

Martin Luther and the Book of Proverbs:

Sketch of a 'Lion' Sage

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The wicked flee when no one pursues,
but the righteous are bold as a lion.
Proverbs 28:1

Luther never wrote a commentary on the biblical book of Proverbs. We do not know the exact reason, but I will argue that it is not due to a lack of interest as he appreciated the book and was immersed in it. Perhaps he did not think that a commentary on this book was urgent,¹⁾ as Old Testament works on Genesis, Psalms, and even Ecclesiastes took precedence. It is well known that Luther did not have the comfort to write a 'systematic theology,' or even to tackle an orderly interpretation of the biblical books. His early focus was "on negating wrong developments within the church and its devotional practices based on his understanding of Scripture," as he mostly wrote in a context of conflict, in the midst of "existentially troubling

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1) It is well known that Luther did not have the comfort to write systematic works as much of his time was engaged in disputes, and his writings and sermons are addressed to the urgent issues of his time. See the relevant comment of Timothy F. Lull, "Luther's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-61, here 39: "He was more a contextual theologian than a systematician – usually responding to specific opponents and immediate pastoral challenges."

spiritual trials.”²⁾ For most of his life, polemics and disputes hindered him from doing much constructive work,³⁾ and the book of Proverbs did not have a highly relevant place for these. All these factors provide a plausible explanation why Luther never attempted a full commentary on Proverbs.

Despite not writing a commentary on the biblical book of Proverbs, Luther's copious use and interest in (non-biblical) proverbs indicate that it is legitimate to characterize him as a 'sage.' His interest in proverbs was well documented by James C. Cornette, Jr.⁴⁾ Thus, he quoted German proverbs 1825 times, and if we include his collection of 489 proverbs (in his unpublished *Sprichtwörterammlung*) and the proverbial expressions, the number is close to 5000.⁵⁾ He was exposed to proverbs by birth and environment as he was a scholar with a peasant's background.⁶⁾ Thus, he was familiar with the

2) Markus Wriedt. "Notes from "Luther's Theology,"" in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86-119, here 100 and 87. Luther saw himself mainly as a pastor whose concern was the preaching of the Gospel through the exposition of Holy Scripture (and most of it focused on the Old Testament).

3) Wriedt, "Luther's Theology," 100.

4) James Clarke Cornett Jr. (1918-1991) published his dissertation *Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions in the German Works of Martin Luther* at the University of North Carolina in 1942. For this information I rely on the edited work with the same name by Wolfgang Mieder and Dorothee Racette (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

5) The exact number is 4987. Note that this does not include the proverbs from his Latin works, but many of the German proverbs were translated from Latin. Luther made his collection of 489 German proverbs during a period when the interest in proverbs was rife (first half of the sixteenth century). Thus, from 1529 to 1541 four independent collections of proverbs appeared in Germany (besides Erasmus' *Adagia*). For more details and bibliography, see Cornette, *Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions*, 15-34.

6) Cornette, quotes Luther (from Justus Köstlin, *Martin Luther, sein Leben und seine Schriften* [Verlag Alexander Duncker: Berlin, 1903], 10): "Ich bin eines

language and proverbs of the folk and constantly used proverbs to appeal to his audience and “to lend greater truth and authority to the opinion expressed.”⁷⁾

Based on his interest and skillful use of (non-biblical) proverbs⁸⁾, it is warranted to refer to him as a ‘sage’ (not only as a pastor, professor, and reformer). In this essay, however, I will focus on his interest and use of the biblical book of Proverbs and argue that he was a ‘lion sage,’ a bold sage who was inspired especially by those sayings that encouraged perseverance in adversity and boldness.

The evidence shows that Luther was immersed in the book of Proverbs quoting it frequently, and relied especially on passages that encouraged him in his tumultuous and fighting-filled life. Thus, the data from Luther’s Works shows that Luther quoted Proverbs at least once in all but one of

Bauren Sohn; mein Vater, Grossvater, Ahnherrnsindrechte Baurengewest.”

7) Cornette, *Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions*, 29. Luther was also familiar with Erasmus’ compilation of proverbs in *Copia* and *Adagia* (which contains 4151 proverbs) and he praised these works. Thus, his interest was also in the learned Latin proverbs of the scholars. See Cornette, *Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions*, 17-18, and 23. But note that even though Luther was interested in and appreciated “worldly heather wisdom,” he was also aware of the ambiguity of human wisdom. In his tract on *Secular Authority* Luther urges princes “to render judgments by making use of common sense and being guided by love.” He uses the term *Gleichmut* (fairness or reasonableness) for the ‘wisdom’ to be used when one must make decisions in difficult situations where there is no obvious answer. See Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 70-76.

8) To be called a sage it is not enough to be interested in and know many proverbs. It is crucial that these are also used well (see Proverbs 26:7 and 9). Luther qualifies as a sage because he used proverbs skillfully and with great effect to connect to the folk and lend authority to his sermons and writings. Also, his preferred style of speaking in opposites or word pairs (e.g. freedom and service, law and gospel, justified and sinner at the same time, etc.) parallels the approach of the sages in the book of Proverbs.

the volumes of his work published in English,⁹⁾ and there are numerous references to Solomon.¹⁰⁾ The following quotation from his preface to the Bible is probably fully applicable to himself: “Any man who intends to become righteous might well take this book as a hand-book, or prayer-book, for daily use, and read it often, and see his own life in it.” One can imagine that Luther himself practiced what he preached and read it often making daily use if it in his discussions and writing.

