



# Luther's Hagiographical Reformation of the Doctrine of Sanctification in His Lectures on Genesis (1535–1545)

SARAH HINLICKY WILSON

**L**uther got rid of the saints. That's a standard line in the telling of the Reformation story. The only problem with it is that it's wrong.

Luther got rid of the *invocation* of the saints premised on the assumption that they would be more pliable than the unyielding Almighty. Luther granted that the saints probably pray *for us* in heaven, but he could find no biblical evidence that *we* should pray *to them*. Luther further noticed that in New Testament usage, "saint" is basically a synonym for "Christian." Sainthood is not a moral category but a soteriological one.

But to say *only* that Luther eliminated the invocation of the saints, or made "saint" and "Christian" logical equivalents, is to neglect the much bigger and far more interesting story. Luther did not only eliminate, where the saints were concerned; he also retained, altered, and added. In this essay I intend to demonstrate that it was precisely through attention to the unique and irreducible saints of the book of Genesis that Luther was able to articulate most profoundly his reformed doctrine of sanctification.

*What does it mean to be a saint, to be saintly? In popular religious thought, a saint is a morally holy and often quite ethereal person. Luther rejects this, understanding that it is the presence of God's Word on one's lips and in their being that makes them a saint. Saints are not perfect people, but rather those in whom the saving Word of God dwells.*

## CHRISTIAN SAINTS IN GENESIS

While Luther continued to find inspiration in the saint stories of the early church,<sup>1</sup> and nominated some of his martyred contemporaries to that illustrious category,<sup>2</sup> even a cursory examination of the Genesis lectures that occupied the last decade of the reformer's life reveals that his all-time favorite saints were none other than the patriarchs and matriarchs—in fact, Old Testament Jews.<sup>3</sup> Luther was diabolically and reprehensibly opposed to rabbinic Judaism, an aspect of his teaching that we must forswear today with shame and repentance. And yet, for all that, he remained an impassioned lover of Old Testament Judaism, which he understood to be the *same faith* as that of the church, in anticipation of the Messiah instead of coming after the fact, and restricted to the people of Israel instead of extended to all the nations of the earth.<sup>4</sup> Luther finds better “Christians” in Genesis than just about anywhere else or in any other time: “These patriarchs are saints in the true sense of the word,” Luther writes, and “in comparison with them we are altogether nothing.”<sup>5</sup>

The chief reason Luther finds Genesis so handy for talking about saintliness, even of the Christian variety, is that it has something the New Testament doesn't: narratives of the whole human life span in its ordinary course. The Gospels and Acts focus on nonrepresentative figures at the moment of cosmic *kairos*—but, by definition, that isn't the usual state of affairs, and not terribly helpful to those of us who live outside the *kairos* moment. “Christ and John the Baptist are beyond comparison,” Luther admits, and so were the apostles. “But,” he points out, “all these had a short span of life. Abraham, however, lived for a long time and did

<sup>1</sup> For just one example of many, he mentions approvingly “the saintly maidens Agatha, Lucia, and many others” in Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–), 8:255.

<sup>2</sup> Among others, Leonhard Kaiser and the Antwerp martyrs.

<sup>3</sup> See the excellent and thorough study by Sherry Elaine Jordan, “The Patriarchs and Matriarchs as Saints in Luther's Lectures on Genesis,” PhD diss., Yale University, 1995. Mickey Leland Mattox focuses more specifically on the women in his “*Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*”: *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesim, 1535–1545* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2003), which illuminatingly sets Luther's exegesis alongside that of medieval and other sixteenth-century interpreters.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Kaufmann discusses thoughtfully and insightfully the double-edged sword of this approach in Luther—and indeed in all of Christianity: claiming the Old Testament as Scripture for the Christian faith also means acknowledging the inescapable rootedness of Jesus's ministry, cross, and resurrection in Israel and its faith, and thereby avoids and rejects Marcionite and other supersessionist heresies. On the other hand, conviction that the Old Testament foreshadows, anticipates, and elucidates who Jesus was and what he did can easily lead to condemnation of Jews who believe in the God of Israel but not in Jesus the Christ, to the point of accusing them of willful blindness and even demonizing them, a precedent for which treatment was already set in the New Testament. There is no easy solution to this, though the goal ought to be both full-throated Christian recognition of the Old Testament as holy Scripture and full-throated repudiation of the long Christian habit of despising Jews, real or imagined. Just how to manage that should be among the most urgent Christian tasks for today. This essay, deliberating taking up the notorious Luther's admiration of Old Testament Jews, is a self-conscious effort in that direction. See Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> LW 5:90.

many wonderful deeds besides. Therefore, he is rightly considered the chief of all the saints.”<sup>6</sup> It’s as if Luther were saying: Try making it into your *hundreds* still holy, and then we can talk about sanctification.

