



Studies in Luther  
Luther the Iconographer of the Saints of Genesis

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In 1894 the Greifswald theologian and *Alttestamentler* Otto Zockler published a remarkable little book—the first of its kind—entitled *Luther as an Expositor of the Old Testament: Assessed on the Basis of His Great Genesis Commentary*<sup>1</sup> Zockler was a highly-regarded theologian who had written widely in church history and theology, as well as several commentaries on the Old Testament. For some years he had also been at the forefront of Lutheran efforts to defend the biblical doctrine of creation in the context of the challenges posed by Darwinism. He had produced books on natural theology, the relationship between theology and science, and even the witness of the natural world to the fact of creation. As Hans Schwarz puts it, Zockler wanted to show that there was no necessary conflict between good theology and good science.<sup>2</sup> The findings of geology, Zockler believed, could be reconciled with Scripture's assertion that the world was created in six days. The book of nature confirms the book of revelation, and vice versa.

Turning to Luther's Genesis lectures, Zockler also became the first modern scholar to try to derive the shape of Luther's theology as a whole from them. Others also began to recognize the value of these lectures. Writing in the later nineteenth century, for example, Julius Kostlin drew upon the lectures and praised them as a rich resource for understanding Luther's theology and his practical wisdom of life.<sup>3</sup>

Why is Zockler's pathbreaking work on the massive Genesis lectures—arguably the greatest work of Luther's career—so little-known today? Why are Luther's Genesis lectures themselves so little known and discussed, for that matter? The answer is twofold.

First, the mainstream turn-of-the-century German theologians under the influence of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher were less inclined than more conservative theologians like Zockler to seek confirmation of Christian beliefs in the world of nature. Kant's internal *a priori* concepts and Schleiermacher's internal "feeling of absolute dependence" pointed theologians, well, inward, in a way that left them somewhat less concerned than men like Zockler to find evidence, still less proofs, for God in the world outside.

Second and even more importantly, early twentieth-century critical studies of Luther's Genesis lectures undermined scholarly confidence in their historical integrity. In the 1930s, first Erich Seeberg (whose father Reinhold Seeberg had written the massive *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*<sup>4</sup>), and then his student Peter Meinhold, published source-critical analyses of the Genesis lectures that rendered them all but unusable.<sup>5</sup> The Genesis lectures, it was pointed out, were compiled long after the fact, and more importantly, Meinhold argued, they had been prepared for publication by a group of editors whose theological outlook was shaped not by the authentic Luther but instead by the later Philip Melancthon. The lectures, therefore, were tainted by an "alien theology" foreign to Luther's own thought. This alleged chasm between the real Luther and the Genesis lectures was also inscribed in Jaroslav Pelikan's Introduction to the first volume of Luther's Works (*Genesis 7—5*), which left it more or less up to the reader to decide where Luther's own voice could be heard and where one heard instead the voices of Melancthonian editors.

## *Why are Luther's Genesis lectures so little known and discussed?*

The work of Seeberg and Meinhold relegated the Genesis lectures to the sidelines of Luther studies for a half-century. That situation changed only recently. Following the pathbreaking work of Juhani Forsberg, published in 1984, on Luther's interpretation of Abraham in the Genesis lectures, a series of cautious studies gradually emerged. Jonathan Trigg based his study of Luther's doctrine of baptism largely on the Genesis lectures<sup>6</sup>; Heiko Oberman praised them as a point of entry for understanding Luther's theology<sup>7</sup>; Ulrich Asendorf published a comprehensive overview<sup>8</sup>; my own study of Luther's Genesis interpretation in the light of patristic and medieval exegesis came out in 2003<sup>9</sup>; and in 2008 John Maxfield provided an analysis of the lectures in terms of their movement-shaping impact on Luther's students.<sup>10</sup> The fifty-year silence on Luther's

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Genesis, it seems, has come to an end. Has a period of harvest begun?

## *The "Dear Genesis;" Still on the Sidelines*

As a preacher and professor, Martin Luther worked more and longer on the book of Genesis than on any other book in the Bible. To be sure, his Psalms commentaries are varied and weighty, and they stem from all phases of his career. The John sermons, too, are lengthy. But his work on Genesis outweighs them all.

