

# Preaching the Christian Gospel from Old Testament Texts. One More Time.

Colleagues,

Two items criss-crossed my desk since last week's ThTh posting, which prompt this sequel to the topic of that post. This time with a focus on Luther and the OT. First was Kit Kleinhans' telling me about some Luther stuff she found on that Genesis text (prominent in last week's ThTh) about Jacob wrestling with God. Second was my reading Ralph Klein's article in the current issue of CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION, "Reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther—and Without Him." It prompted me to send something to Ralph.

Here you have both items—from Kleinhans and to Klein..

Peace and joy!

Ed Schoeder

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## **NUMBER ONE. Kit's comments**

She too attended the LWF consultation in March earlier this year at Augsburg. She was in the congregation for the closing liturgy where the sermon text was Jacob's wrestling-match with God, and Christ didn't show up anywhere during the homily. In the ThTh570 posting I mentioned Luther's Genesis commentary with reference to that pericope. Here's what Kit told me.

*Ed, More fun, I think, is seeing where Luther makes reference to Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok other than in the Genesis*

commentaries. A few snippets with clear Gospel connections follow:

- A. *Against Latomus* [Luther's Works Vol. 32, Page 193] God cares admirably for us by making us certain of two things. First, he teaches in Gal. 5[:22] what good works are manifest. "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace," etc.; and, in Matt. 7[:20], "You will know them by their fruits." [On the other hand,] He has made us certain that they [the good works] are not sinless and faultless (so that our trust is not in them), with the result that we can acknowledge in a confession without doubt or falsity that we are sinners in all our works and are men whom mercy has found. Further, in order that we may have unflinching peace, he has given us his Word in Christ, on which we rely with confidence, secure from all evil. The gates of hell, together with all sins, do not prevail against that Word. This is our rock of refuge where we, with Jacob, can wrestle against God [Gen. 32:28] and, so to speak, dare to press hard upon him with his promises, his truth, and his own Word. Who will judge God and his Word? Who will accuse or condemn faith in his Word?
- B. *The Gospel for the Sunday After Christmas*, Luke 2[:33-40] [LW Vol. 52, Page 129] In Genesis 32[:30] after Jacob had wrestled and fought with the angel, he called that place "Peniel" or "Phanuel" and said: "I have seen God face to face, and because of it my soul has been saved." Now the meaning of "Peniel" is "face of God." But "face of God" is nothing else but the knowledge of God. Nobody knows God except through faith in his word. The word and promises of God declare nothing but consolation and grace in Christ; therefore, whoever believes them sees God's mercy and goodness. This amounts to knowing God properly

*and this makes the heart joyful and blessed, as David says in Psalm 4[:6-7]: "Raise up the light of your countenance over us, thereby you bestow joy upon my heart." And Psalm 80[:3] says: "O God, show us your face, then we shall be blessed." Many things are written in the Bible about the turning away and the turning toward of the face of God. Behold, in this manner all the fathers and saints of old were children of Phanel, of the divine knowledge and wisdom which made them joyful. Their faith in the divine promises guided them and made them prophets. But they obtained faith and the promise only because they were dear little Annas, i.e., out of God's favor and compassion.*

- C. LW 18 Minor Prophets. Chapter Twelve [Hosea 12:4] *If you want to be genuine followers of Jacob, do what Jacob did, etc. You do not supplant, but you are supplanted. Also, he wrestled with God. This is an example of very great faith. You, however, do not cling to the promises of God as Jacob did.*

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## **NUMBER TWO Ralph W. Klein's article "Reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther—and Without Him."**

Ralph and I are old buddies from the trenches during the Wars of Missouri back in the 1970s. Equally dear—so I think—to each other. And that means we've arm-wrestled on theological matters before. Although he is a no-nonsense practitioner of the so-called historical critical method in his OT scholarship, he's equally no-nonsense about the centrality of God's promise in, with, (and sometimes under, very under) the multi-layered texts of the Hebrew scriptures. So we have lots in common—and we don't always agree.

So his piece on OT and ML triggered some thoughts, which I passed on to him—and now do so to you. Should Ralph wish to continue the conversation, I'll gladly do likewise with his response, if he gives permission. I bet he will. Now just retired after 35 years as editor of CURRENTS (210 issues!) he may be looking for places to say something. Especially when piqued by friendly piquers. So you may hear more on this subject.

The full text of Ralph's essay comes with this post as an attachment in pdf format. I've never added an attachment to any previous Thursday Theology posting, so this is an experiment to see if it all comes to you via our listserve mediator.

*Hi Ralph, Have you read my Second Opinion (well sortuv) to your CURRENTS article, which was posted as last week's ThTh 570? About preaching the Christian Gospel from OT texts. That's actually your own central theme in telling us about Luther and the OT.*

*Too bad you're no longer at the helm of CURRENTS. Here's the outline of a response, an op Ed (in more ways than one), to your April article that I'd propose for you to publish.*

*Too bad that the Seminex 35th birthday party planners didn't think of something like this for the program next month. Not incessant lectures—such old hat—but Ralph and Ed “discussing” ML & the OT. That would surely be more fun for all of us goldie-oldies—and esp. our alums—than those already posted (threatened?) plenary presentations.*

*Items from my side for just such a conversation taken from your ML/OT article:*

- 1. Your several references to ML not being “helpful” in this or that OT utterance of his. Since when has “helpful” [a*

fairly recent neologism in contemporary analysis] been a valid category for theological adjudication? What makes for helpful or unhelpful? Helpful for what? I recently heard of a pastor who dismisses the notion of “wrath of God” because it is not “helpful.” Would that I could dismiss my diabetes on the same grounds.