My analysis of Luther’s attitude and interpretation of the book of Proverbs will focus on his prefaces of the poetic books and Proverbs in his Bible, a brief note in Table Talks, and on the passages that he quoted/referenced most extensively – as I believe that these reveals better Luther’s heart on this subject. A more thorough analysis of his interpretation would take into consideration all the passages where he makes references to the book of Proverbs (or at least more of his favorite passages), but this is beyond the scope of this essay.

9) Unless otherwise specified, all the citations from the works of Martin Luther are from *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 75 vols, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (Philadelphia: Fortress Press: Concordia Publishing House, 1955). References will contain the volume and page number. The only volume without at least one reference is volume 37 on *Word and Sacrament III*. Even in this volume he references Solomon twice, once as he quotes Ecclesiastes 5:3. See *Luther’s Works* 37:56.

10) According to the index in *Luther’s Works* (volume 55), Luther quotes the book of Proverbs more than 400 times (c. 446 times including the footnotes) and there are numerous references to Solomon in the context of wisdom. With the publication of 11 more volumes from the proposed 28, more than 55 references to Proverbs can be added to the total. Thus the total comes close to 500.

1. The Prefaces and *Table Talk*

Luther's preface to the books of Solomon makes it clear that he believes that Solomon is behind the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. This is not surprising as it was the traditional understanding, thus Luther does not spend any space to argue for the Solomonic authorship of Proverbs. For him it was clearly Solomon who put "his doctrine into proverbs, so that it can be grasped the more easily and kept the more gladly."¹¹⁾

Though Luther believed that Solomon was the main figure behind the book of Proverbs, he also believed that the words were inspired by the Holy Spirit and were therefore from God. It is very clear from his interpretations that the words of 'lady' Wisdom in Proverbs 8, are the very words of God. Thus, note his comment on Genesis 30:8, where he explains the Hebrew נִפְתַּלִּי by appealing to the root פָּתַל in Psalm 18:26 and to Proverbs 8:8 (There is nothing perverse in the words of wisdom), "that is, God's Word is not changed, not perverted."¹²⁾ More specifically, in his preface to the book of Proverbs, Solomon acknowledges that "no proverbs have their origin anywhere else than in God's words and his works...".¹³⁾ The reference to God's

11) Charles M. Jacobs, "Preface to the Books of the Bible," http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_f8.htm (accessed, February 17, 2017). Unless specified, all the quotations in this section are from here. Note the interesting comment of Luther in his commentary on Genesis 18:6-8, "Moreover, there is no doubt that Solomon has drawn maxims from the account of Abraham and has included them in his Proverbs." See *Luther's Works* 3:197 (W, XLIII, 15, 16).

12) *Luther's Works* 3: 336-338. He argues that פָּתַל means "to change," "to pervert." Notice also his interpretation of Proverbs 1:25 where wisdom speaks again (You have ignored all my counsel...), and Luther applies the words to God. *Luther's Works*, 38:135.

13) "Preface to the Books of the Bible." See also *Luther's Works* 58:298, where the

works in this context is due to the fact that Solomon perceived God's wisdom as being present also in his works.

Luther thinks that the book of Proverbs is addressed especially to "young people" (this is mentioned about 7 times), as it is the young people who are "of themselves inclined to evil" and they especially need a teacher to teach and train them "how they should act blessedly before God according to the spirit, and wisely before the world with body and goods."¹⁴⁾ At the same time, the book is for everybody - as the book "does not hit the young people only, though his [Solomon's] chief purpose is to teach them, but people of all stations, from the highest to the lowest." In his *Table Talk* from the winter of 1542-1543, he praises the book and recommends it specifically to rulers: "Proverbs is an excellent book. Rulers ought to read it. There one can see how things happen in the world. There is nothing in the book but "'Fear God' and 'Pray.'"¹⁵⁾

Thus, even though Luther believes that the book of Proverbs is especially useful for young people, he concedes that it is useful for everyone, including rulers. But it is especially the role of the rulers and teachers to use the book "to exhort, warn, rebuke, and chastise" the young people and "to hold them constantly" to the fear of God and to His commandments, and to keep off the devil, the world, and the flesh."¹⁶⁾

Proverbs is a book of "good works" in the sense that it can teach its readers "how to lead a good life before God and the world." It should help its readers choose wisely between two ways, one of obedience and submission to the elders'

words of wisdom from Prov. 1:24 are identified with the word of God.

14) "Preface to the Books of the Bible."

15) *Luther's Works*, 54:450. This is from his *Table Talk* No. 5541 in the winter of 1542-1543.

16) "Preface to the Books of the Bible."

