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Mickey Mattox

Marquette University, mickey.mattox@marquette.edu

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications/Department of Theology

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Martin Luther: Student of the Creation

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Martin Luther, so the conventional wisdom says, was a "Pauline" theologian, the doctor of justification by grace through faith alone. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to learn that his work as professor of Bible was not centered in Paul, nor even in the New Testament.

Instead, he lectured mostly on the Old Testament, and for longer on Genesis than on any other book. In 1535, Luther took up Genesis and began a series of lectures that would continue until late 1545, only a few months before his death. In the original Latin, these lectures comprise some 2,200 pages, which are filled with Luther's theological insight and pastoral wisdom, as well as his trademark fire and bombast.

Luther as Exegete

In searching for the meaning of Genesis, Luther took for granted the theological convictions given in the Christian faith. The right understanding of the text requires that the reader put to work what she has learned through the proclamation of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit, he said, calls us to faith and so unites us to Christ, who opens up the way to the Father. Consequently, Luther's reading of Holy Scripture was Trinitarian and Christocentric from the outset. To put it

in his own terms, one can understand the words (*verba*) of Scripture only when one already knows the reality (*res*) to which they refer.

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Luther had also mastered the text in its original languages. In 1534, just before the Genesis lectures began, the first complete edition of the “Luther Bible” was published. Luther’s hermeneutical approach to the text, however, was informed by more than just grammar and philology. Exegesis since the days of Thomas Aquinas had been turning to the literal sense, embracing what has been called “the full spirituality of the letter.” In focusing his attention on the story level of the text, Luther did not reject this development. Instead, he extended it. His insistence on the plain sense of such texts as “this is my body,” for example, owes much to his training in late medieval philosophy.

In addition, Luther was well read in humanist rhetorical theory as it had been developed by such figures as Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Philip Melancthon. Luther’s doctrine of the Word of God was indebted to the rhetorical approach to truth developed by these Christian humanist scholars. He agreed with them, for example, that the oral proclamation of God’s Word has the Spirit-given power to move the human heart, and, just so, to change the mind. Only those whose hearts and minds have been so moved and changed are ready to interpret Holy Scripture.

Luther’s approach to the Bible, however, cannot be adequately described as either “scholastic” or “humanist,” because he brought so much more to the text. During his nearly two decades as an Augustinian friar, Luther had absorbed the monastic emphasis on humility in the presence of God. This humility informed his sense that the Christian exegete should adopt a posture of surrender, readily placing himself under the Word of God. Luther also eagerly appropriated the traditions of German mysticism, found in such sources as Johannes Tauler and the “German Theology.” A sense of mystical encounter informed Luther’s reading of the Bible. Scripture is a locus of divine self-disclosure, a place where the reader meets and experiences God. In addition, Luther attended to history. Convinced that human nature remains fundamentally unchanged since the days of Adam and Eve, he developed a “presentist” approach to biblical narrative, one that turned the stories of the Old Testament “saints” into textbook examples that showed how to live out the faith in times of testing. Prayerfully placing himself before the “mirror of Scripture,” he thought, the faithful reader comes to recognize the rhythms of judgement and grace in his own life. These recurrent rhythms unite the stories of the biblical saints with the lives of their post-biblical successors. This suggests a two-way relationship: Scripture interprets one’s experience, while one’s experience illuminates Scripture.

Soundings from Luther's Reading of Genesis 1-2

Two brief examples from Luther's reading of Genesis showcase his approach to the text. Following Christian tradition, Luther interpreted Genesis 1 as referring first to God the Father who created (1:1), next to the Spirit who brooded over the waters (1:2), and finally to the Word (the Father's co-eternal Son) who "said, let there be light" (1:3; cf. John 1:3). The conviction that the Word of God was the primary agent of creation combined in Luther's exegesis with the humanist emphasis on the power of the divine speech. "For God," Luther writes, "to speak is to do." Creatures in their various kinds were "letters" spoken into existence by the Word. In Luther's mind, this means that the creation itself was intelligible, and he further surmises that Adam and Eve—who had been given dominion over their world—must have been able to read and understand it. The image of God in which they were created included the ability to read the letters in which the Word had written the works of creation. When God led the creatures before Adam in Genesis 2 to see what he would call them, therefore, Adam did not merely "name" them. He discerned their essences, and called them what they were.