This notion of the normal span of the human life is central to Luther’s thought on the saints. And it derives directly from his close reading of the Genesis text. What does Genesis talk about? There’s a lot about: cattle, breeding goats, planting crops, getting from here to there and back again. Marriage and giving in marriage. Conceiving and bearing children—both good and bad ways to go about getting that done. Meals are eaten and wine is drunk. Households are managed. “I do not always pray,” Luther remarks, “nor do I always meditate on the Law of the Lord and struggle continually with sin, death, and the devil; but I put on my clothes, I sleep, I play with the children, eat, drink, etc.”<sup>7</sup> Is this *religion*?

You may be thinking—aha, Luther’s doctrine of vocation! The everyday business of life is blessed! True, to an extent; but it is easy to overinflate Luther’s doctrine of vocation, better to suit twenty-first-century tastes. We demand *meaningful work that makes the world a better place*, and preferably on a grand scale—a function of privilege if ever there was one. That’s not the point Luther’s after here. It’s still too “religious” in the human sense of the word.

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Luther puts the issue, rather, like this: “One can ask why the Holy Spirit mentions such trifling, childish, slavish, womanish, worldly, and carnal things concerning most saintly [people] who have very clear promises—[all those] things they have in common with any other godless [person]. Why does [the Spirit] not write about other things—things that are weightier and more sublime? For of what importance is the fact that they had to sweat while occupying themselves with these sordid household affairs? I reply: ‘Let the wicked man be removed, lest he see the glory of God’ (cf. Is 26:10). God hides His saints under such masks and carnal matters in order that nothing may seem to be more abject than they.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> LW 2:399.

<sup>7</sup> LW 6:180.

<sup>8</sup> LW 7:310–11.

## THE BODIES OF THE SAINTS

To put it another way: This ordinary stuff of life *is* the life in and of God. Eating, drinking, going to the bathroom, the sweat and blood of child-making and child-bearing, building a shelter, tending animals: it is all the work of God the Creator. Believing and living the doctrine of creation means simply to *be a body* to the glory of God. Luther's teaching on sainthood is first and foremost a vindication of bodily life. Not theoretically but "fleshily," in all the real stuff that bodies experience, do, and suffer. He comments, "Even though these works do not have the appearance of sanctity, one remains in good standing even when one does these things. For we observe that God did not consider it beneath His dignity to have these seemingly unimportant and paltry works recorded in His book."<sup>9</sup>

It's important to recognize that Luther is not romanticizing bodily life or offering a kind of saccharine blessing on obedience to physical needs and impulses. Bodily life is also sinful life because *human* life is sinful life. It is good, however, because God made, redeems, and covers it; its sinfulness can be covered with righteousness. "Although marriage is an unclean kind of life because the copulation of the man and the woman cannot take place without carnal uncleanness, tending cattle is a filthy business, and the life of the government and of subjects is highly impure and abounds in vices . . . nevertheless God has richly honored all this and has ordained it in His Word. And if you hold fast to the Word, you have already been cleansed of all your uncleanness."<sup>10</sup>

## THE EMOTIONS OF THE SAINTS

The saint's bodily life has a complement, in Luther's way of thinking: the saint's emotional life. Every bit as much as it is a vindication of bodily life, Luther's teaching on sainthood is a vindication of emotional life. Another truism is that Luther rejected the scholastic notion that "grace does not destroy but perfects nature"—feared to be a spurious claim for creaturely independence and potential apart from God. But in his hagiographical revision of the doctrine of sanctification, Luther concedes the point while making it entirely his own: grace as the gift of holiness does not destroy human emotions any more than it destroys human bodies.<sup>11</sup>

Holiness is not emotionless. "The Holy Spirit," Luther asserts, "does not make trunks and irrational human beings out of people when He pours faith into them. No, He preserves and increases whatever good there is in nature; He preserves and increases fatherly, filial affections, etc."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *LW* 2:350.

<sup>10</sup> *LW* 5:4.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in *LW* 4:37: "God does not change nature in the saints, nor does He destroy their affections." *LW* 7:305: "The natural affections, which produce this grief and sorrow, remain in the saints, and . . . God is the author not of the destruction of nature but of its healing."

