

HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD REGARD MOSES

1525

Translated by E. Theodore Bachmann

INTRODUCTION

The year of this sermon, 1525, was fraught with high tension and tragic turmoil. For Luther it had begun with the publication of *Against the Heavenly Prophets*,¹ his sharp attack against his former colleague, Andreas Karlstadt, and the Sacramentarians. Between January and August the explosive peasant uprising took place, and Luther's succession of well-intended but ill-timed and infelicitous pamphlets² alienated many. On May 27, Thomas Münzer, the religious radical and fomenter of peasant unrest, was put to death.³

Luther's opposition to both Karlstadt and Münzer derived from his theological convictions—stated in this treatise—concerning the relationship between law and gospel and the related problem of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Law and gospel are chosen ways through which God addresses his word to men. In the law God says No to man, the sinner; in the gospel he says Yes to man, the righteous—that man who has repented and believes his promise in Jesus Christ. Law and gospel are both present in both of the Testaments. They must always be distinguished but never identified or confused.⁴

For several years too the problem of usury and unfair interest rates had also occupied Luther's attention,⁵ particularly since certain earnest evangelical Christians like Pastor Jacob Strauss at

¹ LW 40, (75) 79-223.

² *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* (late April [?], 1525). PE 4, (205) 219-244. *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (early May, 1525). PE 4, (247) 248-254. *An Open Letter Concerning the Hard Book Against the Peasants* (early July, 1525). PE 4, (257) 259-281.

³ See p. 403, n. 74.

⁴ For a fuller understanding of Luther's thought on this vital matter one should, of course, look beyond this single writing to other treatises of divergent emphasis such as his 1539 polemic, *Against the Antinomians*. WA 50, (461) 468-477; and his 1543 discussion of *The Last Words of David*. WA 54, (16) 28-100.

⁵ Luther had written on this subject at various times between 1519 and 1524. PE 4, (9) 12-69. WA 15, (279) 293-322. WA, Br 3, 176-177, 305-308. Smith and Jacobs, *Luther's Correspondence*, II, 236-238.

Eisenach and the court preacher Wolfgang Stein at Weimar had brought their considerable influence to bear on the Saxon princes in favor of substituting the more humane laws of the Old Testament for the then current imperial and canon laws. Luther opposed the notion that the Scriptures would be properly exalted if Mosaic precepts were suddenly, as law, to replace laws of the German state and church. He warned that while seemingly honoring the Scriptures, one can actually distort the meaning and intention of the Word of God. This entire discussion too stands in the background of this 1525 discourse on Moses.⁶

In the course of his career as an expositor of the Scriptures, Luther had developed a distinctive understanding of the Word of God. It is the Word of God, our Lord. We can receive *it* only by submitting to *him*. Such submission includes the recognition that he is the Lord who does and bestows all and whose lordship consists in his saving activity. But, contends Luther, if I now imagined that God's lordship expresses itself in certain legal statements or precepts which I had the possibility of ascertaining and expounding, then I should precisely *not* have understood what God's lordship really is. Instead I should then—despite all my own outward protest against Roman papism—have substituted a biblicistic for a papal police. Therefore I am not to make the Word of God function simply as a part of human law. "Moses" is not the Word of God in the sense that "Moses" could be substituted for a piece of human legislation.

How, then, is "Moses" Word of God, and how is "Moses" law? How do Word of God and law relate to each other?

Here Luther makes sometimes the most contrary statements. On the one hand "Moses" is completely abolished: "Moses does not pertain to us." On the other hand we hear Luther expressing the wish "that [today's] lords ruled according to the example of Moses."

Anyone who, like the enthusiasts, erects Mosaic law as a biblical-divine requirement does injury to the preaching of Christ. Just as the Judaizers of old, who would have required circumcision as an initial requirement, so also the enthusiasts and radicals of this later era do not see that Christ is the end of the Mosaic law. For

⁶ Most of what follows in this introduction is based on an introduction to this same treatise provided by George Merz in *MA* 4, 398-401.

all the stipulations of that law, insofar as they go beyond the natural law, have been abolished by Christ. The Ten Commandments are binding upon all men only so far as they are implanted in everyone by nature. In this sense Luther declares that "Moses is dead."