(including the father) instructions and chastisement that leads to life, and one of disobedience that leads to death. The obedience that it teaches and recommends is “in the face of mad lust and curiosity.” Proverbs is also a book that makes a distinction between ‘fools’ as people who despise God’s word, and ‘wise men’ who keep God’s commandments. More specifically, the ‘fool’ is one who presumptuously guides himself by his own mind and notions.” In this connection, the book “praises wisdom and rebukes folly.” Folly is rebuked because of its damaging consequences and because it’s “what takes place without God’s Word and works.”

Overall, the role of Solomon is downplayed, and the content is understood as having its origins in the very Word and works of God.¹⁷⁾ Therefore, it would be foolish to ignore as that would mean” to live without God’s Word and to act and speak” according to one’s own reason and purposes.

17) Note the useful explanation of Luther in his comment on Genesis 4:3 (*Luther’s Works* 1:248 [W, XLII, 184]) where he cites Proverbs 8:30: “I was delighted every day, playing before him, playing in the world, and my delight was with the children of men.” But the Hebrew verb פָּנַן is incorrectly reproduced by the word “play.” What Wisdom is saying is that Its concerns was for men and that It revealed Itself to them. It is as if It were to say: “I have always displayed Myself to the eyes and ears of men in such a way that they could become aware of My presence in the sacrifices, in circumcision, in burning incense, in the cloud, in the Red Sea, in the manna, in the brazen Serpent, in the tabernacle of Moses, in the temple of Solomon, and in the cloud. And it was my delight to display and reveal Myself in this manner to the children of men.” These are some great examples of the works of God where His Wisdom is revealed in Luther’s understanding. For more on Proverbs 8, see below.

2. Luther's Writings and the Book of Proverbs

It is easy to be intimidated by the sheer mass of writings associated with Luther. His writings contain sixty-six volumes so far in the English translation, and even more in the critical edition in German and Latin, the Weimar Ausgabe.¹⁸⁾ To keep this research manageable, this essay has focused mainly on the volumes already available in English. The German and Latin writings have been consulted only when access to the exact words was necessary for interpretation.

Luther quotes from the book of Proverbs in the volumes translated in English about 500 times.¹⁹⁾ The purpose of this essay is not to be exhaustive by analyzing all the passages, but rather to focus on the verses that he refers to the most and on Proverbs 8. The assumption is that these are the verses that he knew and loved most, and they can tell us a bit about his personality and interests. Even from this list of most referenced proverbs, due to space consideration, only the top two will be considered (Proverbs 24:16 and Proverbs 28:1) and also the references to key verses in Proverbs 8. Proverbs 24:16 and 28:1 are mentioned considerably more than the others in Luther's writings and key verses from Proverbs 8 are mentioned more than 20 times.²⁰⁾

18) For more information about this see Lull, "Luther's Writings," 39-40. Note that when Lull wrote his article in 2003 he was aware of only 55 volumes in English. Since then, a new project started to translated 28 more volumes. At the time of this writing there were 11 more volumes published, which brings the total to sixty-six. I did not have access for this research to volumes 78 and 79 (Church Postils IV and V). See note 9 for bibliography.

19) See notes 10 and 18.

20) Proverbs 24:16 is referenced 14 times and Proverbs 28:1 is referenced 12 times. See the discussion below for more on these verses. The following passages are mentioned considerably less: Proverbs 1:28 (8 times), Proverbs 3:5 (7 times),

3. Luther's Interpretation of Proverbs 8²¹⁾

Because the Christological exegesis of Proverbs 8 was important and controversial in the history of exegesis,²²⁾ it is useful to verify if Luther contributes in any significant way to the understanding of this chapter. The focus will be especially on vv. 22 to 31, but I will also pay attention to the relevant verses earlier in the chapter (especially 8:14).

Luther, following a long line of church fathers, understood the personified wisdom in Proverb 8 to refer to Christ. Thus, in his interpretation of Genesis 1:2, he specifically refers to Arius as one who was not able to deny that Christ existed before creation (due to John 8:58). Luther also brings Proverbs 8:27 for support, because it is Christ who says: "Before the heavens were, I am."²³⁾

Proverbs 8:14 (6 times), Proverbs 18: 10 and 22 (6 times), Proverbs 22:15 (6 times), and many others are mentioned 4 or more times. Though these will not be covered in this essay, it is clear from the references to Proverbs 1:28 and Proverbs 3:5 (and v. 7), that Luther cares very much about the warning voice of God behind Wisdom in chapter 1, and he also discourages "leaning on one's understanding" in favor of trusting in God and his word. Thus, as it is well known, Luther trusts in the reliability of the Word of God and emphasizes faith in God. This agrees with Oswald Bayer who remarks that "Word and faith" were the core of Luther's theology. See O. Bayer, "Luther as Interpreter of Holy Scriptures," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73-85, here 77.

21) Luther never engages in a sustained exegesis of this chapter, but he refers to various verses from this chapter more than 22 times in *Luther's Works*. See especially the reference to 8:4 in *Luther's Works*, 7:146, 217, 310; 13:148; 18:263; 24:383; and 46:238. On various verses from 8:22-31, see especially *Luther's Works*, 1:13, 20, 248; 2:93; 6:243; 7:109; 11:338, 341; 18:273, 20:147, 25:145, 29:113; 32:199; 52:44; 58:200; 59:316.

22) See for example the relevant discussion of Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 14-18.

