



Luther in Front of the Text: The Genesis Commentary

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When Luther finished his lectures on Genesis, which had lasted for about a decade, he deferred to commentators to follow: “This is now the dear Genesis,” he said. “God grant that after me others will do better.”¹

Some recent commentators may have provided the answer to Luther’s prayer. Both Gerhard von Rad and Claus Westermann have produced more historically oriented commentaries that at the same time open up the text for preachers. Theirs are considered magisterial works.²

This said, there is still reason to examine Luther’s work with Genesis. Beginning in 1535 and continuing until close to his death, Luther gave extended attention to the narrative. Though he sometimes appears historically naive, to listen to Luther’s comments on Eve, Jacob, and the others is to move into an imaginative world in which the people of the story come to life both personally and theologically.

Living in an age that seems to resemble a tale told by an idiot and serving in a church recently described as having lost its story,³ reading Luther’s commentary is like walking into another world—one in which the narrative still functions with power to illuminate daily life. This commentary is extraordinarily helpful for preachers, showing how the narrative becomes effective both in the pulpit and in the larger life of the community of faith.

¹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, vol. 8 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966) 333; *Luther's Works* hereafter cited as LW.

²Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981-84).

³Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* 36 (October 1993) 19ff.

Before examining the commentary’s gift, however, we need to address some preliminary questions: first, an historical problem with the original editing of Luther’s lectures; second, given the fanciful character of some of Luther’s reconstructions, his method of interpretation. After considering these matters, we will consider the narrative itself.

THE TEXT OF THE COMMENTARY

Over fifty years ago, Peter Meinhold, a German Luther scholar, provided a comprehensive analysis of the Genesis commentary, raising substantial evidence of theological alterations in its final editing.⁴ A review of Meinhold’s analysis, taken in conjunction with further consideration of the commentary’s treatment of law, confirms that the altered readings touch on some of the most important aspects of the Lutheran dialectic. Because of this editing, Luther’s

commentary must be used in a measured way, particularly regarding theological issues that later became matters of dispute in the Lutheran community.

As in several of Luther's commentaries, his original treatment of Genesis came in lectures that were transcribed by his students. The man most responsible for the final form of the transcription was Viet Dietrich, who was also involved in a more minor way in the transcription of the lectures that became, after Luther's review, the great Galatians commentary of 1535. Luther did not take such a second look at the work on Genesis.

Tracing Dietrich's development as a theologian, Meinhold demonstrates that he, like most of the younger Wittenberg theologians of the 1530s and '40s, was critically influenced by Melanchthon's proposed revisions of the earlier Lutheran dialectic.⁵ Meinhold tracks what he identifies as the footprints of a foreign theology in the commentary, showing the influence of Dietrich and the editors on matters like the word and faith, law and gospel, the work of Christ, and so forth. It is clear, Meinhold argues, that the lectures have been edited to enlist Luther's authority in support of the theological revisions Melanchthon was espousing in the 1540s.⁶

Two additional factors support Meinhold's analysis. One involves some of Luther's discussion of law in the commentary; the other, more recent scholarship concerning Melanchthon's theological developments.

Luther was in the midst of the Genesis lectures when the antinomian strife reopened. Conflict between Melanchthon and Johann Agricola on the place of the law in the church had surfaced in the summer of 1528. Agricola joined the theological faculty in Wittenberg in 1536. Soon after his arrival, anonymous documents circulated in the city arguing that the law belongs in the courthouse, not in the church. Luther challenged Agricola on the issue, and, beginning in 1537, they faced off in a series of six disputations that remain Luther's most important statements on the doctrine of law.

⁴Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936).

⁵Ibid., 44-52.

⁶Ibid., 370-428.

