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“He Spake and it was Done”: Luther’s Creation Theology in His 1535 Lectures on Genesis 1:1–2:4

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When Martin Luther began giving lectures on the book of Genesis in the summer of 1535, he did not anticipate that this series of lectures would become the last and longest of all his lecture series.¹ He had already preached earlier about various passages from Genesis,² but his later lectures on that biblical book from between 1535 and 1545 constitute a more mature and detailed exposition than his earlier treatments. These lectures have been studied from a variety of perspectives, such as gender equality,³

¹ Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1883), vols. 42-44 [hereafter WA]; idem, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1-5*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958) [hereafter LW]. Cf. Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535 - 1545)*, vol. 87 of *Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998). The lectures were interrupted several times due to the spreading pestilence and Luther’s declining health.

² WA 14:97-488; 24:1-710.

³ Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther Against the Contempt of Women,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1988): 521-528; Mickey L. Mattox, “Martin Luther’s Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Context of the Christian Exegetical Tradition,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1997); 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*, vol. 92 of *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Kristen E. Kvam, “Equality in Eden? Gender Dynamics and Luther’s Lectures on the Creation of Adam and Eve,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 6, no. 2 (2004): 5-18. Martin Luther says that Eve “was

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anthropology,⁴ work and vocation,⁵ the cross and salvation,⁶ the two kingdoms of God,⁷ ecclesiology,⁸ ecology,⁹ the doctrine of the Godhead,¹⁰

a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige." See *LW* 1:69. Since this statement stands in tension with the conclusion of the above scholars, it would be worth researching this issue more deeply.

⁴ Armin-Ernst Buchrucker, "Luthers Anthropologie nach der großen Genesisvorlesung von 1535/45," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 14, no. 2 (1972): 250-262; Theodor Jørgensen, "Der Mensch vor Gott in der Genesisvorlesung Luthers," in *Luther nach 1530, Theologie, Kirche und Politik: Referate und Berichte des zehnten Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung, København, 4. - 9. August 2002*, vol. 71 of *Lutherjahrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 131-158; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, transl. and ed. by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 240-247. Luther recognized that Paul connected *creatio ex nihilo* and the resurrection of the dead as well as justification in Rom 4:17 ("vocat, quae non, ut sint" [he calls what is not that it is]). See *WA* 40/3:154,13. Thus, the resurrection of the dead is a *creatio ex nihilo*. See *WA* 17/1:219,33-36; 43:147,5-6.9-10. Cf. Friedrich Lohmann, "Die Bedeutung der dogmatischen Rede von der 'creatio ex nihilo'," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 99, no. 2 (2002): 201.

⁵ Martin J. Heineken, "Luther and the 'Orders of Creation' in Relation to a Doctrine of Work and Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1952): 393-414; Eric R. Andre, "Gustaf Wingren's Confession of the Doctrine of Creation for an Understanding of Vocation and Sanctification," *Logia* 11, no. 3 (2002): 29-35.

⁶ Ernest L. Simmons, "Creation in Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (1991): 50-58; Asendorf, 68-147, 376-387, 431-468; Michael Roth, "Die fundamentalethische Bedeutung der Unterscheidung von Schöpfung und Erlösung: Bemerkungen zur Zwei-Regimenten-Lehre," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 46, no. 2 (2004): 184-206; Christopher Voigt-Goy, "Die gesellschaftlichen Stände, die Schöpfung und der Fall: Zur Ständelehre in Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535)," in *Kontexte: Biografische und forschungsgeschichtliche Schnittpunkte der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft: Festschrift für Hans Jochen Boecker zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Thomas Wagner, Dieter Vieweger, and Kurt Erlemann (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), 65-80. As the *solus Christus* and the *sola gratia* deny any human participation in the work of salvation so the *creatio ex nihilo* rejects that anything else than the divine will participated in the origin of the world. See Vitor Westhelle, "Cross, Creation, and Ecology: The Meeting Point Between the Theology of the Cross and Creation Theology in Luther," in *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkans forskningsråd, 1995), 159-167; Lohmann, 202; Niels H. Gregersen, "Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 20, 21.

⁷ Asendorf, 468-483; Roth, 184-206.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Die Kirche nach Luthers Genesisvorlesung," in *Lutherforschung heute: Referate und Berichte des 1. Internationalen Lutherforschungskongresses, Aarhus, 18. - 23. August 1956*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Berlin: Evangelisches Verlagshaus, 1958),

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as well as the philosophical and theological knowledge of God.¹¹ Other researchers focused on the sources that Luther consulted as well as on the editors and publishers of his lectures.¹² Besides, it is well-known among scholars that the present text of Luther's Genesis lectures reflects the notes of his students and the editorial work of the publishers rather than what he himself had actually written. Several writers have pointed out that the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* was pivotal to both Luther's doctrine of creation and his doctrine of justification.¹³ Johannes Schwanke studied

102-110; Asendorf, 248-298; Michael Beyer and Volker Mantey, "Ekklesiologische Texte aus Luthers Genesisvorlesung, 1535-1545," in *Luther nach 1530, Theologie, Kirche und Politik: Referate und Berichte des zehnten Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung, København, 4 - 9. August 2002*, vol. 71 of *Lutherjahrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 246-248.

⁹ Noel F. R. Guzman, "Martin Luther's Ethics of Creation," (Th.D. dissertation, Boston University, 2006).

¹⁰ Asendorf, 147-247, 387-430.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 299-376.

