



Luther in the Garden of Eden: His Commentary on Genesis 1-3

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Martin Luther was an academic with a doctorate in biblical studies; virtually his entire career was spent as professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg. His *Lectures on Genesis* constitute the major professorial output of his latter years and represent his mature thought. This article concerns itself with Luther's treatment of Genesis 1-3, first singling out a number of major themes and then identifying several principles that underlie his thought about these chapters.¹

I. MAJOR THEMES

"The first chapter [of Genesis] is written in the simplest language," Luther begins, "yet it contains matters of the utmost importance and very difficult to understand" (3).² Among these matters is the way in which God creates the world. It can be clearly drawn from the text of Genesis, he holds, that the world had a beginning and was created by God out of nothing (3). He notes the constantly repeated refrain, "And God said, Let there be..." and asserts that God creates the world through his Word. God, he says, "speaks true and existent realities," so that all creatures (including ourselves) are words of God. When we speak, on the other hand, we simply "assign names to objects which have already been created" (21-22).

Rather surprising is the amount of attention Luther gives, in his treatment of the manner of creation, to the contribution of philosophy (including what we call the natural sciences). In this connection, he is interested, as we might expect, in showing that what Genesis has to say about the subject is in harmony with the conclusions of experience and reason. Even when philosophers go beyond biblical teaching, they are to be encouraged (27). It is true that Luther can conceive of circumstances in which conflict might arise, and then there can be no question about precedence (30). Nevertheless, he seems less concerned in this commentary with warning against the threat posed by the natural sciences than with arguing that each discipline has its own integrity and proper vocabu-

¹This article is a shorter version of a faculty lecture delivered at Concordia College as part of the observance of Luther's 500th anniversary year.

²All page references to the *Lectures on Genesis* are provided in the text and are from Volume 1 of *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; Saint Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76).

lary (47-48). An example of this occurs in his treatment of the passage of Genesis 1 about the creation of the heavenly bodies. He reports that, according to astronomers, the moon derives its light from the sun. Luther comments:

This is really well proved at an eclipse of the moon, when the earth, intervening in a direct line between the sun and the moon, does not permit the light of the sun to pass to the moon....The astronomers are the experts from whom it is most convenient to get what may be discussed about these subjects. For me it is enough that in those bodies, which are so elegant and necessary for our life, we recognize both the goodness of God and His power, that He created such important objects and preserves them to the present day for our use. These are views which are proper to our profession; that is, they are theological, and have power to instill confidence in our hearts. (41)

Human nature is a second theme that engages Luther's attention in these lectures. The description of the creation of human beings in Genesis "indicates that man is a creature far superior to the rest of the living beings that live a physical life" (56). So does the fact that God plants a garden especially in which to place the first man and woman (90-91). But it is largely in his treatment of the statement in Genesis 1 that God created humanity in his own image that Luther develops his ideas about this subject.

Luther excludes some opinions as to what constitutes the image of God on the basis of his conviction that this image has been lost through sin. Thus it cannot consist in memory, will, or mind because we still possess these, albeit in an utterly depraved condition (61). He prefers to explain the image in more dynamic terms:

Therefore my understanding of the image of God is this: that Adam had it in his being and that he not only knew God and believed that He was good, but that he also lived in a life that was wholly godly; that is, he was without the fear of death or of any other danger, and was content with God's favor. (62-63)

From the acknowledgement of God as Lord came dominion over all other creatures (64), and this dominion included, so Luther says, comprehensive knowledge of nature: "all the qualities of trees and herbs and the disposition of all the beasts...the most dependable knowledge of the stars and of the whole astronomy" (66). Especially interesting is Luther's view that, had it not been for the fall, humans would not have used their dominion over the creatures to secure food, clothing, or money; "they would have made use of the creatures only for the admiration of God and for a holy joy which is unknown to us in this corrupt state of nature" (71)

A third theme, one we can certainly not omit to review, is what Luther has to say in these lectures about women and the relation between women and men—not only because the subject is a compelling one in our day but also because, given the nature of the Genesis materials, it looms large in Luther's commentary. It is a matter of common knowledge that Luther was both a product of and a participant in a society in which the status of women left much to be desired. Those who care to do so can collect a number of unfortunate quotations from Luther on the subject. Many of these are from his often ill-

considered "table talk," but the *Lectures on Genesis* would yield a few more.³ This has to be noted and deplored.