When Luther's arguments in the Antinomian Disputations are compared with some of his statements in the Genesis commentary, differences appear immediately. One is a simple matter of chronology—the Genesis lectures from the summer of 1535 refer to an issue that didn't arise between Luther and Agricola until 1536.⁷

But more significantly, there is a critical alteration in the dialectic used repeatedly by Luther in his own later argument with Agricola. In the fifth Antinomian Disputation (theses 40 and 41), Luther argues from two poles: first, "insofar as Christ is raised in us, so far are we without the law, sin, and death"; second, "insofar as he truly is not yet raised in us, so far are we under the law, sin, and death."⁸ In the Genesis commentary, the first pole is rejected as a sign of antinomianism, the dialectic being smoothed out in a characteristically Melanchthonian way.⁹

Luther and Melanchthon were agreed, against Agricola, that the law had to be proclaimed to believers as well as unbelievers. But the end of the law as an actual cessation of its power in the conscience, so important to Luther in classical statements like the Galatians commentary and the Antinomian Disputations, has been severely qualified in the Genesis commentary, as it was in Melanchthon's contemporaneous work.¹⁰

A second external support for Meinhold's analysis comes from more recent scholarship. Clemens Bauer has demonstrated that in the early 1540s Melanchthon began a programmatic reappraisal of his prior understanding of the law, one that led to critical theological readjustments.¹¹

Summarizing the changes, Melanchthon attempted to base the eschatologically oriented biblical theology of Luther on the Aristotelian, substantialist ontology that Luther had rejected. He further attempted to revise the earlier Lutheran argument in a direction that he believed would make it more socially productive, emphasizing personal moral reform. Matters like the nature of the law, the bondage of the will, the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament, repentance, and faith all became issues for Melanchthon and his students. The subsequent theological battles on these and other questions were finally settled in the Formula of Concord, which rejected Melanchthon's modifications while at the same time carrying forward his theological method.¹²

⁷LW 1:107.

⁸WA 39.1:356.

⁹LW 1:109f.

¹⁰Clyde L. Manschreck, tr. and ed., *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555* (New York: Oxford University, 1965) 196ff.; compare Library of Christian Classics 19:120-130. Though published later, the 1555 *Loci* is consistent with the editions of the 1540s; it is inconsistent with the 1521 and earlier editions of the *Loci* where the end of the law is a significant emphasis.

¹¹Clemens Bauer, "Melanchthons Naturrechtslehre," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 42 (1951) 64-91; cf. also Lauri Haikola, "A Comparison of Melanchthon's and Luther's Doctrine of Justification," *dialog* 2/2 (Winter 1963) 31 ff., for an assessment of the critical importance of assumptions concerning the law in Lutheran dialectics.

¹²The best introduction to the differences between Luther and Melanchthon, and their significance, is in Vilmos Vajta, ed., *Luther and Melanchthon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962); see also Franz Hildebrandt, *Melanchthon: Alien or Ally?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1946).

It has been important to examine these arguments, if only briefly, because of Jaroslav Pelikan's underestimation of Meinhold's significance in his preface to the American Edition of the Genesis commentary. There is no doubt that making Luther's work available to English-speaking readers was a major contribution. But Pelikan, apparently concerned that Meinhold's analysis cast doubt on the value of his work, caricatured Meinhold's analysis as "profound skepticism" and sought to limit the force of the argument to only the most peripheral matters—astrology and the like.¹³ The tendentiousness of Pelikan's treatment is self-evident.

In summary, the Genesis commentary, in both the Weimar and American editions, is a compromised text. It was edited by Dietrich and his colleagues to use Luther's authority in support of Melanchthon's theological emendations. Consequently, it must be used very judiciously, particularly on those matters where the Philippists, as they were later called, found it necessary to make changes. The commentary can be safely used to illustrate or to amplify; in matters that remained uncontroverted in the Lutheran community, there would be no pressing reason for Dietrich and company to make revisions. But the text of the commentary cannot stand alone, as does Luther's work on Galatians or his earlier considerations of biblical texts. For example, the outstanding discussion of predestination in Luther's consideration of Gen 26:9 would have to be interpreted in light of the *Bondage of the Will* rather than vice versa.¹⁴

II. LUTHER'S INTERPRETIVE METHOD

Luther's work with the Old Testament raises questions about his method. In his first lectures on the Psalms, begun in 1513, he literally found Christ everywhere present; in the Genesis commentary, though he goes about it differently, Luther still clearly assumes an historic continuity in the gospel. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, along with Seth and other lesser known figures, emerge in the commentary looking like early Lutheran preachers. The text may appear to have become pretext, leading readers to wonder whether there is any discipline at all.

The question of method can be addressed at two levels, one theological, the other historical.