23) *Luther's Works*, 1:13.

The identification is made more specific and clear in his exegesis of Genesis 40:5-7, a passage that pleases Luther for attributing Joseph's wisdom to the Lord. He continues to say that the Lord "is Wisdom, that is, the Son of God, who was to become incarnate, was with him; for in Proverbs Solomon also undoubtedly calls wisdom the Son among the divine Persons, and on the basis of what Paul says we also teach that Christ led the people of Israel out of Egypt (1 Cor. 10:4)."²⁴⁾ In his comments on Hebrew 1:5,²⁵⁾ he thinks that the verse applies "to both births of Christ." For the 'birth' or filiation of Christ that took place before the sun Luther quotes Proverbs 8:25, clearly identifying again wisdom with Christ.

In a more extensive comment on Genesis 1:5,²⁶⁾ he uses specifically Proverbs 8:22-27 and links it with 30:5 to support the "plurality of Persons" in the Trinity. It is implicit that the text refers again to Christ. Luther comments: "Here Solomon shows that he understood the doctrine of our religion which was revealed by Moses, but he does it in such a way that the uneducated people heard and read his words and yet did not understand them. If Solomon had not understood this mystery, he could not have spoken thus. But he drew it all from Moses, as also that question, Prov. 30:5: "What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know?" Unfortunately, Luther does

24) Luther's Works, 7:109. Though the reference here to Proverbs is not explicit, it is most likely to Proverbs 8:22-31 in line with the exegetical tradition. See note 4. In a sermon on Titus 3:4-5, Luther references Proverbs 8:31 and states that the wisdom of God is Christ (the Lord). This Christ is a "lover of humanity" who rejoices in human beings. See *Luther's Works* 58:200.

25) [For to what angel did God ever say]: Thou art My Son. Today I have begotten Thee? For this verse and the comments on this paragraph see *Luther's Works*, 29:113 (W, LVii-3, 102, 103). In this interpretation of Hebrews 1:5, Luther depends on Paulus Burgensis. See Nicolaus de Lyra, *Postilla super Psalterium, with the Additiones of Paul Burgensis* (Mantua, 1477).

26) See *Luther's Works*, 1:20-21 (W, XLII, 16,17) for the whole paragraph.

not elaborate more on these texts from Proverbs, but it is clear enough that both are interpreted “Christologically” and follows the previous interpretations of the church fathers and medieval interpreters.

A more interesting and perhaps original explanation can be seen in Luther’s exegesis of Romans. Thus, in his comment on Romans 1:5, where he recognizes that the Gospel “proclaims only what prophecy has said it would proclaim,” he continues to say that “this Gospel was ordained before we existed.” He then surprisingly quotes Proverbs 8:23 (“Ages ago I was set up, at the first”) to identify Wisdom now with the Gospel: “For the Gospel, which is the wisdom and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24) has established the church and does everything that wisdom in that passage says about itself for its own glory and praise.” This identification of the Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with the Gospel is most likely original and is probably due to his newly discovered Gospel-oriented interpretation of Scripture. It is based on his own ‘intertextual’ reading of the Bible.

Luther refers to Proverbs 8:14 (“I have counsel and sound wisdom, I have insight, I have strength”) at least six times:²⁷⁾ In his interpretation of Genesis 41:16 he applies the words of Wisdom to the Lord. What is more interesting in this case, is that his translation does not seem to be consistent, and also his explanation of תוֹשִׁיָּה based on the Hebrew. In Luther’s interpretation of Micah 6:9 he argues that תוֹשִׁיָּה (which also appears in Proverbs 8:14 translated above as ‘sound wisdom’) means “blessedness, success, and what turns out well and successfully,” because through תוֹשִׁיָּה “plans are carried out successfully.”²⁸⁾ This ‘performative’ function of תוֹשִׁיָּה is made

27) See *Luther’s Works* 7:146, 217 and 310; 13:148; 18:263; and 24:383. The translation of the text is from *Luther’s Works* 7:146 (W, XLIV, 407).

28) *Luther’s Works* 18:232 (W, XIII, 334). At least some respected contemporary commentators come close to this interpretation. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book*

even clearer in Luther's analysis of Psalm 101 where he translated Proverbs 8:14 in the following way: "Both the proposing and the disposing are Mine."²⁹⁾ Here תושיה is translated as 'disposing.' Emphasizing even more the effective aspect of תושיה, in his exegesis of John 16:23 Luther translated Proverbs 8:14 in the following way: "Mine is the doctrine; Mine is also the power of execution."³⁰⁾ Thus, revealed doctrine is not enough, much more is required to actually achieve the desired action (תושיה).

This explanation is reinforced in his commentary on Genesis 42:1-2 where it is accompanied by an additional explanation of תושיה.³¹⁾ Here he argues that the existential particle יש (usually translated as "there is/are") means "it is at hand," or "it is abundant" and תושיה comes from this. He continues: "I give counsel and תושיה, that is, the deed or success, or the execution in any business whatever. Mine is the voice of deed. Mine is to speak and do, that is, whatever I counsel I also perform." (Cf. 8:14). This is the force of the word תושיה,

of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 402, translates the word as "resourcefulness." Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, AYB (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 272, translates as "competence" and says that "it denotes clear, efficient thinking in the exercise of power and practical operations, as distinct from thinking as an intellectual act." Thus, both Fox and Waltke move toward a more performative function of the word, but not quite as strongly as Luther.