¹² G. Koffmane, "Einleitung," in *WA 42:viii-x*; Erich Seeberg, *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem alten Luther*, 36/1 of *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932); Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber*, vol. 8 of *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Geistesgeschichte* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936); W. Köhler, "[Book Review] *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber* by Peter Meinhold," *Historische Zeitschrift* 160, no. 3 (1939):578-580; Thomas M. Kalita, "The Influence of Nicholas of Lyra on Martin Luther's Commentary on Genesis," (S.T.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1985); Asendorf, 484-490; Hans-Ulrich Delius, *Die Quellen von Martin Luthers Genesisvorlesung*, vol. 111 of *Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie* (München: Kaiser, 1992). Luther's disposition of the lectures is found in *WA 42:xix-xxv*.

¹³ Paul Althaus, *Der Schöpfungsgedanke bei Luther: Vorgetragen am 8. Mai 1959*, vol. 7 of *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* (München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1959), 12, 18; David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther*, vol. 10 of *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 23, 163; Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1963), 109-118; Lohmann, 199, 200. Thus many generations of confirmees had to learn the statement: "Ich gläube, daß mich Gott geschaffen hat sampt allen Kreaturn" (I believe that God created me along with all creatures) which concludes with the confession "ohn all mein Verdienst und Wirdigkeit" (without all my merits and worthiness). Quoted in *ibid.*, 200. Creation and justification are connected because both reflect similar patterns of divine action—God creates / recreates something out of nothing and humans do not act any meritorious part in that creation/recreation. Hence Luther viewed *creatio ex nihilo* almost as a foundational principle of divine action. See *WA*

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Luther's Genesis lectures specifically from the perspective of that concept, suggesting that it is the overruling theme of these lectures.¹⁴ The present article wants to focus specifically on Luther's lectures on the biblical creation account as found in Gen 1:1-2:4, categorizing the Reformer's explanations into subjects that reoccur repeatedly in order to extract the themes that seemed to be of special importance to him.

Luther's Basic Presuppositions

Before looking at Luther's interpretation of the biblical creation account, it is helpful to take note of explicit premises and underlying presuppositions found in his lectures. The premises and presuppositions of a person influence his or her interpretations and conclusions. Paying attention to underlying assumptions may shed light on other topics and themes. Since Luther seemed to emphasize the authority of the sources, concepts of time and space, and God's nature, the present section will focus on these three themes.

The Authority of Sources

Martin Luther approached the issue of origins from the basic premise that the Bible is the only safe and reliable source of information on that topic,¹⁵ being superior to the writings of philosophers, theologians, astronomers, and scientists. His lectures reveal, nevertheless, that he interacted with the writings of a wide range of ancient and mediaeval Greek, Jewish, and Latin philosophers and theologians.¹⁶ In matters of science, he considered the ancient Greek philosophers superior to Christian theologians and philosophers. Their reflections were "more advanced" and "more clever" than the childish ideas (*pueriles cogitationes*) of Ambrose and Augustine.¹⁷ Luther regarded it expedient to follow the advice of

7:547,1-9; cf. Lohmann, 200.

¹⁴ Johannes Schwanke, *Creatio ex nihilo: Luthers Lehre von der Schöpfung aus dem Nichts in der Großen Genesisvorlesung (1535 - 1545)*, vol. 126 of *Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

¹⁵ *WA* 42:3-5, 21-23, 33, 35, 36; *LW* 1:3-6, 27, 29, 30, 44, 47, 49.

¹⁶ Koffmane, "Einleitung," in *WA* 42:viii; Otto Zöckler, *Luther als Ausleger des Alten Testaments: Gewürdigt auf Grund seines grösseren Genesis-Commentars* (Greifswald: Julius Abel, 1884); Kalita; Delius.

¹⁷ *WA* 42:5, 22-24; *LW* 1:6, 28-32.

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Jerome and Averroës who recommended refraining from attempts to scientifically explain the exact procedure of creation.¹⁸ Such attempts were futile because God is not necessarily bound to the laws of nature but is even able to alter them.¹⁹ Although Moses' creation account may not be able to explain in every detail how creation happened, there is no better teacher in matters of origins than Moses.²⁰ Hence, Luther advised his students to follow the biblical creation account rather than philosophers and church fathers.²¹ Science was assigned the place to observe and ponder over the divine works for it cannot clarify their origin.²² One should remember that the terminology of Scripture may differ from the language employed by scientists and philosophers. Thus, for example, the entire area that the Bible calls "heaven" was divided by astronomers into "spheres," "apsides," and "epicycles."²³ Yet, in his attempt to assess the views of ancient and mediaeval scholars from an independent and critical perspective, Luther was not always able to divest himself of their presuppositions.

Luther's Worldview and Concept of Time

His understanding of time and timelessness may be an example of his having been influenced by ancient and medieval scholars. While rumors of Nicholas Copernicus' heliocentric worldview had already spread throughout Europe in the mid-1510s, the majority of the astronomers still rejected that system at the end of the 16th century.²⁴ Luther was not an exception; being a child of his time he still reasoned that the earth is at rest and everything moves around it, including the sun.²⁵ In the Genesis creation account, he stated, Moses "is speaking of the natural day, which consists of twenty-four hours, during which the *primum mobile* [the sun] revolves

¹⁸ *WA* 42:22; *LW* 1:28, 29. Yet, Luther's acceptance of Irenaeus' critique of various cosmogonies shows that he did not always follow this principle. See below.