Besides, the Jewish assembly of Sinai and of the decalogue has been replaced by the Christian congregation of Pentecost and of the new covenant. The era of Mosaic law extends from Sinai to Pentecost. In this era the Jewish people served its particular purpose, for this people, alone among all the peoples, was during that time span both state and church. It was just one national ethnic group among others on earth, but at the same time it was a peculiar people set apart for God as an instrument of his plan for all peoples.

So far as "Moses" is simply the *Sachsenspiegel* or law code of the Jewish people as a national ethnic group, it can be listed as just one code of laws among many, features of which may or may not be considered desirable in another age or nation. But so far as the Mosaic law is the law of the Old Testament congregation of God, it has a prophetic and promissory significance comparable to nothing in the laws of other peoples; and it has a continuing relevance not to any people simply as people but only to the post-Pentecost church of God spread among all peoples.

Delivered on August 27, 1525, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* was Number 29 in Luther's long series of seventy-seven sermons on Exodus preached from October 2, 1524, to February 2, 1527. It was reworked for separate publication and issued as a pamphlet from the press of Hans Weisz at Wittenberg on May 1, 1526. With slight later additions it was inserted by an editor as a fitting introduction to the 1527 printed volume of Luther's sermons on Genesis, a series that had been preached March 22, 1523—September 18, 1524. In that form, almost without modification, it was included in a 1528 exposition of the Ten Commandments, which was simply a reproduction of sermons 29-37 in the series on Exodus,⁷ and again in the festival portion of certain editions of the church postils. Our translation, the first in English, is based on the first separate printing of 1526: *Eyn Unterrichtung wie sich die Christen ynn Mosen sollen schicken*, as it is given in *WA* 16, 363-393, text "U."

⁷ *WA* 16, (xv) 363-393, text "A."

HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD REGARD MOSES

Dear friends, you have often heard that there has never been a public sermon from heaven except twice. Apart from them God has spoken many times through and with men on earth, as in the case of the holy patriarchs Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, down to Moses. But in none of these cases did he speak with such glorious splendor, visible reality, or public cry and exclamation as he did on those two occasions. Rather God illuminated their heart within and spoke through their mouth, as Luke indicates in the first chapter of his gospel where he says, "As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" [Luke 1:70].

Now the first sermon is in Exodus¹ 19 and 20; by it God caused himself to be heard from heaven with great splendor and might. For the people of Israel heard the trumpets and the voice of God himself.

In the second place God delivered a public sermon through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost [Acts 2:2-4]. On that occasion the Holy Spirit came with great splendor and visible impressiveness, such that there came from heaven the sudden rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach and speak in other tongues. This happened with great splendor and glorious might, so that thereafter the apostles preached so powerfully that the sermons which we hear in the world today are hardly a shadow compared to theirs, so far as the visible splendor and substance of their sermons is concerned. For the apostles spoke in all sorts of languages, performed great miracles, etc. Yet through our preachers today the Holy Spirit does not cause

¹ Where Luther refers to a specific book of the Pentateuch by number (e.g., "The Second Book of Moses") we have given the corresponding English title.

himself to be either heard or seen; nothing is coming down openly from heaven. This is why I have said that there are only two such special and public sermons which have been seen and heard from heaven. To be sure, God spoke also to Christ from heaven, when he was baptized in the Jordan [Matt. 3:17], and [at the Transfiguration] on Mount Tabor [Matt. 17:5]. However none of this took place in the presence of the general public.

God wanted to send that second sermon into the world, for it had earlier been announced by the mouth and in the books of the holy prophets. He will no longer speak that way publicly through sermons. Instead, in the third place, he will come in person with divine glory, so that all creatures will tremble and quake before him [Luke 21:25-27]; and then he will no longer preach to them, but they will see and handle him himself [Luke 24:39].

Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake." So, then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men. Just as we and God are separated from one another, so also these two doctrines are widely separated from one another. For the gospel teaches exclusively what has been given us by God, and not—as in the case of the law—what we are to do and give to God.

