15, and her son, to be born outside of the normal physical process, is the Promised Seed. Mary, the virgin mother, is indispensable for Luther's understanding of the gospel. All humanity, by virtue of natural physical conception and birth, is under a curse and condemned. Only one who does not share that curse can redeem humanity from it. This promise of the Seed and belief in it constitute the common faith of both Old and New Testaments; for Luther, Old Testament faith and New Testament faith are fundamentally the same. The natural seed of Abraham, that is, the Jews, were God's chosen vessel to bear this promise. Although natural Israel failed miserably in its mission and the majority have become hardened, only the Jews, and not the Gentiles, have the promise that there will always be Christians, however few, among them. For this reason, Christians should treat Jews in a friendly manner. If Jews reject the gospel, Christians should leave them alone. In all of this, the treatise moves very much in the direction of *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the gravity of the accusations against him, this could quite easily have been Luther's final work. Had that been the case, his words here on the need to treat

the Jews in a kindly manner as well as his opposition to forced conversions would have left a significantly different legacy on the question of the relationship between Jews and Christians.

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**The Magnificat**

{LW 21:297, 349-355}

*Translated and Expounded by Dr. Martin Luther, Augustinian*

Jesus

To his Serene Highness, Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, Landgrave of Thuringia, Margrave of Meissen, my Gracious Lord and Patron

...  
 {Luke 1:54. *He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy.*

After enumerating the works of God in her and in all men, Mary returns to the beginning and to the chief thing. She concludes the Magnificat by mentioning the very greatest of all God's works—the Incarnation of the Son of God. She freely acknowledges herself as the handmaiden and servant of all the world, confessing that this work which was performed in her was not done for her sake alone, but for the sake of all Israel. But she divides Israel into two parts and refers only to that part that is God's servant . . .

Now, the Israel that is God's servant is the one whom the Incarnation of Christ benefits. That is His own beloved people, for whose sake He also became man, to redeem them from the power of the devil, of sin, death, and hell, and to lead them to righteousness, eternal life, and salvation. That is the help of which Mary sings. As Paul says in Titus 2:14: "Christ gave Himself for us, to purify for Himself a people of His own"; and St. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9: "You are a holy nation, a chosen people, a royal priesthood." These are the riches of the boundless mercy of God, which we have received by no merit but by pure grace. Therefore she sings: "He has remembered His mercy." She does not say: "He has remembered our merit and worthiness." We were in need, to be sure, but completely unworthy. That is the basis of His praise and glory, while our boasting and presumption must keep quiet. There was nothing for Him to regard that could move Him except His mercy, and this name He desired to make known. But why does she say, "He remembered" rather than "He regarded"? Because He had promised this mercy as the following verse shows. Now, He had waited a long time before showing it, until it seemed as though He had forgotten—even as all His works seem as though He were forgetting us—but when He came, it was seen that He had not forgotten but had continually had in mind to fulfill His promise.

It is true that the word "Israel" means the Jews alone and not us Gentiles. But because they would not have Him, He chose certain out of their number and thus

satisfied the name Israel and made of it henceforth a spiritual Israel. This was shown in Genesis 32:24–28, when the holy patriarch Jacob wrestled with the angel, who strained the hollow of his thigh out of joint, to show that his children should henceforth not boast of their fleshly birth, as the Jews do. Therefore he also received a new name, that he should henceforth be called Israel, as a patriarch who was not only Jacob, the father of fleshly children, but Israel, the father of spiritual children. With this the word “Israel” agrees, for it means “a prince with God.” That is a most high and holy name and contains in itself the great miracle that, by the grace of God, a man prevailed, as it were, with God, so that God does what man desires. We see the same thing in the case of Christendom: Through Christ she is joined to God as a bride to her bridegroom, so that the bride has a right to, and power over, her Bridegroom’s body and all His possessions; all of this happens through faith. By faith man does what God wills; God in turn does what man wills. Thus Israel means a godlike, God-conquering man, who is a lord in God, with God, and through God, able to do all things.