¹⁹ *WA* 42:21; *LW* 1:27.

²⁰ *WA* 42:4-6, 23, 38, 39; *LW* 1:4-6, 30, 52.

²¹ *WA* 42:4-6; *LW* 1:4-6.

²² *WA* 42:6, 22-24; *LW* 1:6, 29-32.

²³ *WA* 42:35, 36; *LW* 1:47, 48.

²⁴ Peter Hanns Reill and Ellen Judy Wilson, *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, Library of World History, rev. ed. (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 129; Mario D'Addio, *The Galileo Case: Trial, Science, Truth*, transl. by Brian Williams (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2004), 25.

²⁵ *WA* 42:33, 41; *LW* 1:44, 55. See also Schwanke, 104-108.

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from east to west.”²⁶ In his understanding it was not merely the earthly reckoning of time but time in general, that came into existence on the first day of the creation week.²⁷ The heavenly bodies were actually made specifically for humans in their physical life on this earth, since they were able to count; an ability that animals did not possess.²⁸ He argued that both the counting of definite times and time in general are strictly connected to the movement of the heavenly bodies.²⁹ Thus, in his opinion, there was no time before that first day.³⁰ Speculations about what happened and what God was doing previous to the existence of time were to be avoided however.³¹ In fact, God is “outside the scope of time,” which is why all things are present to Him; “nothing . . . is earlier or later, swifter or slower.”³² Hence, when this present world will come to an end, time will cease as well, and the saints too will exist in a realm of timelessness.³³ Luther’s suggestion that the Father “begets the Word *in eternity* and *in time* establishes this world through the Word” resounds the idea of the eternal generation of the Son.³⁴ It is apparent that Luther unconsciously depended on the Greek philosophical notion of time despite his affirmation of the Bible as the last norm in the interpretation of biblical passages.

The Nature of God

The Genesis account provided much material for discussions about the nature of God. Luther admitted that the NT talks with more clarity about the Trinitarian concept than the OT, but he insisted that the patriarchs knew this concept through the Holy Spirit as indicated by a few biblical passages.³⁵ He noticed the different usages of the divine names in Gen 1 and 2: אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*, God) is used in Gen 1, whereas the divine covenant name יְהוָה (*Yahweh*) does not appear in that chapter. He interpreted it as

²⁶ *WA* 42:31; *LW* 1:42.

²⁷ *WA* 42:11; *LW* 1:11.

²⁸ *WA* 42:32, 33; *LW* 1:42-44.

²⁹ *WA* 42:32, 33; *LW* 1:42-44.

³⁰ *WA* 42:33, 36; *LW* 1:44, 47, 48.

³¹ *WA* 42:10; *LW* 1:11.

³² *WA* 42:57, 58; *LW* 1:76.

³³ *WA* 42:33, 36; *LW* 1:44, 47, 48.

³⁴ *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:50.

³⁵ *WA* 42:44; *LW* 1:59.

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Moses' attempt to highlight the divine plurality, an effort that he saw in various ways throughout the chapter. Thus, Luther argued that Gen 1:1-3 portrays how each of the divine persons became active in the creation process—the Father began to create in the beginning of the first day (1:1), the Holy Spirit seated himself above the work of creation (1:2), and the Son became active when God “spoke” all things into existence (1:3). As all the things were made through the Word (John 1:1-3), so everything is made alive through the Spirit.³⁶

That the various creation acts are preceded by the phrase “God said”³⁷ was a circumstance that Luther regarded as a reference to the creative activity of the Word.³⁸ His allocation of the phrases “God said,” “He made,”³⁹ and “He saw”⁴⁰ to the respective divine persons obviously stems from Augustine. The first phrase pointed to the eternal generation of the Son and the establishment of the world through the Word “in time.” The second phrase referred to the Son who is the image of both the Divine Majesty and all created things which is why he can bestow existence on all things. The third phrase points to the Holy Spirit who “sees the created things and approves them.” According to Luther, the action verbs—said, made, and saw—were intentionally chosen to assist the reader in understanding more clearly the doctrine of the Trinity. He acknowledged that this argumentation is not explicitly articulated in the biblical text, yet he saw nothing wrong with the teaching as such.⁴¹

In the context of his discussion of *dixit* (he said) and *creatio ex nihilo*, Luther distinguished between an unspoken and a spoken word in God. The unspoken, uncreated Word was one with God and a separate person, whereas the spoken, created Word created all things. God's spoken words are not merely grammatical words or vocabularies but true and substantial

³⁶ *WA* 42:8-17; *LW* 1:9-22. See also Henry W. Reimann, “Luther on Creation: A Study in Theocentric Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 1 (1953): 28; Niels H. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 22.

³⁷ Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, and 26.

³⁸ *WA* 42:23; *LW* 1:30.

³⁹ Gen 1:7, 16, 25, 31; 2:2-4.

⁴⁰ Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

⁴¹ *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:49, 50.

