Yale
BIBLE STUDY

Reformation History

Genesis

In many respects the Book of Genesis formed the theological heart of the Protestant Reformation. With its subjects of creation, the fall, and covenants between God and humanity, the reformers returned to Genesis as the foundation for many of their core teachings. Abraham was regarded as the father of the faith, as Paul was to say in the Letter to the Romans. Not surprisingly, we find numerous commentaries on Genesis written in the Reformation period as well as extensive collections of sermons.

During the last ten years of his life Martin Luther worked on his commentary on Genesis, a biblical book with which he had been engaged from his earliest days as a professor in Wittenberg. Luther regarded his Genesis commentary as one of his greatest achievements, although in his preface to the work he acknowledged that others would and should come along later who would do a better job than he had done. Luther's approach to reading Genesis, as it was for all of the books of the Old Testament, was centered on the person of Jesus Christ, whom he found everywhere in the Hebrew scriptures. As a consequence, Luther had no problem speaking of the presence of the Gospel in Genesis, as well as of the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole of the first book of Moses he considered to be preparation for the coming of Christ.

Central to Luther's reading of Genesis was his understanding of law and gospel, which was more than a crude distinction between the two testaments. Both law and gospel refer to the distinctive forms of God's sovereignty and revelation. Law contains anything that constrains or puts a harness on human conduct, such as laws, legislation, and institutions. Law is the means by which God curbs humanity in order that God's promise might be received. But there is another, darker aspect to law, for it has the effect of burdening the conscience of the person by revealing how far short of God's demands the he or she falls. It is when we acknowledge that we are unable to meet the demands of the law that God speaks the word of Gospel, which is in Christ. God provides all that is demanded by the law by relieving the burdened conscience of the believer. For Luther, this was a story not limited to the New Testament but was clear from the promises found in Genesis, and he wrote in his 1523 preface to the Old Testament:

> Know, then, that the Old Testament is a book of laws, which teaches what men are to do and not to do, and gives, besides, examples and stories of how these laws are kept or broken; just as the New Testament is a Gospel book, or book of grace, and teaches where one is to get the power to fulfill the law. But in the New Testament there are given, along with the teaching about grace, many other teachings that are laws and commandments for the ruling of the flesh, since in this life the spirit is not perfected and grace alone cannot rule. Just so in the Old Testament there are, beside the laws, certain promises and offers of grace, by which the holy fathers and prophets, under the law, were kept, like us, under the faith of Christ.
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> Nevertheless, just as the peculiar and chief teaching of the New Testament is the proclamation of grace and peace in Christ, through the forgiveness of sins; so the peculiar and chief teaching of the Old Testament is the teaching of laws, the showing of sin, and the furtherance of good. Know that this is what you have to expect in the Old Testament.

As Luther read Genesis in terms of law and gospel, he also saw the first book of the Pentateuch as being about the church and its fulfillment. The people of the Old Testament looked to the coming of the messiah just as Christians looked to the second coming, the new creation. In a manner shared by all the writers of the Reformation, Luther perceived and drew direct parallels between the worlds of the ancient Jews and the contemporary world in which he lived. In both the past and present, the people lived under gospel and law, seeking to fulfill the demands of God and finding themselves woefully unable to succeed. They struggled against the demonic powers of the earth that engaged them in daily struggle. For Luther, Satan and his demons were a daily reality against whom each person was engaged in a pitched battle. Amid this quotidian struggle, the faithful heard the word of grace of God's promises that they might live in hope.

This approach of drawing a line from the lives of the characters of Genesis to the contemporary world where he preached was Luther's understanding of the historical meaning of the biblical text. Although he was a well-trained scholar, for pastoral purposes Luther was not interested in the philological or textual history of the biblical books, but he did see a continuity between the men and women of scripture with those people in front of whom he was preaching. Through hearing the stories of Genesis read and the Word expounded he hoped his congregations would recognize themselves in the ancient accounts, that they would realize that as God fulfilled God's promises to the Jews so could they be assured that they would never be abandoned.