That is the meaning of Israel. For **יִשְׂרָאֵל** means a lord, a prince; **אֱלֹהִים** means God. Put them together, and they become **אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** according to the Hebrew fashion. Such an Israel God would have. Therefore, when Jacob had wrestled with the angel and prevailed, He said to him (Gen. 32:28): “Your name shall be called Israel; for since you have power with God, you shall also have power with men.” There would be much more to say on this subject, for Israel is a strange and profound mystery.

*55. As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever*

Here all merit and presumption are brought low, and God’s grace and mercy alone are exalted. For God has not helped Israel on account of their merits, but on account of His own promise. In pure grace He made the promise, in pure grace He also fulfilled it. Wherefore St. Paul says in Galatians 3:17, that God gave the promise to Abraham four hundred years before He gave the Law to Moses, that no one might glory, saying he had merited and obtained such grace and promise through the Law or the works of the Law. This same promise the Mother of God here lauds and exalts above all else, ascribing this work of the Incarnation of God solely to the undeserved promise of divine grace, made to Abraham.

The promise of God to Abraham is recorded especially in Genesis 12:3} and Genesis 22:18, and is referred to in many other places besides. It runs thus: “By Myself I have sworn: in your Seed shall all families or nations of the earth be blessed.” These words are highly esteemed by St. Paul (Gal. 3:16) and by all the prophets, and well might they be. For in these words Abraham and all his descendants were preserved and saved, and in them we, too, must all be saved; for here Christ is contained and promised as the Savior of the whole world. This is Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:22), in which were kept all who were saved before Christ’s birth; without these words no one was saved, even though he had performed all good works. Let us examine them more fully.

In the first place, it follows from these words of God that without Christ all the world is in sin and under condemnation, and is accursed with all its doing and knowing. For if He says that not some but all nations shall be blessed in Abraham’s Seed, then without Abraham’s Seed no nation shall be blessed. What need was there for God to promise so solemnly and with so mighty an oath, that He would bless them, if they were already blessed and not rather cursed? From this saying the prophets drew many inferences; namely, that all men are evil, liars all, false and blind, in short, without God, so that in the Scriptural usage to be called a man is no great honor, since in God’s sight the name “man” is no better than the name “liar” or “faithless” in the eyes of the world. So completely is man corrupted through Adam’s fall that the curse is innate with him and become, as it were, his nature and being.

It follows, in the second place, that this Seed of Abraham could not be born in the common course of nature, of a man and a woman; for such a birth is cursed and results in nothing but accursed seed, as we have just said. Now, if all the world was to be redeemed from the curse by this Seed of Abraham and thereby blessed, as the word and oath of God declare, the Seed itself had to be blessed first, neither touched nor tainted by that curse, but pure blessing, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Again, if God, who cannot lie, declared with an oath that it should be Abraham’s natural seed, that is, a natural and genuine child, born of his flesh and blood, then this Seed had to be a true, natural man, of the flesh and blood of Abraham. Here, then, we have a contradiction—the natural flesh and blood of Abraham, and yet not born in the course of nature, of man and wife. Therefore He uses the word “your seed,” not “your child,” to make it very clear and certain that it should be his natural flesh and blood, such as seed is. For a child need not be one’s natural child, as everyone knows. Now, who will find the means to establish God’s word and oath, where such contradictory things lie side by side?

God Himself has done this thing. He is able to keep what He has promised, even though no one may understand it before it come to pass; for His word and work do not demand the proof of reason, but a free and pure faith. Behold, how He combined the two. He raises up seed for Abraham, the natural son of one of his daughters, a pure virgin, Mary, through the Holy Spirit, and without her knowing a man. Here there was no natural conception with its curse, nor could it touch this seed; and yet it is the natural seed of Abraham, as truly as any of the other children of Abraham. That is the blessed Seed of Abraham, in whom all the world is set free from its curse. For whoever believes in this Seed, calls upon Him, confesses Him, and abides in Him, to him all his curse is forgiven and all blessing given, as the word and oath of God declare—“In your Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” That is to say: “Whatever is to be blessed must and shall be blessed through this Seed, and in no other way.” This is Abraham’s Seed, begotten by none of his sons, as the Jews always confidently expected, but born of this one daughter of his, Mary alone.