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Luther further confirmed the intelligibility of the creation by appeal to a traditional scholastic distinction between prime or inchoate matter (*materia prima*) and secondary or formed matter (*materia secunda*). The former, he thought, was the result of the undifferentiated act of initial divine creation *ex nihilo* mentioned in Genesis 1:1. The heavens and the earth were then made, as the text clearly indicates, empty and lacking in form (Gen. 1:2). Secondary acts of creation subsequently formed chaotic matter into intelligible creatures. God's word—i.e., "God said"—is not mentioned until verse 3, moreover, which Luther took to mean that the Word of God is the agent who created (again *ex nihilo*) in a secondary sense, imparting a previously non-existent meaning and intelligibility to the crude and inchoate matter of the first creation. The action of the Word of God correlates, therefore, with a formed creation characterized by order and reason.

There is more. The unfallen Adam and Eve could see through created things to their "final cause," God the Holy Trinity. Creation was already divine revelation. Indeed, it was a thoroughgoing theophany. Each breath, each glance, each step our "first parents" took brought with it the knowledge of God. Of course, from the first instant of their existence, they had known their Creator. Afterwards, however, they were introduced to created things, which naturally testified to their Creator. Taking in the creation through their senses, the eyes of the first created humans were lifted back to their Creator. The order of human knowledge proceeds from doxology, to wonder, and back again!



Portret van Martin Luther als Augustijner monnik | Lucas Cranach, 1520

On the other hand, Luther's interpretation of the creation narrative also showcases his conviction that in a fallen world, Scripture alone is the source of certain knowledge, both of God and of the creation. Of course, he appropriated the best scientific knowledge available, utilizing both astronomical observation and Aristotelian science to help understand the creation. He found real wisdom in astronomy; indeed, in the classroom he called it "divine revelation." He reviewed the Ptolemaic image of the cosmos, with the earth at its center, the planets in their courses above, and its outer limits at the firmament of the stars. He thought this image was true, or at least as near the truth as human wisdom was likely to come. Indeed, he was ready to bring Scripture to its defense. When his students reported to him an upstart astronomer (apparently Copernicus) who was arguing for a heliocentric cosmos rather than a geocentric one, Luther immediately dismissed it, confident that the witness of Scripture—which indicated in Joshua 10 that it was the sun in its orbit that stood still and not the earth—could not be overturned by the uncertain findings of some "new astrologer."

Similarly, in the Genesis lectures Luther noted that some movements of the heavenly bodies are not easily explained by the astronomers. In its orbit around the earth, for example, Mercury inexplicably reverses course. Such perplexing movements of the heavenly bodies, he thought, should be explained not by a mathematically complex appeal to epicycles (as Ptolemy and his heirs had done), but by direct, special divine action. God causes miracles in the heavens to inspire faith. Mercury's disordered movements are intended to awaken the sinner to the power and activity of God. Luther's cosmos was thus a theatre not only of order and symmetry, but of special divine action as well.

Concluding Thoughts

Luther's Genesis lectures remain an important resource for the doctrine of creation today, particularly his reading of the first human pair and their world as filled with the presence of

God. Everyone interested in *theosis*, or in the relationship between nature and grace, should read it carefully. Luther's exegesis as described above also illustrates an abiding tension in Christian readings of the creation: on the one hand, an unshakable confidence that our world is intelligible, and a means through which God is made known; on the other hand, a sense that we fallen creatures need a sure Word from God to enable us to understand both the creation and its Creator aright.



Mickey L. Mattox (Ph.D. Duke University) is Professor of Historical Theology at Marquette University. He serves as Associate Editor for the 1.4 million-word [Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion: Martin Luther](#), now available online, and scheduled for print release in August 2017 at the Luther Congress in Wittenberg, Germany. His books include a study of Luther's interpretation of the women of Genesis, and *An Exposition of Genesis 1-3* (Marquette University Press, 2013), which offers an introduction and translation of the commentary on Genesis 1-3 written by the church reformer, Johannes Oecolampadius. Mattox is presently writing a book on Luther's cosmology entitled, *From Chaos to Cosmos: Martin Luther's Catholic Worldview*.