2. Though Luther’s promise-focus for the OT is cherished by you too, you find him often “much too christological,” “excessively christological” now and again. What’s the benchmark for “just the right amount” of christological? And just what constitutes “christological” when you are interpreting any Biblical text—OT or NT?
3. And why should “21st century standards” be taken as a rubric for the proper amount of christology?
4. And even more who sets “21st century standards”? Why should “today’s critical scholarship” be taken as a standard? Had you been at the Augsburg LWF bash in March, you’d have heard Asian and African Bible scholars—all of them with Ph.D.s from Western schools—almost unisonally tell you how “unhelpful” all that stuff is—21st cent. standards and critical scholarship—that they HAD TO learn because the Enlightenment still reigns even in allegedly post-modern western grad education—not only unhelpful, but useless, for their life and work in mission and ministry on the barricades in their worlds. [You’ve been overseas too, so you know .] And so they asked us westerners: Why is Christian faith dying in your Europe and N. America, since you have all this supposedly wonderful stuff in Biblical scholarship? By their fruits you shall know them?
5. You tell us readers that the Formula of Concord in our Lutheran Confessions contains “lines . . . which we know are not true.” Those are lines about the descendants of the Holy Patriarchs who allegedly were also promise-

centered believers. I'd argue that Is. 53 signals one "descendent of the patriarchs" who verifies that "line" which you caveat. And maybe even extend the "descendents" right on into the time of Caesar Augustus.

6. "Perfectly clear" you say now and again about the meaning of this or that OT text.. I say "Hmmm..."
7. Luther on Satan & Gen. 3 "escalates unnecessarily [by whose standard of necessity?] and unhelpfully [aargh!], in my opinion, Satan's role in the death of Jesus." OK, prof, just what was Satan's role in the death of Jesus? Helpfully, please. Have you ever read RWB's UofC dissertation (1963)? He tracks Luther's read on that one. It's now available en toto on the Crossings website.
8. You like the definition of Gospel as "good news for a bad situation." Not at all a "good" definition, I would say, for what "euaggelion" means in the NT. Consult Fred Dankers's magnum opus Lexicon. Also good is Elert's concordance study on the term in his dogmatics—passed on to the ThTh crowd some time back <https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur110608.shtml>. I think Jack Elliot brought that phrase "into our circles." Not exactly a blessing, not "helpful" – "in my opinion."
9. Luther and Moses. You tell us readers what is "unhelpful" from ML in his opinions about Moses and the law. I think you are arguing with St. Paul—and St. John too—on this one, and not just ML. For John it's beginning right in the prolog with the Moses/Christ "distinction." If in doubt, see my ancient piece "Mosaic and Christic Ethos in the Gospel of John" presented to the Society for Christian Ethics back in the days when I was young(er) and foolish(er). On the Crossings website.
10. Your concluding lines about reading OT "without" ML. First paragraph you tell us, reading the OT without

Luther “means that we recognize in Judaism a faithful understanding of the OT.” What? “Faithful?” And which of today’s three American branches of Judaism would you designate as most faithful? I remember a Rabbi from the Reformed branch once telling our St. Louis pastoral conference that “orthodox Judaism” is a “different religion from mine.” If “Judaism is a faithful understanding of the OT,” why did the Judaism of the time find Jesus such a nemesis? Sounds like you’re saying Paul got it wrong about his own fellow Jews, ditto for St. John, ditto for JESUS in John. Is there such a word as retro-sessionism? Maybe “21st cent. standards” make such a verdict “kosher” for what “we Christians” recognize in Judaism, but getting any NT author to agree to that won’t be easy.

11. Your second last para. “Try to learn about God from a distinctively OT perspective.” Whose “distinctively OT perspective?” Not only of the many different OT perspectives within the OT itself, but the plethora of distinctively different OT perspectives among OT scholars today—and throughout the last 2 millennia of religious history. Sounds like you’re proposing “reading the OT with NO hermeneutic lenses at all.” But that, I know you know, is impossible.
12. I’ll make no attempt to validate Luther’s horrific rant about the Jews in his later years other than some understanding why such madness can arise from my own times of paranoia and perceived defeats. On occasion I too have been simul peccator et peccator—no justus showing whatsoever.
13. One more thought on the historical critical method. Ed Krentz and I did a point-counterpoint on this back in Seminex days when we offered a seminar on “Historical Critical Method and Law-Promise Hermeneutics.” As I

recall, neither one of us changed the other's mind. Here's my take on it. The HCM on its own does not bring anyone to the "Promise-Aha!" about the OT, so far as I know. That Aha! is what makes your own teaching and preaching, Ralph, so winsome. I'll bet you did not learn that while doing your Ph.D. at Harvard way back when. It's the fact that you see *promissio* as the center (eventually specked out, for example, in Isaiah 53 or Jeremiah 31) for good news in the OT and not Exodus/Sinai. Or, as Dell Hillers once showed us in his monumental book on Covenant in the OT, God's covenants with David (2 Sam 7), with Noah, and with Abraham's are all *sola gratia/sola fide* offerings, qualitatively different at the core from God's covenant offers at Sinai and Shechem. THAT'S what trademarked your preaching/teaching when I've been in your audience. HCM can help you make that center even more winsome, but with alternate proposals for what the OT center is (and their names are legion) HCM will just as easily obfuscate *promissio*-finding.

14. And with that we're back to Bertram's probably MOST important essay of his entire life—three pages in the early years of the Wars of Missouri (several years before Seminex) on THE HERMENEUTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF APOLOGY IV. I think the Wars of Missouri arose *de facto* from that hermeneutical conflict, and not the alleged squabble about you exegetes and your HCM. For HCM the same verdict is true as Luther said about "human reason." She will sell herself to any and all customers. And all customers have their "Vorverständnis" [commitment, agenda, "angle"] already in place before they hire this agent to assist them in hustling their agendas.