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things. Thus, God created all things through the uncreated Word by speaking.⁴²

As may be expected, the phrase “Let us make man in our image” (Gen 1:27) called for a lengthy commentary on God’s nature. Luther sensed that this statement was intended to assure the reader of the divine mystery that “from eternity there is one God and that there are three separate Persons in one Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ Being aware of various arguments proposed by Jewish scholars in objection to the Trinitarian interpretation of verse 27, he took time to critique those arguments.⁴⁴ He concluded that the three divine persons cooperated in their creative activity. Therefore they express the deliberation of their council by saying “Let us make man” (v. 27).⁴⁵ The Father did not make one man, the Son another, and the Holy Spirit still another but “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one and the same God, is the Author and Creator of the same work.” Adam was not the image of only one of the three divine persons but of all three, signifying that he was made by “three separate persons in one divine essence.”⁴⁶ Yet, the Father is only known in the Son and through the Holy Spirit. Thus God cannot be divided subjectively because he is one God “so far as His substance or essence is concerned. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct Persons in One Godhead.”⁴⁷

Creation—An Act of Divine Benevolence

As has been shown previously, the famous German reformer intended to use Scripture as the ultimate and authoritative source of information on the issue of origins. Yet, the fact that he continued to assume the validity

⁴² *WA* 42:17; *LW* 1:22.

⁴³ *WA* 42:43; *LW* 1:57.

⁴⁴ *WA* 42:43, 44; *LW* 1:57-59.

⁴⁵ *WA* 42:41, 43, 44; *LW* 1:56, 58, 59.

⁴⁶ *WA* 42:43, 44; *LW* 1:58. Luther pointed out that the discussion about the exact meaning of the *imago Dei* is futile because every human being is a sinner now so that the daily experience is something totally opposite. Besides Adam and Eve no one ever had the experience to bear the *imago Dei*. The gospel provides, however, a slight hint at what it means to bear the *imago Dei* for it brings about the restoration of that image. Yet, it only begins but is not finished in this life. Eventually Luther stated that to bear the *imago Dei* means to live in God and with God, and be one with him. See *WA* 42:45, 46, 48, 49; *LW* 1:60-62, 64, 65.

⁴⁷ *WA* 42:44; *LW* 1:58, 59.

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of the Greek idea of God's timelessness and the eternal generation of the Son should caution us that these concepts may resurface in this study. Luther's concern with God's nature and character will play a major role in this section, since the theme of divine grace and benevolence occurs basically everywhere in Luther's lectures.

Creatio Ex Nihilo in Six Literal Days

Interestingly, Luther could not discern any complications or difficulties between the idea of God's *timelessness* and the biblical affirmation of the divine creation activity *in time*. God created all things by speaking, *per verbum increatum* (by the uncreated word).⁴⁸ Everything—sun, moon, stars, conditions on earth, plants, and animals—came into existence through the Word.⁴⁹ Some have argued that the phrase *creatio ex nihilo* lies at the heart of Luther's creation theology;⁵⁰ yet, it appears that he often referred to that concept by mentioning the power of the Word without explicitly bringing up the phrase *per se*.⁵¹ His view of *creatio ex nihilo* was obviously in harmony with Irenaeus' concept.⁵² The latter had opposed three different cosmogonies—(1) the Gnostic view that the world emanated from God, (2) another Gnostic idea that the world is wicked *per se* and was not created by God himself, and (3) the Platonic idea that God used already existing matter. Irenaeus countered the first two views by emphasizing that God created the world *ex nihilo* and the third view by underscoring that God had invented matter.⁵³ Similarly, Luther stated that God did not need pre-existing matter to create for he merely spoke and things, animate and inanimate, were generated. Thus, the reference to the creative activity of the Word emphasizes God's ability to create *ex nihilo*. Yet this concept was

⁴⁸ *WA* 42:35, 39-40; *LW* 1:47; 53, 54.

⁴⁹ *WA* 42:20-25, 27, 30, 32, 35-37. 39, 57; *LW* 1:25, 27, 29-31, 33, 36, 40, 42, 47-49, 52, 75.

⁵⁰ Luther's frequent emphasis of the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* led some scholars to the conclusion that it was in creation theology that Luther's actual heart was beating. See Althaus, *Der Schöpfungsgedanke bei Luther*, 12, 18; idem, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 109-118; Löfgren, 163. Lohmann, 200, 201, rightly points out that Luther connected that concept with his teaching on justification after he made his discoveries in the Epistle to Romans.

⁵¹ See, e.g., *WA* 42:3, 4; *LW* 1:3, 4.

⁵² Cf. Löfgren, 25; Lohmann, 197, 198.

⁵³ *Haer.* II,10,2,4; IV,20,2; 38,3.

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not only found in Gen 1:1-3, but also supported by many other biblical passages.⁵⁴ Exod 20:11 was specifically significant because it emphasizes that “the heavens and the earth” were made “in six days.” The primary matter of the heavens and the earth and everything that is therein was not created “outside the six days but at the beginning of the first day, . . . according to the plain words of the Decalogue (Exod 20:11).”⁵⁵ His literal understanding of the creation days led him to reject the views of Augustine and Hilary who had argued for an instantaneous and simultaneous creation.⁵⁶

Creation as a Manifestation of Divine Charity

Luther was not only concerned with apologetic questions, but also—and even more—with what the creation account teaches its readers about God’s character and personality. He viewed almost everything in the account as a revelation of God’s benevolence and grace. Thus the creation of the heavenly bodies, the physical conditions of the earth, and the plant life reveal God’s benevolent character. In fact, he prepared “a home and an inn” furnished with every joyful thing for humanity. In this way, God had already taken care of human needs even before he created humans, suggesting that divine providence is far greater than all “anxiety and care.”⁵⁷ The heavenly bodies—sun, moon, and stars—were intended as service agents to humanity because the motion of those bodies allows for the counting of days, months, seasons, and years.⁵⁸ Luther emphasized that God repeatedly expressed his satisfaction and delight with the results of his creation, which was intended to be the realm of life for humanity.⁵⁹

The description of the earth as *תהו* (*tohu*; formless) and *בוהו* (*bohû*; void) was viewed by Luther as another indication of God’s benevolence; God’s solution to this “dark and mixed” condition of the earth “without any fruits

⁵⁴ *WA* 42:6, 13-17, 20, 24, 25; *LW* 1:6, 16-21, 26, 34. He referred to such texts as Exod 20:11; Job 38:10; Ps 33:6; 104:2, 9; Prov 8:22-27; John 1:1, 2, 18; Rom 4:17; Col 1:16; and Hebr 1:2.