In the Weimar (wa) edition of Luther's writings, his work on Genesis includes the following: student notes on an undated series of sermons (wa 9), which may have been preached as early as

1518; student notes on a complete set of sermons on Genesis preached in German from 1523 to 1524 (wa 14); those same sermons, edited, translated, and published first in Latin and then in German in 1527 (wa 24); and finally, the massive lecture series of 1535-1545, the lengthiest classroom effort of Luther's career (wa 42-44). The Luther of 1535, moreover, was arguably at the top of his game, so one would expect scholars to have paid a good deal of attention to his interpretation of Genesis, especially after the recent studies noted above. But that is still not so. Why?

The primary reason is surely the epoch-making tale of the young Martin Luther of the years 1517 to 1521. The wider world commemorated his work, after all, in 2017, exactly five hundred years after the year when it all (apparently) began. The series of events that brought Luther at last to Worms in 1521 continues to captivate, including his humble beginnings, his monastic quest to "find a gracious God," the unintentional sensation and celebrity that came from the Ninety-Five Theses, his subsequent battles with a series of intimidating theological adversaries, and his eventual stand against pope and empire. This story is largely why Luther is remembered today, and it is a whopper of a tale, so much so that even now it is the younger Luther who gets all the press.<sup>11</sup> Rare is the Luther study that frontloads the work of his later career in order to introduce it as a whole, except perhaps the occasional privileging of the Galatians lectures (1531/35) as expressive of his "mature theology."

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Beyond the understandable tendency to focus on the young Luther's development, there are other reasons his "dear Genesis" has always had to ride in the back seat.<sup>12</sup> First, and not to put too fine a point on it, Luther's work on Genesis is, well, odd. Readers who approach the Genesis lectures today are tempted to take him as someone near us, the "first modern man" perhaps, and so to assume that relatively little preparation would be required in order to see what he was doing with Genesis. We think we know that he insisted on the sole final authority of Holy Scripture, and that he paired this insistence with an equally emphatic conviction that Scripture should be interpreted according to the *sensus literalis*, the plain or story-level of the text. We think we know that Luther taught the *Schriftprinzip* or *sola Scriptura*, and we think he wanted the Bible to be interpreted grammatically and historically. Thus, in order to read the Genesis lectures, you just read them.

There is much to commend in these assumptions, and of course it is better to read Luther than not to read him, whether one is relatively well prepared for the task or not! But if we want to read him better, it is imperative to recognize that the common-sense approach to the Genesis lectures outlined above won't do. It includes a hidden retrojective assumption about Luther's approach to the Bible, one that reads later Protestant exegetical methods into his early sixteenth-century exegesis. As one wag has put it, if we want to know the *real* Luther then we will have to find him in the sixteenth century, and much closer to the fifteenth than the seventeenth.

Precisely so. As a reader of Scripture, the elder Luther remained an enthusiastic participant in approaches to exegesis that had been developing in later medieval scholasticism and in Renaissance humanism, both of which he had become familiar with as a young student.<sup>13</sup> The elder Luther, in short, remained indebted both to the scholastic teachers who taught him how words work (semantics, term-inist logic, and so forth)<sup>14</sup> and to the humanist movement with its concern for the recovery of the classical languages for the power of learned eloquence to move the human heart and for people of faith to hasten back to the original sources of Christian doctrine in the holy Scriptures: *ad fontes!*

The oddness of Luther's reading of Genesis stems not only from the application of his own powerful intellect and supple imagination to the text, nor even from his eclectic development of interpretive strategies and motifs found in the writings of his patristic and medieval predecessors. Instead, and even more fundamentally, it derives from his determination to extend the insights of the more recent traditions in which he himself had been trained in order to read Scripture in what he saw as a new and better way. Later medieval concerns for the spirituality of the literal sense, patristic and medieval traditions of interpretation, pastoral wisdom, medieval semantics, and humanist biblicism came together in Luther's exegesis in new and original ways, and

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this potent mix is arguably nowhere more powerfully on display than in his readings of the stories of Genesis. It is precisely the historical distance of this mixture from the controversies of our own times that renders Luther's readings of Genesis so potentially useful to us today

In the stories of Adam and Eve, their descendants down through Noah, as well as Abraham and Sarah and the patriarchs and matriarchs of the covenant people of Israel, Luther finds the gospel in action. We read Moses, as Luther sees the matter, precisely because in his writings—and nowhere more than in *das erste Buch Mose*, Genesis—Moses portrays with unparalleled power all that the Christian life includes: faith and faithfulness, sin and unbelief, grace and works, marriage and home life, politics good and bad, church true and false, cross and suffering, death and the devil.