29) *Luther's Works* 13:148. Italics are mine.

30) *Luther's Works* 28:383 (W, XLVI, 76). Italics are mine. It's the Wisdom of God that speaks which is God's Word. The German has (lacking in the English): Denn also spricht die Weisheit Gottes...." In Luther's German the text for Proverbs 8:15 is: "Mein ist die Lere, mein ist auch das Thuen." See W, XLVI, 76. This is also supported in Luther's "Preface to the Christian Order for the City of Göttingen" in 1531. He talks about "raden [Raten] und geraden [Geraten]." See *Luther's Works* 59:316.

31) Note also the similar explanation in his commentary on Genesis 43:1-5 in *Luther's Works* 7:310 (W, XLIV, 529).

namely, to put a thing in its place.”³²⁾ This is also clearly supported by Luther’s German translation of the Bible: “Mein ist beides, Rat und Tat” (Mine is both, advice and action).

From Luther’s interpretation of Proverbs 8, we can see that he stands firmly in the earlier tradition (as found in the interpretation of both the church fathers and medieval commentators) in the way that he identifies Wisdom with Christ, and perhaps also in his Trinitarian observations. He does show, however, a clear move toward a new type of interpretation (though the line is still blurred), one that will be later known as a Reformation interpretation, as he takes the original languages seriously, and looks at texts through the prism of the Gospel. Where it is appropriate and supported by Scripture, the Old Testament is illuminated by Christ and his Gospel.

4. Luther’s Interpretation of Proverbs 24:16

Luther’s favorite proverb seems to be 24:16, as it is found fourteen times in Luther’s Works, more than any other.³³⁾ Most

32) *Luther’s Works* 7:217 (W, XLIV 459, 460). The exact text in Latin (from W, XLIV, 460) is the following: “Ubi sapientia inquit: ‘Meum est et consilium et successus. Ego do consilium et *Thuschiah*’, hoc est, rem vel successum et executionem in quocunque negocio, Mea est vox et res, meum est loqui facere, hoc est quicquid consulo id etiam perficio.” It is not clear where Luther’s interpretation of the Hebrew comes from, but he may rely on Johannes Reuchlin, *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* (Pforzheim, 1506). On the same page his explanation of a Hithpael verb is more clearly from Reuchlin. Luther had access to Reuchlin’s work which was very helpful to his interpretation of the Old Testament. See Siegfried Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, Vol. II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, edited by Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 363-405.

likely this was firmly planted in his memory and he used it whenever he found it applicable.³⁴⁾ Therefore, it is important to analyze Luther's interpretation of this passage to understand how he uses it, and also speculate why it was so dear to him.

It is instructive to note Luther's unusual translation of the verse. He adds the word "a day" to the first part, thus modifying slightly the meaning of the verse: "The righteous man falls seven times a day."³⁵⁾ Luther uses the verse twice in his Heidelberg disputation to argue that there is no righteous man on earth who does not sin.³⁶⁾ Moreover, in his commentary on Genesis 19:9 (in reference to Lot who sinned with his daughters), he uses the verse to argue that "it is not rare that the saints stumble and fall...Because they have sinful flesh just as we do, it is not surprising if they sometimes fall."³⁷⁾

33) See *Luther's Works* 3:261 and 334; 10:32f; 11:248; 14:221 and 289; 25:316; 31:45 and 60; 36:186f; 44:37; 51:63; 52:86; and 75:314.

34) Here is the text of the verse in the ESV translation: *For the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.*

35) This is how he translates the verse in *Luther's Works* 3:261 ("*six times* in the course of a *day*") and 34; 10:31f; 11:248; 14:289; 31:45 and 60. Italics are mine. But he is correct (without adding "a day" which is lacking in both the original Hebrew and the Septuagint) in his translation in *Luther's Works* 10:31f; 25:36; 36:186-187; 44:37; 51:63; and 52:86. One wonders if the 'mistranslation' may be due to the fact that Luther is quoting the verse from memory slightly mistaken!? Note that it is known that Luther had a great retentive memory, and there is evidence that many quotations (including those of classical authors) in his works are from memory. At the same time, the editors seem to have altered some of the citations. See the comments of Jaroslav Pelikan in his introduction to *Luther's Works* 1:x-xi. The German text of Luther's Bible (both the 1512 and 1545 editions) does not have "a day": Denn ein Gerechter fällt siebenmal und stehet wieder auf; aber die Gottlosen versinken in Unglück.

36) *Luther's Works* 31:45 and 60. In both cases he starts with the supporting verse in Eccles. 7:20, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."

37) *Luther's Works* 3:261 (W, XLIII, 61, 62). Italics are mine.

