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FAITH IN CREATION: MARTIN LUTHER'S SERMONS ON GENESIS 1*

MICKEY L. MATTOX**

If he were still here today, the late Richard John Neuhaus would surely remind us that Evangelicals and Catholics need one another.¹ In the present bewildering cultural moment, with challenges to traditional faith and practice confronting Christians on every side, that observation surely applies more than ever. The need for Evangelical/Catholic solidarity, moreover, is nowhere more important than in the doctrine of creation. To be sure, questions about our world and its status as God's creation have always been difficult. St. Augustine, for example, noted an answer sometimes given to those who ask the difficult question what God was doing before he made the world (creating hell for people who even ask such questions). For his part, Augustine pleaded ignorance: "What I do not know I do not know."² Elsewhere, we find him puzzling over another difficult question, the origins of Eve's soul. Was it passed on to her physically by her husband, or created immediately by God? Unconvinced by his own efforts to find an answer, he invited others either to offer him a better one, or to join him in the search for someone else who could.³

Today our situation seems even more difficult. Primarily as a result of advances in the scientific realm—e.g., astrophysics, human evolution—some of the classical pillars of Christian theological

*This essay began as the Scripture & Ministry Lecture at the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding in October 2016. I thank the Center's staff and leadership for inviting me, especially Joel Chopp, Geoffrey Fulkerson, and Tom McCall. I dedicate the essay with gratitude to my former teachers John D. Woodbridge and Martin I. Klauber.

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¹Neuhaus was one of the founders of Evangelicals & Catholics Together (ECT), which issued its first statement, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," in 1994. ECT's most recent common affirmation is "The Christian Way," available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/12/the-christian-way>.

²NPNF1-01, *Confessions*, bk. 12. Available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.vi.XI.XII.html?highlight=what,i,do,not,know#highlight>.

³*De Genesi ad litteram*, bk. 7, sec. 43. English translation in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 2, trans. John Hammond Taylor S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 225. On this question, see Robert J. O'Connell S.J., *The Origin of the Soul in St. Augustine's Later Works* (New York: Fordham, 1987), 225–26.

approaches to God and the creation seem to be on the chopping block. These doctrines may be recognized as classical because they derive from earliest Christian faith and practice, and, more particularly, from the common early Christian confession of faith as epitomized in the Nicene Creed. We Christians believe, the Nicene fathers affirmed, in the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we believe further that this one God is the “Father Almighty” and “maker of all things.” Such beliefs had been expressed in creeds and baptismal formulae long before the Council of Nicaea, and these artifacts reflect both the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* of earliest Christianity.⁴ The statements of belief and confessional writings of the Protestant and Evangelical communities, not to mention the Catholic and Orthodox churches, still commonly include these beliefs as well.

Considering how much the sciences have changed the way we see our world, are these classical ideas about God and the creation in need of updating? If some trajectories in contemporary cosmology—think “multiverse”—push back against creation *ex nihilo* or divine omnipotence, for example, should we temper belief in God’s almighty power? Or if the evil of death—sometimes called natural or evolutionary evil, including human death—seems intrinsic to the eons-long processes that led to our development as a species, then has the time come to revise or even reject traditional ideas about the origins of this-worldly evil in the creaturely misuse of the gift of free will? Is there some sense in which evil—as reflected in the way some interpret the “chaos” of Gen 1:2—is equiprimordial with the One God? If that question is answered in the affirmative, what are the implications for the doctrine of God? What would that affirmation mean for our understanding of God’s plan to save sinners through the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

These are difficult questions, and any attempt to answer all of them would far exceed the scope of this essay. Instead, I want to focus in what follows on the interplay between 1) classical notions about the creation of all things out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by an all-powerful God and 2) the Christian doctrine of the God who saves. I want further to suggest that shared convictions about God and the creation should continue to unite Evangelicals and Catholics in a common faith, just as they always have. To foster that common faith, I turn, perhaps surprisingly, toward the theological work of Martin Luther.⁵ My purpose in turning to Luther is quite simple. Examining

⁴See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972); and Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM, 1991).

⁵New studies of Luther’s life abound. The still-standard critical biography is Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols., trans. James L. Schaff (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985–1993). A particularly helpful biography, recently released in English translation, is Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther: A Late Medieval Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). The more detailed German original is, *Martin Luther* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2006). A few of the more noteworthy recent biographical studies: Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale, 2017); Andrew

Luther's doctrine of creation, we Catholics and Evangelicals find a common heritage, one that can help us meet some of the challenges mentioned above. Divisive as his life and work proved to be 500 years ago, Catholics should readily affirm the catholic orthodoxy of Luther's approach to God and the creation. Evangelicals, on the other hand, traditionally look back to Luther as a man raised up by God as a vital witness to the gospel of our salvation through faith in Jesus the Christ. A review of Luther's theological reflections on the story of our world's creation will remind us how such seemingly abstruse doctrines as God's omnipotence and the creation *ex nihilo* are connected to faith in the saving God, and how these teachings bind Christians together in faith.

I proceed in three steps. In part one below, I briefly tell the story of Luther and the Bible. Remembering that Luther grew up in the fifteenth century leads me to a consideration of some of the ways that recent research has pushed him as an exegete back into the Catholic Middle Ages. Luther's approach to Scripture was deeply embedded within later medieval trends in exegesis and theology. Recognizing that this is so will help us better understand the way Luther read Gen 1. In part two I offer an overview of Luther's surprising interest in the Bible's first book. He preached and lectured on Genesis longer than on any other biblical text. Why? The answer to that question will lead to part three, where I focus upon a text that has been little discussed in the literature on Martin Luther, namely, an eighteen-month long series of sermons on Genesis, which he began on 22 March 1523 and finished on 18 September 1524.⁶ Luther's prefatory remarks and homiletical observations on Gen 1 reveal not only why he found Genesis so fascinating. They also show how as a pastor he preached the creation, and how he connected crucial elements in the doctrine of creation to saving faith and confidence in God's word.

Pettegree, *Brand Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Richard Rex, *The Making of Martin Luther* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017).

⁶In what follows, Luther is cited from the critical edition of his works, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906–1961); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–1921). These are abbreviated as WA, WADB, and WATR; cited below by volume, page, and line number, e.g., WA 8:394.10. English translations provided here are my own. I also refer occasionally to *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. plus 20 vols. in the Continuation Edition (Philadelphia/St. Louis, 1955–), which is abbreviated as LW.

The dating of the Genesis sermons is provided in WA 14:92. Interestingly, Luther was lecturing on Deuteronomy during almost the same period. See the dating in Andrea van Dülmen's *Luther-Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983), 99–101.