Be that as it may, Luther's fundamental honesty as interpreter leads him to some statements of another sort. Commenting on the knowledge possessed before the fall, he says, "Eve had these mental gifts in the same degree as Adam....Her very nature was pure and full of the knowledge of God to such a degree that by herself she knew the Word of God and understood it" (66-67). Eve was created according to divine plan and, apart from sin, "she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects" (115). Indeed, the very name "Woman" indicates equality with man; had they remained in "the innocence of Paradise...the management would have been equally divided" (137-138).

That God brings the woman to the man shows marriage to be "a divine ordinance and institution" and "gives support for marriage in opposition to the wicked invectives with which the papacy has brought shame on marriage. For is it not a great thing that even in the state of innocence God ordained and instituted marriage?" (134). As we might expect, Luther sees procreation as central to marriage (116-117), but he also speaks of the "constant and permanent relationship between husband and wife which, apart from the fall, would have been totally delightful and sacred" (117), and sometimes he waxes quite lyrical and sentimental about this "living-together of husband and wife" (133).

The third chapter of Genesis provides Luther with the occasion to explore another theme, namely, the character of temptation and sin. He is concerned at the outset to disabuse us of the notion that the sin described in this story is some particular act that can be isolated and identified. To understand his point here, we must be aware that the creation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which God forbade Adam to eat, was a benevolent act. It was created, he says, "for the distinguishing of good and evil, so that Adam might have a definite way to express his worship and reverence toward God...by not eating anything from it" (95). Thus the temptation of Eve by the serpent

was the greatest and severest of all temptations; for the serpent directs its attack at God's good will and makes it its business to prove from the prohibition of the tree that God's will toward man is not good. Therefore it launches its attack against the very image of God and the most excellent powers in the uncorrupted nature. The highest form of worship itself, which God had ordained, it tries to destroy. It is, therefore, vain for us to discuss this or that sin. Eve is simply urged on to all sins, since she is being urged on against the Word and the good will of God. (146)

Eve's sin was therefore not picking the fruit and eating it; she had already listened to another word and departed from the one God had spoken. To be more precise, first the will is corrupted, then the intellect, and finally the body (146-147).

The character of sin is revealed not only in the scene in which Eve is tempted by the serpent, but also in the one in which God seeks out Adam and Eve after both have disobeyed. That they try to hide from God shows "that the

³Among these is the paragraph (on p. 151) in which he speculates that Satan cleverly directed his first temptation against "the weak part of the human nature, Eve the woman," and that "if he had tempted Adam first, the victory would have been Adam's."

farther man withdraws from God, the farther he still desires to withdraw” (173). When they are confronted, they both attempt a similar ploy. “The woman *whom thou gavest to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate,” says Adam. “The serpent (that is, a ‘wild creature that the Lord God had made,’ 3:1) beguiled me, and I ate,” says Eve. Luther’s comment is:

Thus when man has been accused of sin by God, he does not acknowledge his sin but rather accuses God and transfers his guilt from himself to the Creator. The outcome is that in this way sin grows endlessly unless God through His mercy grants His help....This is the last step of sin, to insult God and to charge Him with being the originator of sin. (175, 179)

One last theme to be considered is the grace and mercy of God. When one considers the apparently tragic turn of events in Genesis 3—and Luther’s own very heavy emphasis on how much was lost in the Fall—this is surprising. He finds this divine kindness in several features of the account. Despite the warning that had accompanied the prohibition, Eve does not immediately experience death after succumbing to temptation (159). God condemns the serpent out of hand, but is more patient in questioning Adam and Eve (180-181). Eve is not repudiated by God, separated from Adam, or deprived of motherhood (199). Above all, there are the words that, according to Luther, are addressed to Satan, but spoken to the serpent so that Adam and Eve might hear and be comforted (Gen 3:15).

On the face of it, these words are not especially comforting. They refer, apparently, to the well-known antipathy between snakes and human beings, who perpetually try to do each other in. Or, at a slightly more edifying level, since the serpent is in this context the agent of temptation, the verse might be seen to refer to the perennial struggle which all who are born of women must wage against temptation. Luther insists that there is more to it than this. The “you” of the verse is, in Luther’s view, Satan, who is the one actually being addressed. The “seed” referred to is not just all individuals in general, but one individual, Jesus Christ, the Seed of Mary, who is a mother without union with a male (195). So,

The main point of the comfort is this: Although this enemy fights with cunning and treacheries, the Seed will be born who will crush the head of the serpent. These words point to the ultimate destruction of Satan’s tyranny, although it will not pass away without a most bitter conflict being fought for man. (190)

This, then, is the comforting word that brings Adam and Eve back from death to life, although it is life hoped for, rather than life already possessed. And this, according to Luther, is what all believers receive through baptism; since human nature, after the fall, could not achieve this, it must be accomplished through the sacrifice of the Son of God (196-197).

II. UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Among the most important of these principles is the centrality of God’s Word in his dealing with the world. As Jaroslav Pelikan points out:

According to Luther, when the Scriptures asserted that the creation was derived from the Word of God, they were saying something about the cosmos; but they were also saying something about God. By employing His speech or Word to create the world, God has made His Word the essential and constitutive element in all His dealings with the world. Luther contended that whatever God might be in and of Himself apart from the created world, in creation He had put relations between Himself and the world upon the foundation of the Word of God.⁴

For Luther, furthermore, the Word of God is the Second Person of the Trinity. “Christ is the true God,” Luther says, “who is with the Father from eternity, before the world was made, and...through him, who is the wisdom and the Word of the Father, the Father made everything” (17). Again, “The Father creates heaven and earth out of nothing through the Son, whom Moses calls the Word. Over these the Holy Spirit broods” (9). From the very beginning of the Bible, for Luther, God is present as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Closely linked to the centrality of God’s Word is a second principle, namely, Christ as the content of all of Scripture. As Paul Althaus describes Luther’s view, “Christ is the incarnate Word of God. Therefore the Bible can be the word of God only if its sole and entire content is Christ.”⁵ But in what sense can it be said that Christ is the content of the Old Testament as well as the New? In part, this is because, in the Old Testament, Christ is present as promise. An example is provided by Luther’s interpretation of Genesis 3:15. Christ is the content of this verse in the sense that he is the promised future Seed of the woman who will overcome the tempter. There is more to it than this, however. The Christ who is present in the Old Testament as promise is truly present. As Althaus notes, “For Luther, ‘Christ’ means the gospel of that free mercy of God in Christ on which alone man’s salvation depends.”⁶ This mercy, as the Old Testament abundantly attests, God has been showing to human beings from the very beginning. In Luther’s view, according to Heinrich Bornkamm, “The work of Christ in the Old Testament depended on the fact that he would one day become man; the incarnation, and the center of all events of salvation, radiated just as much back into the past as forward into the future.”⁷

It follows that, if Christ is already present in the Old Testament, so is faith—the same faith as that which the church has today.⁸ This is illustrated by a point we already noted briefly: Luther’s view that the word addressed by God to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 brings Adam and Eve back from death to life, and that this—which is precisely what all believers receive through baptism—can only be accomplished by the sacrifice of the Son of God (196-197).

This brings us to a third principle: Scripture as its own interpreter. We have just seen that, in Luther’s view, Christ is the content of the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments alike. While the entire truth of the gospel is therefore present in both Testaments, it does not follow that this truth is equally clear

⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther’s Works: Companion Volume: Luther the Expositor* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959) 51.

⁵Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 74.

⁶*Ibid.*, 79.

⁷Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 255-256.

⁸P. Althaus, *Theology*, 98; cf. H. Bomkamm, *Luther*, 257.

everywhere. Even within the New Testament, greater clarity is found in some parts than in others; but the important point in regard to our topic is that the New Testament makes clear the truth that is present in the Old.⁹

Luther repeatedly returns to this point in his lectures on Genesis. As part of his argument that there are allusions to the Trinity in Genesis 1, he says, “Of course, [Moses] does not say in so many words that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the one true God; this was to be reserved for the teaching of the Gospel” (12), and later Luther makes the same point at greater length (59).

We come now to a fourth principle. If Scripture is to be its own interpreter, it must be read only according to its literal historical sense. Behind Luther was a long tradition of allegorical interpretation of the Bible. There were those who, long before Luther, voiced objections to the excesses of allegorical interpretation, or at least gave primacy to the literal sense. But repeatedly, in his lectures on Genesis 1-3 as elsewhere, Luther rejects the allegorical tradition in biblical interpretation. “Nor does it serve any useful purpose,” says Luther, “to make Moses at the outset so mystical and allegorical. His purpose is to teach us, not about allegorical creatures and an allegorical world but about real creatures and a visible world apprehended by the senses” (4-5). Near the end of his commentary on Genesis 3, he enters into an extended discussion of the subject (231-233).