In his commentary on Genesis 20:4-5, he argues that even when godly persons actively do evil the result is good.³⁸⁾

Because when a godly person is aware of his fall, he becomes ashamed and is perturbed. Thus this fall leads to humility and then also to fervent prayer. It is for this reason that Solomon says (Prov. 24:16): “A righteous man falls seven times in a day and rises again.” For they do not persist in their sins; they groan and grieve. Moreover, the evil which remains in our flesh is like a spur which urges us on, with the result that we are angry with ourselves, and cry out with Paul (Rom 7:24): “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this sin?” Lord, take away and crucify our flesh! Thus faith grows by reason of our failings, the seeds of which remain in our flesh.

Both the righteous and the wicked fall because of their sinful nature. However, there is a distinction, as Luther makes it clear in his exposition of Psalm 94:18, the righteous will rise again while the wicked will fall down into evil (Prov. 24:16), “for the former soon confesses as one humbled, while the latter excuse themselves as proud people.”³⁹⁾ While discussing Psalm 37:24 (“Though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong; for the Lord is the stay of his hand”), he makes reference to Prov. 24:16 (without a full quotation) to make the point that “the righteous man sins occasionally but then stands up again.”⁴⁰⁾ The “fall” in Proverbs is clearly understood as sinning.

In Luther’s commentary on Psalm 1, he takes some space to describe the ungodly (רָשָׁע) and the righteous (צַדִּיק), two

38) Here he gives as an example Joseph’s brothers. *Luther’s Works* 3:334 (W, XLIII, 114,115).

39) *Luther’s Works* 11:248 (W, IV, 96,97). In a sermon on John 1:14, Luther connects the fall of the wicked in this verse with “Lucifer’s calamity.” See *Luther’s Works* 75:314.

40) *Luther’s Works* 14:221 (W, XIX, 563, 564).

terms that also appear in Prov. 24:16. For him, the difference between piety and impiety is not about behavior, but about attitudes which are “the source of behavior.” He continues, “Thus whoever rightly believes in God can do nothing but good and lead a good life. And even though the righteous falls seven times a day, he will rise again just as often (Prov. 24:16). But the wicked fall into evil and do not rise again. Because they are unbelievers, they do no good works at all.” Therefore, it all has to do with faith and the attitude of the heart. This is what distinguishes the pious from the ungodly, and what allows one to rise again, while the other to falter. Because, “he is godly who lives by faith, and he is ungodly who lives in unbelief.”⁴¹⁾

I turn now to Luther’s interpretation of this passage when the translation is correct (omitting the addition of “a day”). He references this verse in connection to Romans 6:10 (“For the death he died he died to sin, once and for all, but the life he lives he lived to God”) to argue for “the eternal nature of righteousness, which in this life can often be lost and regained without conflicting with its eternal nature.”⁴²⁾ The apostle Peter is then given as an example of one who sinned “a mortal sin” which was contrary to the Gospel (Gal. 2:11ff), but whose righteousness was regained.

Undoubtedly, this proverb was an encouraging one for Luther and his audience, especially in a context where he recognized that even the saints were aware of only a very small portion of one’s sins. Though saints also sin, they are not harmed due to their faith in Christ, and because they “depend solely

41) All citations in this paragraph are from *Luther’s Works* 14:289 (W, V, 28, 29).

Luther commented on this psalm sometime around 1518. In the *Wartburg Postil* (between 1521 and 1522 during his “exile” on the Wartburg), he associates the fall of the wicked in Proverbs 24:16 with the fall of Lucifer. See *Luther’s Works* 52:86.

42) *Luther’s Works* 25:316.

on the mercy of God and regard their works as nothing.”⁴³⁾ God cannot abandon the humble persons who confess their sins and depend on God for righteousness.

He refers to this proverb again in his “Treatise on Good Works” (1520) as an answer to the following question: “But you say, how can I be absolutely sure that all my works are pleasing to God, when at times I fall, talk, eat, drink, and sleep too much, or otherwise transgress in ways I cannot avoid.”⁴⁴⁾ To this he responds by criticizing the imaginary questioner as still regarding faith “as a work among works” and is not set “above all other works.” For Luther faith “is the highest work because it blots out these everyday sins and still stands fast by never doubting that God is so favorably disposed” toward the believer that “he overlooks such everyday failures and offenses.” To support this point, he supports his argument with 1 John 1:2, Wisdom of Solomon 15:2 (“And though we have already sinned, we are still thine, and know that thou are great”), and Proverbs 24:16.

As long as the one who falls despairs of his works and believes, God is favorable to him and forgives, as “it is by the mercy and grace of God and not by their own nature that works are without guilt and are forgiven. They are good because of faith, which abandons itself to this same mercy.”⁴⁵⁾ This point is made even more forcefully in his sermon preached at Erfurt in 1521 on the way to Worms: “What does it matter if we commit a fresh sin? If we do not immediately despair, but rather say within ourselves, “O God, thou livest still! Christ my Lord is the destroyer of sin,” then at once the sin is gone.”⁴⁶⁾

43) *Luther's Works* 36:186-187. These comments appear in “The Misuse of the Mass” (1521) in the second volume of *Word and Sacrament*. The writings in this volume center on his teaching concerning the Lord's Supper.

44) See *Luther's Works* 44:37.

45) *Luther's Works* 44:37-38.