In June of 1535 Luther once again turned to Genesis, this time in the classroom, where he began what would become the lengthiest lecture series of his academic career. See WA 42–44; translated in LW 1–8.

Two important qualifications should be noted. First, I make no attempt here to take the measure of Luther's reliance on antecedent traditions, whether exegetical, philosophical, or otherwise. It should be presumed that much of what Luther had to say had been said before, and that the various topics that arise here had been explored by others in greater depth. Second, my purpose in bringing Luther forward is not to uphold his reading of Gen 1 as normative for today, much less to suggest any particular deficiencies in contemporary approaches to the text. Luther's work is five hundred years old. He cannot directly answer today's exegetical questions. But as we shall see, he can serve as a witness to the inseparable connection between the doctrine of God the almighty Creator and the Good News of salvation in Christ.

I. LUTHER AND THE BIBLE: A RELATIONSHIP

As a reader, commentator, preacher, and translator of the Bible, Martin Luther had—and has—few peers.⁷ Easy enough to say, and, as it turns out, not much harder to demonstrate.⁸ Consider for a moment Luther's knowledge of the Bible from a phenomenological perspective. How did he experience and come to know the Bible? To begin at the beginning, Martin was born in Eisleben, Germany on 10 October 1483, the first of the eight or nine children of Hans and Margarethe Luder.⁹ The following day he was baptized, where he

⁷Studies of Luther and the Bible abound, even if comprehensive assessments are few. See, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959); Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretative Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word*, (Devon: Paternoster, 1969). For a recent summary of the state of our knowledge of the Luther Bible, see Arnoud Visser, "The Luther Bible," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 350–57.

⁸Current research on Luther is evaluated and summarized topically in the massive *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, 3 vols., ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Abbreviated below as OEML, cited by volume and page number. For interested readers, each article cited offers additional bibliography. For Luther and the Bible, see Anja Lobenstein-Reichmann, "Bible Translation and the German Language," OEML 1:117–41; Erik H. Herrmann, "Biblical Commentary: New Testament," OEML 1:141–66; John A. Maxfield, "Biblical Commentary: Old Testament," OEML 1:166–81. See also Siegfried Raeder, "The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 363–406.

⁹Luther himself altered the spelling of his family name, changing it from "Luder" to "Luther" during the indulgences controversy when he self-consciously styled himself as "Martin Eleutherios" (Gk. for "liberated"). See Volker Leppin, "Life: 1483–1516," in OEML 1:119. Timothy J. Wengert notes the abiding significance of Luther's name change for his self-understanding as a man working in the emerging tradition of Christian humanism, a movement more often associated with Luther's foe in the controversy over the "bound will," Erasmus of Rotterdam. See his "Melanchthon, Luther, and Their Wittenberg Colleagues," OEML 2:518–41, at p. 533.

began his full immersion, so to speak, in the words of the Bible as found in the baptismal rite.

As was common among rising middle-class Germans, Hans and Margarethe took their son to mass regularly, where he seems to have heard sermons that reflected the distinctive northern German piety of his mother's side of the family.¹⁰ Theirs was a stout faith, rich with what later generations would come to see as a potent mix of Christian doctrine and folk religion, e.g., one in which angels and demons were prominent, Mary and the saints were powerful intercessors, and the church's indulgences trade was prospering.¹¹ More importantly for present purposes, young Martin was formed in the context of the later medieval *Frömmigkeitstheologie*¹² ("theology for piety"), an informal movement that reflected the widespread desire of lay Christians to deepen the religious rhythms of their lives. German families like the Luders wanted to hear good preaching and to bring their faith to expression in daily life. It also seems that Martin was catechized at home, where his parents emphasized the fourth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother."¹³ In sum, his immersion in the faith of the church and her Holy Scriptures was grounded in his family's way of life.

In 1501 Martin enrolled at university in Erfurt, where he earned the Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees. He then began the study of law, per his father's wishes. Only a few weeks later, however, in July 1505, Luther quit his studies, said a quick goodbye to friends, and presented himself as a postulant at the nearby Augustinian monastery. Living in Augustinian community for the next 18 years, brother Martin prayed the monastic hours with his confreres many times each day.¹⁴ As countless religious had done before him, he all

¹⁰See Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Luther and His Mother* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

¹¹A number of scholars have questioned the "decline and decay" reading of the later Middle Ages. The most fundamental such work is probably Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1963). Two prominent works that take a more positive view of the Christian later middle ages are: John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400–1700* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale, 1992).

¹²This descriptive term has been used extensively by Berndt Hamm and is now a commonplace. See Hamm, "Was ist Frömmigkeitstheologie? Überlegungen zum 14. bis 16. Jahrhundert," in *Praxis Pietatis: Beiträge zu Theologie und Frömmigkeit in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Hans-Jörg Nieden and Marcel Nieden (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999), 9–45. For the impact of this movement on Luther himself, see Eric L. Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Noting the tendency of lay Christians to imitate the practices of the religious, Saak speaks of the "religionization" of later medieval Christianity, thus extending Hamm's piety motif.

¹³Leppin notes that Luther not only learned the catechism at home from his parents, but that his vivid sense of life "between God and the devil" was rooted in "the piety of the family home" (*Martin Luther*, 20–21 [German original]).

¹⁴To this see Eric L. Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 671. For a winsome introduction to this way of life, see the classic study of Jean Leclercq O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the*

but memorized the Psalms. Through the daily lectionary, moreover, he became intimately familiar with the rhythms of Scripture by hearing the books of the OT read daily alongside the Gospels and Epistles of the New. In dinner table conversations recorded years later by his students and friends, Luther also reported that he had been given a red leather Bible as an Augustinian novice,¹⁵ and that his habit was to read through it twice each year.¹⁶

Following his ordination as a priest in spring 1507, Luther was ordered by his monastic superiors to begin advanced study in Theology, and in 1512 he received the Doctor's degree and was named professor of Theology¹⁷ in "little Wittenberg," a somewhat remote German town that had become the *Residenzstadt* of the Prince-Electors of Ernestine Saxony.¹⁸ Over his 33-year career there, Dr. Luther lectured through most of the Bible. Following the arrival of the Greek scholar, Philip Melancthon, in 1519, Luther's university lectures focused primarily on the OT.¹⁹ In the end, his legacy of biblical exposition includes both sermon series, classroom lectures, and the occasional treatise on one or another biblical text. Most prominent among these are several commentaries on the Psalms, sermons on the Gospel of John, and both sermons and lecture series on Genesis.

In 1515 friar Martin was elected a regional vicar in his order. He had also been assigned as a regular preacher in Wittenberg's churches, typically several times a week. In all these duties, the reading and application of Scripture played a central role. During his years of study in the monastery, he found time to teach himself NT Greek. Before long he gained a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew

Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).