It's all there, given in the stories and examples of the people of Israel. What does faith in action look like? How are women and men of faith put to the test in this world? What ironies and contradictions are likely to come their way? Where can the believer find the wisdom to respond well to all that the world, the flesh, and the devil may hurl against her? Luther well recognizes that the answers to all such questions are already given in creed and catechism and experienced in the rhythms of prayer, liturgy, and so on. But concrete and inspiring examples? Salutary warnings? These Moses provides by narrating the lives of the Old Testament saints. Genesis, on Luther's reading, is a practical how-to book, timeless in its wisdom, perennially relevant to all who hope to live and die in the faith.

## **Introducing the Saints of Genesis**

The most representative figure of all in Luther's Genesis exegesis, or at least so it seems to me, is St. Eve. Readers have long noticed that Adam doesn't have much to say in the narrative of

Genesis 3 where Moses relates the common human *Urgeschichte*, the archetypal story of sin and redemption. Instead, the action centers on Eve.

As a reader Luther was deeply interested in the movements of her psyche as she considered the serpent's word: "You shall not die." Eve on Luther's reading became, as it were, an "every-man," a representative figure who was just like each person who, when faced with temptation, wavers and falls into sin. Luther's emphasis in reading her story falls not, however, on a moral evaluation of the type(s) or sequence

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of sin involved in her decision to disobey God's command, which was traditionally understood as pride, followed by the other deadly sins. Instead he examines the internal movement of her soul away from faith in the simple words of God—"You will surely die"—toward outright unbelief when she accepted the serpent's words.

Just so, Luther figured, all people sink down when they cease to look to God with the simplicity of faith. The fall occurred in Eve's heart before it was expressed in her action. What happened to Eve, moreover, is what happens to everyone. Indeed, it happened even to the disciple Peter, who walked momentarily on the water but sank clown when he took his eyes off Jesus. Holiness, one would rightly conclude, is for Luther what happens when sinners remember to look to Christ alone, and sin is what happens when sinners look away. Learning how to discern the rhythms of faith, temptation, and unbelief, on the other hand, is what happens when readers attend with care to the stories of the faithful, particularly the story Moses tells about our first mother.

St. Abraham is a universal figure in a different sense from St. Eve. To understand how this is so, we need to recall Luther's doctrine of the three estates: church, home, and state. The former two are included in the original creation, while the latter is a concession to the fall. Each denotes a fundamental set of relationships: of humankind to God, of wives and husbands to one another and to their children; and of rulers to subjects. Each of the estates also requires leadership: in the church, pastors; in the home, parents; and in the state, princes. Abraham's universal example reflects Luther's reading of a simpler time, when one man could be at the same time pastor and preacher for his community, which was nothing other than the extended family over which he was already both parent and political ruler. Abraham ruled, in other words, in church, home, and state at the same time. Insofar as that was so, Luther perceives, Abraham's story is filled with examples fit to edify the people who occupy positions of authority and responsibility today. Thus Luther explores Abraham's story with interest and energy, and he hopes that every preacher, parent, and community leader will do so as well.