We now want to see how this first sermon sounded forth and with what splendor God gave the law on Mount Sinai. He selected the place where he wanted to be seen and heard. Not that God actually spoke, for he has no mouth, tongue, teeth, or lips as

we do. But he who created and formed the mouth of all men [Exod. 4:11] can also make speech and the voice. For no one would be able to speak a single word unless God first gave it, as the prophet says, "It would be impossible to speak except God first put it in our mouth."² Language, speech, and voice are thus gifts of God like any other gifts, such as the fruit on the trees. Now he who fashioned the mouth and put speech in it can also make and use speech even though there is no mouth present. Now the words which are here written were spoken through an angel. This is not to say that only one angel was there, for there was a great multitude there serving God and preaching to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. The angel, however, who spoke here and did the talking, spoke just as if God himself were speaking and saying, "I am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," etc. [Exod. 20:1], as if Peter or Paul were speaking in God's stead and saying, "I am your God," etc. In his letter to the Galatians [3:19], Paul says that the law was ordained by angels. That is, angels were assigned, in God's behalf, to give the law of God; and Moses, as an intermediary, received it from the angels. I say this so that you might know who gave the law. He did this to them, however, because he wanted thereby to compel, burden, and press the Jews.

What kind of a voice that was, you may well imagine. It was a voice like the voice of a man, such that it was actually heard. The syllables and letters thus made sounds which the physical ear was able to pick up. But it was a bold, glorious, and great voice. As told in Deuteronomy 4[:12], the people heard the voice, but saw no one. They heard a powerful voice, for he spoke in a powerful voice, as if in the dark we should hear a voice from a high tower or roof top, and could see no one but only hear the strong voice of a man. And this is why it is called the voice of God, because it was above a human voice.

Now you will hear how God used this voice in order to arouse his people and make them brave. For he intended to institute the tangible [*eusserliche*] and spiritual government. It was previously stated how, on the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses had

² Cf. Num. 22:38.

established the temporal government and appointed rulers and judges [Exod. 18:13-26]. Beyond that there is yet a spiritual kingdom in which Christ rules in the hearts of men; this kingdom we cannot see, because it consists only in faith and will continue until the Last Day.

These are two kingdoms:³ the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men.

The law of Moses binds only the Jews and not the Gentiles

Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts. For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to be clever, and think they know something more than is presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before.

But we will not have this sort of thing. We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to

³ On the two kingdoms cf. pp. 289-290.

them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, "Thus says Moses," etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised,⁴ wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.

That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved⁵ from Exodus 20[:1], where God himself speaks, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. Therefore it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles. He has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God, when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave his Son, etc.

Again one can prove it from the third commandment that Moses does not pertain to Gentiles and Christians. For Paul [Col. 2:16] and the New Testament [Matt. 12:1-12; John 5:16; 7:22-23; 9:14-16] abolish the sabbath, to show us that the sabbath was given to the Jews alone, for whom it is a stern commandment. The prophets referred to it too, that the sabbath of the Jews would be abolished. For Isaiah says in the last chapter, "When the Savior comes, then such will be the time, one sabbath after the other, one month after

⁴ In a letter to Chancellor Brück of Saxony dated January 13, 1524, Luther wrote that the people of Orlamünde, Karlstadt's parish, would probably circumcise themselves and be wholly Mosaic. MA³ 4, 402, n. 182.

⁵ *Zwingen* probably means *zwingend beweisen* as MA³ 4, 402, n. 183, 4 suggests.

the other," etc.⁶ This is as though he were trying to say, "It will be the sabbath every day, and the people will be such that they make no distinction between days. For in the New Testament the sabbath is annihilated as regards the crude external observance, for every day is a holy day," etc.

Now if anyone confronts you with Moses and his commandments, and wants to compel you to keep them, simply answer, "Go to the Jews with your Moses; I am no Jew. Do not entangle me with Moses. If I accept Moses in one respect (Paul tells the Galatians in chapter 5[:3]), then I am obligated to keep the entire law." For not one little period in Moses pertains to us.

Question:

Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?

Answer to the Question:

Three things are to be noted in Moses.

I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug,⁷ because I find three things in Moses.

In the first place I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, "This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular."