Theologically, Luther would undoubtedly be surprised by the questioning of Christ's presence in the Old Testament. This is a modern problem, the result of a rigidly chronological, sequential, developmental understanding of time. In this view—a bequest of the enlightenment—Jesus of Nazareth simply could not be present in books written before his birth. He wasn't around yet.¹⁵

The notion of prophecy as foretelling, a somewhat more historical way of drawing a connection between ages, also becomes problematic under modern assumptions about time. Whatever people claim to know of the future comes under the suspicion of being after-the-fact projection.

¹³LW 1:xi.

¹⁴LW 5:42-50.

¹⁵The definitive analysis of Luther's treatment of the Old Testament is still Heinrich Bornkamm's *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

As a pre-enlightenment commentator, Luther was not so troubled. He was an apocalypticist who understood himself to stand at the brink of time, in the face of Christ's impending return, the last stage in a progression of development. This conviction is sufficient by itself to make time seem inter-connected.

But the most important presupposition for Luther's assumption of the presence in the Old Testament of the gospel, as a specific word about Christ, is the doctrine of the Trinity with its assertion of Christ's pre-existence. When the Old Testament is interpreted in a trinitarian perspective, Jesus of Nazareth—the crucified and risen Christ—doesn't have to be found there; rather, the second person of the Trinity is as continuously present as the Father and the Holy Spirit. For the three persons are inseparable—where the one is, the others are also.

When and if time became a problem under this trinitarian assumption, the notion of prophecy quickly resolved it. Once again, Luther's apocalypticism intensified a prior conviction of the church, going all the way back to the New Testament, that the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ were all prophetically foretold. Convinced he was on the edge of time, Luther was equally sure that he could see all the way back to the beginning. Everything that preceded Christ's original coming, as everything that now precedes his return, would be preparatory.

So with the church's tradition, Luther took Gen 3:15, what has been called the "proto-evangelion," as the original promise of the gospel. God comforted Adam and Eve in the face of their sin by promising to send his own son as the seed that would crush the serpent's heel.

Confident that God would bring such a gospel promise to Adam and Eve, Luther was equally sure they would treasure it, passing it on to their family who would in turn speak it themselves.¹⁶ What appears plainly imaginary to an historically conscious, contemporary reader has for Luther quite a matter of fact basis. It is just plain common sense, informed by the gospel.

There is an historical dimension to Luther's interpretation, however, one that frees the Old Testament from what might appear to be Christian imposition to speak on its own terms. It is this shift, evident in Luther's later work with the texts, which made him a principal in the recovery of the Old Testament in the church.¹⁷

From the time of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, some of the earliest commentators, formal interpretation of the Old Testament was set up on the distinction of letter and spirit. Using Paul's statement in 2 Cor 3:6, the church equated the letter with the literal meaning of the Old Testament, employing allegory to bring it to an appropriately spiritual and therefore life-giving level of significance.

In the medieval church, the letter/spirit distinction was taken over in the quadriga, or four-fold method of interpretation, whereby meaning was subdivided into literal, spiritual, anagogical, and tropological senses so that the doctrinal, eschatological, and moral implications of the texts could be isolated. The

¹⁶LW 1:191; 6:227.

¹⁷Wai-Shing Chau, "The Letter and the Spirit: A History of the Interpretation from Origen to Luther" (Th.D. diss., Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, 1990) 262ff.

literal meaning had the approximate value of a golf tee.

Luther's apocalypticism was one of the critical factors in breaking the letter/spirit scheme and thereby freeing the Old Testament into a more historical dimension. Leaving behind the ontological equations of the prior interpretative tradition, whereby the letter equals the flesh and the spirit the soul, Luther moved to the distinction of law and gospel.

Law and gospel are not, as stereotypically misunderstood, a way of speaking of the Old Testament and New as literary forms. Nor is there merely a grammatical distinction, dividing imperatives from indicatives. Rather, law and gospel are two different ways in which God rules. The law is anything that restrains or drives, be it legislative, literary, or the imaginings provoked by fright. Through the law, God holds the world in order for the promise, and drives to it. The gospel is the specific word of grace in Christ which comforts, bringing peace and joy to a conscience smitten by the law. Through the gospel, God gives what the law demands, freeing a person for this life and the life to come.