Reading the Genesis narratives as stories of the saints also enabled Luther to find heroic faith and moral virtue in unexpected places and in the lives of people who were not nearly so central to the

narrative as an Eve or an Abraham. Thus, his lectures praise the lives and deeds not only of such men as Isaac or Jacob but also their wives, their slaves, and even those

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whose names are never mentioned. An example of the latter can be seen in Luther's reading of the exile of Cain following his murder of the virtuous Abel. The text tells us that Cain went out and built a city. Luther surmises that Cain founded a civilization by building a city with walls and defenses. But he could hardly have founded the race of "Cainites" without the help of a wife. Who was she? Borrowing from rabbinic legends, Luther names Cain's wife Calmana and marvels aloud at the heroic faith of this otherwise unnamed and unmentioned woman. In obedience to the covenant of marriage instituted in Genesis 2, she went into exile with her husband even though she was not, like him, a sinner estranged from Adam and the true church. Luther thus invites his student auditors, and us his later readers, to imagine this young woman dwelling in the fortified city of the Cainites but remaining at the same time very much a believer, numbered among the saints of God. Ferreting out the story of this unnamed woman alerts us to the presence of the unnoticed people of faith near to us. Who are our Calmanas?<sup>15</sup>

In a similar case Luther enters imaginatively into the suffering and marvels at the faith of St. Rachel, the second wife of the patriarch Jacob. Like all the young women among Abraham's descendants, she greatly desired the gift of motherhood. Like

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them she knew (so Luther) that a "crusher" had been promised to Eve, the one who, born of a woman, would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). Luther's empathy for Rachel, though, seems to reflect more than just a conviction that she considered herself duty-bound to hasten the birth of the Messiah. Luther seems to feel how much Rachel, the one whom Jacob had loved and worked for so long, desired the natural good of motherhood. What a sorrow her barrenness must have been!

So, Luther surmises, she must have entreated God most earnestly with her prayers, crying out for the gift of a child. God answered her prayer and gave her Joseph because this prayer was powerful and effective. Why? In a word, Rachel had the Holy Spirit. In her suffering, Luther, ever the good mystic, discerns an interior groaning that was wondrously combined with a divine lifting up: *simul gemitus et rap- tus*. The Holy Spirit was present and at work in Rachel so that her humble cry to God became the ecstatic groaning of the Spirit at work within her. This, he figures, was truly a prayer of omnipotence, one whose all-powerful plea God could not refuse to answer. Rachel's prayer was at the same time the prayer of the Spirit of God and just so a prayer that God could not reject. St. Rachel, therefore, who knew and spoke with God, was a woman with a story to tell, even a sermon to preach.<sup>16</sup> Luther's interpretation of this mother in the faith invites the reader not only to marvel at the power and goodness of God but also to listen when women of faith tell others about it.

Readers should not conclude from these examples that Luther gave short shrift to the men of Genesis. Perhaps the most memorable of his readings of the patriarchs is that of St. Joseph, who was simply, Luther says, an *exemplar hominis perfecti*. Does that sound like something Luther would *never* say? It does. Did he say it? Yes, and much more. The Christian heroism Luther had found consistently in such great patriarchs as Noah, Shem, Abraham, and Isaac arguably reaches its peak in his reading of Joseph.

But what exactly does it mean that Luther describes him as “the exemplar of the perfect man”? Naturally, it means that Joseph was in fact a very good man, even the best of men. This implication did not escape the notice, by the way, of the editors who saw the lectures into print. The last of the four massive tomes in which they were first

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published bore the subtitle “Volume Four, Containing the Story of the Most Holy Patriarch Joseph.” Luther’s students had not missed the point. But how, concretely, was Joseph good?

Again, the three estates come into play, even if Luther does not mention them explicitly. The Joseph who came to work in Potiphar’s house was, first of all, an obedient subject. But precisely by being so, he came also to be a leader in church and home and even, eventually, in the state. Luther describes Joseph as a man who got up early every morning, said his prayers, retained the worship of the true God, and so became the one to whom everyone in the household looked for leadership. Even Potiphar himself. He was, moreover, tried and tested when Mrs. Potiphar approached him for sexual favors. Passing the test, however, he found himself unjustly accused and on trial.

And here virtuous Joseph not only retained faith but also exercised the highest spiritual wisdom. The devil appeared as God in this trial, according to Luther, as the voice of the wealthy, successful, and powerful Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar. Justice, light, and goodness seemed to be on their side. God, on the other hand, played along, hiding Himself under a contrary form. Thus God appeared to be the devil, leading holy Joseph straight

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down to the living hell of an Egyptian prison, and so surely also to death. In his persistent faith even in the God Who so hides Himself, Joseph became an example of the *homo perfectus* in a twofold manner. He was virtuous in fact, a deeply good man who excelled in everything he did and yet remained a humble God-fearer. But even more so, in his suffering, trial, and unjust sentence of death he became a type of the coming savior, ready to go even to the point of divine abandonment, and so serendipitously fulfilling and surpassing the hopes and prayers of his good mother.