I would even be glad if [today's] lords ruled according to the example of Moses. If I were emperor, I would take from Moses a model for [my] statutes; not that Moses should be binding on me, but that I should be free to follow him in ruling as he ruled. For example, tithing is a very fine rule, because with the giving of the tenth all other taxes would be eliminated. For the ordinary man

⁶ Our rendering of Isa. 66:23 is here based on the Douay version, as Luther's was on the Vulgate.

⁷ *Unter den bank stecken* (literally, "put under the bench") is a proverbial expression meaning to put aside, hide, or forget some despicable thing. WA 51, 661 and 724, No. 468. Wander (ed.), *Sprichwörter-Lexikon* I, 229, "Bank," No. 40. Cf. p. 253, n. 53.

it would also be easier to give a tenth than to pay rents and fees. Suppose I had ten cows; I would then give one. If I had only five, I would give nothing. If my fields were yielding only a little, I would give proportionately little; if much, I would give much. All of this would be in God's providence. But as things are now, I must pay the Gentile tax even if the hail should ruin my entire crop. If I owe a hundred gulden in taxes, I must pay it even though there may be nothing growing in the field. This is also the way the pope decrees and governs. But it would be better if things were so arranged that when I raise much, I give much; and when little, I give little.

Again in Moses it is also stipulated that no man should sell his field into a perpetual estate, but only up to the jubilee year.⁸ When that year came, every man returned to the field or possessions which he had sold. In this way the possessions remained in the family relationship. There are also other extraordinarily fine rules in Moses which one should like to accept, use, and put into effect. Not that one should bind or be bound by them, but (as I said earlier) the emperor could here take an example for setting up a good government on the basis of Moses, just as the Romans conducted a good government, and just like the *Sachsenspiegel*⁹ by which affairs are ordered in this land of ours. The Gentiles are not obligated to obey Moses. Moses is the *Sachsenspiegel* for the Jews. But if an example of good government were to be taken from Moses, one could adhere to it without obligation as long as one pleased, etc.

Again Moses says, "If a man dies without children, then his brother or closest relative should take the widow into his home and have her to wife, and thus raise up offspring for the deceased brother or relative. The first child thus born was credited to the deceased brother or relative" [Deut. 25:5-6]. So it came about that one man had many wives. Now this is also a very good rule.

When these factious spirits come, however, and say, "Moses has

⁸ *Laut jar*. Cf. Lev. 25:8-55.

⁹ This "Saxon code of law" was a thirteenth century compilation of the economic and social laws obtaining in and around Magdeburg and Halberstadt; it was influential in the codification of German law until the nineteenth century. The radical Reformers sometimes sought to replace it with the law of Moses or the Sermon on the Mount. Cf. LW 21, 90, n. 37 and LW 40, 98, n. 20.

commanded it," then simply drop Moses and reply, "I am not concerned about what Moses commands." "Yes," they say, "he has commanded that we should have one God, that we should trust and believe in him, that we should not swear by his name; that we should honor father and mother; not kill, steal, commit adultery; not bear false witness, and not covet [Exod. 20:3-17]; should we not keep these commandments?" You reply: Nature also has these laws. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact. For there never was a Gentile who did not call upon his idols, even though these were not the true God. This also happened among the Jews, for they had their idols as did the Gentiles; only the Jews have received the law. The Gentiles have it written in their heart, and there is no distinction [Rom. 3:22]. As St. Paul also shows in Romans 2[:14-15], the Gentiles, who have no law, have the law written in their heart.

But just as the Jews fail, so also do the Gentiles. Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature, etc.

But the other commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men] by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others equally fine which I wish we had too. Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely, the commandments to which I am not bound except insofar as they are [implanted in everyone] by nature [and written in everyone's heart].¹⁰

The second thing to notice in Moses

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ.

¹⁰ The bracketed phrases in this paragraph are from the version given in the 1528 *Exposition of the Ten Commandments*. WA 16, 380, ll. 26, 31. See the Introduction, p. 159.

This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. The first thing, namely, the commandments, does not pertain to us. I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith. For things take place in the kingdom of Christ just as I read in Moses that they will; therein I find also my sure foundation.