<sup>12</sup> *LW* 7:305.

If anything, Luther is arguing, where grace abounds, emotions abound too. Affections are intense and impassioned! The saints are “unsettled and carried away by their affections,”<sup>13</sup> Luther says; “not blocks of wood and devoid of feeling; but they are human beings, and the emotions and affections implanted in human nature are present in them to a higher degree than they are in others.”<sup>14</sup> “For the saintlier one is and the more intimately one knows God, the more one understands the creatures and is attached to them.”<sup>15</sup>

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Abraham, for example, overflowed with “inexpressible groans, sighs, sobs, and fatherly tears.”<sup>16</sup> Luther makes a huge deal out of the passing remark in Genesis 35:8 that Rebekah’s nurse, Deborah, died and was buried under an oak below Bethel, to which Jacob gave a special name. Luther praises Jacob’s tears over the loss of “this saintly woman.”<sup>17</sup> And Joseph is moved in his very bowels with compassion for his rotten, treacherous brothers.<sup>18</sup> The Holy Spirit loves the tender-hearted, Luther tells us. And even the emotion of anger has its place, if rightly used, as Jesus shows us.<sup>19</sup>

As with the body, this is not to romanticize the impulsive or the melodramatic or the hysterical. “Since these emotions have been corrupted by original sin,” Luther sagely observes, “one must then see to it that they are corrected.”<sup>20</sup> In human society we “learn to curb and subdue the sins of lust, wrath, and similar emotions, and in this way to use wrath and sexual desire in the proper manner, so that pride, ambition, hatred, lust, etc. are purged out. But this cannot be done without great toil and grief. Therefore, one sees in the saints not only that human nature is created this way with its emotions, which the Holy Spirit does not extinguish; but one also sees weakness and corruption, against which they fight constantly, like men standing in readiness for battle. They take pains to slay their depraved emotions.”<sup>21</sup>

But not to slay emotions as such. “See how great the power of nature is,” Luther says. “The better and purer it is, the more excellent and ardent are its natural

<sup>13</sup> LW 4:19.

<sup>14</sup> LW 4:112.

<sup>15</sup> LW 4:195.

<sup>16</sup> LW 4:108.

<sup>17</sup> LW 6:253.

<sup>18</sup> LW 7:340, 343.

<sup>19</sup> LW 7:262.

<sup>20</sup> LW 7:262.

<sup>21</sup> LW 7:262–63.

affections. Nor do grace and the Holy Spirit remove or corrupt it . . . but the Holy Spirit heals it and restores it to a healthy state when it has been corrupted.”<sup>22</sup>

### THE SINS OF THE SAINT

At this point, the spiritually aspirational may object that hardly anything, then, sets Christians apart from others—whether unbelievers or adherents of other faiths. Luther concedes that: “The saints are not always impelled by the prompting of the Holy Spirit,” he says. “They have their desires and afflictions just as everybody else does. Therefore they, too, engage in ordinary pursuits: they sow, plow, build, etc. Reason and diligence are adequate for doing these things; and although the ungodly, too, do similar things, nevertheless, in the case of the godly, these things are pleasing to God because of the faith in which the godly live.”<sup>23</sup> Luther remarks that the most surprising thing about the saints of Genesis is that “in the kind of life involving the management of a household they had absolutely no unusual or special semblance of saintliness!”<sup>24</sup>

Should this make us a little uneasy again? Is being a Christian really nothing other than being a good parent, worker, or citizen?

Indeed, if saintliness were defined from below, from a human perspective, it would be very hard to draw that line—and perhaps that’s all to the good. But Luther’s intention was never to define sainthood behaviorally anyway. So far, he has simply excluded the notion that sainthood by definition cannot coexist with, for example, being a farmer, making love to one’s spouse, wrangling a defiant toddler, having a nice breakfast, or grieving over a dead parent.

But doing these things is not the constitutive quality of sainthood: it is the constitutive quality of *humanity*, created by God, in whom the holiness of God intends to do battle against sin.

What then sets the saint apart? “In all ages God has done great things and wonderful works through His saints. These works are impressive and strike the eye; but for us who teach as well as learn the Holy Scriptures, *God’s own utterance* must be especially resplendent. This, above all, adorns the legends of the saints and distinguishes them from the accounts of the heathen. They are called ‘sacred’ accounts because *the Word of God shines in them.*”<sup>25</sup>

In short, a saint is someone to whom the Word of God has been addressed.