Though his research was keyed to Luther's work on Psalms, James Samuel Preus's analysis works as well with the Genesis commentary. Preus argues that, following his interpretive shift, Luther saw the community of the Old Testament as parallel to the church. Both are eschatologically oriented communities: the people of the Old Testament awaited the messiah just as the people of the New Testament now await the return of the messiah.¹⁸

Thus the community of the patriarchs in Genesis and the community of the faithful gathered in Wittenberg by the word share a number of common characteristics. Both live in a realm of law, battered by the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Both have heard a word of promise that has given them hope and the confidence of faith in the face of difficulties. Both

communities experience tension as they struggle under the law, awaiting the realization of the gospel.

In a certain sense, Luther's work with Genesis could, therefore, be called historical. That term is most commonly used to refer to the factual representation of the past; but it may also be used to speak of the particularity, the down-to-earthness of present existence. This latter sense applies to Luther's commentary. He is not nearly as interested in the world behind the text, the context which has so absorbed modern scholarship, as he is in the world in front of it, so to speak.

The world in front of the text is the one where the people in the narrative as well as those in subsequent history, including our own time, must live—the historical world of everyday realities. It is the realm of law into which the gospel enters as an alien word, bespeaking righteousness and bringing forth the freedom that is the hallmark of the new age. The test of interpretation for Luther is not the theoretical re-construction of what the text originally meant; rather, it is the opening of the text to the hearers as a word in which Christ is brought home, enabling life amid the hard particularities of present-day historical life. For such a purpose, Luther will use the

¹⁸James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1969) 212-225.

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historical data available to him and even allegory if he finds it necessary.

III. THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

For preachers, Luther's approach to Genesis is at its greatest strength just where current biblical criticism is at its weakest—in ferreting out the way the text addresses the hearer. Here Luther's use of the text shows the way biblical narrative has functioned in the past and should once again, as the church seeks to recover its story.

The best way to see the strength of Luther's work with the text is to follow him through the traces, reading along as he develops his comments on particular people or situations in the narrative. The fact that the commentary covers eight volumes of the American Edition may make that task seem a little daunting—a sabbatical project—but it is well worth the required investment; the people in the narrative come to life, demonstrating the freshness and pertinence of the text. Two examples are Luther's treatment of Eve and Jacob.

Taking up the story of the fall, Luther argues that Adam and Eve were created for faith and lived in it until the devil led them from faith in God's word to faith in their own believing. "And this also reveals Satan's cunning," Luther writes. "He does not immediately try to allure Eve by means of the loveliness of the fruit. He first attacks man's greatest strength, faith in the word. Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God."¹⁹

Describing how this drawing away took place, Luther writes:

the pattern of all the temptations of Satan is the same, namely, that he first puts faith to trial and draws away from the Word. Then follow the sins against the Second Table. From our own experience we perceive that this is his procedure. The events which now follow deal with the description of sin: what its nature is

when it is active, and what it is later on when it lies in the past. For while it is active it is not felt; otherwise we would be warned and draw back. But because these lie hidden, we proceed smugly to the deed itself after we have forsaken our uprightness and faith. Eve trespassed similarly in the instance of the fruit after she had been persuaded, contrary to the Word of God, that she would not die.²⁰

Moved from faith in the word to faith in their own faith, Adam and Eve have literally no one to whom they can turn. They are left hanging. The original sin is enthusiasm, a god-within-ism that assumes itself in possession of the promise and thereby attempts to propel itself beyond all earthly limit. Seeking to transcend itself, it gets stuck with itself. It only wakes up to what has happened after the fact, when there is no alternative.

Luther's treatment of Jacob is equally revealing. As Luther moves through the narrative, the personality of Jacob emerges from the text with power and dimension. His call and his suffering are examined with a depth of compassion and understanding that is deeply moving.

For when [Jacob's] household was in a most disturbed condition and full of great

¹⁹LW 1:162.

²⁰LW 1:163.

disasters and the worries by which we have heard that the saintly patriarch was afflicted, not so much on account of the enmity of his brother and injuries from his father-in-law, which he overcame with great courage, unconquerable faith, and wonderful patience, as on account of his domestic afflictions, Dinah's defilement, and the deaths of his nurse Deborah and his wife Rachel, and finally on account of the unspeakable incest of his son, who polluted the paternal couch—in these great difficulties, his one hope and comfort in old age and in troubles remained in the firstborn son of his deceased wife, Joseph, who with his piety and saintly life in one way or another healed and encouraged the sick heart of his father. Suddenly and unexpectedly he is also removed, so that the unhappy father after the loss of his dearest wife is also deprived of the son who was especially beloved.²¹

Jacob's experience, Luther's, that of Luther's hearers, and our own come together here in patterns of life recognizable to all. Yet in the midst of such troubled patterns, Jacob remains a person of deep faith: "but he nevertheless retains hope and confidence with wonderful constancy."²² As such, he and the source of his hope offer consolation and solace to all.