¹⁵WATR 1:44.116.

¹⁶WATR 1:320.674.

¹⁷For a revisionist view of Luther's development in these years, consult Leppin, "Life: 1483–1516," 1:119–31. Importantly, as Leppin notes, Ulrich Köpf has shown that Luther's chair was not, as has commonly been said, in Bible, but in Theology generally. Luther's focus on the Bible in his early lectures, indeed throughout his career, thus appears not as a happenstance reflection of the particular chair to which he was named, but a reflection instead of his own humanist determination to take theology "back to the sources" (*ad fontes*). Once again Luther's work is better understood in historical context.

¹⁸For the development of Wittenberg under the Saxon prince-electors, see the wide-ranging collection edited by Stefan Oehmig, *700 Jahre Wittenberg: Stadt, Universität, Reformation* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1995). For a breakthrough study that emphasizes the importance of the local situation for the development of Luther's reform, see Natalie Krentz, "The Making of the Reformation: The Early Urban Reformation between Continuity and Change," in *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 19.1 (2017): 30–49.

¹⁹See Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Erich W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). To the extent that Luther's preference to teach OT was grounded in his humanist commitment *ad fontes*, and therefore not in the disciplinary boundaries characteristic of the late-20th century academics, Bornkamm's claim that Luther would have been a professor of OT is somewhat misleading.

as well, relying on the grammar produced by Johannes Reuchlin.²⁰ In those days priests and theologians skilled in the former language and especially the latter, were still relatively rare. Luther's enthusiastic participation in the linguistic studies associated with Renaissance humanism made him the master of the three languages necessary for theology: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

Then in 1517, writing both as a pastor and as a university professor, Luther issued a call to debate concerning the power and efficacy of indulgences, in an incendiary publication that became known as the "95 Theses." Only two months later, the theses were referred to Rome on suspicion of heresy by Luther's Archbishop, Albrecht of Magdeburg and Mainz. By late spring 1521, Luther had been excommunicated from the church, and tried and convicted of blasphemy and high treason. With the issuance of the Edict of Worms on 26 May 1521, he was sentenced to death. At the initiative of his Prince-Elector, however, Luther took refuge at the remote Wartburg castle. What to do there? Once again, the Bible assumed a central place. To pass the time productively Luther wrote a series of model sermons for parish priests, "postils," which conveyed the gospel as he understood it.²¹ Relying on Erasmus of Rotterdam's 1516 edition of the Greek NT, the "*Novum Instrumentum*," he also completed a German translation of the entire NT, the first of its kind.²² The latter appeared for the first time in September 1522; hence the moniker *Septembertestament*.

Following his return to Wittenberg earlier that same year, Luther resumed his biblical lectures as well as his regular preaching duties. In addition, he continued translation work on the Bible. In 1534, the first complete Luther Bible was published. Speaking to friends at table in 1532, he boasted that if the Scriptures were a forest, then he had shaken every tree.²³ And he felt a deep connectedness not only to the Bible as a whole, but to particular texts for which he had special affection. "The letter to Galatians," he said, "is my own little letter, to which I have betrothed myself. It's my Katie von Bora."²⁴

²⁰For Luther's position in the sixteenth-century appropriation of the Hebrew language and Jewish exegesis, see Stephen G. Burnett, "Christian Hebraism," in OEML 1:253-66. Ironically, Reuchlin's legal case (regarding the status of Jewish books in a Christian culture) was being heard in Rome at almost the same time as Luther's. For a study of the Reuchlin affair, see David H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a broader view, see Franz Posset, *Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522): A Theological Biography* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015).

²¹On the tradition of postil writing, which Luther did not invent, see John Frymire, "Works: Sermons and Postils," in OEML 3:561-89.

²²Broadly to Luther's biblical translation work, see Siegfried Raeder, "Luther als Ausleger und Übersetzer der Heiligen Schrift," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 253-78.

²³WATR 2:244.1877.

²⁴WATR 1:69.146. Cited in Mickey L. Mattox, "Martin Luther's Reception of Paul," in *A Companion to Paul in the Reformation*, ed. Ward Holder (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 93-128; at 112.

Similarly, in his last academic lecture, delivered on Genesis in November 1545, the old exegete took leave of the book with these words: "That now is the beloved Genesis."²⁵ Nevertheless, as he lay dying in February 1546, Luther bemoaned the unfinished business of learning the Scriptures: "No one should think that he has tasted the Scriptures sufficiently until with the prophets he has governed the churches for a hundred years.... We are beggars. That is the truth."²⁶

Granted Luther's long and deep engagement with the Bible, did he develop a new way to read it? It has often been said that Luther's Reformation originated as a hermeneutical event when he identified Christ as the Bible's central concern and so achieved his so-called "Reformation breakthrough."²⁷ This is a traditional reading of Luther's theological development, and one for which much support can be found in the sources, including the elder Luther's reminiscences. It tends to take Luther at his word regarding the course of events.²⁸ Recent studies that take a more critical view of Luther's self-narration tell a somewhat different story, spelling out, for example, the young Luther's sometimes unrecognized indebtedness to later medieval monastic and mystical traditions, and attempting to demonstrate how he appropriated the patristic and medieval exegetical tradition.²⁹ Others begin with the recognition that Luther came of age as a theologian and exegete near the end of a very long period in which theologians had increasingly turned to the literal sense of Scripture rather than to allegorical or figurative senses. Later medieval biblical scholars increasingly found

²⁵See WA 44:825.10, the closing lines of the Genesis lectures.

²⁶WATR 5:317.16–318.3.

²⁷For an exemplary exposition of this view, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The dating of this supposed "breakthrough" was much-discussed and hotly-debated in Luther scholarship, especially in the later 20th century. More recently, Leppin observes that this event was not mentioned until much later in Luther's life. As a consequence, he argues, when we examine the early Luther we should look for developments in his thought, rather than moments of radical discontinuity. See his "Life, 1483–1516," 1:126.

²⁸For a short but bracing invitation to question some elements in the traditional Luther narrative, see Risto Saarinen, "Luther the Urban Legend," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 13–31.