That is what the tender mother of this Seed means here by saying: "He has helped His servant Israel, as He promised to Abraham and to all his seed." She found the promise fulfilled in herself; hence she says: "It is now fulfilled! He has brought help and kept His word, solely in remembrance of His mercy." Here we have the foundation of the Gospel and see why all its teaching and preaching drive men to faith in Christ and into Abraham's bosom. For where there is not this faith, no other way can be devised and no help given to lay hold of this blessed Seed. And indeed, the whole Bible depends on this oath of God, for in the Bible everything has to do with Christ. Furthermore, we see that all the fathers in the Old Testament, together with all the holy prophets, had the same faith and Gospel as we have, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10{:1-4}; for they all remained with a strong faith in this oath of God and in Abraham's bosom and were preserved in it. The sole difference is, they believed in the coming and promised Seed; we believe in the Seed that has come and has been given. But it is all the one truth of the promise, and hence also one faith, one Spirit, one Christ, one Lord (Eph. 4:5); now as then, and forever, as Paul says in Hebrews 13{:8}.

But the subsequent giving of the Law to the Jews is not on a par with this promise. The Law was given in order that by its light they might the better come to know their cursed state and the more fervently and heartily desire the promised Seed; in this they had an advantage over all the heathen world. But they turned this advantage into a disadvantage; they undertook to keep the Law by their own strength, and failed to learn from it their needy and cursed state. Thus they shut the door upon themselves, so that the Seed was compelled to pass them by. They still continue in this state, but God grant not for long. Amen. This was the cause of the quarrel all the prophets had with them. For the prophets well understood the purpose of the Law, namely, that men should thereby know their accursed nature and learn to call upon Christ. Hence they condemned all the good works and everything in the life of the Jews that did not agree with this purpose. Therefore the Jews became angry with them and put them to death as men who condemned the service of God, good works, and godly living; even as the hypocrites and graceless saints ever do, of which we might say a great deal.

When Mary says, "His seed forever," we are to understand "forever" to mean that such grace is to continue to Abraham's seed (that is, the Jews) from that time forth, throughout all time, down to the Last Day. Although the vast majority of them are hardened, yet there are always some, however few, that are converted to Christ and believe in Him. For this promise of God does not lie: the promise was made to Abraham and to his seed, not for one year or for a thousand years, but "for the ages," that is, from one generation to another, without end. We ought, therefore, not to treat the Jews in so unkindly a spirit, for there are future Christians among them, and they are turning every day. Moreover, they alone, and not we Gentiles,

have this promise, that there shall always be Christians among Abraham's seed, who acknowledge the blessed Seed, who knows how or when? As for our cause, it rests upon pure grace, without a promise of God. If we lived Christian lives, and led them with kindness to Christ, there would be the proper response. Who would desire to become a Christian when he sees Christians dealing with men in so unchristian a spirit? Not so, my dear Christians. Tell them the truth in all kindness; if they will not receive it, let them go. How many Christians are there who despise Christ, do not hear His Word, and are worse than Jews or heathen! Yet we leave them in peace and even fall down at their feet and well might adore them as gods. Let this suffice for the present. We pray God to give us a right understanding of this Magnificat, an understanding that consists not merely in brilliant words but in glowing life in body and soul. May Christ grant us this through the intercession and for the sake of His dear Mother Mary! Amen.

meaning, and he called their readings “*gemachte Grammatica*” (artificial grammar). By way of example we quote here an extended diatribe, which captures in one place the level of antagonism that one encounters throughout the Genesis lectures, and illustrating as well the overall attitude with which Luther pursues his interpretation of Genesis over against Judaism. It occurs in his treatment of Gen. 25:21, the story of Rebecca’s conception of Esau and Jacob:

For the sake of those who at some time or other will read the commentaries of the rabbis let us next add something of the Jewish nonsense. At this point they raise the question why Isaac did not marry another wife after he had discovered in the course of almost twenty years that his wife was barren, while in the example of Sarah they conclude that ten years should be allowed for discovering barrenness or fecundity. Their answer is that in Isaac’s case the situation is different from what it is in the case of Abraham. They say that because Isaac was sacrificed to God and became a burnt offering by the direction of God, he was not permitted to marry another wife. . . . Everybody sees how absurd and worthless these ideas are. Nevertheless, they must be touched on at times, in order to advise those who are students of the Hebrew language to read the sayings and writings of the Jews with discretion. We acknowledge, of course, that it is a great benefit that we have received the language from them; but we must beware of the dung of the rabbis, who have made of Holy Scripture a sort of privy in which they deposited their foulness and their exceedingly foolish opinions. I am advising this because even among our own theologians many give too much credit to the rabbis in explaining the meaning of Scripture. In the matter of grammar I readily bear with them; but they lack the true sense and understanding, in accordance with the well-known words in Is. 29{1:4}: “*The wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid.*” This statement declares that there will be no understanding of Scripture among the Jews. No, this book of Holy Scripture has been closed for them and sealed. “*With an alien tongue the Lord will speak to this people*” (Is. 28:11). And they know nothing else than sheer blasphemies against the Christian religion.<sup>1</sup>

Excerpted below is a portion of Luther’s treatment of Gen. 12:3, the call and blessing of Abraham, which most likely derives from the summer or fall of 1537. Luther stresses the blessing of the Gentiles that comes via Abraham and then argues at length that the Jews have lost everything promised to Abraham. The text in question, Luther states, is one of the key texts for “refuting the perfidious [that is, treacherous] Jews,” who are most definitely not the true seed of Abraham.

## Genesis 12

{LW 2:259–266}

**12:3.** *I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse. . . . And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*

So far the Lord has promised material blessings. For even though these are properly called spiritual blessings—that the Lord dwelt among this people, and that He revealed Himself through signs, miracles, and His Word in the holy prophets—these were nevertheless blessings that belonged to this earthly life.

But now there follows that promise which should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the languages of all people, for it offers eternal treasures. For it cannot be understood in a material sense, namely, that it would be confined to this people only, as the previous blessings were. But if, as the words clearly indicate, this promise is to be extended to all nations, or families of the earth, who else, shall we say, has dispensed this blessing among all nations except the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ?

Therefore the simple, true, and incontrovertible meaning is this: “Listen, Abraham, I have given you and your descendants grand promises; but this is not yet enough. I shall distinguish you also with a blessing that will overflow to all the families of the earth.” Abraham understood this promise well. For he reasoned thus: “If all the families of the earth are to be blessed through me, then of necessity this blessing must not depend on my person. For I shall not live till then. Furthermore, I am not blessed through myself, but through the mercy of God the blessing has come to me too. Therefore all nations will not be blessed because of my person or through my power. But from my posterity will be born One who is blessed in His own person and who will bring a blessing so long and wide that it will reach all the families of the earth. He must necessarily be God and not a human being, although He will be a human being and will take on our flesh so that He is truly my seed.”

No doubt Christ referred to these thoughts of the holy patriarch when He said (John 8:56): “*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see My day; he saw it and was glad.*” The statement of the text, “*all the families of the earth,*” is not to be understood of extent only, of the families of one time, but of duration, as long as the world will stand. It is altogether in accord with the statement of Christ (Mark 16:15–16): “*Go, preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” This blessing has now endured for 1,500 years, and it will endure until the end of the world, since the gates of hell (Mart. 16:18), tyrants, and ungodly men will oppose it and rage against it in vain.

But above all it must be noted that the text does not say that all the nations will flow together to the Jews and will become Jews; but it declares that the blessing this people is to possess will be transferred from this people to the heathen, that is, to those who are not circumcised and who know nothing of Moses and of his statutes.

Therefore it is proper for us to contrast the blessing in this passage with the curse under which all human beings are because of sin. The curse has been taken away by Christ, and a blessing will be bestowed on all who receive Him and believe in His name. The remarkable blessing is this, that after being freed from sin, from death, and from the tyranny of the devil, we are in the company of the angels of God and have become partakers of eternal life.

Out of this promise flowed the sermons of the prophets concerning Christ and His kingdom, about the forgiveness of sins, about the gift of the Holy Spirit, about the preservation and the government of the church, about the punishments of the unbelievers, etc. They saw that these conclusions were definitely implied: If the Seed of Abraham does this, He must necessarily be a true human being by nature; on the other hand, if He blesses others, even all the families of the earth, He must necessarily be something greater than the seed of Abraham, because the seed of Abraham itself stands in need of this blessing on account of its sin.