No doubt, according to the strict historicism of our own day, Luther's reconstructions may appear tendentious. It sometimes seems as though Luther and Jacob had had a beer together the night before the lecture, talking over their family difficulties. Yet Luther's interpretation makes a direct connection between the text and the hearer, pulling together the common features of living amid conflict under the promise of the cross and the resurrection.

This is precisely the point where the historicism of much contemporary biblical work fails. Assuming a critical connection between the context and the text, it attempts scholarly reconstruction of the world in which the text was originally written, as often as not losing itself in

obscurantist detail with only the remotest possible connection with the hearer. The preacher who follows this kind of scholarship into what can at best be the scholar's historically informed projection about what the ancient world must have been, gets marooned there, all connections between the world of the text and the world of the contemporary hearer cut off by academic rules of evidence or claims of historicity.

It is no wonder that those who work the historical method most conscientiously complain of finding themselves with piles of notes and nothing to say. And it's no surprise either, in view of this situation, that lots of preachers appear to have simply given up on exegetical preaching, as though they were more capable of making contact with their congregations than the biblical word.

Luther interprets by a different standard, one about which he is very clear. "Christ is the Lord of the Scripture," he wrote to Erasmus, another scholar who insisted on the obscurity of the text and consequently the necessity of imposed interpretation, "take Christ out of them and what do you have left?"²³ Unabash-

²¹LW 6:312.

²²LW 6:313.

²³J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, trs., *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1957) 71.

edly, without apology or capitulation to literalism, Luther reads the text for how law or gospel or both law and gospel are set forth, prioritizing the promise and the gifts it bestows.

Luther then takes the narrative for what it already demonstrates, the junctions between the word and human experience. In the stories, the hearer has a dramatic account of how law and gospel intersect with the conscience, bringing about repentance and faith. Thus it is a short step from the narrative to the pulpit. The story line provides a ready-made sermon outline; points of pinch and release for the characters of the narrative provide immediate suggestions as to where the text is most likely to expose and/or bless the contemporary hearer. The narrative in effect introduces a meeting point between the world of the text and the world of the hearer where it is possible to rub shoulders in common experience.

In a recent essay, Robert W. Jenson offers a brilliant analysis of how narrative has functioned for the church historically.²⁴ The narrative assumes a comprehensible world, Jenson argues, one to which the biblical story gives access. Set side by side, the biblical story and the hearer's story interact, the text interpreting the hearer so that the common experience of law and gospel—of struggle and hope, daily crucifixion and resurrection with Christ—makes sense to faith.

By extension, it could be argued that whereas doctrine distills theology in thetical form, narrative embodies the truth of the witness more discursively, dramatically, in the form of a story. As the story unfolds, the hearer begins to see its implications, not so much in a distilled, propositional statement as in the hearer's being taken up, included, interpreted. The world in front of the text, in its past and present forms, comes together.

For this reason, while preserving its heritage doctrinally and confessionally, the church has insisted that there be regular contact with the biblical narrative—in the gospel readings, most of all, but also in the lessons. As the story of Jesus is told, his life intersects with that of the

hearers. As Eve and Jacob, Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Peter appear in the stories, they become—as they are, should be, and must be—our biblical neighbors, whose story is also and at the same time our own.

This is the lasting value of Luther's commentary. No doubt, masters of contemporary methodology like von Rad and Westermann, with their historical and theological work, anchor the text more firmly in the particular and thereby open it to further examination. But Luther's work with Genesis also has something to offer. For as Jenson so persuasively argues, the narrative has provided the framework of comprehensibility within which preaching has functioned and to which it has referred for its authorization. For all of its violations of the canons of contemporary historical-critical approaches to the biblical text, Luther's own exploration of the narrative offers a model for a living conversation with the text in which the story line can be recovered.

²⁴See note 3.

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