5. Luther's Interpretation of Proverbs 28:1

The second most beloved proverb by Luther is 28:1 ("The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.") as it is found at least twelve times in his works.⁴⁷⁾ Sometimes he focuses mainly on the wicked in the first part of the proverb.⁴⁸⁾ Thus, in the context of Adam's fall in Genesis 3 and God's interrogation in verse 13, he counts Adam and Eve with the wicked who have a frightened conscience and hide. This is contrasted with the believer who lives by faith and is not ashamed (Is. 49:23; Hab. 2:4; and Prov. 24:16b). Other examples of wicked men who have an evil conscience and "are alarmed after the manner of the wicked," are Laban (commentary on Genesis 31:44), the brothers of Joseph (commentary on Genesis 43:18), the clerical evildoers, and even the pope and his church.⁴⁹⁾

The text in Isaiah 7:2, where the heart of Ahaz and his people "shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" when Syria and Ephraim joined against them, also provides an excellent opportunity for Luther to refer to this verse. He comments, "No one is more scared in trouble than the top hypocrites. In peace they are unyielding and harder than flint; in distress they are shaken like trees at every breeze...So is the heart that is destitute of the Word of God and open to all calamities. Then works try to come to one's assistance instead of the Word, but these provide no protection. But God's wisdom

46) *Luther's Works* 51:63. He then goes on and quotes Prov. 24:16 in Latin for support.

47) See *Luther's Works* 1:181; 6:71 and 78; 7:170, 330, and 335; 16:79; 25:400; 31:127; 32:67; 45:58; and 75:157.

48) See *Luther's Works* 1:181; 6:71 and 78; 7:330; 16:79; 31:127; 32:67; and 45:58.

49) See Luther's "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles" in *Luther's Works* 32:67 for the pope and his church.

does.”⁵⁰⁾ If believers do the works that God commanded and rely on God’s Word (not on works), there is reason for confidence and not for fear.⁵¹⁾

Three texts focus mainly on the second part of the verse which emphasizes the boldness of the righteous.⁵²⁾ In Luther’s exposition of Genesis 41:40, he refers to Joseph and Moses as examples of leadership and courage:

“...whenever God gives a leader and warrior such as Joseph and Moses were, He can conquer a great army of lions with small forces of deer...Thus Joseph undoubtedly had very great courage...He rushes into the jaws of the devil and death. Nevertheless, he does not fear or despair; for the Spirit of faith is with him. Under his leadership he would have overthrown three armies.”⁵³⁾

In his commentary on Genesis 43:23, he looks at Joseph’s brothers who were anxious and fearful, and warns about the danger of an evil conscience, as he was also accustomed to “tremble and flee” when his conscience was guilty and perturbed. The text, is then use to exhort his readers to guard their conscience and to trust in God:⁵⁴⁾

Let us, then with all zeal and care beware of lapses that wound the conscience; and let us learn to trust in God and to receive

50) *Luther’s Works* 16:79-80.

51) He also notes on a sermon on Philippians 4:4-7 that if “there is no faith, there is only fear, flight, timidity and sorrow as soon as God is even thought or named.” Because the sinner has in his heart “consciousness of sin and knowledge of God’s punishment he is worried every moment “that God stands behind him with a club, as Solomon says” in Proverbs 28:1. See *Luther’s Works* 75:157.

52) See especially *Luther’s Works* 7:170 and 335; and 25:400.

53) *Luther’s Works* 7:170. Earlier Luther points out that he “would rather go to war under the leadership of Joseph than under Alexander the Great.”

54) *Luther’s Works* 7:335.

with a tranquil and pious heart the things offered us by God... For an evil conscience can in no way be satisfied or converted to God unless it has died. Otherwise it always flees from God, from whom it should neither flee nor shrink, since God is such a good God that He should be the sole Refuge of all those who despair and destitute of help and comfort of all creatures. But a heart conscious of its guilt would rather be changed into thousand forms and sooner rush through rocks, fires, bronze mountains, and finally to the devil himself than approach God.

Another relevant mention of this verse is in his exposition of Romans 9:33 (“He who believes in Him will not be put to shame.”) where Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:16. He points out that the Hebrew has “He who believes shall not make haste,” and then interprets it “to mean that he who believes in Christ is secure in his conscience and righteous and, as the Scripture says, “bold as a lion” (Prov. 28:1b). This contrasts with the wicked who have no peace and “who flee when no one pursues” (quoting Prov. 28:1a).

Other Old Testament verses (Is. 57:20, Ps, 1:4, Lev. 26:36, Deut 28:65, etc) are brought to emphasize this contrast, and leads him to conclude very eloquently the following:

“...he who believes in Christ will not be in a hurry, will not flee, will not be terrified, for he fears nothing, he stands quiet and secure, established on the solid rock, as our Lord taught in Matt. 7:24. But he who does not believe in Him, even though he “makes haste,” that is, flees, yet he cannot escape the tribulation and the anguish which beset him, and particularly judgment. For this is the penalty of the damned, and their iniquity is without end, that they flee from God and yet cannot escape Him...Such is the horror and the flight of the hastening conscience, which is the very confusion of the conscience itself.”⁵⁵⁾

55) *Luther's Works* 25:400-401.