In these few simple words the Holy Spirit has thus encompassed the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God. The holy patriarchs and prophets explained this more fully later on in their sermons, namely, that through the Son of God the entire world would be made free, hell and death would be destroyed, the Law would be abrogated, sins would be forgiven, and eternal salvation and life would be given freely to those who believe in Him. This is the day of Christ about which He discourses in John (8:56), the day which Abraham did not see with his bodily eyes but did see in the spirit, and was glad. To the flesh these things were invisible, impossible, and for this reason incredible.

This passage is profitable not only for instruction and encouragement but also for refuting the perfidious Jews. Because God promises Abraham the material blessing that his descendants will be a great nation, let them declare about themselves whether they are a blessed and great nation today! But if their very situation compels them to declare that they are both an afflicted and a small band, what else can be concluded from this passage except that God is a liar in His promises or that they themselves are in error and are not the true seed of Abraham? But to maintain the former is wicked; therefore the latter necessarily follows. For what the blessing consists of is familiar:

Furthermore, a people is called a nation when it has a government, a body politic, laws, and liberty. But what of this do the Jews have today? They are a people scattered here and there, oppressed in various ways, and all but held in captivity wherever they live. They fancy that they have great power and prestige and wealth in some Babel, of which I know nothing, and among the Turks. And it is true that the Turks favor them because of their traitorous activities. For whatever secret plans the Jews are able to fish out from all the courts of Christian princes, they immediately betray to the Turk. Great is not only the folly but also the ungodliness of some

princes, that they have Jews as such close friends. But if you consider the actual situation, the Jews are prey for the Turks themselves, as I know for sure from those who lived not only at Constantinople but in Damascus itself, where the number of the Jews is very great.

Therefore let the miserable Jews confess that they are not the true seed of Abraham, that is, that they are in error and are under God's wrath because they oppose the true religion; or we ourselves shall drive them to the blasphemy of maintaining that God is a liar. For what middle ground can there be?

The statement we have made about the blessing and about the great nation, however, we also make about the great name that God promises to make for Abraham. What sort of name have the Jews today? Are they not the reproach of all human beings? Nothing is more despised than the Jews, as the discourses of the prophets threaten that they will be a reproach and laughingstock for all nations. Where, then, is their great name? Must they not declare by their own witness that they have lost it? And yet the seed of Abraham must have a great name, for God does not lie.

But consider this too: whether those who bless the Jews and intimately associate with them are blessed. There are obvious examples, not only of private individuals but also of great princes, who can bear witness concerning this blessing that they experience because of their intimacy with Jews, namely, that they are being ruined with respect to fortune, body, and soul.

But perhaps the Jews will object that the psalm (109:1) says: "May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!" They will say that the Jews do not experience this from Christians, but the Christians from the Jews; for it is well known how much harm they cause the state with their excessive interest.

My answer is this: In the first place, reason itself teaches that interest or usury is contrary to nature and for this reason is actually a sin. Therefore Christians have the rule (Luke 6:35): "*Lend, expecting nothing in return.*" Those who are disciples of Christ observe this rule and beware of interest as of a real sin. Moreover, experience also shows that riches gained in this manner are cursed by the Lord and do not last. Therefore if the Jews consider interest or usury a blessing, let them enjoy it. For it is certain that it is a sin; and a sure penalty is attached to this sin, as Scripture teaches again and again, and as the Jews themselves prove by their own example.

Consider whether they are not being drained of their possessions. While they are scraping together their wealth by pennies, they pay a large number of tolls, levies, and real estate taxes. And yet they are being treated considerably by Christian governments in comparison with what they suffer from the Turks. These would not even spare their bodies and life if they did not recall the great advantages of the treason for which the Jews are very well trained by their hate of the Christians.

However this may be, let them boast of their wealth for all I care; let them glory that they do not pay interest but collect it. What a small matter this is in comparison

with what they are compelled to admit that they have lost! They were driven out of the land that God had given them and had blessed; they lost the kingdom; they lost their worship; they live in deepest darkness and have no understanding of the sacred prophecies. In short, they have no hope for salvation except to invent some idea about God's mercy and goodness. If all this does not compel those unhappy people to confess that they are thrice wretched, let them be happy with this blessing, that they lend money to others at interest and do not borrow money.