Abraham lies, Jacob deceives, Joseph brags—not attractive qualities in any of them. On *behavioral* grounds they are surely disqualified. In fact, one of the most distinctive qualities of Luther’s teaching on the saints is how often he stresses the *sins* of the saints! To be a saint is not to be perfect, as popular usage has it. “Even

<sup>22</sup> LW 7:340.

<sup>23</sup> LW 3:320.

<sup>24</sup> LW 4:332.

<sup>25</sup> LW 2:351.

the greatest saints sometimes fall,<sup>26</sup> Luther insists, and their sins are not to be excused, as if somehow negligible on account of being saints.<sup>27</sup>

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But again, this is because sainthood is not defined primarily from the human side. Humans are sinners; saints are humans; ergo, saints sin. *But to the saints God has spoken*, and this is what draws our attention to them, our interest and our honor. "We teach," says Luther, "—and this should be diligently and frequently impressed—that in the examples of the saintly fathers it should be looked upon as the main thing and the highest commendation that God spoke with them and that they had the Word of God."<sup>28</sup>

#### GOD'S ADDRESS TO THE SAINTS

Now this might sound pretty discouraging to the believer seeking life in God today. Easy for them, back in Ur of the Chaldeans or up on Mount Moriah! God showed up, or sent an angel, or spoke in a great big Orson Welles kind of voice from the sky. I could be a saint, too, if God did that for me!

But here's where Luther catches us off guard again. To be sure, there is something unique and irreplaceable about these scriptural accounts of encountering God, which test and shape all that we say about God ever after. But Luther *rejects* the notion of earthquake-and-lightning theophany. He *rejects* the big scary voice from the clouds. Luther historicizes the Word of God by placing it on human lips. Once humans have been expelled from the Garden, they hear God's Word *from each other*.

Astonishingly enough, Luther takes every instance in Genesis of "thus spake the Lord" and attributes it to a human actor as a medium or relay. Adam was thus the first preacher of the church: he was the one to confront Cain over Abel's murder. When Adam returned to the earth from which he came, Noah's son Shem took up the torch; and on it went. Melchizedek spoke the Word of God to Abram.

<sup>26</sup> LW 2:167.

<sup>27</sup> LW 5:25–26.

<sup>28</sup> LW 5:3.

Luther, not incidentally, put into Melchizedek's mouth as good a summary as any of his own view of divine and human agency: "Abram, [says Melchizedek,] you have done great things; but God did them through you. This victory must be ascribed, not to you but to God, the Possessor of heaven and earth.' [And] Abram gladly heard that the glory of this achievement was being transferred from him to its true Author."<sup>29</sup>

What's the effect of Luther's historicizing of the Word of God? For our purposes, it's that the saints of the Old Testament are not in a chronologically privileged position over against us. They don't have an advantage we lack—as if we were some kind of secret dispensationalists who had to resign ourselves to God's permanent hiddenness.

God has always spoken through *preachers*, Luther insists. He did then. He does now. Preachers learn to recognize the Word of God through the written Scripture, which they receive from their forebears and wrestle with and fight against and defer to; then they speak this Word to the people living now: "You are the man!" or "Nor do I condemn you; go forth and sin no more!" or "For freedom Christ has set you free!" or "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!"

Hear those words of God and you, too, may become a saint.

#### THE GAME GOD PLAYS WITH HIS SAINTS

Saints are those to whom the Word of God is addressed. But this is not simply a transfer of data, a divine download. The Word of God is definitely not neutral, a take-it-or-leave-it affair. God does not ask you to do something and then leave it up to you and your cooperativeness; God gets right in there and mucks around in your life.

Much of the time, this is not a comfortable thing. Luther even gives it an uncomfortable name: the "game" God plays with His saints. You'll come to see, Luther says, that "your life is a game played by God, that all you do and suffer is pleasing to Him, provided that it is done in faith, and that finally death itself is precious in the sight of the Lord (Ps 116:15). For we see that God took delight in the lives and all the actions of the patriarchs."<sup>30</sup>

And how does this game unfold? Luther again:

God places His own under the cross; and although He delays their deliverance, nevertheless in the end He gloriously snatches them out of their dangers and makes them victors, but only after they have first been greatly vexed and have been wearied to despair by sundry conflicts. To be aware of this divine procedure with which God rules us is profitable and necessary. Thus, we learn to show patience in adversity, to trust in God's goodness, and to hope for salvation, but in prosperity

<sup>29</sup> LW 2:392.