²⁹The most fundamental work in re-reading the young Luther's theological development in the matrix of German mysticism is Leppin, *Martin Luther*, cited above. His formation as an Augustinian monk and appropriation of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought is examined in Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For his creative appropriation of patristic and medieval exegesis, see Mickey L. Mattox, "Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs": *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesis 1535–1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). John A. Maxfield takes the opposite approach, arguing for a radical discontinuity between Luther and his predecessors in *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008).

themselves on a quest, as it were, to vindicate, as Chris Ocker puts it, the full "spirituality of the letter."³⁰

Luther himself always retained a profound sense of the internal rhythms and intertextual harmonies in Holy Scripture, and he freely admitted that he enjoyed a good allegory as much as the next person, even if one should not build a doctrine on a happy allegory alone. Instead, and like many of his medieval predecessors, Luther thought the real riches of the Bible were to be found in the literal sense, that is, by attending to the stories of the Bible precisely as stories. At the same time, the interpretation of the stories was governed by the rule of faith, for Luther identified Jesus Christ as narrated in the ecumenical creeds as the central content of the Scripture as a whole. "Take Christ out of the Scriptures," he once asked, "and what will you find left in them?"³¹ The real meaning of Scripture, as found in the literal sense of the seemingly humble books of the Bible, is therefore *was Christum treibet*:³² that which promotes the saving Christ.³³

II. LUTHER AND "THE DEAR GENESIS"

As noted above, the traditional narrative of Luther's "Reformation breakthrough" focuses on his reading of the letters of Paul, particularly his attempt to understand the meaning of Rom 1:16–18, "the just shall live by faith." Ironically, however, his exegetical predilections bore arguably their most distinctive fruits in his exegesis of the OT, especially the book of Genesis. He lectured or preached his way through the book at least twice, or perhaps three

³⁰For the medieval turn to the letter, one must still consult Beryl Smalley's groundbreaking work, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941). Ocker's remark may be found in his *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219. Summarizing the results of his study, Ocker situates Luther firmly within later medieval exegesis: "This means that Luther's breakthrough was much less 'hermeneutic' than scholars have alleged. When Luther rejected the four-fold sense, his purpose was to affirm the spirituality of the letter. Verbal signification and theological exegesis had indicated as much for two hundred years." For a broad overview of medieval developments and Luther's own exegesis, see *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Luther's work is surveyed by Mark D. Thompson (*ibid.*, 299–318).

³¹LW 33:26, from "On the Bondage of the Will."

³²This comment is found in Luther's 1522 preface to the book of James in the aforementioned *Septembertestament*. Luther notes that James promotes God's law and so rejects its apostolicity. The touchstone of apostolic authority, he insists, is that their works always preach and promote Christ (WADB 7:385). For the book of James in Luther and the Lutheran tradition, see Jason D. Lane, *Luther's Epistle of Straw: The Voice of St. James in Reformation Preaching* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018).

³³For a broader analysis of Luther's theological approach to the Bible, see Mickey L. Mattox, "Martin Luther," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Overview*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 94–113.

times, as some evidence suggests.³⁴ In any case the Weimar critical edition of Luther's writings includes, as noted above, two major published works on Genesis—one a set of sermons, the other a massive series of classroom lectures—each of which eventually appeared in published form. These complete works are all the more impressive when we recall that Genesis is a long book. During the Reformation period, many writers began works on Genesis, but many fewer completed them. Partial commentaries abound, a fact which underscores the significance of Luther's having publicly interpreted the entire book at least twice.³⁵

The sermons date from 1523–1524, when they were delivered to the people of Wittenberg in the vernacular German. They were published three years later, first in a Latin version and then in the original German.³⁶ The lectures, on the other hand, turned out to be both Luther's lengthiest and his last classroom lectures on Scripture. In the Weimar edition of his works, these lectures run about 2,500 massive folio pages, while in English translation they comprise the first 8 volumes in the American Edition, *Luther's Works*. But why? What was it about Genesis that so galvanized Luther's attention?

The answer is to be found in Luther's appropriation of the later medieval emphasis, noted above, on the *sensus literalis*. Attending imaginatively to the stories of Genesis, Luther discovered that the patriarchal households of Genesis contained not merely the shadow of what was later revealed in the NT, but the canonical narratives by which to interpret the believer's own life as a struggle for faith and faithfulness: the reader interprets the text, and, just so, the text interprets the reader. Here Luther's embrace of clerical marriage, and, more broadly, of the goodness of the married estate itself, came powerfully into play. The households of the married men and women of Genesis became in his Genesis exegesis—and in his own life as well—the new paradigm for the Christian life.³⁷ In the

³⁴For one effort to answer some critical questions regarding Luther's work on Genesis, including the authenticity of the later lectures on Genesis, see Mattox, "Defender," Appendix 1, 259–75.

³⁵For a broad survey of Genesis commentaries published in the sixteenth century, see Mattox, "Defender," Appendix 2. See also the bibliography in John L. Thompson, *Genesis 1–11*, vol. 1 in *The Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 371–77.

³⁶I have elsewhere suggested the influence of these sermons on the Genesis lectures delivered by Johannes Oecolampadius in Basel in 1531. See "Eve in Early Reformation Exegesis: The Case of Johannes Oecolampadius," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 17.2 (2015): 196–205, esp. 203. For Oecolampadius's work on Genesis, see *Johannes Oecolampadius: An Exposition of Genesis*, trans. Mickey L. Mattox (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013). For an evaluation of Oecolampadius's distinctive approach to Scripture, see the important new study by Jeff Fisher, *A Christoscopic Reading of Scripture: Johannes Oecolampadius on Hebrews* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

³⁷For a brief introduction to Luther's view of marriage, see Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," *LQ* 14 (2000): 335–50. For a consideration of marriage as both secular and religious in the context of Luther's marriage to Katharina von Bora, see Mattox, "Defender," 67–73.

households of the faithful in Genesis, he found heroes of faith, men and women who faced down the contradictions of sin, death, and the devil by keeping their ears steadily attuned to the word of the God who had promised a Savior (Gen 3:15).

Luther wanted to lift up these stories for his hearers, whether in the classroom or in the church, and this seems to have been the most important factor in leading him to focus sustained attention on the book of Genesis. He was convinced that the saving God had been at work in the lives of the men and women of Genesis, just as he was at work in the lives of people in his own day. Thus, the stories of the OT "saints" became verbal icons of the Christian life. Contemplating them, Luther taught his people to look for the signs of faith and unbelief, of sin and forgiveness, as they played out in the midst of the contradictions imposed on people of faith by sin, death, and the devil. The proper imitation of the holy men and women of the Bible therefore meant, on Luther's account, not so much to mimic their actions as to imitate their faith, that is "to believe and rejoice in Christ"³⁸ as they did, and to keep on believing and rejoicing no matter what the world, the flesh, or the devil may bring your way. If for Luther there is a how-to book for the Christian life, Genesis is it.