In this manner, therefore, I should accept Moses, and not sweep him under the rug: first because he provides fine examples of laws, from which excerpts may be taken. Second, in Moses there are the promises of God which sustain faith. As it is written of Eve in Genesis 3[:15], "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head," etc. Again Abraham was given this promise by God, speaking thus in Genesis [22:18], "In your descendants shall all the nations be blessed"; that is, through Christ the gospel is to arise.

Again in Deuteronomy 18[:15-16] Moses says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed; just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly," etc. Many are these texts in the Old Testament, which the holy apostles quoted and drew upon.

But our factious spirits go ahead and say of everything they find in Moses, "Here God is speaking, no one can deny it; therefore we must keep it." So then the rabble go to it. Whew! If God has said it, who then will say anything against it? Then they are really pressed hard like pigs at a trough. Our dear prophets have chattered thus into the minds of the people, "Dear people, God has ordered his people to beat Amalek to death" [Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19].¹¹ Misery and tribulation have come out of this sort of thing. The

¹¹ Thomas Münzer in a sermon of July, 1524, at Allstedt demanded that the princes wipe out all the godless, including godless rulers, priests, and monks. MA^a 4, 402, n. 187, 9. Cf. LW 40, 47.

peasants have arisen,¹² not knowing the difference, and have been led into this error by those insane factious spirits.

Had there been educated preachers around, they could have stood up to the false prophets and stopped them, and said this to them, "Dear factious spirits, it is true that God commanded this of Moses and spoke thus to the people; but we are not this people. Land, God spoke also to Adam; but that does not make me Adam. God commanded Abraham to put his son to death [Gen. 22:2]; but that does not make me Abraham and obligate me to put my son to death. God spoke also with David. It is all God's word. But let God's word be what it may, I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed. You are still a long way from being the people with whom God spoke." The false prophets say, "You are that people, God is speaking to you." You must prove that to me. With talk like that these factious spirits could have been refuted. But they wanted to be beaten, and so the rabble went to the devil.

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day.¹³ God said to David, "Out of you shall come the king," etc. [II Sam. 7:13]. But this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you.

The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say, "Dear people, this is the word of God." That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people. God has not given us the directive. The factious spirits came in and wanted to stir up something new, saying, "We must keep the Old Testa-

¹² On the Peasants' War see the Introduction, p. 157.

¹³ *Da scheidet denn sich sommer und winter.*

ment also." So they led the peasants into a sweat and ruined them in wife and child. These insane people imagined that it had been withheld from them, that no one had told them they are supposed to murder. It serves them right. They would not follow or listen to anybody. I have seen and experienced it myself, how mad, raving, and senseless they were.¹⁴

Therefore tell this to Moses: Leave Moses and his people together; they have had their day and do not pertain to me. I listen to that word which applies to me. We have the gospel. Christ says, "Go and preach the gospel," not only to the Jews as Moses did, but to "all nations," to "all creatures" [Mark 16:15]. To me it is said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. Again, "Go and do to your neighbor as has been done to you."¹⁵ These words strike me too, for I am one of the "all creatures." If Christ had not added, "preach to all creatures," then I would not listen, would not be baptized, just as I now will not listen to Moses because he is given not to me but only to the Jews. However because Christ says: not to one people, nor in this or in that place in the world, but to "all creatures," therefore no one is exempt. Rather all are thereby included; no one should doubt that to him too the gospel is to be preached. And so I believe that word; it does pertain also to me. I too belong under the gospel, in the new covenant. Therefore I put my trust in that word, even if it should cost a hundred thousand lives.

This distinction should be noticed, grasped, and taken to heart by those preachers who would teach others; indeed by all Christians, for everything depends entirely upon it. If the peasants had understood it this way, they would have salvaged much and would not have been so pitifully misled and ruined. And where we understand it differently, there we make sects and factions, slaving among the rabble and into the raving and uncomprehending people without any distinction, saying, "God's word, God's word." But my dear fellow, the question is whether it was said to you. God

¹⁴ In April and May, 1525, Luther had preached personally against the insurrection, both in Mansfeld and in Thuringia. *MA*⁸ 4, 402, n. 188, 11.