But how much better it is to seek alms from street to street than to use this sinful means to gain riches, out of which others, in turn, cheat them later! And to this supposedly extraordinary blessing, of which they boast so much, there are attached many great liabilities. Nowhere do they have a continuing abode; they are hated and despised by all men; they live most wretchedly in dirt and filth; they are not permitted to engage in the more honorable occupations—and who could enumerate all the hardships of the enemies of Christ?

Hence this is a most powerful argument to support our religion and faith and to refute the deceitful Jews, namely, that they have lost everything promised here to Abraham, and especially what is promised last, that the blessing will spread from the seed of Abraham to all the families of the earth.

They are hard pressed by this reasoning. Therefore they prate that this statement was fulfilled in Solomon, the son of David, and that he was blessed by the nations, that is, was renowned and was praised by everybody. But what has it to do with the text if he was blessed or praised by others? What the words mean is this, that this seed will bring a blessing to all nations. Now what did Solomon bring to the nations?

Therefore this text clearly compels us to confess that the Messiah or Christ has long since come and was revealed, and that He brought a spiritual and eternal blessing with Him into the world. When the unbelieving Jews rejected this and would not have it, it was brought to the heathen. But the wretched Jews were deprived of both their material and their spiritual blessing, as experience demonstrates. They have now been living for almost 1,500 years under great hardships and in uninterrupted captivity, and they have nothing of the promises of which the Lord is speaking here. If God is truthful in His promises, then they must be liars; and through their unbelief they have forfeited these promises and are no longer the seed of Abraham to which these promises were given.

The error under which all Jews labor today is well known: they are waiting for a Messiah to beat down all the heathen and restore to them an earthly kingdom over all nations, just as under Ahasuerus (Esther 8:10).<sup>2</sup> For then the power and the prestige of the Jews was great.

The passage before us clearly gives the lie to this vain hope. It does not state that the heathen will be oppressed by the seed of Abraham or will be reduced to servitude, but that they will be "blessed," that is, that they will be given aid against

death and sin. But for all I care, let the gloss of the Jews stand that "to bless" has this meaning; for then it will become apparent that they have the greatest blessing, that is, that they are most severely oppressed by the heathen. To call this a blessing is the devil's language.

Because God is good, He uses "blessing" to mean deliverance from the curse and wrath of God, and He promises that this will occur through the seed of Abraham, not only for the descendants of Abraham but for all the families of the earth. This blessing the Son of God, Jesus Christ, brought us. He was born from the seed of Abraham by the Virgin Mary. But because the unbelieving synagog did not want this blessing, it was withdrawn, and it lost not only this eternal blessing but also those earlier material ones. Therefore it is manifest to all that this is a nation that is cursed and subjected to God's wrath.

Hence this passage is profitable for us in various ways, and therefore it deserves to be noted by students of the Holy Scriptures. Not only does it emphatically refute the stubborn Jews and portray the person of Abraham, whom all godly people ought to contemplate in order that they may learn to believe from his example; but, together with Abraham, it also describes the progress and the good fortune of this entire people, indeed of the entire church to the end of the world. Whatever will be achieved in the church until the end of the world and whatever has been achieved in it until now, has been achieved and will be achieved by virtue of this promise, which endures and is in force to this day.

If you desire to reduce to a few words the history of the church from the time of Abraham until today, carefully consider these four verses. You will see the blessing, and you will also see some who curse; but these, in turn, God has cursed so that they utterly perished, while the eternal blessing of the church has remained unshaken. Hence this passage is in agreement with the first sermon about the Seed who crushes the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The church does not lack enemies; it is troubled, and it sighs; and yet it overcomes through the Seed and finally triumphs forever over all its enemies.

But just as the Lord gave a warning above about the bite of the serpent, so here He warns that the seed of Abraham will encounter some who will curse it. But if we are hurt by the world and the devil, the damage is slight, since we have the angels, yes, even God Himself to bless us and annihilate our adversaries. But such an explanation of this passage must be looked for in the prophets. This is the source from which they drew both their consolations and their threats. Hence the divine wisdom is truly admirable, that such important matters and the history of all ages, so far as it concerns the church, have been reduced to a few words in this passage.