³⁸I allude here to the (in)famous counsel Luther offered in a letter, written in the second month of his stay at the Wartburg, to his Wittenberg colleague, Philip Melancthon, who was struggling with his responsibilities in Wittenberg during Luther's absence. This context makes all the difference. "If you are a preacher of grace," Luther advised Melancthon, "then preach a true grace, not a false one. And if it is a true grace, then it will take away a true, not a fictitious, sin. For God does not save fictitious sinners. Be a sinner, therefore, and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice more boldly still in Christ, who is the victor over sin, death, and the world." This "sin boldly" is often cited by critics as proof of Luther's antinomianism. Luther's point, however, is plainly not that one should sin "boldly" so that "grace might abound." To the contrary, it is pastoral counsel given to a struggling Christian who fears that his own sin may bring to nothing all the good he tries to do, even, and especially, the good of preaching the gospel of Christ. Melancthon was worried, it seems (his letter to Luther is lost), about the alleged sin of not taking the cup of the Lord's Supper together with the bread. Back in Wittenberg, their colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt had suddenly instituted communion in "both kinds," and insisted that it would be a sin to refuse to take the cup along with the bread. Melancthon hesitated to obey Karlstadt's mandate, but was worried that he might be right. For Luther's letter, see WABR 2:370-73, translated in LW 48:277-82. On this question one may still consult to good effect John Alfred Faulkner, "Pecca Fortiter," in *AmJT* 18.4 (1914): 600-604. See also, Hans-Martin Barth, "'Pecca fortiter, sed fortius fide ...': Martin Luther als Seelsorger," in *EvT* 44 (1984): 12-25; Alexander S. Jensen, "Martin Luther's 'Sin Boldly' Revisited: A Fresh Look at a Controversial Concept in the Light of Modern Pastoral Psychology," in *Contact* 1 (2002): 2-13.

III. GENESIS 1 IN ÜBER DAS ERSTE BUCH MOSE, PREDIGTEN³⁹

This distinctive approach to Genesis is already apparent in the 1523–1524 sermons, even if it is not as fully developed as it would be in the Genesis lectures. In his preface to the published version of the sermons, Luther emphasizes how important the books of Moses are for Christians.⁴⁰ Why read Moses today, after the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ? Because, Luther answers, Moses offers the attentive reader canonical examples of all that the Christian life includes. In Luther's reading, the stories Moses tells are the stories of the OT "saints," the "holy fathers."

[W]e read Moses on account of the lovely examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as well as the love of the holy fathers Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses so that we should learn to love and to trust God, through and through. Here we also find examples of the unbelief of the ungodly, and of the wrath of God.... Nowhere does one find such fine examples of faith and unbelief as in Moses. That's why we shouldn't leave Moses under the bed!⁴¹

Luther's point in preaching Moses, then, is to preach the God who saves, and to illustrate the crosses one must carry when one follows the path of faith and love. Thus, as mentioned above, the whole of Scripture rhymes to the Christ who followed that path to perfection. As Luther puts it here, "Scripture as a whole is given in order that the proclaimed Christ may be known; he is the goal (*scopus*) of all Scripture."⁴² The existential drama of the human being situated between faith and unbelief presupposes the Christian in

³⁹The sermons were delivered in German, but notes were taken in both Latin and German by Stephan Roth, Georg Römer, and others, on the basis of which the published sermons were compiled. In the preface he wrote for the Latin edition, Luther says: "Primum librum Mosi quem Genesin vocaverunt, populo meo Wittengergensi declamationibus vernaculis tractavi" (WA 24:1.3–5). In what follows I normally cite the German text but turn to the Latin where it is useful. Latin citations are indicated as *Declamationes*.

⁴⁰The connection between this question and Luther's Genesis sermons was apparent to the publisher of the German edition as well, who included Luther's 1525 sermon on Exod 19, entitled "How Christians Should Regard Moses," as an introduction to the published Genesis *Predigten*. For the original sermon, see WA 16:363–93. The animating question is how as Israel's lawgiver, Moses speaks to Christians, who are under the gospel of Christ. Luther's answer, in short, is to find both law and gospel in Moses, which has the effect of Christianizing the covenant people of Israel. As Luther puts it in a comment on the protevangelium in Gen 3:15, "Semper ergo fuerunt Christiani ab initio mundi" (WA 24:100.10–11).

The painful question of Luther and the Jews is too complex to explore here. For the state of research, see Dorothea Wendebourg, "Jews and Judaism," OEML 2:55–69.

⁴¹WA 24:15.1–14; preface. The colloquialism here, "nicht unter die Banck stecken," suggests a book that has been left lying under the bed and so remains unread and unused. Luther means to emphasize the significance of Moses for the here and now of the Christian life.

⁴²WA 24:16.1–3 (Latin preface). Luther's use of "*scopus*" here parallels that of Oecolampadius, mentioned above.

relation to God and the devil, and so pastor Luther endeavors in these sermons to make clear to his congregation the power and majesty of the Creator. In doing so, he rings the changes on the Christian doctrine of God as Creator and offers a moving affirmation of its crucial connections to the salvation of the sinner.

A. Taking the Longer View: The Six Days

In modern times, one of the most vexed questions concerning the creation account in Gen 1 has to do with the meaning of "day." Does the word denote here a day as we know it, i.e., a temporal period of twenty-four hours, or not? Preaching on Gen 1, Luther, too, is interested in the question of the days. His frame of reference is Aristotelian, his cosmology Ptolemaic. In the philosophy of Aristotle, the world was understood as eternal, a point that Christian thinkers in the Western Latin tradition had long felt the need to correct, prioritizing the divinely-revealed fact of creation over the otherwise compelling philosophical reasoning that suggested an eternally perduring cosmos.⁴³ Luther agreed with and contributed to the standard medieval Christian rejection of Aristotelian eternalism.⁴⁴ In the present case, however, he is concerned not with Aristotle, but with a venerable Christian reading of the "days" of creation.⁴⁵

Augustine of Hippo had taken the creation of the heavens and the earth as described in Gen 1 as a portrayal, respectively, of creation in its spiritual and material aspects. The days here are not temporal but spiritual/intellectual. They do not describe the divine work by which the creation was brought into being, but instead narrate the angelic contemplation of created things in their "seminal reasons" (*rationes seminales*), that is, as they existed—"prior" to the creation—in the mind of God. "Evening came, and morning followed." With this biblical rhythm in mind, Augustine had imagined that the angels begin each "day" of this intellectual event by taking in the "evening knowledge" of created things as they exist in themselves, and afterwards turn to the "morning knowledge" that arises when they contemplate those same things as they exist in their Creator. Evening and morning knowledge together comprise the original angelic apprehension of the creation, in itself and in God.

⁴³The story of Aristotle and Latin scholastic theology is narrated in Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

⁴⁴Without question, Luther was a lifelong Aristotelian, particularly in his outlook on natural philosophy. See Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy"; as well as Mickey L. Mattox, "Cosmology," OEML 1:296–313. The fundamental study of Luther's Aristotelianism is Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).