Conclusions

In 1512, after Luther received his doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg, he promised “to teach Holy Scripture faithfully and in purity.”⁵⁶⁾ After that, since he lectured on biblical Scriptures exclusively, his “theological work was to be aimed exclusively at the exposition of Holy Scripture.” This is what we find in most of his works, including the sermons. And in his painstaking and faithful exegetical work, isolated proverbs are used to make important points and are also sometimes exegeted themselves. More importantly, they are used to warn unbelievers, and to strengthen those who are in danger to fall, or even the “fallen.”

It seems to me that Luther took his own advice and used the book of Proverbs daily as a hand-book, perhaps even as a prayer-book, read it often, and in his two favorite verses analyzed above, he probably saw his own life. From this brief analysis, we can agree with Bornkamm that Luther “Christianized the Old Testament thoroughly.”⁵⁷⁾ This is clear not only in his interpretation of Proverbs 8 where he stays faithful to Christological interpretation of many of the early church fathers, but even beyond.⁵⁸⁾ Luther looks at the Scripture through the spectrum of the Gospel, and even Old Testament proverbs are interpreted with the lens of faith. Thus, Raeder is correct to speak about his interpretation as “evangelio-centric,”⁵⁹⁾ as his key for opening the door of the Old Testament “was the fact that God revealed himself in Christ,” and thus the Old

56) Raeder, “Exegetical Work,” 365.

57) Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969 [German orig. 1948]), 266.

58) Note his brief reference to Proverbs 30:5 briefly discussed above.

59) Raeder, “Exegetical Work,” 377.

Testament could be illuminated.⁶⁰⁾

He does just that in the way he analyzes and applies Proverbs 24:16 and 28:1. In the process, he takes the Hebrew text seriously, but also allows himself some liberties with the text. As one who “fell” many times, perhaps many times “a day” (to use his mistaken or free translation), he knew that he needed faith, humility, and confession to be able to rise again. And for him these were available only in the comfort of the Gospel revealed in Christ. To be bold in the face of adversity, he understood that he needed a clear conscience and firm trust in God. This is what he strove for, and what these verses taught him. No wonder he used them in his interpretation of Scripture, memorized them, and encouraged others through them.

The evidence from this brief analysis is clear. Besides being a pastor, a scholar, and a reformer, Luther was a sage who loved proverbs (biblical and non-biblical), memorized them, and used them with great effect in his writings and sermons. His favorite proverbs suggest that he was a biblical “lion sage”, one who was bold when it mattered, because he had a clear conscience and trusted God and his word. As it was the case with his other writings (e.g. Psalms), the biblical proverbs were subject to illumination from experience, and they also helped and illuminated his experience. More importantly for contemporary believers, just as those proverbs had an application to his day, he still speaks the crucial, liberating, and encouraging word today.

No doubt, to understand better Luther’s view and usage of biblical Proverbs in his exegesis much more detailed research is required. However, even this brief analysis of two of his favorite proverbs and Proverbs 8, has revealed enough to be able to place Luther in the category of sages, to encourage the faithful, and to desire to pursue this subject further. Only by

60) Raeder, “Exegetical Work,” 377-78.

studying Luther's use of all (or at least most of) the biblical proverbs that he quotes or alludes to can a deeper understanding of his hermeneutic to this book be outlined.

<주요어>

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<Abstract>

Martin Luther and the Book of Proverbs:

Sketch of a 'Lion' Sage

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Luther never wrote a commentary of the book of Proverbs. However, there is strong evidence that Luther loved proverbs and proverbial sayings, and was also well versed in the biblical book of Proverbs.

This essay will focus on Luther's interpretation of the book of Proverbs and will argue that Luther was a true sage because he loved wisdom literature, was very conversant with the book, and used proverbs (both biblical and non-biblical) with great skill and effect.

Based on Luther's interpretation of key favorite proverbs, this essay will also support the fact that Luther read and interpreted the Bible through the spectrum of the Gospel. I will also argue that most portraits of Luther, by not interacting with his view and interpretation of the book of Proverbs, miss the fact that he was not just an excellent pastor (preacher and expositor), but also a bold sage.

<초록>

마틴 루터와 잠언

-‘사자’ 지혜자의 스케치-

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루터는 잠언 주석을 쓴 적이 없다. 그렇지만 루터가 잠언과 일반 금언들을 좋아한 증거는 많다. 그는 잠언에 대해 깊은 학식을 갖고 있었다.

이 논문은 루터의 잠언 해석을 중심으로 루터가 진정한 지혜자임을 논증하고 있다. 그는 지혜문학을 사랑하였고, 잠언에 정통하였으며, 성경의 잠언과 일반 금언들에 대해서도 탁월한 이해력과 적용을 하였다.

필자는 루터가 사랑한 잠언 몇 구절들에 대한 해석에 근거하여, 그가 복음의 스펙트럼을 통하여 잠언과 성경을 읽고 해석하였음을 밝히려고 한다. 또한 필자는 루터의 잠언관이나 잠언 해석을 다루지 않은 대부분의 해석들은 루터가 탁월한 목회자, 설교자, 해석자였을 뿐만 아니라, 대담한 지혜자였다는 사실을 놓치고 있음을 지적하려고 한다.