⁵⁵ *WA* 42:6; *LW* 1:6.

⁵⁶ *WA* 42:4-6, 52; *LW* 1:4-7, 69.

⁵⁷ *WA* 42:35, 29, 30; *LW* 1:47, 39.

⁵⁸ *WA* 42:31-33; *LW* 1:42-44.

⁵⁹ *WA* 42:27; *LW* 1:36. Here he referred to Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

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and barren” was his work of “forming” and “adorning.”⁶⁰ The idea of “adorning” was derived from the Latin reading of Gen 2:1, *igitur perfecti sunt caeli et terra et omnis ornatus eorum* (thus were finished heaven and the earth and all their adornment).⁶¹ The “adorning” of the earth happened accordingly between the fourth and the sixth day.⁶² Luther suggested that the creation of all things, animate and inanimate, reveals God as a lover of beauty. A bird, for example, has “such pretty feet and such delicate hair that it is clear that it was created by the Word of God with a definite plan in view.”⁶³

Luther perceived a difference between animate and inanimate things. While God declared that he was “pleased” with the inanimate things that he had made, he emphasized that he “blessed” all the animate beings.⁶⁴ Since Luther defined blessing as “increase,” he interpreted it as the initiation of the new method of procreation. Thus, this blessing of living beings, which are capable of fruitful procreation, announced “increase” and was “effective immediately.”⁶⁵ A further difference between the living beings that God created occurred by “the creation of man” because that activity was regarded by Luther as “the last and most beautiful work of God.”⁶⁶ It was by the “special plan and providence of God” that “man was created.”⁶⁷ The repetition in Gen 1:27 was supposed to be understood, according to Luther, as an emphasis of the “Creator’s rejoicing and exulting over the most beautiful work He had made.” God was more delighted and pleased to make “so beautiful a creature” than with “the other creatures” for he created “man . . . according to His own similitude” so that God “is truly recognized” in him. That is why Luther declared: “In him [man] there is such wisdom, justice, and knowledge of all things that he may rightly be

⁶⁰ *WA* 42:6, 7, 25-27, 29; *LW* 1:7, 8, 34, 36, 39. Modern scholars have recognized this descriptive difference of the creation days—day 1-3 constitute the forming, whereas day 4-6 describe the filling with content—already for a long time but Luther’s denotation of the action of the last three days as “adorning” is far more positive and artful than the rather dry describing “filling with content.”

⁶¹ *WA* 42:56; *LW* 1:74.

⁶² *WA* 42:27, 29; *LW* 1:36, 39.

⁶³ *WA* 42:39; *LW* 1:52.

⁶⁴ *WA* 42:39; *LW* 1:52.

⁶⁵ *WA* 42:39, 40; *LW* 1:53.

⁶⁶ *WA* 42:41; *LW* 1:55.

⁶⁷ *WA* 42:42; *LW* 1:56.

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called a world in miniature. He has an understanding of heaven, earth, and the entire creation.”⁶⁸ Yet, he recognized still another difference: “No other beautiful sight in the whole world appeared lovelier and more attractive to Adam than his own Eve.” Between them there was a union of hearts and wills that was not possible between them and any animal.⁶⁹

After God had finished all his work of creation, His character became especially visible. For He did not abandon the earth but He expressed his love towards and approval of the created things. His preserving and governing activities still prove His nearness and presence in the affairs of the world.⁷⁰ Luther regarded the entire process of creation in the beginning of the world and the continual upholding of the universe and the earth as an amazing, attracting, benevolent, generous, and selfless act of God that testifies of his goodness and love towards humanity.⁷¹

The Significance of the Sabbath

Another sign of God's benevolence was the Sabbath.⁷² That God rested on the seventh day was not an indication that he entirely ceased from doing anything. The German Reformer argued that the Creator did not so much cease the work of “preserving and governing the heaven and the earth” rather that he refrained from creating “a new heaven, a new earth, new stars, [and] new trees.”⁷³ Yet, questions arise as to what the Sabbath rest of God was and how He sanctified the Sabbath. He sanctified the Sabbath not for anyone else but for Himself. That it is sanctified signifies that it is made holy or set aside for a sacred purpose, which in turn means that the time on that day should be devoted to divine worship. On that day Adam would have instructed his descendants about the divine will and the worship of God. They would have praised Him and given thanks to Him.⁷⁴ Luther

⁶⁸ *WA* 42:49; *LW* 1:68.

⁶⁹ *WA* 42:50; *LW* 1:67.

⁷⁰ *WA* 42:38; *LW* 1:50, 51.

⁷¹ *WA* 42:29-31, 33; *LW* 1:39, 41, 44; cf. Reimann, 27, 29; Gregersen, 19; Schwanke, 124-130, 139-153.