<sup>30</sup> LW 7:357.



to humble ourselves and give the glory to God. For it is His custom to do both: to bring down to hell and to bring back, to afflict and to comfort, to kill and to make alive. This is the game, with its continual changes, that He plays with His saints.<sup>31</sup>

The supreme example of this is in the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Luther comments, “The chief significance of this story, then, is the example of perfect saints and of temptations in high degree, not against flesh, blood, the devil, and a good angel[,] but against God appearing in hostile form.”<sup>32</sup>

Note well, this is not because God is arbitrary or sadistic. “It is God’s will that precautions be taken against both courses,” Luther explains, “that we should not be proud according to the flesh and not despair according to the spirit but that we should proceed by the middle way between sorrow and joy, between boasting and disgrace.”<sup>33</sup> The reason for this so-called “game” is because God is not a principle or a theory or a formula to be mastered—any more than we are. God is personal, God is Three Persons, interacting with us personally, in all the complex ways that personal relationships unfold.

And all the more so when the relationship is between the creating, almighty Father who sends forth His Son and His Spirit, on the one hand, and us mortal sinners, on the other. “You cannot see My face, but you shall see My back,” God says to Moses in Exodus; and Hagar says of God, “I have seen the back of Him who sees me.” For Luther, these two examples are not just metaphors but reveal the very substance of how the saints interact with God. To be a saint is to suffer—first and foremost, *to suffer God*. Luther explains: “It is more useful for us to be driven and led by God than to act, understand, foresee, and arrange things according to our own plans. Our suffering is the saintliest life of all. Thus, therefore, in one moment they have been driven headlong from heaven into hell, from life into death.”<sup>34</sup>

#### FOR US AND FOR OUR SANCTIFICATION

And yet, Luther urges us to take comfort in the stories of the saints. They show us that troubles and weakness are not alien to the experience of holiness but are right at the center of it.<sup>35</sup> The saints don’t know everything all at once by some miracle but share in the universal human experience of striving toward knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Sainthood is not a steady trajectory of victory but a better acquaintance with death. Luther waxes eloquent on the death of the Sarah, “that most saintly matriarch,” as he calls her, “in comparison with whom we are nothing.” And yet, for all her holiness, her death “differs in no wise from our own death but was just

<sup>31</sup> LW 2:369.

<sup>32</sup> LW 6:134.

<sup>33</sup> LW 6:180.

<sup>34</sup> LW 7:362.

<sup>35</sup> LW 3:52; 3:264.

<sup>36</sup> LW 4:376.

as odious and ignominious. . . . [The saints'] bodies were buried, consumed by worms, and hidden in the earth on account of their stench . . . yet they were most saintly people, and, although departed, they are actually alive in Christ."<sup>37</sup>

For another example, David's conquest of Goliath doesn't do me much good—truth be told, I'm not often called upon to topple giants—but David's "weakness, sins, trepidation, and trials," his "complaints, sobs, fears, and feelings of despair": these "buoy me up in a wonderful manner," Luther says, "and give great consolation."<sup>38</sup> In Luther's view, God permitted the saints to sin and fail precisely so we can see how God forgives and renews the lost, sinful, stubborn, and weak.<sup>39</sup>

To riff off Luther's melody here: If we are made saints by God's address of the Word to us, then becoming holy is something like learning a language. We start out unable to utter a single word, but as others speak to us, we listen. In time we imitate them, first their sounds, then their words and phrases. After a while we try forming our own sentences. We make lots of errors as we go, but that's no cause for shame—it's simply part of the process. If we want to become proficient, we must keep on listening to fluent speakers who model the language for us, show us the breadth of its possibilities, and correct our mistakes. In this shared language, in which so many before us have expressed themselves, we too can add our own words. What will we say? We will do well if we repeat the classics that have shaped so many others. But we may also dare in time to add to the shared repository of speech. The saints are those who become poets: poets of holiness.

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To this Luther poses one final twist. The saints are only secondarily poets. They are first of all *poems*. As he puts it: "Such is the nature of God's poems, as Paul neatly says in Eph. 2:10: 'We are His ποιήματα.' God is the Poet, and we are the verses or songs He writes."<sup>40</sup> ⊕

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<sup>37</sup> LW 4:189.

<sup>38</sup> LW 5:24.

<sup>39</sup> LW 4:377; 7:11.

<sup>40</sup> LW 7:366.