This bond of past and present, the reformers argued, was only possible where the Bible was absolutely clear. The Protestants spoke of the literal understanding of the biblical text, which meant something quite different from what we often mean today. Biblical literalism as we speak of it comes largely from the nineteenth century. In the sixteenth

century, the literal was understood to refer to the intended meaning of the words, not just what they say grammatically. For Luther, as for Calvin and others, every word of the Bible was inspired and is the Word of God, but scripture had to be read in faith. Without faith, the Bible is just a collection of words that can never be experienced inwardly or fulfilled. Neither Luther nor Calvin was bothered by internal inconsistencies or linguistic problems in the text, for what we have was written by fallible human hands. At the heart of their reading of the Bible was the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the belief that God's gracious act in Christ frees the faithful from the bondage of sin. Thus, for Luther the purpose of biblical interpretation was not to find the textual history (although he recognized the importance of that work), but to open the Bible to the people by revealing Christ. Thus, for the reformers, there was a doctrinal core to the Bible, which was justification in Christ through faith alone, and it was the role of the interpreter of both the Old and New Testaments to reveal that message in the words of the Hebrew and Greek. The reason Luther had no time for the books of Esther or the Epistle of James was because he felt they did not speak that central truth.

For the reformers, doctrine, history, and grammar all flowed into one another, and in reading the commentaries of Luther and Calvin we do not simply find theological explanations of Genesis. What opens before us is a rich world in which the reformers took enormous interest in lives, personalities, and historical contexts of the ancient men and women. Let us look for example at a passage on Jacob, and we find a concern with the person of the biblical character, his family, and concerns. All of this Luther implicitly draws into the world of his German hearers.

> For when [Jacob's] household was in a most disturbed condition and full of great disasters and the worries by which we have heard that the saintly patriarch was afflicted, not so much on account of the enmity of his brother and injuries from his father-in-law, which he overcame with great courage, unconquerable faith, and wonderful patience, as on account of his domestic afflictions, Dinah's defilement, and the deaths of his nurse Deborah and his wife Rachel, and finally on account of the unspeakable incest of his son, who polluted the paternal couch—in these great difficulties, his one hope and comfort in old age and in troubles remained in the firstborn son of his deceased wife, Joseph, who with his piety and saintly life in one way or another healed and encouraged the sick heart of his father. Suddenly and unexpectedly he is also removed, so that the unhappy father after the loss of his dearest wife is also deprived of the son who was especially beloved. (Luther Works, vol. 6, p. 312)

In reading the Genesis text, Luther worked to bring the reader's life into contact with the biblical Jacob, revealing the tumults and worries of human existence. It is the world into which God's alien grace comes and transforms life. That message, for Luther, is the narrative of human life and the central message to be gleaned from scripture.

If we turn to John Calvin and his treatment of Genesis we find further thought on the nature of the biblical text. One question that interested him and is relevant to conversations today concerns the relationship between the Bible and science. In treating creation, Calvin was clear that what we read in Genesis is not a strictly scientific account of what happened but rather a treatment of a narrative shaped by faith. As Calvin famously said, "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere," From his commentary on Genesis, Calvin wrote:

> I have said, that Moses does not here subtlety descant, as a philosopher, on the secrets of nature, as may be seen in these words…. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote, in a popular style, things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons endued with common sense are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend…. Nor did Moses truly wish to withdraw us from [astronomy] in omitting such things as are peculiar to the art; but because he was ordained a teacher as well of the unlearned and rude as of the learned, he could not otherwise fulfill his office than by descending to this grosser method of instruction…. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage. (Genesis Commentary, 1:16)

For Calvin the Bible is not a transcript of the divine mind, but the Word of God accommodated to limited human capacity. God speaks to God's audience in the most appropriate forms. This is Calvin's use of the Latin term "accommodatio", by which he means that God addresses fallen humanity in forms in which men and women can best understand. Famously, Calvin uses the image of a mother speaking to a child to describe how God speaks to us.

One of the central teachings in the Reformed tradition to emerge from Genesis is the concept of the covenant, which lay at the foundation of Reformed and Puritan conceptions of the Church. John Calvin in his Institutes of the Christian Religion wrote that:

> The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth.

For Calvin, following earlier Reformed writers such as Huldrych Zwingli, the covenant was the essential form of the relationship between God and God's elect. That relationship extended from the moment of creation when God chose who would be

saved, but the formal relationship is found in Genesis 17 with Abraham. The whole of human history is based on the covenantal relationship established between God and Abraham, which Calvin, along with other members of the Reformed tradition, emphasized was fulfilled in the incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ.

In their Christological reading of Genesis, the Protestant reformers found the key doctrines of their faith. From the opening story of creation, which they saw as evidence for the Trinity, to the sacrifice of Isaac, which they understood as referring to Christ's passion, and the covenant with Abraham, they believed the whole of Christian teaching to be foreshadowed in the ancient book.

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