⁴⁵The standard work on Luther's doctrine of creation is David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960). See also Johannes Schwanke, "Doctrine of Creation," OEML 1:366–83.

Turning to the actual creation of the world, Augustine had further argued that it occurred not over a span of time—as if the eternal and immutable God were working within and as a part of time—but instead all at once and in an instant (*simul*). Both time and creatures came into existence in the same moment.⁴⁶ This so-called *simul* doctrine of creation—in which the days of Genesis are not at all days in the everyday sense of the term—has a venerable history, and it was well known to Luther and his contemporaries.

Luther's resistance to this traditional interpretation can be understood first as an example of his determination, noted above, to let the biblical text speak in its own native voice. This distinctive approach to discerning biblical meaning may itself be seen as in part an outgrowth of later medieval semantic theory, in which textual meaning is closely tied to the words of the text,⁴⁷ and in part as a reflection of Luther's determination to let Scripture speak on its own terms, i.e., without imposing predetermined meanings upon the words. Holy Scripture has its own language—what he would elsewhere call the *nova lingua* of the Holy Spirit⁴⁸—and theology, therefore, is not required to adopt the definition of terms as they are used in philosophy, or in any other discipline.⁴⁹ At the same time, Luther also wants to allow the Scripture to fulfill its divinely-intended purpose, that is, to speak to sinful human beings about a just and holy God who offers salvation through faith in Christ. To this end, the reader must understand that Scripture has its own distinctive grammar, which means that the Bible asserts truths about God and salvation in ways that surpass the bounds of reason, e.g., in the case of the incarnation that "this man is God." "This man is God" cannot be true in philosophy, but in theology its truth is undeniable.

Determined in the present case to understand what Scripture says in its own way, Luther attends to the plain sense of the words. The creation described in this text is not, he insists, a timeless reality located in the mind of God or the understanding of the angels. To the contrary, Scripture here narrates divine acts undertaken in time, acts which, moreover, took time. Those who argue for the creation of all things in "the wink of an eye," even if they include "many exalted personages" such as Augustine and Hilary,⁵⁰ vainly appeal to Sir

⁴⁶For an overview of these issues, see Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), ch. 3.

⁴⁷On Luther's broadly nominalist approach to the meaning of biblical words, see Graham White, *Luther as Nominalist: A Study of the Logical Methods Used in Martin Luther's Disputations in the Light of Their Medieval Background* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft, 1994). More generally, see David Luy, "Works: Disputations," in OEML 3:518–50, including tables listing Luther's disputations.

⁴⁸See White, *Luther as Nominalist*, esp. ch. 6. For the most recent word on this problem, see Dennis Bielfeldt, "Ontology," OEML 3:1–21.

⁴⁹To this point, see Grosshans, cited above. For the medieval background to Luther's approach to philosophy more generally, see Pekka Kärkkäinen, "Nominalism and the Via Moderna," OEML 3:696–708.

⁵⁰WA 24:19.22–23: "Und sind viel hohe leute, als Augustinus und Hilarius, dieser meynung, das es ynn einem augenblick alles und gar gestanden sey" (from the

18:1 and Deut 32:4, which Luther seems to have cited in the Latin and then translated into German: "The works of God are perfect," and "The One Who lives in eternity made all things at once." Rather than looking to these texts, Luther advises, the humble reader will attend to the simple meaning of the words and so allow God to be the teacher. Thus, a day is a day. Luther is not content to leave it at that, however, but appeals for support to another and presumably more pertinent biblical text. "Take the words for what they say," he advises, but he also reminds his people that in Exodus Moses reaffirms that "in six days" God created all things.⁵¹ This text, he insists, is more relevant for understanding the days of Gen 1 than either Sir 18:1 or Deut 32:4. So, God created in time.

How is that to be understood? Leaving Moses to interpret his own words, Luther the preacher offers two accessible analogies. Just as each human being is made not all at once but instead over a period of nine months in a mother's body; and just as the image of a man is not completed until the painter finishes his work; so also, God created the heavens and the earth not in an instant outside of time, but within time, and, specifically, over the space of six days.⁵² Thus, Luther not only objects to the *simul* doctrine on textual grounds, but also to any suggestion that the eternal God is incapable of working within time. The Latin text makes the point explicitly: "Time, seasons, and creatures have a beginning, because God created them, not in a moment, however, but in time."⁵³ Does Luther's insistence on God's creation of the cosmos in time mean that he is indifferent to the traditional teaching that God is self-sufficient and impassible? Does God's working within time in the creation bring something new to God?

*B. The One Eternal, Impassible, and Self-Sufficient God,
Who Creates Out of Nothing*

To the contrary, Luther's affirmation in these sermons of God's eternity, impassibility, and self-sufficiency is thoroughgoing and pervasive. Treating Gen 1:1 ("In principio creavit Deus"), for example, he observes that "in the beginning" should be understood to mean that God alone "was," with neither any "change (*vicissitudo*) nor any substance, as there are now."⁵⁴ For Luther God exists timelessly and without change prior to the creation. God's priority to

preface). For some important examples of medieval rejections or modifications of the Augustinian *simul* doctrine, see Charlotte Gross, "Twelfth-Century Concepts of Time: Three Reinterpretations of Augustine's Doctrine of Creation *Simul*," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23.3 (1985): 325-38.

⁵¹WA 24:19.2-11, 19-31; preface. The Weimar editors recognize with scare quotes but do not add a marginal note for Luther's intertextual appeal to Exod 20:11 (in the *Declamationes*).

⁵²WA 24:20.16-32 (preface).

⁵³WA 24:25.9-10 (Latin preface).

⁵⁴*Declamationes*. WA 24:24.8-9 (on Gen 1:1).

creation, therefore, must be understood in a transcendent theological sense rather than a temporal one. The vernacular text spells out God's transcendence over time colloquially:

For God the beginning of the world is just as near as the end; a thousand years are as one day.... For he sees time in such a way that, what is to human eyes two things far apart from one another, he brings together in the blink of an eye. I say this so that no one should take this foolishly and speak of "the beginning" as if there was something already there beforehand, but instead should understand that here time and all creatures began, which previously did not exist.⁵⁵

From eternity the Creator has neither end nor beginning. God in Luther's understanding views all of time in an instant.

The affirmation of God's timelessness leads Luther directly to a consideration of the creation itself, all that is not God, in relation to God's self. Clearly, he says, there was neither pre-existing matter nor any change. The act of creation itself, therefore, cannot be understood as the mere arrangement of a prior chaos. Change, moreover, is characteristic not of the eternal divine life but of that which was created. Indeed, Luther explicitly affirms that the act of creation did nothing to change God: "With God there is nothing new. Newness is in things."⁵⁶ The Latin text thus confirms the statement mentioned above, that prior to God's act of creation there was neither substance nor change. With the act of creation noneternal and mutable things were brought into existence and made substantial (a term he uses here in a nontechnical sense). In short, the eternal God created time and all things out of nothing.