⁷² For a discussion of Luther's ideas on the Sabbath see William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther's Religious Thought* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1971), 191-198; P. Gerard Damsteegt, “The Sabbath and the Most Prominent Magisterial Reformers” (Shelf document, Biblical Research Institute, n.d.).

⁷³ *WA* 42:57, 58; *LW* 1:75, 76.

⁷⁴ *WA* 42:59, 60; *LW* 1:79.

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made various remarkable statements about the envisioned observance of the Sabbath:

Therefore from the beginning of the world the Sabbath was intended for the worship of God. Unspoiled human nature would have proclaimed the glory and the kindnesses of God in this way: on the Sabbath day men would have conversed about the immeasurable goodness of the Creator; they would have sacrificed; they would have prayed, etc.⁷⁵

The Sabbath shows specifically that man was created to know and worship his Creator. While “dogs, horses, sheep, and cows” as well as other animals may learn to recognize the voice of their owner, humans are different in that they are capable of hearing God, knowing his will, and communing with him through prayer and faith.⁷⁶

Luther declared that “the Sabbath command remains for the church” for, although humanity has lost the knowledge of their Creator, God wanted “this command about sanctifying the Sabbath to remain in force” because it signifies that spiritual life will be restored to the believers through Christ.⁷⁷ Thus, the real purpose of the seventh day is the preaching and hearing of the Word, and since humans should spend their Sabbath time with God’s Word and other forms of worship, they are also made aware of the fact that they were primarily created to acknowledge and glorify God.⁷⁸ It is especially on the Sabbath that “God speaks with us through his Word,” and in both Scripture and general practice it was morning time that was set

⁷⁵ *WA* 42:60; *LW* 1:80.

⁷⁶ *WA* 42:60, 61; *LW* 1:80, 81.

⁷⁷ *WA* 42:60, 61; *LW* 1:80.

⁷⁸ *WA* 42:60, 61; *LW* 1:80, 81.

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aside for prayer and preaching (Ps 5:3).⁷⁹ Luther also recognized a future significance of the Sabbath, an aspect that will be outlined further later.

Creation—A Continuous Divine Activity

It is striking that Luther considered creation and the physical world inherently good. Everything that God did in and through creation was driven by his love, benevolence, kindness, and goodness. He explained the original meaning and the abiding significance of the seventh day, the Sabbath, without even addressing once Sunday as the modern day of worship. The central statement in Luther's comments on the biblical creation account is that everything was created out of nothing through the Word. It is this aspect that will be of great significance for his descriptions of God's continuing interaction in present and future times.

Preservation, Governance, and Ongoing Creation

One has to remember that Edward Herbert's *De Veritate*⁸⁰ and the philosophy of Deism were still future when Luther made the following remark which otherwise could be easily understood as a direct attack against Deism: "God did not create things with the idea of abandoning them after they had been created, but He loves them and expresses His approval of them. Therefore He is altogether with them. He sets in motion, He moves, and He preserves each according to its own manner."⁸¹ God is interested and directly involved in human affairs. An observer of the events and developments in nature and the heavens may not understand what happens behind the scenes, yet God does not cease to be supreme and the

⁷⁹ *WA* 42:61, 62; *LW* 1:81, 82. All these statements about the Sabbath could be easily understood as an affirmation of the perpetuity of the Sabbath commandment (Exod 20:8-11). Luther's statements sound far more positive than the remarks in his "Sermon on the Third Commandment" on October 22, 1525. However, his 1538-treatise "Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend" shows the clear opposition to a Jewish Sabbath observance. See *WA* 50:312-337; *LW* 47:65-98; Martin Luther, "Against the Sabbatarians (1538)," in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader*, ed. Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 147-155; Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 71-77, 135.

⁸⁰ Edward Herbert, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate prout distinguitur a revelatione a verisimili, a possibili et a falso* (Paris: n.p., 1624).

⁸¹ *WA* 42:38; *LW* 1:50, 51.

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only master of order.⁸² Philosophers may wonder about the growing of seeds and plants; Luther ascribed the cause behind that phenomenon simply to the divine Word.⁸³ It is through the Word of God that the human realm of life is continually preserved—a fact not recognized by philosophers.⁸⁴ It is through the “power and effectiveness” of that Word that the entire creation is still preserved and governed.⁸⁵ God’s preservative and governing activity can be seen, as Luther pointed out, in his continual moving of the heavenly bodies, in his holding back of the sea so that the territory necessary for habitation and life is preserved. It is, in fact, through the Word that created everything *ex nihilo* that everything is continually preserved and governed.⁸⁶

Luther considered the nature of the divine Sabbath rest also as indicative of several aspects of the divine work of preservation. While God ceased to create a new heaven and a new earth due to his satisfaction with the ones that had been “created by the Word,” he was still working although he rested from his work. He merely ceased to establish whereas he did not cease to govern and preserve. The sun, the moon, and the stars still continue their course on the seventh day—their motion is actually caused by the divine Word.⁸⁷ On the first seventh day God refrained from creating new classes of beings, for whatever he wanted to make he had already made.⁸⁸ But now, after sin has come into the world, God does not only preserve his creation but he also changes and renews it; thus new classes come into existence—a signifier of the many species and races that exist today, even those who are “troublesome and harmful.”⁸⁹

Even procreation was viewed by Luther as a creative act that takes place “through the working of the Word” because the Word is active in the

⁸² *WA* 42:25; *LW* 1:33.