What does the reader learn from Luther here? If there is a *simul peccator* in virtuous Joseph, then it is hidden, so to speak, under a contrary form. This is not to say that Luther thought Joseph needed neither God’s help nor His grace and favor. To the contrary, he needed all that, as the

episode when his brothers sold his arrogant younger self into slavery well illustrates. But it is simply to recognize that Luther did not actually imagine great Christians—those who have been chastened by suffering, loss, and even failure -as living by faith and at the same time continuing to practice sin. St. Joseph's example clearly says otherwise. He was raised up for faith and for faithfulness. The implication? Go and do likewise.

## Luther's Genesis Today

Otto Zockler was right: Luther's lectures on Genesis reward and challenge the reader, and they are crucial for knowing Luther's theology. For his part, Zockler thought what was needed was to sketch out Luther's systematic theology as a whole on the basis of the lectures, from prolegomena to last things. Luther himself, however, seems to have been up to something a bit different.<sup>17</sup> Imagining his way into the lives of the men and women of Genesis, he finds that their stories beat to the abiding rhythms of the Christian life as he understands it: law and gospel, faith and unbelief, sin and forgiveness.

Perhaps we could think of the old professor as an iconographer. Lecturing his way through Genesis in the company of young students eager to join the growing ranks of evangelical ministers, he transformed the narratives of Genesis into verbal icons. The love and faithfulness of God are revealed in the lives of the holy men and women of Israel. Their faith invites imitation. God will be with this generation, Luther assures his students, as He was with the generations of the people of Israel long ago. Luther's Genesis, it seems, is an old man's wisdom, less the fireworks and more the steady flame.

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## Notes

1. Otto Zockler, *Luther als Ausleger des Alten Testaments: Gewilrdigt auf Grund seines grosseren Genesis-Commentars* (Greifswald: Julius Abel, 1884).
2. See Hans Schwarz's *Vying for Truth—Theology and the Natural Sciences: From the 17th Century to the Present* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 44—7.
3. Julius Kostlin, *The Theology of Luther in its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897).
4. Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1905).
5. Erich Seeberg, *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem alten Luther* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932). Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber* Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936).
6. Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
7. Heiko Obermann, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 166-7.
8. Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535-1545)* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).
9. Mickey L. Mattox, *“Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs”: Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesin 1535-1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).



10. John Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirks- ville: Truman State University Press, 2008).
11. For a quick survey of the life and work of the elder Luther, see my article "Life: 1526-1546," in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, eds. Derek Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) [hereafter cited as oeml], 2:148-63.
12. The phrase is from Luther's closing remarks on Genesis, "Das ist nu der liebe Genesis," in *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Schriften*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883— 2009) [hereafter cited as wa], 44.825.
13. For Luther's association with Renaissance humanism at Wittenberg, see Timothy J. Wengert, "Melancthon, Luther, and their Wittenberg Colleagues," oeml 2:518-41.
14. For Luther's nominalist background and its significance for his theology and approach to understanding the meaning of the Bible, see Graham White, *Luther as Nominalist* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1994). See now also the more recent evaluations in Pekka Karkkainen, "Nominalism and the Via Mod- erna," oeml 3:696-708, and Dennis Bielfeldt, "Ontology," oeml 3:1-21.
15. For further analysis of Luther's reading of Cain's story, interested readers may consult my "Fortuita Misericordia: Martin Luther on the Salvation of Some Biblical Outsiders," *Pro Ecclesia* 15/3 (2006): 281-303.
16. The answers Luther gives to questions about women's preaching in the Genesis lectures are explored in my "Luther on Eve, Women and the Church," *Lutheran Quarterly* 17/4(2003): 456-74.
17. Further to this point, and for Zockler's criticisms of Luther's hagiographical reading of the men and women of Genesis, see my aforementioned book "*Defender*," 25.