Without going into great detail, Luther also raises and answers the question of the status of the first made substance, considering that it is described, per his German translation, as "*wüst und leer*," terms that suggest a watery, undifferentiated mass.⁵⁷ In this connection, Luther insists, one should not reach for the "Ideas" of the philosophers Plato or Aristotle to understand the creation.⁵⁸ Here, perhaps, he has in mind once again Augustine and those who interpret the letter of this text as a reference to an ideal creation in the mind of God. Better, he insists, to follow 1 Pet 3:5 and take the mention of the original chaos as an indication that, as Peter confirms, the earth was formed "in water" with darkness all-round it like a cloud or dense fog, and in which there was as yet no light.⁵⁹ Without quite saying so, Luther seems to find the difference between the chaos of Gen. 1:2 and the goodness of created things that follow in

⁵⁵WA 24:25.16-34.

⁵⁶WA 24:25.9.

⁵⁷The German *die Wüste* indicates a desert or wasteland. *Wüst*, however, means excrement or sewage.

⁵⁸WA 24:25.31-32.

⁵⁹WA 24:26.23-26, and 24:27.11-15.

reliance on the Aristotelian distinction between *materia prima* and *materia secunda*, which was a commonplace in Christian Aristotelianism. Interestingly, then, Luther is giving an Aristotelian response to a problem he associates with Greek idealism. If that is so, then the transition implied by Luther's distinction between the original unformed matter and that which would arise after it had been given definition and shape functions as the decisive marker of the movement from formless mass of Gen. 1:1 and the beautifully formed cosmos that has emerged by Genesis 2:1. The acts of creation in time, therefore, are precisely those acts that give unformed matter its intelligibility and order, and so make the earth a fit dwelling place for humankind.

C. Creation as the Work of the Triune God

For Luther the God who creates is clearly the Holy Trinity; to confess faith in the former is therefore by definition to confess faith in the latter. Thus, Luther finds the Trinity in the Bible's first verses. In the words "God created," Luther notes, one hears that there is one God. But in the words that follow? "Here you have the three persons."⁶⁰ The German text explains:

Where Moses says "in the beginning God created heaven and earth" etc. he mentions or names no Person. But as soon as he says further "And God said: Let there be light" he expresses that with God there was a Word.... Since it was prior to when time and all creatures began, it must be eternal and another and higher reality than all creatures. It follows, therefore, that it is God.... Moreover, because the word is also God, it must be another person. Thus, two persons are mentioned: the Father, who speaks the word and has his essence from himself, and the Son, who is the word and proceeds from the Father and is eternally with him.⁶¹

This is the God, moreover, whom one meets in this text. Speaking in just the kind of homespun language his parishioners could understand, Luther calls to mind Moses's experience of the burning bush. Here again, Moses's knowledge and experience of God as witnessed elsewhere in the Pentateuch are brought to bear on understanding Gen 1:

Here now a fleshly person must take off his shoes. For these pointed words are not written or set down for children, but to intelligent people [so that they should know] ... that the Lord speaks a word and through that same word made all creatures.⁶²

⁶⁰WA 24:28.6.

⁶¹WA 24:29.4-14. Luther concludes this reasoning by citing John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word."

⁶²WA 24:29.22-26.

Luther also finds the Spirit explicitly mentioned here, though “furtively” (*heimlich*). Why furtive? Because the mention of the Spirit is, like the affirmation of the Trinity itself, in some sense hidden, clear to those who have eyes to see, but opaque to those who have not.⁶³ To the Christian reader, therefore, it is clear that creation is the act of the One God in Three Persons. Thus, as Luther had found God the Son in the “and God said” of Gen 1:3 so he finds the Spirit of God in the “and God saw” of Gen 1:4.

But Luther wants his parishioners not only to know that the One God is Three Persons, but also to understand these Persons were present and active in the creation. To do so one must listen to Moses, who defines the Persons thus: “First, the Father, when he said ‘and God made;’ second, the Son, when he said, ‘and God spoke;’ and then the Holy Ghost (*heiliger Geist*), when he said ‘God saw that it was good.’”⁶⁴ The upshot for Luther is that the creation as a whole is a work of the undivided Trinity. “God made, spoke, and saw. He [Moses] does not want to deny but rather to affirm that all three Persons are alike God, and that all three were present [and active] on the first day.”⁶⁵

D. Genesis and Humility: Knowing the Almighty Creator

In the sixteenth century as today, a great deal of what expositors had to say about Gen 1 had been said previously by someone else. The younger Luther was no exception. It is no surprise, therefore, when we find him in his first remarks on the text noting the commonplace that the ancient Jews had not allowed anyone under thirty years of age to comment on Genesis. The ancients, it seems, feared the flights of fancy younger readers were likely to take with the text. Luther’s invocation of this idea suggests that only one properly catechized into the faith is prepared to approach the Scriptures. A similar conviction animated many of Luther’s peers. The Genesis lectures of Johannes Oecolampadius, for example, which were given in Basel only a few years after Luther’s sermons, showcase the similarity. Oecolampadius warned his readers beforehand about entering into this text: “We draw near, beloved ... to the most holy threshold of the divine inner sanctum.”⁶⁶ Scripture is a holy place and so requires a contrite heart, a point Luther insisted on no less than his Swiss contemporary.

To express this gateway conviction, however, Luther averts to properly theological terms and the language of the divine mystery, rather than to that of ritual purity. One enters here for Luther into a text that grounds what is “without doubt the highest Article of the faith,” namely: “I believe in God the Father Almighty.” In citing this

⁶³WA 24:30.20. Cf. WA 24:28.

⁶⁴WA 24:31.20–22.

⁶⁵WA 24:31.29–31.