¹⁵ Cf. Matt. 7:12.

indeed speaks also to angels, wood, fish, birds, animals, and all creatures, but this does not make it pertain to me. I should pay attention to that which applies to me, that which is said to me, in which God admonishes, drives, and requires something of me.

Here is an illustration. Suppose a housefather had a wife, a daughter, a son, a maid, and a hired man. Now he speaks to the hired man and orders him to hitch up the horses and bring in a load of wood, or drive over to the field, or do some other job. And suppose he tells the maid to milk the cows, churn some butter, and so on. And suppose he tells his wife to take care of the kitchen and his daughter to do some spinning and make the beds. All this would be the words of one master, one housefather. Suppose now the maid decided she wanted to drive the horses and fetch the wood, the hired man sat down and began milking the cows, the daughter wanted to drive the wagon or plow the field, the wife took a notion to make the beds or spin and so forgot all about the kitchen; and then they all said, "The master has commanded this, these are the housefather's orders!" Then what? Then the housefather would grab a club and knock them all in a heap, and say, "Although it is my command, yet I have not commanded it of you; I gave each of you your instructions, you should have stuck to them."

It is like this with the word of God. Suppose I take up something that God ordered someone else to do, and then I declare, "But you said to do it." God would answer, "Let the devil thank you; I did not tell you to do it." One must distinguish well whether the word pertains to only one or to everybody. If, now, the housefather should say, "On Friday we are going to eat meat," this would be a word common to everybody in the house. Thus what God said to Moses by way of commandment is for the Jews only. But the gospel goes through the whole world in its entirety; it is offered to all creatures without exception. Therefore all the world should accept it, and accept it as if it had been offered to each person individually. The word, "We should love one another" [John 15:12], pertains to me, for it pertains to all who belong to the gospel. Thus we read Moses not because he applies to us, that we must obey him, but because he agrees with the natural law and is conceived better than

the Gentiles would ever have been able to do. Thus the Ten Commandments are a mirror of our life, in which we can see wherein we are lacking, etc. The sectarian spirits have misunderstood also with respect to the images;¹⁶ for that too pertains only to the Jews.

Summing up this second part, we read Moses for the sake of the promises about Christ, who belongs not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles; for through Christ all the Gentiles should have the blessing, as was promised to Abraham [Gen. 12:3].

The third thing to be seen in Moses

In the third place we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith. Therefore we should not sweep Moses under the rug. Moreover the Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage.

Conclusion and Summary

I have stated that all Christians, and especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses aright. Thus where he gives commandment, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know,

¹⁶ The iconoclasm of the radical leftists, who took Moses literally and destroyed images, windows, and other church art, aroused Luther's indignation. Cf. his fuller treatment of this subject, also during 1525, in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*. LW 40, 84-101.

observe, do, and leave undone. However it is true that Moses sets down, in addition to the laws, fine examples of faith and unfaith—punishment of the godless, elevation of the righteous and believing—and also the dear and comforting promises concerning Christ which we should accept. The same is true also in the gospel. For example in the account of the ten lepers, that Christ bids them go to the priest and make sacrifice [Luke 17:14] does not pertain to me. The example of their faith, however, does pertain to me; I should believe Christ, as did they.

Enough has now been said of this, and it is to be noted well for it is really crucial. Many great and outstanding people have missed it, while even today many great preachers still stumble over it. They do not know how to preach Moses, nor how properly to regard his books. They are absurd as they rage and fume, chattering to people, "God's word, God's word!" All the while they mislead the poor people and drive them to destruction. Many learned men have not known how far Moses ought to be taught. Origen,¹⁷ Jerome,¹⁸ and others like them, have not shown clearly how far Moses can really serve us. This is what I have attempted, to say in an introduction to Moses how we should regard him, and how he should be understood and received and not simply be swept under the rug. For in Moses there is comprehended such a fine order, that it is a joy, etc.

God be praised.

¹⁷ Origen (ca. 185-254), Alexandrian theologian and ascetic, always sought in his exegesis the deeper, hidden spiritual meaning that lay back of the unspiritual grammatical-historical meaning of the text. See p. 403, n. 7.

¹⁸ On Jerome see p. 117, n. 1.

ON TRANSLATING: AN OPEN LETTER

1530

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