⁸³ *WA* 42:27, 28; *LW* 1:36, 37. According to Luther, God initially sped up the functions of the herbs and trees that these were mature and ripe right away. See *WA* 42:28; *LW* 1:37, 38.

⁸⁴ *WA* 42:26; *LW* 1:35.

⁸⁵ *WA* 42:57, 58; *LW* 1:75, 76.

⁸⁶ *WA* 42:22-27, 35; *LW* 1:29-31, 34-36, 47.

⁸⁷ *WA* 42:57-60; *LW* 1:75, 76, 78, 79.

⁸⁸ *WA* 42:58-60; *LW* 1:77-79.

⁸⁹ *WA* 42:40, 48, 49; *LW* 1:54, 77.

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parents in the moment of procreation.⁹⁰ Thus, the Word creates whenever living beings—animals and humans—procreate and beget descendants.⁹¹

The Spiritual and Moral Purpose of the Creation Account

While Luther firmly believed in the historicity of a recent, literal six day creation, he also recognized the positive impact that the creation account could have on its readers. Thus it reveals the amazing divine power that created all things “by a method surpassing all reason and understanding,” which fills the reader with awe and “wonderment at the power of the Divine Majesty”—a fact that builds up the faith of the reader.⁹² Here Luther connected two aspects of God’s nature and character—His omniscience and intimate love for humanity. If God has so much power, He should also have the power to defend humans against their physical and spiritual enemies today.⁹³ The creation account should open the eyes of the reader and build up his faith to believe more readily that God can preserve him too.⁹⁴ Yet, Luther recognized a purpose of the creation account that surpassed the general comfort for the present life—it may move to “hope and longing for the Coming Day and the future life.”⁹⁵ That God is able to resurrect people from the dead is displayed by his ability to create *ex nihilo* through the power of the Word.⁹⁶

Seeing that God prepared a home for the first humans and already took care of their needs before they were even created may convince the reader of the divine providence that is greater than all his or her “anxiety and care.”⁹⁷ It moves the reader to an appreciation of God’s kindness, goodness, generosity, and solicitude, as can be seen from the following quotation:

Therefore I prefer that we reflect on the divine solicitude and benevolence toward us, because He provided such an attractive dwelling place for the future human being before the human being was created. Thus afterwards,

⁹⁰ *WA* 42:40; *LW* 1:53.

⁹¹ *WA* 42:40; *LW* 1:54.

⁹² *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:49. He further stated that we unfortunately “lost our wonderment” because of “our daily association” with these things.

⁹³ *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:49.

⁹⁴ *WA* 42:38; *LW* 1:51.

⁹⁵ *WA* 42:56; *LW* 1:73.

⁹⁶ *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:49.

⁹⁷ *WA* 42:35; *LW* 1:47.

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when man is created, he finds a ready and equipped home into which he is brought by God and commanded to enjoy all the riches of so splendid a home. On the third day He provides kitchen and provisions. On the fourth, sun and moon are given to man for attendance and Service. On the fifth the rule over the fish and the birds is turned over to him. On the sixth the rule over all the beasts is turned over to him, so that he might enjoy all this wealth free, in proportion to his need. And all this generosity is intended to make man recognize the goodness of God and live in the fear of God. This care and solicitude of God for us, even before we were created, may rightly and profitably be considered here.⁹⁸

God's goodness and power is also seen in his preservation of life on earth as well as in his governing of the heavenly bodies. Even this will have a positive impact on the spiritual life of the believer if he or she ponders over it.

For me it is enough that in those bodies, which are so elegant and necessary for our life, we recognize both the goodness of God and His power, that He created such important objects and preserves them to the present day for our use. These are views which are proper to our profession; that is, they are theological, and they have power to instill confidence in our hearts.⁹⁹

Some people have speculated why God may have started to equip or adorn the earth on the third day, whereas Luther emphasized that it is far more profitable to study the creation account in order to learn more about God's kindness, to meditate and wonder now and in the future at His "concern, care, generosity, and benevolence." God makes humanity rich and wealthy before it is able to concern itself with itself.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Luther believed that creation was created by God as something inherently positive¹⁰¹ so that "the care and the concern for nature" should be "the response to the belief that God is the cause and source of all creatures."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *WA* 42:29; *LW* 1:39.

⁹⁹ *WA* 42:31; *LW* 1:41.

¹⁰⁰ *WA* 42:30; *LW* 1:39.

¹⁰¹ Lohmann, 197, 198.

¹⁰² Westhelle in Mortensen, 166.

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The Creation Account as a Type of the Future

Luther frequently drew parallels between elements of the creation account and the future life. Thus the Eden home served as a figure of the future heavenly home for the redeemed. Reflecting on the biblical creation account would ignite a desire and a longing for the future that God promised in the Bible. The following statement illustrates that point:

Yet it is a good thing to know these facts and to ponder them, so that we may have a longing for that Coming Day when that which we lost in Paradise through sin will be restored to us. We are waiting for that life for which Adam also should have waited. And we duly marvel at this and thank God for it, that although we are so disfigured by sin, so dull, ignorant, and dead, as it were, nevertheless, through the merit of Christ, we wait for the same glory of the spiritual life for which Adam would have waited if he had remained in his physical life, which was endowed with the image of God.¹⁰³