⁶⁶Oecolampadius, “An Exposition of Genesis,” 35–36.

particular phrase, Luther brings to his parishioners' minds the very faith into which they were baptized. At the gate of entry to the Christian faith stands the confession of faith in the "Almighty God" (*omnipotens Deus*). From the outset, then, a subjective consequence correlates with Luther's reading of the doctrine of God in Gen 1:1. The Christian teaching that God is almighty, per Luther, has as its immediate subjective corollary the faith that the reader already knows, given in the rite of baptism. Meeting the almighty God leads the Christian to reflect on his or her own creaturely status. Thus, as some scholars have emphasized, faith in God is on Luther's account reflexive.⁶⁷

Indeed, Luther takes this reflexivity even further, drawing attention to the inevitable impact of an existential grappling with the doctrine of creation. It is impossible, he believes, to believe in God as almighty Creator without at the same time coming to see oneself differently. "Without doubt," he avers, to consider God's almighty acts of creation is at the same time to know oneself—and necessarily so—as a creature. The implication of this self-knowledge? Luther continues:

This is the highest article of the faith, wherein we say: "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.... Few are those who come so far as to believe that he really is the God who makes and creates all things. For such a person must be dead to all things, to good and evil, death and life, hell and heaven, and so confess from the heart, that out of his own powers he can do nothing."⁶⁸

For Luther the logic of creation by God *ex nihilo* parallels the logic of redemption out of the "nothing" of sinfulness.⁶⁹ Put

⁶⁷The Catholic writer Paul Hacker, for example, criticized the subjectivity he found in Luther's understanding of faith. This alleged subjectivity sets Luther in a long line of modern thinkers—e.g., Descartes, Kant—who caused modern philosophy to take its "subjective turn." See Hacker, *Faith in Luther: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2017) (German original, *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther* [Graz, Austria: Styria, 1966]). The reflexivity documented here in Luther's sermons on Gen 1 is not at all the subjectivity of a Descartes or a Kant. Its grounding, to be brief, is extrinsic in the word and working of God.

⁶⁸WA 24:18.29–34 (from the preface). For a consideration of the difficulty involved in believing in God's omnipotence in Luther's theology, see Christine Helmer, "More Difficult to Believe? Luther on Divine Omnipotence," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3.1 (2001): 2–26.

⁶⁹For the different ways Luther can speak of "nothing," I am indebted to the unpublished paper of Dennis Bielfeldt, "Creatio ex nihilo in Luther's Genesis Commentary and the Causal Question," presented at the 12th International Congress for Luther Research (Helsinki, 2012). Used with the author's permission. For a detailed study of the question, see Sammeli Juntunen, *Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft, 1996). A précis of some aspects of Juntunen's work is offered in his "Luther and Metaphysics: What is the Structure of Being according to Luther?" in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 129–60. For a

differently, the humble recognition of God as almighty Creator anticipates the interior resignation—"dead to all things"—the sinner experiences when humbled and then lifted up by the holy God, "who makes the dead alive, and who calls that which is not so that it might be."⁷⁰ To believe in the almighty Creator is already to have faith in the one and only God who has the power to save.

The person who has been so humbled is in the very humility of faith also exalted. Consider: to believe that God has made all things by his own word and command is, so Luther, to know "that I am a part of the world, and therefore also his creation."⁷¹ To believe in God the Almighty Creator is to possess the faith that will sustain one during times of affliction, when one's struggle is against not only the world and the flesh, but also the devil.

Even if Satan should conquer everything and become lord over all, nevertheless he is a creature of God, and he has God above him. Here is the use of this chapter and the fruit of creation. He who does not understand this understands nothing but makes up things about prime matter and other trifles.⁷²

Luther here cuts evil down to size. Wherever it is, and however it has arisen, it is nothing more than a corruption of realities to which God is related, not as a competitor, and certainly not as an equal, but as the almighty Creator. If that is really so, then neither sin nor sickness nor adversity nor even Satan himself can prevail against God.⁷³ "One who has faith," therefore, "is lifted up above all creatures [including Satan]; all these things work together for his good."⁷⁴ The Christian has such "joy and certainty" that she has

fascinating reflection on "self-creation" as a phenomenon of our own times, see Rémi Brague's whimsical but penetrating essay, "The Necessity of the Good: Why Western Culture Needs a Return to Plato," in *First Things* 250 (Feb 2015): 47-52.

⁷⁰I follow here Luther's 1522 translation of Rom 1:17. WADB 7:43: "Wie geschrieben stehet, Ich habe dich gesetzt zum Vater vieler Heiden, fur Gott, dem du geglaubt hast, Der da lebendig machet die Todten, vnd ruffet dem das nicht ist, das es sey."

⁷¹WA 24:21.8, 34. The interplay between the Latin and German texts here is interesting, with the former in the first-person plural, the latter the first-person singular: "pars mundi sumus," versus "ich auch eine stuecke der welt und seiner schoepffung sey." The German text thus seems more personal, relational, and homiletical.

⁷²WA 24:22.2-23.1 (Latin preface).

⁷³For an introduction to Luther's demonology, see Volker Leppin, "Luther on the Devil," *Seminary Ridge Review* 16.2 (2014): 13-27. Some distinctive features of Luther's understanding of the devil are examined in Susan E. Schreiner, "Unmasking the Angel of Light: The Problem of Deception in Martin Luther and Teresa of Avila," in *Mystics; Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). For Luther's distinction between the "black devil" and the "white devil," see Mattox, "Martin Luther's Reception of Paul," 121-28.

⁷⁴WA 24:22.2-23.1 (Latin preface). The final phrase is: "Illi omnia serviunt in bonum." The WA editors do not note it, but this is an allusion to Rom 8:28. Cf. the Wittenbergers's revised vulgate Bible translation (*Vulgata Revision*), which reads:

become "a lord over all things." She fears nothing, save God alone.⁷⁵ When that is so, then her fearlessness reflects the heroic faith of the martyrs and confessors.

The faith that arises as a consequence of the knowledge that God is the Creator thus also marks the dividing line between heaven and hell. Anyone who has not faith in God has God for an enemy and so already suffers the terrors of hell, just as Adam and Eve after their act of disobedience were startled by the sound of every rustling leaf. "But those who have faith are already in paradise and in their hearts are seated in heaven, all those, that is, who receive the fruit of the Word."⁷⁶ Already here in Moses, and even in his first words about the creation—"In the beginning God created"—one finds the faith that opens the very gates of heaven.

IV. CONCLUSION

For Luther saving faith is inseparable from belief in God the almighty Creator. To save sinners it takes a powerful God, one who is Lord over existence itself, over heaven and hell, sin, death, and the devil. In the Genesis sermons we find Luther's answer to the question of the relationship between belief in the one, eternal, impassible, self-sufficient Holy Trinity who as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created out of nothing, and the preaching of the Good News of salvation in Christ. Only the almighty God can promise, and then certainly deliver, eternal salvation. The preacher who cannot assure God's people that this is so cannot offer them the faith that saves. What is at stake, then, in today's debates over the doctrine of God and creation? If Luther were here his answer would be simple: everything.

"Scimus autem quod diligentibus Deum omnia cooperantur in bonum" (WADB 5:641.11-12).

⁷⁵WA 24:22.23-25.

⁷⁶WA 24.23.1-7.

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