For Luther, literal historical interpretation differs from allegory in two important respects. First, allegory is notoriously difficult to control; it can make almost any text mean almost anything. This is not so great a problem if limits are imposed by some external authority. But if Scripture is to be its own interpreter, then it must have a single definite meaning. This is what Luther calls its historical literal sense. Second, allegory finds in the Old Testament only shadows or prefigurations of the New. Since for Luther, as we have seen, Christ and faith are already present in the Old Testament, he must find evidence of that presence in the real history that the Old Testament records. Such evidence need not necessarily be expressed only in what we might call historical reporting, so long as it testifies to the saving grace of God concretely and fully realized in the historical moment reflected in the text. This, too, is the literal historical meaning for Luther.¹⁰ The point is that, while judgments about a particular text might differ, literal historical interpretation does not mean that everything in Scripture must be understood as actually having taken place as described. As Bornkamm puts it, Luther’s “interest in the Old Testament is not historical (*historisch*) in the sense of modern science of history but rather historical (*geschichtlich*) in the sense of a true history of God.”¹¹

The final principle to be considered here is the kerygmatic function of Scripture. Word of God and Scripture are by no means identified in Luther’s thought. God’s Word is the Second Person of the Trinity, eternal, incarnate in Jesus Christ, addressed to human beings beginning with our first parents. God’s Word is fundamentally a spoken word, a living proclamation directed to a particular situation. Its content is the gospel, defined by the message Christ commanded his apostles to announce, a message that was also originally spoken.

⁹Cf. P. Althaus, *Theology*, 88.

¹⁰Ibid., 96; H. Bornkamm, *Luther*, 250-251.

¹¹H. Bornkamm, *Luther*, 259.

Luther comments on God's command to the man when he puts him in the garden (Gen 2:16-17):

For if Adam had remained in innocence, this preaching would have been like a Bible for him and for all of us; and we would have no need for paper, ink, pens, and that endless multitude of books which we require today, although we do not attain a thousandth part of that wisdom which Adam had in Paradise. (105)

The Bible, therefore, assists in the proclamation of the Word of God to specific individuals and communities in the concrete circumstances of their lives. Concerning the presentation of God's creative activity in Genesis 1, Luther says: "These things are written down and must be carefully learned that we may learn to be filled with wonderment at the power of the Divine Majesty and from those wonderful deeds build up our faith" (49). The story of the perfect life enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the garden must be attended to because what we have lost through original sin can be known partly by experience, but can be fully appreciated only by looking back on the state of innocence (141). Thus what has been lost "should be emphasized, I say, for the reason that unless the severity of the disease is correctly recognized, the cure is also not known or desired. The more you minimize sin, the more will grace decline in value"(142). Again, God's words spoken when Adam is expelled "are not spoken only to Adam; they also concern us, who, after being baptized and renewed by grace, must make every effort to guard against falling back into our former ungodliness" (224).

III. CONCLUSION

This last principle—that the Bible serves the proclamation of the gospel—provides a stance from which to offer a word of assessment of Luther's work. Surely no one today could expound the first three chapters of Genesis in just the way he did—or at any rate no one should. It is true that Luther offers particular insights that are still provocative and enlightening, and he often expresses them in strikingly pungent language. His lectures on Genesis are well worth reading for this reason alone. But that does not mean that his interpretation can ever be normative or final. It is not just that some of his statements are outrageous in the light of modern knowledge or sensibilities, though that is sometimes the case. Luther spoke (to repeat what he said about the fathers as interpreters before him) "as the result of an emotion and of a particular mood which we do not have and cannot have, since we do not have similar situations" (61).

Nevertheless, we can learn more from Luther than a few particular insights. He was not a dispassionate critic. He made no effort to efface himself in what he wrote. He was deeply involved—with the text, with those who had interpreted it before him, and with his listeners and readers. He was passionately concerned that his audience hear the Scriptures, think about them; wrestle with them, and ultimately believe the One who speaks his Word through them. Not many of us could, or would, emulate his style. But we can learn from him that the highest goal of the interpreter of Scripture is to bring together ancient text and modern reader in such a way that the word that was alive and vital to those who wrote may be a living word in our day also.