He saw parallels between Christ's adorning of the Eden home for the first, but as yet uncreated, human beings and Christ's furnishing of the heavenly home for the saints who still live on earth.¹⁰⁴ That is why he regarded the world in its first finished form and way as "a type and figure of the future world."¹⁰⁵ While he noticed clear terminological and thematic parallels between aspects of the creation account and Christ's earthly and heavenly activities now and in the future, Augustine's allegorizations—considering the moon, e.g., as a signifier to the church—appeared too speculative to the German reformer. Adhering closely to the literal meaning of the text seemed to guard from such conjectures.¹⁰⁶

The Sabbath pointed forward to the future life in different ways. Luther mused that "all the things that God wants [to be] done on the Sabbath are clear signs of another life after this life." He saw no significance of God speaking to the believers through his Word if there would not be a hope for a future and eternal life. They could live then like people who do not have that hope and do not know God. Yet, since God speaks to them so that they

¹⁰³ *WA* 42:50; *LW* 1:67, 68.

¹⁰⁴ *WA* 42:29-31, 33; *LW* 1:39, 41, 44.

¹⁰⁵ *WA* 42:30; *LW* 1:39.

¹⁰⁶ *WA* 42:31; *LW* 1:41.

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may know Him, “it necessarily follows that there is another life after this life.” They need His Word and the knowledge of Him to attain that life. The beasts of the field, however, do not know God and the Word, and they are not promised any life beyond this temporal and present physical one. Thus, the divine commands to spend time with the Word, to sanctify the Sabbath, and to worship God all prove that “man was created not [only] for this physical life” but that “there remains a life after this life.” Hence, there is a “sure hope of immortality”¹⁰⁷ which is again a sign of God’s goodness and love towards humanity, as can be seen in the following statement:

But without a doubt, just as at that time God rejoiced in the counsel and work by which man was created, so today, too. He takes pleasure in restoring this work of His through His Son and our Deliverer, Christ. It is useful to ponder these facts, namely, that God is most kindly inclined toward us and takes delight in His thought and plan of restoring all who have behaved in Christ to spiritual life through the resurrection of the dead.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Most of the themes highlighted in Luther’s lectures on Gen 1:1-2:4 center in his picture of God’s nature and character. Although the German Reformer deliberately chose the Bible as the ultimate norm for his interpretation of the biblical creation account, considering it more reliable and accurate than the observations of scientists, astronomers, and philosophers, it did not shield him from maintaining some of their presuppositions. Thus, time did not exist before the creation of the earth and will cease to exist when the saints go to Heaven. At the same time, God dwelt in a realm of timelessness but, in Luther’s view, God was not confined to that realm. God, consisting of three distinct persons, was deeply interested and active in human affairs. While the Father began to create, it was the Son—the Word—who became active when the Father spoke, whereas the Spirit made everything alive. Luther’s main emphasis was not so much on the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* as on the idea that everything was created, is preserved and governed *per verbum*, which adds a slightly

¹⁰⁷ *WA* 42:60, 61; *LW* 1:80, 81; cf. *WA* 42:37; *LW* 1:49.

¹⁰⁸ *WA* 42:51; *LW* 1:68.

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different nuance to Schwanke's findings.¹⁰⁹ The reference to the Word is certainly indicative of the idea that God did not need primary matter to create, yet it is not necessarily bound to it. For although God's continual preserving and governing activities occur through the Word, it does not create new things but preserves what has been created before and keeps it in motion.

The German reformer strongly insisted on the historicity of a literal six-day creation that occurred about six thousand years ago, in contrast to the notions of such church fathers as Augustine and Hilary who believed in an instantaneous, one-day creation. It seems that Luther regarded the moral and spiritual purpose of the creation account and its significance for the picture of God as being almost more important than the question of historicity. The creation account revealed divine goodness, kindness, providence, love, generosity, selflessness, benevolence, wisdom, justice, knowledge, and power. Creation was not something bad and evil but something amazing, attracting, beautiful, pleasant, and inherently good.

According to Luther, the Sabbath was intended as a time for divine worship, for the preaching and hearing of God's Word, and for the growing relationship with God. The Sabbath points believers specifically to God's goodness for, on that day, he continues to keep the universe in motion, and to govern and preserve the realm of human life. All this happens through the constant benevolent activity of the Word. God's creative, preserving, and governing activities make believers wonder at his power. They build up faith that he will preserve and defend them too. It shows them that God is able to take care of their needs before they are even aware of them, and that he can resurrect them from the dead. All this is possible through the power of the Word. Yet, his positive statements should not be understood as an affirmation of the perpetuity of the fourth commandment.

Finally, Luther considered creation as a type for the future. As God prepared the Eden home for the first humans, so Christ prepares a heavenly home for the redeemed. The Sabbath also points to the future for communion with God on earth would be meaningless if there would be no

¹⁰⁹ Future studies may extend the focus to Luther's lectures on Gen 2:5-25, comparing the findings to the conclusions drawn in both Schwanke's research on the entire Genesis lecture and the present study on the lectures on Gen 1:1-2:4. Other studies may focus specifically on various individual aspects.

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hope for a future life in communion with God. Growing in knowledge of God would be meaningless if everything would end at death.

While Luther addressed every verse of the Mosaic creation account, he focused specifically on divine activities. The creative, preserving, governing, and recreating activities of the Word stand out distinctly. Luther did not only deal with the biblical text but was also able to apply it to the daily life of the believer. He emphasized that God was not only active in the past but is still active today and wants to play a role in the life of every individual person.

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